

HOLODOMOR: WAS IT ETHNOCIDE?

OPINION & ANALYSIS: By Andrei Marchukov, PhD (History),
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MOSCOW - The Soviet famine of 1932-33 was an act of genocide against Ukrainians. Kiev has been forcing this point on the world, the United Nations and Moscow for several years now, in a vast and aggressive campaign.

The Famine (Holodomor, in Ukrainian) is an all-pervading ideological concept, a tool of public indoctrination. It is not only a tribute to the victims' memory but also a pressing political demonstration by present-day Ukrainian leaders, spearheaded against Russia as much as against the communist past.

The matter returned to the United Nations on October 15, when Ukraine submitted to a UNESCO conference a resolution demanding the greatest possible information about the Great Famine. In fact, this information is not withheld, even though the world does not regard the Famine as a deliberate genocidal act.

While fully recognizing the Ukrainian tragedy, there is no explicit proof that the famine was provoked by the Kremlin and intended to exterminate the Ukrainian nation.

The holodomor concept first arose amongst the Ukrainian Diaspora. Many books and press publications appeared in the West in the 1940s-70s describing the Famine as a Kremlin plot to kill off Ukrainians and undermine the survivors' spirit. Public attention to the holodomor skyrocketed in the 1980s.

This was the time when President Ronald Reagan was referring to the U.S.S.R. as the Evil Empire. Ukrainian emigres added fuel to the fire with their reminiscences and analyses of the holodomor.

In 1984, the U.S. Congress established an ad hoc commission to investigate the causes of the Great Famine in Ukraine in 1932-33. Its 1988 Report to Congress described the famine as "man-made" and denied any causal connection with drought.

"Joseph Stalin and those around him committed genocide against Ukrainians in 1932-1933," the report says. Perestroika, with its outspoken spirit, brought the concept to Ukraine. Mourning the millions starved to death went hand-in-hand with wrathful denunciations of genocide.

Today's propaganda aims to make the holodomor part of the Ukrainian world-view. President Viktor Yushchenko called on politicians of his generation to "preserve historical memory and spare no efforts to make the world qualify the Famine of 1932-33 as genocidal".

Why is such sensation whipped up over by-gones? On the one hand, Ukrainian propaganda has found a satanic enemy, the epitome of Absolute Evil, and is now out to develop a guilt complex in Russians to make them feel morally and materially responsible for the tragedy.

On the other hand, it seeks to make Ukrainians feel like innocent victims, and spread this assumption worldwide. Tellingly, Ukrainian leaders are ever more frequently referring to the Famine as the "Ukrainian Holocaust" - thus putting the U.S.S.R. on a par with Nazi Germany.

Cardinal Lubomir Husar, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, concisely described the goal of the campaign: "Memory of the holodomor is what our nation shall stand on." Words of equal aptitude belong to former President Leonid Kuchma: "Ukrainian national consolidation has a long way to travel yet. We have made Ukraine. Now is the time to make Ukrainians."

"Making Ukrainians" implies a new national ethic and mentality, with the idea of Ukrainians and Russians as two nations apart. What several Ukrainian generations firmly believed in has been turned on its head.

The young regard their country's recent past as a time of colonialism, when Ukrainians were ruthlessly exterminated. It is hard to find a more graphic example than the Famine.

Was it really genocide or ethnocide against Ukrainians? The U.S.S.R. owed the terrible famine of 1932-33 to agricultural collectivization.

The rapid creation of a thoroughly new type of farming went together with the cruel dispossession of well-to-do farmers, so-called "kulaks". Peasant resistance inevitably followed.

Bloated grain procurement quotas envisaged total confiscations—seed, food and fodder grain. The 1932 quota for Ukraine was 400 million poods, or 6.4 million metric tons, but even the severest possible confiscations brought only 261 million poods, so extra procurements were launched, with searches, ruinous fines—and firing squads. Peasants were dying of starvation as early as October 1932, and the famine went on up to the next year's end.

Those two years saw 2.9-3.5 million deaths from starvation in Ukraine alone, according to various estimates. Yet it was not ethnocide proper.

Registry office statistics for 1933 show death rates in urban localities no higher than average, in contrast to an exorbitant death toll in the countryside not only in Ukraine but all over the Soviet Union. People were doomed not on the grounds of ethnicity, but merely because they lived in rural areas.

Grain shortages were exacerbated by a rapid increase of the urban population. It swelled by 12.4 million nationwide in the four years 1929-32, and by 4.1 million in Ukraine within 1931, mainly because persecuted peasants fled their villages.

Nothing could have been easier for the regime than to starve townspeople, who depended on food supplies from elsewhere for their survival. Yet, it was not done. The regime made do with harsh food rationing.

Peasantry as a social class was the victim of the cruel policy. This point clearly follows from the geography of the Great Famine.

It spread throughout the Soviet breadbasket areas-Ukraine, the middle and lower reaches of the Volga, the North Caucasus, the central part of the Black Earth Zone, the Urals, part of Siberia, and Kazakhstan - with a total population of 50 million. The Famine killed 6-7 million people nationwide. All Soviet peoples were victims.

Arguments cited to prove that the famine was a deliberate act of genocide do not hold water. Still, many Ukrainians do not want to turn the tragic page of history. This is understandable. If they did, public attention would turn to their own, present-day, policy and its dire fruit.

The Ukrainian population shrank by 4.3 million in 1991-2003-3.6 million died, and over 1.2 million emigrated, while only 500,000 former emigres returned.

If we extrapolate the figures to the end of 2006, the population decline exceeds 5.4 million-this without wars, famine, or the Kremlin's imperialism. Don't these statistics give food for uneasy thought?

NOTE: Andrei Marchukov, PhD (History), is staff researcher of the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Russian History. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of RIA Novosti.

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