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Why the Ukrainians Fight The Holodomor (1932–33)

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Abstract: Nations fight for several reasons. The nation may have been invaded, as was Ukraine by Russia. Nations will fight for political or religious reasons. Nations will also fight due to historical animosities. In 1932–33, Joseph Stalin inflicted on Ukraine an intentional man-made famine that killed 3–7.5 million people. This action was taken to consolidate Soviet political power and enforce collectivization of farmland. The Holodomor is firmly embedded in the history and mindset of the Ukrainian people. It is one of the reasons they feel the need to fight the invaders from Moscow. This article explains how historical events can fuel future conflicts, and these narratives can serve as a resource to establish national identity and solidarity.

Keywords: genocide, famine, political repression, collectivization

There is a horrible war going on in Ukraine. Russia has invaded, and the Ukrainians are fighting with great skill and courage against the invaders. One motivation for the fierceness of their resistance is a historical event

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known as the Holodomor. When describing the importance of the Holodomor, Shaun Walker stated that “the decade leading up to the Second World War is almost as critical for understanding the recent clash between Moscow and Kiev as the history of the war itself. In Soviet Ukraine, after a brief flourishing of Ukrainian identity, in the 1920s a devastating, unnecessary famine during Stalin’s collectivization drive caused millions of deaths in what became known as the Holodomor.”¹

Ukraine was a vassal republic of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics from 1919 to 1991. It was known as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. One of the darkest chapters in the history of Ukraine was the intentionally caused man-made famine known as the Holodomor that occurred between 1932 and 1933. The Holodomor was a genocide in which an estimated 3–7.5 million Ukrainians perished.² The term *genocide* was coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944 and defines genocide as an intentional action to destroy a people.³ Genocides are usually conducted for religious, ethnic, racial, or political reasons.⁴ The Holodomor was inflicted on the people of Ukraine by the government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics for political reasons.

Introduction

The history of relations between Russia and Ukraine has been a tumultuous one filled with wars, conflicts, and political turmoil. Humans have lived in the area known as Ukraine since at least 32,000 BCE.⁵ Both the Russians and the Ukrainians trace their origins back to the Kievan Rus (882–1240 CE). Although some historians disagree, many historians such as Michael T. Florinsky, Gregory L. Freeze, and Paul Dukes acknowledge that the Kyivan Rus was a forerunner of modern Russia.⁶ The Rus had accepted Christianity by 988 CE when Prince Volodymyr was baptized in Chersonesus.⁷ Kyiv or Kiev was the capitol and by the eleventh century had become one of the largest countries in Europe.⁸ The area was made rich by trade routes between Asia and Europe. The Kyivan Rus came to an end in 1240 with the sacking of Kyiv by the Mongols of the Golden Horde under Batu Khan.⁹ The area became filled with small principalities who paid tribute to the Golden Horde until the fourteenth century when the Polish and Lithuanians began to contest the Mongols for control of Ukraine. Kyiv was captured by the Lithuanians in 1362.¹⁰

Anne Applebaum observed: “By the late Middle Ages, there was a distinct Ukrainian language, with Slavic roots, related to but distinct from Polish or Russian, much as Italian is related to but distinct from Spanish or French.”¹¹ The Ukrainian language developed from Old East Slavic, which is also an ancestor of Russian.¹² Ukrainians had their own foods, their own customs and local traditions, and their own villains, heroes, and legends. Like other European nations, Ukraine’s sense of identity sharpened during the eighteenth and nine-

teenth centuries. But for most of its history, the territory we now call Ukraine was, like Ireland or Slovakia, a colony that formed part of other European land empires.

In 1569, Ukraine came under Polish control. After a rebellion of the Cossacks against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that resulted in the Russo-Polish War (1654–67), Ukraine came under Muscovite jurisdiction.¹³ Russian rule of Ukraine was challenged in 1708 when Charles XII of Sweden invaded the area. The Russians defeated the Swedes at the Battle of Poltava in 1709 and most of Ukraine remained in Russian hands. Poland was partitioned by Austria-Hungary in 1793 and in 1795 by Russia, which caused Poland to cease to exist as a nation until after World War I. In 1876, the Edict of Ems bans all Ukrainian language publishing and teaching in the Russian Empire.¹⁴ Ukraine and Ukrainian nationalism were repressed.

The Imperial Russian Empire collapsed in February 1917. Many Ukrainians felt that this was a time for an independent Ukraine. During this time of revolution, the Central Rada (Українська Центральна Рада, *Ukrayins'ka Tsentral'na rada*) or Central Council of the Ukraine became the revolutionary Ukrainian parliament after the All-Ukrainian Congress in April 1917. The Central Rada declared the Ukrainian People's Republic as an independent nation and free of external control on 9 January 1918.¹⁵ The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 also fanned hopes of success for Ukrainian independence. The Poles and the Soviets had other ideas. The Central Rada lasted until the Ukrainian-Soviet War (1917–21).

A workers and peasants military force formed and was known as the Revolutionary Insurgent Army or sometimes the “Black Army” since they fought under the anarchist black flag. This anarchist army was sometimes known as *Makhnovshchyna* after the anarchist, Nestor Makhno.¹⁶ Applebaum noted Leon Trotsky's description of Makhno's followers as “Kulak plunders” who “throw dust in the eyes of the most benighted and backward peasants.”¹⁷ The Black Army had up to 10,000 cavalry, 40,000 foot soldiers, and artillery. They fought the Germans, the Poles, the Russian anti-Bolshevik “White” forces under counterrevolutionary Anton I. Denikin, and the Soviet forces for control of Ukraine. They also fought other Ukrainian nationalist forces at times. In 1920, Makhno formed a truce with the Soviet forces to fight the White Russian forces under General Pyotr N. Wrangel and prevent them from seizing the grain harvest in Ukraine. After the defeat of the White Russian forces, the Red Army received instructions from Vladimir Lenin to arrest Makhno as a counterrevolutionary. Makhno fled first to Romania and then to Paris, where he died in 1934 of tuberculosis. The constant fighting in Ukraine between 1918 and 1921 resulted in Kyiv changing hands several times and many villages being laid to waste.¹⁸ Lucien van Der Walt observed that the Bolshevik Revolution under Lenin had

gone from a revolutionary movement to a dictatorship “because Marxism/Bolshevism is based on the idea of socialism from above.”¹⁹ It was this consolidation and centralization of Communist power by the Soviet government that ultimately resulted in the Holodomor.

The Setting

Many peasants chose to sell their grain and other agricultural goods at village markets rather than sell their grain to the state. Many of these markets operated on an underground basis. Lenin denounced these black-market traders as ideological enemies in 1919. Applebaum noted that “from there he needed to make only a short logical leap to the denunciation of the peasants who sold grain to these speculators.”²⁰ Stalin was put in charge of matters in southern Russia, including Ukraine, with orders to collect grain for Moscow. To do this, Stalin used the Red Army. Peasant rebellions broke out in several places as collectivization and grain requisitions were very unpopular.

In 1919, the Bolsheviks were quickly consolidating power in Ukraine. Ukrainian newspapers were banned. The use of the Ukrainian language in schools was banned as well as Ukrainian theaters. The Soviet secret police, the Cheka, began rounding up Ukrainian intellectuals and accused them of separatism. People who spoke Ukrainian on the street were subject to being shot by the Russian soldiers that occupied Kyiv.²¹ Private land was confiscated, and an attempt was made to collectivize the farms.

Bernard Pares noted that the word *kulak* means fist. It was used before the revolution for hard-fisted merchants or for peasants who got a hold of their fellows and were probably village usurers. They also gained power over others by hiring labor or leasing out machinery or land. It was now used wholesale as a word of abuse for any who used machinery or employed hired labor—in short, for the thrifty, who were the leaders of the village.²² Thus, basically a kulak was a successful Ukrainian farmer.

Ukraine is the breadbasket of this region. The disruption of war was compounded by drought and attempts by the Bolsheviks to control all aspects of local life including agriculture. Robert Conquest explains: “But mere disruption was far more important. The decline in agriculture only began in 1919, but by 1922 work horses were down 35.1% (from 1916), cattle 24.4%, hogs 42.2%, sheep and goats 24.8%, livestock, in fact being at about two-thirds of the prewar level.”²³ Conquest further found that the problems were compounded by the fact that less crops were being planted, observing that “in 1913 about 700,000 tons of fertilizer had been used, in 1921 about 20,000 tons. The area sown had gone down from 214 million acres in 1916 to 133 million in 1922. The grain crop (including potatoes) had gone down by about 57% between 1909–1913 and 1921.”²⁴ The result was the great famine of 1921.

The famine of 1921 gave the Bolsheviks a new chance to consolidate their power in Ukraine. Applebaum observed that “the grain requisition system broke up communities, severed relationships, and forced peasants to leave home in search of food. Starvation weakened and demoralized those who remained, forcing them to abandon the armed struggle.” The state then struck at the religious beliefs of the people when, in the name of famine relief, the Ukrainian churches were forced to give up religious objects made of precious metal to the state. The Ukrainian Orthodox church had declared its independence from Moscow in 1921. Lenin explained that these actions were to teach the peasants, religious clergy, and political opponents “a lesson.”²⁵

When describing the New Economic Policy (NEP) adopted by Lenin in 1921, Edward Hallet Carr explained the problem facing the Soviet government, explaining:

Another jarring, but irresistible, Russian force had imposed itself on the original Marxist conception of the revolution. The question that the Bolshevik leaders had to ask themselves in 1921 was essentially the question that had divided the Westerners and the Slavophiles. Would the triumph of socialism in Russia be achieved by following the Western path, or by following a specifically Russian line of development? If the first answer were accepted, reliance must be placed on the development of industry and of the proletariat, if necessary, at the expense of the peasant. If the second answer were accepted, reliance must be placed on conciliating the peasant and winning their support for increased agricultural production as the prerequisite of an advance to socialism. As always in Russian history, a clear-cut choice between two answers was impossible. Russia could neither unconditionally pursue nor reject the Western path. In NEP, Lenin found the compromise between the two answers—the “link” between proletariat and the peasantry, which for a time make it possible to travel the two roads simultaneously. But the compromise, which was also a “retreat,” had ideological implications, and these implications also carried reflections of the Russian past. The resistance of the Russian peasant to Marxism was the resistance of the traditional Russian way of life to western innovation.²⁶

The death of Lenin on 21 January 1924 threw the Soviet Union into a power struggle. The struggle for power between Joseph Stalin, Leon Trotsky, Grigory Y. Zinovyev, Lev Kamenev, and Nikolay Bukharin ended with the ruthless victory of Stalin and the downfall, exile, or outright execution of all Stalin’s rivals.²⁷ Stalin began to consolidate his power not only over the Communist Party, but over all the Soviet Union as well. Kamenev and Zinovyev were exe-

cuted in 1936 after show trials during the purges. Bukharin's execution came in 1938 after another show trial. Trotsky fled the Soviet Union but was murdered in Mexico in 1940 by a Soviet agent.²⁸ In her assessment of the situation, Applebaum stated that

war Communism had failed. The radical workers' state had not brought prosperity to the workers. But by the latter part of the 1920s, Lenin's New Economic Policy was failing too. Theoretically, markets were free. But in practice, the state was not content to leave them alone. Officials, suspicious of the traders profiting from the sale of grain, interfered constantly by circulating aggressive, "anti-speculator" propaganda and imposing heavy regulations. They set high prices for industrial goods and low prices for agricultural products (hence the designation "scissors crisis"), which created an imbalance.

Applebaum explained that many peasants refused to sell their grain at the low state offered prices and either kept the grain or fed it to their livestock.²⁹ Applebaum observed that, by 1927, another crisis had appeared:

For the Communist Party the crisis threatened to overshadow an important anniversary: ten years after the revolution, living standards in the Soviet Union were still lower than they had been under the tsars. Food of all kinds was obsessively rationed—workers received food coupons according to their status—and very scarce. So sensitive was information about grain production that five months before the anniversary celebrations, in May 1927, the OGPU forbade all Soviet newspapers from writing about any "difficulties or interruptions in the supply of grain to the country as they could . . . cause panic."³⁰

The first Five-Year Plan came into effect in 1928 and lasted until 1932. In 1929, Stalin modified the plan to include collectivization of agriculture.

Facing an obvious failure of their agricultural policy, the Soviets looked for someone to blame. Stalin chose the kulaks. A kulak was generally a small farm owner who was rich enough to employ labor. On 27 December 1929, Stalin told the meeting of the Congress of Agrarian Marxists that "we have gone over from a policy of limiting the exploiting tendencies of the kulak to a policy of eliminating the kulaks as a class."³¹ Thus, the policy of dekulakization had begun. This policy resulted in the arrest, deportation, exile, and murder of thousands of kulaks, especially in Ukraine. According to Conquest: "Already, deportation quotas were laid down for different areas. Mass execution also played its part. Stalin later told Churchill that 10 million kulaks had to be dealt with, and that 'the great bulk' were 'wiped out,' others being transferred to Siberia. Some 3

million seem to have ended up in the newly expanding labour-camp system.” Stephen Kotkin observed that “those that refused to join the collectives became ‘Kulacks,’ no matter how poor.”³²

The phrases *chrezvychnyye меры* (extraordinary measures) and *chrezvychnaya situatsiia* (state of emergency) began to be used by Stalin and other Soviet leaders. Accused of hoarding grain for speculation purposes, the grain traders had become scapegoats.³³ The kulak had become an enemy of the people.³⁴ The grain shortage problem was complicated by several droughts that resulted in poor harvests.

The Disaster

Bohdan Klid and Alexander J. Motyl found that the actions taken by Stalin against Ukraine were a deliberate attempt devised to kill and subdue ethnic Ukrainians and destroy their aspirations of statehood, as separate from the Soviet Union. Central Committee members Lazar M. Kaganovich and Vyacheslav Molotov were given the responsibility of enforcing collectivization and dealing with the kulaks at the All-Ukrainian Party Conference in 1930. They were assisted by Pavel Postyshev (first secretary of the Kyiv Regional Committee), Stanislaw Vikentyevich Kosior (first secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine), and Vlas Chubar (Central Committee Member).³⁵

The Ukrainian kulaks were deemed enemies of the state. Stalin had announced in 1929 that the kulaks would be eliminated as a class.³⁶ Beginning in 1929, in a program called “dekulakisation,” up to 12 million kulaks were deported.³⁷ In 1930, the political purges in Ukraine had spread to political leaders, academics/intellectuals, writers, linguists, artists, singers, students, clergy, and lawyers. Mass arrests and executions became common.³⁸ Some Ukrainians resisted the collectivization, but without their leadership resistance soon collapsed.³⁹

By 1931, although the secret police had triumphed over peasant resistance to collectivization through mass arrests, mass deportations, and mass repression, their actions had not fixed the problem of low agricultural output. The Soviet government continued these policies and were even harsher in their actions against the peasants of Ukraine. Olha Dovbnia found that “the political repression against the peasantry of the Ukrainian SSR in 1921–1939 focused on solving economic problems, suppressing all forms of resistance, and modeling social processes and regional peculiarities of repressive politics depended on combinations of directives of the center, initiatives of the local authorities and the public security authorities. The repression was not limited to a specific group of the richest peasantry but was directed against the peasantry opposing a forced collectivization.” Many peasants were given the choice of either joining the collective or being shot where they stood.⁴⁰

Basil Dmytryshyn observed that “the speed and ferocity with which the mass collectivization program was carried out benefited neither the state, nor the collective farms nor the peasants. Before they ‘joined’ collectives, the peasants, in desperation, killed their cattle, pigs, and horses; destroyed their farm implements; and either burned their crops or allowed them to rot in the field.”⁴¹ Robert W. Thurston found that “grain was funneled from farms to the Red Army and the cities, despite the grave lack of consumer goods flowing the other way.”⁴²

Signs of starvation had been reported as early as 1930 in some areas. Collectivization did not motivate the peasants to work harder or more efficiently to raise crops. The threat of violence had forced the peasants to relinquish their lands, livestock, and farm machinery to the state collective farms, but it did not motivate them to work hard for no perceived rewards. Peasants began to abandon the farms and leave for jobs in the city.⁴³

The migration of the peasants to the cities resulted in a rapid growth of many cities in Ukraine. The peasants had found jobs doing various tasks, but this increased the need for food to be brought into the cities to feed the growing population. The effects of the famine on the available food supply were devastating. Snyder observed that in the cities of Ukraine, people would begin to line up at 0200 in the morning to wait for the shops to open in hope of buying a single loaf of bread. Some in the line were so desperate to keep their place that they hung on to the belts of those in front of them. Others were so weak that they had to be held up by strangers who were also standing in line. Starving peasants begged those in line for crumbs of food. One observer called the peasants “living skeletons.”⁴⁴

Stalin’s Five-Year Plans demanded unrealistic agricultural production goals from Ukraine. When the goals were not met, the quotas were raised, not lowered. Walker stated:

The few first-hand accounts of the Holodomor that survive make for gruesome reading. First came the absurd grain targets sent to the region from the Centre; if the officials did not fulfill them, they would be considered wreckers themselves. Brigades of enthusiastic party officials and volunteers descended on villages and farms, requisitioning grain seeds, then personal supplies before smashing up homes looking for anything that might have been hoarded.⁴⁵

Even the seed grain was confiscated. Conquest observed that watch towers were erected in the fields and armed patrols prevented the peasants from accessing the food from the fields.⁴⁶ The result was mass starvation. Walker also observed that “during the winter of 1932, the famine spread more widely. People ate rats, cats and eventually each other. . . . By the Spring of 1933,

people were dying in eastern Ukraine at a rate of more than 10,000 per day.”⁴⁷

When examining the Holodomor, Kotkin discovered that “death and disease wracked the entire Soviet wheat belt—Ukraine (including the Moldavian autonomous republic), the North Caucasus (including the Kuban, Stavropol, and Don provinces) the Middle and Lower Volga valley, Novgorod to Astrakhan, including the Volga autonomous republic and the central black earth region. . . . Party officials begged for emergency aid to ‘save the lives of many people from starvation death’.”⁴⁸

Kotkin stated that “reports of cannibalism in Ukraine were averaging ten per day. Parents were killing one child and feeding it to the others; some prepared soup stock and salted the remaining flesh in barrels to preserve it.” The secret police reported on cannibal bands that targeted orphans: “This group cut up and consumed as food three children, including an eleven-year-old son and an orphan whose parents perished from starvation.”⁴⁹ No aid was permitted from outside provinces. As a direct result, an estimated 3–7.5 million Ukrainians perished.⁵⁰ Millions more were deported to Siberia and other provinces.⁵¹

Investigation and Assessment of the Event

During 1934–35, the Soviets intensified their program of Russification in Ukraine. Churches and synagogues were seized by the government and either repurposed or torn down. Monuments and buildings to Ukrainian glory were removed or destroyed. Ukrainian authors had their books banned and removed from libraries. Even the dictionary was changed to Russify the Ukrainian alphabet and make words more Russian sounding. The dramatic population change in Ukraine as a result of the famine was revealed in the 1937–38 census. The census showed that there was a population drop of millions in Ukraine. Stalin fired the census takers and declared the results a state secret.⁵² In 1939, Nikita Khrushchev became the first party secretary in Ukraine and the political situation stabilized somewhat.⁵³ However, Kotkin found that “at least 160,000 victims, in Moscow and Ukraine, would be arrested under Khrushchev during the terror.”⁵⁴ Three of the organizers of the Holodomor, Kosior, Postyshev, and Chubar were denounced in the Stalinist purges and shot in 1939.⁵⁵

Lessons Learned and Policy Impact

During the latter 1930s, collectivization was responsible for food shortages in the Soviet Union. Individual farmers in collectives did not feel responsible for the overall output and production of the collective. The collective farms were not nearly as efficient as the privately run ones had been.⁵⁶

Anti-Soviet sentiment lingered. When the Nazis from Germany invaded the USSR in 1941, they were greeted as liberators by many Ukrainians and giv-

en gifts of bread and salt. Olesya Khromeychuk stated that “during the Second World War large numbers of inhabitants of central, eastern and southern Europe joined the German Armed Forces. Among them were around 250,000 soldiers who identified themselves as Ukrainian. They served in the Wehrmacht, as well as the Waffen SS; a considerable number of them also served in the auxiliary police.”⁵⁷ The Ukrainians soon realized their mistake.

In the former Soviet Union, the Holodomor was hidden as a state secret for decades. In 1963, Khrushchev (now the first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) finally publicly acknowledged the famine in Ukraine and blamed Stalin.⁵⁸ In 1966, Ukrainian Communist Party leader Petro Shelest finally allowed it to be mentioned in an article that was being published in *News from the Ukraine*, which was a newspaper published for Ukrainians abroad.⁵⁹ In 2010, a Ukrainian court found Kaganovich, Molotov, Postyshev, Kosior, and Chobar guilty of genocide for their participation in actions during the Holodomor. The verdict against the defendants was posthumous.⁶⁰

The impact of the Holodomor is still felt among the Ukrainian people today.⁶¹ A study of the intergenerational transmission of trauma from the Holodomor genocide found that the psychological and cultural impacts of the Holodomor were still felt by Ukrainians, resulting in fear and mistrust of government and a perceived need to conserve food or overeating and shame that this had been inflicted on them. The relationship between Russia and Ukraine was an uneasy one. Since the Russian invasion, the relationship has evolved to open warfare. The Ukrainians are fighting a desperate battle to retain their country.

Implications for Modern Emergency Management

Droughts and famines will always occur. It is the job of emergency management authorities to plan for these disasters. The preparation, planning, and training for disasters are what helps a nation mitigate the impact of the disaster, save lives, and recover from the disaster’s effects. Interagency agreements for mutual aid help emergency managers to supplement areas that they do not have enough resources in.⁶² The USSR did not request foreign aid and in fact continued to export food to the cities and elsewhere.

Hiroaki Kuromiya noted the negative impact of these decisions, stating: “Had Moscow stopped all grain exports and released all strategic grain reserves, the available 2.6 million tons of grain, under optimal conditions of distribution, might have saved up to 7.8 million lives, which was the approximate number of actual deaths from the 1932–1933 famine. Of course, Moscow did not release the grain reserves, even in the face of mass starvation.”⁶³ Stalin used starvation as a strategic weapon to ensure compliance with Soviet policies of collectivization.

Summary

The Holodomor was the result of a deliberate effort by Stalin to crush all opposition and force collectivization on Ukraine and its peoples by weaponizing its resources against the population. Alessandro Toscano notes that “Stalin held ‘enemies’ and ‘kulaks’ as the main cause behind the ‘food difficulties’.”⁶⁴ Stalin intentionally caused the crisis and withheld food aid until all opposition was crushed and forced collectivization was achieved in Ukraine. The result was that an estimated 3–7.5 million Ukrainians perished.⁶⁵ Stalin felt that Ukrainian nationalism was a threat to the Soviet state.

Larisa Yepik and Eduard Semeshyn discovered that the methods and measures of the Bolsheviks’ fight against the private market became one of the main causes of the artificial famine that occurred in Ukraine in 1932–33. They advocate that the Holodomor was “provoked by the political and economic transformations of the communist rule.”⁶⁶

The Holodomor was the result of the deliberate exercise of raw political and military power by Stalin. While the objective of forced collectivization was achieved, millions died in the process. The actions taken by the USSR during this period still affect the relationship between Russia and Ukraine to this day. It was a man-made genocide. After the fall of the USSR in 1991, Ukraine became independent again. The Ukrainians began to de-Russify their country, changing the spelling of their capital back to Kyiv and removing other signs of the Soviet times. The National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide was opened in Kyiv so that this horror would never be forgotten. Ukrainians are further motivated to defend their country against the invasion from Russia. They feel that it is a matter of survival, not only of their country, but of the very lives of their people.

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