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Holodomor

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Holodomor, man-made famine that convulsed the Soviet republic of Ukraine from 1932 to 1933, peaking in the late spring of 1933. It was part of a broader Soviet famine (1931–34) that also caused mass starvation in the grain-growing regions of Soviet Russia and Kazakhstan. The Ukrainian famine, however, was made deadlier by a series of political decrees and decisions that were aimed mostly or only at Ukraine. In acknowledgement of its scale, the famine of 1932–33 is often called the Holodomor, a term derived from the Ukrainian words for hunger (*holod*) and extermination (*mor*).

Causes of the famine

The origins of the famine lay in the decision by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to collectivize agriculture in 1929. Teams of Communist Party agitators forced peasants to relinquish their land, personal property, and sometimes housing to collective farms, and they deported so-called kulaks—wealthier peasants—as well as any peasants who resisted collectivization altogether. Collectivization led to a drop in production, the disorganization of the rural economy, and food shortages. It also sparked a series of peasant rebellions, including armed uprisings, in some parts of Ukraine.

The rebellions worried Stalin because they were unfolding in provinces which had, a decade earlier, fought against the Red Army during the Russian Civil War. He was also concerned by anger and resistance to the state agricultural policy within the Ukrainian Communist Party. “If we don’t make an effort now to improve the situation in Ukraine,” he wrote to his colleague Lazar Kaganovich in August 1932, “we may lose Ukraine.” That autumn the Soviet Politburo, the elite leadership of the Soviet Communist Party, took a series of decisions that widened and deepened the famine in the Ukrainian countryside. Farms, villages, and whole towns in Ukraine were placed on blacklists and prevented from receiving food. Peasants were forbidden to leave the Ukrainian republic in search of food. Despite growing starvation, food requisitions were increased and aid was not provided in sufficient quantities. The crisis reached its peak in the winter of 1932–33, when organized groups of police and communist apparatchiks ransacked the homes of peasants and took everything edible, from crops to personal food supplies to pets. Hunger and fear drove these actions, but they were reinforced by more than a decade of hateful and conspiratorial rhetoric emanating from the highest levels of the Kremlin.

From famine to extermination

The result of Stalin's campaign was a catastrophe. In spring 1933 death rates in Ukraine spiked. Between 1931 and 1934 at least 5 million people perished of hunger all across the U.S.S.R. Among them, according to a study conducted by a team of Ukrainian demographers, were at least 3.9 million Ukrainians. Police archives contain multiple descriptions of instances of cannibalism as well as lawlessness, theft, and lynching. Mass graves were dug across the countryside. Hunger also affected the urban population, though many were able to survive thanks to ration cards. Still, in Ukraine's largest cities, corpses could be seen on the street.

The famine was accompanied by a broader assault on Ukrainian identity. While peasants were dying by the millions, agents of the Soviet secret police were targeting the Ukrainian political establishment and intelligentsia. The famine provided cover for a campaign of repression and persecution that was carried out against Ukrainian culture and Ukrainian religious leaders. The official policy of Ukrainization, which had encouraged the use of the Ukrainian language, was effectively halted. Moreover, anyone connected to the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic—an independent government that had been declared in June 1917 in the wake of the February Revolution but was dismantled after the Bolsheviks conquered Ukrainian territory—was subjected to vicious reprisals. All those targeted by this campaign were liable to be publicly vilified, jailed, sent to the Gulag (a system of Soviet prisons and forced-labour camps), or executed. Knowing that this Russification program would inevitably reach him, Mykola Skrypnyk, one of the best-known leaders of the Ukrainian Communist Party, committed suicide rather than submit to one of Stalin's show trials.

As the famine was happening, news of it was deliberately silenced by Soviet bureaucrats. Party officials did not mention it in public. Western journalists based in Moscow were instructed not to write about it. One of the most famous Moscow correspondents at the time, Walter Duranty of *The New York Times*, went out of his way to dismiss reports of the famine when they were published by a young freelancer, Gareth Jones, as he "thought Mr. Jones's judgment was somewhat hasty." Jones was murdered under suspicious circumstances in 1935 in Japanese-occupied Mongolia. Stalin himself went so far as to repress the results of a census taken in 1937; the administrators of that census were arrested and murdered, in part because the figures revealed the decimation of Ukraine's population.

Although the famine was discussed during the Nazi occupation of Ukraine in World War II, it became taboo again during the postwar years. The first public mention of it in the Soviet Union was in 1986, in the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster. That disaster too was initially kept secret by Soviet authorities.

Assessment

Because the famine was so deadly, and because it was officially denied by the Kremlin for more than half a century, it has played a large role in Ukrainian public memory, particularly since independence. Ukrainian poet Ivan Drach was the first to speak publicly about the famine, in 1986, after the Chernobyl disaster, citing it as an example of how damaging official silence can be. Monuments commemorating the Holodomor have been erected by the Ukrainian government as well as by the Ukrainian diaspora, and Holodomor Remembrance Day is observed around the world on the fourth Saturday of November. Ukraine has also invested in research on the famine.

By early 2019, 16 countries as well as the Vatican had recognized the Holodomor as a genocide, and both houses of the United States Congress had passed resolutions declaring that “Joseph Stalin and those around him committed genocide against the Ukrainians in 1932–1933.”