HOLODOMOR ESSAY PRIZE 2021: FIRST PLACE
To what extent can the Holodomor (1932 - 1933) be classed as genocide?

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While the standard historical narrative in Ukraine concurs that the Holodomor constitutes genocide — the destruction or attempted destruction of a nation or ethnic group — this issue remains an area of contention in the international community. For one, the UN has not yet officially recognised this crisis as genocide, and there remain scholars and public figures who believe that the famine that took place under Soviet authority was non-genocidal. This school of thought posits that the Soviet measures were not taken with national or ethnic considerations specific to Ukraine, but that the action was economically motivated in order to fuel rapid industrialisation (Wheatcroft 2018, 476). However, proponents of the concept of the Ukrainian genocide argue that the famine was used as a means to eliminate the political threat of Ukrainian nationalism and diminish Ukrainian culture, thus providing adequate grounds for the classification of genocide (Graziosi 2015, 73, 2004, 11). Stalin was aware of the impending famine caused by the excessive grain quotas and later consciously exacerbated the crisis, suggesting that he had ulterior motives beyond economic obligations.

If one regards the sole motivation behind the policies enacted towards Ukraine as an economic necessity to drive industrialisation, the Holodomor perhaps cannot be seen as an act of genocide. High grain procurements were vital to boost the Soviet economy through exports and to fuel the growing urban population (Ellman 2007, 667). Wheatcroft posits that "The state showed no signs of a conscious attempt to kill lots of Ukrainians," but that the crisis occurred as a result of the "mistakes carried out by a generally ill-informed, and excessively ambitious, government" (2018, 476). By attributing excessive Soviet policies to overambition and error, this perspective denies that Moscow had genocidal motivations. However, Wheatcroft has been criticised for not being perceptive enough and having a "very narrow understanding of intent" (Ellman 2007, 681). Arguably, Wheatcroft's perspective as a western economic historian prevents him from appreciating the more comprehensive concurrent attack on Ukrainian culture which is largely seen by Ukrainian historians as a crucial grounds for which the Holodomor constitutes genocide (Kul'chyts'kyi 2015, 115). Conversely, Ellman maintains that the simultaneous economic objective to export grain does not negate the fact that Stalin "intentionally starv(ed) the peasants" (2007, 681). This raises the idea that the motivations behind the action were multidimensional: Stalin aimed to both fuel industrialisation and to attack Ukraine through an insidious scheme. Conquest opposes the idea that the policies

leading up to the Holodomor were motivated by mere economic incentives as the excessive grain targets were not imposed on the most grain-productive areas such as the rich Russian agricultural region (1986, 327). This suggests that the Soviet leadership had malicious ulterior motives but that the action was partially taken under the guise of economic policy.

Cultural and ethnic diversity naturally presented a threat to the USSR - a centralised state which strove for conformity and compliance among its subjects. Beyond the economic motivation to drive industrialisation, the long-standing political threat posed by Ukrainian nationalism suggests that the Soviet policies were intentionally directed at Ukraine as a nation. Ukraine saw the most vehement opposition to collectivisation in the USSR; one period of insurgency in 1930 involved nearly 1 million Ukrainians (Andriewsky 2015, 39). A series of Ukrainian revolts in early 1930 saw some participants chanting ‘Down with the Soviet power, long live the People’s Will’ (Patrilak 2014). Therefore, it may be inferred that the famine was deliberately used as a tool to weaken Ukraine politically. As outlined in the 1932 Politburo meeting, the Soviet policy of blacklisting villages entailed the “Immediate cessation of delivery of goods, complete suspension of cooperative and state trade in the villages, and removal of all available goods from cooperative and state stores” (Library of Congress 1997). This absolute extraction of food, which coincided with many arrests and the blockade of the village, indicates a desire to impose death on those who were targeted, reflecting the term Holodomor, meaning murder by starvation (Kul'chyts'kyi 2015, 95). Andriewsky notes that “Villages with known supporters of the Ukrainian People’s Republic in 1919 and/or with a history of resistance to Bolshevik grain requisitioning” were particularly targeted by blacklisting (2015, 30). This demonstrates that the Soviet measures had political motivations and were taken with such brutal force so as to eliminate the threat of Ukrainian nationalism. It appears that this was achieved: in 1934, Politburo member Pavel Postyshev declared that 1933 was the “year of the defeat of Ukrainian nationalist counterrevolution” (Klid and Motyl 2012, 43). The Ukrainian peasants now had a “change in mentality” and entirely submitted to the scheme of collectivisation (Kul’chyts'kyi, Olynyk, and Wynnyckyj 2008, 6). Therefore, the intent to starve a significant proportion of the Ukrainian population, which suppressed Ukrainian nationalism and dissent, demonstrates the genocidal nature of the Soviet course of action.

The wider attack on Ukrainian nationalism and culture beyond the policies on food extraction further suggests that the Soviet approach was taken with genocidal intentions. Andriewsky writes: “The repeated attacks on Ukrainian intellectuals, the assault on religion and the Ukrainian churches, the dispersal and fragmentation of the Ukrainian people—all of these were part of a larger pattern.” It could be argued

that Andriewsky, a Ukrainian historian, is too speculative when attributing Soviet policies to a “larger pattern” towards Ukraine. The purging and suppression of religion and intellectuals were carried out throughout the USSR and may not have been specific to Ukraine but indicative of the regime’s totalitarian nature. Nonetheless, Ganna Zakharova, the descendent of a Holodomor survivor, writes that those “who survived the Holodomor became terrified of acknowledging their cultural identity” (2018). It is plausible to state that an erosion of cultural identity, an essential element of nationalism, reduces a group’s desire for political independence, as evident in Ukraine. Therefore, the combined and mutually reinforcing assault on Ukrainian culture and widespread persecution of Ukrainians, particularly those suspected of being politically subversive, suggests that these actions were indeed taken with the intent to, in part, destroy a national group.

The excessively brutal nature of the Soviet policies further demonstrates that Moscow acted with the intention of killing a significant proportion of the Ukrainian population. It was not that the famine was just caused by acts of omission — failing to provide relief — but purposeful acts of commission through the imposition of increasingly severe policies (Ellman 2007, 680). It is widely accepted that Stalin was aware of the famine by late 1932 (Mace 1988). Indeed, the experience of the previous 1918-1921 famines which had arisen as a result of high grain quotas demonstrates that Stalin was not oblivious to the foreseeable result of famine in the first place and is therefore highly culpable for the outcome (Conquest 1986, 326). Following the escalation of the famine, in January 1933, Stalin issued a secret decree to prevent the “mass flight of starving villagers in search of food” by “arresting peasants fleeing North from Ukraine” (Klid and Motyl 2012, 30–31). Serbyn regards this decree as “perhaps the best available proof of the dictator’s genocidal intent against the Ukrainian nation” (2007, 12). The very name of the decree instructs the prevention of “starving villagers” from obtaining food, of which there would have been enough to feed the entire population had grain exports not been so high (Ellman 2007, 679). This shows that Stalin was fully aware that Ukrainians were starving, yet took measures to further prevent them from acquiring food and thus intentionally condemned them to death. One famine testimony, which recounts cannibalism in their village, states that those who set off to Russia were “turned back at the border” and “all perished on the way” (Kuryliw 2018). This illustrates the magnitude of the actions against Ukraine: excessive grain quotas (arguably deliberately) caused the onset of the famine, which was later purposely exacerbated by subsequent Soviet policies. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Soviet leadership acted to diminish Ukraine as an entity, both in terms of the physical population and in weakening the fabric of the society in terms of culture and nationalism, and thus Stalin exhibited genocidal intent. In fact, the combination of the attack on Ukrainian culture and political subversion through and alongside the

famine amplified the overall impact on Ukraine, indicating that the actions were taken to debilitate Ukraine in all respects.

In conclusion, it can be said that there were clear ‘non-genocidal’ economic considerations for the initial policies towards Ukraine. However, the coinciding political motivations and result of eroding Ukrainian dissent and culture provide adequate grounds for the claim that the Holodomor was an act of genocide. There is sufficient evidence that Stalin was not oblivious to the potentially catastrophic impact of the initial high grain quotas and was aware of the situation in Ukraine throughout the crisis. Subsequent Soviet policies which consciously prevented Ukrainians from obtaining food further demonstrate the intent to, in part, destroy a national group.

One might question the necessity of classifying an event as genocide that took place almost 100 years ago, yet the magnitude of the Holodomor and how it has been dealt with remind us that history cannot be separated from present politics and conversations. The famine is seared into the memory of Ukraine, above all for having resulted in the death of around 13% of the population (Kiger 2019). Despite these abhorrent facts, the full extent of the crisis has only recently come to light, having been obscured for decades under the USSR. The aforementioned cultural suppression is another aspect that has altered the fabric of Ukraine as a nation and continues to affect later generations. It is only right that the event is duly recognised considering the immense impact of the crisis and the ruthlessness with which it was sanctioned. Of course, it must be conceded that there is a degree of difficulty in assigning the term genocide to an event that took place decades before the concept was officially established. The allegation of genocide largely relies on intent, a fundamentally abstract concept which is hence an issue of contention between historians, particularly concerning the Soviet leadership which was notorious for falsification. However, a controversial subject should not be avoided solely for this reason. Ultimately, to condemn genocidal acts in the past is to remain vigilant against current crimes against humanity and bring a degree of justice to those painfully wronged.

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