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Extended abstract

### **Famine Files: Truth, Authority, and Reckoning with Repressive Past in Ukraine and Russia**

The process of opening the Soviet archives, which began in the late 1980s, led to unprecedented access to long-closed Communist Party and government archives, revealing those parts of Soviet history that could not be officially studied until then. The newly rediscovered piles of clandestine materials stored at the Secret Police archives inspired historical redress across Eastern Europe. Whether in the case of German *Stasi*, Polish *Bezpieka*, or Romanian *Securitate*, Secret Police archives were at the center of heated debates concerning authority, authenticity, and control over the communist past. At the same time, the (re)discovery of files led to the spreading of national(ist) rhetoric and the “hardening” of international borders.

This presentation aims to decolonize the prevailing representation of the Soviet past and expose a certain fetishization of state documents in writing Soviet history. As the postcolonial critique of archives demonstrates, bureaucratic papers have been embedded in power relations through how they had been created, sequestered, and rearranged. Yet, rather than demonstrating strong and rational state machinery, bureaucratic papers are sites of political anxiety that mark forms of privileged knowledge (Stoler 2010). It is then necessary to note how, especially in the Soviet case, archives became the objects oriented towards producing social and political effects (Kotkin 2002). Until the late 1980s, the long-closed Communist Party and government archives limited the scope of historical inquiry and blocked the study of many past events. Yet, the “file

fever” (Verdery 2014) of the early 1990s did not always help to uncover the truths about the Soviet past, and many events, especially those from the Stalinist period, remain hotly debated in academia (Edele 2020). In the Soviet context, similarly to other post-conflict societies, “atrocities files” drove the historical redress and shaped the reckoning with the repressive past (Caswell 2014; Weld 2014).

In this presentation, I trace how the knowledge about the Soviet-era famines resurfaced differently in Ukraine and Russia after the collapse of the Soviet regime. By comparing political debates over the meaning and status of “famine files,” I argue that the differences in circulation, control, and (re)usage of Stalin-era atrocity files contributed to the emergence of radically opposed perspectives of shared history in both countries. By examining how the notions of history, responsibility, and justice have been debated in both countries since the 1990s, I demonstrate how the epistemological uncertainty surrounding the “famine files” brings political anxiety that opens the violent past for various manipulations in the present. This presentation places the case of Ukraine-Russia history wars in the comparative context of Eastern Europe, where since the 1990s, Communist-era documents have been crucial mediators that transformed, distorted, and modified the meaning of the repressive past.

This presentation draws on my first book project that examines the transnational processes of reckoning with the Ukrainian Famine from the 1930s till the outburst of the Russo-Ukrainian war. It combines sociological and historical approaches to analyze how the Soviet denial of famine resulted in the uneven distribution of epistemic power through which this event became known and accounted for.

## References

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