

## HOLODOMOR ESSAY PRIZE 2021: SECOND PLACE

Holodomor – A crime of genocide, and a victim of ignorance

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'Holodomor' refers to a systematic famine-cum-genocide perpetrated by the Soviet Regime of Joseph Stalin over a span of 18 months from 1932-33, resulting in a calculated death toll of at least three-and-a-half million Ukrainian nationals, with other estimates rising higher than seven million. It represented one prong of 'a planned three-pronged attack on Ukraine', comprising 'dekulakisation, collectivisation, and systematically organised famine' (Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain, 2008) designed to force the submission of the Ukrainian people to Soviet will, under the guise of providing food for Russia's industrial heartlands.

One of the most critical elements of establishing the context of Holodomor is to utilise the knowledge of those who lived through it, and to corroborate said knowledge with expert testimony. A common theme running through eyewitness accounts is an ever-present sense of pain and dread, stemming from a situation which is 'hard [...] to talk about' because of how the victims 'suffered greatly' (Smereka, 2008). These accounts share, in abundance, recantations of 'misery that is impossible to describe', evoking imagery of 'a cart [that] would come to collect the dead' as 'people began to fall ill from hunger' – 'it was as if we all had to die, as if we were marked out for death' (Ostapiuk, 2008). New evidence demonstrates that Ostapiuk was indeed correct - this was indeed what had been planned. Liudmyla Hrynevych, a Ukrainian Historian, claims that 'Stalin prepared the Holodomor with the very same methods which Hitler prepared the Holocaust', attacking with propaganda both enemies to his economic ideology (Kulaks, who were 'liquidated as a class' (Gregorovich, 1974)) and specific ethnic groups (such as Ukrainians) in a similar vein to how Hitler used Propaganda 'to portray the Jews as the enemy of the German people and to dehumanise them' (Goble, 2018). Furthermore, the accounts themselves are both wide-ranging in scope and similar in substance, which indicates that the event had universal consequences, and lessens the likelihood that it had been fabricated by few with the aim of fooling the many. What this corroborated evidence demonstrates, in fact, is the intrinsic perceived reliability of these sources, and thereby allows us to analyse the sources further with relative confidence of their accuracy. While many of these accounts were gathered more than 75 years after the events in question but concerns about memory degradation can be assuaged by the similarity of the accounts themselves, and the unlikelihood of multiple people misremembering the same traumatic event in the same way.

Holodomor denial, much like denial of the Holocaust, is almost universally justified by specious or invalid evidence which exists only to obstruct what has been deemed to be an event of historical truth. Indeed, much of the denial of the Holodomor centres on the supposed complete lack of evidence of Stalin outright stating his plan to attack Ukraine and its inhabitants, but it should be noted that explicit statements of plans to attack are rarely made. Indeed, Adolf Hitler made no such comments before

or during the near-universally recognised Holocaust (Goble, 2018), and therefore denial of the Holodomor on the grounds of a lack of Stalinist statements is a logical fallacy through the instigation of double-standards. However, there does appear to be some evidence of Stalin's call to action against the Ukrainian peasants and the Kulaks (Ellman, 2007). Early in his rule, Stalin went to great lengths to specify two groups, the 'class enemies', who comprised, among others, the Kulaks and 'Counter-revolutionaries', and the 'idlers', who should be punished with 'repression or starvation' (Ellman, 2007). On 20th July 1932, Stalin proposed, as a rule, that 'thieves' who were 'stealing' the property of the state or of the Kolkhoz should be killed, which allowed officials locally to interpret that those currently dying of starvation as being in their position by their own volition (Rees, Khlevnyuk, Davies, Kosheleva, & Rogovaya, 2001). As a result, the starvation suffered by Ukrainians during Holodomor would have been interpreted as 'justified', because, according to Stalin's own proposal, they would have deserved it. However, historical fact is often not enough to dispel those so entrenched in ideologies as to refuse empirical fact.

Such ideological groups include, overwhelmingly, those with neo-Communist and neo-Stalinist views, as the Holodomor acts as a direct criticism of both the Communist policy of Collectivisation and of Stalin's 'ignorance of agricultural and peasant matters' (Ellman, 2007). One such organisation is the 'Progressive Labour Party' (PLP), who, in one article, cite the Soviet response to famine in the early 1930s as a plan to 'redistribute it [grain] in a more egalitarian manner', and blames the famine on 'the peasants themselves, and attacks from kulak landowners' (Progressive Labour Party, 2014), which are two provably false claims. Furthermore, in the same article, the PLP claims that there is 'no evidence' to support the claims that collectivisation, and subsequent 'disruptions', caused problems, and dismisses the 'Holodomor' as 'bogus'. Aside from the colloquialisms lowering the reputation of the source, the former claim is contradicted one paragraph earlier, in which they claim that there were 'errors in carrying out the plan'. The author has neglected to provide any sources for any of their claims, let alone those seen as the most outlandish with currently held evidence. Such an example is the claim that 'Holodomor originated in the Ukrainian diaspora, particularly among those who had fought alongside the Nazis and fled with German troops [...] as the Red Army advanced', but it is claimed without evidence. Furthermore, this claim appears to make little sense, given that 4.5 million Ukrainian citizens were part of the Soviet Red Army, of whom nearly 11% were given awards for bravery by the USSR (Potichnyj, n.d.). Furthermore, the 'Reichskommissariat Ukraine' (RKU), the state set up during the Nazi occupation of Ukraine, is deemed to be responsible for 'Nazi extermination policies [which] reached an estimated 3,000,000 people' (Magocsi, 1996), let alone the fact that the Ukrainians were, under Nazi ideology, *Untermensch* (Subhuman), and 'original Nazi plans called for the extermination of 65 percent of the nation's 23.2 million Ukrainians (Schmuhl, 2008), with the survivors to be treated as slaves' (Gellately, 1996), rather than soldiers. The article may be referring to 'an additional more than two million Ukrainians [...] deported as slave labourers to Germany' (Rud, 2014). As there is no available evidence to support the claims of widespread Ukrainian Nazism, and significant evidence to the contrary, we must assume that the unsubstantiated claims are false, which further weakens the cause

of the source. Ending the article, the source claims that 'many peasants who hated the kolkhozy [...] worked hard on them', and that 'many other peasants worked willingly' and 'accepted collectivisation'. While this may have been true for Russian peasants, who had operated similarly under Tsardom's *Mir* for centuries, Ukrainian peasants had worked individually throughout, causing much higher levels of resentment towards collectivisation in Ukraine, as evidenced by the eyewitness accounts gathered by the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain (AUGB). The father of Kateryna Buriak, despite pleas from his wife, refused to join the Kolkhoz, and 'said that he would rather die than work there' (Buriak, 2008). Kulaks were forced to work on the Kolkhoz through threats of 'torture' and 'for fear of being shot' (Diachenko, n.d.). In direct contravention to the source is the claim that 'People were forced to go and work in the kolkhoz, but nobody wanted to become a member of the collective' (Smereka, 2008) and, given the previous establishment of the reliability of the primary sources, one is inclined to believe them over an unsourced, uncited, and provably false article by an ideologically driven organisation.

A similar pattern can be found in the PLP's other works, given their status as a primary, direct denier of the Holodomor. Another article claims, using quotes by historian Mark Tauger, that the Holodomor is 'political propaganda disguised as History' (Progressive Labour Party, 2014), and claims, yet again, that the Soviet government delivered large amounts of aid to Ukraine, which remains at odds with eyewitness testimonies. Furthermore, data from a Ukrainian research paper highlights that populations in Ukrainian cities from 1926-37 did, for some, fall by more than 55%, indicating that this aid either did not come in time, or came for too few (Kulchytsky & Yifmenko, 2003). Indeed, it is that latter which appears to be the case, as cited by Kul'chyts'kyi [sic] again (Kul'chyts'kyi, Olynyk, & Wynnyckyj, 2008), in which he claims that 'in Ukraine, the draconian food requisitions caused the same kind of famine as in other commodity farming regions'. What he proceeds to detail, however, is that 'the situation changed qualitatively when Stalin's security service began confiscating all foodstuffs', which was not standard practice. 'The peasants ended up utterly dependent on food relief from the state' and, 'beginning on 8 February 1933, Stalin set about feeding the starving populace through the collective farms and Soviet state farms' with grain that they had originally hoarded for reserves, despite the obvious argument that a famine would constitute an emergency. While this does, initially, appear to support those who deny the Holodomor, the authors note that 'this assistance should not be mistaken for charity: the only people who were fed were those who were still capable of working on the sowing campaign', thereby meaning that, while some were fed back from starvation, 'those who could not work perished'. The denial alleges that 'proponents misrepresent history by omitting evidence' (Progressive Labour Party, 2014), when, in fact, it is they who have done so, which only serves to further weaken the cause for denial of the Holodomor.

One of the most often cited articles of Holodomor denial is that of Jeff Coplon in the *Village Voice*, published in 1988. However, much of the article focuses on semantics, and fails to address the core of the argument for the existence of the Holodomor – deliberate starvation. Coplon solely questions the reasons behind pushing

awareness of the Holodomor, going so far as to claim that it supported ‘a denial of Hitler’s holocaust against the Jews’ (Coplton, 1988), rather than attacking its designation. It is articles such as this which cause Holodomor scepticism, even though the existence of one tragedy does not preclude the existence of the other. Indeed, one of the alleged ‘experts’, Moshe Lewin (University of Pennsylvania), belittles recognising the event as ‘adding horrors until it becomes a pathology’, indicating that they are more concerned with the image of the past than about recording people’s suffering, in complete contravention to the duty of the historian. One must ask the question, overall, of whether a source that ignores the crux of an issue can truly be considered useful for denialists, and, logically, the answer should be no. A source that does not address an issue can only be attacked for such and cannot be rebutted in the typical style – with evidence.

Denial by omission is the most common form of Holodomor Denial. As of writing, only sixteen countries recognise the event as a genocide, but steps have been taken to rectify this. By the autumn of 1988, the Holodomor had a distinct place on the curriculum in New York State, alongside the Holocaust, and attempts by the AUGB to raise awareness in 2008 prompted Edinburgh to commission, and subsequently unveil in 2017, a commemorative stone to mark the event’s 85th Anniversary. Despite the efforts of people attempting to raise awareness, however, ‘they say we are making it up’ (Dowhopiat, 2007)

The Holodomor must be concluded, therefore, to be a verifiable historical event, which is distinctly lacking in worldwide recognition. Efforts to deny this event are often unsourced or uncorroborated, and many stem either from neo-Communist or neo-Stalinist organisations, who mask atrocities committed by the Soviet regime, or have quarrel with semantics, rather than with the event itself. Arguably, the event is summarised by one eyewitness quote: ‘It was a terrible time for me – one that I will never forget’ (Semianiw, 2008)

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