

# Genocide or "A Vast Tragedy"?

University students in an Alberta classroom try to decide.

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From January to April 2009, I audited an undergraduate history class at the University of Alberta, taught by John-Paul Himka under the rubric "Topics in Ukrainian History." The topic we studied—the Great Famine of 1932–33 in Soviet Ukraine "in History and Memory"—had been virtually ignored by western historians until 1986 and the publication of works commemorating the event's 50th anniversary, although famine had killed seven times as many people as the much more familiar Great Terror of 1934–39. Famine in 1932 followed by Holodomor (death by starvation) in 1933 had been produced in the context of the staggering achievement of the Soviet economy, urban industrialization and the mass collectivization of the countryside.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the determined resistance of peasants, by 1930 about 70 percent of farming households in Ukraine belonged to 28,000 collective farms. Then the horror began. Confiscation of food, brutalization of resisters including the so-called "women's revolts," deportation and execution of intellectuals and communist party skeptics, increasingly punitive quotas, party denials in the face of mass starvation, trauma and despair. Of the 30-some million Ukrainians alive in 1930, claims of 3.5 million to 7 million are estimated to have died by 1933.

That a catastrophe befell Soviet Ukraine—a territory stretching from Kharkiv, its capital, in the east, to the border with Polish Galicia in the west—has long been acknowledged internationally. The question that has never been resolved, however, is whether this was a case of deliberate genocide driven by Stalinist economic and social policies or simply a vast tragedy based on chaotic mismanagement, blinkered ideology and ruthless disregard for human life.<sup>2</sup>

I have a vivid memory from my adolescence of a book, which I found in my parents' library, called *Black Deeds of the Kremlin: A White Book*, published in Toronto in 1953 by the Ukrainian Association of Victims of Russian Communist Terror. It horrified me—narratives of appalling misery and brutality, including cannibalism, shadowy black and white photographs of heaps of stiffened corpses by the railway tracks—but I did not believe any of it. It was too extreme. Now here it was again, on the required reading list of History 415, together with its 1987 riposte from Canadian Communist Party circles, Douglas Tottle's *Fraud, Famine and Fascism: The Ukrainian Genocide Myth from Hitler to Harvard*.

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Harvard. The reference is to the 1986 publication of Robert Conquest's *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. But even as Tottle was writing his book, in the atmosphere of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in Gorbachev's Soviet Union and the opening of previously restricted or sealed archives, reams of new scholarship, western and post-Soviet, began to be published and have not let up. For example, the most recent literature we read in History 415, from 2008, included opinions about the legal classification of genocide, the relative politics of Nazi and Soviet genocides and Himka's own article, "How Many Perished in the Famine and Why Does It Matter?"

The history is contentious and Himka cautioned us to "suspend our disbelief" about any one argument while giving the writer the chance to be heard. This was not easy to do, to judge from the sighs and groans of the students, who confessed to being "torn" by stories of suffering and "bored" by tables and graphs of deficits of food grains production. Himka: "We are not going to end this course with everyone in possession of the truth. This is the most post-modern topic you could study: it *demands* interpretation."

By the summer of 1932, workers in Soviet cities, already starving on rations of 200 grams of bread a day, rioted, abandoned work sites, sickened and died. In the villages of Ukraine, signs of famine were unmistakable: death rates were rising inexorably even as more and more furious decrees from Moscow demanded greater and greater deliveries—later, confiscations—of grain. By June 1933 in many regions no grain or flour was available at all: people dug up corpses of horses and ate, sickened and died. Decrees forbade movement off the collective farms: only "enemies of Soviet power" would try to leave. They died at the train stations. Children in crèches were fed grass, and died. Typhus raged around Kyiv. By 1934, some 3.5 million Soviet Ukrainians were dead.

What had happened? Despite the intense political and social drive for rapid industrialization, the state's procurement of grain for the towns repeatedly failed. Forced requisition from farmers and later from the collective farms was unrelenting but its management was chaotic and production declined. "Class enemies," especially in Ukraine, were everywhere, saboteurs and wreckers: they were deported to slave labour or shot, but still the starving died.

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Several historiographical problems immediately present themselves in studying the documents of such a catastrophic event. Without access to archives, Himka pointed out, eyewitness testimonials of survivors are of critical importance for social history in reporting on the experience of the sufferers ("people do not experience themselves as a meta-narrative") while archives mainly collect the records of the perpetrators. We read the testimonials with increasing empathy and agitation but, although people may have a very clear recall of what happened to them, what they saw and what they heard, they are not good at understanding why this was happening. Or, as a student put it, "post-traumatic syndrome problematizes oral history."

Because there is virtually no photographic record of the 1932–33 famine, books keep reproducing the same handful of images from the famine of 1918–22. The opened archives still contain only two unsuppressed censuses from the period, which explains the bedevilled science of population statistics for the ex-Soviet Union. Many sources have yet to be tapped: Polish and Romanian journalism, and private correspondence of those who got away to the West. Much of what passes for scholarship of the famine is in fact competitive, not comparative, research that seeks to establish Ukraine as a victim nation, the target of Stalin’s desire to wipe out the Ukrainian people.

So we read the texts with alertness as we asked the questions: for whom, why and how is something written? Tottle, echoing the Soviet line in 1987, acknowledged there was a famine but attributed it to drought, amateurish planning, sabotage and class struggle around the collectivization of agriculture. The testimonials in *Black Deeds* attribute mass death in Ukraine to Russian imperialism, Bolshevik Ukrainian turncoats and the ruthless party shock brigades with their diabolical iron rods prodding all the nooks and crannies of the houses already ransacked for their pathetic stores of grain.

The draconian 1932 Law of Protection of Socialist Property sentenced to death anyone caught stealing or hoarding collective grain. A student, “shocked” by the sheer repetitiousness of stories of suffering, summarized them as “We had some food, then they took it away, then they took more away, and then we starved.”

In spite of coercion, terror and deliberate impoverishment, the staggering policy failure is most sobering.

Conquest’s *Harvest of Sorrow* occupied us for three weeks. Now fully vindicated by the survivors’ accounts he depended on, he made the case for linking collectivization and “terror-famine,” for Bolshevik ignorance of how agriculture works and, of course, for class hatred of the individual property owner.

Leninist doctrine, not economic theory, drove the party: 67 percent of those shot by court order were peasants, mainly the despised *kulak* or “rich” peasant who owned two or three cows and ten hectares of sowing area and was clearly enterprising and skilled. All of us students protested the irrationality of such policies—how can a state acquire grain if it shoots its most productive farmers?—but Himka assured us there was method in the madness: the party was “terrified” of the reappearance of a capitalist market in the countryside.

The sheer number of factors operating at once burdened us: the violence of seizing grain from peasants who consumed 80 percent of what they produced (the definition of subsistence and the reason Canada has farmers, not peasants), incompetent price policies, lack of tractors and, later, spare parts, faked trials of “wreckers,” class warfare against “bourgeois” specialists, purge of activists, liquidation of the *kulaks*, peasant resistance (looting, burial of grain, assaults on party activists), introduction of internal passports and the re-enservment of the peasantry, armed guards in watchtowers over the fields, mass death ... not to mention Stalin’s own personality, his paranoia about Polish plots on the

Soviet Union and about the collusion of Ukrainian nationalists, including communists, with these plots. In spite of coercion, terror and deliberate impoverishment, it was the staggering, utter failure of policy that sobered us.

Conquest's book was biased, too "pro-Ukrainian," in one student's view. Another retorted: "Why does coming up strong on one side mean bias? A monstrous story demands it." "Is it 'one-sided' to be appalled by the Holocaust?" another chimed in, finally mentioning the elephant in the room, that other 20th-century mass death. "But if I'm too skeptical of Conquest's narrative as one sided," said a fourth, "I'm worried about seeming to be a Holocaust denier." In for one genocide, in for them all?

The question of genocide has become broadly politicized.

With *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture 1931–33*, by R.W. Davies and Stephen Wheatcroft, we were finally clearly in the territory of post-Soviet-era scholarship, a book from the archives about Soviet agriculture, part of a huge project documenting Soviet economic history, category by category. The chapters proceed, dispassionately and thoroughly, from one crisis to the next, each one subdivided month by month: The Collection Plan, The Spring Sowing 1932, Excess Deaths by Region. It is history by incremental information, and I lament the loss of panoramic narrative to the minutiae of primary sources, as revealing and nuanced as these are. The minutiae allow us to see the twists and turns, the zig-zag of decision making, the shades of argument and the distribution of responsibility. "But where is the famine?" I asked. One student agreed—"This throwing around of stats about people dying felt cold and inhuman"—while another argued that "some stats are really significant and troubling, for example the plummeting birthrates that were shocking enough without the emotionalism." This is a book with hundreds of tables: number of households collectivized 1928–33, food consumption per collective farmer per day in the Odessa region, registered rural annualized monthly crude death rate, by region. We were a long way from grainy photographs of cannibals.

One student, who found Davies and Wheatcroft "not as bad as expected," now thought that reading Conquest seemed "like watching the History Channel, with his loaded language and moral judgements." Another saw the conclusions chapter by chapter "but not the Big Picture," to which Himka replied that "maybe this isn't about a Big Picture. Does 'history' really demonstrate anything? Sometimes history *undemonstrates*."

So, does history demonstrate a genocide in Ukraine from 1932 to 1933?

The question has become broadly politicized, from organizational websites claiming that the Holodomor was "an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people," to the passage in Canadian legislatures of bills condemning the famine as a genocide, to the Ukrainian government's criminalizing of "famine denial," to the Russian government's claim that the Famine (or, rather, famine) was the result of "Stalin's criminal policy" against the peasantry and not against any particular ethnic group.

Distribution is a political issue. Reckless indifference is a choice.

What do the historians say? In an argument back and forth between Michael Ellman, on one side, and Davies and Wheatcroft, on the other, in *Europe-Asia Studies* in 2006, the case is made that, since Bolsheviks did not perceive famine as a humanitarian catastrophe but as a historical process of class struggle, as Ellman argued, why wouldn't Stalin, who used arrests, deportations and executions against the peasants, be prepared to starve them too? However, it is countered, "there are no serious grounds" that Stalin pursued any conscious or deliberate policy of starvation. In fact, wrote Davies and Wheatcroft, until 1932 Stalin was still convinced that his policies would raise the collectives' standard of living. They cite Conquest, who argued in 2003 that the famine was a crime of omission rather than commission, that Stalin put "Soviet interest rather than feeding the starving first."

Of course it all depends on what we mean by genocide. It can be approached archivally (the "no evidence" argument), or legalistically, in the context of national and international criminal law that rests on "the intent to destroy" (except that the United Nations Convention on Genocide excludes "social" groups from its definition of target groups), or it can be approached politically, in terms of the famine's political context: the systematic Russification, the repression of Ukraine's cultural and intellectual resources, the closing of Ukraine's borders and refusal of international aid, all of them factors leading to underdevelopment of the group/nation over the decades. Himka: "Here you do find one of the cases for 'genocide.'" Genocide by subjugation if not eradication.

Another perspective is that of economist Amartya Sen, cited by the University of Ottawa's Dominique Arel in an unpublished 2007 paper that modern era famines are not caused by lack of food but by a breakdown in distribution (not enough access to food). And distribution is a political issue. The murderously high quotas for grain set by the Soviet state and the ensuing starvation of peasants demonstrated not so much the "intent to destroy" them as "reckless indifference" to their fate. Reckless indifference too is a choice.

On the last day of class, Himka called for a vote: "How many believe the famine was not genocide?" The question arose also from a parallel discussion: how do you measure genocide in the shadow of the Holocaust? Comparatively, only the Holocaust qualifies as the intent to exterminate an ethnic group; competitively, figures of 7 to 10 million dead in the Holodomor have been cited—"blithe claims," in Himka's words, "disrespectful to the dead, that people use ... in a ploy to gain the moral capital of victimhood or to score points in interethnic rivalry in North America ... The discussion of tragedies like these demands a certain moral probity."

Compared to the Holocaust, there has been little serious study of the famine even among its survivors.

All the same, however, as the class progressed through the reading list, the disparity in the weight of the Holocaust and Holodomor on western public consciousness, not to

mention conscience, became troubling. As one student put it, “I’ve been bugged the whole time why the famine hasn’t penetrated western awareness.” The ghastly familiarity of images and stories of the Holocaust meant, to another, that the famine felt like a “pre-Holocaust. I feel that I’ve read this all before.” But, she added, “the difference is that in Ukraine people died in their homes.” There are no sites of mass death, at least not until mass graves have been opened, which they have not.

Compared to the reports of the Armenian and Jewish genocides, there was a decades-long delay in accounts of famine in the USSR reaching the west, and when they were received, they were often disbelieved. To this day, “strident” anti--communism is viewed with some suspicion compared to anti-fascism, which can never be “strident” enough.

“As an historian,” Himka summarized, “he finds it very important to ask when and how? The West waged a huge war against Nazism, won it and purged it from Germany. The swastika is suppressed to this day. If there had been a hot war right after World War Two against the USSR, I’m sure the crimes of Stalin would have been treated the same way, with revulsion. And communism would not have appealed as a liberating ideology anymore. Communism can still advance an agenda of social justice but as soon as it says, ‘only when such-and-such a group is eliminated,’ it loses all liberatory possibility.”

Compared to the global numbers of Holocaust memorials, museums, education centres and lists of names, not to mention the many thousands of published titles devoted to the murder of Europe’s Jews, there has been little serious study of the memory of the famine even among its survivors. Documentation of highly contested issues of policy has been accessible only for the last five years and is vulnerable to politicization where the genocide “campaign” detracts from serious scholarship and in any case is impossible to determine: “Only Ukrainians,” said Himka, “believe that somewhere in a vault in Moscow is a file with the number of dead. Listen, even the Soviets didn’t know.” Ukraine’s historical memory could not be aired for more than 50 years. And now that it is being articulated, its victims tend rather to think that what happened to them was a tragedy, not a crime.

So a vote was held among the nine of us: who believes the famine was not a genocide? Five, including me. Who believes it was? No one. Who abstains: Four, including Himka.

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## Notes

1. A *Pravda* editorial of January 1933 was titled, “Ukraine: The Deciding Factor in Grain Collection.” Although Ukraine accounted for 27 percent of the total grain harvest of the Soviet Union, it was made to deliver 38 percent of its quotas (see Orest Subtelný’s *Ukraine: A History*, published by the University of Toronto Press in 1988).

2. The 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as “any of a number of acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group: killing members

of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”