By 1920, the civil war in Russia was over, but other troubles lay just ahead. The Communist government’s policy on food production soon led to an economic disaster. The new policy caused farmers to reduce the amount of land that they sowed. This caused a drastic reduction in the amount of grain production. Consequently, when a drought struck Russia in 1921, a widespread famine resulted. Over five million people died of starvation. In the following account, a traveler in Russia describes the terrible effects of the famine.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Causes**

According to Gibbs, what caused the famine?

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After four days in that train we came to Kazan which lay under a heavy mantle of snow. It was now the capital of the Tartar Republic—a province of Soviet Russia—and was at the head of the richest grain-growing district of the Volga valley. Now there was no grain because it had been burnt in its seed time by a terrible drought, leaving the peasants without food because their reserves had been taken up to feed the Red Army.

With deep snow on its roofs and lying thick on the ground so that no passing footsteps sounded it was like a city in a Russian fairy tale. Here in the old Tsarist days nobles had built villas and laid out fine gardens for their pleasure in summer months. Now those houses were filled with refugees from famine, dying of hunger and disease, and across the snow came small children, hand in hand, who had walked a long way from starving villages where their parents were already dead. Like frozen birds many of them died in the snow. There were forty homes here for abandoned or wandering children. I went into a number of them and they were all alike in general character. In big, bare rooms the children were naked and huddled together like little monkeys for warmth. There was no other warmth as there was no fuel. Their clothes had been burnt because of the lice which spread typhus among them. There were no other clothes to replace their ragged old sheepskins and woollen garments. Often it was too late to check the epidemic of typhus and thousands died and now were dying.

We went into the hospitals and they were dreadful. Because there was no fuel the patients, stricken with typhus, dysentery, and all kinds of diseases, lay together in unventilated wards. Many of the beds had been burnt for fuel, and most of the inmates lay on bare boards. Those who had beds lay together, two one way and two the other. There were no medicines, no anaesthetics, no soap, no dressings.

There was ice on the Volga and we were the last boat to get through, having to break our way. I shall never forget that voyage—the flat mud banks of the great

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river lying white under snow, the Russian villages, deep in snow within their stockades, all with whitewashed churches with pear-shaped domes, the landing stages where little groups of gaunt hunger-stricken men and women waited to see us, and tell their tales, and beg for help. Now and then a man would come on board and our interpreter would question him. Always he told of the famine which was threatening 25 million people with death in the broad valley of the Volga.

We went into some of those villages and saw tragic things. There was no food in the marketplaces and money was useless, even if there were any money. At one stage of the journey we found a *troika*—a sledge with three horses—waiting for us. It had been ordered by the Commune of the district who had been notified by Moscow. The driver was excited by our presence and drove his *troika* like a Roman chariot at a great pace, with his long whip curling above the horses’ heads. They seemed to be the only horses in the district. The others were dead and their skeletons lay on the roads, their flesh having been eaten. The villages were as quiet as death. No one stirred from the little wooden houses, though now and again we saw faces at the windows—pallid faces with dark eyes staring at us. In one village I remember we had as our guide a tall, middle-aged peasant who had blue eyes and a straw-coloured beard. When he spoke of the famine in all those villages hercubouts he struck his breast and tears came into his eyes. He led us into timbered houses where Russian families were hibernating and waiting for death. In some of them they had no food of any kind. There was one family I saw who left an indelible mark on my mind. The father and mother were lying on the floor when we entered and were almost too weak to rise. Some young children were on a bed above the stove, dying of hunger. A boy of eighteen lay back in a wooden settle against the window sill in a kind of coma. These people had nothing to eat—nothing at all.

In other houses they were still keeping themselves alive by a kind of brownish powder made of leaves ground up and mixed with the husks of grain. Others were eating some stuff which looked like lead.

It was a clay of some kind, dug from a hillside named Bitarjisk, and had some nutritive quality, though for young children it was harmful, making the stomachs swell. Everywhere we went in these villages peasant women, weeping quietly, showed us their naked children with distended stomachs, the sign of starvation at its last stage. From other cottages they came to where we stood, crossing themselves at the doorways in the old Russian way and then lamenting. Only once did we meet with a wild desperation which made the women fierce and frightening. They seemed to think we had brought food and they came shrieking and clawing at us like starving animals, as indeed they were! Mostly they were quiet, even in their weeping, and we went into homes where the little ones looked like fairy-tale children but with the wolf outside the door waiting for them.


1. gaunt: very thin, often because of hunger or other suffering
2. sledge: sleigh