

Stanislav Kulchytsky

The Famine of 1932–1933 in Ukraine. An Anatomy of the Holodomor

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The Holodomor, or killing by famine, in Ukraine was a devastating event which, as Ukrainians rightly point out, has long been neglected by the world owing to Moscow's disinformation. When the Soviet Union collapsed, information on the famine became available from the formerly secret archives in Russia and Ukraine and Moscow was forced to acknowledge the persistence of famine in the Soviet Union in 1932–1933. Even so Moscow continues to this day to deny that the famine targeted Ukraine. As a result, angry voices of Ukrainians have become ever louder, demanding recognition from the world that the Holodomor was a Ukrainian Holocaust. The view of the Holodomor as a Ukrainian ethnic genocide is deeply divisive not only for Ukrainian and Russian historians but also for historians in the West.

Stanislaw Kulchytsky, a foremost historian of Ukrainian history in the Soviet period, presents in this book a lucid account of why Moscow's denial is unbelievable, detailing the factors that made the famine in Ukraine different from the famine that took place simultaneously elsewhere in the Soviet Union. This is one of the most honest and forceful accounts given by a Ukrainian historian. Kulchytsky does not shy away from the three factors that skeptics of the Holodomor as a Ukrainian genocide use in their arguments: (1) that the Soviet Union not only drastically curtailed grain export but even secretly imported grain from abroad at the time; (2) that there is no documentary proof showing Moscow's genocidal intention; (3) that Moscow authorized series of secret deliveries of food and seeds to the famine areas of Ukraine (and elsewhere).

Kulchytsky does not dwell on the first factor. He seems to deem it non-critical, because Moscow did not stop the export of grain altogether in spite of the famine. He might have added that the grain purchased abroad was not given to Ukraine. Kulchytsky does dwell on the second factor. He, along with many other historians, have uncovered numerous documents which demonstrate Stalin's murderous intent to take grain and other foodstuffs from the peasantry. The title of Chapter 5, "The 'Crushing Blow'" is taken from Stalin's speech in which he told the party to "respond to the blow struck by these individual collective farmers and collective farms with a crushing blow of their own" (p. 97). Kulchytsky correctly notes that this "crushing blow" was not directed against Ukraine alone, but first and foremost against Ukraine and the kindred Kuban. The famine did affect the entire country. But what distinguishes Ukraine and the Kuban from the rest of the country is the infliction of terror by famine: From January 1933, Moscow began to confiscate not merely grain (little of which was left in any case) but any and all food from the peasantry in Ukraine and the Kuban. Moreover, a physical blockade was imposed on the famished people who were prevented from seeking food outside Ukraine and the Kuban. The physical blockade was augmented by an information blockade which prohibited any mention of famine. Stalin's policy was not a procurement operation but a terror operation, "mass murder – planned in advance and well organized" (p. 116), the result of which is a "historically unprecedented genocidal crime" (p. 135).

Kulchytsky admits that there is no documentary evidence to show that all food was confiscated for the purpose of annihilation of the population or that the policy of confiscating all foodstuffs was carried out in all of Ukraine and the Kuban. Yet this does not matter, he suggests, because in essence Moscow's policy meant mass murder and those who carried it out understood it as such. Lack of documentation, in any case, does not mean that relevant documents do not exist somewhere deep in Moscow's secret archives. Like other dictators, Stalin, too, may well have chosen not to leave incriminating evidence in writing.

Kulchytsky's discussion of the third factor is less convincing. Obviously concerned about the negative effect of the famine on the sowing campaign, Moscow adopted a series of *secret* resolutions, between February and July 1933, to extend food loans and aid to the famished regions, and the plan was over-fulfilled, with more than eighty percent destined for Ukraine and the Northern Caucasus. The aid, Kulchytsky says, "took on considerable proportions" (143). Inexplicably, however, Kulchytsky states that this "rescue operation took place to much fanfare" (p. 122). He emphasizes the information blockade imposed by Moscow, and then seems to negate it by stating that Moscow gave "food aid to the starving" and publicized it in the mass media (p. 143). In fact, these were secret operations without fanfare. Other secret resolutions extended seed loans and aid to the famished

regions at the same time. A more complex analysis is needed here to explain the interplay of secrecy and publicity in these matters – if such interplay did take place.

Unlike many other historians, Kulchytsky does not emphasize the threat of Ukrainian separatism at the time of the famine. He explicitly states: “In all likelihood, the Kremlin overestimated rather than underestimated the threat of Ukrainian separatism” (p. 95). In fact, Moscow did not seem to be overly concerned with this threat, notwithstanding its rhetoric. The threat of separatism makes sense only in connection with threats from abroad (particularly from Poland and to a lesser extent Germany). In this sense, the external or international factors of the time provide an important backdrop to Moscow’s decision-making. Alas, this is absent in the present book.

One also wishes Kulchytsky addressed other relevant issues. There is little comparison with the Kazakh famine, for example, which proportionately speaking killed more people than that in Ukraine. He also mentions that between 1926 and 1937 Saratov Province (an offshoot of the old Lower Volga region) in Russia underwent a far sharper demographic decline than did Ukraine (p. 132). What this actually means is not adequately explained.

It is unlikely that Kulchytsky will convince skeptics that the Ukrainian famine was a Ukrainian ethnic genocide. Nevertheless, he presents his argument forcefully by taking up issues most proponents of the Ukrainian genocide choose to ignore. In that alone, this is a commendable book. It represents the distillation of thirty years of distinguished work by Kulchytsky, and comes with a helpful account of Kulchytsky’s academic career by Bohdan Klid that spans more than half a century. The book also includes vivid photographs of the famine victims taken by an Austrian engineer working in Kharkiv at the time (Alexander Wienerberger). The present book is concise and readable and should be read widely by specialists and non-specialists alike.

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