

Ukraine's enduring Holodomor horror, when millions starved in the 1930s

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[Ukraine](#), a fertile provider of food, almost died 80 years ago – of starvation. In the village of Targan, 120 kilometres south of the Ukrainian capital Kiev [Kyiv], half the people died from hunger in 1932-1933.

Oleksandra Ovdyyuk, 92 today, survived what Ukrainians call the “Hunger-extermination” – not insufficient food, but deliberate policy imposed by the Soviet dictator Stalin.

She said: “The Bolsheviks had special brigades of seven men that would sweep through the villages in wagons and confiscate any hidden beans, grain or other food from the farmers' homes.”

Opinion has remained divided for many decades whether the mass death was the result of a deliberate drive to kill an entire people, because Ukrainian nationalism was on the rise, or the unintentional effect of misguided mismanagement by Stalin in his quest to feed rapid industrialisation elsewhere. Millions fell, mostly in rural [Ukraine](#). Cannibalism was documented.

Survivor Olena Goncharuk felt the terror: “We were afraid to go out in the village, because people were starving and they hunted children. My neighbour had a daughter, who disappeared. We went to her house. The head was separated from the body, and the body was cooking in the oven.”

Stalin's forces in 1932-33 requisitioned food stores, deported peasants or forbade them from leaving the land, carried out mass executions and put people in prison.

Olena Goncharuk relives the horror: “There was a man who went into a woman's house to take the body away. But she was still alive. She asked the man: ‘Don't take me, I'm still breathing.’ And he said: ‘One way or another you are going to die, and I don't want to have to come back for you tomorrow!’”

Cherished sites today belie the great nameless burials. Stalin's reign of terror would claim many victims in other terrible actions too, aimed at consolidating power – his purges, for example. And information about death tolls and nationalities of who died where and how – by firing squad or famine – was guarded, repressed, denied or distorted with propaganda pseudo-justification.

Historian Volodymyr Serhiychuk told us: “There was famine in other USSR regions, in Kazakhstan, for instance, but Kazakhs could go and seek food in neighbouring Russian regions, or in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Ukrainians, in contrast, in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, couldn't go to Belarus or Russia, because the borders were closed and there were no railway tickets for them.

“Ukrainian farmers didn't want to join collective farms, they didn't want to give the Bolsheviks their produce. That's why the Bolsheviks killed them with famine.”

Then more millions were killed in World War Two. It was only many years later that light could be shed on the Holodomor. After independence in 1991, a law in Ukraine made it a criminal offence to deny that the Holodomor was pre-meditated genocide.

Iryna Gibert, from euronews headquarters in Lyon, spoke about this with André Liebich, a professor at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva.

He is a historian whose speciality is the countries of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the USSR.

euronews: "Ukrainian law defines the Holodomor as a genocide against the people of Ukraine. More than 20 countries recognise this. But many people consider that the term 'genocide' does not say enough. Why is this?"

André Liebich: "It is in fact a poorly chosen term. When we think 'genocide', and certainly in the context of the 1930s, we think foremost of the Holocaust. The difference is that the Holodomor did not only affect the Ukrainian people but also other peoples within Ukraine and outside it: in Kazakhstan and in Russia. In addition, the Holocaust was a campaign whose intention was to exterminate a people while the Holodomor was not conceived to eradicate the Ukrainian people, even though there were undeniably millions of victims. It was the result of a brutal, inhumane policy led by Stalin, who didn't care how many died because of him. But his first intention wasn't to eliminate the Ukrainians but rather to realise his programme, whatever the cost, even if it meant millions of peasant victims especially – peasants who often were Ukrainians."

euronews: "The criminal code in Ukraine provides for prosecution for public denial of the Holodomor. Doesn't that stifle debate on the subject?"

Liebich: "Absolutely. It is not up to the state to decree what is true, or to put a stop to discussion. The fact that the Holodomor is contested by some people only makes the debate more real and necessary. It is by showing what happened and discussing the number of victims that we manage to establish the truth. It's not for the state to legislate what is true and not true, and to stop discussion."

euronews: "The reality is millions of individual deaths – even if the numbers vary. Isn't it fair to count this tragedy on the scale of a crime against humanity, as is the case for the Holocaust?"

Liebich: "Entirely so: as a crime against humanity – not as a crime against a particular people. If we conceive of the Holodomor as a crime that affected millions of individuals across the former USSR, we have the foundation for a common commemoration, a reconciliation between the Russians and the Ukrainians and other peoples. If we portray the Holodomor as exclusive, as a purely Ukrainian tragedy targeting only them, we only create conflicts with others who were also victims of that tragedy."

euronews: "Ukraine is often criticised for competitively inflating the death toll. What's your opinion on that?"

Liebich: "There is, effectively, an overstating of the number of victims which doesn't help anyone. The lowest we can give for the Holodomor is 2,000,000. If we add those who died of illness, of famine-induced weakness, add the birth deficit, we get a figure of several million – but we don't get the 10,000,000 that we sometimes hear, and maybe not even the 6,000,000 that is the standard figure for the Holocaust, to which some seek to compare the Holodomor."

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