Holodomor: Understanding Joseph Stalin's Genocide

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Abstract

The Holodomor, Ukrainian for "death by hunger," was one of the deadliest famines known to man: over 4 million Ukrainian lives perished during this famine. Ninety years later, this famine remains an important reminder of the brutality suffered by people under the regime of Joseph Stalin. As a result of the push for increased industrialisation in the wake of World War I, collectivisation was implemented under Stalin's Five Year Plan. This practice saw the collectivisation of peasant-run farms into state-owned farms, removing individual autonomy and leading to popular outrage. By 1932 harvests had taken a large hit, leading to several years of poor grain production. Needing food to fuel industrialisation, Stalin brought forth brutal measures of food procurement targeted against the peasant farmer population, taking personal food stores and retaliating against those who resisted. The Ukrainian peasant population, which was the single largest producer of grain, was hit much harder than other areas within the USSR and suffered unique discrimination not felt by other groups. Based on the United Nations' definition of "genocide," this paper analyses how Stalin purposely targeted the Ukrainian peasant population with food procurement, internal isolation, and refusal of aid to answer the question: is the Holodomor definable as genocide?

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The people of Ukraine have suffered many tragic events throughout their history, living through both World Wars, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. However, one of the most devastating events in Ukrainian history was the 1932-1933 man-made famine orchestrated by Joseph Stalin and his communist regime, commonly known as the Holodomor. Ukrainian for "death by hunger," Holodomor is an appropriate name for the famine that resulted in the deaths of an estimated four million Ukrainians plus many more throughout the USSR.[307] This famine was a result of Stalin's first Five-Year plan in 1928, which called for the collectivisation of agriculture to support rapid industrialisation. This plan impacted Ukrainian peasants especially hard because they were the primary agricultural workforce in the USSR. As a result, many peasants tried to resist collectivisation, leading to the confiscation of peasant property by the state, being labelled kulaks and enemies of the USSR, and the deportation of thousands from their homes.[308] Initially referring to members of the upper-class peasantry, the term kulak would later come to define anyone who resisted collectivisation. Once the government established collectivisation, the flaws in Stalin's Five-Year Plan made themselves known. In 1932, due to impossibly high grain quotas, authorities began confiscating grain and taking foodstuffs as a fine for failing to meet the demand.[309] The series of events described above are what led to the starvation of millions of Ukrainian peasants and, subsequently, one of the most important scholarly debates surrounding the Holodomor: can the Holodomor be classified as genocide? The United Nations defines a crime against humanity as "a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population."[310] Unlike genocide, a crime against humanity does not involve the attempted destruction of the victimised group. In the context of the early stages of the famine, the crimes against the peasants of Ukraine would have included deportation, imprisonment, and proxy murder at the minimum.[311] In contrast, the term "genocide" was defined by the United Nations General Assembly in 1946 and the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group."[312] Through this definition, the two key elements that make up the crime of genocide are shown: a mental element and a physical element. The mental element, "with intent to destroy," can be difficult to determine as there must be proven intent to commit genocide. The physical element refers to the act of genocide itself through "acts committed… to destroy, in whole or in part."[313] To be definable as genocide, at least one of five acts must be committed: killing members of the group; causing serious physical or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting conditions of life meant to destroy the group in whole or in part; imposing measures to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.[314] This paper argues that, by examining the evolution of the Holodomor, its escalation from crime against humanity to genocide against the Ukrainian peasantry is unmistakable.

The crimes that would eventually lead to the Holodomor famine began with Stalin's first Five-Year plan in 1928. This plan was designed to rapidly increase the industrial strength of the USSR to match that of Western Europe. One of the main reasons for rapid industrialisation was to create an

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[307] Bohdan Klid, "Holodomor: Holodomor and UN Genocide Convention Criteria," in Modern Genocide: Understanding Causes and Consequences (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013) quoted in Holodomor Research and Education Consortium, "Was Holodomor a Genocide?" Holodomor Research and Education Consortium, https://holodomor.ca/resource/was-the-holodomor-a-genocide/ (accessed 27 July 2020); Rudnytskyi et al., "The 1921–1923 Famine and the Holodomor of 1932–1933 in Ukraine: Common and Distinctive Features," Nationalities Papers 48, no.3 (2020): 561, https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.81.

[308] Klid, "Holodomor. "

[309] Ibid.

[310] United Nations, "Crimes Against Humanity," Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml (accessed 10 November 2022).

[311] Ibid.

[312] Ibid.

[313] Ibid.

[314] Ibid.

industrial economy that could support increased military might. This was a key goal of Stalin who sought to avoid future military losses like those suffered in the First World War. To support this rapid industrial growth, the regime collectivised all agriculture, and by extension the peasantry, to take control of the grain harvest.[315] Collectivisation saw the removal of private farms and the creation of collective farms, known as *kolkhoz*, which were owned by the state and operated by peasant families. By taking control of the harvest and its bounty, the regime could feed the growing urban population who worked in the industrial centres and finance the purchase of machinery from abroad to further support the industrial drive.[316] However, most peasants in the USSR were opposed to collectivisation because of its removal of land ownership and negative impact on the livelihood of the peasantry.

The peasant desire for autonomy and private land ownership can be seen during the civil war in 1919-1921 when peasants used force to claim their own plots of land. This was allowed by the early Bolsheviks who sought rural support; however, with Stalin's push for collectivisation, most peasants would lose their privately owned land. This loss of land ownership severely impacted the peasant work ethic as they no longer had anything to work for. "[T]here was no need to work hard as the state took all the harvest anyway, leaving the grain farmers starving."[317] The strict collectivisation of the harvest severely impacted the livelihood of peasants such that many now faced starvation. Because Ukraine was the agricultural epicentre of the USSR, the resistance towards collectivisation was more prevalent there. In fact, "in the first seven months of 1932, out of the 1,630 registered peasant uprisings in the whole USSR, there were 923 peasant uprisings in Ukraine" alone.[318] To combat this resistance and enforce collectivisation, the regime attacked the "*kulaks*" and forcefully imprisoned and deported thousands. Not only did this attack lead to the deportation of thousands of potential workers to the gulag labour camps, but also increased the peasants' disdain for collectivisation and further demoralised them. Forced deportation was a common fate met by those who resisted the regime. The significance of this tactic is emphasised by top Communist official Lazar Kaganovich who stated, "We will resettle all those to the North who refuse to sow now!"[319] As a result of this policy, "during November 1932 more than 60,000 peasants and Cossacks were deported from the Kuban," and, while the Kuban is not in Ukraine, it was home to a majority Ukrainian peasant population.[320]

As illustrated above, the build-up to the Holodomor was undeniably a crime against humanity as defined by the United Nations. To force the peasant population into collectivisation, largely in Ukraine or involving those of Ukrainian origin, the Soviet regime attacked civilians through famine, forced deportation, imprisonment, and, as this paper argues, proxy murder. Still, this early stage cannot be classified as genocide as there was no clear intent to destroy the Ukrainian peasantry. However, these crimes against humanity and the early ruthlessness surrounding collectivisation would lay the foundation for what would become the genocide of the Ukrainian peasantry.

To show how the Holodomor became a genocide against the Ukrainian peasantry, the mental element of intent and the physical element of the act itself must be determined. Both can be clearly seen through the regime's constant awareness of the famine leading to genocidal policies of increased food requisition, refusing to acknowledge the famine and accept foreign aid, and internally isolating the Ukrainian peasantry. In April 1933, the novelist Mikhail Sholokhov wrote to Stalin to alert him to the famine occurring in Ukraine. Stalin responded, "[t]hese people [the peasants] deliberately tried to undermine the Soviet state. It is a fight to the death Comrade Sholokhov!"[321] Not only does this challenge

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[315] Norman M. Naimarck, "The Holodomor," in *Stalin's Genocides*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 71. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400836062-006.
[316] Klid, "Holodomor."
[317] Rudnytskyi et al., "The 1921–1923 Famine," 560.
[318] Ibid., 561.
[319] Stanislav V. Kulchytskyi, *Holodomor and Gorta Mór: Histories, Memories and Representations of Famine in Ukraine and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 23. https://doi.org/10.7135/UPO9780857282231.0 02.
[320] Ibid.
[321] Kulchytskyi, *Holodomor and Gorta Mór,* 23.

doubt whether Stalin was aware of the famine taking place, but is evidence that he actively encouraged it. Indeed, Stalin saw the Ukrainian peasantry as a threat due to their resistance and rebellious nature. In particular, Stalin's wariness toward Ukrainian defiance and rebelliousness stemmed from their brief period of independence from 1918 to 1920 that emphasised the Ukranians' strong national pride and drive for autonomy.[322] So prevalent was Stalin's concern over Ukraine, that in August 1932, Stalin wrote to Kaganovich, "we may lose Ukraine."[323] As explored above, losing Ukraine would have been a disaster for Stalin as it was the primary agricultural producer and home to invaluable resources like iron and coal. Yet, the Kremlin's awareness of the famine and Stalin's enthusiasm in its perpetuation does not prove that its goal was the destruction of the Ukrainian people, it directly led to what would become the genocidal policies designed to destroy the Ukrainian peasantry.

As outlined earlier, the increases in food requisition can be traced back to the failings of collectivisation and its negative impact on peasant families. As a result, grain production in Ukraine decreased. The quotas, however, remained. The strict collection of grain was heightened by Stalin, who "insisted that grain should be collected from the Ukrainian peasants 'at all costs.'"[324] To do this, special teams were sent to the Ukrainian countryside to collect any remaining grain, seed, and personal food stores: "[t]hose who survived the Holodomor report that during these searches not only potatoes and meat were taken... but all edible products."[325] The seizure of personal food stores from the already starving peasants suggests the willingness to destroy the Ukrainian peasantry through the genocidal acts of causing serious bodily harm: deliberately inflicting starvation with the intent to destroy. As a result, these actions killed an estimated four million Ukrainian peasants.[326] Furthermore, these additional seizures were ordered by the Kremlin, who, as shown above, were fully aware of the famine in Ukraine and had additional motivation to quell Ukrainian resistance to secure the state for resource extraction. As said by a Ukrainian scientist in September 1932, "'[t]his is a policy aimed at breaking the Ukrainian nation completely as the only national force capable of serious resistance.'"[327]

The Soviet regime's denial of the famine's existence and subsequent refusal of aid further shows the intent to destroy the Ukrainian peasantry through acts of genocide. Despite this denial, Ukrainian correspondence to family outside the USSR and the testimony of international journalists who witnessed the famine first hand alerted the world to the famine taking place. As a result of this knowledge, both independent groups and foreign countries sent numerous offers of assistance to the USSR with the specific intent to feed the people of Ukraine. However, these offers were denied by the authorities as the Soviet government insisted that "there is no famine or prospect of one, that the relief is not needed and that the campaigns themselves are a form of anti-Soviet propaganda."[328] Strikingly, these offers of aid came at limited financial expense to the state, yet were still refused. For example, "in November 1933, the Soviet regime was said to have refused 'bread from abroad even when half of the shipment was to be given to the state for free.'"[329] Thus, the regime was offered support to save the starving peasants of Ukraine, but refused every offer, instead choosing to let millions starve to death. Through Soviet diplomatic actions, the presence of an act of genocide is clear. The genocidal acts of purposely killing members of the Ukrainian peasantry, causing serious bodily and mental harm to them, and deliberately inflicting on them conditions of life designed to bring about their physical destruction were committed.[330]

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[322] Klid, "Holodomor."
[323] Naimark, "The Holodomor," 71-72.
[324] Ibid., 72.
[325] Klid, "Holodomor"; Kulchytskyi, *Holodomor and Gorta Mór,* 31.
[326] Klid, "Holodomor."
[327] Rudnytskyi et al., "The 1921–1923 Famine," 560-561.
[328] Serge Cipko, *Starving Ukraine: The Holodomor and Canada's Response (*Regina: Regina University Press, 2018), 172. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1764771.
[329] Cipko, Starving Ukraine, 167.
[330] United Nations, "Genocide," Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml (accessed 9 November 2022).

The targeted internal isolation of the Ukrainian peasantry is another key policy that demonstrates both the mental intent and physical acts of genocide committed by the Soviet regime. In February 1932, right before the outbreak of the Holodomor, the *Toronto Star* reported "that forty Ukrainian peasants, fleeing 'an impending famine,' were shot by Soviet frontier guardsmen as they attempted to swim across the river into Romania."[331] While authorities were given strict, but informal, instructions not to let Ukrainian peasants flee the state, on 22 January 1933 Stalin signed an order that would "prevent peasants leaving Ukraine and the North Caucasus in search of food in other parts of the Soviet Union."[332] This order led to the arrest of over 220,000 Ukrainian peasants for attempting to flee their villages in February 1933.[333] Thousands of these peasants were sent to the gulags, where death rates were extraordinarily high, while the rest were sent back to their villages, "which meant they were essentially condemned to death."[334] Not only were peasants unable to leave Ukraine to find food, but they were also prevented from entering Ukrainian cities where food was sometimes available.[335] The bans preventing the peasantry from leaving Ukraine and preventing them from entering the city centres shows how this genocide deliberately targeted the Ukrainian peasantry. Granted, it did not target Ukrainians as a whole, yet these acts clearly demonstrate the intent of the Soviet regime to destroy the Ukrainian peasantry through starvation, thereby enacting a genocidal state policy.

In exploring the evolution of the Holodomor, its escalation from crime against humanity to genocide against the Ukrainian peasantry is clear. In the early stages of the Holodomor, deportation, imprisonment, proxy murder against the Ukrainian peasantry to enforce strict grain quotas, and violent state response towards Ukrainian resistance to collectivisation are emblematic of crimes against humanity. Of course, this itself cannot be classified as genocide as there is no clear evidence to suggest that these initial measures were intended to destroy the Ukrainian peasantry, but rather the result of enforcing rapid collectivisation. However, from 1932-1933, Stalin's regime intentionally committed several acts against the Ukrainian peasantry designed to destroy them. Correspondence within the regime shows the mental element of genocide, while the acts themselves show the physical element. The presence of both the mental and physical elements working in tandem constitute genocide. During the Holodomor, these elements are exhibited by the regime's awareness of the famine in Ukraine and subsequent increase of food requisitions, denial of foreign aid, and restriction of Ukrainian peasants' freedom of travel. In other words, the Soviet regime committed three acts of genocide against the Ukrainian peasantry according to international law: causing serious physical and mental harm; deliberately inflicting conditions of life (starvation) meant to destroy a population in whole or in part; and the successful killing of members of that population.[336] The Holodomor casts an ever-present shadow over Ukraine due to its immense impact on the nation and her people and it remains a critical event in understanding the brutality and devastation that was commonplace in the USSR under Joseph Stalin's regime.

[331] Cipko, *Starving Ukraine*, viii.
[332] Ibid., ix.
[333] Naimark, "The Holodomor," 73.
[334] Ibid.
[335] Ibid.
[336] Klid, "Holodomor."

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