

THE FAMINE/GENOCIDE IN UKRAINE

"THE HOLODOMOR, 1932-1933"

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In the 1930's, in the country known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, occurred one of the most devastating genocides of the twentieth century. As many, if not more lives were lost in Ukraine due to the genocide than in all of Europe as a consequence of World War I. Today, the Government of Ukraine estimates that up to ten million Ukrainians were starved to death in 1932-33, executed by firing squads, or sent to concentration camps, twenty-five percent of the entire population of which at least three million were children.

History. After 250 years of Russian Tsarist rule, Ukrainians had tried to gain independence during the Russian Revolution and Civil War period (1917-1920). After a terrifying decade of war, revolution and attempts at independence, Ukraine became a part of the Soviet Union in 1922. To appease the Ukrainian population in the 1920's, a certain amount of cultural and economic freedom was allowed and private enterprise permitted. As a result, a large number of successful independent farmers flourished in Ukraine. Alongside these developments, there was also unleashed a cultural renaissance in Ukraine, as writers, artists, and intellectuals flourished. Alas, these freedoms were not to last for long. Stalin saw both the farmers and the cultural freedoms as a threat to the newly formed Soviet Union. In the 1930's, Joseph Stalin politically instigated and deliberately wiped out the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and its clergy, Ukraine's writers, educators and cultural elite. The farmers, who constituted about 80 percent of Ukraine's population and who were resisting communism, were also dealt a mortal blow. They constituted about 1,500,000 of Ukraine's population.

Beginning in 1928 as part of The Five Year Plan (1928-1933), independent farmers were forced to give up to the state without compensation their private land, livestock, and equipment. The more well-to-do farmers, labelled as *kurkuls* (kulaks) and leaders in the villages, were targeted by the Soviet government as "anti-soviet, unwanted elements". They were systematically destroyed by deportations to Siberia, concentration camps, and or suffered firing squads.

Once they were disposed of, the remaining farmers were dealt with. Any opposition to collectivization was met by brutal force as Secret Police (OGPU) and Red Army units were sent to villages to collect, not only the grain quota set by Moscow, but eventually any food found in individual households. The borders of Ukraine were sealed, so as to prevent any food imports. To ensure that Ukrainian farmers did not leave their villages to seek relief in the cities, the Soviet government instituted a system of passports so that no one could travel without permission. They executed those who tried to obtain food from the fields, and imprisoned those who attempted to flee to the cities or beyond Ukraine's borders. Entire populations of villages died from induced starvation, one third blacklisted, cordoned off from supplies, for bringing in too little grain for the state. In the meantime, wheat collected in government-owned bins was either sent abroad for export, rotted from mismanagement, or was used for the production of alcohol. To ensure compliance with the strategy of using "food as a weapon", and to minimize any sympathy for the suffering of the local population, Stalin replaced Ukrainians in key positions with non-Ukrainians in the Ukrainian Government. On the collective farms, those farmers who survived became little better than slave labourers, with few rights or privileges on land cultivated by their ancestors, which had served as the "breadbasket of Europe" for centuries before.

Causes. Why did this happen? The answer lies in a statement made by Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs, in 1932: "Food is a weapon."

The famine was a conscious instrument of Soviet policy to break the body and spirit of the Ukrainian farmer and nation, and, thus, subjugate the Ukrainian people completely to Soviet rule.

To quote Stalin's words:

"Farmers present by themselves the basic force of the national movement. Without farmers there can be no strong national movement. This is what we mean when we say that the national question is actually, the farmers' question."

Joseph Stalin

Even Leon Trotsky, one of Stalin's main opponents observed the severity of the situation in Ukraine,

"Nowhere else did repressions, purges, suppressions, and all other kinds of bureaucratic hooliganism in general acquire such horrifying scope as in Ukraine, in the struggle against powerful forces concealed in the Ukrainian masses that desired more freedom and independence."

Leon Trotsky

Reaction to the Ukrainian Famine/Genocide

The Cover-Up. Foreign journalist stationed inside the USSR largely ignored the event in the 1930's and most governments, whose home countries were going through the Great Depression, made peace with genocide. Journalists, such as Walter Duranty, who would eventually be given a Pulitzer Prize for journalism wrote that,

"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."

But there were individuals such as Gareth Jones, who wrote for the New York American/Los Angeles Examiner and Malcolm Muggeridge, a British Foreign Correspondent, who wrote of the true nature of the "Holodomor" in Ukraine in the Fortnightly Review on May 1, 1933 in an article , "War on the Peasants",

"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."

In fact, in 1932, Soviet wheat from Ukraine was dumped on world markets at ridiculously low prices, wheat which had been confiscated from Ukrainian farmers by Red Army troops and secret police. Even Canadian farmers suffered because they could not match the prices. No one could believe that the people growing the wheat were being starved to death.

The Genocide the World Forgot In Ukraine, until independence in 1991, it was considered a crime to mention, teach about, or to discuss the Ukrainian Genocide – Holodomor of 1932-1933. Only in the

West was information forthcoming from refugees, who had escaped the Soviet Union during World War 11.

Soviet governments maintained a formal denial that the Ukrainian Genocide - the Holodomor, had ever taken place, or that the state had any part in creating it. Even today, Russian authorities refuse to acknowledge that millions of Ukrainians were deliberately starved to death in 1932-1933. Only in the West was information forthcoming from political émigrés, who had been fortunate to escape from the Soviet Union during World War 11. Consequently, the truth about the events of 1932-1933 started to become available to the citizens of Ukraine on the eve of the break up of the USSR. Fortunately, as archives are opened, there now exists excellent documentary records that Ukraine, "the breadbasket of Europe," was indeed a target of genocide with starvation as a potent weapon of Soviet policy in a crippling blow to its largest minority group, the Ukrainian people.

This year marks the 75 th Anniversary of the Holodomor, the Ukrainian word for "death inflicted by starvation" from two words, "holod" - starvation/famine and "moryty" – to inflict death. Canada and numerous other countries have recognized the "Holodomor" as a genocide of the 20 th century, a genocide few people knew about. We need to remember these victims. They are just too many to forget."

"The Famine/Genocide in Ukraine – "The Holodomor of 1932-1933"

Answer the following questions:

1. Why is the Ukrainian Famine/Genocide considered to be one of the worst tragedies of the twentieth century?
2. What are the estimated numbers of victims in this tragedy?
3. What became of Ukraine's attempts at independence at the turn of the 20 th century?
4. What groups were specifically targeted by the Soviet authorities in Ukraine?
5. How did the Soviets deal with the farmers of Ukraine?
6. List the actions of Soviet authorities that led to famine.
7. What reason is given for these actions against the farmers.
8. How did journalists deal with the Famine in Ukraine in 1932-1933?
9. Explain how Canadians were affected by events in Ukraine in 1932-1933.
10. Why was it possible to cover up the Famine-Genocide for over 70 years?
11. Why has information about "the Holodomor" surfaced today?
12. What does the term "The Holodomor" mean?

Bonus question:

List other genocides that have occurred since then in which "food was used as a weapon".

