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Holodomor: The Secret Holocaust in Ukraine

In 1933, the recently elected administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt granted official U.S. recognition to the Soviet Union for the first time. Especially repugnant was that this recognition was granted even though Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin had just concluded a campaign of genocide against Ukraine that left over 10 million dead. This atrocity was known to the Roosevelt administration, but not to the American people at large, thanks to suppression of the story by the Western press — as we shall show.

Ukraine's Untold Tragedy

The Ukrainian genocide remains largely unknown. After 76 years, the blood of the victims still cries for truth, and the guilt of the perpetrators for exposure.

Many Americans are barely acquainted with Ukraine, even though it is Europe's second largest country after Russia, and has been a distinct land and people for centuries. One reason for this unfamiliarity is that Ukraine has rarely known political independence; it was under Russia's heel throughout much of its existence — under Soviet domination prior to 1991, and under Czarist Russia before that. Many American students heard little or nothing of Ukraine in their history classes because the nation had been relegated to the status of a Russian "province."

Stalin accomplished genocide against Ukraine by two means. One was massive executions and deportations to labor camps. But his second tool of murder was more unique: an artificial famine created by confiscation of all food. Ukrainians call this the *Holodomor*, translated by one modern Ukrainian dictionary as "artificial hunger, organized on a vast scale by the criminal regime against the country's population," but often simply translated as "murder by hunger."

Ukraine was the last place one would have expected famine, for it had been known for centuries as the "breadbasket of Europe." French diplomat Blaise de Vigenère wrote in 1573: "Ukraine is overflowing with honey and wax.... The soil of this country is so good and fertile that when you leave a plow in the field, it becomes overgrown with grass after two or three days. It will be difficult to find." The 18th-century British traveler Joseph Marshall wrote: "The Ukraine is the richest province of the Russian empire.... The soil is a black loam.... I think I have never seen such deep plowing as these peasants give their ground."

In the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution, Ukraine became part of a bloody battlefield of fighting between the Bolsheviks (the group that eventually became the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), Czarist Whites, and Ukrainian nationalists. Ultimately, of course, the Bolsheviks prevailed, but Lenin shrewdly recognized that concessions would be necessary to gain Ukraine's cooperation as a member of the unstable young USSR. To exploit Ukrainians' long-standing resentment of Czarist domination, he permitted them to retain much of their national culture. Ukrainians experienced a relatively high degree of freedom extending into the mid-1920s. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and

non-communist Ukrainian Academy of Sciences were allowed to operate independently. However, as the Soviet Union consolidated its power, and Joseph Stalin ascended to the party's top, these freedoms became expendable, and Ukrainian nationalism, at first exploited, now became viewed as a liability.

Coerced Collectivization

Despite a communist push for collectivization, Ukraine's farms had mostly remained private — the foundation of their success. But in 1929, the Central Committee of the Soviet Union's Communist Party decided to embark on a program of total collectivization. Private farms were to be completely replaced by collectives — in Ukraine known as *kolkhozes*. This was, of course, consistent with Marxist ideology: the *Communist Manifesto* had called for abolition of private property.

Intense pressure was placed upon Ukrainian peasants to join the *kolkhozes*. Twenty-five thousand fanatical young communists from the USSR's cities were sent to Ukraine to compel the transition. These became known as the *Twenty-Five Thousanders*; each was assigned a particular locality, and was accompanied by a weapons-bearing communist entourage, including members of the GPU (secret police, forerunner of the KGB). A communist commission was established in each village.

Holodomor survivor Miron Dolot, in his book *Execution by Hunger*, describes what happened soon after a commission was started in his village by its *Twenty-Five Thousander*, Comrade Zeitlin:

> We did not have to wait too long for Comrade Zeitlin's strategy to reveal itself. The first incident occurred very early on a cold January morning in 1930 while people in our village were still asleep. Fifteen villagers were arrested, and someone said that the Checkists [GPU] had arrived in the village at midnight.…

The most prominent villagers were among those arrested.… This was frightening. Our official leadership had been taken away in one night. The farmers, mostly illiterate and ignorant, were thereby left much more defenseless.

The leaders of Dolot's village were never seen again.

Throughout Ukraine, the *Twenty-Five Thousanders* held mandatory village meetings in which they demanded that all peasants relinquish private farming and "volunteer" to join a collective. Most peasants fiercely resisted. In principle, of course, there is nothing wrong with farmers pooling their resources and efforts in a cooperative venture. But this was not what the communists meant by collectivization. On the *kolkhozes*, the government owned everything — the land, animals, equipment, and produce. The worker kept no fruits of his labor, and was at the state's mercy to receive a pittance of pay.

Soviet collectives never succeeded. As the eminent Sovietologist Robert Conquest noted of them, "Wherever they had existed they had, with all the advantages given them by the regime, done worse than the individual farm." On the *kolkhozes*, livestock, poorly cared for, easily died, and equipment fell into disrepair. This was because the workers did not own them, nor did they have any stake in the collective. This illustrated the conflict between Marxist ideology and the reality of human nature. Making matters worse, the collectives were organized by the *Twenty-Five Thousanders*, who, being urban youths, had no agricultural experience; their ignorance of farming basics often became the butt of jokes among local Ukrainians.

To force the villagers into collectives, the communists threatened them with being declared enemies of the state, to be dealt with by the GPU. Jails — unfamiliar to Ukrainian peasants — began appearing in

every village. To instill additional fear, Soviet army units were brought in, lodging themselves in homes without permission. Torturous punishments were devised, such as "path treading," in which a resisting peasant would be forced to walk through the snow to the next village, there to be interrogated by its officials, and if he still refused to join a collective, walk to the next village. This would carry on until the peasant either died of exhaustion or bent to the state's will. A very effective method was to simply seize a family's food supply. Threatened with seeing their children starve, many peasants gave in. By the summer of 1932, 80 percent of Ukraine's farmland had been forcibly collectivized.

Scapegoat for Communist Failure

But since the *kolkhozes* failed to produce as predicted by Marxist theory, and with many peasants still refusing to join, Stalin sought a scapegoat. It was announced that the failure of collectivization was due to sabotage by "kulaks." These were the more prosperous peasants. Merely owning a cow, hiring another peasant, or having a tin roof (instead of the more common thatched roof) were all considered evidence that one was a kulak.

Of course, in any economy, some people thrive more than others. This is usually owing to industriousness and efficiency. According to Marxist doctrine, however, all wealthier peasants (kulaks) were "bloodsuckers" and "parasites" who had grown rich by exploiting poorer peasants and who were now subverting collectivization. Stalin announced that the solution to better grain production was to "struggle against the capitalist elements of the peasantry, against the kulaks," and he proclaimed the goal of "liquidation of the kulaks as a class." In reality, however, Ukraine had never had a distinct social class of kulaks — this concept was a Marxist invention.

Those accused of being kulaks were either shot, deported to remote slave labor camps in Russia, or put in local labor details. Few survived. One could be accused of being a kulak on the flimsiest evidence. Some peasants accused others merely out of envy or dislike. As one Soviet writer later noted: "It was easy to do a man in; you wrote a denunciation; you did not even have to sign it. All you had to say was that he had paid people to work for him as hired hands, or that he had owned three cows." Some very poor peasants were accused of being kulaks simply because they were religiously devout. And ironically, many of the "rich" kulaks earned less income than the communist officials prosecuting them! "Dekulakization" slaughtered millions.

Ironically, this process killed off the most productive farmers, guaranteeing a smaller harvest and a more impoverished Soviet Union. The remaining farmers did not dare take steps to improve their lands or prosper, for fear they would be reclassified as kulaks. But Stalin accomplished his true goal: destroying leadership that might oppose the complete subjugation of Ukraine.

This campaign extended beyond kulaks to broadly attacking all vestiges of Ukrainian nationalism. As Dolot notes, the Soviet Communist Party

> sent [Pavel] Postyshev, a sadistically cruel Russian chauvinist, as its viceroy to Ukraine. His appointment played a crucial role in the lives of all Ukrainians. It was Postyshev who brought along and implemented a new Soviet Russian policy in Ukraine. It was an openly proclaimed policy of deliberate and unrestricted destruction of everything Ukrainian. From now on, we were continually reminded that there were "bourgeois-nationalists" among us whom we must destroy.… This new campaign against the Ukrainian national movement had resulted in the annihilation of the Ukrainian central government as well as all Ukrainian cultural, educational, and social institutions.

The Ukrainian Language Institute, Ukrainian Institute of Philosophy, Ukrainian State Publishing House, and countless other institutions were purged, their leaders murdered or imprisoned. So fanatical was the war on nationalism that even the colorful embroidered national costumes Ukrainians wore were seized. Eyewitness Yefrosyniya Poplavets recalls: "To save our embroidered shirts we put them on under our old ragged jackets. It didn't work! They undressed us and took the shirts to eradicate any national spirit in the household."

But perhaps the most intense thrust was against the church, for it represented not only a form of Ukrainian solidarity, but the Gospel whose principles inherently oppose those of Marxism. The Communist Party declared: "The church is the kulak's agitprop." Priests were executed or sent to labor camps; church land was confiscated; monasteries were closed. The churches — some of them centuries-old national monuments — were either demolished, or turned into cinemas, libraries, barracks and other secular uses for the state. Church icons were smashed; books and archives were burned; church bells were even sold as scrap. By the end of 1930, 80 percent of all Ukraine's village churches had been shut down. These measures were applied not only against Ukraine's Orthodox churches, but against other denominations and religions, for as Marx had said, "Religion is the opiate of the masses."

"Murder by Hunger"

Yet the worst still awaited Ukraine. By 1932, virtually all kulaks had been liquidated, but many of the remaining poor peasants still resisted communism and collectivization. Stalin now began war upon Ukraine's poorest — ironically those who, in Marxist doctrine, should have been esteemed as "the proletariat."

In 1932, Stalin demanded that Ukraine increase its grain output by 44 percent. Such a goal would have been unachievable even if the communists had not already ruined the nation's productivity by eliminating the best farmers and forcing others onto the feeble collectives. That year, not a single village was able to meet the impossible quota, which far exceeded Ukraine's best output in the pre-collective years.

Stalin then issued one of the cruelest orders of his dark career: if quotas were not met, all grain was to be confiscated. As one Soviet author much later wrote: "All the grain without exception was requisitioned for the fulfillment of the Plan, including that set aside for sowing, fodder, and even that previously issued to the *kolkhozniki* as payment for their work." The authorization included seizure of all food from all households. Any home that did not turn over all its grain was accused of "hoarding" state property. One villager recalled the process by which communist "brigades" invaded homes:

> Every brigade had a so-called "specialist" for searching out grain. He was equipped with a long iron crow-bar with which he probed for hidden grain.

The brigade went from house to house. At first they entered homes and asked, "How much grain have you got for the government?" "I haven't any. If you don't believe me search for yourselves," was the usual laconic answer.

And so the "search" began. They searched in the house, in the attic, shed, pantry and the cellar. Then they went outside and searched the barn, pig pen, granary and the straw pile. They measured the oven and calculated if it was large enough to hold hidden grain behind the brickwork. They broke beams in the attic, pounded on the floor of the house, tramped the whole yard and garden. If they found a suspicious-looking spot, in went the crow-bar.

Miron Dolot recalls:

> They measured the thickness of the walls, and inspected them for bulges where grain could have been concealed. Sometimes they completely tore down suspicious walls.... Nothing in the houses remained intact or untouched. They upturned everything: even the cribs of babies, and the babies themselves were thoroughly frisked, not to mention the other family members. They looked for "hidden grain" in and under men's and women's clothing. Even the smallest amount that was found was confiscated. If so much as a small can or jar of seeds was found that had been set aside for spring planting, it was taken away, and the owner was accused of hiding food from the state.

Of course, to avoid starvation, nearly every family did attempt to conceal food. But experience soon made the brigades proficient at detecting even the most clever hiding places.

The result was mass starvation that took millions of lives during the terrible winter of 1932-33. Food was nearly impossible to find anywhere. Many begged neighbors for potato skins or other scraps — only to find their neighbors equally destitute.

There was still some food on the collectives, which the communists did not deplete like households. However, in August 1932 the Communist Party of the USSR had passed a law mandating the death penalty for theft of "social property." Watchtowers were built on the collectives, manned by trigger-happy young communists. Thousands of peasants were shot for attempting to take a handful of grain or a few beets from the *kolkhozes*, to feed their starving families.

Unable to get food, many ate whatever could pass for it — weeds, leaves, tree bark, and insects. The luckiest were able to survive secretly on small woodland animals. American journalist Thomas Walker wrote:

> About twenty miles south of Kiev (Kyiv), I came upon a village that was practically extinct by starvation. There had been fifteen houses in this village and a population of forty-odd persons. Every dog and cat had been eaten. The horses and oxen had all been appropriated by the Bolsheviks to stock the collective farms. In one hut they were cooking a mess that defied analysis. There were bones, pig-weed, skin, and what looked like a boot top in this pot. The way the remaining half dozen inhabitants eagerly watched this slimy mess showed the state of their hunger.

A few people even resorted to cannibalism, eating those who had died and, in some cases, murdering those still living.

Many peasants attempted to reach Ukraine's cities like Kiev, where factory workers were still allowed a

little pay and food. However, in December 1932 the communists introduced the "internal passport." This made it impossible for a villager to get a city job without the Party's permission, which was almost universally denied.

Other peasants hoped to get to Poland, Romania, or even Russia, where there was no famine. But emigration was strictly forbidden. Ukrainian train stations were swamped with the starving, who hoped to sneak aboard a train, or beg in hopes that a passenger on a passing train might throw them a bread crust. They were repelled by GPU guards, who found themselves faced with the problem of removing countless corpses of the starving who littered these stations.

Horror of Genocide

British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, who secretly investigated Ukraine without Soviet permission, was able to escape communist censorship by sending details home to the *Manchester Guardian* in a diplomatic bag. He reported:

> On a recent visit to the Northern Caucasus and the Ukraine, I saw something of the battle that is going on between the government and the peasants.... On the one side, millions of starving peasants, their bodies often swollen from lack of food; on the other, soldier members of the GPU 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.

At the famine's height, 25,000 people per day were dying. As the winter wore on, Ukraine became a panorama of horror. The roadsides were filled with the corpses of those who died seeking food. The bodies, many of which snow concealed until the spring thaw, were unceremoniously dumped into mass graves by the communists.

Many others died of starvation in their own homes. Some chose to end the process by suicide, commonly by hanging — if they had the strength to do it. "They just sat," writes Dolot of his fellow villagers, "or lay down silently, too feeble even to talk. The bodies of some were reduced to skeletons, with their skin hanging grayish-yellow and loose over their bones. Their faces looked like rubber masks with large, bulging, immobile eyes. Their necks seemed to have shrunk onto their shoulders. The look in their eyes was glassy, heralding their approaching death."

The communists, on the other hand, ate excellent rations, and party bosses even enjoyed luxurious ones. In Robert Conquest's *Harvest of Sorrow*, we read the following account of the party officials' dining hall at Pohrebyshcha:

> Day and night it was guarded by militia keeping the starving peasants away from the restaurant.... In the dining room, at very low prices, white bread, meat, poultry, canned fruit and delicacies, wines and sweets were served to the district bosses.... Around these oases famine and death were raging.

But perhaps the worst paradox: although much of the confiscated grain was exported to the West, large portions were simply dumped into the sea by the Soviets, or allowed to rot. For example, a huge supply of grain lay decaying under GPU guard at Reshetylivka Station in Poltava Province. Passing it in a train, an American correspondent saw "huge pyramids of grain, piled high, and smoking from internal combustion." In the Lubotino region, thousands of tons of confiscated potatoes were allowed to rot, surrounded by barbed wire.

All this underscores the true purpose of the food confiscation: genocide. Sergio Gradenigo, the Italian consul in Moscow, wrote in a dispatch to Rome on May 31, 1933:

> The famine has been deliberately planned by the Moscow government and implemented by means of brutal requisition. The definite aim of this crime is to liquidate the Ukrainian problem over a few months, sacrificing from 10 to 15 million people. Do not consider this figure to be exaggerated: I'm sure it could even have been reached and exceeded by now.

While there is disagreement over how many lives the genocide claimed, Gradenigo's figures have turned out to be rather accurate. In *Harvest of Sorrow*, historian Robert Conquest, considered by many the leading authority on the famine, put the toll at 14.5 million. About half of these deaths represent the liquidation of the kulaks, via execution and slow death in gulags, while the famine itself claimed the lives of approximately seven million, including three million children.

Helping Stalin Hide the Holocaust

How did a holocaust of these dimensions remain unknown in the West? First, the Soviets suppressed all information regarding the famine. Russia's state-controlled press was prohibited from discussing it, and for ordinary citizens, just mentioning the famine carried a penalty of three to five years' imprisonment.

Although some Western observers did report the magnitude of the Ukrainians' plight, such comments were extremely rare. During the famine, the Soviets prohibited foreign journalists from visiting Ukraine. But just as significant was the cooperation of influential Western writers sympathetic to communism. The Fabian Socialist George Bernard Shaw, after receiving a tour carefully orchestrated by the Soviets, proclaimed in 1932: "I did not see a single under-nourished person in Russia, young or old."

But by far the worst offender was Walter Duranty, *New York Times*' Moscow bureau chief from 1922 to 1936. Duranty enjoyed personal access to Stalin, called him "the greatest living statesman," and even praised the dictator's notorious show trials. To call Duranty a Soviet sympathizer greatly understates his role. Journalist Joseph Alsop termed Duranty a "KGB agent," and Malcolm Muggeridge called him "the greatest liar of any journalist I have met in 50 years of journalism."

Duranty's published denials of Ukraine's *Holodomor* were perhaps the vilest acts of his career. In November 1932, he brazenly told his *New York Times* readers, "There is no famine or actual starvation nor is there likely to be." He denounced as "liars" the few brave writers who reported the famine, which he called "malignant propaganda." When accumulating reports made the massive deaths hard to dispute, Duranty switched tactics from outright denial to downplay. He wrote in the *Times* in March 1933: "There is no actual starvation or deaths from starvation but there is widespread mortality from deaths due to malnutrition."

Incredibly, Duranty was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1932 for "dispassionate, interpretive reporting of the news from Russia."

Some will ask: did the Ukrainians resist the genocide? Yes! Throughout Stalin's war, hundreds of riots and revolts, on various scales, erupted throughout Ukraine. There are even a number of stories where groups of heroic women overran the communist-guarded *kolkhozes* and seized grain for their starving children. And it was not unusual for a village's local party tyrant to suddenly be found dead.

However, such resistance was brutally suppressed. The Soviets had passed gun registration decrees in 1926, 1928, and 1929, and few Ukrainians owned effective weapons. Resistance largely constituted

pitchforks against machine guns. The GPU and Soviet army dealt with revolts; aircraft were brought in to suppress the more serious ones. And the famine of 1932-33 left peasants too weak to resist.

Triumph at Last, Tragedy Not Forgotten

The *Holodomor* stands as a permanent warning of what happens when unlimited state power destroys God-given rights. A cursory review of America's Bill of Rights demonstrates that virtually every right mentioned was trampled on by Stalin in Ukraine. Yet although the dictator used every means to eradicate the people's will, the national spirit lived on unbreakably, until Ukraine gained its independence in 1991.

Here in the United States, Ukrainian-American organizations such as the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America (UCCA), Ukrainian Genocide Famine Foundation, and others work diligently to maintain awareness of the *Holodomor*. Last year, they helped commemorate the genocide's 75th anniversary. And largely thanks to their efforts, in 2008 the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution deploring the genocidal famine. One of UCCA's ongoing campaigns — which *The New American* heartily endorses — is for the long-deserved revocation of Walter Duranty's Pulitzer Prize.

James Perloff is the author of *The Shadows of Power: The Council on Foreign Relations and the American Decline* and *Tornado in a Junkyard: The Relentless Myth of Darwinism*.

Photo: Ukrainian Congress Committee of America