

B E A R I N G W I T N E S S

GENOCIDE AND ETHNIC CLEANSING™



HOLODOMOR

THE UKRAINIAN FAMINE-GENOCIDE

PHILIP WOLNY

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On the cover: This 1932 photograph shows food being taken away from a collective farm by the Bolsheviks in the village of Alekseyevka, located in Ukraine's Kharkiv region.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
CHAPTER 1	
A GATHERING CLOUD: UKRAINE UNDER THE SOVIETS	7
CHAPTER 2	
A GRIM SEASON BEGINS	15
CHAPTER 3	
HARVEST OF SORROW	25
CHAPTER 4	
HIDING A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY	37
CHAPTER 5	
REWRITING HISTORY AND REMEMBRANCE	45
TIMELINE	52
GLOSSARY	54
FOR MORE INFORMATION	56
FOR FURTHER READING	59
BIBLIOGRAPHY	60
INDEX	62

INTRODUCTION

On November 7, 2015, at the intersection of North Capital Street and Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, DC, a new monument was unveiled. The bronze, rectangular sculpture bears an image of wheat stalks. Looked at from left to right, the image seems to fade until there is no wheat at all, as if it has disappeared.

The wheat's disappearance on the monument is a symbol of a greater loss, however. Written on the monument itself are the words "Holodomor 1932–1933." The Ukrainian word *holodomor* translates approximately to "death by hunger," or "to kill through hunger." It commonly refers to a tragedy that took place in 1932 and 1933. This was the intentional campaign by the Soviet government, led by Joseph Stalin, to starve millions of Ukrainians to death. The victims were mostly farmers in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, then a part of the Soviet Union. While famine also killed many in neighboring regions during this period, the term "Holodomor" specifically refers to the massive numbers of Ukrainians who died as the result of Soviet policies during those years.

The concept of genocide is a familiar one that is much in the news nowadays. Events that are universally recognized as genocide include the Holocaust during World War II and the campaign by the Hutu ethnic group against the Tutsis in the 1994 mass slaughter in Rwanda. The more gradual (but no less devastating) wiping out of Native American peoples by Europeans and American colonists and settlers from the



The Holodomor Memorial in Washington, DC, was authorized by Congress in 2006 and dedicated in 2015. The memorial was designed by architect Larisa Kurylas and cast at Laran Bronze, a foundry in Pennsylvania.

seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries has also been described as genocide.

While it has been used to describe earlier events, the word “genocide” was not coined until 1944. The person who came up with the word was a Polish Jewish lawyer and scholar

named Raphael Lemkin. Lemkin himself had escaped the Holocaust by fleeing to the United States in 1941. However, the Germans slaughtered nearly fifty of his relatives. He had also studied the mass death of Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Turks between 1915 and 1917. Lemkin derived his word from the Greek word for ethnic group, race, or people, *genos*, combined with the French suffix *-cide*, which loosely means “killing of.” “Genocide” meant the killing of a people. Recently, the definition has expanded a bit to include efforts to kill off those belonging to a particular class of people—such as the farmers of the Holodomor—or those who share particular political beliefs.

In recent years, more people have learned about the Holodomor and come to understand how horrible it really was. Observances in memory of those lost have become more common. However, it was almost completely concealed by the Soviet Union until that country’s dissolution in 1991. Even now, there remain debates about what to consider it. Ukrainians and Russians sometimes argue over its causes and details. However, few deny that it happened or that it was a terrible tragedy. Looking at it now in detail gives us a glimpse at how the absolute power of governments can take a terrible human toll.

A GATHERING CLOUD: UKRAINE UNDER THE SOVIETS

The 1930s was a time of great change all over the world. Many nations, including the United States, were dealing with the effects of the great stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression it caused. However, few nations had changed as much in the previous ten years as the Soviet Union.

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND A NEW NATION

The Russian Empire had been a major power for centuries. Throughout the nineteenth century, movements arose to try to change the oppressive imperial government led by the Russian rulers, known as the tsars. At the turn of the twentieth century, new political movements like communism and various revolutionary groups fiercely opposed the last tsar, Nicholas II, as well as the tsarist system of government itself. Their support grew because shortages of food and supplies, government repression, and Russian involvement in World

HOLODOMOR: THE UKRAINIAN FAMINE-GENOCIDE

War I angered many citizens, including the many poor and struggling peasants.

Together the revolutionaries—including the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin and Aleksandr Kerensky—overthrew Nicholas and formed a provisional, or temporary, government. Months later, during what became known as the October Revolution, Lenin and his Bolsheviks won the power struggle



The Communist revolutionary Lenin (born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov), leader of Russia and then the Soviet Union through 1924, is shown here in Moscow's Red Square during the Russian Revolution in 1917.

to decide the nation's future direction. The new state was known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), sometimes called the Soviet Union for short. The Soviets instituted a communist system of rule. This included a very powerful central government, with themselves as the sole political party.

In 1924, one of Lenin's top lieutenants and allies, Joseph Stalin, came to power. After a struggle, he emerged as the absolute leader of the nation by the late 1920s, as general secretary of the Communist Party. The Soviet Union was a young country and Stalin wanted to modernize its agricultural and industrial sectors quickly.

The Communists also had drastic changes in mind as to how property, land, and factories would be distributed and controlled. Lenin, Stalin, and many of their followers believed that in the ideal society, property and the means of production should be owned and controlled by workers themselves.

Remaking society depended on a vanguard—disciplined revolutionary soldiers and leaders who would pave the way to a brighter future by providing common workers with the understanding and guidance they needed to mobilize. Their aims included transferring ownership of factories to the government itself. Huge agricultural estates and farms became cooperatives, theoretically owned by the peasants, who worked for themselves. These were ambitious plans, and they caused great tension and confusion, especially because they were rolled out so quickly and throughout so much of Soviet society. Not everyone was on board.

STALINISM AND THE CULT OF PERSONALITY

The Bolsheviks had fought collectively to overthrow the oppressive power of the tsar and the imperial system with the stated intention of freeing the common man. But the nation that Stalin would head would become one of the least free in modern history. Much of his rule included purges, which featured mass murders, arrests, and the exile and imprisonment of his political opponents, or simply those he and his supporters suspected might turn against them in the future. The purges raged on and off for much of Stalin's reign.

Stalin was the dictator and unquestioned leader of this totalitarian state. Any criticism or disobedience could mean punishment or even death. Statues and images of Stalin and other Communists filled public spaces and often people's private homes. The state secret police, the Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (NKVD), seemed to be everywhere, and it watched closely to make sure people stayed loyal.

The Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn related one legend demonstrating the fear that reigned during the Stalinist era in his book *The Gulag Archipelago*. He described a political rally in a paper factory. The speakers called for a tribute to Stalin. Everyone began applauding. But rather than ending after a short while, it went on and on. No one wanted to be the first one to stop applauding. They knew that NKVD agents were likely deployed and watching for those who displayed insufficient enthusiasm. Solzhenitsyn wrote,

Then, after eleven minutes, the director of the paper factory assumed a businesslike expression and sat down in his seat ... The squirrel had been smart enough to jump off his revolving wheel. That, however, was how they discovered who the independent people were. And that was how they went about eliminating them. That same night the factory director was arrested."

DEALING WITH UKRAINIAN NATIONALISM

One force threatening the wishes and plans of Stalin and his Central Committee was Ukrainian nationalism. Many individuals and groups within Soviet territories resisted the new changes, some of them even violently. They thought their freedoms were being taken away and resented the central command of authorities in faraway Moscow, the Soviet capital. Such feelings were especially prevalent among Ukrainians, who cherished their national identity. Many of them came to think of the Soviets as simply the newest version of the Russian Empire, which had ruled over them for many years.



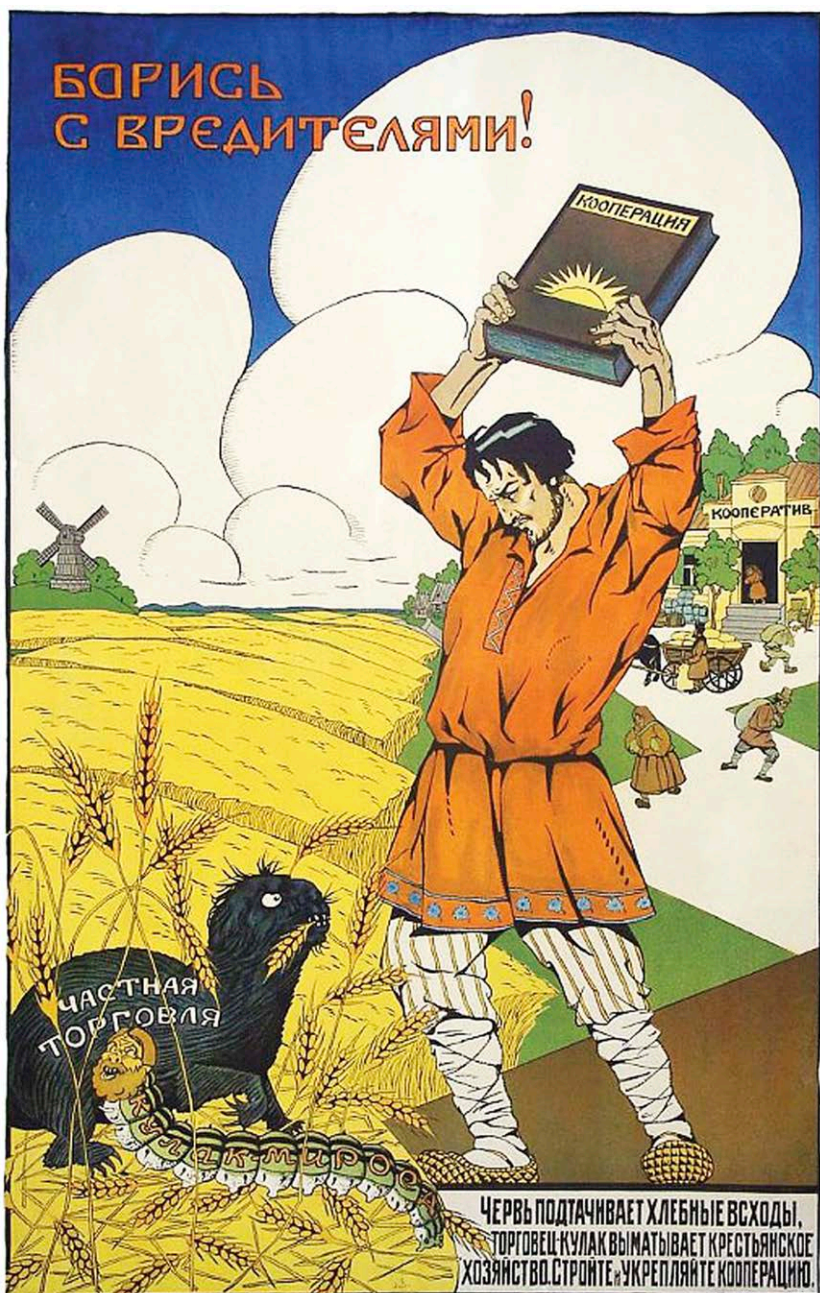
The fertile plenty of the Ukrainian landscape is depicted here in this 1880 oil painting by Vladimir Orlovsky, entitled *Harvest in the Ukraine*.

The relationship between Russia and Ukraine had been complicated for a long time. After the Soviet Union replaced the Russian Empire, the Soviets hoped to win acceptance for their rule by giving the nations that comprised the USSR certain freedoms. At the same time, they actively pushed the rapid growth of Communist Party rule throughout all the villages, towns, and regions under their control.

Therefore, the Soviets did something that few other states with many ethnic groups and nationalities had done before. They promoted national consciousness in many territories, encouraged the use of national languages, and promoted regional cultures. They did all of this, of course, while also imposing Communist power structures on local citizens. It was an experiment that Stalin himself pushed during his first years in power. The Soviet approach felt like a big improvement over the oppression that many of the Soviet Union's ethnic groups had faced when Imperial Russia ruled.

THE KULAKS: THE FIRST SCAPEGOATS

To best execute their plans, the Soviets needed to single out a group that other people could easily blame for their troubles. In Russia and Ukraine alike, the Soviet authorities grouped rural farmers into three categories: the poor peasants, the middle-income peasants, and the kulaks. This last group was a class of middle-class or wealthier landowning peasants who had gotten some more property and livestock due to reforms that had been passed a couple of decades earlier.



This Soviet propaganda poster from 1920 shows a Russian peasant hoisting up a book labeled "cooperation" to smash a rodent and caterpillar labeled, respectively, "private trade" and "Kulak parasite."

At first, the kulaks who faced the worst abuse from the Communists were the ones who had resisted the Bolsheviks during the revolutionary era. Throughout the 1920s, many others had their land, property, and livestock confiscated. Laws were passed making it harder for kulaks to earn money. Many were forced to leave their villages. Others were persecuted, put on trial for sabotage or for hiding food or livestock from those who were charged with confiscating it. Those who remained could not vote, participate in politics, obtain loans or other economic benefits, or enroll their children in colleges or trade schools.

Nearly all historical episodes of genocide or ethnic cleansing begin with one group being singled out, dehumanized, and scapegoated. For Germans angry about the economic collapse after their nation's loss in World War I, the Jews became the easiest group to blame for their troubles. The Soviets' own authoritarianism was partly based on their own particular political views. In their most extreme forms, these included hatred for capitalists, owners, and even the moderately well off, whom they blamed for the exploitation of workers and peasants. The kulaks were an unsurprising choice of scapegoat.

A GRIM SEASON BEGINS

Like many human tragedies, the death of millions can seem sudden or unexpected. In reality, it is something that builds over time, sometimes years in the making. By 1929, the Soviets were waging a campaign to vilify and slander the kulaks as class enemies who would betray the revolution and exploit their fellow man. Political elites considered these landowners the greatest internal enemy of Soviet “progress.”

“ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE”

The definition of kulak changed over time. Far from being the wealthy parasites they were made out to be, a typical kulak family or household owned between 10 and 12 acres (4.5–4.8 hectares) of land. They may have owned a cow, a horse, a pig, and some chickens or sheep, mostly for their own use.

Other qualifications, such as a family’s hiring labor or owning a mill, creamery, or any business using complex machines, kept the category wide open enough for the authorities to pick whom they wanted to persecute or confiscate

from. After a time, the government even classified landowners who made barely as much as an average factory worker in a city as kulaks. All this made it easy for the authorities to cast a wide net. It also spread suspicion and hatred among villagers and neighbors who were not really materially different from one another. Soon, even having kulak “attitudes” qualified one for elimination.

The kulaks’ taxes were increased. This included raising quotas for the amount of grain they had to turn over to the government, with criminal penalties for those who fell short. It was also at this time that Stalin decided to push farmland collectivization like never before.

THE MOLOTOV COMMISSION

In December 1929, Stalin secretly declared to top Soviet officials that it was time to “liquidate the kulaks as a class,” according to historian Lynne Viola. A special commission headed by one of Stalin’s protégés, Vyacheslav Molotov, drew up a troubling plan. “Total collectivization” in certain areas would be achieved, along with dividing the kulaks into three groups: 1) those whom the government planned to arrest, imprison in concentration camps, or kill outright; 2) those to be exiled to faraway, harsh environments like Siberia, and 3) those to be turned out of their homes and resettled somewhere else in the region.

The official reasons for the tragedies to come were supposed shortages and a series of poor wheat harvests. But the real ones were political. Ukraine had long been known as a

breadbasket of Europe, famous for its rich soil. The Ukrainians had been among those most resistant to Russia's hold on the rest of the USSR's republics. Stalin was determined to bend them to his will for good and teach them a lesson in the process.

Beyond politics, there were major economic motivations. The Soviets desperately required foreign money to fund their plans to develop industry by building factories, roads, and many other projects. They wanted to modernize. The most straightforward way to raise money was via exports—namely, the export of Soviet wheat and other agricultural products. They would collectivize the farms and set high grain production quotas for collective farmers to ensure higher and higher exports.



Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, shown here in an official portrait, was the Soviet supreme leader from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953. His rule is remembered for mass political terror and repression.

Stalin soon undertook the first of many drastic measures. The winter of 1929 to 1930 could be considered the beginning of the end, even though the massive tragedies loomed two to three years ahead. Though kulaks were purged throughout several republics, including in Russia itself, some of the worst violence was inflicted on the Ukrainian kulaks.

COLLECTIVIZATION RAMPS UP

Party activists, members of the Komsomol Communist youth organization, operatives of the secret police (the OGPU), and others helping the government formed armed groups. These groups then set out throughout the countryside. They occupied villages and held meetings that everyone was required to attend. Kulaks and other people considered enemies were denounced before their neighbors.

Peasants were told that they no longer owned their property, which was now technically part of their local collective farm. They could not sell their livestock, nor slaughter it for food. Nor could they leave their villages without permission. Stalin sped up the processes of collectivization, fearing that kulaks would try to secretly sell or barter their property before the armed brigades forced them to turn it over.

The idea that this process was designed to help poorer villagers was mostly propaganda. Most kulaks by now were nearly as poor as, or even poorer than, their neighbors. Communist operatives tended to make much higher salaries. This did not stop many local collaborators, however, who were

A GRIM SEASON BEGINS

more than happy to steal from their fellow farmers when legally sanctioned by the government.

Many of the denunciation sessions ended with the teams shooting the accused. Tens of thousands died as a result. Several million of the remaining kulaks were marched off to train stations by the authorities. They were packed into cattle cars, in much the same way that Jews would be sent off to Nazi concentration camps a decade later in Eastern Europe. Millions of families were deported from Ukraine and other Soviet republics to Siberia and other far-off outposts. In Ukraine, these victims accounted for more than 1.5 million people.



A kulak family stands in front of their confiscated home in the village of Udachne, in 1932 or 1933. Such families could take only a few possessions with them, bound for uncertain futures.

It was so cold on board that many thousands perished on the way, including infants and toddlers. A large portion of the survivors ended up in forced labor camps, with many others simply dropped off in the wilderness to fend for themselves. Thousands more died of disease or starvation in these harsh environments. The vast majority were young children, especially vulnerable to the fierce cold and harsh weather of the distant Soviet wilderness areas. This was a major part of what came to be known as dekulakization. It was only a taste of the repression to come, however.

DEHUMANIZATION: PAVING THE WAY FOR PERSECUTION

Many scholars, historians, and human rights activists have pointed out that one of the greatest tools of the perpetrators of genocide is dehumanization. It is in the interest of those who wage war and commit atrocities that those who follow their orders do not think twice about doing terrible things but instead consider their actions righteous and justified. This was why the Nazis used grotesque cartoons, flyers, and other visual media to portray Jewish people as animals (especially vermin like rats or insects) or otherwise subhuman or inhuman. This made it easier for even everyday citizens to justify stripping more and more rights over time from people who had once been their neighbors and countrymen.

A GRIM SEASON BEGINS

Soviet efforts in the early 1930s were not aimed at an ethnic or religious minority, but instead were intended to dehumanize members of the kulak economic class. Posters were printed and widely distributed that smeared kulaks as “fat cat capitalists” who resisted collectivization out of greed and hatred of poorer peasants and workers. Some propaganda materials showed kulaks as red faced, mean, and wearing crosses. This was an effort to depict them as out of touch, religious, and superstitious—everything the “new Soviet man” was not. Their persecutors also sometimes spoke of kulak attitudes as something contagious, as if they were a disease that could be caught by others nearby. Others spoke of this economic group in almost racial terms, as if they had specific traits they should not be allowed to pass on to a new generation. Norman Naimark writes about how kulaks were vilified in *Stalin’s Genocides*:

They were “enemies of the people,” to be sure, but also “swine,” “dogs,” and “cockroaches”; they were “scum,” “vermin,” “filth,” and “garbage,” to be cleansed, crushed, and eliminated. [Russian writer Maxim] Gorky described them as “half animals,” while Soviet press and propaganda materials sometimes depicted them as apes. Kulaks in this sense were dehumanized and racialized into beings inherently inferior to others—and they were treated as such.

RESISTANCE AND REPRISALS

Stalin's plans to force all peasants onto collective farms were part of the massive and ambitious government project called the Five-Year Plan, launched in 1928. By March 1930, Soviet authorities claimed that the amount of arable land collectivized had increased from about 6 percent to nearly 70 percent, according to Serhii Plokyh in *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*.

However, many families had owned their land for generations and took pride in their self-sufficiency and



Groups of farmers gather in circles in the fields of the Lenin's Way collective farm in the village of Vilshanka, located in the Kiev region of Ukraine, in August 1936.

independence. They did not go quietly in the face of what they viewed as theft and tyranny. Plokyh wrote that the Soviets estimated there were more than 1,700 protests or outright revolts that March alone, and as many as 1,895 villages had disturbances. Others count as many as 4,000 mass protests, with millions collectively turning out throughout the republic in 1930. Rebel farmers killed dozens of government administrators in forty-one out of Ukraine's forty-four districts. Many more were resisted or assaulted.

A big section of Ukraine had been part of neighboring Poland in the pre-Soviet era, and entire villages in these areas decided to uproot themselves and leave Soviet Ukraine. Government officials and leaders were especially worried about these border areas protesting. Army and secret police units were deployed to put down these outbursts harshly. Stalin himself was extremely paranoid that agents of rival nations like Poland were stirring up trouble among the farmers. He even expressed to his top aides that many Ukrainian Communists were probably unreliable allies.

TIGHTENING THE NOOSE

As the 1930s began, all signs seemed to indicate that time was running out for a nation and a people. Stalin's secret police and civil servants had harshly persecuted the church hierarchy of Ukraine's state church, the Ukraine Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Under pressure from the authorities, the church actually voted to abolish itself



Saint Andrew's Church in the Ukrainian capital city of Kiev, shown here, has long been the headquarters of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, one of three major Orthodox churches in the nation.

in 1930, though parts of it would continue under the radar. In the meantime, many of its clergy were imprisoned and killed, much like what happened to the poor farmers of their congregations. One of the main sources of hope and emotional refuge for Ukrainians was thus extinguished when it was most needed.

Along with the church, the national institutions that had earlier been allowed and encouraged by the Soviets were soon destroyed, too. These included the Ukrainian Language Institute, State Publishing House, the Institute of Philosophy, and many more important cultural organizations and sites.

HARVEST OF SORROW

There were a few reasons why the tragedy about to unfold for Ukrainians in the countryside came to pass when it did. After the mass deportations, replacement workers were installed to help with farming the vast grain-producing areas of Ukraine. Other workers, however, had been encouraged to flock to cities, both in Ukraine and throughout the Soviet Union, in search of new factory jobs. Many of the replacement workers—especially those appointed to manage the collective farms—were loyal Communists but inexperienced at farming. There was a mild drought during this time, which had a slight effect on the harvest. But crop yields were also likely lower and more inefficiently harvested due to the new management running the farms.

A FAMINE BEGINS, AND SPREADS

As early as 1931, Stalin's government had decided to drastically raise grain production quotas for Ukrainian farmers to fill.



This 1930 propaganda poster, in which a woman worker shouts, "Comrade, come join us at the collective farm!," was part of the massive effort Stalin and the Soviets made to collectivize agriculture at the time.

According to Norman Naimark's figures in *Stalin's Genocides*, "the state collections of cereals [grains] in the largest wheat-growing of Ukraine and the northern Caucasus constituted 45–46 percent of the entire harvest, leaving the peasants bereft of food supplies."

Other sources report that the Soviets demanded as much as 2.3 times the amount of grain from Ukraine's collective farms in 1932 as before. Harsh laws punished those who hid food, butchered livestock, or did anything the Soviet authorities considered theft. This included keeping supplies of seed grain to be used to plant the following year's harvest.

Anyone who has gone hungry for more than a day knows that it is not a comfortable feeling. But millions of people in Ukraine soon found their supplies getting lower than they had ever before experienced, even in past years of bad harvests or crop failures. People grew hungrier, and even their hidden food supplies got low. They were naturally willing to risk imprisonment or exile to feed themselves. As the months went on, grain was forcibly collected and taken away in more and more areas, and the situation grew more dire.

The government had taken everything. Many people were one animal slaughter away from having no more livestock. They had no prospects of procuring more grain, meat, or anything else. The last pig or chicken was killed and lasted a short while among a family. Then there was nothing but a small bushel of potatoes. That went fast, too. Then there was nothing.

THE LAW OF SPIKELETS

On August 7, 1932, the highest Soviet ruling committee issued a decree to punish various forms of theft, the Decree About the Protection of Socialist Property, more commonly known as the Law of Spikelets. Officially, it was an effort to prevent thievery on the collective farms and punish those who would “violate the sanctity of socialist property.”

The term “spikelets” refers to the tiny end parts of grain crops left behind in the fields after a harvest. The law made it a crime to collect even this pathetic amount of grain. Many people were doing just that, however, in their losing battles against starvation. It was hardly an honest or well-intentioned rule. Rather, it was deliberately imposed to punish those who were already losing most or all of their harvests to the state.

The penalty for violating these rules was sometimes execution: death by shooting. Those who were luckier were imprisoned. Most were sentenced to between five and ten years in the gulag, but some sentences were longer. Members of the kulak class were rarely let off lightly.

People were accused on the flimsiest bits of evidence. As also happened with high-level Communist Party members whom Stalin wanted to purge, many kulak farmers experienced “show trials.” These were legal proceedings designed more to make an example of political enemies than to uncover the truth about real crimes. Approximately eleven thousand people were executed under this law.

“AT ALL COSTS”

News began to circulate all over Ukraine, and back to Moscow, that the food situation was growing more dangerous by the week. But Stalin would not change course. He wrote on June 21, 1932, “No matter of deviation—regarding either amounts or deadlines set for grain deliveries—can be permitted from the plan established for your region.” Grain would be requisitioned “at all costs.”

Those who still had something tried to hide their food. They feared not only their desperate neighbors, but also confiscation brigades. These aggressive and abusive units would tear apart whole homes with crowbars and other tools to find hiding



A Communist special committee unlocks a barn as part of its search of a kulak farmer's property in Ukraine's Donetsk region during the years of famine.

places where food might be kept. Those who were discovered to be “hoarding” even a handful of grain underneath their floor could be shot on the spot or sent to a gulag. Some even claim that searchers would check the toilets and take human feces, to test it later for traces of grain that had been illegally consumed!

AN OPEN-AIR CONCENTRATION CAMP

As hunger grew among the citizenry, hundreds of thousands began to move around Ukraine and other affected areas, looking for food or a way to obtain money to buy it. The OGPU clamped down on this, however. Ukrainians’ freedom of movement became heavily restricted with the issue of internal passports. Much like a passport to leave and reenter one’s home country, these documents had to be presented when traveling anywhere, for any purpose—even from one village to a neighboring one. Such passports had actually been a familiar feature under the oppressive system of the tsars. It was another sign that the replacement for the system that had been overthrown was just as bad—and in some ways even more totalitarian.

Russia also closed its borders with Ukraine. Rail travel was suspended for peasants and others without permission. Stalin became infuriated that those who had traveled to other areas of the Soviet Union before the new restrictions were in place had spread the news about the conditions back home. By February 1933, OGPU troops had arrested at least 220,000 internal peasant refugees. About 190,000 were forced back to



Throughout Soviet history, the government was strict in controlling its people's movements. Here, a Russian print shop employee produces citizen passports, required to be on everyone's person at all times.

their villages, where they had no food left. Forced return had become essentially a death sentence.

Just as starving people were not allowed to leave their areas, others were not permitted to enter the famine-plagued areas. Anyone attempting to bring in any kind of unapproved materials or food was stopped and then either turned away, had everything confiscated, or both. The OGPU and military set up roadblocks at the entrances to large towns and cities to prevent peasants from seeking relief there. Even if they entered secretly, their passports

barred people of the countryside from getting work or shelter in the cities. The peasants were thus blocked from even the remote chance of saving themselves. Some historians have remarked that these restrictions meant the countryside had become like a gigantic open-air prison or concentration camp.

FROM BAD TO WORSE

Tales of the collective and individual suffering of the Ukrainians sometimes leaked out into the world at large. More horrifying tales would be revealed years later. Even a pro-Communist writer, the Hungarian-British Arthur Koestler, later wrote about taking a train through Ukraine at the time. He noted that the train “stations were lined with begging peasants with swollen hands and feet, the women holding up to the carriage windows horrible infants with enormous wobbling heads, stick-like limbs and swollen pointed bellies.” Many begged passengers on moving trains for simply a crust of bread or other leftovers.

Nowadays, a famine covered on the news will inspire millions to donate money and food. International aid agencies and governments will try to save suffering people. But there was no relief for the villagers of Ukraine. With all food and livestock long gone, villagers turned to eating dogs, cats, crows, and other wild animals—anything they could get their hands on. When these were gone, people ate insects, tree bark, grasses, and weeds. Many became sick from these food sources and, in their weakened state, caught diseases that killed them.



One emaciated child feeds another during the Holodomor. Such shocking images of the famine's effects were largely suppressed and only surfaced decades later.

Tales of cannibalism also spread. In *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, author Timothy Snyder notes that smoke coming out of a house's chimney became known in Ukrainian villages as a clue that "cannibals were eating their kill or that families were roasting one of their members." The police even took advantage of this knowledge to make arrests. Snyder notes that at least 2,505 people were sentenced criminally for cannibalism between 1932 and 1933 in Ukraine. Tragically, cannibalism often happened within families. Accounts of parents eating their own children are disturbingly widespread. Horrific though these stories may be, Snyder explains that "while cannibalism in Soviet Ukraine in 1933 says much about the Soviet system, it says nothing about Ukrainians as a people. With starvation will come cannibalism. There came a moment in Ukraine when there was little or no grain, and the only meat was human."

A GRAVEYARD OF MILLIONS

At its deadliest, the Holodomor famine-genocide is estimated to have killed anywhere between 25,000 and 30,000 daily for months on end. Exact numbers are hard to come by because of the scale of the disaster, poor record keeping, and the desire by the government to cover up the events. Even now, historians and others have heated debates about the accuracy of the numbers of the dead. Historian Timothy Snyder estimated that 3.3 million Ukrainians perished from 1932 to 1933, adding that people also died from famine around this time in other parts of the Soviet

HARVEST OF SORROW



The human cost of the Holodomor lasted long after the worst of the famine was over. Homeless children—like this boy photographed in 1934 in Moscow—wandered all over the Soviet Union.

Union. As many as 1.3 million perished among the nomadic peoples of Kazakhstan, and there were numerous victims in Soviet republics bordering Ukraine and the Caucasus region.

Others disagree with Snyder's numbers, regarding both the Holodomor and the total number of innocent civilians killed during the Stalinist era (1929 to 1953, including during World War II). One political scientist, R. J. Rummel, believes that the usual number historians quote for the total death toll at Stalin's hands—20 million—is actually very low. He believes the toll was closer to 40 million, over more than two decades. Rummel also believes that around 5 million died during the Holodomor, and as many as 11.4 million people in total died during collectivization throughout the entire Soviet Union.

The famine would subside over time. Grain exports were even cut, and Ukraine's collective farmers were gradually allowed to keep more of their crop. Still, thousands continued to starve into 1934 and after. The kulaks and other "class enemies" had pretty much been broken. This did not stop Stalin from launching more purges, antikulak actions, and targeted massacres throughout the 1930s and after.

HIDING A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

It is hard to imagine that something as large and destructive as the Holodomor could be inflicted upon a people today without millions around the world knowing about it. Media networks that broadcast twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week, the wide reach of the internet, and the common use of smartphones all make news travel fast.

But remove these elements, and think back to the technologies that existed in the early 1930s. Doing so, you can imagine how it was once much easier to conceal a crime as horrific as genocide. Film, radio, newspapers, and books were the mass media. Most of these could not help people follow current events happening in real time, with even radio being a poor substitute in terms of providing proof and lacking the shocking imagery of film.



Field workers read a newspaper during a break on a collective farm while hard at work harvesting, sometime during the 1930s. The official state version of events differed dramatically from reality.

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

It was obviously in the interests of the Soviets to hide any evidence of their crimes. But it was also convenient for much of the international community to look the other way, or at least not to inquire too much. One reason was that many nations profited from their relationship with the Soviets. This included the wheat and other grains the Soviets could provide in exports. At the time, these were the only things the Soviet Union could sell to Europe in order to fuel its industrial buildup.

Another reason that many people disbelieved stories of horrific Soviet crimes was political bias. There were many earnest and dedicated leftists, socialists, and communists in Western Europe and the United States at the time. Many were fighting for labor rights and other noble goals. However, they were biased to view the Soviet Union and communism in an idealistic way. This included newspaper reporters, authors, politicians, and other famous and influential people. Many of them unfortunately fed other people false narratives about the ongoing famines in Ukraine and the Soviet Union.

Such widespread starvation was, of course, not a secret at all to the peoples who lived in the borderlands next to Ukraine. Many ethnic Ukrainians lived in Poland, and others had escaped or emigrated there after the Russian Revolution. When news spread of the growing tragedy next door, protests erupted in places that had big populations of expatriate Ukrainians, including Poland. But even the Polish, Russia's longtime rivals and enemies, did little at the time. They had just signed a nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union. Other nations had recently concluded similar deals, including trade deals. No one wanted to get involved.

“A GARDEN IN FULL BLOOM”

In 1933, the Soviets made careful preparations for a very important visitor, Édouard Herriot. Herriot had been French prime minister several times and had just finished his third term in office in December 1932. For political and economic

HOLODOMOR: THE UKRAINIAN FAMINE-GENOCIDE



French politician Édouard Herriot, pictured here at his desk in 1930, provided the Soviets with one of their biggest propaganda victories when he toured Ukraine and vastly downplayed the famine there.

reasons, Stalin badly needed world opinion on the side of his nation. But positive progovernment messages coming from the Soviets themselves would not be enough. These would not be believable and would be seen as mere propaganda.

Herriot was taken on a tour of the streets of Kiev, Ukraine's capital, and was brought to visit nearby collective farms. The city streets he saw had been carefully tidied up, while the farms he visited were full of smiling, friendly workers who assured him everything was fine. Some historians believe the farmers Herriot spoke with may have been actors. Others suspect that they were actual farm workers who had been intimidated or otherwise convinced to lie about what was going on.

When Herriot came back to France, he told his countrymen, other world leaders, and the press that reports about hunger and even famine in Ukraine were untrue. He also transmitted the message that the harvests were successful and that people were well fed and treated with dignity. He famously referred to Soviet Ukraine as "a garden in full bloom." Herriot's trip proved incredibly important for molding public opinion in the Soviets' favor. The Soviets claimed that reports to the contrary were actually anti-Soviet propaganda, spread not only by internal enemies, but also by procapitalist media and leaders worldwide who were jealous and resentful of the Soviet Union's successes.

Other high-profile people helped conceal Stalin's crimes, too. The bureau chief for the *New York Times* in Moscow, Walter Duranty, is remembered as one of the most notorious journalists to push Soviet propaganda. Known for admiring Stalin, Duranty once wrote, "There is no famine or actual

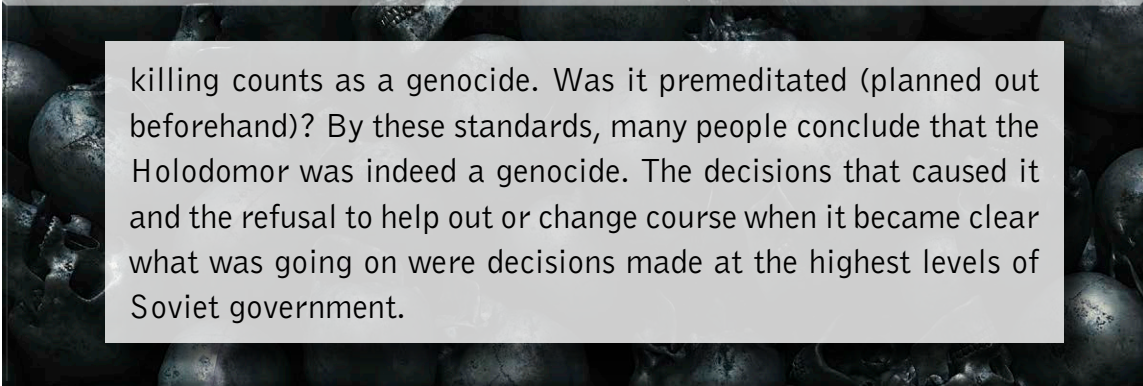
GENOCIDE AND ETHNIC CLEANSING: DEFINING THE HOLODOMOR

There has been much debate about what to call the Holodomor. Today, few serious, unbiased historians or experts on Soviet history dispute that millions died from hunger. But was it a mass murder driven mostly by politics? Did the Soviet government have it in for Ukrainians specifically?

Many certainly perished in non-Ukrainian republics, including in Russia itself. However, a government might kill hundreds, thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of its political enemies without it being classified as genocide. Some people believe that the term “genocide” should be used narrowly, only applying to targeted, deliberate attempts to wipe out a people or ethnic group. They argue that it is a particularly horrible crime—one in a class by itself—and should not even be compared to other forms of mass murder, such as an invasion that kills many of a country’s citizens.

In the middle and late twentieth century, academics, politicians, and others debated what constitutes genocide or ethnic cleansing. The United Nations Convention on Genocide issued a declaration in 1948 that defined genocide as acts intended to “destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.” Norman Naimark notes in *Stalin’s Genocides* that “Soviet diplomats had demanded the exclusion of any reference to social, economic, and political groups. Had they left these categories in, prosecution of the USSR for the murder of aristocrats (a social group), kulaks (an economic group), or Trotskyites (a political group) would have been possible.”

Scholars who study the morality of war and conflict also believe intention is a major factor in identifying whether a mass



killing counts as a genocide. Was it premeditated (planned out beforehand)? By these standards, many people conclude that the Holodomor was indeed a genocide. The decisions that caused it and the refusal to help out or change course when it became clear what was going on were decisions made at the highest levels of Soviet government.

starvation, nor is there likely to be,” and declared reporters who wrote about it to be liars spreading “malignant propaganda.” Even when his statements were proven false, Duranty still held on to defending the Soviet regime.

A GENOCIDE DENIED

Official government propaganda all but erased the victims of the Holodomor from the history books, certainly from Soviet-era ones. No official papers operating in the Soviet Union could say anything about it around the time of the tragedy. Soviet foreign minister Maxim Litvinov officially denied the existence of the famine, and in doing so also refused the aid of the International Red Cross. The Holodomor Research and Education Consortium (HREC), formed by members of the large Ukrainian-Canadian community, wrote on their website that disinformation was a major strategy to distract from and hide the events of the early 1930s: “Soviet authorities mixed small amounts of truth into their denial, thus making it more difficult to figure out what was actually happening. The Soviet media would vigorously attack any reporter or



Maxim Litvinov is shown here exiting a 1934 meeting about the Soviet Union's desire to join the League of Nations. This happened despite the atrocities occurring back home.

foreign dignitary who spoke out on this issue, drowning their voices in a sea of criticism.”

Over the coming fifty years or so, there was no official mention of the Holodomor in newspapers, books, or history books. If any appeared anywhere, it was written off as “food difficulties” arising from weather or anti-Communist sabotage. It was only in the 1980s, when Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev started his era of *glasnost*, or more government openness, that more of the story came to light. Gorbachev was born in March 1931, and his mother’s parents were

Ukrainian. Half his village had starved in the larger Soviet famine that also touched his region of the North Caucasus, including two aunts and an uncle.

REWRITING HISTORY AND REMEMBRANCE

When the Soviet Union was dissolved officially on December 26, 1991, it was one of the last and biggest downfalls of many that marked the end of communism in Eastern Europe. The crimes of Stalin and other Soviet officials of his time had been mostly hidden or ignored, even as their policies were quietly abandoned by his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, after Stalin's death in 1953. But the tales and hushed rumors about the Holodomor and other atrocities had been kept alive by people opposed to the regime. Many had emigrated to the West, while a few dared to write about these crimes while still living in the Soviet bloc.

A TALE OF TWO NATIONALISMS

Reputable historians agree that a man-made famine occurred on Ukrainian soil in the 1930s. Of course, as with any topic that involves nations and groups in conflict, remembering the Holodomor has proven political at times. This has especially



A patrol of unidentified soldiers—assumed by many to be Russian—march in Crimea, the former Ukrainian region whose takeover by Russia in 2014 sparked great tension between the two nations.

been true in recent years, when tensions have risen between the Russian Federation and modern Ukraine.

Pro-Russian Ukrainians and their opponents have been fighting in an area of eastern Ukraine called Donbass since March 2014. The former Ukrainian territory known as Crimea was annexed by Russia around the same time. Both events brought up old wounds between the two nations, which split

REMEMBRANCE AND AWARENESS

Holodomor remembrance and awareness is being promoted successfully, online and off. The internet can be an incredible resource for historical research. But it can be tough to determine which sources to trust. When the Ukrainian Holodomor Memorial was being prepared for unveiling in Washington, DC, in 2015, the U.S. Committee for Ukrainian Holodomor-Genocide Awareness 1932–1933 (the main group working in the United States to spread awareness of the tragedy) announced its launch of a comprehensive, modern website to serve as a thorough online resource for those seeking to learn about the Holodomor.

Ukraine genocide.com is a revamped version of previous sites and includes testimonials, history, and rare historic film footage and imagery. Before the monument was unveiled in November 2015, it also provided updates and news about the memorial dedication. The site also informs visitors about the steady but continuing movement to have governments around the world acknowledge the genocide. Around two dozen have officially recognized the Holodomor as a genocide, while others have declared it a criminal act of the Stalinist era.

These days, the website also keeps the public informed about various annual Holodomor remembrances wherever they occur. Many of these are held annually around or during the fourth weekend of November. The Ukrainian Canadian Congress, for example, hosts an annual Holodomor Awareness Week, with commemorations, educational workshops, and religious ceremonies taking place in several Canadian cities and towns.

apart when the Soviet Union fell in 1991. Nowadays, Russian patriots are likely to downplay the negative roles of the Russian Soviets in the famine. Ukrainian nationalists and patriots are equally likely to mention it and declare it genocide.

REMEMBRANCE AND RECOGNITION

Ukrainians in their home country have worked with members of the Ukrainian diaspora—Ukrainians who settled around the world, many of them people whose families left before the Soviet Union collapsed—to push for recognition of the Holodomor as a genocidal action.

In 2003, Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, issued a declaration that the Holodomor should be recognized as a deliberately organized genocide by Stalin and the Soviet Union. In 2006, the parliament officially declared it to be so. A court in Kiev even took the legal steps to declare Stalin and other Communist leaders guilty of genocide against the Ukrainian nation in 2010.

Around the world, other nations have slowly but surely come around to making their own declarations on the matter. Many international organizations and entities have acknowledged it as a crime and tragedy but have yet to officially designate it genocide, including the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) and the European Parliament.

Calling it something else does not diminish in any way the lives lost, but many Ukrainians and others feel that an official declaration is important to the memories of those who perished and to discourage other nations from engaging in future crimes



A candlelight vigil is held with Ukrainian flags aloft on November 26, 2016, at a Holodomor memorial in Kiev, more than eight decades after the tragedy.

against humanity. Official recognition by Russia itself is unlikely. But if it happened, it could open the door to some kind of reparations provided to descendants and families of the dead.

CAN IT HAPPEN ANYWHERE?

Many people in the middle of a terrible historical moment—like the Holocaust, the Holodomor, or the ethnic cleansing campaigns of the 1990s Balkan Wars, for example—hold on to

HOLODOMOR: THE UKRAINIAN FAMINE-GENOCIDE

a sense of disbelief and naive optimism in the face of terrible things that are happening. It is frightening to think that there are groups out there who want to harm others just based on their ethnicity, religion, gender identity, class, or any other group identification. Equally scary are the ideas that one's government would fail to protect one from hate or that it would actively work to harm or destroy whole groups.



An archival photo from 1932 documents the misery experienced by one family as they and their nation starved.

REWRITING HISTORY AND REMEMBRANCE

It takes people at all levels of power, from the top to the bottom, to allow genocide or ethnic cleansing to occur. Many of those involved in making the Holodomor possible in Ukraine probably thought they were doing the right or necessary thing. Genocides are monstrous events, but they are mostly planned out and committed by people who are human beings just like you and your neighbors. Few people believe they are setting out to do evil.

However, also remember that even a single person can grind the gears of death to a halt, even if only for a moment. Imagine if many people had realized this and spoken out or said no early enough as the collectivization of Ukraine was launched. Or imagine what could have been if they had collectively decided not to allow their fellow citizens to be victimized.

Of course, it is always easy in hindsight to say, “I would have done something.” There are injustices happening right now, even in your own backyard. You are the one who decides if you will stand strong for what’s right or stand aside.

TIMELINE

- 1915–1917** As many as 1.5 million Armenians are killed in the Armenian Genocide.
- 1917** Vladimir Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders return from exile and overthrow Tsar Nicholas II.
- 1922** The Soviet Union (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) is officially formed, with Ukraine SSR as a republic part of it.
- 1924** Joseph Stalin fully succeeds Lenin as leader of the Soviet Union.
- 1928** Stalin announces the first Five-Year Plan, which includes mass forced collectivization of farmland.
- 1929** Stalin announces plans to liquidate the kulaks as a class of people.
- 1929–1930** Millions of kulaks are removed from their lands and shot or exiled to the gulags or the distant wilderness. Mass protests and rebellions against collectivization and grain confiscation ensue and are violently repressed.
- 1930** The Ukraine Autocephalous Orthodox Church is abolished.
- 1931** Grain production quotas are raised again, despite evidence of starvation beginning in the countryside.
- 1932** The Holodomor begins. In June, despite overwhelming evidence of famine, Stalin and his officials will not change their policies. In August, the Law of Spikelets is issued, making it a capital offense to save or hoard even tiny amounts of food.
- 1933** Mass arrests of internal refugees occur, who are fleeing to escape starvation but are blocked from the cities and prevented from leaving Ukraine. Mass starvation occurs, with as many as thirty thousand dying daily. Cannibalism cases are prosecuted by the authorities, but no official relief is distributed or made.

- 1933–1945** Six million Jews are killed in the Holocaust.
- 1944** Raphael Lemkin, who lost multiple family members in the Holocaust, coins the word “genocide.”
- 1953** Stalin dies, and new premier Nikita Khrushchev begins a process of reforms.
- 1983** A memorial to the Holodomor is unveiled in Edmonton, Alberta. It is the first monument in Canada to honor the victims of the Holodomor.
- 1991** On December 26, the Soviet Union is officially dissolved after many decades as a world power.
- 2006** The Ukrainian parliament issues a decree defining the Holodomor as a deliberate act of genocide.
- 2014** Tensions once again mount between Ukraine and Russia, with armed conflict breaking out in the Donbass region and the annexation of the Crimea by Russia.
- 2015** The Holodomor Memorial is constructed and opened in Washington, DC, as part of an ongoing campaign to provide remembrance and justice for the once seemingly forgotten victims.

GLOSSARY

arable Suited for farming.

authoritarianism A system of government in which strict obedience to authority is the most important thing.

Bolsheviks A rebel force that overthrew the Russian tsar and helped create the Soviet Union.

brigade An organized team, loosely based on the military unit by the same name.

collectivization The process by which Communist authorities pressed farmers to give up their private property and instead move onto collective farms, where everything was owned by the Soviet government.

communism A political system in which the means of production, property, and other resources are owned by all people in common.

dekulakization The process of eliminating, through murder and exile, the entire class of people the Soviets identified as kulaks.

denunciation session A public hearing at which people are charged with real or made-up crimes.

deviation Departure from an established plan.

disinformation False information that is mixed with real facts in order to confuse and mislead its audience.

expatriate A person living outside his or her native country.

glasnost A Russian term that loosely means “political openness”; it refers to the period of reforms begun by Russian

premier Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s that paved the way for the end of the Soviet Union.

gulag A harsh prison camp set up by the Soviets in faraway regions like Siberia where political prisoners were sent for punishment and where many perished.

kulak A social group largely made up by the Soviet government that included somewhat better-off peasants who were persecuted by the authorities.

OGPU Short for Obedinennoe Gossudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravleniye (Joint State Political Directorate under the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR), this was the internal intelligence service (secret police) of the Soviet Union until 1934.

propaganda Information, sometimes untrue, that is put out to promote a particular cause, political party, or idea.

repression Control through force, fear, and often violence.

spikelets The flowering parts of grain crops.

totalitarian Referring to a centralized, dictatorial state that demands total obedience.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

International Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies
(IIGHRS)

255 Duncan Mill Road, Suite 310

Toronto, ON M3B 3H9

Canada

(416) 250-9807

Website: <http://www.genocidestudies.org>

Email: admin@genocidestudies.org

The institute promotes the study of and publication of materials concerning genocide and human rights of marginalized groups. Students from more than twenty countries have attended it.

Museum of Tolerance (MOT)

Simon Wiesenthal Plaza

9786 West Pico Boulevard

Los Angeles, CA 90035

(310) 772-2452

Website: <http://www.museumoftolerance.com>

Email: info@museumoftolerance.com

Twitter: @musoftolerance

The Museum of Tolerance (MOT) is a human rights laboratory and educational center dedicated to challenging visitors to understand the Holocaust in both historic and contemporary contexts and to confront all forms of prejudice and discrimination in the world today.

Ukrainian Canadian Congress

203-952 Main Street

Winnipeg, Manitoba R2W 3P4

Canada

FOR MORE INFORMATION

(204) 942-4627

Website: <http://www.ucc.ca>

Email: ucc@ucc.ca

Facebook: @UkrainianCanadianCongress

Twitter: @ukrcancongress

YouTube: Ukrainian Canadian Congress

This umbrella organization represents the interests of the more than 1.2 million Canadians of Ukrainian descent. It is comprised of national, provincial, and local groups and has spoken out for the Ukrainian Canadian community since 1941.

Ukrainian Canadian Research & Documentation Centre (UCRDC)

620 Spadina Avenue

Toronto, ON M5S 2H4

Canada

(416) 966-1819

Website: <http://www.ucrdc.org>

The UCRDC is a community institution that collects, catalogs, and preserves material documenting the history, culture, and contributions of Ukrainians throughout the world.

Ukrainian Institute of America

2 East 79th Street

New York, NY 10075

(212) 288-8660

Website: <http://ukrainianinstitute.org>

Facebook: @UkrInstitute

Instagram: ukrainianinstitute

Twitter: @UkrInstitute

The Ukrainian Institute is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the art, music, and literature of Ukraine and the Ukrainian diaspora.

U.S.-Ukraine Foundation
1090 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 789-4467

Website: <http://www.usukraine.org>

Email: info@usukraine.org

This nonprofit organization was founded in 1991 (the year that Ukraine won its independence) to foster good relations between Ukraine and the United States.

WEBSITES

Because of the changing nature of internet links, Rosen Publishing has developed an online list of websites related to the subject of this book. Use this link to access the list:

<http://www.rosenlinks.com/BWGE/Famine>

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INDEX

A

anti-Communists, 44
authoritarianism, 14

B

Bolsheviks, 8–9, 10, 14

C

cannibalism, 34
Central Committee, 11
collectivization, 16, 17, 18–20,
21, 22, 36, 51
Communists, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14,
18, 28, 25, 32, 39, 45
leaders, 48
Ukrainian, 23

D

death toll, of Holodomor,
34, 36
dehumanization, 14, 20–21
dekulakization, 20
denunciation session, 19
disinformation, 43
Duranty, Walter, 41, 43

F

Five-Year Plan, 22

G

glasnost, 44
Gorbachev, Mikhail, 44
Great Depression, 7
gulag, 28, 40

H

Herriot, Édouard, 39, 41
Holodomor Research and
Education Consortium
(HREC), 43

K

Kerensky, Aleksandr, 8
Khrushchev, Nikita, 45
Komsomol Communist youth, 18
kulaks, 15, 16, 18, 19, 36
as class, 28
as scapegoats, 12, 14

L

Law of Spikelets, 28
Lemkin, Raphael, 5–6
Lenin, Vladimir, 8–9
Litvinov, Maxim, 43

M

Molotov Commission, 16–18

N

nationalism, Ukrainian, 11–12,
45–46, 48
Nicholas II, 7, 8
NKVD, 10

O

OGPU, 18, 30, 31

P

peasants, 7–8, 9, 12, 14, 18, 21,
22, 27, 30, 31, 32

Poland, 23, 39

propaganda, 18, 21, 41, 43

purges, 10, 18, 28, 36

R

repression, 7–8, 20

resistance, to Stalin's plans, 21,
22–23

Russian Revolution, 7–9, 39

S

Soviet Union, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12, 25, 30,
34, 36, 38, 39, 43, 45, 46, 48

end of, 45

successes of, 41

Stalin, Joseph, 4, 9, 11, 12, 16, 17,

18, 23, 29, 30, 41, 43, 45, 48

crimes of, 41, 45

government of, 25

plans of, 22

secret police of, 23

Stalinist era, 36

T

tsars, rule of, 7, 10, 30

U

Ukraine Autocephalous

Orthodox Church, 23

Ukrainian Holodomor

Memorial, 47

United Nations Convention on
Genocide, 42

W

wheat

export of, 17, 38

harvest of, 16, 27

as symbol of Holodomor, 4

World War I, 7–8, 14

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