



**EJW**

ECON JOURNAL WATCH  
Scholarly Comments on  
Academic Economics

ECON JOURNAL WATCH 21(1)  
March 2024: 79–91

# Counter-Reply to Naumenko on the Soviet Famine in Ukraine in 1933

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[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

*Econ Journal Watch* in its September 2023 issue, after several revisions, published my article-response to a series of papers by the economist Natalya Naumenko on the famine of 1932–1933 in Ukraine. I wrote this article because Naumenko's papers presented many false and misleading claims about Russian and Soviet history and about some of my earlier publications, and also presented detailed statistical calculations on the causes and character of that famine that were based on invalid and incorrect evidence. She also in one of the papers appropriated data and arguments that I had presented many years earlier in an article in an important American journal, yet did not cite my article and instead made it appear as if these data and arguments were exclusively her work. All of my criticisms were carefully documented, in contrast to many of her claims that had inadequate, misrepresented, or no documentation.

I am grateful to *Econ Journal Watch* for publishing my article, but they also published with it a brief reply by Naumenko, in which she tried to discredit my paper by using some of the same problematic approaches that she used in her earlier papers. After reading her reply, I decided that I had to write at least a partial counter-reply that explained these problematic approaches, so that readers will have the opportunity to understand the problems with her reply.

This counter-reply addresses the following issues:

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1. The general importance of accurate background information. Naumenko dismissed it as unimportant for her arguments, but in fact the background information is important on its own and as an indicator of the writer's knowledge and reliability.
2. Peasant and kolkhoz private food trade, one of the main background issues. On this topic Naumenko in her response again appropriated one of my arguments without acknowledgment, and on which she ignored substantial evidence I presented that contradicted her arguments.
3. The structure and functioning of the collective farms, especially the peasants' private plots and the existence of incentives.
4. Most important, the relative importance of collectivization and agro-environmental factors in the causation of the famine. My points here are:
  - Naumenko's analysis of collectivization is based on inaccurate data.
  - The main way she argues that collectivization caused the famine, high grain procurements, is not correct because as I documented the Soviet government sharply cut grain procurements for Ukraine in 1932.
  - The agro-environmental factors that sharply reduced grain harvests in Ukraine and other regions were more important than Naumenko admits, and such disasters had caused many crop failures and famines in Russia and the early Soviet Union with no collectivization.
  - Attributing the famine to collectivization would lead to the expectation that more famines should have occurred as collectivization increased in the 1930s, yet the collective farm system responded to the famine crisis by increasing grain production greatly in Ukraine and most other primary grain regions in 1933.

## **Background information**

Naumenko (2023, 305) thanked me “for pointing out inaccuracies and oversimplifications in the Background section,” and promised to be “more nuanced” on the Civil War, food trade, and collectivization. She argued, however, that the Background section had no new findings and did not affect her paper's conclusions.

This claim overlooked the problem that I emphasized in my article: that her “arguments and analysis are based on major historical inaccuracies and falsehoods, omissions of essential evidence contained in her sources or easily available, and substantial misunderstandings of certain key topics. All of these characteristics reflect a biased approach to the history and issues that these papers address” (Tauger 2023, 255). Naumenko failed to deal with this point: an author presenting an interpretation of Soviet history who gets basic aspects of this history wrong in an ideological manner is an author who is biased, and this makes her conclusions questionable.

## Peasant food trade

Then she turned to one of her major mistakes in a background topic, her claim that the Soviet regime prohibited private trade in food. In response to my evidence and arguments against this claim, she argued in her reply that food trade “was in legal limbo until the ‘neo-NEP’ reforms of May 1932.” She asserts that “peasants were allowed to sell their produce there [at collective farm markets] only after the whole region where they lived fulfilled its compulsory grain procurement quota” (Naumenko 2023, 305).

There are two major problems with Naumenko’s responses here. First, all of the arguments that she made in this section repeated arguments that I made in my article, yet she does not acknowledge this duplication at all, instead presenting her claims as if they were exclusively her findings and implying that I did not make these points.

One example of this was the May 1932 decree that explicitly authorized kolkhoz and peasant private food trade after procurements were fulfilled. I documented this decree and this restriction the decree imposed on private trade in my article (Tauger 2023, 278). In my discussion I provided much more information than Naumenko did, including the date that the regime set for allowing trade—15 January—and references to two other related laws issued in the same month. Naumenko’s failure to acknowledge that I made this point in my article repeated one of her problematic practices that I described in my article when she cited the kolkhoz annual reports without acknowledging that I had published that information first (Tauger 2023, 259). Here again she made this point about the May 1932 law as if I had never mentioned it and as if it was exclusively her finding, when I was the scholar in this exchange who documented it first in my EJW article (*ibid.*, 278), as well as in my first article in 1991.

The second problem with Naumenko’s response here is that she ignored the substantial evidence I presented from Soviet published and archival sources

and from Western eyewitness sources that contradicted her arguments in her reply and that showed that peasant food trade continued extensively despite these restrictions (Tauger 2023, 277–279).

On her “legal limbo” argument, she referred to a “slogan” at a grain conference in June 1931 that opposed “speculation,” implying that the regime opposed private trade (Naumenko 2023, 305). Yet she ignored the evidence I presented that while Soviet economic publications in 1930 argued that because of high inflation (in other words, speculation) and predicted “planned exchange” in the future, by May 1931 Sovnarkom reversed this and promoted private trade to replace rationing—in other words, before that “slogan” she quoted came out—and later the regime gave up trying to stop that trade and instead decided to tax it (Tauger 2023, 277). She treats that reference to a “slogan” as the only viewpoint at that time, yet I unambiguously documented that the regime was rejecting the viewpoint of that “slogan,” and she ignored my points and my evidence.

Additionally on this point of “legal limbo,” Naumenko ignored the GOSPLAN studies I cited that showed that peasants in 1930–1932 made billions of rubles on private food trade. This evidence clearly indicated that this “legal limbo” status she emphasizes had virtually no effect on peasant food trade (Tauger 2023, 277).

Then, Naumenko’s statement about the May 1932 decree’s restriction on private trade until after fulfillment of procurements ignored my arguments and evidence that peasants and most officials ignored that restriction. In particular, she ignored the archival document from the secret police (OGPU) in October 1932 that admitted that peasants were trading grain “everywhere” despite the 1932 law and that no officials were enforcing that law but were instead tolerating this trade. She ignored my point that this decree ordered confiscation of grain being sold illegally but also ordered *no interruption* of trade in other food products. This point in the OGPU document clearly showed that that May 1932 decree did *not* attempt to control all trade in food, but only in grain (Tauger 2023, 278–279).

The way Naumenko wrote suggested that she thought that if the Soviet regime issued a regulation, everyone automatically followed it, like robots, without any deviation. This viewpoint is biased and ignorant about Soviet history. As the evidence I presented in my article documented, those government statements and laws had virtually no effect, and trade continued, and certain Soviet leaders recognized this and did not act against it.

Naumenko’s “push back” against my points here constituted an attempt to mislead readers by hiding behind certain official Soviet statements and decrees while failing to acknowledge the much more substantial evidence I presented that shows that those statements and decrees were overturned and ignored, as well as failing to acknowledge that I had made her points earlier. I do not know whether

this failure on her part was intentional, the result of incomplete reading or forgetfulness, but either way it is clearly incompetent, and readers should be aware of this.

## Structure and functioning of collective farms

Naumenko (2023, 305–306) challenged my points about kolkhoz private plots and livestock. She cites the claim by Soviet historian Stephen Kotkin that Stalin and other leaders demanded formation of *kommuna kolkhozy* during the first collectivization drive in early 1930, referring to a “politburo resolution” of 5 January 1930.

I checked in my three-volume publication of Soviet Politburo agendas, and the decree on collectivization from 5 January has the same title as the Central Committee decree of 5 January, the same date: “On the tempo of collectivization and measures of government aid to kolkhoz construction” (Anderson et al. 2001, II:7; Sharova et al. 1957, 258–260).

This decree does *not* have any statement demanding formation of *kommuna kolkhozy*. Instead, in point 9 it states that the main form of kolkhoz at that time was the TOZ, which still had private property of the ‘means of production’ and that the new system should shift to the *artel’* as a transitional form, in which the basic means of production would be under the control of the farm but would still allow a private sector. This point then commissioned the commissariat of agriculture and kolkhoz organizations to prepare a model *artel’* statute.

If Naumenko is trying to use this decree to argue that Stalin was behind the “excesses” of promoting *kommuna kolkhozy*, this decree does not support that claim at all. The decree, which Stalin endorsed, unambiguously promoted the *artel’* form. This decree was issued in January 1930, in the midst of the campaign, and two months later Stalin clearly endorsed the *artel’* in his “Dizzy with Success” article, and simultaneously the government published that model statute of the *artel’*. Naumenko (2023, 306) cites Kotkin referring to “rabid members of the Yakovlev commission,” and I also referred to radicals who in the first campaign promoted *kommuny* (which again she did not acknowledge), but overall there were very few such *kommuny* formed in that campaign. Naumenko’s attempt to attribute all of those cases to Stalin is not supported by the evidence she cites. She also ignored the evidence and arguments I made that showed the dominance of the *artel’* form in the history of collective farms in the USSR in the 1920s (Tauger 2023, 285–286).

Naumenko’s attempt to discredit my arguments is thus based again on her ignorance of the actual history and documents, and on what appears to be a bias.

She ignored the evidence I presented about private plots in Soviet kolkhozy from 1918 to 1929, a much longer period than the few weeks of the early 1930 campaign, during which the existence of a private sector in kolkhoz was firmly established, and it continued for the rest of Soviet history.

Naumenko (2023, 306–307) also attempts to challenge my arguments about the functioning of kolkhozy. First, she tries to undermine my point that peasant village communes in some ways anticipated collective farms, by arguing that peasants in communes were still “independent production units” and that “communes provided more economic freedom.”

These points are not quite correct. Peasants in village communes had to farm the crops that the village decided on in the fields defined by the village, and therefore all the peasants had to farm their strips in the spring crop field with the spring crops that the village decided on, and the same with the other fields. They were only “independent” in that each peasant household was responsible for farming their own strips, and if they did not farm their strips, they would not get any harvest from them. While communes did have certain economic freedoms that kolkhozy did not have, my research found that kolkhozy also had certain economic freedoms, both within the laws and by ignoring the laws, as they did in conducting private food trade long before the official date in the 1932 decree discussed above. These points are issues that would require detailed discussion with much more evidence than the unsupported assertions that Naumenko makes (on these points, see Tauger 1991). Nonetheless, peasants in village communes before collectivization were already working as groups and not as totally “independent production units,” and in that sense village communes already had elements of collective farming.

Then Naumenko tries to challenge my argument that kolkhozy did have some incentives. She presents three quotes asserting that kolkhozy lacked material incentives, or that those incentives did not replace the incentives of the market. These sources are extremely problematic. First, these writers and their sources overlooked the fact that collectivization reduced the need for labor in farms, because it eliminated interstripping. Then, I cited studies of kolkhozy in 1930 showing that they increased their cropped land despite low labor turnout because they no longer needed so much labor. This was one of the basic premises for collectivization—that it would free labor for industry.

Finally, despite all of these issues, the kolkhozy and sovkhozy farmed very large areas in 1931–1932 and afterwards, and while in some years they had poor harvests, in others they had good harvests. All those critical quotes that Naumenko cites ignored these facts: their views reflected an anti-collectivization bias. They also ignored the fact that many if not most agricultural systems around the world provide inadequate pay and low incentives for farm laborers (Tauger 2021).

## **Relative importance of collectivization and agro-environmental factors in the causes of the famine**

Naumenko (2023, 308–311) begins this section with the weather issue. First, she admits that she “misread” my 1991 article and that she agrees with my points about the exaggerated official harvest estimates.

Then she disputes my points regarding the total grain procurements from Ukraine in 1932. She refers to her original sources, which are official figures. Naumenko ignores the much more reliable archival sources that I cited showing that Ukraine did *not* fulfill the procurement quota she cites, and that the regime even specified that additional procurement collections in early 1933 were to be used for seed (Tauger 2023, 260). She described my point as “puzzling,” but it is only puzzling because she cannot accept that her official evidence was wrong. This is the case even though in her NBER paper she referred to a table from the work of Davies and Wheatcroft that showed the procurement quotas were not met (Markevich et al. 2023, 9).

Then Naumenko responded to my point that the drought in 1931 affected Ukraine. My point was to show that Naumenko’s assertion that there was no drought in Ukraine was incorrect (Tauger 2023, 265). Naumenko in her response did not admit her mistake, but instead evaded the points I made and argued instead that there were other droughts in 1934 and 1936 “without catastrophic famine,” and that “picking just one factor that deviated from the average as the cause of harvest failure and famine is wrong” (Naumenko 2023, 309). Here again Naumenko repeated a point that I made without acknowledging it. As I wrote: “any study of agriculture will show that in most cases one cannot reduce agricultural production exclusively to weather” (Tauger 2023, 267). There I showed that Naumenko was the writer who was “picking just one factor” to argue that the famine did not have natural causes, yet in her reply she failed to acknowledge that this criticism applied to her work and that I had pointed it out in my article. She attempted to evade this by asserting that “it is important to not just look at one selected factor (April–June rainfall), but at weather overall” (Naumenko 2023, 309), but the weather was still just one factor—she dismissed all the other environmental factors that affect farm production.

Naumenko attempted to revive her comparative argument that the 1901–1915 weather showed that weather did not cause crop failure in 1931–1932. She acknowledged my point that the 1901–1915 period had harvest failures and that she ignored them, but she asserted that she “never claimed (nor thought)”

that his period saw only good weather and harvests. Yet nowhere in any of her three papers did she ever acknowledge any of the massive weather disasters, crop failures, or famines of the 1901–1915 period. She even repeated her false claim that the 1891–1892 famine was “the last large famine under the tzarist regime” (2023, 310), which clearly indicated that she did not think or acknowledge that there were any later climate disasters, even though I documented clearly that there were several. Furthermore, as in dealing with 1931–1932, she relied on official general weather information for 1901–1915, when in fact the very long and substantial tzarist government reports on the crop failures in those years showed extremely volatile weather conditions in those years which would not be reflected in generalized data she cited and her generalized approach to them.

Then Naumenko discussed the other environmental factors I had discussed, pests and infestations. First, she tried to discredit my points by asserting that other scholars did not mention these factors. Yet she ignored the fact that I used scientific evidence that no previous scholars ever cited or even mentioned before I published it, and that was not fully understood by the few scholars who cited it after I published it, such as Davies and Wheatcroft.

Next she manipulated my point by arguing that if weather helped spread these factors, “the grain production function should capture it.” In a footnote to this point, she cited a passage I quoted from an archival source that attributed the ergot infestation to favorable weather, and again asserted that this “should be captured by the weather-driven grain production function” (Naumenko 2023, 310). Yet when she used her “grain production function,” she clearly did *not* include anything beyond weather conditions, mainly temperature and rainfall. One of the points I was trying to make in that discussion in my article was that since “favorable weather” also supported the expansion of infestations, therefore “favorable weather” would not inherently lead to improved production but could and did also lead to serious crop damage and reduced production. Her assertions about the “grain production function” concealed the fact that this function, as she devised it and used it, completely overlooked non-weather environmental factors in grain production.

Naumenko again referred to the failure of published documents to mention these environmental factors, and then at least she admitted that I was correct about unpublished documents showing these. She failed to acknowledge, however, my points about the ignorance of Soviet officials regarding agriculture. Then she argued that even if this is true, that her correlation of famine mortality with collectivization, according to the “estimates” in her paper, showed the connection between pests and diseases and collectivization. This point again overlooks what I wrote. While to a small degree collectivization may have worsened some of these environmental factors, many of them would have occurred without collectivization



as well, and in total they represented a major agro-environmental crisis that Naumenko, given her failure to reference *any* primary or scientific sources on these topics, is not in a position to deny.

Then Naumenko tried to argue that weather or infestations and pests could not have been the causes of the 1933 famine on the basis of reference to the 1891–1892 famine, which she had described as “the last large famine under the tsarist regime,” which it was not. She argued that Russian agricultural productivity slowly developed afterward, so that by 1928 the “Soviet economy” recovered to the pre-WWI level. She then proposed that agricultural technology returned to the level of 1913 or even 1891, and asked how natural disasters could have “killed five to ten million people—an order of magnitude more than in 1892?” (Naumenko 2023, 310). She asserted that the environmental factors had to have been “of Biblical proportions (and should be easily spotted in the data, which they are not)” or were exacerbated by collectivization, so that the famine was ultimately caused by government policies.

Yet as I showed, Naumenko did *not* use any of the archival evidence on the environmental factors, and Soviet officials were ignorant about these factors and did not understand them. Since Naumenko did not use any of the archival sources that documented these environmental factors, the fact that her data did not recognize those factors did not mean that they were not large-scale. As I documented in one of my archival citations, for example, “rust has the character of almost uniform infestation in the whole territory of the [Ukrainian] Republic” (quoted in Tauger 2023, 269). A total infestation of all of Ukraine is pretty close to “Biblical proportions,” but Naumenko again ignored, or overlooked, or forgot my arguments and evidence.

Her assertion that, during collectivization, agricultural technology regressed to the level of 1913 or 1891 was utterly false. In 1929 the Soviet government established VASKhNiL, the first national academy of agricultural sciences under the internationally recognized agronomist Nikolai Vavilov, and this agency immediately began taking a wide range of measures to improve agricultural production. Also in this period the Soviet government, as part of the first five-year plan, established many new factories to produce agricultural machinery, including tractors and combine harvesters, and also imported significant numbers of these (see Tauger 1991 and many other sources).

Then Naumenko turned to government policies (2023, 311–312). First, she indirectly insulted me by referring to a “gulf in training between quantitative fields like political science and economics and qualitative fields like history” which she claimed prevented “a more informed debate.” Then she referred to her Table 1 in her 2021 article (Naumenko 2021a, 180), Panel C Column 4, which she claimed compared mortality change from 1927–1928 to 1933 in regions with similar “pre-

famine characteristics.”

Yet she ignored the fact that this table claimed to relate mortality in 1933 to collectivization in 1930, which is absurd, as I documented using statistics that she did not use. As I documented clearly, there was *no* single level of collectivization anywhere in the USSR in 1930, especially in the Ukrainian Republic. She even asserted that she used for her calculations the level of collectivization in May 1930, which according to her article was 45 percent in Ukraine (Naumenko 2021a, 162). The archival data I presented in my article showed that the collectivization level in Ukraine in May 1930 was 41.5 percent, having declined drastically from 60.8 percent in March, and continued to decline to 28.8 percent into October and November (Tauger 2023, 290). She criticized my “training” as “qualitative,” implying that she was superior in her quantitative skills, yet in her reply she completely ignored the quantitative data I presented in my article. This was not a competent response to my points and evidence.

Naumenko claimed to compare similar regions in 1927–1928, but she never mentioned, either in her reply or in her original papers, the famine of 1928–1929 that was most severe in Ukraine. As I noted in my article, in her previous papers she explicitly denied that any famines took place in the later 1920s, which was completely wrong and which I had documented in previous published articles based on extensive archival research (Tauger 2023, 261–263).

Then Naumenko discussed issues of probability in order to reassert her earlier arguments that higher levels of collectivization were too strongly associated with higher mortality to be “just a coincidence” (2023, 312). This assertion is invalid for several reasons. First, she tried to connect a collectivization level in 1930 with mortality in 1933, which, as I explained above and in my article, is false because there was *no* single level of collectivization in 1930. Second, since collectivization changed significantly by 1932–1933, any connection between 1930 and 1933 omits those changes and is therefore invalid.

Third and most important, her calculations again omit any consideration of the agro-environmental disasters that harmed farm production in 1932. In her appendices, Table C3, she does the same calculation with collectivization data from 1932, which she argues shows a closer correlation between collectivization and famine mortality (Naumenko 2021b, 33). Yet, as I showed, those agro-environmental disasters were much worse in the regions with higher collectivization—especially Ukraine, the North Caucasus, and the Volga River basin (and also in Kazakhstan)—than elsewhere in the USSR. As I documented in my article and other publications, these were regions that had a history of environmental disasters that caused crop failures and famines repeatedly in Russian history.

The 1931–1933 famine was much more complex, and the agro-environmental factors had a much larger role in its causation, than her narrowly

focused and incomplete calculations accommodate. Furthermore, Naumenko's emphasis on collectivization as a cause of the famine was based in part on her assumption that collectivization subjected peasants to higher procurements, but in 1932 in Ukraine this was clearly not the case. She ignored the fact, which I documented from archival sources, that the Soviet regime reduced grain procurements for Ukraine four times to approximately half their level in 1931 and, as I documented, that grain procurements both total and per-capita were much lower in Ukraine than anywhere else in the USSR in 1932 (Tauger 2023, 280ff., and table on 284). Clearly, if grain procurements were so greatly reduced, yet a severe famine followed, the agro-environmental factors were more important than collectivization in causing this famine.

Finally, Naumenko also overlooked a point I made at the end of my article: that I did not mean "to exonerate the Soviet regime completely for the famine" (Tauger 2023, 297). These agro-environmental disasters took place in a highly complex and politicized context, so they were not the only causes of the famine. At the same time, however, we cannot dismiss or minimize these factors, because if the harvests in 1931 and 1932 had actually been as large as the official figures indicated, in other words as large as the harvests of 1930 and 1933, especially given the reduced grain procurements in 1932, there would have been, as Naumenko herself recognized, much more food left in the villages, and no famine would have occurred. The agro-environmental crises have to be the central part of the explanation of the famine, even if government policies also played a role.

To summarize the points in this section:

- Naumenko's attempt to reassert the connection between collectivization and mortality relied on inaccurate evidence and omitted the correct evidence that I presented in my article. In particular, in her reply she ignored the evidence I presented that showed that per-capita procurements were much lower in Ukraine than in any other primary grain region in 1932, as a result of the government's repeated reduction of grain procurements for Ukraine in 1932.
- Naumenko ignored the evidence I presented that Russia and the early USSR had numerous serious crop failures and famines, not just one in 1891–1892, all caused by environmental disasters. Naumenko's reply and earlier publications, by ignoring and suppressing this history, clearly constituted an attempt to misrepresent the real history of the 1931–1933 famine. These disasters and the crop failures and famines they caused occurred so many times in earlier Russian and Soviet history that this pattern was clearly sufficient to have been the primary cause of the 1931–1933 famines.

Finally, one further point on collectivization and famine. If collectivization was the cause of famine in 1931–1933, then one might expect that as collectivization levels increased after 1933, there should have been more famines. One might argue against this that the peasants adapted to collectivization afterwards. But the problem with this argument is that the collective farm system already reached more than 20 percent of peasants in 1930, yet they did not have a disastrous crop failure and famine in 1930, but instead increased cropland, farm production, and procurement of grain and other crops in that year. If collectivization caused famine, there should have been a disastrous famine that year, but there was not.

To understand this, we must remember that collectivization involved the same peasants farming the same crops in the same land as they had before, just in larger consolidated fields rather than dozens of strips scattered over the landscape. The peasants had done such large-scale farming for decades before the 1917 revolution when they worked on the big estates of the Russian landlords, so it was not new to them. The peasants, moreover, had wanted more land for decades before collectivization and the Bolshevik revolution, so they were quite ready to farm more land in 1930. This was one of the reasons, as I documented in my article, why during the first collectivization campaign in winter 1930, fewer than 5 percent of peasants put up any overt resistance to collectivization: many of them must have understood the advantage of having more land to farm.

All of these considerations imply that collectivization was not the disaster for Soviet peasant farming that Naumenko attempted to argue, and that the agro-environmental disasters of 1931–1932 played a central role in the famine crises of those years. Again, I acknowledge that some Soviet government policies and practices, especially their misunderstanding of these environmental factors, also played important roles in the famine. Still, if the harvests of 1931 and 1932 had been as good as the official figures showed, there would not have been any famine in these years.

I hope this counter-reply makes clear the problematic approaches in Naumenko's reply, and I hope it encourages anyone who has read only her reply to read my initial article.

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