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The Holodomor: A Tragic Famine or Genocide Against the Ukrainian Peoples?

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Abstract

The Ukrainian Starvation of 1932-33, also known as the Holodomor, was a famine that impacted the Soviet Union, especially Ukraine, as a result of Stalinist policies and the First Five-Year Plan. This paper looks to argue that the events leading up to and during the famine were evidence of a genocide committed against the Ukrainian people. When the word was defined during the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in response to what had happened to European Jews during the Holocaust, certain groups that would and have been victims of genocide, along with actions that have been used to exterminate groups, were excluded from the definition as an attempt to exempt certain countries from being charged with human rights abuses. With that in mind, this paper looks to examine how Stalin's policies and the First Five-Year Plan were used to orchestrate a famine in the Ukrainian countryside in a deliberate attempt to exterminate the Ukrainian peoples and culture, despite the suffering of the different ethnic groups living in Ukraine and the suffering of people in other Soviet States.

Keywords

ukrainian starvation, genocide, famine, soviet union, five-year plan

Disciplines

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Comments

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The Ukrainian Starvation:
A Tragic Famine or Genocide Against Ukrainian Peoples?

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History 216: Modern Russian and Soviet History

Professor Bowman

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“I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work
and have not witnessed a violation of the honor code.”

Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish lawyer who pioneered genocide studies during his travels in Europe, coined the term genocide in 1943 and defined the word as “the disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups,” when he brought his petition to the United Nations in 1945 after World War II. When the United Nations convened in 1948 for the *Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide*, the General Assembly officially defined the word as “acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group.”¹ The Ukrainian Starvation, also known as the Holodomor, although not often thought of as a genocide, was the systematic famine perpetuated by the Stalinist state in order to suppress and destroy the Ukrainian people. From 1928 with the beginning of the First Five-Year Plan, to the peak of the disaster in 1933, 3 million to an estimated 10 million people were killed due to this famine. Stalin used his policies of collectivization, dekulakization, and Russification as a cover for his intentions of using this famine to destroy the Ukrainian peoples and bring their country under the total control of the Soviet Union.

The integration of Ukraine into the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union was important to both countries primarily due to one major factor about Ukraine, its arable land and reputation as the “Breadbasket of Europe.” Integrating Ukraine into the Soviet Union also meant the possibility of putting a cap on one of the national minorities that made their displeasure of the Soviet Union and its policies well known to the leaders. While Ukraine was able to declare

¹ Gregory H. Stanton, “Genocide Watch-What is Genocide?” n.d., <https://www.genocidewatch.com/what-is-genocide> (accessed April 19, 2020).

independence from Russia in 1918 when its neighboring country was in the midst of a civil war, it was soon taken over again by Bolshevik forces in 1921.² Like many national minorities living in the Soviet Union, Ukrainians made an effort to continue practicing their culture, language, and religion while living under communist rule. When Stalin officially rose to power in 1924, he devised plans to not only fix the economic problems that the New Economic Policies created, but plans that would also fix the issues of nationalist sentiment within the minorities of the Soviet Union; Stalin's Five-Year Plans and policies of Russification would be used to create a "true" communist state in the Soviet Union that would see the end of capitalism, class and nationality.³ Russification of national minorities was an important policy for the Soviet government as it was a necessary step towards solidifying the Soviet Union. With these policies, the country looked to make their national minorities more "Russian" and "Soviet-like;" in the case of Ukraine, policies of Russification were some of the first stages of the Holodomor. One of the ten stages of genocide is known as persecution. In Ukraine, this stage was seen carried out when "Ukraine's writers, artists, educators, intellectuals, and cultural elites were liquidated for being 'too Ukrainian,'" and were seen as a threat to the Soviet Model.⁴ Once intellectual and political leaders were rid of, the Soviets turned their attention to Ukrainian churches. The attack on the churches would lead to many of them closing and thousands of priests being executed.⁵ Ukraine's culture and traditions were already being exterminated before the famine would even begin in the country. This persecution under Russification allowed the Soviets to dispose of the

² Valentina Kuryliw, "General Essay" n.d.,

<https://education.holodomor.ca/teaching-materials/general-essay/> (accessed April 19, 2020).

³ Gregory L. Freeze, "Russia: A History," (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 344.

⁴ "The History of the Holodomor," Національний музей Голодомору-геноциду, October 18, 2019, <https://holodomormuseum.org.ua/en/the-history-of-the-holodomor/> (accessed April 19, 2020)

⁵ Norman M. Naimark, "How the Holodomor Can Be Integrated into our Understanding of Genocide," *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* Vo. 2, No. 1 (2015): 120

leaders in Ukraine; without their cultural and intellectual leaders, it would be harder for Ukrainians to recover from the blow to their history and traditions. Even though there were other nationalities living within the borders of Ukraine, by specifically targeting Ukrainian leaders, Stalin showed that he was indeed beginning to target a certain group of people in the country before the famine could truly begin.

As a part of the First Five-Plan, Stalin introduced the policy of collectivization in order to help industrialize the countryside and help maintain industry in the Soviet Union as a whole. These policies of collectivization meant that within the first two months of 1930, over 60 million peasants were moved onto collective farms.⁶ In order to use these farms as a means to industrialize the countryside, high quotas were set for the production of grain so that the crop could be sold and distributed at quick rates.⁷ These farms would bring the richest peasants together with the poorest peasants and the mass middle. In these collective farms, the wealthier peasants, called kulaks, and middle peasants were required to give up their land, extra food, and livestock to ensure that all the farmers in the countryside were given equal access to food and work. While working on these farms and producing grain for both themselves and for the rest of the Soviet Union, “peasants were required to sell their grain at low prices” in order to make up for what they were missing at home in order to maintain their quotas.⁸ To encourage peasants to continue moving onto these farms and producing grain, Stalin began to campaign for the eradication of the kulaks, with policies that became known as dekulakization. Kulaks were labeled “class enemies” due to them holding more money, land, and livestock than other people

⁶ Norman M. Naimark , and Norman M. M. Naimark, “Stalin’s Genocides,” (Princeton University Press, 2010), 34.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

in the countryside. By targeting richer peasants, Stalin had hoped to create a divide among the farmers to make their removal from the countryside easier to accomplish. Stalin targeted these people in order to stop any kind of rebellion that may arise due to collectivization, and as early as 1929, over 1.5 million so-called kulaks were either deported or killed.⁹ As quotas began to take a toll on the collective farms, Ukrainians along with other peasants began rebelling against the system due to having a common ground. Even though poorer peasants were more welcoming of Stalinist policies as it meant they were given access to the wealth of their neighbors that would be redistributed to them, peasants began banding together as the state continued to treat all of the peasants the same.¹⁰ Policies of dekulakization were now no longer being restricted to “well-to-do” peasants as Stalin began turning these policies against anyone who was against the collectivization of the countryside or against the communist party.

These policies of collectivization quickly grew out of hand as Stalin looked to “break the back of the independent peasantry,” and demanded that grain was collected from the Ukrainians “at all costs” regardless of their hardships.¹¹ As the famine grew worse, and Stalin’s dekulakization beared down on the whole population, Ukraine’s farmers were stuck in a corner. They were not allowed to seek food outside of Ukraine (Fig. 1) and many were punished by the secret



Fig. 1: Innitzer Collection - villagers leaving Kharkiv in search of food

⁹ Freeze, “Russia: A History,” 348; “The History of the Holodomor” <https://holodomormuseum.org.ua/en/the-history-of-the-holodomor/>

¹⁰ Freeze, “Russia: A History,” 348; Christian Noack, Lindsay Janssen, and Vincent Comerford, “Holodomor and Gorta Mór: Histories, Memories and Representations of Famine in Ukraine and Ireland,” (London: Anthem Press, 2012), 25.

¹¹ Naimark, “Stalin’s Genocides,” 34 and 43.

police.¹² These restrictions on top of quotas that continued to grow over time eventually led to the peak of the famine in the summer of 1933. During this time, Ukraine would see 28,000 people dying every day due to hunger and any food that was sent to the country was only given to those living in collective farms that were still capable of work.¹³ I had the opportunity to speak with a survivor, the grandmother of a classmate, who recounted her childhood during this time. She explained to me how collectivization and dekulakization led to her family and neighbors dying, along with seeing people being arrested, exiled, and or killed. As her community struggled to meet the grain quotas that they had every month, her family would use pickaxes to dig holes in the ground that they would put grain in to keep it hidden when the Soviets came during collection. When people were caught hiding food, they were often punished to set an example to the other peasants, some were taken away (Fig. 2).

She also described the times during the peak of the famine where people would kill their own dogs for food, while others even resorted to cannibalism in order to stay alive. Similar experiences can be seen



Fig. 2: Men digging for hidden grain in Donetsk

with other survivors such as Sviatoslav Karavansky. He stated in his testimony to the US Commission on the Ukrainian Famine that “the entire population lived on rations. The portions that were handed out continued to decrease... I, as a dependent, received 200 grams of black

¹² Patrick J. Kiger, “How Joseph Stalin Starved Millions in the Ukrainian Famine,” April 16, 2019; <https://www.history.com/news/ukrainian-famine-stalin> (accessed April 23, 2020); Naimark, “Understanding of Genocide,” 124-125.

¹³ “The History of the Holodomor” <https://holodomormuseum.org.ua/en/the-history-of-the-holodomor/>; Lana Babij and Natasha Sazonova, “Holodomor Facts and History: Chronology of Events Surrounding the Famine.” Holodomor 1932-33, n.d. (accessed April 23, 2020). <http://holodomorct.org/holodomor-facts-and-history/>

bread per day... There were rumors in Odessa that people were being arrested for selling human sausage in the marketplace.”¹⁴ When Stalin began to decrease grain quotas at the end of 1933, anywhere from 3 million to 10 million peasants were killed due to the famine; most of those dead were Ukrainians and the number of people who actually died during this time is still often debated today.¹⁵ Regardless of how many people died or who was the specific target of the famine, Ukraine as a country and as a culture continued to suffer during and after the Holodomor.

The experience of the victims of the famine grew worse as Stalin refused any help that was offered to those in the countryside and punished those who spoke out against his actions and policies. Any aid from allies or from organizations, such as the Red Cross, were turned away as Stalin and the Soviet government outright denied that there was any famine taking place in Ukraine.¹⁶ Since speaking of the famine was made illegal in the USSR, any survivors were left without the ability to grieve after the tragedy or seek justice for what had happened. In fact, even Ukrainians that were living in the United States failed to see justice served as President Roosevelt formally recognized the Soviet Union in 1933 and signed a new trade agreement with the country; later the Soviet Union would also be granted admission to the League of Nations as well.¹⁷ Having recognized the Soviet government and agreed to a trade deal, President Roosevelt and the United States government were not in a position to accuse Stalin or his government of

¹⁴ “Memoir,” HREC Education (University of Alberta: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies), accessed April 23, 2020, <https://education.holodomor.ca/teaching-materials/memoir/>

¹⁵ Babij and Sazonova, “Holodomor Facts and History,” <http://holodomorct.org/holodomor-facts-and-history/>

¹⁶ Nicole Loroff, Jordan Vincent, and Valentina Kuryliw, “Holodomor - Denial and Silences,” HREC Education, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://education.holodomor.ca/teaching-materials/holodomor-denial-silences/>

¹⁷ Babij and Sazonova, “Holodomor Facts and History,” <http://holodomorct.org/holodomor-facts-and-history/>

perpetuating a famine or committing genocide against the Ukrainians as it would put their new international relationship at risk. Those who were able to enter the Soviet Union from the West were greatly restricted and monitored during this time. Few were able to experience what was happening in Ukraine and many could not report what was happening because they were completely unaware of the situation in the country. Correspondents were often held in Moscow and had to be accompanied by Soviet personnel when leaving the city, they were forbidden from entering Ukraine, and those who were able to get out of the city were often put into “Potemkin villages,” or model villages to hide the conditions that the Soviet people were facing. One writer, Walter Duranty, was granted permission to enter Ukraine and reported that there was no famine in the country.¹⁸ Unfortunately, his report and the reputation of the *New York Times* would overshadow reporters who managed to enter Ukraine under the radar and wrote about the tragedies that were happening in the countryside.

Denial by the Soviet Union and by Western countries continued well into the 20th century. Classifying the Holodomor as a genocide became difficult when the United Nations published their official definition of the word after World War II and the Holocaust. Although Raphael Lemkin fought to include all groups in the definition of genocide, countries like France, the United States, and the Soviet Union all voted to remove social and political groups from the document as to avoid punishment for their crimes in the past.¹⁹ Due to the differences in definition, the Soviet Union and Ukraine, along with scholars, debated as to whether the Holodomor can be classified as a genocide. Some say that the famine was not a genocide since it

¹⁸ Loroff, Vincent, Kuryliw, “Denial and Silences,” <https://education.holodomor.ca/teaching-materials/holodomor-denial-silences/>

¹⁹ Naimark, “Understanding of Genocide,” 120.

targeted the citizens of the Ukrainian state, not necessarily a certain nationality or occupation.²⁰ These people argue that because there were other nationalities living in Ukraine who were also affected by the famine, that the disaster cannot be considered a genocide against Ukrainian people as they were not the sole victims. This argument is flawed however, as that would mean that the Holocaust was not a genocide committed against European Jews since there were other people that were targeted and put into concentration camps as well. During the latter half of the 20th century, the United Nations became more comfortable with referring to tragedies as genocide without undermining the Holocaust. Denial of the Holodomor began to be reversed when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Before then, people were still labeled as “anti-Soviet” for commemorating the Holodomor, like the survivors and legacies living in Canada; Robert Conquest would finally bring the Holodomor to the majority of the western public eye in 1986 with his book *Harvest of Sorrows*.²¹ After a long battle with Stalin and the Soviet Union, Ukrainians would begin to see justice served when the Soviet Union fell. The first two presidents of the newly independent Ukraine recognized the famine and classified it as a genocide against their people. Although Russia still denies that there was a famine in Ukraine, the United Nations recognized the famine as a “national tragedy” in 2003, and as of 2018, nearly 20 countries recognize the Holodomor as a genocide, with others recognizing it as a crime against humanity.²²

²⁰ Noack, Janssen, and Comerford, “Holodomor and Gorta Mór” (London: Anthem Press, 2012), 21-22.

²¹ Loroff, Vincent, Kuryliw, “Denial and Silences,”

<https://education.holodomor.ca/teaching-materials/holodomor-denial-silences/>); Naimark, “Understanding of Genocide,” 122.

²² Loroff, Vincent, Kuryliw, “Denial and Silences,”

<https://education.holodomor.ca/teaching-materials/holodomor-denial-silences/>); About the Source Euromaidan Press Staff, “See Which Countries Recognize Ukraine's Holodomor Famine as Genocide on an Interactive Map,” Euromaidan Press, May 3, 2019, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2018/11/24/see-which-countries-recognize-ukraines-holodomor-famine-as-genocide-on-an-interactive-map/>)

The tragedy that the Ukrainian people faced in 1932-1933 was up to debate as to whether or not the famine could be classified as a genocide, and for a long time, Stalin and the Soviet Government completely denied that a famine existed, let alone a systematic one. However, the Holodomor was a genocide. As with many other genocides throughout history, certain Ukrainians were labelled and targeted as the enemy, and the government made an effort to dispose of Ukrainian leaders in their community. The Holodomor was a genocide against Ukrainian people; although the famine affected other parts of the Soviet Union, Stalin and his government deliberately withheld food and aid from Ukraine and punished those who tried to seek help. The Holodomor was a tragedy that was covered up by the Soviet Union under the Five-Year Plans and Russification until the Ukrainian people saw freedom from their oppressors. Now out of the oppression that the Ukrainians faced at the hands of the Soviets, survivors of the famine along with their legacies can now commemorate their history and grieve the hardships that they had faced during the Holodomor.

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