

HOLODOMOR ESSAY PRIZE 2021: THIRD PLACE

Did the world condone the Holodomor?

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The horrors of the Holodomor remained a well-guarded secret until the late 1980's^[1], something which has been largely attributed to the Soviet government's attempts to hide the Holodomor from the world and suppress any survivors through intense fear of persecution. However, what if this isn't the only reason why the Holodomor wasn't stopped from 1932 onwards? Despite western journalists such as Malcolm Muggeridge and Gareth Jones exposing the truth behind the famine in Ukraine, there is a lack of evidence to suggest that western countries made any serious, or successful attempt at intervention between 1932 and 1933. Could the ignorance of other countries have played a role in the Holodomor's secrecy? Or were the suppression and fear associated with the Holodomor completely responsible for its clandestinity?

*"Not everyone believes that it happened [...] They say **we are making it up.**"*^[2]

These are the words of Ivan Dowhopiat, a survivor of the Holodomor. His testimony is significant because it demonstrates how well-concealed the Holodomor was – the government of the USSR had brainwashed the population into blind submission so intensely that when Holodomor survivors told of their horrific experiences, people didn't believe them. They were said to be liars. Whilst it is arguable that the disbelief of the general population was a choice, preventing them from accepting that approximately 7 million men, women, and children^[3] had forcibly starved to death, it is perhaps more reliable to see this disbelief as a product of the Soviet government's attempts to criminalise the victims of the Holodomor to conceal their own atrocities. This criminalisation of Ukrainians came in many forms, one notable example being the government's circulation of the rhetoric that the population losses and imprisonment of 'kulaks' was the fault of the 'kulaks' themselves; They were accused of manipulating statistics in the government registry offices by registering deaths multiple times and not registering births to make the communist government seem incompetent.^[4] In effect, this may have contributed to the denial of the Holodomor by presenting the real victims of the Holodomor as people who deserved punishment, discouraging others from both investigating the loss of life in Ukraine and Kuban, and excusing the brutality of the Soviet Government, consequently helping to hide the truths of the Holodomor from the world. Furthermore, when some Ukrainians managed to escape the USSR and migrate to Poland in the hopes of freedom^[5], the USSR closed all borders between Ukraine and the rest of the USSR, as well as the Ukrainian-Polish border to prevent word spreading of the impending obscenities of the Holodomor.^[5] Moreover, any village which didn't meet the unrealistic grain quotas set out in the Law for The Five Ears of Grain was put on a Blacklist – this was essentially certain death for the village's inhabitants as every morsel of food they had left was taken away, and they were condemned to martial law. This prevented anyone from entering or leaving the area.^[5] Ultimately, these measures isolated Holodomor victims from the rest of the world, silencing them and preventing them from telling their story.

Despite these ruthless attempts by the USSR, it is undeniable that the West knew about the Holodomor. Various western journalists managed to enter, photograph and report on the realities of the Holodomor, but the issue didn't appear to receive national attention. One of the first western journalists to report on the Holodomor was Malcolm Muggeridge, a journalist from the United Kingdom who investigated conditions in Ukraine and wrote about his first-hand experiences:^[6]

*"I mean starving in its **absolute sense**"*

*"The famine is an **organized one.**"*^[6]

From this, it is unequivocal that the West not only knew about the Holodomor itself, but also how deliberate it was – the West was aware of an "organized" famine in Ukraine yet stood by and allowed more innocent Ukrainians to die. Also, Muggeridge's articles are significant because he was forced to go to extreme lengths to prevent them from being censored by the Soviet Government; he sent his articles out

of the country to ensure his reports provided a true depiction of the ongoing trauma in Ukraine. ^[6] This corroborates the drastic attempts made by the USSR to conceal the true brutalities of the Holodomor from both the citizens of the USSR, and the rest of the world. However, this also demonstrates how, despite the attempts of the USSR, it was in fact possible to uncover the true horrors of the famine in Ukraine - the reports of Gareth Jones further consolidate this. Gareth Jones published various articles about his experiences of the Holodomor, in which he described the swollen stomachs of children who hadn't eaten a real meal in weeks ^[7], the desperate cries for help from villagers, saying: "There is no bread, we are dying!", ^[8] but also the way in which the communist government seemed to deny the existence of any famine despite clear evidence to suggest otherwise, asking: "May I [...] congratulate the Soviet Foreign Office on its skill in concealing the true situation in the U.S.S.R.?" ^[9] Notably, despite these harrowing reports of the torture that Holodomor victims were forced to endure, there is no evidence of any real national reaction to the Holodomor in the West. People seemed to have read their morning paper, exposing the stark realities of the ongoing genocide in the USSR, and then sipped their coffee and went about their day as if nothing had changed - How is this possible?

*"Almost single-handedly did Duranty aid and abet one of the world's most prolific mass murderers, **knowing all the while what was going on, but refraining from saying precisely what he knew to be true.**" ^[10]*

*"Duranty loved to repeat [...], 'you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.' **Those 'eggs' were the heads of men, women and children, and those 'few' were merely tens of millions**" ^[10]*

Walter Duranty, a soviet-sympathetic journalist, was instrumental in the lack of intervention from the West. Duranty published numerous articles denying the existence of any famine in the USSR, saying "There [was] no actual starvation or deaths from starvation, but there [was] widespread mortality from diseases due to malnutrition." ^[11] Duranty claimed that rather than there being an "organized" ^[6] famine as Muggerridge and Jones had described, the loss of life within the USSR was simply an effect of the failed collectivisation system. Furthermore, having potentially agreed with the USSR to spread news of no famine in Russia in exchange for preferential treatment ^[13], Duranty went on to discredit the works of Gareth Jones. He stated that Jones had failed to survey an appropriate "cross-section" of the USSR so as to imply that his findings were unsubstantiated. ^[12] Yet, it was the public's positive reaction towards these statements that caused them to be so significant – in 1932, Duranty received a Pulitzer Prize for his "profundity and intimate comprehension of conditions in Russia" ^[14]. Consequently, having been nationally celebrated for his authenticity, his depiction of the USSR as a country which was struggling with temporary poverty and food shortages was widely accepted, perhaps contextualising the West's hesitancy to act; they believed that the USSR was struggling with collectivisation just as they were struggling with the Great Depression. However, it is possible that the acceptance of Duranty's work was more a strategic choice than a result of disinformation. The consequence of accepting that there was a genocide in Ukraine meant intervention against a communist state in a time when the West feared another war, as well as the imposition of communism itself. In this sense, Duranty's statement that he was "convinced [Bolshevism] [was] unsuitable for the United States and Western Europe", and that it wouldn't "spread westward unless a new war wreck[ed] the established system.", ^[14] may have epitomised the overwhelming fear of communism in the West hence discouraging them from acting against the USSR. Indisputably, the rich leaders of countries which relied on capitalism and democracy would have viewed the imposition of communism, a system which advocated the equal distribution of wealth and nationalisation, as a threat. Whilst Duranty's Soviet links reiterate the USSR's role in hiding the Holodomor, is it possible that the acceptance of Duranty's work over that of Muggerridge and Jones was a conscious choice by the West? To avoid war and the expansion of communism into western territory, the West may have purposefully

endorsed Duranty's anti-famine perspective to justify their inaction against the Holodomor, corroborating the theory that the West knowingly condoned the Holodomor.

As a result of this western apathy towards the Holodomor, the genocide's victims were forced to become their own salvation. Notably, the work of the International Alliance of Women (IAW), rallied by a group of Ukrainian refugees, was instrumental in gaining an unprecedented level of recognition for the Holodomor - after desperately fleeing Ukraine pre-border-closures, a group of Holodomor refugees reached Poland and began circulating recollections of their experiences under Stalin's regime^[5]. This is significant because, whilst the Polish press was restricted by the forced censorship enacted in the Polish-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty of July 1932^[5], these refugees succeeded in gaining the attention of the League of Nations through their communication with the IAW.^[15] However, even when faced with a direct appeal from Holodomor victims themselves, the world refused to act – not just the West, the world.

*“When the head of the Council explained the situation, **no one [...] denied the fact of the famine**. However, representatives of the countries that saw **their interests lying in political and economic cooperation with the Soviet Union indicated formal obstacles to an official reaction** on the part of the League of Nations concerning the Famine.”*

^[15]

Only 3 countries supported Norwegian Prime Minister Johan Ludwig Mowinckel's requests for League members “to speak out boldly and act generously”^[15] against the Holodomor: Germany, Ireland, and Spain.^[15] Whilst on the surface this provides evidence to suggest that the West was mostly to blame for condoning the Holodomor, these seemingly accepting countries were in fact acting on behalf of their own political agendas more than their moral conscience. Germany in particular is thought to have supported action against the Holodomor because it would serve as a distraction from the anti-Semitic atrocities that they were implementing under their Nazi regime.^[15] Other countries, who denied assistance against the famine, blamed their inaction on the fact that the USSR and Ukraine weren't members of the League and hadn't specifically requested assistance.^[15] Arguably to avoid backlash as the 'secret meeting' was exposed to the public, the League chose to transfer the case to the Red Cross.^[15] In theory this could have been successful if not for the repressive Soviet government, who of course denied the existence of any famine and refused to allow the Red Cross to enter the USSR to provide relief.^[15] This left millions of Ukrainians helpless once again. In effect, the foreign reaction to the Holodomor was a series of excuses and empty promises which assisted Stalin in his massacre of millions.

The world must not be relieved of their responsibility in the Holodomor. Despite the USSR's attempts to conceal the Holodomor, numerous reports were published globally which exposed the truly horrific acts of the Soviet government against innocent Ukrainians - the world hid their ignorance behind a thin veil of false justifications and denials. The world remained silent whilst 7 million men, women and children were murdered.^[3] No amount of disinformation, political fears or foreign policy aims can excuse this blatant lack of intervention.

Nothing can excuse the role the world played in millions of lives lost; in the millions of stories untold; in the millions of families torn apart.

Even to this day, only 17 countries recognise the Holodomor as a genocide; ^[16] only 17 nations have swallowed their pride and admitted to their failure to act against a genocide they were fully aware of.

There is no doubt, the world did, and continues to, condone the Holodomor.

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