The Holodomor as Genocide

Patrick Gage

Patrick Gage is a junior studying International History at Georgetown University. He would like to acknowledge the International History department, his professors, and his parents for their support.

The *Holodomor* caused millions of starvation-related deaths in communist Ukraine from 1932 to 1933 and constituted one of the Soviet Union's worst famines. Yet after decades of debate its status as an act of genocide remains a bitter point of contention: while scholars like Robert Conquest blame Russian authorities for deliberately creating artificial grain shortages to exterminate the Ukrainian population, others fault agricultural mismanagement and industrial expansion instead. Per the International Criminal Court, which defines genocide as a crime "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group," the latter position seems more accurate.[1] Although Stalin intentionally exacerbated Ukraine's lack of food to ensure its people suffered, his goal was not their physical destruction, but rather the promotion of Soviet industrialization. Considering the *Holodomor* a genocide therefore ignores the essence of such anact as determined by international law.

Ukraine's road to famine began in 1928 with the introduction of Stalin's first Five-Year Plan, a dramatic economic program that aimed to transform bucolic Russia into a major industrial power. The "breakneck speed" at which Moscow attempted to modernize proved problematic, however, as millions of new workers moved to booming cities such as Magnitogorsk.[2] Annual urban migration increased from 1.1 million people in 1926-1929 to 3 million in 1930-1932.[3] The regime already faced chronic food shortages as a result of Lenin's pseudo-capitalist New Economic Policy (NEP), which encouraged Soviet farmers to "[keep] grain for their own consumption…and [instead] sell the government industrial crops or cattle for which compensation was higher."[4] Thus by the late 1920s, communist officials had instituted rationing policies in many urban areas.[5]

The Kremlin's rapid investment in hard industry – steel, coal, machinery – only compounded the problem. While the number of non-

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[1] "Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court," *International Criminal Court*, accessed November 26, 2015, 3. In 1998 the ICC essentially committed itself to prosecuting all potential cases of future or past genocide, a right frequently recognized by the United Nations Security Council. For that reason the court's definition of the crime, which mirrors the United Nations', is proper to use in this context.

[2] Richard Pipes, *Communism: A History* (London: Phoenix Press, 2002), 56.

[3] Massimo Livi-Bacci, "On the Human Costs of Collectivization in the Soviet Union," *Population and Development Review* 19, no. 4 (1993): 744.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Livi-Bacci, "On the Human Costs of Collectivization in the Soviet Union," 744.

agricultural workers in Russia soared, the amount of food available to feed them did not. In response Stalin turned to collectivization, a brutal, involuntary process by which landed peasants, who lived primarily in Ukraine, the North Caucasus, Kazakhstan, and the Kuban, merged their property with neighboring plots to form vast, quota-controlled collective farms overseen by party activists. Consistent with Bolshevik ideology, Moscow believed nationalizing the U.S.S.R.'s arable land and organizing it into larger, more easily controlled tracts would increase efficiency, decrease prices, and lead to higher rates of production, finally supplying enough food to support the empire's burgeoning cities. Stalin also hoped to finance Russia's industrial expansion by exporting surplus grain at a profit.

Moscow's first attack on Ukraine came in 1929 with the repression of its so-called 'bourgeois farmers,' or *kulaks*, who constituted five percent of the peasantry; in reality the term was used to describe "any peasant opposed to collectivisation and de-kulakisation." [6] Blaming them for Russia's grain shortages, communist agents deported or shot hundreds of thousands before the end of 1931.[7] The campaign proved catastrophic: "In this way, a large part of Ukraine's most industrious and efficient farmers ceased to exist."[8]

As 'dekulakization' reached a fever pitch in early 1930, so too did collectivization. Naturally the Ukrainian peasantry violently opposed abolishing private property. Party officials who entered villages and demanded farmers pool their land, tools, and cattle met harsh rebuke; some were even killed. Knowing they would eventually lose, many peasants chose to destroy or squander their possessions rather than hand them over; between 1928 and 1932, Ukrainian farmers killed more than fifty percent of their livestock and intentionally sold surplus grain at a "great loss."[9] Nevertheless collectivization continued, and by March 1930 "about 3.2 million peasant households in Ukraine had surrendered to the invaders of their villages and…entered the collective farms to await their fate."[10] Although Stalin eased the process that same month, allowing many displaced families to take up private farming once again, his officials made operating a small stead nearly impossible. Thus in

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[6] Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 409); per Subtelny, Soviet *kulaks* were in fact very poor by modern standards, with few exceeding US$800 in total net worth (inflation-adjusted based on dollar value in 2000); Hiroaki Kuromiya, *The Voices of the Dead: Stalin's Great Terror in the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 93.

[7] Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 89; Livi-Bacci, "On the Human Costs of Collectivization in the Soviet Union," 745.

[8] Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 410.

[9] Alexander Orlov, *The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes* (London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1954), 41.

[10] Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 411.

1932 collectives "accounted for [roughly] 70% of [Ukrainian] farming households."[11]

Collectivization had a disastrous effect on Soviet agriculture. Bolshevik officials, many lacking prior experience, often ordered "the planting of inappropriate crops" and failed to provide farmers sufficient technical support; tractor production, for example, proved inadequate and crude, leaving collectives without suitable replacements for Ukraine's slaughtered draught animals.[12] Compounding the problem, grain from peasant-owned, government-controlled farms (*kolkhozy*), along with that collected from state-owned *radhospy*, frequently spoiled long before shipping due to Ukraine's sub-par transportation system. Plagued by drought, the region struggled to produce foodstuffs. In 1931, "almost one-third of the grain yield was lost during the harvest," and twelve months later "the total area sown in Ukraine contracted by a fifth."[13] Yet Stalin ignored calls to ease procurement and kept quotas high, despite pleas for leniency from local leaders.

The Great Famine was no foregone conclusion in Ukraine.[14] For all of the Bolsheviks' mistakes, grain yields in 1932 were not so low as to necessarily leave the entire region starving. That said, the harvest was indeed significantly smaller than in past years, posing an enormous threat to Soviet food supplies. Widespread hunger became inevitable.

Near the end of his first Five-Year Plan, Stalin refused to let paltry yields and a recalcitrant Ukrainian population slow Russian industry. In August 1932 he authorized officials to seize grain from peasants and arrest or kill anyone caught stealing; by the end of 1933, officials had sentenced 125,000 Soviet farmers and executed 5,400.[15] Bolshevik agents subsequently began "shipping out all the food from entire districts."[16] In November, Moscow barred Ukrainians from keeping any grain for themselves until their quotas had been filled. Those who failed to meet Stalin's demands were "required to pay a special tax in meat," particularly devastating to families who had thus far relied on homemade, milk-based products to survive.[17] In early January 1933, Ukraine saw her internal and external borders sealed in an attempt to keep farmers from moving to better nourished regions; in just one month's time, the police forcibly returned 190,000 aspiring migrants to their crumbling villages. Soviet Ukraine now "resembled a giant starvation camp."[18]

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[11] Ibid., 412.
[12] Ibid., 412-413.
[13] Ibid., 413.
[14] Ibid., 414.
[15] Pipes, *Communism*, 60.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 43.
[18] Ibid., 45.

After months of ruthless requisitions, the Great Famine took hold. At the beginning of 1933, a five-person Ukrainian peasant family was expected to survive the year on roughly 80 kilograms of grain, or 1.7 kilograms per person per month.[19] Rats, garbage, and even human flesh replaced bread at the table. The situation can only be described as hellish: "The most terrifying sights were the little children with skeleton limbs dangling from balloon-like abdomens. Starvation wiped every trace of youth from their faces, turning them into tortured gargoyles."[20] In the face of rising death tolls, Moscow rejected foreign aid.[21] Approximately 2.6 million Ukrainians perished as a result of negligence and deliberate action on Stalin's behalf; total demographic losses equaled 4.6 million by 1939.[22]

The Soviet government cannot be blamed for creating a poor harvest in 1932. While communist policies precipitated Ukraine's catastrophic decrease in planted arable land and 16-20 percent reduction in yields compared to 1928, they did not do so intentionally. The goal was always more grain, not less, and as a matter of utility, officials hoped to avoid mass starvation; they needed as many experienced farmers as possible, especially after dekulakization. Nevertheless, Stalin can and should be held responsible for the tragic events that followed. But did he commit genocide?

The 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines genocide as any situation in which a regime deliberately attacks a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group with a view toward that group's total or partial physical destruction. If the *Holodomor* was genocide against the Ukrainian people, then, Stalin must have intentionally targeted ethnic/national Ukrainians for total or partial destruction. Thus two questions emerge: Was the Great Famine intentional and ethnically/nationally focused, and if so, what was its goal?

Intentionality has always posed a problem for historians; proving what someone did is far easier than demonstrating why he did it. *Holodomor* scholarship suffers the same shortcomings. On the one hand, academics bitterly dispute the Great Famine's causes. In contrast to Orest Subtelny, who claims "food was available," R.W. Davies and Stephen G. Wheatcroft conclude Ukraine and the rest of southern and southeastern Russia produced a mere 58.1 million tons of grain in 1932, 10 million tons less than

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[19] Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 414.
[20] Ibid., 414-415.
[21] David. R. Marples, *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), 42.
[22] Jacques Vallin, France Meslé, Serguei Adamets, and Serhii Pyrozhkov, "A New Estimate of Ukrainian Population Losses during the Crises of the 1930s and 1940s," *Population Studies* 56, no. 3 (2002): 252; France Meslé, Jacques Vallin, and Evgeny Andreev, "Demographic Consequences of the Great Famine: Then and Now," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 30, no. 1/4 (2008): 220.

contemporary reports suggest.[23] "In our opinion," they write, "the 1932 harvest was 16-20 per cent smaller than the 1928 harvests…. The 1932 harvest was thus lower than that in the drought year 1931…. The occurrence of two bad harvests in succession greatly added to the difficulties of the authorities in distributing grain."[24] Davies and Wheatcroft fault Soviet mismanagement and natural phenomena like drought, rather than deliberate Bolshevik policy, for prompting such dramatic declines.

Yet even if Stalin did not manufacture the Soviet Union's dangerous food shortages, he intentionally made the problem in Ukraine worse. Reduced grain supplies meant all, or at least part of the U.S.S.R would go hungry to some extent. Moscow could have distributed that hunger evenly among the empire's independent republics, but instead Stalin held firm on Ukrainian grain quotas. In fact, Premier Vyacheslav Molotov, then one of his "two main associates in the field of agriculture," increased procurement in November 1932.[25] Agents also began seizing other food products, like sugar, beets, potatoes, and lard. "The government," writes David Marples, "was creating the conditions for the complete physical destruction of the rural population, including women and children."[26] But whether Stalin specifically targeted Ukrainians remains in dispute.

Davies and Wheatcroft accurately point out that all southern Soviet regions, including non-Ukrainian Kazakhstan, suffered immensely. Yale historian Timothy Snyder counters: "Famine had struck parts of Soviet Russia as well as much of Soviet Ukraine in 1932. Nevertheless, the policy response to Ukraine was special, and lethal. Seven crucial policies were applied only, or mainly, in Soviet Ukraine in late 1932 or early 1933."[27] Orest Subtelny also identifies Ukraine as Stalin's primary victim, due to its size and relative importance. The region's catastrophic losses during the collectivization and famine periods, which far outstripped those of its neighbors, make the latter position more likely.

Stalin's emphasis on Ukraine does not prove he singled out a specific ethnic or national population; the republic was by no means homogenous. Yet contextual realities like the rise of Ukrainian nationalism, which had threatened Soviet unity for years, and Ukraine's seemingly friendly relationship with Poland, a longtime Russian enemy, lend credence to the theory that Moscow attacked a people who jeopardized the U.S.S.R.'s territorial integrity, rather than a province. Stalin's December 1932 mandate calling for the "correct implementation of Ukrainization" and removal of

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[23] Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 413; R.W. Davies and S.G. Wheatcroft, "The Soviet Famine of 1932-33 and the Crisis in Agriculture," in *Challenging Traditional Views of Russian History*, ed. S.G. Wheatcroft (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 71.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Marples, *Heroes and Villains*, 41-42.
[26] Ibid., 42.
[27] Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 42.

"bourgeois [Ukrainian] nationalists from party and Soviet organizations" indicates just such an ethno-national focus.[28] Unfortunately, making a conclusive claim on the subject is difficult, considering how many other communities suffered, particularly Germans and Poles. That said, Ukraine's uniquely painful experience, combined with Stalin's apparent interest in crushing Ukrainian national sentiment and well-known distaste for Russia's rural neighbors, implies Moscow subjected the region to particularly egregious starvation conditions for reasons other than its great size. Its objective in doing so, however, derails the *Holodomor*'s claim to "genocide."

While millions of Ukrainian peasants starved in 1932 and 1933, their deaths do not appear to have been Stalin's goal. In a desperate attempt to continue feeding Russia's urban workforce and financing industrialization, the Kremlin instituted a policy of requisition at all costs. Its principal aim was not to kill Ukrainians. Instead, it intended first and foremost to save the Soviet Union's industrial proletariat at the expense of conveniently anti-communist farmers. This last question invalidates the *Holodomor*'s claim to genocide.

While history indicates intentionality and an ethno-national focus, Stalin attacked Ukrainians not to destroy them, but to fund Soviet industrialization. Ukraine's Great Famine therefore fails to meet the last criteria for genocide set forth in the 1998 Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court and thus cannot be considered as such.

[28] Marples, *Heroes and Villains*, 42.