

The Holodomor: Continuing Controversy in Ukrainian Politics and External Relations

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Following Stalin's rise to power in the early years of the Soviet Union, one of the regime's first priorities was a rapid collectivization of the agricultural process, beginning as early as 1917. Where agrarian peasants in the "bread basket" of the new Soviet Union, encompassing much of present-day Ukraine, once cultivated grain on an individual basis, they were now called upon by the Soviet authorities to shift to a cooperative agricultural mode. The transition was rocky, replete with peasant revolts and other resistance to Moscow's central planning scheme. By 1931, however, the collectivization process was proceeding apace, and authorities implemented a grain procurement plan with quotas for collection from individual regions. Quotas were based on harvest estimates from the previous year, and when harvests, particularly in Ukraine, failed to meet these expectations in 1932, the Soviet government took drastic measures, including authorizing coercive methods of grain procurement, and, where grain was not available, the seizure of all other available foodstuffs. The resulting

famine in 1932 and 1933, especially pronounced in the ethnically Ukrainian areas of Ukraine and Russia, claimed the lives of several million people.

The apparent ethnic specificity of the famine's effects and Stalin's known conflicts with Ukrainian nationalism led many to term the event an ethnically targeted campaign, or genocide. The precise number of people who died in the famine, subsequently termed the "Holodomor" by Ukrainian historians, remains the subject of intense debate. Similarly, the causes and motivations for the grain procurement methods and the destruction they caused remains a particularly divisive issue among politicians and historians in Ukraine, Russia, and the Ukrainian diaspora. In this paper, following a discussion of relevant background information on the historiography of the Holodomor, I explore the continuing impact of the debate surrounding this event on Ukraine's domestic politics and international relations, particularly with the Russian Federation. I argue that the Holodomor continues to play a major role in all aspects of the above, and that contending historical narratives act as a determinative factor in the course of contemporary Ukrainian governance, especially in a region that continues to be so bitterly scarred and divided by its historical legacy. Most importantly, I show that debate over the

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Holodomor is motivated less by its intrinsic significance than its usefulness as a divisive and effective political instrument in contemporary politics.

The Debate over Numbers

The debate over the Holodomor continues to unfold in part because, for most of the Soviet period, discussion of the famine was completely forbidden. While people have long been convinced of various facts surrounding the incident, information only now emerging from old Soviet archives is reshaping the debate. For example, documents recently released from KGB archives in Kiev demonstrate more conclusively than before, according to some analysts, that the famine was intentionally planned from within the Soviet power structure, rather than the mere result of poor yields and bad planning (Fawkes, 2006). The new records also emphasize the brutality of the Soviet coercion mechanism: “One document is an order from Moscow to shoot people who steal food. It is signed by Stalin in red ink” (Fawkes, 2006).

Among the problems facing politicians and historians attempting to grapple with the history is a lack of reliable information. The leading historians of the Holodomor have widely divergent estimates of the number of lives it claimed. Robert Conquest, perhaps

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the earliest and most famous of these, suggests in his book, *Harvest of Sorrow* (1986) that as many as five million people died in Ukraine alone. Newer historians question the accuracy of his method, which relied on Stalin's own population growth statistics before other information was available (Maksudov, 2007). Unfortunately, some of the archival records with the potential to validate Conquest's higher estimates have not been translated into English for broader academic consumption (Marples, 2005). Historian Sergei Maksudov places his estimate between 4 and 4.5 million lives, and prominent Ukrainian historian Stansilav Kulchitsky claims between 3 and 3.5 million (Maksudov, 2007). With the death of American-born historian James E. Mace, there are no prominent English-speaking historians remaining who dedicate their research exclusively to the Ukrainian Holodomor, so new academic interpretations may be slow to emerge.

The Politics of the Holodomor

Alongside an ongoing struggle by politicians, nationalists, and historians to gain a broader acceptance and awareness of this event, the late Soviet period proved fertile ground for disseminating information critical of Stalin, as Soviet authorities sought to channel and deflect negative sentiments about the failing regime. In 1988, Ukrainian writer Oleksa Musiyenko published one of the earliest reports in a Kiev

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journal, taking advantage of the newly anti-Stalin climate. She accused Stalin of orchestrating a brutal grain procurement campaign in Ukraine, resulting in the 1933 famine. She also coined the word “Holodomor” in this report for the first time (Kulchytsky, Part 3, 2005). Since this term and the unifying narrative surrounding it entered the popular parlance, Ukrainians have drawn frequent comparisons between the Holodomor and the much better known Holocaust, leading to a new and separate controversy altogether.

Generally, acknowledgement of the Holocaust in Ukraine has proven controversial, in part because the victimization narrative of the Ukrainian people is placed into competition with that of the Jews, and Ukrainians are no longer portrayed as the period’s sole victims. When President Yushchenko proposed the construction of a Holocaust museum in Ukraine in 2000, some scholars raised opposition, saying the construction of a Holodomor museum was more urgently needed. Similarly, Canadian members of the Ukrainian diaspora raised opposition to a Canadian Holocaust museum that did not acknowledge the Holodomor (Himka, 2005, p. 5). The debate has often become ugly, with nationalist elements in Ukraine insisting that Jews, some of whom were members of the Communist apparatus, had partial responsibility for the crimes, and other academics insisting on a double

standard of evidence for Holodomor and Holocaust memories, both often substantiated by hearsay rather than formal records. More commonly, however, historians with an interest in disseminating information about the Holodomor use the Holocaust history as a model for how to frame their own narrative, often referring to it as the “Famine-Genocide” and the “Famine-Holocaust” in international media (Himka, 2005, p. 8).

Famine or Genocide?

Widespread disagreement persists concerning whether the event actually constituted genocide, even among the ranks of international historians. As Stansilav Kulchytsky reports, as recently as 2005, most historians remained unconvinced by Ukrainians’ attempts to differentiate the Holodomor from the wider USSR grain procurement-induced famine in 1931 and the 1932 famine that occurred in various other Soviet Republics (Kulchytsky, Part 1, 2005). An examination of the historiographic evolution of the Holodomor in academia underscores how controversial the topic remains in Ukrainian domestic politics, and in international exchanges particularly where Russia is concerned.

Gaining acceptance for the Holodomor as genocide is difficult for the intellectual elite when the Ukrainian populace remains

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inconsistently informed about the event, and opinions continue to be mixed. On the 70th anniversary of the famine, Ukrainian Communist Party leader Petro Symonenko delivered a highly politicized speech before Parliament, claiming the famine was attributable to crop shortages and drought, expressing a position diametrically opposed to most of the academic output over the last two decades. Historian Stansilav Kulchytsky maintains that most of his peers, in the generation born between 1921 and 1950, find it extremely difficult to accept that the Soviet regime was as brutal as the Holodomor-as-genocide narrative would suggest: “Many of my peers *a priori* refuse to believe that the Soviet government could deliberately exterminate people. There are many who still believe ‘enemies of the people’ actually existed. A post-genocidal society ... is a sick society” (Kulchytsky, Part 1, 2005). Though of the genocide school himself, Kulchytsky thus proposes a compelling explanation of why so many in post-Soviet Ukraine still reject his narrative and continue to accept the Stalinist alternative—namely, that elements within Ukraine and Russia hoarded provisions, sold them privately, or otherwise sought to sabotage the central planning at the state’s expense, and were thus somehow deserving of harsh consequences.

Memorializing the Holodomor

Fully aware of this hesitance to accept certain historical interpretations, the Ukrainian government has put an increasingly large emphasis on creating memorial icons of this and other events since the fall of the Soviet Union. Initially, Ukraine's presidents emphasized comparatively unsubstantive symbolic gestures, such as a Holodomor plaque in Kiev's St. Michael's Square. Most of the early-1990s books on the Holodomor were published using outside donations, not government funding (Kulchytsky, Part 4, 2005). With each passing year since the Orange Revolution, a greater emphasis has been placed by the government itself on commemorating the event (Sheeter, 2007). Often, this action has drawn criticism for instrumentalizing history and reopening historic wounds to motivate the electorate, at times in ways that are directly at odds with those methods advocated by scholars and historians.

Former president Leonid Kuchma created an official Memorial Day in 1998 to commemorate the victims of the Holodomor, to be celebrated on November 25 (Fawkes, 2006). The Yushchenko administration continues to observe this holiday, but only after his government tried and failed to move it from autumn to spring so the

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holiday would not conflict with the anniversary of the Orange Revolution. The event demonstrates the instrumentalization at work in an administration that has placed commemorating the Holodomor high on its domestic agenda, and frustrates historians who see potential for a genuine opening for a frank and nonpolitical discussion of Soviet history (Kulchytsky, Part 4, 2005).

Recently, President Yushchenko has come before Parliament calling for a series of laws designed to commemorate the Holodomor, and has drawn stark distinctions between those who accept his interpretation of the event and those who view it otherwise. On November 27, 2006, Parliament voted on his law to declare the Holodomor genocide against the Ukrainian people. This legislative event is instructive in indicating the underlying Ukrainian political conflict:

The vote essentially reproduced the fault lines of the Orange Revolution, with the Socialists joining forces with the Tymoshenko Bloc and Our Ukraine, while only two deputies of the Party of Regions, and no Communists, were in favor. Opponents accused the president, who initiated the draft law, of 'politicizing' a human tragedy (Arel, 2007).

In 2007, Yushchenko introduced a law amending the national code to make it a crime to deny the occurrence of the Holodomor, using the widespread illegality of Holocaust denial as precedent, and implicitly placing the two events on par with one another. In addition,

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he has proposed ordering the government to publish a comprehensive list of all victims, produce a feature film, print a commemorative postage stamp, and dismantle statues of political figures implicated in the tragedy (“Holodomor and Holocaust...”, 2007).

Most significantly, these political fault lines exist on a spectrum made apparent by the Holodomor debate. The Communists in Parliament and other far left-wing groups deny the Holodomor occurred at all, even as a result of poor Stalinist planning. Communist historian Sergei Gmyrya decried the legislation, saying, “This is like dancing on the graves of the dead. Before it’s been proved this was an act of genocide, the Orange authorities are doing their best to persuade everyone that it was” (Fawkes, 2006). Similarly, following the vote, Communist leader Pyotr Simonenko said, “[Yushchenko] draws people’s attention to history so as not to answer questions about the problems of today—he speaks of the dead, not thinking about the living” (Sheeter, 2007). The Party of Regions acknowledges the event, but favors replacing the reference to genocide with “crime against humanity perpetrated by the Stalinist totalitarian regime.” This is a crucial linguistic difference that hints at their political concerns: “Deep down, the Party of Regions, and Russian-speaking Eastern Ukrainians, more generally, are uncomfortable with the label of genocide because

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of their fear that it could drive a wedge between ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians in Ukraine” (Arel, 2007). Where the Orange government seeks to orient Ukraine on course with the West, using the most divisive treatment of the Holodomor narrative to do so, the opposition is uncomfortable burning bridges with Russia on domestic policy. All the while, the far-left rejects the narrative altogether, decrying the politicization of history that is damaging to the public perception of their increasingly anachronistic political ideology.

The International Politics of the Holodomor

In domestic disputes about whether and to what extent Ukraine should be involved in international organizations, the political arguments about the nation’s orientation persist, and debate about the Holodomor is once again a frequent forum for the manifestation of these divides. President Yushchenko vociferously advocates Ukrainian NATO entry, with the support of many western governments including the United States, in addition to entry into the European Union. The Party of Regions, under Viktor Yanukovych, favors EU membership, but opposes NATO entry over concerns about alienating Russia. (“Holodomor and Holocaust...”, 2007) The same division—on the same grounds—exists in the ongoing debate over entry into the

Russian-led “Single Economic Space,” alongside which the Holodomor argument also surfaced.

President Victor Yushchenko’s remarks before the Canadian Parliament show a similar fixation on the Holodomor as a rallying point for alignment with the West. Referring to a speech delivered last year, the Russian state news agency reported:

Yushchenko said that NATO membership for Ukraine was motivated by the long years of repression his country suffered as part of Soviet Union [sic], citing the 1932-33 famine or Holodomor, which claimed up to 10 million lives. [Canadian Prime Minister] Harper pledged to back a bill formally recognizing the Holodomor as a deliberate act of genocide (*RIA Novosti*, 2008).

Russia, predictably, opposes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s attempts to gain NATO entry, calling it an outdated Cold War alliance, even as Ukraine insists its membership would pose no threat to Russia or its other neighbors. The Canadian government’s reaction demonstrates that Ukraine’s Holodomor-related maneuvering is not just effective in its domestic politics. Instead, it provides a convenient opportunity for Western governments to symbolically support Ukraine and facilitate Ukraine’s increased distance from the Russian Federation.

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), comprised of former Soviet republics and assembled after the fall of the Soviet Union, collects high-level ministers to periodically meet and discuss relations among the countries. At one such meeting in 2006, entry into

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the aforementioned Russian free-trade zone became divided along the lines of an emerging Eastern European coalition. The current Single Economic Space consists only of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Ukraine and Georgia used the meeting as a forum to protest Russian economic policies seen as hindering growth prior to their own possible entry. Similarly, in commemorating the Holocaust before the United Nations in 2005, Ukrainian Representative Valeriy Kuchinsky noted the improved attitude toward minority rights and recognition of the Holocaust since the Orange Revolution, before proceeding to call for international recognition of other tragedies; namely, the Holodomor (Kuchinsky, 2005).

Together with Azerbaijan and Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia have formed the “GUAM” coalition, often used in an attempt to counterbalance Russian influence, and that division was apparent at the CIS meeting. Ukraine attempted to schedule discussion of the Holodomor on the meeting agenda, hoping to present arguments about why the event constituted genocide. The Ukrainians failed in the attempt, because Russia was able to orchestrate a procedural blockage preventing debate with the assistance of Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Armenia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan declined to take sides, and Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan voted

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with Ukraine (Socor, 2006). As a result of the meeting's events, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk gave a series of scathing remarks, calling the CIS "useless" and "unresponsive to situations that are most sensitive to member states" (Socor, 2006). As was the case in domestic Ukrainian politics, discussion and controversy surrounding the Holodomor continues to be an instructive case in determining which groups are aligned toward the West, and which continue to align themselves with Russia. By presenting the Holodomor as a sensitive and important Ukrainian domestic priority, politicians have succeeded in creating an effective proxy war with Russia, around which political groups and neighbor countries must choose their allegiances and rally their publics.

It is useful to take note of Russia's response to Ukraine's central treatment of the issue, to the extent that it characterizes relations between the two nations. German historian Wilfried Jilge describes Russian resentment of the event's politicization:

The foreign ministry of the Russian Federation explains that in the context of the Ukrainian debate over the Holodomor, criticism of the famine as a genocide along ethnic and national lines is not laudable, and warns of a politicization of the topic. The responsibility of the Soviet regime for the famine belongs to the "shared memory" of Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan, and other peoples of the former Soviet Union. The Russian side finds the

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Ukrainian president's support of the genocide thesis to be implicitly anti-Russian (Jilge, 2007).¹

Russian officials have often been quoted as saying it is insulting to other nationalities that also suffered under Stalinist repression and crop requisitioning to claim that the process was solely directed at Ukrainians in order to score political points.

Conclusion: The Meaning of the Holodomor

In all likelihood, discussion of the Holodomor will remain symbolic. Even if Russia admits that the Soviet government intentionally targeted Ukrainians with famine on ethnic grounds, only a few right-wing Ukrainian politicians assert Russian financial culpability for the event. This is an argument based on Russia's claim as the legal successor to the former Soviet regime (Kulchytsky, Part 4, 2005). Kulchytsky makes an important point in noting that the academic attitude toward Russia in relation to the Holodomor might be far more moderate than the Ukrainian political climate suggests. It is, after all, because of voluntary Russian archival opening that most of the new, hard evidence for Holodomor-as-genocide is available in the first place. In view of that fact, it seems most appropriate to view the Holodomor not as a contemporary political topic of intrinsic

¹ The author's translation from Jilge's original German publication.

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significance, but rather as a point around which emerging political alliances have begun to rally. It is a Ukrainian means of asserting distance from Russian influence by harnessing significant historical resentment. In the West, it is equally important as a means of drawing Ukraine away from Russia using popular and well-tested arguments about respect for human rights and victims' memory. Undoubtedly, divisiveness surrounding the Holodomor will continue into the future as long as Eastern European political realignment remains an ongoing process.

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