

The Holodomor 1932-1933

by Valentina Kuryliw

1 One of the most devastating events of the twentieth century occurred in Ukraine after it was conquered and incorporated into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922. A genocide was carried out against the Ukrainian population in 1932–1933, which subsequently was denied, dismissed and hidden from world scrutiny for more than five decades. Although Ukrainians in the West had long maintained that millions had died as a result of the Soviet state’s policies, the true nature the Holodomor came to light only when archives in Moscow and Ukraine were opened following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In addition to those who died of starvation, countless numbers of Ukrainians were executed by firing squads, deported to Siberia or sent to the Gulag. The word *Holodomor* is used to describe death inflicted by starvation. It comes from two Ukrainian words: *holod*, meaning starvation, and *moryty* to cause a torturous death. For generations, the very mention of the Famine was forbidden in Ukraine, and the Holodomor was often a bitter secret guarded by survivors, hidden even from their own children. In the West, this great human tragedy was little known or acknowledged. How and why did this happen and who was responsible for the death of these millions?

Historical background.

2 After 250 years of Russian Tsarist rule, Ukrainians declared independence from Russia in January 1918 in the midst of war and revolution. Ravaged by war, revolutions and invasions by various armies, Ukraine lost the battle for independence. By 1921, Ukraine was partitioned with the central and eastern regions controlled by Bolshevik (Russian Communist) forces and the western region annexed by Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. Ukrainians became the largest non-Russian nationality within the newly formed USSR. To stabilize and rebuild the economy within the Soviet Union, the Soviet leadership launched a New Economic Policy in 1921 that provided greater economic freedom and permitted private enterprise, mainly independent farms and small businesses. To increase support for the Communist regime, a policy of indigenization (*korenizatsiia*) was introduced in 1923, which sought to develop the non-Russian Soviet republics culturally. Throughout much of the 1920s Ukrainian village populations flourished – socially, politically, educationally and demographically, bring about an increase in the number of successful independent farmers on the black soil (*chornozem*) of Ukraine. The Ukrainian SSR also experienced a notable cultural rebirth, with writers, artists and intellectuals creating innovative new works in the Ukrainian language.

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Lead-up to the Genocidal Famine

3 By 1928 Joseph Stalin won the power struggle within the Communist Party and became the dominant and undisputed leader of the USSR. His rule was characterized by the ruthless elimination of anyone and anything he perceived as a threat to his power. For Stalin, the independent-minded farmers and cultural freedoms in Ukraine constituted a threat. Starting in 1929, Ukraine's writers, artists, educators, intellectuals, and cultural elites were repressed for being too Ukrainian and not Soviet enough. In 1930 Stalin destroyed Ukraine's independent church, the Ukrainian Autocephalous (independent from the Russian) Orthodox Church, and its clergy. Following the attack on the intellectuals and the church, Ukrainian farmers, who made up over 80 percent of Ukraine's population and thus were carriers of the language and cultural, were next to be dealt a mortal blow.

4 In 1928 the first Five-Year Plan of the Soviet Union was put in place, which had as its aim the rapid industrialization of the USSR at any cost. As part of the Five-Year Plan of 1928–1933, the Soviet leaders conducted a massive reorganization of privately owned farms into collective (state-controlled) farms and imposed high crop requisition quotas. It was the sale of grain that was to pay for industrialization. Independent farmers were forced to give their private land, livestock and equipment to the collective farm without compensation. They became simply workers on state-controlled collective farms, paid only if the collective farm handed over the quota in crops set by Moscow.

5 The opposition of Ukrainian farmers to collectivization was fierce and revolts were widespread. The Soviet state reacted quickly and ruthlessly. First, the more well-to-do successful farmers and their families were labeled by the state as *kurkuls* in Ukrainian or *kulaks* in Russian, and these village leaders were targeted and demonized in the press by the Soviet government as “anti-Soviet unwanted elements.” Beginning in 1929, so-called *kurkuls/kulaks* and their families, about half a million in Ukraine, were executed by firing squads or deported, many to Siberian concentration camps. Anyone opposed to collectivization was conveniently labeled *kurkuls/kulaks* and dealt with accordingly.

Implementing the Holodomor

6 Having disposed of the leaders and successful farmers in Ukraine, the Soviet regime continued with the forced collectivization of agriculture, and the remaining farmers became the target. Several measures were implemented. The state imposed huge quotas for wheat, which were especially severe in Ukraine. Any opposition to collectivization was met with brutal force. Secret police (OGPU) and Red Army units were sent to villages to collect the very last bit of grain by force. The state then implemented policies that aimed not just at the collection

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of quotas, but also caused the death of millions of farmers in Ukrainian villages. Communist brigades were sent out to search the homes of individual farmers, supposedly for hidden grain and seed, but they also confiscated all kinds of foodstuffs – onions, pumpkins, vegetables pickled in jars for the winter – anything that families might use to survive. A law enacted in August 1932, The law of Five Stalks of Grain, stated that anyone, even a child caught taking any produce from a collective field could be shot or imprisoned for stealing “socialist property.” A decree in January 1933 specifically sealed the borders of Ukraine. The Soviet government also started a system of internal passports, which made it more difficult for farmers to leave their villages to seek food elsewhere, and to travel or obtain a train ticket without permission. Those caught attempting to flee to the cities or beyond Ukraine's borders, where conditions were better, were imprisoned or sent home to die. Over one-third of the villages in Ukraine and the Kuban (an area in the Russian republic adjacent to Ukraine where the population was mostly Ukrainian) were put on a blacklist (*chorna doska*) and blockaded for failing to meet grain quotas and were forbidden from receiving any supplies. This was essentially a collective death sentence for these villages. Settlers from Russia and Belarus were later brought in to resettle some of these depopulated areas, but not all remained.

7 In the meantime, the wheat stored in government warehouses was often sold abroad for export, rotted due to mismanagement or used for the production of alcohol. In fact, in 1932, Soviet wheat from Ukraine – confiscated from Ukrainian farmers by Red Army troops and secret police – was dumped on world markets at exceedingly low prices. Even Canadian farmers suffered because they could not match the low prices set for Soviet grain. Many could not believe that the people who had grown the wheat were being starved to death during a good harvest.

8 To minimize possible sympathy for the suffering of the local population, Stalin also attacked political leaders in Ukraine, imprisoning many and putting others to death. Some committed suicide. Some of these Ukrainian Communists were replaced with Party members from outside the Ukrainian SSR. Having brought the Ukrainian farmers to their knees and eliminated the political leadership that might harbour Ukrainian national awareness, there was little open opposition to Soviet rule. On the collective farms, those who survived became little better than slave labourers on land cultivated by their ancestors, which had served as the breadbasket of Europe for centuries. In the summer of 1933, after the Soviet state opened the granaries the famine subsided. The nation was devastated and defeated and had lost millions of its citizens.

Causes

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9 Why did this happen? This remains a very important question for historians. For decades, the USSR denied outright that the Famine had taken place, to say nothing of the charge that it was human-made. One group of historians attributed the loss of life to “excesses” or difficulties in the production of collectivization. There is no question that the disruption of agricultural life through the reorganization of land ownership and cultivation methods led to food shortages and death. However, this point of view does not account for the disproportionately massive starvation that occurred in Ukraine and in the Kuban, where the population was mostly Ukrainian .

10 Another school of historians has concluded that the Famine was deliberate and linked to a broader Soviet policy to subjugate the Ukrainian people. With the fall of the Soviet Union and opening of Soviet-era archives, researchers have been able to demonstrate that Soviet authorities undertook measures in Ukraine with the knowledge that the result would be the death of millions of Ukrainians by starvation. The most recent research leaves little doubt that the Holodomor was an act of genocide.

Nationalities Policy

11 As can be expected the economy was not the only concern of the newly created state – establishing Soviet power over the different nationalities was also a major concern. In 1923, the Soviets launched a policy called indigenization (*korenizatsiia*), which was aimed at attracting members of non-Russian nationalities into the Communist Party. In Ukraine the policy was called Ukrainization. It led to a cultural renaissance, growth of Ukrainian national identity, and also a more favorable view of the USSR. Many Ukrainians were conscious of their national identity, valued their language and culture, and considered themselves a separate and distinct ethnic group equal to the Russians. However, the resistance to collectivization and to forced grain requisitions in Ukraine were in Stalin's mind related to a growing Ukrainian nationalism that could lead to the separation of Ukraine from the USSR. In August 1932, at a critical time in the events leading up to the Holodomor, Stalin expressed his concerns that “if we do not correct the situation . . . we could lose Ukraine.”

Reaction to the Ukrainian Genocidal Famine

12 Some foreign journalists stationed inside the USSR largely ignored the Holodomor in the 1930s, or did not accurately report on it, while most governments whose countries were going through the Great Depression knew, but did nothing about it.

13 The journalist Walter Duranty, at the *New York Times*, who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his articles about the USSR wrote that:

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“ There is no actual starvation or deaths from starvation, but there is widespread mortality from disease due to malnutrition . . . conditions are bad. But there is no famine.”

14 There were a few journalists who wrote about starvation in Ukraine. Two such journalists were the Welshman Garth Jones, who wrote for the *New York American* and *Los Angeles Examiner*, and Malcolm Muggeridge, a British foreign correspondent. In his article “War on the Peasants” in the *Fortnightly Review*. May 1, 1933, Muggeridge wrote:

“On one side, millions of starving peasants, their bellies often swollen from lack of food; on the other, soldiers, members of the GPU (secret police) carrying out the instructions of the dictatorship of the proletariat. They had gone over the country like a swarm of locusts and taken away everything edible, they had shot or exiled thousands of peasants, sometimes whole villages, they had reduced some of the most fertile land in the world to a melancholy desert.”

15 In Ukraine it was impossible to mention publicly, teach about or to discuss the Holodomor openly until the late 1980s. Information about the Famine was only available in the West, mostly from eyewitness testimonies of refugees who had survived the event and escaped from the Soviet Union during World War Two.

16 A succession of Soviet governments formally denied that the Holodomor had taken place. Even today, authorities of the Russian Federation will admit that there were famines in the 1930s in the USSR, although they refused to acknowledge that Ukraine and Ukrainians were singled out in decrees that led to disproportionate deaths. The truth about the Holodomor started to become openly available to the citizens of Ukraine only on the eve of the breakup of the USSR. Eyewitnesses account and documentary evidence emerged that showed that Ukraine was indeed targeted for starvation in the wake of this shift in Soviet nationality policy. There were many ways of bringing about the destruction of a nation or its parts – starvation was one of these methods, and it was used against the Ukrainians in the twentieth century.

17 Until recently, the Holodomor was denied, covered up and ignored. Today, the Holodomor is commemorated worldwide each year on the fourth Saturday in November. Canada and numerous other countries have recognized the Holodomor as genocide. Across Canada, many school boards commemorate Holodomor Memorial Day each year on the fourth Friday in November. We remember and honour its victims and resolve to prevent such crimes from occurring again. “They are just too many to forget.”

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Reprinted with permission from Valentina Kuryliw, daughter of two survivors of the Holodomor, from her book titled "*Holodomor in Ukraine: The Genocidal Famine, 1932-1933*"

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