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Was the Ukrainian famine of 1932–1933 genocide?

YAROSLAV BILINSKY

A distinguished Holocaust scholar, Michael R. Marrus, in his foreword to a 1988 book *The Foreign Office and the Famine: British Documents on Ukraine and the Great Famine of 1932–1933* said: "In my view, formal classification of the famine [as a genocidal attack upon Ukrainians] matters less at this point than the appreciation of the limitless cruelty and anguish it entailed" (Marrus, 1988, p xv). Some 10 years after Ukraine has become independent, I would respectfully disagree. For both intellectual and political reasons it does matter whether the man-made Soviet famine was a central act in a campaign of genocide, or whether it was designed to simply cow Ukrainian peasants into submission, drive them into the collectives and ensure a steady supply of grain for Soviet industrialization. There is, to be sure, honest disagreement in the literature on the Ukrainian famine whether it was genocidal or not. I, however, would argue that the preponderance of the evidence shows that it was, even if a more restrictive definition of genocide be adopted as, for instance, that by Henry R. Huttenbach, to wit: "Genocide is the destruction of a specific group within a given national or even international population. ... Genocide is any act that puts the very existence of a group in jeopardy" (Huttenbach, 1988, pp 295, 297). To help resolve the problem, a review of the literature might be in order.

I

The first book, edited by Roman Serbyn and Bohdan Krawchenko, which is based on a 1983 conference held at the Université du Quebec at Montreal, in essence does not find that the man-made famine of 1932–1933 was genocidal (Serbyn and Krawchenko, 1986), even though at least one contributor, in the lead-contribution, implicitly suggested that it be so designated. James E. Mace, a Ukrainian historian of American-Irish origin wrote:

> For the Ukrainians the famine must be understood *as the most terrible part of a consistent policy* carried out against them: the destruction of their cultural and spiritual elite which began with the trial of the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine, the destruction of the official Ukrainian wing of the Communist Party, and the destruction of their social basis in the countryside. Against them the famine seems to have been designed *as part of a campaign to destroy them as a political factor and as a social organism.* (Mace, 1986, p 12; emphasis added)

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Mace's conclusion begs the question: is this not a policy of genocide?

The main reason why the Serbyn–Krawchenko volume does not find that the famine was genocidal appears to lie in their acceptance of the conceptual scheme of Holocaust scholars Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, who have become "increasingly uncomfortable" with the term genocide, as coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944 and particularly with the political use—and abuse—to which it has been put (Chalk and Jonassohn, 1986, p 179). They prefer the term "mass extermination" and emphasize that there must be an "*intent* to destroy a whole group of people" (ibid, p 181; emphasis in original). Leaving aside the unfortunate nuance contained in the term "extermination," which perfectly captures the thinking of a Hitler or a Stalin, to whom hostile human beings were just "vermin," and granted that in their later book Chalk and Jonassohn changed their definition of genocide to "one-sided mass killing," which is less insulting to the victims (Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990, p 23), their 1986 position in denying genocidal character to the Ukrainian famine is arguably a reasonable one. In their words:

> Considering the inaccessibility of the archives in the USSR, it will probably remain impossible to document the intent of the perpetrator. But whatever the actual intent, it would have been impossible to implement the mass extermination of the entire Ukrainian population. *In terms of our typology, we think that the case of the Ukrainian famine is a rather late occurrence of type two, where the intent is to terrorize a people conquered by a colonizing power.* It seems to have achieved this aim, albeit in enormous cost in human lives and suffering. (Chalk and Jonassohn, 1986, p 189; emphasis added)

Another book, a solid documentary study edited by Canadian poet, translator and publicist Marco Carynnyk, Canadian geographer Lubomyr Y. Luciuk, and American political scientist Bohdan S. Kordan, with the brief, but important foreword by Marrus, documents with persuasive detail what the British Foreign Office knew about the Ukrainian famine and when. It avoids, however, except in the foreword, any explicit discussion whether the famine was genocidal. Even worse, *by implication*, the book presents in its long introduction the economic factor as the decisive one, without weighing possible alternative interpretations. The last operative sentence of the substantive introduction, before the table on the "Rates of Decline in the Rural Female Cohort of 1929–1933" and before the technical remarks and acknowledgments, reads:

> ... The areas of greatest [demographic] decline coincide with the fertile chernozem belt. The famine was less severe in the podzolized soil regions of the forest steppe, the intrazonal regions and the chestnut soil regions along the Black Sea. *This suggests that the famine was the result of a decision to extract from the most fertile regions of Ukraine and the North Caucasus the maximum amount of grain in order to finance the industrialization.* The famine, in other words, was not a natural phenomenon but *a politically engineered cataclysm.* (Carynnyk *et al.*, 1988, p xlix; emphasis added)

What about the *political* content of that "politically engineered cataclysm"?

Only in the foreword does Marrus raise and partly answer the question. He graciously allows that some horrified witnesses suggest that it was genocide of

Ukrainians. He even points to a "venomous detestation of Ukrainians among Communist party officials in Moscow at the time [of the famine]" (Marrus, 1988, p xv). He then hints that he himself would not consider the famine genocidal, pending "a conclusive evaluation of motivations ... of the Soviet officials who presided over this catastrophe." That would call "for a release of materials in Soviet archives—if that ever is to happen" (ibid). But then he diplomatically turns the question aside by saying that the presentation of the evidence of the famine at the time of writing (1988) was more important than its "formal classification" (ibid).

A smaller preceding volume by Luciuk and Kordan, with a foreword by Hugh A. Macdonald, deals with American and British documents on the "Ukrainian Question" from 1938 to 1951, that is, not directly with the famine. But in the introductory material, the two editors could have talked about the nature of what they call the "Great Famine of 1932–1933," but do not. Instead, they quickly turn to the pale euphemism of "denationalization in Soviet Ukraine," which "paralleled to a lesser [*sic*] degree developments in Polish East Galicia ..." (Luciuk and Kordan, 1987, p 3).

On the other hand the famine is evaluated differently—as genocide—in the small 1983 volume by the Ukrainian scholar and publicist Vasyl Hryshko (Hryshko, 1983), the magisterial work by Robert Conquest (Conquest, 1986), and the publications of the US Commission on the Ukraine Famine ([US] Commission on the Ukraine Famine, 1988, 1990). Hryshko's slim volume, edited and translated by Marco Carynnyk, above all, wants to pay tribute to the victims of 1932–1933 on the fiftieth anniversary of the famine. It is also another appeal to the conscience of the West. But in his documentation and his arguments, Hryshko in some ways anticipates the broader approach by Conquest.

Hryshko not only finds that genocide, in which more than six million Ukrainians perished, had been committed in terms of the UN General Assembly resolution of December 11, 1946, but that during the discussions of genocide in the General Assembly the Soviet representatives even proposed to include the linguistic and cultural aspects (what I would call cultural genocide) (Hryshko, 1983, pp vii, 1–2). Not only was collectivization pushed faster and more ruthlessly in Ukraine than in Russia, in Ukraine it was linked to the persecution of Ukrainian elites. "In Russia, the collectivization was limited to the liquidation of the peasantry as a social class independent of the state. *In Ukraine, however, it was the starting point for the liquidation of the Ukrainian national question as such, based on the destruction of the peasantry as the principal source of Ukrainian nationalism*" (ibid, p 114; emphasis added). Hryshko and Conquest after him allude to what I would call "the gun that Stalin fired," more of which later in this article (Hryshko, 1983, p 66; Conquest, 1986, p 219). Hryshko's treatise is also very interesting in that he argues that Brezhnev continued Stalin's genocide on a less murderous scale:

> The contemporary policy of "merging" the non-Russian peoples of the USSR on the basis of the "international" Russian language, which amounts to eliminating them through

> merciless Russification, makes clear, as never before, the aim of Moscow's genocide in 1933 and the consequences of that genocide for Ukraine. In the present Ukrainian situation in the USSR *we have nothing less than a continuation and intensification [?] of the nationalities course that Stalin applied so savagely to Ukraine in 1933.* (Hryshko, 1983, p 117; emphasis added.)

Robert Conquest, the British-born poet, master historian and political analyst, has entitled his minor masterpiece *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror Famine.* There is even no entry for genocide in the index of the book. Does he imply with Serbyn–Kravchenko and Chalk–Jonassohn that the Ukrainian famine had been either *sui generis* or an effort to "create terror"? Not really. At the very end of Chapter 13 "A land laid waste," there is a brief—but somewhat inconclusive—discussion of genocide, as defined by Articles I and II of the Genocide Convention, which Conquest cites in full without, however, analyzing what particular clauses apply to the Ukraine famine. Conquest then writes: "It certainly appears that a charge of genocide lies against the Soviet Union for its actions in the Ukraine. Such, at least, was the view of Professor Rafael Lemkin who drafted the Convention." The substantiating note is an account in *The New York Times* about a manifestation of Ukrainian-Americans in September 1953 to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the famine, mentioning that Dr. Lemkin was a featured speaker at the gathering. Conquest continues in a somewhat puzzling vein, possibly anticipating the statement by Professor Marrus: "But whether these events are to be *formally defined as genocide is scarcely the point [?].* It would hardly be denied that a crime had been committed against the Ukrainian nation; and whether in the execution cellars, the forced labor camps, or the starving villages, crime after crime against the millions of individuals forming that nation." The chapter ends with a part-ironical, part-polemical counterpoint: "The *Large Soviet Encyclopaedia* has an article on 'Genocide,' which it characterizes as an 'offshoot of decaying imperialism'" (Conquest, 1986, pp 272–273; emphasis added).

It is difficult to avoid the impression that Conquest was not particularly concerned with elucidating whether the famine could formally be defined as genocide, especially given the rhetorical abuse of the term. His main concern was to establish the facts. But through poetic allusion, the testimony of witnesses who had analyzed genocide and through somewhat understated historical analysis Conquest strongly implied that the famine was genocidal. The two opening paragraphs of the book are particularly effective in linking the terror-famine to the Holocaust:

> Fifty years ago as I write these words, the Ukraine and the Ukrainian, Cossack and other areas to its east—a great stretch of territory with some forty million inhabitants—was like one vast Belsen. A quarter of the rural population, men women and children, lay dead and dying, the rest in various stages of debilitation with no strength to bury their families or neighbors. At the same time (as at Belsen), well-fed squads of police or party officials supervised the victims.
>
> This was the climax of the "revolution from above," as Stalin put it, in which he and his

> associates crushed two elements seen as irremediably hostile to the regime: the peasantry of the USSR as a whole, and the Ukrainian nation. (Conquest, 1986, p 3; emphasis added.)

As did Hryshko, Conquest cites the late Jewish Ukrainian writer and Holocaust researcher Vasily Grossman (Conquest, 1986, p 9 and especially pp 129, 286), though Grossman describes both the preceding de-kulakization (deportation of kulaks) and the terror-famine itself. Most clearly in Chapter 11 ("Assault on the Ukraine, 1930–32"), Conquest links the famine of 1932–1933, to the preceding wholesale attacks on the Ukrainian intelligentsia and, in a tantalizing way, alludes to Stalin's "ideas about the connection between nationality and the peasantry" (ibid, pp 217–224, esp. p 219), of which more later in this article. Did Conquest find that the famine was genocide? Yes, but it was more by allusion and implication than by extended analysis, despite his three explicit paragraphs on pp 272–273.

Conquest's collaborator and later Staff Director of the US Commission on the Ukraine Famine, James E. Mace, has repeatedly, though not exhaustively, addressed himself to the question whether the Ukraine famine was genocidal. For instance, in his well-known article in *Problems of Communism*, he wrote: "... The famine seemed to represent a means used by Stalin to impose a 'final solution' on the most pressing nationality problem in the Soviet Union. According to internationally accepted definitions [such as the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide], this constitutes an act of genocide" (Mace, 1984b, p 37). In the same article, Mace calculates the number of victims as "almost 7.5 million Ukrainians" (Mace, 1984b, p 39). This is also included in the authoritative Executive Summary of the Report of the US Commission on the Ukraine Famine to Congress. The Commission accepted the conclusion that "one or more of the actions specified in the Genocide Convention was taken against the Ukrainians *in order to destroy a substantial part of the Ukrainian people and thus to neutralize them politically in the Soviet Union*" ([US] Commission on the Ukraine Famine, 1988, p xxiii [emphasis added], see also point 16 on p vii). The Commission, however, is more cautious in assessing the precise number of victims: there are "millions" of them ... " Various scholars have given estimates ranging from three million to over 8,000,000 Ukrainians who perished in the Famine" ([US] Commission on the Ukraine Famine, 1988, pp vi [point 2], ix). For a more nuanced view of Mace, in the context of genocide studies, we have to turn to an earlier piece of his. At the 1982 International Conference on the Holocaust and genocide, Mace wrote:

> What Ukrainians call shtuchnyi holod (the man-made famine) or even the Ukrainian holocaust claimed an estimated five to seven million lives. Purely in terms of mortality, it was thus of the same order of magnitude as the Jewish Holocaust. It was, however, a very different kind of genocide *in that it was neither motivated by any quest for racial purity, nor was it an attempt to physically murder every single Ukrainian. The purpose, insofar as we may discern it, was to destroy the Ukrainian nation as a political factor and social organism, a goal which could be attained far short of complete extermination.* (Mace, 1984a, p 67; underlined text in the original, italics added for emphasis.)

Writing in 1988 by himself, Mace repeats some of his earlier reservations against calling the famine genocidal. He writes: "The famine of 1932–33 poses particular problems from the standpoint of internationally accepted definitions of genocide, since *its focus was geographic, rather than discriminatory against specific groups within a given area, and it was clearly not an attempt to destroy all members of a given group*" (Mace, 1988, p 117; emphasis added). The genocidal nature of the famine, according to him, must be inferred from the "clarity with which it was geographically focussed against areas containing target populations" and the combination of particularly harsh nationality policies against the Ukrainian target group (ibid). The area was clearly limited to the ethnically mixed Kuban region in the Northern Caucasus and all of Ukraine. In commenting on a much earlier version of this article, Robert Conquest shared with the author a top secret instruction by Party Central Committee Secretary Stalin and Soviet Prime Minister Molotov of January 22, 1933, in which the Kuban and all of Ukraine were to be subjected to a strict blockade and all peasants were to be prevented by the secret police from travelling into neighboring areas in search of food. The peasants' efforts to leave the Kuban and Ukraine were allegedly organized by "enemies of the Soviet authority, by Social Revolutionaries and Polish agents with the purpose of conducting agitation 'by means of peasants' against the collective farms and Soviet authority in general in the northern districts of the USSR." The instruction was ominous in blaming the local party, Soviet and secret police organs for not noticing "that counter-revolutionary conspiracy in the previous year [1932]." It was as if war had been declared against the Kuban region and all of Ukraine, but not against the neighboring Volga region and against Byelorus.

II

I believe that the famine clearly fits the somewhat loose UN Genocide Convention. Lyman H. Legters put it best in his contribution at the 1982 International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide, when he wrote:

> ... From Lemkin's campaign forward, and including the final phrasing of the Genocide Convention, the crime in question is a crime against identifiable groups—national, ethnic, religious—of sufficient scope and import as to threaten the survival of that group in recognizable form. (I take this to be the intended implication of the ambiguous "in whole or in part" of the Convention ...) (Legters, 1984, p 62)

The famine would also fit the narrower definition of Huttenbach ("... Genocide is any act that puts the very existence of a group in jeopardy"). Let us also disentangle the question of the Ukrainian terror-famine as genocide from the psychological impediments of some Ukrainians participating in the Jewish pogroms in Ukraine in 1919, or of those helping the Nazis to carry out the Holocaust in World War II, and then claiming that the famine was equivalent to the Holocaust. The question of Ukrainian guilt towards the Jews is logically separate from that of the genocidal terror-famine and it should be best addressed

by a joint Jewish–Ukrainian Commission of Scholars (Bilinsky, 1988, p 374). I also do believe that it is logically inappropriate to call the Ukrainian terror-famine a Holocaust. In the words of Yehuda Bauer: "... There may be no difference between Holocaust and genocide for the victim of either. *But there are gradations of evil, unfortunately.* Holocaust was the policy of the total, sacral act of mass murder of all Jews they could lay hands on. Genocide was horrible enough, but it did not entail *total* murder if only because the subject peoples were needed as slaves. They were indeed 'subhumans' in Nazi terminology. The Jews were not human at all" (Bauer, 1978; first italics added, second in the original).

What is the case for considering the terror-famine a near successful genocide? Stalin was known as a Ukrainophobe, as seen in the matter-of-fact statements by the liberal ethnic Russian leader Academician Andrei D. Sakharov (Sakharov, 1968, p 54). At the same time, unlike Hitler, Stalin was not a braggart who would shout his true feelings from the rooftops; beside expert witness testimony, we have to draw inferences from his public and confidential statements to arrive at his true intentions toward Ukrainians. The depth of his hatred toward autonomy-minded Ukrainian leaders appears clearly from his telegram of April 4, 1918, to Ukrainian communist Volodymyr Zatonsky, who at that time was the Chairman of the Ukrainian SSR Central Executive Committee: "You have been playing long enough those [childish] games of a government and a republic. Enough is enough, stop it" (Kopelev, 1982, p 61). With this outburst, it is not difficult to imagine Stalin's feelings toward Lenin's former associate Mykola Skrypnyk, who together with dissident Georgian communists torpedoed Stalin's favorite project informally to resurrect the Russian Empire at the 12th Party Congress in 1923 (the question of so-called autonomization, which was, on Lenin's insistence, transformed into the creation of the federal Soviet Union). In 1925, at the height of the Ukrainization policy in Ukraine, Stalin possibly unwittingly issued a declaration of war against the Ukrainians—"fired his gun." He also very cogently established the link between the peasant problem and the nationality policy. In that year he publicly attacked the Yugoslav communist Semich for attempting to reduce the "national [i.e. nationality] question to a constitutional issue ..." Stalin continued:

> That mistake leads him to another, namely his refusal to regard the national question as being, in essence, a peasant question. Not an agrarian but a peasant question, for these are two different things. It is quite true that the national question must not be identified with the peasant question, for, in addition to peasant questions, the national question includes such questions as national culture, national statehood, etc. That explains the fact that *the peasantry constitutes the main army of the national movement, that there is no powerful national movement without the peasant army, nor can there be.* (Stalin, 1954, pp 71–72; italics added)

Judging from Stalin's subsequent policy toward Yugoslavia in 1948, he was not very knowledgeable about Yugoslav political conditions. But the public rebuke of Semich in 1925 shows Stalin as fully appreciating the political significance of

the Ukrainian peasantry. As a realist, he also knew that he could not kill all the 30 million Eastern Ukrainians: Khrushchev in addressing the 1956 Congress said that Stalin wanted to deport all Ukrainians but he could not find an area for resettling them (Khrushchev, 1970, p 596). (Being a determined antisemite as well as a Ukrainophobe, Stalin thought that he had solved the logistic problem of how to deport all the Soviet Jews in early 1953, when death overtook him and saved many Soviet Jews.) In 1932, Stalin had no illusion that he would exterminate all the Ukrainians at once, but by killing approximately one-fifth of all the Eastern Ukrainians he made a good start of turning them into a more submissive, denationalized people of "sowers of millet (*hrechkosiiv* in Ukrainian, with its pejorative connotation) and hewers of wood." Is this not genocide, even in narrower, post-Lemkin definition?

Finally a few words about contemporary political usage in Ukraine. On the fiftieth anniversary of the massacre of Jews at Babi Yar, in September 1991, then-Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Ukraine and soon to be elected first President of Ukraine, Leonid M. Kravchuk, organized a week-long commemorative ceremony. One of its highlights was Kravchuk's public apology to the Jews for any misdeeds that Ukrainians had committed toward them. This cleared the air, even though Kravchuk's speech was ignored by *The New York Times*, but not by *The Washington Post.* In his first foreign interview as president, Kravchuk touched upon the problem of the terror-famine as genocide, though as translated from Russian and printed in German, he may not have used the Latin term, but the German word *Völkermord* or killing of peoples. He put the number of people killed in the famine as five million (possibly, Conquest's figure) and he added that two more million had been killed during Stalinist purges (*Repressalien*). For our purpose, the key sentence in the interview was: "I received some other information which showed that *Völkermord* (genocide?) had been constantly and systematically committed against Ukraine and that this people had suffered more than any other under the Stalinist machine as well as after his death" (Kravchuk, 1992, p 160). For a number of reasons, which may not all be due to the economic depression, but could also touch on the political advisability of attacking Ukraine's communist past, the problem of genocide has not been fully explored in independent Ukraine. But Kravchuk did in September 1993 publicly commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the genocidal famine, and beginning with November 1998 (the sixty-fifth anniversary) the third Sunday in November is to be devoted to a public commemoration of the famine, which has been officially defined as genocide, similar to the Jewish Holocaust and the Armenian genocide, with an estimated 7.5 million victims. On the other hand, for whatever reason, the US House of Representatives Concurrent Resolution 295, commemorating the famine in 1995, studiously avoids the word genocide (*Ukrainian Weekly*, 1998; *America*, 1998).

Political usage should not override scholarly logic, especially political usage which is just being established in independent Ukraine, arguably seven years late. My argument, however, is that both logic and political usage in Ukraine point in one direction, that of the terror-famine being genocidal. Stalin hated the

Ukrainians, as accepted as a fact by Sakharov, revealed in the telegram to Zatonsky and inferred from his polemics with the Yugoslav communist Semich. Stalin decided to collectivize Soviet agriculture and under the cover of collectivization teach the Ukrainians a bloody lesson. Had it not been for Stalinist hubris and the incorporation of the more nationalistically minded and less physically decimated Western Ukrainians after 1939, the Ukrainian nation might have never recovered from the Stalinist offensive against the main army of the Ukrainian national movement, the peasants.

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