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IS THE UKRAINIAN GENOCIDE A MYTH?

In 1988 the US Commission on the Ukraine Famine arrived at nineteen findings, among them (No. 16) that what happened to the Ukrainians in 1932-1933 constituted genocide.¹ This was, in fact the most important of the commission's conclusions, and as the person who drafted those conclusions for the commission's approval, I feel a certain responsibility to defend it in this journal in the light of new evidence that has been made available after the collapse of the Soviet Union and published by scholars in Ukraine.

United Nations reports

There have been two major United Nation documents on genocide, the Ruhashyankiko report of 1978 and the Whittaker report of 1985.² Both are major studies of genocide from the standpoint of the commission, with the second intended as a corrective to the former. The Ruhashyankiko report had been forced to delete any mention of the Armenian genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire because of extensive pressure by the government of Turkey. The Whittaker report was intended as a corrective and did hold that the Armenian massacres had constituted genocide. These reports, however, were merely adopted by a UN subcommittee and did not necessarily reflect the views of higher UN bodies, let alone of the UN as a whole. The same is true of the US Commission on the Ukraine famine, which was adopted by and thus reflected the opinion of a temporary joint (hybrid) commission of the Congress, representatives of the president of the United States, and public members appointed by the members from Congress but was in no way binding on either Congress or the president, since it required approval from neither.

Neither of the UN reports mentioned Ukraine. If Turkey had been able to block findings not to its liking, imagine what the Soviet Union could have done. Moreover, while the Whittaker report was being prepared, I corresponded with the author, who said that since the issue was one of only three million or so Ukrainians, about 10 percent of the total Ukrainian SSR popula-

1. Commission on the Ukraine Famine, *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-1933: Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), pp. vii, xxiii.

2. Nicodeme Ruhashyankiko, *Report to the U.N. Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of National Minorities: Study of the Question of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (E/CN.4/Sub. 2/416, 4 July 1978), 186 pp.; Ben Whitaker, *Revised and Updated Report on the Question of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (E/CN.4/Sub. 2/416/1985/6, 2 July 1985), 62 pp.

tion at the time, it really did not merit consideration as genocide. As a person having no standing with the body in question, there was little I could do to pursue the matter further.

However, it should be kept in mind that when Ukrainians raise the issue of the international recognition of the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33 as genocide, about all that is feasible is something on the order of the UN reports, and any attempt to get an amendment to or revised and updated report would likely face the same obstacles placed by the Russian government as those placed by that of Turkey to any recognition of the Armenian genocide in past years. In addition, it must be kept in mind that Russia, unlike Turkey, is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and thus carries far more weight in all UN organizations. Still, what is not feasible today might well become so in the future.

The International Commission of Inquiry

Unlike the US Commission on the Ukraine Famine, in 1990 the International Commission of Inquiry Into the 1932-33 Famine in Ukraine, a moot court sponsored by the then World Congress of Free Ukrainians, stopped short of such a conclusion, stating:

If the intent to eliminate seems to have been present, was it nevertheless bent upon eliminating "a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, *as such*"?

There is no doubt that the famine and the policies from which it arose were not confined to Ukraine, even if the territories with a Ukrainian majority appear to have been tragically privileged. Moreover, history has since largely confirmed that Stalin's hatred extended beyond the Ukrainians. One is led to envisage the possibility of a series of genocides, however frightful that might be, but this does not in itself rule hypothesis of a genocide during the 1932-33 famine.

To this extent, and with due regard for the substantiating data supplied it, the Commission deems it plausible that the constituent elements of genocide were present at the time.³

This is a little like the Scottish verdict, of "not proven," that is, the charge is one explanation that does not necessarily exclude others but not enough for a conviction. It was adopted because the chairman of the commission, Prof. Jacob Sundberg, argued:

3. International Commission of Inquiry into the 1932-33 Famine in Ukraine, *The Final Report: 1990* (Toronto: International Commission of Inquiry into the 1932-1933 Famine in Ukraine, 1990), p. 61.

... such prosecution would have to take the general defences into account, the most important of which perhaps would be that invoking the Genocide Convention would mean its retroactive application to a moment in Europe's history when no European or American power was willing to intervene in favour of the victims of the famine, not even by relief on purely humanitarian grounds, much less by a forcible humanitarian intervention of the type that used to hit the Ottoman Empire.⁴

While this was presented as a dissenting opinion of the chairman, it was certainly taken into account by his colleagues in drawing up the majority opinion. In fact, with the exception of this point Prof. Sundberg's dissent was perhaps stronger than that of the majority of his colleagues in its condemnation of the Soviet policies that brought about the famine. While Prof. Sundberg found that among the multiple goals Stalin's regime pursued in creating the famine was "destroying the Ukrainian nation,"⁵ it was precisely on this point that the majority, which found that the Genocide Convention applied to acts committed before its legal adoption,⁶ found its reason for dancing around the issue of whether this element needed to demonstrate genocide had been legally proven or merely proven to be one of several "plausible" explanations.

Why the *Holodomor* was genocide

With all due respect to the distinguished legal scholars on the tribunal, the only real reason for not finding that a crime of genocide had been perpetrated was that those most obviously culpable were almost all dead by the time the given commission announced its findings, and finding something to charge with a crime now, thirteen years later, would be well nigh impossible. However, Professor Sundberg, not the majority, was quite correct in finding on the basis of the limited evidence we had at the time that the intent was there. Consider a private letter of September 11, 1932, from Stalin to Kaganovich, recently published from the personal archives of Lazar Kaganovich:

... The main thing is now Ukraine. Matters in Ukraine are now extremely bad. Bad from the standpoint of the Party line. They say that there are two oblasts of Ukraine (Kyiv and Dnipropetrovs'k, it seems) where almost 50 *raikomy* [district Party committees] have come out against the plan of grain procurements, considering them unrealistic. In other *raikomy*, they confirm, the matter is no better. What does this look like? This is no party, but a parliament, a caricature of a parliament. Instead of directing the districts, Kosior is always waffling between the directives of

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

the CC VKP(b) and the demands of the district Party committees and waffled to the end. Lenin was right, when he said that a person who lacks the courage at the necessary moment to go against the current cannot be a real Bolshevik leader. Bad from the standpoint of the Soviet [state] line. Chubar is no leader. Bad from the standpoint of the GPU. Redens lacks the energy to direct the struggle with the counterrevolution in such a big and unique republic as Ukraine.

If we do not now correct the situation in Ukraine, we could lose Ukraine.

Consider that Pilsudski is not daydreaming, and his agents in Ukraine are much stronger than Redens or Kosior imagine. Also consider that within the Ukrainian Communist Party (500,000 members, ha, ha) there are not a few (yes, not a few!) rotten elements that are conscious or unconscious Petliura adherents and in the final analysis agents of Pilsudski. If the situation gets any worse, these elements won't hesitate to open a front within (and outside) the Party, against the Party. Worst of all, the Ukrainian leadership doesn't see these dangers. . . . Set yourself the task of turning Ukraine in the shortest possible time into a fortress of the USSR, into the most inalienable republic. Don't worry about money for this purpose.⁷

Transforming Ukraine at any cost in the shortest possible time into a fortress of the Soviet Union and the most inalienable republic is a pattern that the late Hryhory Kostiuk as early as 1960 was able to describe on the basis of Soviet official press sources as Hryhory Kostiuk's *Stalinist Rule in the Ukraine: A Study in the Decade of Mass Terror, 1929-1939*. Based on what could be learned from the official Soviet Ukrainian press of the period, Kostiuk called this policy one of turning "the non-Russian republics of the USSR into *de facto* provinces of Russia."⁸

Now, of course, with Ukrainian historians having had over a decade to work in the archives, we know much more about the details. We know about Molotov's and Kaganovich's direct role in Ukraine and the Kuban after being appointed heads of special commissions on October 22, 1932, to oversee the grain procurements in those places and how they were able to send the very top Communists in their own jurisdictions wherever they decided in order to fulfil whatever tasks they assigned.⁹ We now have the terrible decree of No-

7. *Komandyry velykoho holodu: Poyizdky V. Molotova i L. Kahanovycha v Ukrainu ta na Pivnichnyi Kavkaz, 1932-1933 rr.*, Valerii Vasyl'iev, Iurii Shapoval, eds. (Kyiv: Heneza, 2001), pp. 174-175; Ukrainian translation, pp. 160-161. Originally published in *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, Nov. 30, 2000.

8. Hryhory Kostiuk's *Stalinist Rule in the Ukraine: A Study in the Decade of Mass Terror, 1929-1939* (London: Atlantic Books, 1960), p. 1 *et passim*.

9. *Holod 1932-1933 rokiv na Ukraini: ochyma istorykiv, movoiu dokumentiv* (Kyiv: Vydavnytstvo politychnoyi literatury Ukrainy, 1990), pp. 228, 245, 260-61.

ember 18, 1932, that Molotov pushed through the Ukrainian Politburo, taking away everything but the seed (that would be taken under a separate decree in late December) if they had not fulfilled their quotas, placing collective farms on blacklists and fining individual peasants in other foodstuffs (in kind) for “maliciously” not having enough bread to seize.¹⁰ We have the Moscow Politburo decree signed by Stalin and Molotov on December 14, 1932, blamed “shortcomings in grain procurements” in Ukraine and the North Caucasus (read the Kuban) on “*kurkul* and nationalist wreckers” in order to unleash a reign of terror on Party officials, decree how many years specific officials in several districts should receive from the courts, end Ukrainization in the North Caucasus, condemn its “mechanistic” implementation (thereby *de facto* eliminating it there also), and the following day ending Ukrainization in the rest of the USSR.¹¹ We have Kaganovich’s diaries recalling how on his first day in the North Caucasus he told the local leadership, “Without doubt among those who have come from Ukraine [i.e., Skrypnyk’s Commissariat of Education – J.M.] there were organized groups leading the work [of promoting kulak attitudes – J.M.], especially in the Kuban where there is the Ukrainian language.”¹²

We also now have thousands of eyewitness accounts recorded in Ukraine itself, basically identical to what the Commission on the Ukraine Oral History Project began to collect almost twenty years ago from those who had fled to North America.¹³ The first outpouring was when Stanislav Kul’chyts’kyi published a list of highly “Party-minded” questions in *Sil’s’ki visti* (Village News) for a book of people’s memory that the Writers Union had commissioned the late Volodymyr Maniak to compile. Maniak sorted through 6,000 letters sent in response to Kul’chyts’kyi’s questions to publish 1,000 accounts.¹⁴ Now there are enough individual memoirs and collections of eyewitness accounts to make up the bulk of an impressive biography.¹⁵ These witnesses can no longer be dismissed as fascist collaborators. Many fought in the Red Army during the Second World War and were exemplary Soviet citizens.

In short, under such pressure from the very pinnacle of Soviet power, witnessed to both by the documents of the perpetrators and the memories of those who survived, the question ceases to become, how many millions died? One is forced to ask instead, how could so many still survive when literally every-

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 250-60.

11. *Komandyry*, pp. 310-12.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

13. Commission on the Ukraine Famine, *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-1933: Oral History Project of the Commission on the Ukraine Famine*, edited for the Commission by James E. Mace and Leonid Heretz, 3 vols. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1990).

14. *33-y holod: Narodna kniha – Memorial*, Lidiya Kovalenko and Volodymyr Maniak, comps. (Kyiv: Radians’ke pismennyk, 1991).

15. *Holodomor v Ukrayini 1932-1933 rr. Bibliografichnyj pokazhchuk* (V-vo M.P. Kots’: Odesa -L’viv, 2001), 654 pp.

thing possible was done to starve them to death? Each account is individual, but taken together their collective accounts of traumatization cannot fail to move even the most "scientific" of historians.

Still, the basic outlines of what happened and why remain basically the same in general outline as what we learned from classical Sovietology working on the basis of the official Soviet press. The only difference is that now we know in much more detail just how invasive Moscow's interventions in Ukraine were. And what Raphael Lemkin – the Jewish jurist from Poland who coined the term *genocide*,¹⁶ wrote the basic documents, and lobbied them through the United Nations – had in mind when he first developed the term is quite clear:

Genocide has two phases: one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressor group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor. This imposition, in turn, may be made upon the oppressed population that is allowed to remain, or upon the territory alone, after removal of the population and colonization of the area by the oppressor's own nationals. Denationalization was the word used in the past to describe the destruction of a national pattern. This author believes, however, that this word is inadequate because: (1) it does not connote the destruction of the biological structure; (2) in connoting the destruction of one national pattern, it does not connote the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor; and (3) denationalization is used by some authors to mean only deprivation of citizenship.¹⁷

Some scholars have called for defining genocide in either too narrow or too broad for scholarly purposes.¹⁸ But what the author of the term had in mind and what was actually adopted by the international community were actions "subordinated to the criminal intent to destroy or cripple permanently a human group."¹⁹ Few would doubt that Ukraine was crippled by the Stalinist period and ways that are both painfully obvious and agonizingly difficult to define. For this reason, in my more recent work I have tried to understand how and why independent Ukraine has thus far been unable to transform itself in the

16. Explaining that he was combining "the ancient Greek word *genos* (race, tribe) and the Latin *cide* (killing)," he added in a footnote, "Another term could be used for the same idea, namely, *ethnocide*, consisting of the Greek word 'ethnos' – nation – and the Latin word 'cide'." Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation—Analysis of Government—Proposals for Redress* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Division of International Law, 1944), p. 79.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

18. Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonasson, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 23-27.

19. Raphael Lemkin, "Genocide as a Crime Under International Law," *The American Journal of International Law*, 41 (1947), p. 147.

ways we might think appropriate and its people deserve. For this reason I have found it useful to describe contemporary Ukraine as a post-genocidal society.

Holocaust or *Holodomor*?

Ukrainians have sometimes spoken of the *Holodomor* as the Ukrainian Holocaust. With all due respect to those who have chosen to do so, I must point out the pitfalls of such a usage of the term. The word *holocaust* is usually traced to Wycliffe's translation of the Bible as a burnt offering to the Lord, and indeed it is an English word from the ancient Greek words *holos* (whole) and *caustos* (to burn). In reference to Hitler's destruction of the Jews, it came to be used as a not quite exact translation of the Hebrew word *shoah* (complete and utter destruction), yet eerily evocative of what Hitler tried to do to with a people traditionally considering themselves to be chosen by God, the Jews, to destroy them entirely as a people, including burning them in ovens specially designed for that purpose. It is not a generic term for a certain kind of crime against any given group but a specific word for a specific event and as such has entered many languages.

Almost until the end of the Soviet Union, Ukrainians in the West used such terms as the Great Famine or the Manmade Famine in Ukraine. Only when the veil of silence began to gradually lift at the end of 1987²⁰ did it become clear that the word *holodomor* become the label that stuck in people's memory in the place where it happened. The word itself is interesting, *holod* (hunger or famine) and *mor* (mass death as in a plague, like *chumats'kyi mor*, the Black Death). For this reason, to speak of the Ukrainian Holocaust makes about as much sense as speaking of the Jewish *Holodomor*. It is a unique term that has arisen from the depths of a victimized nation itself. As the unique tragedy faced by Ukrainians in the USSR becomes more a part of the consciousness of the larger world, the use of the word that Ukrainians in Ukraine have chosen will inevitably enter other languages as well.

As is the case with any culture of which we are not a part, those who are not part of the Ukrainian nation that has lived through the Soviet period, a nation that has been shaped or distorted by precisely that experience, cannot tell them how to understand themselves any more than we can tell them how to overcome all the obstacles that their past has burdened with. Ukrainians in Ukraine will make their own Ukrainian history. Having lived there for a decade not as an expatriate but as one of them, I might be more aware of this than most. Ukrainian historians today have largely retreated from the Party-mindedness of yesterday into the compilation of facts and documents, leaving them to the historians of tomorrow to figure out what it all means for them. We have written our books and will continue to do so. They will either embrace or reject what skills we can offer, preserved in the various works we will

20. Volodymyr Shcherbyts'kyi cracked the door open in a long speech on December 25, 1987, stating that in 1932-33 there has been hardships and even famine in some areas.

leave behind. It is, after all, their country, and they will make their own history for the rest of the world and their own posterity to deal with. We can only hope that they will find what we have to offer of some use. For the reason, Raphael Lemkin, believed that genocide was a crime against humanity because nothing else can "convey the specific losses to civilization in the form of the cultural contributions which can be made only by groups of people united through national, racial or cultural characteristics."²¹ It is up to them to define and recover their own losses in this sphere.

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21. Lemkin, "Genocide as a Crime Under International Law," p. 147.