

The Holodomor: genocide or the result of bad planning?

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ABSTRACT

The 1932-33 famine in the Soviet Union killed an estimated six to eight million people. Although the famine extended throughout the Soviet Union, the highest concentration of deaths was within the Ukraine and Ukrainian populated areas with an estimated three to five million fatalities. This article examines the growth of nationalism within the Ukraine, the famine related policies implemented by the Soviet government, and the death rate per capita in both the Ukraine and Russia. The famine coincided with a campaign against Ukrainian nationalism and targeted peasants who had shown resistance to Soviet policies. The disproportionate number of deaths within the Ukraine and Ukrainian populated areas, combined with the deliberate actions of the Soviet government which actively contributed to the worsening of conditions within the country, show that the famine was an act of genocide intended to create mass fatalities and remove Ukrainian nationalist opposition.

The 1932-3 famine in the Soviet Union killed an estimated six to eight million people with three to five million of these deaths being in the Ukraine and the adjacent Kuban region, which had a Ukrainian majority (Naimark, 2010, p.70). Due to the large concentration of deaths within the Ukraine and Ukrainian populated areas, many have come to believe that the famine was an act of genocide.

Rafael Lemkin defined genocide as ‘a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the group themselves’ (Lemkin, 1973, p.79). Lemkin’s definition was used in the creation of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide and was used as a basis for the legal definition for the term (Moore, 2012, p. 373).

Based upon Lemkin’s definition of genocide, it is imperative to look beyond the sheer number of deaths caused by the famine in the Ukraine, but also to take into consideration the actions, or inactions, of the Soviet government and the reasons behind these. This article will discuss whether the Ukrainian famine was indeed an act of genocide or the consequence of bad planning that also affected the whole of the Soviet Union.

Actions of the Soviet Government

Recent awareness of the Holodomor began within the Ukrainian diaspora in 1983 and spread to Soviet Ukraine in the late 1980s (Kuzio, 2018, p.432). Since 1991 almost all Ukrainian governments have supported this growth in awareness and an estimated 77 percent of Ukrainians believe the Holodomor was a genocide (Kuzio, 2018, p.432). This increasing recognition culminated in the

November 2008 law on the Holodomor as an ‘act of genocide against the Ukrainian people’ which legalised Ukraine’s stance on the famine (Noack, Janssen & Comerford, 2012, p. 19). Internationally, thirteen countries have recognised the 1932-3 famine as a genocide including the USA, Australia, and Canada (Kas’ianov, 2010, p. 41). UNESCO and the European parliament have also adopted special documents for the famine (Kas’ianov, 2010, p. 41). There is an ongoing debate both within historiography and in society as to whether the famine in the Ukraine constitutes a genocide, with Cheryl Madden writing that ‘maps and other sources of primary source documentation expose damning facts about the deliberate nature of the Stalin-directed Holodomor and its anti-Ukrainian nature’ (2008, p.269).

The actions of the Soviet government leading up to and during the famine are one reason why many believe the famine was a genocide. In 1929 Stalin introduced collectivisation and industrialisation with the aim of transforming the Soviet economy. Collectivisation aimed to replace individual owned farms with state owned ‘collective’ farms and remove the power of the Kulaks, ‘capitalist’ peasants who had amassed wealth under the private farming system (Viola, 2005, p.205). Collectivisation was unpopular across the Soviet Union with millions of peasants moving from the countryside to the cities during the first Five Year Plan but it was particularly problematic in the Ukraine where individual farming was entrenched within society and many Ukrainian peasants were independent farmers (Klid & Motyl, 2012, p.33). Dekulakisation and grain-procurement campaigns were launched with the intention of creating fear amongst the peasants and to coerce them into joining the collective farms. However, as the collective farms meant the expropriation of their property, many peasants resisted joining (Klid & Motyl, 2012, p.33).

Ukrainian peasants in particular were opposed to these agricultural policies with almost half of collectivisation related uprisings in 1930 occurring in the Ukraine (Naimark, 2010, pp.71-72). From 1930, the Ukrainian farmers were given unrealistic

targets which by 1931 they were unable to meet. Beginning in 1931, a famine spread across the Ukraine with starvation related deaths occurring in the first half of 1932 (Klid & Motyl, 2012, p.34). In June 1932 two communist party officials in the Ukraine asked for relief from the Soviet government and a reduction in targets. Stalin however, maintained the existing unrealistic targets and blamed the famine on the actions of Ukrainian officials (Klid & Motyl, 2012, p.34).

Despite the growing famine in the Ukraine and requests for a reduction in targets Stalin insisted that grain be collected from Ukrainian peasants ‘at all costs’ (Naimark, 2010, p.72). Not only did the Soviet government fail to provide adequate aid for the Ukraine, they also introduced laws which created further difficulties for the already starving peasants. One example of these laws was the 1932 ‘five ears of corn’ law which declared all collective-farms ‘property equivalent to state property’ and introduced ‘draconian sentences, even death, for stealing state property’ (Klid & Motyl, 2012, p.34). These laws act as evidence for the genocidal nature of the famine as they were not introduced throughout the Soviet Union but were limited to the Ukraine and Ukrainian populated areas. The Soviet government’s targeting of the Ukraine was further shown in November 1932 when Stalin ordered that a ‘knockout blow’ be delivered to collective farmers that continued to resist, showing that he intended to remove those who were opposed to collectivisation through starvation (Naimark 2010, p.73). Anne Applebaum claims that the collectivisation policy in the Ukraine aimed to ‘physically eliminate the most active and engaged Ukrainians’, meaning those who resisted laws from the Soviet government and those who were engaged in nationalism (2017, p.347).

Growth of nationalism within the Ukraine

The growth of nationalism in the Ukraine influenced the Soviet government’s actions. As mentioned previously, Ukrainian peasants were opposed to policies set by Moscow such as collectivisation and grain requisitioning. The

willingness of the peasants to protest against the laws was indicative of the undercurrent of nationalism within the country, and was something that concerned Stalin. Ukrainian peasants were seen to be 'doubly suspect' as, alongside concerns over Ukrainian nationalism, peasants in general were viewed as backwards and counter revolutionary; this has resulted in the belief that the famine was engineered by Stalin in order to remove this part of society when it became apparent they were not going to cooperate with his plans (Naimark, 2010, p.72). Klid and Motyl acknowledge there was a famine in other parts of the Soviet Union but claim the spike in Ukrainian deaths in 1932 and 1933 was a result of the 'deliberate decisions and actions of Stalin' which were aimed at removing nationalism within the country (2012, p.34).

The removal of nationalism took two forms - the first being the aforementioned famine and subsequent laws which worsened the effects of it. The second were the laws and actions aimed at destroying Ukrainian culture and identity. Stalin was unable to separate the national question from the peasant question and, with his concerns over nationalism within the Ukraine growing, destroying the nation seemingly became a priority with starvation being chosen as the vehicle for achieving this (Thom, 2015, p.88). An example of his intent to dismantle Ukrainian nationalism was the December 1932 resolution which stopped the promotion of the use of the Ukrainian language; this was followed a month later by a law which stopped peasants from leaving the Ukraine to find food (Klid & Motyl, 2012, p.35).

The simultaneous enactment of the 'anti-Ukrainian' laws alongside laws which intensified famine suffering demonstrate how the government was using the famine to its advantage to remove nationalism within the Ukraine. Kuzio (2017) also noted this simultaneous nature, writing that the Holodomor took place after Ukrainianization was curtailed and alongside widespread repression in Ukraine of political, cultural, and religious elites. Renate Stark echoes the stance taken by Kuzio as she writes that the famine was a genocide intended

to punish citizens and remove Ukrainian identity, noting in particular that it took place alongside political repressions against academics, writers, and leaders of the Ukrainian communist party (2010, p.25). The introduction of anti-Ukrainian policies by Stalin provides compelling evidence for the argument that the famine was a genocide. Although the government had started to roll back Ukrainianization there was already a growing nationalist movement within parts of the Ukraine, and it would have been difficult to remove this solely through forcing a 'Russian' identity onto them - very likely, Ukrainian nationalism would simply have gone underground. The only way to permanently remove nationalism from the country was to remove the people who were supporting and advocating for it, which Stalin chose to do through starvation.

Ukrainian death rate

The high number of deaths within the Ukraine compared with the rest of the Soviet Union is one of the key pieces of evidence for the famine being an act of genocide. Consumption levels during the famine show that starvation was 'explicitly localised, with Ukraine as its epicentre' and although the famine did spread to the Volga region, the consumption there was 1.5 times higher than in Kiev (Nefedov, 2014, p.146). In Moscow and Leningrad there were few difficulties in getting food with consumption in these regions at a satisfactory level (Nefedov, 2014, p.146). The disproportionate number of deaths is blamed by many on the actions of the government which undoubtedly made suffering worse. An example of the actions taken by the Soviet government was the law that banned Ukrainian peasants from leaving the Ukraine to try to find food; this law was not introduced in other famine-hit areas of the Soviet Union and resulted in many Ukrainian peasants simply having to wait to die from starvation (Stark, 2010, p.27). A further example of Soviet government actions that worsened famine conditions was the continued exportation of grain throughout the period which totalled around 1.8 million tons in 1933 (Naimark, 2010, p.75).

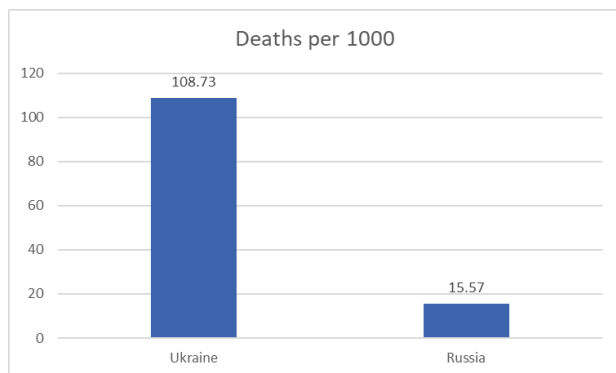


Figure 1- Death rate data from Rudnytskyi et al. (2015) *Demography of a man-made human catastrophe: The case of massive famine in Ukraine 1932–1933*.

It is difficult to establish the exact number of deaths the famine caused. Current estimates used in figure 1 put the overall total for deaths directly related to the famine at around 7.5 million with 3.9 million of these deaths in the Ukraine and 1.6 million in Russia. Figure 1 charts the number of deaths per 1000 in both Russia and the Ukraine. The number of deaths is much higher in the Ukraine with a 108.73 per 1000 death rate, compared with 15.57 per 1000 in Russia. The chart shows only the deaths which were a direct result of the famine. The higher death per capita rate in the Ukraine supports the contention that the famine was a genocide as both the Ukraine and Russia were subject to the same 'bad planning' of the five-year plan's industrial and agricultural policies, meaning that in theory, they should have suffered similarly. The disparity between the two rates can therefore be explained by the Ukraine focused policies of the Soviet government.

There can be little doubt that the famine that occurred across the Soviet Union affected the Ukraine more than other regions; however, there are a number of arguments laid out against the famine being a genocide. Starvation related deaths in other parts of the Soviet Union, famine relief provided to the Ukraine and natural causes such as low harvests and droughts are all used as arguments against the genocidal nature of the famine.

Arguments against the genocide

As the famine affected areas throughout the Soviet Union, it is argued by some scholars that it was a result of the bad planning of Stalin's industrialisation and collectivisation policies which indiscriminately affected many groups and did not have genocidal intentions (Dreyer, 2018, p.556). Kazakhstan is an area of the Soviet Union that was badly affected by the famine with an estimated 1.45 million deaths, which was around 38% of the population (Naimark, 2010, p.76). This high percentage of deaths within this non-Ukrainian region could provide evidence that the famine was not targeted but instead impacted multiple areas of the Soviet Union regardless of ethnicity. However, when discussing the impact of the famine in Kazakhstan, Naimark notes that it was the Soviet government's neglect of the Kazakh economy that led to an increase in deaths rather than the 'purposefully murderous action' that was shown by the Soviet government in the Ukraine (2010, p.76). For example, Kazakhs were not prevented from leaving the country to find food in the way that Ukrainians were (Naimark, 2010, p.76).

Another argument against the genocidal nature of the famine is the relief that was provided by the government, with some arguing that 'the organisation of genocide through famine is incompatible with the provision of massive food relief' (Noack et al., 2012, p.22). Kulchytskyi (as cited in Noack et al., 2012, p.22) quotes research which shows 35 government decrees on the provision of food to famine-hit regions of the USSR; from a total of 320,000 tons of grain, 264,700 tons were given to the Ukraine and Kuban region.

This supposed relief was also shown through the lowering of targets for the Ukrainian farmers with the grain levy being lowered three times in 1932 (Klid & Motyl, 2012, p.34). Although the targets were officially lowered, in reality they were still unrealistic, and in late 1932 Soviet leadership began coercing peasants into giving more grain by blockading villages and banning trade (Klid & Motyl, 2012, p.34). Alongside the relief that the

Soviet government gave famine hit areas there were also offers of relief for the Ukrainians specifically from outside of the Soviet Union. As the famine began to be reported internationally - with some newspapers denying it, most notably Walter Duranty of the New York Times, and others acknowledging it - many foreign governments began to offer aid (Mace, 1988, p.80). Despite the offers of relief from various countries, the Soviet government refused the offers and denied there was a famine in the Ukraine despite the increasing number of deaths (Naimark, 2010, p.73). The Soviet government's denial of the famine continued into the 1980s and whilst officials do now admit that there were famines throughout the USSR in the 1930s, they still refuse to acknowledge the deliberate nature of the Ukrainian famine. The common claim made by both the Russian government and Holodomor deniers is that the famine affected many people in different areas of the Soviet Union not just Ukrainians and that in the Ukraine specifically the higher levels of starvation were due to poor harvests and droughts.

The Ukrainian famine is a contentious topic amongst historians, especially those from the Ukraine and Russia. Whilst a number of western and Ukrainian historians agree that the famine in the Ukraine was intensified by Soviet government actions there are some who believe that the famine was not the result of deliberate actions but rather an unavoidable outcome of agricultural problems. In his 1991 article *The 1932 Harvest and the Famine of 1933* Mark Tauger writes that new Soviet archival data shows that the 1932 harvest was smaller than it had been assumed and he calls for a 'revision of the genocide interpretation' as the low 1932 harvest 'worsened severe food shortages already widespread in the Soviet Union at least since 1931 and... made famine likely if not inevitable in 1933'. (Tauger, 1991, pp.70-71) Tauger concludes that this new data indicates that whilst the famine was real it was the result of a 'failure of economic policy...rather than of a "successful" nationality policy against Ukrainians or other ethnic groups'. (Tauger, 1991, p.89). Tauger's conclusion that the famine was real but a result of 'failure of economic policy' is one

example in which the excuse of bad planning across the USSR is used when disputing the genocidal nature of the tragedy. The argument of 'natural causes' through drought and low harvest is one commonly used by the Russian government when referring to the famine despite the growing global awareness of the deliberate nature of the Holodomor. The debate within the historiography over the causes and contributing factors of the famine echoes the intense debate in the political sphere over how the famine should be classified (Klymenko, 2016, p.343). In the Ukraine in particular, the development of 'national' histories in the 1980s allowed many Ukrainian historians to fill in a 'blank spot' which they had previously not been able to discuss (Kas'ianov, 2011, p.72). This resulted in the questioning of the Soviet governments explanation of the famine.

Kulchytskyi (as cited in Noack et al., 2012, p.20) states that difficulties in researching the famine arise as the Holodomor was one of Stalin's 'most terrible crimes' that was 'carefully planned and masterfully covered up', making it difficult to establish exact death tolls. This difficulty in establishing a definitive narrative has resulted in the majority of research focusing on the causes, dynamic and geography of the famine (Klymenko, 2016, p.342), which in turn has been used by most to come to the conclusion that it was a genocide.

Although there is a general consensus that the famine was a genocide, there are disagreements over whether this was a deliberate action by Stalin, or purposeful inaction. Naimark argues that there is a great deal of evidence for it being a genocide with the initial government actions of collectivisation, requisitioning and continuation of unachievable targets, alongside the implementation of laws that made it impossible for the Ukrainians to leave and try find food elsewhere (2010, p.74). Although Naimark argues that there is evidence to show the government's actions targeted Ukrainians and had the intention of killing them, he admits that there is little to suggest that Stalin himself ordered the famine but that he knew it was disproportionately affecting the Ukraine and chose not to do anything

substantial to help (2010, p.77).

Stark also acknowledges the lack of evidence of a direct order from the government to kill Ukrainian peasants but says that this intention was shown through laws which the Soviet government only applied to Ukrainians, most notably the 'five ears of corn law' and the ban on peasants from leaving the Ukraine to find food (2010, p.27). Timothy Snyder's book *Bloodlands* claims that Stalin could have saved millions of lives if he had wanted, through suspending food exports, releasing grain reserves or giving peasants access to grain storage areas, and if he had done so, 'such simple measures' would have 'kept the death toll to the hundreds of thousands rather than [the] millions' (2011, pp.41-42).

Snyder puts forward the idea that Stalin chose to prioritise grain export profits over the lives of peasants and that 'he decided that peasants would die and he decided which peasants would die in the largest numbers: the inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine' (2011, p.395). When referring back to Lemkin's definition of genocide, this demonstrates a coordinated plan with the aim of annihilating the whole group. Naimark states that Stalin viewed Ukrainian peasants as 'enemies of the people' who deserved to die (2010, p.79) and Stark concludes that the Holodomor is a 'sinister example of an artificial and undoubtedly intentional induction of famine through unfavourable government decisions' (2010, p.2).

Controversies and legacies

The Holodomor is a contentious topic due, in part, to the ongoing conflict between Russia and the Ukraine. The 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia has been condemned by both the Ukraine and 100 of the 193 United Nations member states as a violation of international law (Mälksoo, 2019, pp.303-304). The annexation followed armed intervention by Russian forces and a referendum which has widely been deemed illegal despite Russia's claims that it was defending the 'historical and cultural links' between Crimea and Russia from the pro-EU post-Yanukovich government'

(Biersack & O'Lear, 2014, p.252). This idea of defending Russian citizens, ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, was necessary in legitimising Russian actions and was used alongside the claim that the people of Crimea had 'democratically seceded from Ukraine...asking for and receiving incorporation into the Russian Federation' (Biersack & O'Lear, 2014, p.252). The annexation of Crimea was followed by demonstrations by anti-government groups in East Ukraine and led to a war in the Donbas region between pro-Russian groups and the Ukrainian army. This fighting, alongside the continued occupation of Crimea, has resulted in a collapse in relations between Russia and the Ukraine.

Similarly, Russian politicians use the circumstance that some Ukrainians volunteered for the Waffen-SS and other German organizations in World War Two to denounce Ukrainian attempts to gain more independence from Russian influence as the work of "Neo-Nazis" in Kiev (Garton Ash, 2004). This Neo-Nazi label was used during anti-government protests in 2014 which were described as an 'illegitimate fascist coup' by the Kremlin but were defended as a 'national liberation and anti-corruption movement' that was 'pro-decency and opposed to a president who behaved like a puppet of Russia' by one Ukrainian protestor (Harding, 2014). On the other side of the argument, Ukrainian nationalists use the Holodomor to justify a sterner stance against Russia; all the while ignoring the historic involvement with SS troops and actions such as the ethnic cleansing and murder of the Polish minority in the Volhynia region by Ukrainian nationalists in 1943-44 (Snyder, 2003, p.155). The past of the Ukraine is very much its present, and vice versa, and explains why the historiography surrounding the Holodomor and the actions of the Soviet government during the period is such a controversial topic.

Conclusion

The Holodomor was initially part of a Soviet Union wide famine that occurred due to Stalin's economic policies as part of his first Five Year plan. As a part

of this first plan collectivisation, dekulakization and requisitioning were implemented throughout the Soviet Union. As a result, famine did occur in areas other than the Ukraine, notably in Kazakhstan and parts of Russia. However, the famine was considerably worse in the Ukraine and the Ukrainian populated Kuban due to specific actions taken by the Soviet government and the government's unwillingness to act in order to help Ukrainian peasants. The implementation of laws that prevented peasants from taking grain from collective farms or leaving the Ukraine to find food intensified suffering within the country. Combined with the lack of substantial relief from the government, and the refusal to accept foreign aid for the Ukraine specifically, the famine within the Ukraine was far worse than anywhere else in the Soviet Union. The famine, exacerbated by the actions of the Soviet government, coincided with a campaign against Ukrainian nationalism which aimed to dismantle the nationalist sentiment within the country that Stalin was so suspicious of and was targeted against peasants who had shown resistance to Soviet policies. The disproportionate number of deaths within the Ukraine when compared to other famine hit areas indicates deliberate actions were taken to ensure mass fatalities in the region; and it is therefore plausible that the Ukrainian Famine of 1932 to 1933 can be labelled as a genocide.

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