

HOLODOMOR ESSAY PRIZE 2021: HIGHLY COMMENDED

The Holodomor; Hell on Earth
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As the tranquil winter sun rose on January 1 1932, its serenity revealed the harsh, benighted Soviet landscape which harboured, inter alia, the civilians of then-Soviet Ukraine. The new year would bring unprecedented suffering for the Ukrainian people, of which 1/8th of the population would not see the summer of 1933. These severe lands accommodated a heinous ruler-Joseph Stalin, the man whose actions are attributed to the largest 'man-made' famine ever known: the Holodomor. But for over 50 years, the grim truth was virtually unknown. It's said in much of the world that lies spread twice as fast as the truth; but in Soviet Russia, the truth didn't spread at all. Terror and propaganda ensured the howling reality of the Holodomor was stifled and ignored like an irritating sibling. For example, on June 17 1932, with the famine underway, Stalin furiously accused a bold official named Terekhov of lying and 'fabricating such a fairy-tale about famine'. This conveys the immense effort of Soviet leaders to publicly obscure that the Holodomor was even occurring. Privately however, Stalin sent Kaganovich a letter detailing how he watched the 'glaring absurdities' of 'famine' from his luxury train. Evidently, the severity of the situation was conspicuous to the Soviet leadership, but they did nothing to help. And such is the great paradox of 'communist' Russia: its leaders led lavish lives, while areas such as Ukraine were brought to their knees by grain requisitioning, and driven to their graves by starvation.

From 1932-33, the people of Soviet Ukraine were starving. In an ostensibly egalitarian, cohesive federal union, aid was absent, armed rebellions were quashed mercilessly, and so, with the people too weak to fight back by Spring 1933, the number of deaths accelerated into the millions. Death toll estimates vary anywhere between 3-14 million, and the reason for such divergence comes from the sheer scale of deaths, and the magnitude of the cover-up operation. Robert Conquest, one of the first to comment on the death toll, estimates it being approximately 5 million. Naturally, this has since been contended with the introduction of new archival documents. Although, there is greater consensus on a figure of 600,000 'indirect deaths', whereby 0.6 million pregnant mothers died in the Holodomor, taking their unborn children with them. But it's not just the blood of pregnant mothers on Stalin's hands. Desperate men stealing inconsequential amounts of grain to save their dying women and children; Ukrainians attempting to flee to neighbouring areas for survival; and anyone blaming the authorities for their suffering, were all shot. The habitual reaction from Soviet leadership was savage, callous.

Yet, the most contentious issue remains, was the famine man-made? In late 1931, Stalin became concerned by the mounting desire among the Ukrainian people for self-autonomy. A feverish sense of nationalism was growing concomitantly with the emergence of anti-communist parties. And reasons for the increase in opposition are obvious: the people of Ukraine had previously favoured private farming. Stalin's collectivisation policy introduced in 1928 imposed a reverse lifestyle, whereby farming would be done collectively on a Kolkhoz, a policy predictably detested in Ukraine. Stalin's own wife Nadezhda opposed collectivisation, and the horrific famine it caused undoubtedly contributed to her suicide in November 1932, so it's clear the policy was widely loathed. Coupled with Stalin's treacherous history of maltreatment, principally his brutal handling of the 1922 Georgian affair, a recipe for the intended destruction of the Ukraine materializes. And so, consensus remains amongst historians-past and present-that the Holodomor was a man-made famine, engineered by Stalin. Bolstering this

argument is the knowledge that Ukraine opposed the Red Army, led by Stalin, Lenin and Trotsky, in the Russian Civil War some ten years previous. Stalin would never forget this.

The harvest of 1932 was 60% below the unattainable quota Stalin had set; this grain 'shortage' gave him the perfect opportunity to oppress Ukraine's people through forceful crop collections. The OGPU and the 25,000-ers, a group of 'activists' and communist enthusiasts were told that 'anti-Soviet' peasants were deliberately underperforming to restrict progress. Then, sent in to 'restore order', they would snatch food, grain and any glimmer of survival from Ukrainian hearts. Stalin would then shut Ukraine's borders in January 1933, at the Holodomor's peak, preventing people's only hope of survival. The inhabitants, too weak to fight back and with no method of escape, were obliged to acquiesce their fate. Ukraine's civilians were confronted with an unassailable maze; every outcome ensured certain death. By February 1933's end, 190,000 peasants had been returned to Ukraine, having desperately attempted to flee. Stalin's Ukrainian hatred transcended the ordinary citizen though, as the mass starvation was accompanied by an assault on the elite, an assault on the Ukrainian intellectual and political class. The Holodomor became an attempt to suppress any hint of desire for self-determination. No longer restricting violence to those who failed to meet quotas, Joseph Stalin was punishing people for as little as their nationality.

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Yet, scepticism remains about the 'man-made' element of the Holodomor. Mark Tauger blames the famine on 'poor harvests', outlandishly claiming great aid was brought to the dying people of Ukraine. Tauger writes 'in 1932 the Soviet government developed a food distribution system for 40 million people to provide food to the population...Why did Moscow send tractors to Ukrainian farmers in 1932 if it was going...to organise for them a famine genocide?' Superficially, Tauger seems to make a valid point. However, it should be considered that Stalin's aim wasn't to wipe out Ukraine, as he'd be in a position of undeniable wrongdoing. A place with people meant a place for production-which to Stalin meant a place for profit. The tractors weren't wasted, they would be put to good use in summer 1933, when civilians from other areas of the Soviet Union were sent to work on the devastated fields of Ukraine, replacing the dead. Unsurprisingly, similar measures weren't necessary in the Volga region which Tauger quotes was 'harder hit' according to Stalin, suggesting Tauger's attempt to downplay Ukraine's suffering is unsubstantiated.

Although Stalin was purportedly willing to lower the grain production quotas across the republic, there's no evidence of a 'food distribution system' to mitigate the famine. Almost all actions reveal Stalin accentuating the disaster, such as by shutting Ukraine's borders. Furthermore, Holodomor survivor Vasyl Tsyba debunks Tauger's suggestion that 'the yield in 1932 in the USSR was 20-30% lower.' Tsyba says 'I understand it was a genocide. Because the harvest that year was good...Children were whipped, adults were sent to the Gulag if they resisted.' And the opinion of a man who personally endured the Holodomor subverts that of a historian from decades later, insinuating the famine was Stalin-orchestrated. Certainly, Stalin feared the truth because he executed the administrators of the 1937 census, as it would clearly reveal the monumental, artificial decline in Ukraine's population. When mass grain requisitioning was halted in summer 1933, the famine quickly subsided-an obvious indicator of Stalin's control over the lives of so many. Ultimately, he had the capacity to begin and end the genocidal famine whenever he pleased-and that's what he did.

The incessant denial of a famine even existing defies logic. Any country would, albeit reluctantly, admit this to ensure global aid that could save millions. Unless the lives of those dying were not intended to be saved. During the suffering, the Soviet Union

continued exporting grain en masse, when reducing the export drive could've saved an untold number of lives. However, this potential provision of aid didn't align with Stalin's industrialisation effort. Tauger claims 'export of Soviet grain abroad was reduced to 1% (in 1932), the remaining 99% went to feed the population.' If this were true, then the Soviet Union could've never afforded the forthcoming Five-Year Plan's which saw the country fully industrialised by the eve of WW2. Tauger's claims are subsequently implausible. Throughout his reign, Stalin repeatedly prioritised Soviet supremacy over human life, and the Holodomor is a stark representation of this philosophy. To him, industrialising the Soviet Union was worth 3,000,000 Ukrainian lives-and probably a lot more.

Nowadays, most historians side with the overwhelming evidence that Stalin caused the Holodomor. Gareth Jones, a Welsh freelance journalist of the time was the forerunner in this domain. His actions in reporting the Holodomor to the world, having witnessed the anguish first-hand when touring there during the famine, saw him banned from the Soviet Union in 1935. Returning home, Mr Jones published articles in British and American newspapers, vividly detailing the harrowing Holodomor. He wrote, 'I passed many villages...Everywhere I heard crying: We have no bread. We are dying! Tell England that we are swelling from hunger'. Jones proposed 'the main reason (for the famine) is the Soviet policy of collectivisation.' Clearly, procurement of grain was killing the people; this was the work of more than 'poor harvest'. Meanwhile reporters like Walter Duranty helped cover up the Holodomor, stating 'there is no famine or actual starvation'. Jones valiantly went where no one had, risking his life revealing to the world the Soviet Union's best kept secret.

Much of Jones' information came from consuls who were 'not allowed to express their views in the press...But (are) not so reticent in private conversation.' Having spoken to 'twenty to thirty' consuls who divulged the reality of the Holodomor, Mr Jones' information is invaluable; it unequivocally confirms Stalin caused the famine. During one train ride, Jones spoke to a 'communist who denied there was even a famine', while a peasant 'fished orange peels out the spittoon and devoured them', providing an understanding of how desperate the people had become. While millions died in Ukraine, the rest of the world woke to the truth: the horrendous suffering was Stalin's doing. On August 12 1935, having been kidnapped in Mongolia, Jones would die under dubious circumstances. Suspicion persists that it was the NKVD who murdered Jones. And that's hard to contest, given the damning revelations he made.

Even when presented with all the tools to ease the famine's effects, Stalin continued the great exportation drive at the expense of Soviet lives in the millions. 'I believe it was genocide', proposes reputable historian Anne Applebaum, while Conquest, Service and Montefiore advocate the same position. The Soviet Union prohibited any mention of the event until their Glasnost policy of the 1980s, insisting historians report the event as an 'unavoidable natural disaster'.

Consequently, despite the best efforts of individuals such as Mr Jones, for many years most people didn't know the truth, let alone believe it. To this day, people like Tauger remain intransigent, seeing the famine simply as a shortage of food, the culpability lying with the weather; it was neither man-made nor genocide. Importantly however, the most reliable information available is the accounts of those from the time-such as Jones and Holodomor survivors-and these priceless pieces of evidence have been brought to light. The world now knows the truth.

The introduction of collectivisation and dekulakisation signed the death warrant of anywhere from 3-14million Ukrainians. There was nothing distinctly treacherous about

the weather of 1932-33 to cause upwards of 3 million deaths. Yet, people were starving, Kulaks were persecuted, Ukraine was infused with lifeless corpses, cannibalism was widespread, mothers were burying their children, children were eating their pets, and a country was on its knees, weeping. Fervently trying to cover-up the famine that convulsed the Soviet Union, Stalin's totalitarian regime ensured any mention of the Holodomor was criminalised, punishable with a five-year term in the Gulag labour camps; blaming the authorities was punishable by death. All efforts were driven into ceaseless denial of suffering, of famine, and of any wrongdoing. This recurring theme of concealment and cover-up is a valuable indicator of how Stalin's ruthless sanctions caused the deaths of millions of Ukrainians. But it's also a valuable indicator of something else: the strength of unity. The regime had become an enemy to its own people, while togetherness had prevailed against the iron fist of one ruthless man-the man who made the Holodomor.

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