

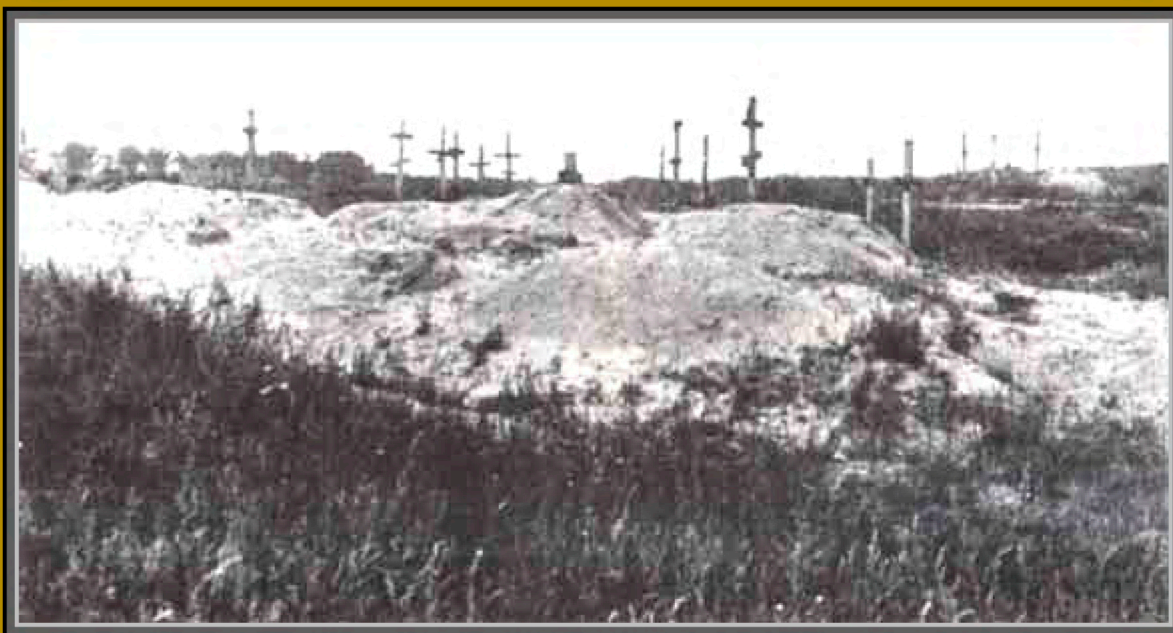


Holodomor – Famine in Soviet Ukraine 1932-1933

In Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary

*An Exhibit in the Ralph J. Bunche Library
United States Department of State
Washington, D.C.*

September 16 – October 31, 2008



Mass graves outside of Kharkiv, Ukraine, 1933

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Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard College Library: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 1986.

Historical Background

The Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic and the Policy of Ukrainization

The Bolsheviks, as the party of proletarian internationalism, found it very difficult to develop a positive policy on the problems of nationality and agriculture. Though Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) had for tactical reasons espoused the most extreme demands of the peasantry and nationalities, his party failed to attract significant support in the countryside and among most national minorities.

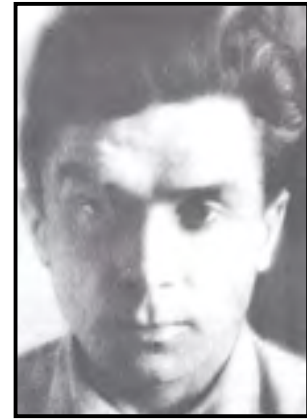
War Communism, the name given to the militant Bolshevik policies of the first years of the Revolution (1917-1921), negated peasant and national concerns. Forced collectivization and the expropriation of grain led to ferocious peasant resistance throughout the territories of the former Russian empire and helped to cause the famine of 1921-1922. To save the country from economic ruin and prevent the overthrow of Soviet power by the rebellious peasantry, the Bolsheviks in 1921 adopted a New Economic Policy (NEP). This policy allowed for free individual agriculture and small private enterprise and brought the Soviet Union, by the late twenties, to relative economic prosperity. Further, it provided the Bolsheviks with the domestic stability they needed to consolidate their power.



In Ukraine, the Bolsheviks implemented the policy of indigenization, which meant “Ukrainization,” together with the already existing NEP. They had exceptional difficulty in installing a stable Communist regime in Ukraine. Each of their three attempts was marked by successively greater concessions to national sentiment. The third such regime, the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic, had its capital in Kharkiv, and until the formation of the Soviet Union in late 1922, was considered to be an independent state. The Bolsheviks eventually went so far as to accept large numbers of non-Bolshevik Ukrainians into the Ukrainian Communist Party and government. Ukrainization also involved the introduction of the Ukrainian language into all levels of governmental, Party, and educational and cultural activity. This policy was carried out with great vigor by the leadership of the Communist Party of Ukraine and an entire generation of intellectuals. Mykola Skrypnyk (1872-1933), Ukrainian People’s Commissar of Education and de facto head of the Party and Soviet Ukraine government, was the most active and aggressive advocate of Ukrainization. In the Moscow Politburo, he became the spokesman for the non-Russian nationalities of the Soviet Union. Throughout the Soviet Union and particularly in Ukraine, the 1920s were a period of intense cultural and economic development and of continuous debate on policy. Ideological disputes focused primarily on the goals of Ukrainization and on political and cultural movement away from Moscow.

The Ukrainian Cultural Renaissance of the 1920s

All aspects of Ukrainian cultural life were marked by intense activity in the 1920s. Literary development was especially strong and turbulent. The writer Mykola Khvył'ovyï (1893-1933) personified this cultural period. As an ardent Communist, he became a leading figure in the heated rivalries between various literary and ideological groups. He was a most effective advocate of re-orientating Ukrainian culture toward European models, and formulated the slogan "Away from Moscow." At the height of the Famine, Khvył'ovyï committed suicide. The cultural resurgence of the 1920s represented so great an advance that in retrospect it came to be known as the "golden era" in Ukrainian literature and arts. But owing to the brutality with which it was later repressed by the Kremlin, the movement also gained a more somber name, that of the "rebirth executed by firing squads" (*rozstriliane vidrodzhennia*).



Mykola Khvył'ovyï

Stalin's Seizure of Power: Purges, Collectivization and Industrialization

Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin (1879-1953) exploited the centrist and ultimately totalitarian tendencies of Bolshevik ideology to attain absolute power. His rule brought a re-implementation of the most extreme aspects of the domestic program of War Communism. Rapid industrialization coupled with forced agricultural collectivization caused indescribable suffering for the peoples of the Soviet Union. In order to pursue such a radical policy, Stalin had to establish the unquestioned rule of the



Communist Party over all aspects of Soviet life and finally end all dissent within the Party itself. In the case of Ukraine, Stalinism brought an end to independent cultural and political life, and in 1932-1933 resulted in the death by famine of one fifth of the Ukrainian nation.

Stalin's anti-Ukrainian campaign began with an assault on the politically most vulnerable group in Ukrainian society, the non-Communist cultural activists. The 1930 show trial of the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine (*Soiuz Vyzvolennia Ukraïny* – the "SVU"), an alleged underground organization supposedly led by academician Serhiï Iefremov (1876-1939), served as a pretext for the liquidation of the non-Bolshevik cultural elite of Ukraine.

In this trial, leaders of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church were charged with plotting the overthrow of Soviet rule in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Academy of Sciences was severely purged. Many prominent scholars were imprisoned and whole institutes of the Academy were shut down. At the same time, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church was disbanded. All but two of its bishops, along with the vast majority of priests and lay activists, were executed or perished in Siberian concentration camps.

The New Economic Policy (1921-1928) had allowed the peasantry to make significant economic progress and maintain a traditional style of life. The period of agricultural collectivization (1929-1933) that followed NEP met with immediate and strong resistance throughout the Soviet Union. This new policy could be implemented only after the destruction of village leadership and opposition. In particular, the label *kurkul'* (in Ukrainian) or *kulak* (in Russian), signifying a well-to-do peasant – and thus a class enemy worthy of exile or liquidation – was indiscriminately applied to all peasants who opposed the Bolsheviks, regardless of their real economic status. The disruption caused by collectivization created severe food shortages throughout the Soviet Union.



These shortages led to mass starvation in Ukraine, the North Caucasus, Kazakhstan and the Lower Volga region. In Kazakhstan during 1930-1933, famines destroyed over a million herdsmen, the indigenous nomadic peoples, to institute sedentary agriculture and industrialization. In the Lower Volga region famine affected predominately ethnic Germans and Don Cossacks. Mass starvation and death also occurred on an unprecedented scale in Ukraine and in the Ukrainian-settled Kuban region of the Northern Caucasus. As the result of a fatal combination of Stalinist cultural and nationality policies, the vast majority of the famine victims, in this case, were Ukrainians.



Famine in Soviet Ukraine 1932-1933 (Holodomor = Extermination by Hunger)

Stalin's campaign against Ukrainian national aspirations was carried out in tandem with the struggle to force peasants into collective farms. It could hardly have been otherwise, as the Ukrainians, then a nation over thirty million, had always been a predominately agricultural people. Concessions to the Ukrainian nation had come as a corollary to concessions made to the peasantry. Hence, a war against the peasantry meant a war against the bulk of the Ukrainian nation.



The Ukrainian peasants fought against the seizure of their farms, the destruction of their culture, and the desecration of their churches. This reaction was branded as “kulak” nationalism, and collectivization was seen as a way to destroy its social foundation, a free peasantry. Urban outsiders were sent into the villages to force the peasants onto collective farms and to seize grain for the state. Villages that resisted collectivization or failed to meet the unrealizable high quotas of grain contribution to the state were put on blacklists. Blacklisting led to purges of the local leadership and a total blockade of the areas in question. Often, the result was complete extermination of the blacklisted village.



Impossible grain quotas were imposed on Ukraine. While Soviet propaganda portrayed well-fed collective farm workers with smiling faces, the last grain was taken from the starving peasants, leaving the quotas still unmet. By 1932, when death from starvation began to occur on a mass scale, the “kulaks” already had been liquidated or exiled to Siberia, and much of Ukrainian agriculture was collectivized. Nonetheless, the Communist Party continued to press the attack on the starving peasantry, by now totally under its control. It raised the grain requisition quotas even higher and, uniquely to Ukraine, sent in special brigades to find and remove any remaining foodstuffs and livestock.

Ukrainian Communist officials led by Mykola Skrypnyk protested to Stalin that the people were dying of hunger. Stalin, seizing the opportunity to solve the problem of Ukrainian nationalism once and for all, publicly blamed the Ukrainian Party for its “criminal negligence” in failing to meet grain quotas. He took direct control of the country sending Viacheslav Molotov (1890-1986) and Lazar Kaganovich (1893-1991) to dictate policy to the Ukrainian Communist Party and government. He then sent his close ally Pavel Postyshev (1887-1937) to Ukraine as

virtual dictator. Postyshev ordered that even more grain be collected, although nothing was left. Under his rule beginning in January 1933, the Ukrainian countryside became a vast death camp. At the same time, Postyshev carried out a wave of terror against the Ukrainian intelligentsia and hounded Skrypnyk to suicide. Ukrainian Communist Party functionaries were purged, while few survived to the end of the 1930s. Satisfied that the Ukrainians had at last been broken, Postyshev allowed the peasants to keep part of what they harvested in the fall of 1933.

The Famine gradually subsided, having claimed an estimated 3 to 6 million lives, according to ongoing demographic and archival research. Official Ukrainian government estimates are still higher at about 7 to 8 million lives lost during the Famine (Holodomor).



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