The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-1933: a case of genocide

Following is the text of a lecture delivered on behalf of the Institute of Ukrainian Studies of Ukraine at the Library of Congress on May 30. (The text has been edited for clarity by Jurij Dobczansky, senior cataloging specialist for the Ukraine, Central and East European Languages, Social Sciences, and Cataloging Division at the Library of Congress.)

Interpretation of the Ukrainian Holodomor of 1932-1933 differs in contemporary Ukraine and Russia. The Ukrainian Parliament adopted a law that defines the Holodomor as genocide. The Russian government, under consideration in the Verkhovna Rada, the Institute of History of Ukraine submitted to the government a deputy a convoking array of evidence.

The genocidal character of this crime perpetrated by Joseph Stalin was highlight in our publications of the early 1990s, yet our Russian colleagues blame the Institute for allegedly distorting the facts at the government's request. Let us leave aside the issue of whether one should consider as genocide the death by famine of hundreds of thousands of people in different regions of the USSR, including Ukraine, because of mandatory government policies. Let us remember another: the death of millions of people caused by the confiscation of all food under the procurement pretexts. Until the last months of 1932, people in Ukraine, as well as in other regions, were dying because their bread was taken away. However, in November-December 1932 they were dying because all other food was taken from them—not only bread.

One may discounted crime staged against the backdrop of famine in other parts of the Soviet Union had its own reasons. This crime was different from the hunger in the rest of the USSR caused by the forced pace of industrialization and Stalin's resolve to make the collective farm system an integral element of the centrally planned economy. As a rule, one components present the following three arguments, which they claim defile the interpretation of the Holodomor as genocide. First, people of different nationalities were starved to death in Ukrainian villages. Second, nobody persecut Ukrainians based on their nationality. Third, they refer to the large-scale food program in 1933 organized by the Soviet government and targeting specifically the population of the so-called "titular nation," that is, the Ukrainian state that emerged for a few years in the late 1930s. The so-called "Ost" plan aimed at depriving the territory of Eastern Europe as far as Crimea of the local population in the name of creating a Greater Germany. The Holodomor should be viewed as terror by famine. This form of terror falls within the purview of the U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The Convention defines genocide as complete or partial elimination of a group of people. Any form of terror aims to repress a part of the population in order to terrorize the whole. Terror in its different forms was the chief method of building communism in the Soviet Union.

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The Ukrainian Famine...

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In April 1930 the law on grain procurement was adopted: collective farms had to give to the state a third to a quarter of their gross output. The lion’s share of the harvest was to be distributed among the peasants. War, it was noted, was but war. The world crisis of 1929-1930 resulted in a slump in the prices of industrial equipment. Soviet trade organizations were buying up everything they could get at reduced prices. It turned out that food prices plummeted even lower. The Soviet Union was not able to get any long-term loans until it agreed to pay off its arrears. Stalin’s measure increased due to badly managed transportation. In short, harvest losses were the consequence of farmers’ economic disinterest. But the Kremlin explained away the disaster with the decrease in grain procurements as organized sabotage, grain concealment and theft.

Hence, on August 7, 1932, Stalin personally wrote the resolution of the USSR Central Executive Committee “On the protection of state property at enterprises, collective farms and cooperatives.” According to the document, a person who stole collective farm property could be shot dead or imprisoned for at least 10 years. By this time the economic crisis had worsened. The Kremlin had to cut its military budget and capital construction expenses. Specially created grain procurement commissions were urgently dispatched to the main grain-producing regions (Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, the Volga region) during the autumn of 1932. The activities of these commissions led to further disasters. Indeed, the grain-consuming regions that were partially withdrawn from the centralized supply began increasing their purchases on the private market. Therefore, the second part of 1932 was marked by a sharp rise in grain prices and loss due to badly managed transportation.

Official propaganda depicted “food complications” as a consequence of the kolkhoz policy and the introduction of the collective farms. But the government knew the causes of the crisis perfectly well. On January 19, 1933 another resolution was adopted by the Communist Party: “On obligatory grain supply to the state by collective farms and private households.”

Could one document drastically change the relations between the leaders of the country’s economy and the farmers? It surely could and here is an example: the decision to switch from so-called food distribution (proizvoditelnaya) to the food tax (prodrazrakhodovanie). This was the beginning of a new economic policy. The regulation of January 19, 1933, stipulated that the amount of food to be taken by the state in the form of a tax should be known in advance, even before the beginning of the year.

The tax character of the supplies meant that the grain seeded on collective farms became the state’s property, that the state acknowledged the farmers’ and collective farms’ property rights to the harvested grain.

Why did Stalin not confine himself to these reasonable economic measures to overcome the crisis but instead added the terrible terror famine to them? To answer that question, it is important to remember that the Terror Famine was aimed not only at Ukrainian peasants.

Stalin’s repressions also focused on the Communist Party of Ukraine, whose half a million members were eventually reduced by 50 percent. The party’s leadership was exterminated completely in 1937. That was the beginning of the persecution of the Ukrainian intelligentsia as punishment for having taken part in the national liberation movement.

Stalin’s often quoted letter to Lazar Kaganovich of August 11, 1932, was revealed in the year 2000. Alarmed by developments in Ukraine, Stalin intended to appoint Kaganovich as secretary general of the Communist Party of Ukraine. Stalin also planned to send the deputy chief of the OGPU (predecessor of the KGB), Balaytsev, to Ukraine. Explaining these personnel re-arrangements, Stalin said: “Without these and similar actions [economic and political consolidation of Ukraine and its frontier regions in the first place] we may lose Ukraine.”

Recently OGPU reports to the Kremlin have been made known to the public. The situation was difficult everywhere, but Stalin singled out Ukraine – a national republic with tremendous economic and human potential at the border of Europe. He did not forget that it took three attempts to conquer Ukraine in 1917-1919. He remembered also that in the spring of 1920 the Ukrainian Communist Party conference rejected the list of Central Committee members recommended by Lenin and elected other leaders according to its own wishes. Stalin did not forget March 1930, when collectivization in Right-Bank Ukraine had to be suspended because of social upheaval. Our opponents underestimate the national background of the crisis that took place at the beginning of 1930s. For them, a starving Ukrainian peasant remains just a peasant and not a citizen of the Ukrainian state. They consider the Soviet Union as a group of republics deprived of any rights. But it became such only after the famine of 1932-1933 and the terror of 1937-1938. Prior to that, the Soviet Union was an alliance of al republics called “korenizatsiya.” The term came from the word “korin” (root), and the purpose of the process was to introduce Soviet power and mentality deep into the roots of non-Russian societies. “Korenizatsiya” meant the reorientation beyond the scope of a bureaucratic campaign and became an instrument of national assimilation. After the population census of 1926, Ukrainian peasants persistently raised before the Communist Party’s Politburo the issue of joining to Ukraine the neighboring territories of the Russian Federation (like the Kuban region) where ethnic Ukrainians constituted a majority. These petitions were not successful, but they did result in obtaining the Kremlin’s consent for the villages of Kuban to become Ukrainian territories. The Kuban region soon transferred all administrative correspondence, mass media and schools from the Russian to the Ukrainian language to reflect the population’s needs. The Kremlin watched this process with increasing concern.

A totally Ukrainian Kuban would end up becoming the territory of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, which would make the “Korenizatsiya” of the great human potential of Ukraine within the USSR. For that reason, Stalin labeled Ukrainian assimilation out of Russia as “Petliurivska” – after Ukrainian national leader Symon Petliura. Hence, in December 1929 a new resolution was passed by Soviet authorities demanding an immediate switch from the Ukrainian to the Russian language in the Soviet and cooperative bodies’ administrative correspondence, as well as all newspapers and school curriculum throughout the Ukrainianized regions of the Northern Caucasus.

Therefore, the second part of 1932 became point at which things were reversed and overlapped – one in social economic policy and the other in national policy of the Kremlin. Stalin was very afraid of social upheaval in starving Ukraine. Therefore, repressions were aimed both at Ukrainian peasants (Terror Famine) and at the Ukrainian intelligentsia (individual terror on a mass scale and the “purging” of the ranks of the Communist Party of Ukraine).

On the one hand, the main thrust of repressions was aimed not at people of a non-Russian nationality, but at the Ukrainian state. On the other hand, it was clear that the large majority of those were those same Ukrainians. Even in the strategies of a Soviet leader, the existence of Ukrainians posed a threat to the Kremlin.

What we say is that the state pushed the Ukrainian peasantry into total dependency by confiscating all the food reserves, our opponents demand: Show us a document. They claim: If there is no document, there was no genocide.

Holodomor survivors and witnesses tell many stories about special brigades that conducted requisitions in farmers’ houses, taking away all the food they found. Dozens, hundreds and thousands of testimonies from people of different settlements and communities, when put together, create an unassailable picture. Those are the only possible conclusion: those who searched the households must have been guided by an executive order that was not fixed on paper. Yet they still demand a written document from us... Well, it is possible to produce a written evidence. In November 1932 Stalin sent the afore mentioned emergency grain procurement commission of the Ukrainian SSR under the guidance of his close crony, Molotov. Molotov drafted the two parts of this order and the two parts of this text were signed by Stalin. These regulations and testimonies about fines-in-kind – by confiscating meat and potatoes...

On January 1, 1933, Stalin sent a

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Filmmaker Halya Kuchmij begins work on ‘William Kurelek: The People’s Painter’

ETOBICOKE, Ontario – Award-winning filmmaker Halya Kuchmij has recently begun work on a feature length documentary film about Ukrainian Canadian artist William Kurelek (1927-1977).

The film, titled “William Kurelek: The People’s Painter,” has received initial funding from the Canadian Television Fund and the Canadian Film Board. The project is currently in the pre-production phase, and is expected to be completed by 2011.

Kuchmij, who has received critical acclaim for her previous films dealing with Ukrainian subject matter, is working with a team of Ukrainian and international specialists to create a comprehensive and authentic portrayal of Kurelek’s life and work.

Kuchmij is renowned for her work with Help Us Help the Children, a Canadian non-profit organization that assists children in Ukraine. She has produced a number of films dealing with Ukrainian subject matter, including “Chornobyl: The Legacy,” “Laughter in My Soul,” and “Psalm for Ukraine.”

With 30 years of experience as an accomplished documentary producer, Kuchmij is well suited to handle the complex and sensitive subject matter of Kurelek’s life and work.

Filming will take place in Canada, the United States, and Ukraine, and is expected to involve interviews with family members, friends, and colleagues of Kurelek, as well as archival footage and other materials from the artist’s personal collection.

The film is expected to be released in the fall of 2011, and will be distributed through major film festivals and theaters worldwide.

For more information, contact Halya Kuchmij at info@kuplowsky.com or visit the website at www.williamkurelek-documentary.com.