

The Holodomor, 90 Years Later

Stalin's terror famine in Ukraine—long denied by the Soviets and their Western sympathizers—has taken on a renewed relevance in 2022.

DECEMBER 1, 2022 • COMMENTARY

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This article appeared in *The Bulwark* on December 1, 2022.

On Wednesday, Germany **became** the latest country—along with sixteen others including the United States, Australia, Canada, Poland, and the Vatican—to officially recognize the Holodomor, the Soviet terror-famine of 1932-33, as a genocide. The vote came shortly after Holodomor Remembrance Day, which was commemorated on November 26. This year, the commemorations had a particularly poignant significance—not only because they marked the 90th anniversary of the grim event, but because

they took place amid another tragedy, one that can be seen as a continuation of the same reign of terror: Russia's war in Ukraine.

To Ukrainians, the Holodomor—literally “death by hunger”—is a genocide, the direct result of Joseph Stalin's strategy to crush Ukrainian resistance to Kremlin rule by using food, and starvation, as a weapon. The Russian political establishment under Vladimir Putin has ferociously disputed this view, zigzagging between outright denial that the famine was a result of deliberate Soviet strategy and insistence that Stalin's intent was to terrorize the peasantry as a class, not Ukrainians as a nation. The second position has adherents among respected historians and is a legitimate subject of debate. But Russia's current war, which includes not only weaponizing grain deliveries but blatantly attempting to force Ukraine into submission by destroying essential services and **infrastructure**—and which relies on unhinged, in many cases openly exterminationist **rhetoric** normalized on Russian state television—certainly makes the view of the Holodomor as anti-Ukrainian genocide more credible and more compelling.

For decades, the Holodomor, estimated to have killed between 7 and 10 million people, remained one of the twentieth century's largely forgotten horrors. In the 1930s, it was downplayed by Western journalists sympathetic to the Soviet project. A key role in this coverup was notoriously played by Pulitzer Prize winner Walter Duranty of the *New York Times*, who once **compared** the Soviet treatment of recalcitrant groups to “the vivisection of living animals”—“sad and dreadful,” but all for a noble cause. The *Nation's* Louis Fischer, who had painted a rosy picture of Soviet life in his 1932–33 dispatches, **briefly acknowledged** the famine in the 1935 book *Soviet Journey* but blamed it on the peasants' resistance to collectivization. Fischer, who would later become disillusioned with communism, dressed up his apologism for Soviet brutality in such sanctimonious disclaimers as “History can be cruel” and “Let no one minimize the sadness of the phenomenon.”

Meanwhile, British journalists Malcolm Muggeridge and Gareth Jones were vilified as

Stalin's terror
famine in

purveyors or what we would nowadays call “fake news” for their accurate reporting on the famine. (Jones was the subject of the 2020 film *Mr. Jones*, which regrettably embellishes his story with a fictional, cliché-ridden thriller plot but is still worth watching as a moving tribute to an unjustly forgotten hero and a neglected tragedy; the wordless scenes in which the horrified reporter roams the starving wintry countryside are truly shattering.)

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Ironically, the deniers were aided by an actual fake-news peddler named **Thomas Walker** (a.k.a. Robert Greene), a convicted forger who sold the anti-Communist Hearst press a series of articles claiming to have witnessed massive famine in Ukraine in 1934, along with photos he had supposedly taken with a concealed camera. The articles, which ran in February 1935, were exposed as a fraud (in fact, by 1934, the famine was over), and the photos were traced back to a different Soviet famine in the early 1920s. This debunking was used to tarnish all Hearst reporting on the Soviet famine, including Jones’s articles published a month before Walker’s, as anti-Soviet propaganda. In subsequent years, the Holodomor was overshadowed by the horrors of World War II.

In the postwar era, Ukrainian exiles tried to keep the memory of the Holodomor alive. Their efforts won the **support** of Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-born Jewish attorney and Yale University scholar who coined the concept of genocide and served as a consultant to U.S. prosecutors during the Nuremberg trials; in September 1953, Lemkin **spoke** about the Holodomor as “Soviet Genocide in Ukraine” at a Ukrainian-American rally in New York. (A typescript of his **speech** was preserved and discovered at the New York Public Library in 1982, but was only published in Kyiv in 2009.) Some Soviet dissident writers, notably Vasily Grossman in *Everything Flows* (1970), also wrote searingly about the famine. But it was with the publication of British historian Robert Conquest’s *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet*

Collectivization and the Terror-Famine in 1986 that the Holodomor truly gained mainstream recognition in the West. It was followed by the 1987 documentary *Harvest of Despair: The Unknown Holocaust*, which aired on U.S. and Canadian television.

The still-functioning Soviet propaganda machine tried to counteract the bad publicity. A booklet titled *Fraud, Famine and Fascism: The Ukrainian Genocide Myth from Hitler to Harvard*, bearing the name of Canadian labor activist Douglas Tottle but most likely **compiled** in the Soviet Union and greenlit by Soviet Ukrainian Party apparatchiks and academics, appeared in Canada in 1987. It was such a sloppy hatchet job that even the Ukrainian-Canadian socialist publisher Kobzar rejected it (despite pressure from the Canadian Communist Party), and it ended up being published by the Toronto-based Progress Books, **described** even by a sympathetic journalist as “an outlet for Soviet releases.”

The denialism was picked up by the *Village Voice*; in January 1988, the left-wing weekly ran a lengthy **piece** by Jeff Coplon titled “In Search of a Soviet Holocaust: A 55-Year-Old Famine Feeds the Right.” Coplon acknowledged the famine and even conceded that heavy-handed collectivization was partly responsible for it (though he also insisted, like Fischer, that peasant resistance was partly to blame), but scoffed at the “genocide” designation and ridiculed the inclusion of the Holodomor in school curricula on human rights. The notion of the Holodomor as a Ukrainian holocaust, Coplon argued, was being pushed by Ukrainian exiles anxious to cover up the Nazi links of Ukraine’s anti-Soviet resistance and embraced by American conservatives eager to exploit it as anti-Soviet talking point.

By then, however, the Soviet regime was tottering, and in just a few years Soviet archives were opened up—by no means completely, but enough to confirm that starving villages were deliberately quarantined, that people were prevented from leaving in search of food, and that Stalin and his henchmen knowingly used starvation to punish and quash peasant resistance. (The newly discovered archive materials are incorporated into Anne Applebaum’s absorbing 2017 history, *Red Famine*.) In 1990, the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party not only passed a resolution blaming the famine on “the criminal course pursued by Stalin and his closest entourage” but allowed the publication of a book reviewing the documentary

evidence.

After the collapse of the USSR, both Russian and Ukrainian leaders were willing to acknowledge the man-made famine as a crime of the Soviet regime, but differences on whether it should be regarded as an anti-Ukrainian genocide or as equal-opportunity mass murder remained. The conflicts became more pronounced after Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" of 2004-05, which brought a pro-Western, strongly anti-Communist government to power even as Putin's Russia was regressing toward a more favorable view of the USSR and, to some extent, even of Stalin. Ukraine's new president, Viktor Yushchenko, made the recognition and commemoration of the Holodomor one of his signature issues. In 2006, the Ukrainian parliament **voted** to declare the famine a genocide; the next year, it also **criminalized** Holodomor denial, adopting the model of Holocaust-denial laws in Germany and Austria. Ukraine also pursued international recognition of the Holodomor. A European Parliament **resolution** adopted in October 2008 for the 75th anniversary of the famine stopped short of the term "genocide" but condemned the Holodomor as "an appalling crime against the Ukrainian people, and against humanity" intentionally planned by the Stalin regime.

Interestingly, during that time, the Ukrainian government repeatedly said that it was not seeking to blame Russia itself or to demand compensation from the Russian state. At a press conference in November 2008, Yuri Kostenko, Ukraine's deputy foreign minister, **stressed** that "the people of the Russian Federation and the Russian leadership bear no responsibility for the crimes of the Stalinist regime, except for those who say that they are the successors of Joseph Stalin's cause"; he also noted that most of the enforcers of Stalin's policies which led to the famine—most notably the food requisition campaigns (*prodrazvertska*) in which peasants who did not meet the state's grain-production quota were subjected to punitive, increasingly draconian food confiscations—were themselves Ukrainian Communists. Speaking at the **opening** of the Holodomor Memorial in Kyiv later that month, Yushchenko rejected "the sacrilegious lie that we blame our tragedy on any particular nation," reiterating that "there was only one criminal: the imperial,

Communist Soviet regime.”

Despite these conciliatory gestures, the Russian leadership reacted to Ukraine’s efforts to memorialize the Holodomor with frank hostility. Then-Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, who was invited to attend the 75th anniversary event in Kyiv along with other heads of state, petulantly **refused**, accusing Ukraine’s leadership of using the famine “to achieve its short-term, opportunistic political goals.” Russia also **blocked** Ukraine’s efforts to pass a United Nations resolution recognizing the Holodomor as a genocide.

In 2010, the “orange” government of Yushchenko was succeeded by the Kremlin-friendly government of Viktor Yanukovich, who questioned his country’s new official view of the Holodomor as a genocide. (He reportedly even **deleted a link** to information about the Holodomor from his office’s website during the first days of his presidency.) Yanukovich’s appointee to head the National Memory Institute created under Yushchenko, historian Valery Soldatenko, was an avowed Communist diehard who **acknowledged** that Stalin’s policies contributed to the Holodomor but rejected the view that the famine was deliberately engineered. Interestingly, under Yanukovich’s tenure, Russia was willing to back a **2010 resolution** of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that honored the victims of the terror-famine and condemned “the cruel policies pursued by the Stalinist regime” as “a crime against humanity” without mentioning genocide.

After the 2014 “Revolution of Dignity,” the seizure of Crimea, and the start of Russia’s covert war in Eastern Ukraine, as Russia-Ukraine relations drastically deteriorated, the Putin regime pivoted toward de facto terror-famine denial. In 2016 and 2017, *Sputnik News*, the English-language Kremlin site once **described** as “the *BuzzFeed* of propaganda,” ran **two articles** by Russian “independent political analyst” **Ekaterina Blinova** purporting to expose the “Holodomor Hoax” and written in a tone that sounded like a Soviet newspaper miraculously frozen in time in the pre-*glasnost* era:

Since the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia,
Western media has made every effort to downplay

the achievements of the Soviets, creating a picture of complete horror and despair which had allegedly engulfed the USSR.

The bold historical experiment kicked off by Communists and based on the concept of a “fair distribution of national wealth,” egalitarianism and internationalism, made the blood of Western plutocrats run cold.... If the new system proved effective it would have changed the world forever. Needless to say, it did not comply with the plans of the Western financial and political elite.

Blinova, who shuttled back and forth between arguing that the mass starvation was a myth and that the famine was due to natural causes, drew her “evidence” from the old 1980s *Fraud, Famine and Fascism* booklet (the Soviet fabrication had thus come full circle). She also recycled its assertion that the Holodomor “lie” was a concoction of Nazi propaganda and pro-Nazi Ukrainian nationalists—a particularly obscene claim considering the effort of Raphael Lemkin, a Jewish refugee who lost dozens of relatives in the Holocaust, to promote Western awareness of the Holodomor as an act of genocide. Needless to say, the *Sputnik* articles never acknowledged the contemporaneous Holodomor reports by Jones, Muggeridge, and others, or the later accounts by Grossman and other Soviet-era authors, such as dissidents **Lev Kopelev** and **Petro Grigorenko**—both of whom felt intense remorse about their own participation in the grain-requisition campaigns in their younger days as Communist zealots.

To be fair, official Russian rhetoric has generally steered clear of such overt denialism. In its **response** to Holodomor Remembrance Day in 2018, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted that the 1932-33 famine in the USSR was “a common tragedy of Russians, Ukrainians, Kazakhs, and many other peoples” while deploring “politicized and anti-scientific” attempts to present it as “a genocide of the Ukrainian people.” However, the ministry’s statement also pointedly avoided any language that would treat the “humanitarian catastrophe” as a crime or assign responsibility to the Soviet regime.

What, then, is the truth of the Holodomor?

Most mainstream scholars today agree that the famine was a man-made atrocity, a result not just of botched policy but of the weaponization of food to quell peasant resistance. There are some dissenters such as West Virginia University historian Mark Tauger, who places most of the blame on an unforeseen bad harvest due to poor weather—though agreeing that the Soviet regime’s actions exacerbated the damage—and **argues** that the view of the famine as deliberately engineered mass murder is rooted in ideological biases. However, Tauger’s key points have serious logical flaws. He suggests that since the Soviet regime moved to provide relief in response to other, far smaller famines in the same region in the 1920s, it makes no sense that it would try to starve the same population in the early 1930s. But this claim overlooks a key development: the end of the New Economic Policy that accommodated markets and the turn to full-scale agricultural collectivization after 1929. (To put it bluntly: In 1932-33, the Soviets had far stronger reasons to want to suppress peasant resistance than in 1928.) Tauger’s argument that the Soviets’ provision of relief to starving regions during the great famine likewise contradicts the “man-made famine” thesis also ignores important nuances—namely, that relief itself could be an effective means of control if it was distributed as a reward for compliance. Indeed, some observers noted this at the time, including William Henry Chamberlin, another Western journalist who tried to tell the truth about the Holodomor. In his horrifying **account** of the famine in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1934, Chamberlin wrote:

Relief was doled out to the collective farms, but on an inadequate scale and so late that many lives had already been lost. The individual peasants were left to shift for themselves; and the much higher mortality rate among the individual peasants proved a most potent argument in favor of joining collective farms.

In *Red Famine*, Applebaum quotes similar observations by a German diplomat who was in the Soviet Union at the time and who believed that “the authorities deliberately refrained from aiding the stricken population, except those organized in collective farms, in order to demonstrate to the recalcitrant peasant that death by starvation was the only alternative to collectivization.”

But were these atrocities based on ethnic/national demographics, or on class? Was Stalin waging war on the peasantry and on private farming, or on Ukrainians and Ukrainian identity? Here, the issues are more complicated, and to some extent the answer is probably “both.” The Great Famine certainly affected regions outside Ukraine, particularly the republic of Kazakhstan and the southern Russian region of Kuban (which, it should be noted, had a large ethnic Ukrainian population). According to generally accepted **estimates**, Ukrainians accounted for about 4 million of the 10 million Soviet famine deaths in 1932-33. Proportionately, it was Kazakhstan where collectivization-related famine took the highest and most staggering toll, **killing** about a third of the population and making ethnic Kazakhs a minority in their own lands for decades after. Russian historian Viktor Kondrashin of Penza State University has also **argued** that common estimates of the famine’s toll have lowballed the numbers for the Russian countryside in the Volga regions. Whether or not this is correct, the survivor accounts Kondrashin has collected in Russian villages are certainly harrowing. The Lithuanian writer Tomas Venclova has coined the term “**stratocide**” to refer to the destruction or attempted destruction of a social class; perhaps it applies here.

On the other hand, many historians believe that there is sufficient evidence of a “Ukrainian” component in the Soviet leadership’s strategy to use the term “genocide.” One convert to this view is French scholar Nicholas Werth, who had earlier viewed the Holodomor as class-based extermination with no ethnic or national motivation but reconsidered his position due to archival discoveries. In his **keynote address** for the **November 2008 Holodomor Conference** at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, Werth argued that newly available documents showed that in the early 1930s, Stalin and the Bolshevik leading circles were obsessed with the peril of Ukrainian nationalism, seeing it as a threat to Soviet statehood. Notably, the Holodomor coincided with brutal repressions

and purges targeting Ukraine's cultural, intellectual and political elites and with policies discouraging Ukrainian culture and identity.

While Werth noted that "whether Stalin targeted, persecuted, and viewed the peasants of Ukraine and Kuban as peasants or as Ukrainians . . . is a matter on which scholars still disagree," he also noted that Stalin was acutely aware of the "national question" and concluded: "By crushing the peasantry with the weapon of hunger, Stalin was annihilating the most powerful national movement capable of opposing and derailing the construction of the Soviet empire."

Obviously, this is not an exact parallel to the Holocaust: Jews did not have the option of surviving and even thriving by joining the Nazis, while Ukrainians could thrive by embracing Soviet patriotism and Russification. But a genocidal policy does not have to pursue the total extermination of a group to qualify as genocide; targeted large-scale murder and the subjugation of the survivors is enough.

At the 2008 Holodomor conference, Werth concluded his speech by noting that while he did believe the Ukrainian Holodomor should be designated as a genocide, it was also essential to remember and stand up for the other victims: Kazakh herders, Russian villagers, or deportees who "died, massively, in silence and total oblivion." This is, of course, entirely correct, as is Werth's admonition (quoting the political scientist Jacques Sémelin) to avoid "the competition of victims."

Yet for years, Russian officialdom has peevishly complained about Russians and other groups being sidelined by Ukrainian Holodomor commemorations without doing anything to remember or recognize Russia's own dead-. As St. Petersburg University historian Kirill Aleksandrov **told** the Russian newspaper *Trud* In 2008, such a recognition "would raise the issue of reassessing the entire Soviet period" and was therefore unlikely under the current leadership. (Back then, one could still say such things in the mainstream Russian press.)

Since then, the rhetoric around the Holodomor has grown more polarized. On Holodomor Remembrance Day, Ukraine's leaders made

permeated on Holodomor Remembrance Day, Ukraine's readers made it clear that they now **hold** Russia, not just the defunct Soviet regime, responsible for the terror-famine—and that they see today's war as “history repeating itself.” Meanwhile, the Donbas-focused news site *Novorossiia*, a project of the Russian nationalist and Orthodox television channel Tsargrad TV, ran a piece by one Natalya Zalevskaya **titled** “Fakes and Myths About the 1932-1933 Famine in Ukraine,” which trotted out the usual accusations of CIA plots and Western wiles but also raised the crazy to a new level. Zalevskaya praises Stalin's wise leadership in the crisis and defends the blockade of Ukraine and the Kuban as a necessary measure to stop news of the famine from spreading, “which could have subverted the stability of Soviet power.” In a final tour de force, she suggests that the Soviet regime's coverup of the famine until the *glasnost* years was actually for the Ukrainians' own good: the state didn't want to “shame” them for their resistance to collectivization and inability to “break free of proprietary instincts.”

Ninety years after the Holodomor, Russia gets mired deeper and deeper in history-denying madness while Ukraine continues to reclaim its story and receive more recognition.

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