

# Review of the holodomor event in ukraine history essay



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The Holodomor was a catastrophic event that saw the deaths by starvation of millions of Ukrainian peasants in the early 1930s. Generally regarded as having been at least partially caused by Soviet agricultural policy, the major school of thought for years has been that crop harvests at the time were not abnormally low, and the famine was a direct result of policies implemented with the intent of causing mass starvation among the people.

However, revisionist theory contends that 1932 saw a massive crop failure in many parts of Ukraine and the Soviet Union, the extent of which made widespread famine an inevitable event, instead of being purposefully engineered by the Soviet leadership. Clearly, there exists sufficient ambiguity with regards to the reasons for the deaths of the millions of peasants involved to warrant an investigation.

As such, an important question to address would be “ To what extent was the Ukrainian famine of 1932 a deliberate act of genocide against the Ukrainian people?” This essay shall argue in favor of a synthesis of the two arguments, accepting that there was indeed a catastrophic crop failure in Ukraine at the time, but also that the subsequent actions of the Stalin points to an unequivocal attempt to decimate the peasantry. This essay will attempt to do this by explaining the motivations that Stalin may have had to institute genocide against the Ukrainian people, and show how his policies and actions reflected the intent to use the crop failure to his own ends.

This essay will also examine the origins, purposes, values, as well as limitations of various sources dealing with the Holodomor, in an attempt to assess their suitability for use as evidence.

## Introduction

Despite continual denials on the part of the Soviet Union and its modern derivative, the Russian Federation, it is now generally accepted that in the years 1932 to 1933, several million peasants died as a result of Soviet agricultural policies, including collectivization and forced seizure of crops, [1]as well as extremely harsh laws. The famine was exacerbated by the forced deportation of millions of peasants that took place during the same time period.[2]This period of famine became known as the Holodomor, Ukrainian for “ death by starvation”. The exact figures with regards to fatalities due to the famine are hard to pin down, due in no small part to the Soviet Union’s suppression of census figures. 1991 saw the release of the 1937 census, which shed some light on the possible range of fatalities of the time. The figures seem to suggest that the number of victims of the famine in 1933 were in the region of 7. 2-8. 1 million;[3]this figure however, does not take into account famine victims of 1932 and 1934. The generally held view in many historical texts is that the famine was avoidable, and it was instead the actions of the Soviet leadership that led to the widespread devastation.[4]

The exact reasons for the famine are a subject of scholarly debate. The first major argument is that of the famine as having been deliberately engineered with the intention of committing genocide against the Ukrainian people from the very onset. This view was raised by esteemed Holodomor historian Robert Conquest in his 1987 work, *Harvest of Sorrow*; the primary evidence for such an argument includes the fact that official Soviet statistics suggest that the grain harvest of 1932 was not abnormally low, and would have

readily fed the population if not for government intervention.[5] Proponents also point to the harsh laws enacted that suggested a deliberate attempt to cause widespread hunger, including the “ five ears law”, which called for the execution or ten-year imprisonment at best, of any hungry person who stole more than a few ears of corn.[6]

However, that view has been countered by historians who see the famine as a completely unforeseen side effect of the collectivization process, caused primarily by the drought of 1931 and poor harvest of 1932. The primary proponent of this view is Dr Mark B. Tauger, who suggests that the classification of the famine as a deliberate act of genocide is down to misinterpretations and factual inaccuracies with regards to the officially released soviet data. Tauger also cites inconsistencies in the official grain harvest statistics of the 1930s and evidence that points towards the unreliability of these statistics.[7]

In light of the evidence raised by both camps, there remains the important question “ To what extent was the Ukrainian famine of 1932 a deliberate act of genocide against the Ukrainian people?” It is clear that there exists room for a synthesis of the two arguments, combining the various pieces of evidence that corroborate with each other in order to piece together a picture of the true nature of events. It is thus argued that the famine was an unexpected as well as undesirable outcome of the industrialization and collectivization process.[8] However, while there was no conscious decision on the part of Stalin to have the Ukrainian populace intentionally starved, and the intention when enacting the collectivization policy was by no means to enact a policy of starvation, Stalin was still indeed guilty of failing to take <https://assignbuster.com/review-of-the-holodomor-event-in-ukraine-history-essay/>

appropriate action to stop the famine from occurring,[9]and sufficient evidence exists to suggest that Stalin's later policy reflected his intention to use the already widespread starvation as a tool to further his own agendas. [10]Thus, unintentional as the famine might have been, the fact "[does] not at all absolve Stalin from responsibility for the famine. His policies towards the peasants were ruthless and brutal".[11]This view has been proposed by historians R. W. Davies and Stephen Wheatcroft in *The Years of Hunger*, and supported in part by Michael Ellman,[12]

## **The 'Accidental' Famine**

Recent scholarship tends to disagree with the notion that Soviet policies were engineered specifically to deal a mortal blow to the Ukrainian peasantry. Ellman, as well as Davies and Wheatcroft, point to the fact that the famine was caused mainly by Stalin's decision to rapidly industrialize the nation by means of tribute from the peasantry,[13]as well as two successive bad harvests of 1931 and 1932. They also point to the fact that foolish policy, for example, neglect of agricultural techniques such as crop rotation, as well as the decision to continue grain export and refuse the import of grain exacerbated the problem. However, it is difficult to conclude that these were intentionally designed to kill.[14]

To begin with, it is important to remember that policy makes in the Soviet Union of the time had little knowledge of agricultural practice, and often over-optimistic about the effects of their own policies.[15]Furthermore, the refusal to import grain had deeply ideological roots. In a time of great anti-communist sentiment around the world, Stalin was keen to ensure that he and his nation continued to project strength and power. Stalin himself in <https://assignbuster.com/review-of-the-holodomor-event-in-ukraine-history-essay/>

1934 said, “ The import of grain now, when abroad they are shouting about the shortage of grain in the USSR, might produce a political minus”.[16]

As such, it can be seen that both the grain procurement policies as well as refusal of foreign import are not necessarily evidence of an active plot to destroy the Ukrainian peasantry. There exists strong evidence to suggest that the starvation was not a planned event, and were instead due to the implementation of policies without proper consideration of their impact. It must be noted though, that Stalin viewed the starving as ‘ idlers’ and ‘ class enemies’,[17]and in his speech delivered at the midst of the famine in 1933, Stalin quoted Lenin by saying “ He who does not work, neither shall he eat”. [18]These reflect the fact that although he had not necessarily planned the famine, he did not view the dying as worthy of aid, and this lends support to the argument that the famine, although unintentional, still placed fault in the hands of Stalin due to his refusal to take action in preventing it.

## **The Poor Harvests**

The view of the famine as an intentional act of genocide rests firmly on the belief that the agricultural yield of the time was not particularly bad. This view was regarded as true for many decades, but historian Dr. Mark B. Tauger, in his journal article published in the Spring 1991 issue of the Slavic Review, suggests that this argument overlooks inconsistencies between official grain harvest statistics for 1930 and the evidence of famine, as well as evidence that these sources are unreliable.[19]

The strict control of peasant movement through the internal passport system was cited by Conquest and others as evidence of the Soviet policy-makers

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keeping the Ukrainian peasants attached to the land, in much the same way traditional serfdom did.[20] Introduced in 1932, the passport system excluded peasants, which meant that the rural agricultural population – who were hit worst by the famine – was unable to leave the countryside without official permission.[21]

However, Tauger asserts that thousands of peasants fled not only from Ukraine, but also from Kuban, the Urals and the Volga basin, among others areas, and that the passport mechanism was put in place to control labor movement and prevent famine stricken areas from being further threatened by depletion of labour.[22]

In response to Conquest's assertion that the grain harvests of the early 1930s were not significantly low, Tauger cites "new Soviet archival data" which shows that the 1932 harvests were much smaller than assumed, and worsened the food shortages that were already widespread by 1931.

[23]Tauger also references R. W. Davies' review of Harvest of Sorrow, which questions Conquest's "uncritical use of evidence and bias".[24]

This viewpoint was written with the intention of debunking the "genocide myth" as put forth by Conquest in Harvest of Sorrow. It does this by pointing out the questionable nature of Conquest's statistical data as well as questioning the assumption that policies at the time were directed only at Ukraine in an effort to murder its people. The case for re-evaluation of the genocide theory was convincing enough that Conquest himself later wrote that he no longer held the view that Stalin deliberately engineered the famine of 1933.[25]

However, Tauger's work may not necessarily be expanded upon enough to be considered an argument on its own. Tauger himself states that the Soviet regime was responsible for the deprivation and suffering of the Soviet populace in the early 1930s. He also goes on to suggest that "the data presented here should contribute to a reevaluation not only of the famine, but also of the Soviet economy", [26] and not necessarily as a view unto its own.

The purpose of Tauger's work was to serve as a counter to Conquest's work. Thus, there are several points that Tauger's work does not cover, which is a limitation to the source. Firstly, the comments of Stalin and various other officials are completely ignored, as is the evidence that Stalin sought to wage class war on the Kulaks. Also, the occurrence of mass deportations, as well as the planned deportation of millions of other peasants is not mentioned. Policies such as the five ears law are also ignored. These issues are important when establishing the causality of the famine, as they are vital indicators of intent on the part of the Soviet leadership to cause harm to the peasantry, whether Ukrainian or otherwise.

Having been written some years after Conquest's works, the source is valuable as it takes into account new information that often serves to counter Conquest's arguments. Thus, it is necessary to gather evidence from both ends of the spectrum in order to establish an argument that takes into account all the various viewpoints.



## **Stalin's Motivations to Kill**

When addressing the motivations that Stalin may have had for inducing an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people, it is important to consider the social and political changes that were happening at the time. Early Bolshevik leaders broke down the shadow of the Tsar and Russian Imperialism by assisting the former subjects of the Russian Empire in rebuilding their own national identity and cultures.[27] This was by no means due to generosity of spirit or goodwill, and was instead necessitated by the political climate of the time, due to widespread dissatisfaction among the non-Russian peasants in wide areas of the Soviet Union.[28]

This rebuilding of national identity had grown in strength especially in the Ukraine, due in no small part to the fact that the 30 million Ukrainians living there were the largest single non-Russian national group in the Soviet Union, several times larger than any other.[29] The policy of Ukrainisation, as it was called, thus went further in Ukraine than it had done in any other state of the Soviet Union. This outpouring of nationalism would not go unnoticed. Stalin, in a message to Kaganovich in 11th August 1932 said: " If we don't make an effort now to improve the situation in Ukraine we may lose Ukraine", suggesting that he saw a danger that the growing nationalism would lead to a rise in counter-revolutionaries.[30]

This rise in nationalism provides compelling evidence to suggest that Stalin did indeed have motivation to enact a policy of genocide against the Ukrainian populace. The policies of indigenization that had dominated the peasantry for the last few years largely went hand-in-hand with Lenin's New Economic Policy, and together were designed to keep the peasantry's

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nationalist aspirations placated in order to satisfy Russia's economic needs.

[31]With Stalin's emergence as the victor in the succession struggle however, came a radical reversal of policies. Stalin had in 1928 done away with the New Economic Policy, and thus it would not have been a great step for him to do away with the indigenization policies. One of the key objectives of this, as put forth by Mace, was " economic and social transformation designed to destroy native society and substitute a social system susceptible of control by Moscow".[32]Further evidence comes from the fact that the time of the famine coincided with non-Russian national self-assertion being labeled as bourgeois nationalism, and suppressed.[33]

As such, the motivation for Stalin to want to enact a policy of enforced starvation against the Ukrainian populace is clear to see. The threat that Nationalism presented was not lost on Stalin, and his need to gain control over all aspects of the peasantry certainly suggests that an act of genocide intended to enforce obedience and crush the intelligentsia would not be beyond Stalin. As Ellman puts it:

" There would be nothing surprising or out of character about Stalin's use of starvation. Stalin explicitly stated that he was engaged in a ' war' [with the peasantry]...and in a war one aims to kill or otherwise overcome one's enemies".[34]

At the same time, Leninism, and by extension Stalinism, viewed the peasantry with distaste, seeing them as petty property owners.[35]Ukraine had for a long time been viewed as the " breadbasket of Europe", a name earned due to its rich soil and largely peasant population.[36]These two

factors combine to form a plausible explanation for why Stalin would instigate starvation in Ukraine.

## **Policies Enacted**

Next this essay shall consider Stalin's actions. Arguments for the case of genocide typically cite two key points. First, the decision to continue exporting and seizing grain even in the midst of widespread starvation, and second, preventing the movement of peasantry out of affected areas. Another major point to consider is the deportation of peasants, even during the period of famine.

Many historians make the case that actual productivity during the period was not overly low. One figure cited was an overall production fall of 9%, [37]which although substantial, was not enough to directly cause the deaths of millions of people. So then, what was the cause? Many point to the aggressive procurement policies that were put into place at the time. In 1932, just when it was beginning to become clear that Ukraine was facing mass starvation, Stalin began to implement policies that greatly affected the Ukrainian people.

Despite falling production, Stalin's top assistants announced that Ukraine's quotas for bread grain would remain unchanged from the previous year. [38]Naturally, the harvest was unable to meet the production quotas, but Ukrainian appeals for an end to the grain seizures were to no avail, and throughout the fall of 1932, bread was seized from farmers, and farms that met their quotas were given supplementary quotas to make up for shortfalls elsewhere.[39]Stalin even ordered " the seizure of even the seed that had

been put aside for spring planting”.[40]President Mikhail Kalinin went so far as to claim that “ only degraded disintegrating classes can produce such cynical elements” in reference to the Ukrainian Politburo’s pleas for contributions to the starving.[41]

Another major piece of evidence pointing to the possible intent of the politburo to commit an act of genocide is that of the mass deportation plans. In 1933, plans were drafted for the deportation of 2 million Kulaks.[42]There is little doubt that such massive deportations would have severely impacted Ukraine’s ability to continue producing the substantial amounts of grain that were required of it. However, to suggest that the planned deportation of the Ukrainian peasantry was intended to induce widespread starvation would be a fallacy. Indeed, by 1933, the roots of famine had already taken hold. [43]Instead, it is likely that the deportations were instead a response to what Stalin saw as “ class enemies” and “ idlers”[44]who were attempting to sabotage the Soviet rule by inducing grain shortages.[45]

## **The Complete Picture**

By looking at the evidence shown, and also taking into account the strengths as well as limitations of the various historical arguments concerning the nature of the Holodomor, we can argue that although the initial aim of the collectivization policy was not to starve the peasantry,[46]Stalin did make use of the famine in order to achieve his other objectives.[47]

There exists significant scholarship that attests to the unforeseen and undesired[48]nature of the famines of 1931 and 1932. Graziosi argues that “ Stalin, at a certain moment decided to use hunger to break the peasants’

opposition to collectivisation”, and that “ even when he did not initiate something willfully, was always very quick to take advantage, of ‘ spontaneous’ events”, drawing parallels to the Kirov assassination.[49]

So then, if the introduction of collectivized farming was not to blame for the deaths, what was? There are several key factors involved: Firstly, the two successive bad harvests of 1931 and 1932; secondly, the politburo’s general ignorance of agricultural practices, leading to the disastrous implementation of agricultural policy. Thirdly, Stalin’s desire to punish the peasants for what he perceived as their counter-revolutionary struggle, and finally, Stalin’s arguable intention to make use of the famine as a cost-effective means of decimating and exerting ultimate control over the peasantry.

Thus it can be seen that this argument takes into account two stages, the first addressing the roots of the famine, and the second dealing with the reaction of the Soviet leadership to the situation.

In contrast to the view that the harvests of 1931 and 1932 were more than sufficient to feed to population, it is arguable that the harvests were so poor that famine eventually became an inevitable outcome. In 1932, the Soviet leadership admitted that there had been crop failure in parts of the Volga Basin and Asiatic Russia,[50]and the harvest was sufficiently bad that there were insufficient stocks to cover urban and rural food supplies, seed and export.[51]The need for grain led to withdrawals from the state stockpiles Nepfond and Mobfond, which started out with 2 million tons in January 1932, and was left with only 0. 641 million tons by July.[52]

In order to fully understand the impact of the crop failures, the administrative policy of the time must be studied. First and foremost, one must remember that the Soviet leadership, to a substantial extent, knew very little of agricultural policy making.[53] This led to the implementation of practices that undoubtedly exacerbated the problem of the already poor harvests. One vital example is that of the methods by which the Soviet leadership arrived at their numerical data. The regime's calculation of grain harvests was based not on actual production values;[54] instead, a statistical method known as "biological yield" was used to calculate a pre-harvest estimate of yield, which was then taken as the actual production value.[55]

The failure to use properly gathered statistics led to many gross miscalculations that placed enormous strain on the production process. For instance, the grain utilization plan for 1932/1933 - at a time when Ukraine was already on the verge of mass starvation,[56] saw a planned reduction in grain export by 3 million tons. However, grain collection fell by 4 million tons, leaving a net fall in grain stocks of 1 million tons.[57]

It can thus be seen that the extent to which the harvests of 1931-33 were in decline was arguably lost on the Soviet leadership. Efforts were made to adjust grain procurement quotas to match the fall in production, with the Politburo seen to have at least attempted to reduce quotas in response to the falling harvests.[58] However, the Politburo at the same time planned to in fact increase the total state stockpile of grain from 1.36 million tons in July 1932 to 2.867 million tons in July 1933,[59] a response to the alarming fall in the Nefond and Mobfond stockpiles in July 1932. These counter-intuitive and contradictory policies seem to point towards the fact that the <https://assignbuster.com/review-of-the-holodomor-event-in-ukraine-history-essay/>

Politburo as an agricultural policy-making body was unable to properly grasp both the extent of the growing famine (caused by unfavourable weather), as well as the impact of their actions, which they implemented over-zealously and with over-optimism about the effects (which further strained the amount of harvest left for the rural populace).

However, the end of 1932 began to see a shift in policy that can be deemed substantial enough to suggest that Stalin had begun to use the opportunity that the famine presented as a means to advance his own ulterior motives. There exists significant evidence to suggest that Stalin had begun to see the famine as a means by which he would exact revenge on the peasantry, as well as force their subservience through fear. Stalin, in a correspondence with Sholokhov, said:

“ The esteemed grain growers of your region (and not only your region) carried out a sit- down strike (sabotage!) and would not have minded leaving the workers and the Red Army without bread. The fact that the sabotage was quiet and apparently harmless (bloodless) does not alter the fact that the esteemed grain growers were basically waging a “ quiet” war against Soviet power. A war by starvation (voina na izmor), dear com. Sholokhov...”[60]

Along the same lines, Stalin condemned members of the peasantry as “ class enemies” and “ idlers”, and felt that they were the engineers of the famine. As a primary source, it is extremely valuable as it shows how Stalin believed that the famines were the direct result of an active plot to undermine “ the Soviet way”, which explains why he felt the need to “ finish off” the Kulaks, who had been beaten but were still very much involved in the perceived “

class struggle”.<sup>[61]</sup> However, as the correspondence was written with the purpose of pushing the blame of the starvation away from the Politburo’s agricultural policy and towards the peasants, it is limited as the situation described by Stalin may have been subject to exaggerations and thus, not fully representative of historical events.

Still, this perceived need to take revenge on the peasants for their counter-revolutionary struggle went hand in hand with Stalin’s other motives, namely, the liquidation of the kulak as a class, and to render the peasantry ultimately subservient to the will of Stalin.

At the beginning of 1933, plans were drawn up for the mass deportation of Ukrainian peasantry. At first 3 million, then reduced to 2 million people, with the destinations being Kazakhstan and West Siberia. However, the estimated cost of such a massive project was put at 1.4 billion roubles, a substantial sum that the Politburo was unwilling to fork out.<sup>[62]</sup> It was around this time that Stalin began to see the mass starvat