

Holodomor: Ukraine's Secret Famine-Genocide of 1932-1933

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Introduction

The man-made artificial famine of 1932-33 in Ukraine known as Holodomor ("murder by starvation") that extinguished millions of innocent lives, is one of the worst—yet remarkably lesser known—crimes against humanity. It was planned and masterminded by Josef Stalin and methodically committed against the Ukrainian people by the government of the Soviet Union; yet it was so cleverly concealed that the world was mostly unaware that a great famine raged in the villages of the country long known as Europe's "Bread Basket." It is mentioned briefly in the lead article by Van Arsdale et al. in this issue.

Over the last seventy-five years, Soviet authorities and Western apologists have continued to promulgate lies to ensure that the memory and evidence of this genocide would be suppressed. However, especially after Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, official documents and statistics have emerged, photos uncovered, testimonies of survivors recorded, books written, and films made. The irreparable cultural harm and irreplaceable human lives will hopefully not be forgotten, and this great tragedy will be recorded in history as genocide.

As suggested in the lead article, Article II of the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* provides a key definition to which historians and scholars look when considering the Armenian massacre, the Jewish Holocaust, and more recent atrocities such as the one in Rwanda. It is important that scholars also reference this definition when discussing the Ukrainian Holodomor, and, in fact, many are starting to do so. Article II, which defines genocide as "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group..." is particularly relevant to the Ukrainian tragedy (Hunczak 2007:18-19). Clause "c" of this article emphasizes that "genocide is a policy of deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." Historian Taras

Hunczak argues that Josef Stalin, the brutal dictator of the Soviet Union, and his followers both in Moscow and in Ukraine did just that; they built their empire on the "bones of millions of innocent victims," while the world seemingly was watching but certainly doing nothing (Hunczak 2007:18-19).

Reasons Behind Stalin's Man-Made Artificial Famine

The period of 1932-1933 was a terrible time in Central and Eastern Ukraine, for the artificial famine exterminated millions of Ukrainians. This tragedy is unfathomable socio-economically, because it occurred (as previously noted) in the "Bread Basket of Europe" with its rich and fertile black soil, which produced bountiful wheat harvests, as well as crops such as sugar beets, vegetables, and fruits. Ukraine once fed much of Western Europe and even parts of the United States. In addition to its legendary soil, Ukraine also has enormous metal and mineral resources in Krivy Rih and the valley of the Donets River. These rich natural resources have always made it the envy of its neighbors, and so Ukraine has suffered a tragic fate of oppression throughout its history at the hands of various resource-hungry invaders and conquerors (Haliy 1963:3, 5).

This particular famine "was not caused by a natural disaster as a flood or drought, nor by any historic cataclysm, such as war, but was deliberately planned and methodically carried out by the Communist Government in Moscow, which was not at war, but enjoying a period of peace. The catastrophe happened not in some remote, little known part of the world, but in a European country [the size of France]" (Haliy 1963:5). Although there were other famines that took the lives of many Ukrainian people, this artificially induced disaster was the most costly in human life. At its height, Ukrainians were dying at a rate of 25,000 people per day, which translates to 1,000 lives lost per hour or seventeen per minute. One in three children perished in this atrocity. In the meantime, the

Soviet regime sold 1.73 million tons of grain to the Western markets—nearly a quarter of a ton of grain for every Ukrainian who starved to death.

Stalin was an extremely paranoid leader, and this famine was part of his “Stalinist Revolution from Above.” This was an ominous experiment that orchestrated paranoia about both internal and external enemies so that shortcomings of his government could be blamed on certain groups of “class enemies,” such as the farmers or peasants. Stalinism was in some ways similar to Nazism; it tried to portray the world as a conflict between different types of people, and the elimination of some was considered a crucial first step towards achieving a new and better state of affairs (Mace 2004:95).

Some scholars, such as Henry Huttenbach, think that the Holodomor has to be seen in the broader spectrum of extreme state violence in the Soviet Union, of which Ukraine was an unwilling part. Huttenbach argues that starting in 1928, Stalin tried to uphold a dual strategy: (1) to further strengthen his undisputed, personal dictatorial power and (2) to mold the Soviet Union into a strong military power and a centralized and “modern” industrial and economic force (Huttenbach 2007:11). In order for this strategy to succeed, massive violence was needed to ensure cooperation, as there were many sources of opposition to Stalin’s vision of a “revolutionary society.” Among those in opposition were Ukrainians, who wanted to be free from Russian domination.

Stalin’s Systematic Elimination of Two Opposing Ukrainian Forces

Stalin wanted to “melt” Ukraine (and all of the other occupied territories) into a common, so-called Soviet, but essentially Russian pot. However, there were two forces that blocked Moscow’s “melting pot” goal for Ukraine: (1) the Ukrainian intelligentsia, which formed the Ukrainian statehood and preserved Ukrainian culture and (2) the Ukrainian peasantry—with centuries-old traditions of individual farming and private ownership, a strong force that upheld those principles in numerous revolts, long after the occupation of Ukraine by the Muscovites (Russians). Therefore, to make Ukraine “cooperate” with Stalin’s visions meant to annihilate these two forces.

First, the systematic elimination of these forces began with massive purges of the Ukrainian cultural and spiritual elite, including bishops, priests and religious clergy, and with the prohibition of the Ukrainian Orthodox and Byzantine-Catholic faiths (the two dominant religions in the country). Second, Stalin tried to obliterate the intelligentsia through sweeping arrests, executions, and exile to slave labor camps in Siberia, from which there was no return. Such was the fate of Ukraine’s cultural leaders—the scholars, artists, poets and writers of the 1930s. This was also the fate of Ukrainian political leaders and economists (Haliy 1963:7). Third, Stalin’s aim—an example of ethnocide, as defined by Van Arsdale et al.—was to quash the Ukrainian spirit by killing off its intellectuals and enforcing “Russification” in every aspect of life, through prohibition of the Ukrainian language, press and religion, as well as bans on literature, arts, and traditional customs. He also ordered the destruction of many ancient Ukrainian churches and monasteries, historical monuments, libraries, valuable manuscripts and books, icons, and other treasures.

The next step was to eliminate the Ukrainian farmers (*seliany*, not technically “peasants”), considered the “heart of Ukraine,” who were too independent for Stalin’s liking. Terming it “socialism in one country,” Stalin initiated a war on the Ukrainian villages in the countryside. Then, he introduced a brutal policy of collective agriculture, which was to replace individual farming, thus depriving the farmers of their private land, livestock, horses and wagons, and the right to plant and grow their own crops. The traditional means of family support were eradicated. Farmers were forced to work in large groups on “state-owned property” with the fruits of their toil going to the government. The objective was obvious—Stalin wanted to make individual farmers hostages of the Communist regime, expecting, in his own words, “to establish a system whereby the collective farmers would deliver, under penalty, to the state and the cooperative organizations, the entirety of their marketable grain” (Hunczak 2007:13-14).

The farmers were classified into different categories: well-to-do farmers, who were labeled as *kulaks* (*kurkuli* in Ukrainian), middle farmers,

and poor farmers and laborers. If one were labeled a kulak, he or she was doomed. The first wave of the more prosperous farmers/kulaks was wiped out in the years between 1917 and 1921. The period of 1921-1922 brought the New Economic Policy (NEP), when the farmers were given some freedom to operate the land. Thus, a new group of "kulaks" emerged as a result of this, because the "poor peasant (farmer) who worked hard became richer, so he became a kulak" (Conquest 1986:5). Therefore, in the years 1929-1932, Stalin implemented a program of "de-kulakization,"² which translated into the arrests of millions of farmers who were labeled as being somehow "involved in anti-Soviet activity" or were just "more affluent." These people were executed or sent in large numbers to labor camps in Siberia (Conquest 1986:6). After this, there were no more kulaks and so the Soviets invented the category of "sub-kulak," which could be applied to any farmer.

The policy of collectivization was officially announced in November of 1929. Individual farmers were forced to surrender their livestock and farming equipment to the collective farms, which then became the property of the state (Hunczak 2007:14). Nearly 62,000 farms were confiscated by the Communists between January and March of 1930. In response to collectivization, farmers rebelled in most regions of Ukraine. They began to strike, revolt, destroy their crops and slaughter their cattle (Conquest 1986:5), but the farmers were no match for the brutal army and the secret police who were sent against them (Hunczak 2007:14). Those farmers who protested were often executed on the spot, while others were sent to concentration camps. Still others and their families were exiled to Siberia, where they were left with little shelter or food. Most did not survive, whereas some were just ordered to leave their districts. More than one million Ukrainian farmers were arrested in the early 1930s and about 850,000 were deported in freight trains to the Russian far north—many never reached their destination (Hunczak 2007:14). Thus began the process of forcing "collectivization" on the people. "According to one report, the homes of the middle, and even poor farmers, were destroyed

in the darkness of night and the farmers were forced, at gunpoint, to join collective farms. Confiscated property was often stolen by urban party activists, while the militia roamed the village streets arresting anyone in sight" (Hunczak 2007:14).

Later, following the Ukrainian farmers' revolts, Stalin sent military forces to once-and-for-all break the resistance of those still left. All land, cattle, harvests, and machinery were to be confiscated and become the property of the state. Thus was precipitated a gruesome artificial famine like none ever seen before (Haliy 1963:8). This famine was exacerbated by Stalinist draconian requisition quotas imposed on Ukraine, forcing the devastated villages of the countryside to deliver millions of tons of grain to the state. Approximately 12,000 Special Forces were sent to the villages to collect the "hidden" food reserves when the farmers could not meet the quotas (Hunczak 2007:14-15). These Special Forces went from village to village confiscating all available food and grain, then locking it up in storage where it rotted and wasted away. Thus, millions of Ukrainians started perishing from a slow and torturous death, a death by starvation. Viacheslav Molotov and Lazar Kaganovich were in charge of enforcing Stalin's policy of grain procurement. These two men made their way through the plundered villages and gave directions on how to rob the starving population. Their orders were effectively executed by local collaborators who, "together with the members of the special brigade and party activists, went from house to house, searching for hidden grain and other food—even taking the last loaf of bread that was on the table. As a result, already in 1932 people were dying of hunger" (Hunczak 2007:15).

The famine-genocide raging in Ukraine reached its peak in 1933 in the ethnic Ukrainian region of the Northern Caucasus, known as Kuban, and in the ethnic Ukrainian part of the lower Volga River valley. Because there was no bread, starving people ate their pets, rats, leaves, tree bark and garbage from the well-provisioned kitchens of the party members (a further indication that this famine was deliberately

targeting Ukrainian farmers). Also, during this period of severe famine, the Soviet regime expanded the system of hard currency stores known as the *torgsin*.³ In exchange for food, these stores helped extract the last valuables remaining in the countryside. In order to survive, people brought their most treasured possessions: intricately embroidered Ukrainian costumes, family heirlooms, jewelry, photographs, china, pottery, carved wood furniture, gold and silver items in exchange for loaves of bread. Often, a gold tooth, a small piece of jewelry, or a silver or gold coin meant the difference between life and death when that person could effect an exchange for food (Mace 2004:102). This is still another indication that this artificial famine was purposefully crafted to destroy the Ukrainian farmers through genocide and—by robbing as many valuables and heirlooms as possible—through ethnocide.

Further proof is seen in the paradoxical antithesis of forced migration, i.e., forcible retrenchment in one's homeland. Whereas forced migration has been used elsewhere, e.g., in Ethiopia in the 1980s, in Ukraine the Communists forced the people in the hardest-hit famine regions to remain and die of starvation. These farmers were not allowed to leave their villages in search of food elsewhere. New passports were created without which villagers had no authority to go to cities, but these documents were not given to the people in the villages. Like serfs of the nineteenth century, they were hostages of modern times on their own land. Many tried to flee to other parts of the Soviet Union, but Stalin prevented this from happening. The Soviet police created checkpoints along the railroad lines to prevent starving Ukrainians from entering Russia, where there was bread, and to stop anyone from Russia from bringing food into Ukraine. This led to an economic blockade of the entire Soviet Ukraine (Mace 2004:75).

On January 22 1933, Stalin officially issued a directive the goal of which was to prevent a farmer exodus from Ukraine, particularly banning people from the predominantly Ukrainian Kuban region from entering Russia and Belarus. As a result of this edict, according

to the Russian scholar N.A. Ivnitsky, 219,460 individuals were arrested and 186,588 sent back to their starving villages (Hunczak 2007:16). Therefore, it can be concluded that in one sense the entire Soviet Ukraine was placed on a *de facto* economic blacklist in order to teach the Ukrainians, as William Henry Chamberlain put it, "a lesson by the grim method of starvation" (Mace 2004:79).

The Ukrainian tragedy of 1932-1933 has been documented in detail by numerous authors and recognized by many governments in the years since, including the United States Congress, as an intentional policy of genocide by the Kremlin against the Ukrainian people. Some scholars, nevertheless, continue to refer to this famine-genocide as the "Soviet Famine." If this were really the case, and if the famine really affected the entire Soviet Union, then why did Stalin release his decree of 1933 closing the borders of Russia and Belarus only to Ukrainians? Would not his decree mean that the food situation was much better in those two republics? (Hunczak 2007:9). Was this not a way to keep Ukrainians trapped in Ukraine, in the strictly famine-affected areas, so they would continue to die of starvation?

Finally, to add insult to injury, in the last stages of the artificial famine, millions of ethnic Russians were sent into Ukraine to "re-populate" the destroyed villages. They were even given special rations so that they would survive and not die alongside the local population (Mace 2004:80). This confirms that this famine was a genocide that exclusively targeted Ukrainians. Unfortunately, there are no complete official Soviet figures available on the loss in human lives caused by this famine (Cairns 1989:xvii). According to Cairns, it is known that males suffered the most, especially in the age cohorts of 20-29, 50-59, and 60 and older. However, when cohort population losses were shown as a percentage of the total mortality, the age groups that had the greatest losses were those spanning 15-19, 20-29, and 40-49 (Cairns 1989:xix). Therefore, it can be inferred that several million Ukrainians starved to death and several million more suffered from extreme malnutrition.

Conclusion

This commentary has provided details demonstrating that what came to be called the Holodomor was Stalin's systematic plan to terminate ethnic Ukrainians in Eastern and Central Europe and re-populate these lands with ethnic Russians. A definite case of genocide, it caused irreparable cultural harm and the loss of millions of lives in the "Bread Basket of Europe." There also have been identity shifts in these parts of Ukraine; anthropologists continue to consider the implications. According to recent demographic analyses, Ukraine's total population is nearly forty-six million, of whom 77.8% are ethnic Ukrainians (the majority of whom live in Western Ukraine, in areas unaffected by the 1932-1933 Holodomor) and 17.3% are ethnic Russians. The demographic profile also indicates that 67% of the population speaks Ukrainian—the official language of Ukraine—while 24% of the population speaks Russian. This points to the fact that not just ethnic Russians speak Russian in Ukraine; some ethnic Ukrainians, mixed Ukrainians, and other minorities living in Ukraine also speak Russian, one indicator of a shift in identity. It can be inferred that there are Russian-speaking Ukrainians who relate more to Russian culture than to Ukrainian, as well as Ukrainian-speaking Russians (although a much smaller number) who relate more to Ukrainian culture than to Russian. Statistics compiled on religious affiliation support this, since 50.4% of Ukrainians follow the Ukrainian Orthodox religion under the Kyiv Patriarch, while 26.1% of people in Ukraine follow the Ukrainian Orthodox religion under the Moscow Patriarch, and 8.0% of Ukrainians follow the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. These are the three dominant religions of Ukraine.

Therefore, because of the massive extermination of ethnic Ukrainians in Eastern and Central Ukraine through the Holodomor, and with the re-population of these lands by ethnic Russians, it is no mystery as to why there are so many controversies in contemporary

Ukraine revolving around Ukrainian-Russian relations. For instance, many ethnic Ukrainians want complete independence from Russia and to join the European Union and NATO; conversely, many mixed Ukrainians or ethnic Russians living in Ukraine want stronger connections with Russia, including making Russian the second official language of Ukraine. In all cases, however, it is hoped that the recognition of the tragedy of the Holodomor as genocide (as well as the revelation of other atrocities that occurred during the Soviet regime) will help improve cross-ethnic understandings in Ukraine. ○

Notes

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2. The XV Party Congress in December 1927 "declared war" on the kulaks and took steps to "restrict the development of capitalism in the countryside peasant farming toward socialism." To pursue these policies courts were empowered to confiscate grain surpluses from kulaks who refused to sell them at fixed low prices, exempt the poor peasants from the land tax and place twenty-five percent of the grain confiscated from the kulaks into the hands of the poor. Instructions were also issued for an increase in the number of sovkhozy and kolkhozy through the consolidation of small-scale holdings (Cairns 1989:viii-ix).

3. The name was an abbreviation for the Russian phrase, *torgovlia's inostrantsami* (trade with foreigners), because only foreigners had the right to possess precious metals and convertible currency (Mace 2004:102).

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