

Was the Ukrainian Famine Really a Genocide?

by Dominique Arel



On November 27, the Verkhovna Rada adopted a law proclaiming that “The Famine of 1932-1933 in Ukraine is a genocide of the Ukrainian people.” The vote essentially reproduced the fault lines of the Orange Revolution, with the Socialists joining forces with the Tymoshenko Bloc and Our Ukraine, while only two deputies from the Party of Regions, and no Communists, were in favor. Opponents accused the President, who initiated the draft law, of “politicizing” a human tragedy.

These opponents are only half-right. There is little doubt that having a parliament engaged in the politics of *naming* an event that devastated Ukrainians in the past is a political exercise. At the same time, the notion that naming what happened in 1932-1933 could be agreed upon in some neutral, apolitical, way is illusory. This is not to say that objective knowledge is unattainable. The facts of mass deaths – how many people died? was food available? what did the authorities know? – can be, and are being objectively investigated by Western and Ukrainian historians. But it is in *categorizing* what we see, or imagine – who were the victims? what caused their deaths? — that we necessarily enter the realm of the subjective, and therefore of the political.

Genocide is the ultimate crime, the deliberate intent to exterminate a group and prevent its reproduction. The ultimate crime calls for the ultimate discredit of the perpetrator. The Nazi regime, the perpetrator of the Holocaust, has few defenders in the West outside of the loony fringe. Yet the legacy of Communism, as a regime, is far more ambiguous in the West and among the populations that lived through it, certainly in the former Soviet Union. In proposing to replace “genocide” with “a crime against humanity perpetrated by the Stalinist totalitarian regime,” thereby emphasizing Stalinism over Communism, the Party of Regions revealed the continued ambivalence of its constituency vis-à-vis what are perceived to be the social achievements of the Soviet era, and its reluctance to associate Communism as such with absolute evil. One thing should be clear: both formulations, whether “genocide” or “Stalinist crime against humanity,” are equally “politicized.” It couldn’t be otherwise.

The backdrop to the “genocide” debate in Ukraine is whether the famine was a famine. The statement may sound sacrilegious, but the position of the Soviet state for sixty years was, in fact, that there was no famine, which meant that one could be arrested for claiming the opposite. Fringe Communist elements, including those in Ukraine, continue to claim the indefensible, but the mainstream debate has shifted to whether the

famine was “man-made” or caused by “natural” forces. That issue remains controversial. A conference on the Ukrainian famine in the US, a few years ago, had to change location at the last minute because a respectable university apparently objected to the term “man-made” in the conference title, arguing that it prejudged an open question. The problem with this assumption is that, as Noble Prize Laureate in Economics Amartya Sen argued in *Poverty and Famines*, there is no such thing as a “natural” famine anymore in the modern era. Famines are not caused by a breakdown in food production per se, but by a breakdown in food distribution. And distribution, one may add, is an inherently political matter.

In Ukraine itself, the key political forces agree that the famine was man-made and the debate revolves around the politics of naming this politically-induced human catastrophe. Parliament, a political body, did name it a genocide by a narrow vote, but what is the evidence adduced by historians and students of mass violence on the matter? The core criteria of genocide, as laid out in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, is “intent to destroy.” Original intent, however, is extremely difficult to demonstrate, not only because written documents may be lacking, but also, as the French social scientist Jacques Sémelin argued, because mass killing should be seen as a *process* in which the aims of actors can change along the way.

Did the Soviet leaders in the late 1920s consciously plan to starve the Ukrainian peasantry when they unleashed their collectivization drive? The evidence is that they did not. They did not expect that the disruption of collectivization, exacerbated by peasant resistance, would have a severely detrimental impact on the harvest. Yet, faced with an extremely serious humanitarian crisis in 1932, the Soviet government chose policies that could only exacerbate it, leaving millions to starve. The first policy was to deny that there was a famine in the first place, which obviously precluded any kind of international aid. If we can demonstrate that the logic of a political action will plausibly, if not inexorably, lead to a catastrophe — essentially what Ukrainian Communist officials told Moscow in 1932 — but political authorities remain in denial for ideological reasons, why should the political responsibility of these elites be less than if they had originally intended to victimize the peasantry?

Who were targeted by the famine? The “Ukrainians” as a nation, or the “peasants” as a class? The standard claim made by reasonable people objecting to the use of “genocide” to characterize the famine is that the famine targeted not the Ukrainians, but the peasants allegedly hoarding the grain, and that the famine touched other areas outside of Ukraine, such as the Volga. There are two ways of answering this argument. The first is empirical. Newly discovered archival evidence indicate that Stalin interpreted the resistance within the Communist Party of Ukraine to the unattainable quotas of grain requisition in 1932 as a manifestation of Ukrainian nationalism. The absolute Soviet ruler thus began, himself, to frame the issue in national terms, and to think in terms of punishment.

The second is conceptual. The 1948 Genocide Convention defines the victims of genocide as “national, ethnical (sic), racial, or religious,” excluding “social” groups such as the peasantry. Yet we have to understand that the Convention is a politically-induced document, reflecting the interests of the UN member-states, and the Soviet Union at that time specifically lobbied to have “social” categories excluded from the list. Why should the targeting of a socially defined group —“kulaks” for the Soviets, “new people” (i.e. the urbanized ones, contaminated by the West) for the Khmer Rouge, or the “hostile class” for the North Korean regime—be all that different from an ethnically defined target group, if it can be shown that the perpetrators aimed at preventing the targeted group from reproducing itself? In that light, a reasonable case can be made that the famine constituted a genocide when “genocide” is used as a category of social science analysis, rather than as a politically arbitrary concept of international law.

Deep down, the Party of Regions, and Russian-speaking Eastern Ukrainians, more generally, are uncomfortable with the label of genocide because of their fear that it could drive a wedge between ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians in Ukraine. In an attempt to assuage these anxieties, the sponsors of the law used the category of “people” (*narod*), rather than “nation” (*natsii*) in defining the victims of the famine. Still, “Ukrainian people” (*ukrains'kyi narod*) retains a certain ethnic connotation and Eastern Ukrainians decode the law as yet another attempt to blame “Russia” for what happened to “Ukrainians,” even if the law explicitly says nothing of the sort.

There are thus two important debates going on. The first is among the international community of scholars on how to best frame the famine in the comparative study of mass killing. The second is among Ukrainians themselves in Ukraine, who remain divided on how to interpret their past, and thereby their common destiny, vis-à-vis Russia. The November 27 vote reiterated that the “Orange” perspective on these identity issues retains a small and geographically polarized majority, but a majority nonetheless, despite the vicissitudes of coalition politics.