Stalinism and The Holodomor

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"Why should we help Spanish people? They did not help us when we starved in 1933!" a Ukrainian collective farmer told grain procurement officials in 1936.[1] This exclamation reveals several things. Firstly, Ukrainian grain was used to help the republicans, whom the Soviet Union supported during the Spanish Civil War. Secondly, 1933 refers to the artificial famine in Soviet Ukraine, known as the Holodomor, that claimed 4 million lives from 1932 to 1933.[2] Finally, despite silencing the fact of the famine, the Holodomor had an enduring presence in the lives of modern Ukrainians.

The Holodomor, which translates as "death by hunger", is a complex phenomenon that includes the 1932–33 famine and the concurrent persecution of the Ukrainian intelligentsia, the political elite, and the Orthodox Church. The sheer scale of the destruction of human life dominates the Holodomor's understanding in Ukraine and western academia in the last forty years. Yet despite the colossal loss of life in peacetime, historical discussion was silenced by the Soviet regime almost until its collapse in 1991. There was no famine relief, no appeal for help to the international community, or even a halt in grain exports. Instead, over several years the Soviet authorities continued to facilitate policies that resulted in people starving to death. Strikingly, even in the western historiography of the Soviet Union, the famine in Ukraine has often been overlooked or located firmly within the context of an all-Soviet famine and cast as a collateral cost of modernization and industrialization, or as part of a broader ideological clash between the Communist authorities and the peasantry.

Conversely, the political roots of the famine in Ukraine could be found not so much in Communist ideology or modernization, but in the events preceding the Holodomor, namely the fall of the Russian Empire and the founding of the Soviet Union itself. Following the February Revolution, the national aspirations of many nations mushroomed across the former empire. Ukrainians were no exception to this development, even if a future Ukrainian state was ini-

tially envisaged as existing within a new, federative Russia.[3] However, as the political struggle within Russia intensified and the Bolsheviks seized power, Ukrainian leaders proclaimed independence. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians did not support Bolsheviks and voted for other parties in the elections for the Constituent Assembly.[4] When the Red Army invaded in 1918 to confiscate Ukrainian bread for the workers of Moscow and Petrograd, they were met with widespread resistance.

Amid the civil war in Russia, that broke out at the end of 1917, the effort of the newly established Ukrainian state army, military involvement from Imperial Germany and Poland and offensives carried out by the anti-Bolshevik Whites and various insurgent forces effectively removed Ukraine and its extensive grain production from Russian control for almost two years. Struggling to feed the Russian proletariat, which was the Communists' main support base, at a critical time, Stalin secured bread by using terror in Tsaritsyn, a grain-producing area in South Russia. Yet, the risks of losing Ukraine left an indelible impression on the Bolshevik leadership. While the Reds eventually defeated the Ukrainian forces, and their numerous other adversaries, the war had taught them an important lesson: using terror in procuring grain and controlling food distribution established total control, whereas national movements remained a problem to be resolved.

Upon its founding, Bolshevik Russia faced significant challenges: its economy was in ruins, with widespread famine in the Volga region, and there was little support for the new Soviet regime in the non-Russian republics. Demonstrating a pragmatic approach, Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy that allowed for private initiatives to revive the economy and invited international relief organizations to aid the starving. Alongside this, the Bolsheviks also sought to appease the various national movements with the policy of indigenization by supporting and promoting local languages and cultures. In Soviet Ukraine, indigenization was known as *Ukrainization*. However, neither of these policies could last without further jeopardizing the Kremlin's rule in Ukraine or compromising communist ideology over the long term.

Education in the Ukrainian language and promotion of Ukrainian culture only accentuated the development of a Ukrainian political nation. Considering Ukrainian literature's long history as a public forum without open political debate, Ukrainian writers immediately questioned Moscow's imperial grip on the republic. A prominent author, Mykola Khvyliovy, urged his peers to get "Away from Moscow!"[5] Such expressions raised concerns of the party. Indeed, many modern nations had emerged with the spread of the printed word, so

one had to choose carefully what was to be taught, published, or broadcast. Repression against the Ukrainian intelligentsia followed swiftly. Show trials such as that for the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine,[6] with consequent imprisonment and executions, continued well into the 1930s with civil society being effectively destroyed.

Neither did private farming bode well within a Soviet command economy in which there was little room for personal property, especially privately-owned arable land. The collectivization policy sought to create large farms in which land, livestock, and implements were the property of the collective with agriculture itself being centrally managed. Moreover, without any historical precedent, there was no body of expertise who could advise on creating such farms. Instead, village officials and activists, students, civil servants, and workers were recruited to facilitate the policy on the ground using only vague guidelines. In practice, they confiscated property, pressured peasants to join the farms by imposing fines, or threatening them with dispossession. The wealthiest and those opposed to these actions were summarily executed or deported in their hundreds of thousands. Collectivization, from the outset, devolved into mass violence.[7]

Naturally, much of the peasantry resisted. When one's land, implements, and livestock are confiscated; their industrious neighbours, or those critical of Soviet policies, are sent to Siberia or northern Russia; and one is told to work for free for an unelected government, would they be motivated to commit themselves? Some took to arms, and many protested by sabotaging the founding of collective farms, or simply refusing to work. Others voted with their feet by abandoning their farms and villages for the city. The countryside was devastated.

In early 1930, the security services reported to Stalin that there was no Soviet rule in dozens of districts in Ukraine: peasants expelled village officials, took their property back, and stalled the state's sowing campaigns.[8] Resistance to collectivization was fiercer in Ukraine than anywhere else in the Soviet Union, and some local party leaders in Ukraine were hesitant to follow the Kremlin's orders. The republic's rebelliousness must have reminded the Kremlin of the events of ten years prior, posing a security risk, once again, to the wider Soviet project. If collectivization failed in Ukraine, it could just as easily fail in other parts of the country. Moreover, resistance to Soviet policies following displays of defiance by the Ukrainian intelligentsia presented another long-term problem that could see national sentiment smouldering in

the countryside, a living reminder of the possibility of a non-Soviet Ukrainian state.

Establishing control over Ukraine manifested in many ways, including the famine. Indeed, all rebellions could be crushed when those rebelling, and their families, had been starved and could no longer resist. Nevertheless, policies addressing the problem of an emergent national movement had to be more lasting.

On a political level, the Communist leadership of Ukraine could no longer be autonomous. The risk of losing Ukraine, as Stalin succinctly put in a 1932 telegram to his representatives, was associated with the republican leadership coming to resembling a parliament or rather "a caricature of a parliament"[9] when they questioned the impossible grain procurement targets that had been set for that year. Indeed, Stalin had even dispatched his trusted envoys, Viacheslav Molotov and Lazar Kaganovich, to push the impossible targets for grain procurement and later to oversee the famine-inducing policies on the ground. In 1933, he subsequently sent another prominent Russian communist, Pavel Postyshev, to assume leadership over the communist party in Ukraine. In such a way control over republican bosses was established during the famine.

In 1932, the Kremlin decided how much grain would be procured in Ukraine over winter 1932–1933. Stalin dismissed all concerns from republican leaders regarding the impossibility of meeting the set targets (these were later lowered but never met). Ukrainian district officials raised similar problems at the III Party conference in Kharkiv in July 1932, but Stalin's envoys, now backed by the republican leadership, simply muted any dissenting voices.[10] As the targets were passed down to the district and village-levels in August, a third of local officials refused to enforce them.[11] While they were replaced with more complacent staff, during the 1932–33 grain procurement campaign that followed, the desertion rates among urban activists in some districts reached 40 per cent, while suicides were not uncommon.[12]

On the ground, village, councils, and collective farm managers organized teams of activists to search farmers' houses for grain. To prevent the starving people from seeking food in the fields, a law prohibiting the theft of socialist property was passed in August 1932. From November, brigades of activists confiscated livestock if no grain could be found, or any other supplies or valuables that could be exchanged for food. On rare occasions when targets were met, collective farms and farmers were given additional targets to meet. Additionally, in late 1932, hundreds of villages and, at times, entire districts were "blacklisted" for failing to meet grain procurement targets. That meant the con-

fiscation of all supplies, including kerosene and matches, which made cooking and preparing food impossible.

In December 1932, another decree prevented peasants from obtaining passports, necessary for purchasing train tickets to escape the famine (collective farmers were not automatically entitled to passports until 1974). Following the directive by the Central Committee of All-Soviet Communist Party (Bolshevik) of 22 January 1933, the borders between Ukraine and Russia and Kuban and Russia were sealed to prevent the victims from leaving the Ukrainian countryside to travel to the other parts of the USSR. Within 50 days of the directive, 219 thousand peasants were detained, most of them returned to the villages they had attempted to escape.[13] All the measures listed above serve as proof of intent to starve the victims by deliberately creating conditions incompatible with life.

Thus, the Soviet authorities were able to dictate who would eat and who would not, demonstrating that resistance would not be tolerated with those who persisted being punished. In March 1933, at the height of the Holodomor, the first secretary of the Central Committee of Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine Stanislav Kosior wrote to Stalin, informing him that "the famine has not yet taught Ukrainian collective farmers a lesson"[14] and that they were planning additional measures to prolong it into the summer. Understanding no law on socialist property would stop the starving from going into the fields during the summer of 1933, Kosior ordered half a million of armed young people to guard the crops, manning watch towers and undertaking foot and horseback-patrols.[15]

Involving the local population in facilitating the famine translated into establishing a power balance in the villages that lasted until the USSR's collapse. Having proved their loyalty, these local perpetrators subsequently became the village leaders and school masters. For many years after the famine, the victims were obliged to observe them wearing their clothes, using their farming implements, or teaching their children. Most poignantly, no one was punished or faced any consequences for the millions of deaths.

Desperate to survive, people ate grass, berries, mushrooms, herbs, tree bark, acorns, chaff, and other substitutes. Local survival strategies were diverse and heart-wrenching. Mothers took their children to orphanages, hoping they would have a better chance of surviving there while many sold family heirlooms to the newly established chain of state-owned shops, which purchased gold from the rural population. The opening of such a system of shops by the state was possibly eerily coincidental. Some took the last of their

valuables across the border to Russia and Belarus, hoping to exchange them for meagre amounts of foodstuffs. As in other severe famines, there were reports of cannibalism.[16] Most victims were buried in unmarked mass graves.

In 1933, local officials organized simple creches where starving children would receive a small, but regular, ration of porridge. This was a lifeline for many with survivors later commenting that the state saved their lives amid the famine. Yet it was the same state that had taken food from them and their parents, creating that very famine. Moreover, while Ukrainians continued to die of starvation throughout the first half of 1933, the USSR proceeded to ship millions of tonnes of Ukrainian grain abroad in hopes of securing more international influence amid the Great depression.[17] The leadership was acutely aware of the situation on the ground yet chose not to help majority of the starving and to export available resources instead.

The famine subsided in the late summer of 1933, when the new harvest was taxed rather than confiscated, and farmers were permitted to keep small private allotments. Millions lost their lives in the meantime with thousands of survivor accounts describing unimaginable trauma. Unable to leave the village, those who remained had to rebuild their lives under the gaze of the officials who had overseen the recent period of starvation. Horrifically, victims were not even allowed to mourn their dead. One even faced accusation of anti-Soviet propaganda for mentioning the famine in public, just like the collective farmer referenced in the opening of this chapter. Stripped of their possessions, or anything that reminded them of life before the famine, Ukrainian peasants became Soviet, or so it seemed.

The man-made character of the famine, accompanied with persecution of non-Soviet Ukrainian intelligentsia and political elite led many scholars to interpret the Holodomor as genocide.[18] Key questions for the historians, however, address the events themselves before establishing pre-existing causal connection between various pieces of evidence. Establishing the intent to destroy Ukrainians as a nation in whole or in part – central point for conceptualising the Holodomor as genocide is a prospect made all the more challenging by the fact that no expression of this exists in the documentation. Stalin did not leave any clear articulation for his motives. The intention can be thus revealed through the policy itself, rather than the pre-mediation of the Holodomor. Intent could be discerned from the actual process of genocide, which was a fluid, complex development rather than a formally defined period of starvation. This could also be shown in response to the famine's emergence as a result of earlier collectivization efforts and grain procurement.

While the famine certainly affected other parts of the Soviet Union, could these areas be described as having already had their borders sealed and certain districts blacklisted, been subjected to proportionally impossible targets, or seen their national intelligentsia and political elite persecuted? Ultimately, political leaders can demonstrate intent via the results of their policies, whether they articulate these intentions or not. Still, regardless of motivation, they are always responsible for the consequences.

Despite the available evidence, many revisionist historians continue to deny not only the intent in the Holodomor but avoid the word 'victims' in describing those who experienced starvation or died as a result of it (which would imply the existence of perpetrators and intentionality). Instead, they discuss 'human cost',[19] thus not distinguishing human acts that led to deaths from occurrences like natural disasters. In the same vein, they interpret the famine as the result of "a poorly conceived and miscalculated policy",[20] "a consequence of the decision to industrialise this peasant country at a breakneck speed"[21] or "a fight to break the anti-Soviet spirit of the peasantry" by Soviet leaders who miscalculated how tough they would be without causing the economically undesirable outcome of mass death.[22] The root of this reluctance can be traced across Slavic studies to the Cold War, when the Soviet Union was juxtaposed with the West. Its unique history and culture were studied and, to some degree, explored with fascination as an alternative to the shortcomings of the West. Therefore, seeking intent in the policies and response to the policies that led to the death of millions presents an epistemological challenge to the Slavists who tend to overlook mass violence nature of collectivisation.

Such an approach, however, ignores the direct mechanisms of the policy. Nobody can survive without food. The argument of an ill-informed leader and a dysfunctional bureaucracy does not stand scrutiny either. We now have unearthed sufficient archival evidence, including correspondence between Molotov, Kaganovich, Stalin and others,[23] to suggest that the leadership was very well-informed and, as the Purges show, deeply involved in processes on the ground. Upon sending Molotov to Ukraine, Stalin telegraphed the former instructions on working with district officials on procurement. These orders were sent down directly from Stalin to those on the ground. To suggest that the Party's General Secretary had been misinformed, brutality was driven from below while blaming a dysfunctional bureaucracy is to ignore ample evidence concerning the mechanisms of a man-made famine.

In fact, in his correspondence with Molotov and Kaganovich, Stalin explains disobedience of the rank-and-file perpetrators of the Holodomor as

indicating their possible involvement in the Ukrainian national (*Petliurite*) movement through which they served as agents for Poland. Indeed, there are many references to the 1919 peasant uprising against the Bolsheviks in Ukraine. In the correspondence exchange between the Kremlin and Kharkiv it is stressed that Ukrainian "kulaks are different to those in Russia proper, and they are more cultured,"[24] referring to their political experience accumulated during the Civil War. That is where a link between intent, social, and national, comes to the fore, making Ukraine's 1932–33 famine distinct from the all-Soviet famine that took place from 1931 to 1934.

Finally, not articulating one's intention to kill millions does not imply an absence of intent. The results of the repressive policies point to the goal of starving certain groups with the pursuit of such policies having been a political choice. In his many speeches Stalin expressed desire to improve the lives of ordinary people yet his decisions took lives of millions. In *Dizziness with Success,* he eloquently accuses the rank-and-file perpetrators of having been guilty of the worst excesses while continuing to defend collectivization as a popular policy. His political speeches could not be taken at face value, especially in Soviet history. It is more important to see what was happening in internal correspondence, intelligence reports, and survivor testimonies than to assume the benevolence of their totalitarian leaders based on their party membership.

Brutalising and denial of fundamental rights for the rural population led not only to humanitarian catastrophe but contributed to the very demise of the Soviet Union. Young people strived to leave the countryside by joining the army or seeking-out education and urban-based employment under Brezhnev. Students and workers were sent to the villages to help with sowing or harvesting to address the workforce shortage at the collective farms as collectivized agriculture proved economically unviable. The sheer scale of the Holodomor, however, demonstrated perennial essence of the Russian rule over Ukraine – exploitative and repressive. As Soviet repressive machine fell apart in the 1980s, memories of the Holodomor became the subject of public discussion and academic research in Ukraine, and the role of the Kremlin in organising the famine came to the fore. When the regime was challenged in 1991, Ukraine was one of the first to leave the Union by a popular vote. Upon the collapse of the empire, this time the USSR, the Holodomor became central to the nation-building process in Ukraine and provides for a better understanding of Ukraine's relations with Russia and its Soviet past.

Notes

1 Upravlinnia SBU v Poltavs'kii oblasti, f. R, spr. 15246, ark. 7.

2 Estimations of the number of victims vary, but the dominant consensus among demographers and historians is 3.9 million. See: Jacques Vallin, France Meslé, Sergei Adamets, and Serhii Pyrozhkov "Kryza 1930 rr," in France Meslé and Jacques Vallin (eds.), *Smertnist' ta prychyny smerti v Ukraïni u XX stolitti* (Kyiv: Stylos, 2008), pp. 37–65; Omelian Rudnyts'kyi, Nataliia Levchuk, Oleh Wolowyna, and Pavlo Shevchuk, "Famine losses in Ukraine in 1932 to 1933 within the context of the Soviet Union," in Declan Curran, Lubomyr Luciuk, and Andrew Newby (eds.), *Famines in European Economic History: The Last Great European Famines Reconsidered* (London: Routledge, 2015).

3 According to the Third Universal of the Central Rada of the Ukrainian People's Republic on 20th November 1917. TsDAVOU, f. 1115, Op. 1, spr. 4, ark. 9. Also see Johannes Remy. "'It Is Unknown Where the Little Russians Are Heading to': The Autonomy Dispute between the Ukrainian Central Rada and the All-Russian Provisional Government in 1917," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 95:4 (2017), pp. 691–719. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.95.4.0691. Accessed 31 Jan. 2023.

4 Dando, William A. "A Map of the Election to the Russian Constituent Assembly of 1917," *Slavic Review* 25:2 (1966), p. 317.

5 Palko, Olena. ""Away from Moscow": a battle against provincialism in Soviet Ukrainian Literature." *Peripheral Histories?* December 11, 2017, https://www.peripheralhistories.co.uk/post/away-from-moscow-a-battle-against-provincialism-in-soviet-ukrainian-literature. Accessed 31 Jan. 2023.

6 On the SVU trial see, Myroslav Shkandrij and Olga Bertelsen. "The Soviet Regime's National Operations in Ukraine, 1929–1934," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23617371. Accessed 31 Jan. 2023.

7 L. Viola, V. Danilov et at., eds. *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927–1930. The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 148. On collectivization in Ukraine as mass violence see Valerii Vasyl'iev and Lynne Viola, *Kolektyvizatsiia i selians'kyi opir na Ukraïni (lystopad 1929–berezen' 1930)* (Vinnitsa: Logos, 1997).

8 TsDAHOU, f. 1, op. 20, spr. 3191, p. 37.

9 Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaka: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 298.
10 TsDAHOU, f. 1, op. 1, spr. 377, ark. 198, 209.
11 *Holod-henotsyd 1932–1933 rokiv v Ukraïni: The Famine-Genocide of 1932–1933 in Ukraine*, ed. Iurii Shapoval (Kingston, Ontario: Kashtan Press, 2005), pp. 146–211.
12 TsDAHOU, f. 1, op. 1, spr. 395, ark. 147.
13 Stanislav Kul'chyts'kyi, *Holodomor 1932–1933 rr iak genotsyd* (Kyiv: Nash Chas, 2008), p. 310.
14 TsDAHOU, f. 1, op. 20, spr. 6277, ark. 3.
15 TsDAHOU, f. 1, op. 1, spr. 406, ark. 141–142.
16 Warren, Joyce W. and Elissa Bemporad. *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).
17 On Soviet exports and Torgsin during the famine see Elena Osokina, *Stalin's Quest for Gold. The Torgsin Hard-Currency Shops and Soviet Industrialization* (Ithaka: Cornell University Press, 2021).
18 Most Ukrainian researchers agree on the Holodomor constituting a genocide, they include, among many others, Stanislav Kul'chyts'kyi, *Holodomor 1932–1933 rr iak genotsyd*; Kul'chyts'kyi, "The 1932–1933 Holodomor in Ukraine within the Context of the Soviet Genocide against the Ukrainian Nation," In Volodymyr Vasylenko and Myroslava Antonovych (eds.) *The Holodomor of 1932–1933 in Ukraine as a Crime of Genocide under International Law*. pp. 74–94 (Kyiv: Kyiv-Mohyla Academy Publisher, 2012); Roman Serbyn, "The Ukrainian Famine of 1932–1933 as Genocide in the Light of the UN Convention of 1948," *The Ukrainian Quarterly* LXII:2 (2006).
19 Christopher Ward, *Stalin's Russia* (London: Edward Arnold, 1993), Chapter 3.
20 Ronald G. Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 228.
21 R. W. Davies and Stephen G. Wheatcroft, *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931–1933* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 441.
22 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team. The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 81.
23 On involvement of the top leadership and the mechanism of the famine from the top see Valerii Vasyl'iev, and Iurii I. Shapoval, *Komandyry velykoho holodu: Poïzdky V. Molotova i L. Kahanovycha v Ukraïnu ta Pivnichnyi Kavkaz, 1932–1933 rr.* (Kyiv: Heneza, 2001); Valerii Vasyl'iev, et al. (eds.) *Partiino-radians'ke kerivnytstvo Ukraïns'koï SSR pid chas Holodomoru 1932–1933: Vozhdi.*

Pratsivnyky. Actyvisty. Zbirnyk dokumentiv ta materialiv (Kyiv: Instytut istorii Ukraiiny, 2013); Lynne Viola, "Stalin's Empire," in Timothy Snyder and Ray Brandon (eds.) *Stalin and Europe: Imitation and Domination, 1928–1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 19–38.

24 TsDAHOU, f. 1, op. 20, spr. 6277, ark. 3.

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