

Deleting the Holodomor: Ukraine Unmakes Itself

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The first thing Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich did after his February 25 inauguration was delete the link to the Holodomor on the president's official Web site. Yanukovich's predecessor, Viktor Yushchenko, had made the Holodomor—the famine of 1932–33 produced by Joseph Stalin and responsible for the deaths of millions of Ukrainian peasants—into a national issue, promoting what Czech novelist Milan Kundera famously called “the struggle of memory over forgetting” as part of his attempt to move the country toward democracy. That Yanukovich turned his back so dramatically on this movement to rehabilitate Ukraine's tragic past indicated the extent to which the recent election was as much about identity as it was about politics.

This was no accident. Thanks to the 2004 Orange Revolution, Ukrainian national identity has become synonymous with democracy and the West. And thanks to Vladimir Putin's construction of a newly assertive Russian state, Russian identity has unfortunately become associated, as in Soviet times, with authoritarianism and empire. Yanukovich's Party of Regions has its electoral base in Ukraine's southeastern rust belt, the Donbas; the region produced, and is still proud of, both Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev and Stalin's favorite proletarian, the coal miner extraordinaire Aleksei Stakhanov. It names its streets after Stalinists, displays statues of the Soviet dictator, and retains its Soviet-era identity as a Russian-speaking enclave with an authoritarian political culture. When president-elect Yanukovich decided to turn back the clock on Yushchenko's Ukraine and reestablish its role as a client of Moscow, it was natural that he should begin by shutting down discussion of what historian Robert Conquest called Stalin's “terror famine.”

Yanukovich's assault on Ukrainian identity, newly resurgent following the Orange Revolution, has focused on education, culture, language, and history. Various policy measures have already begun to squeeze the authentically Ukrainian out of public life, education, and media. University rectors have been co-opted into supporting the new, Russocentric regime, while the only two holdouts—from the pro-Western Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv and the Mohyla Academy in Kiev—have come under pressure from the authorities. But the central target of the regime's rollback of Ukrainian identity is history. As Yanukovich well knows, all new nations develop identities based on their understanding of history. Foundation myths, heroes, villains, defeats, and victories are identified—and sometimes invented—so as to create “narratives” that have implications for contemporary political movements. Americans glorify the Founding Fathers, while the French lionize their first revolution. Germans moved from sanctifying Otto von Bismarck to admiring Konrad Adenauer after the catastrophe of the Third Reich. So, too, have Ukrainians in the last twenty years been developing a distinctly Ukrainian historical narrative as part of their slow-motion embrace of democracy and the West.

Any attempt to construct a distinctly Ukrainian identity must inevitably address the recent past. Ukraine today remains largely a product of the terror, violence, war, and genocide of Russian czars, Soviet Communists, and German Nazis. A 2008 study by the Moscow-based Institute of Demography calculated that Ukraine suffered close to 15 million “excess deaths” from 1914 to 1948: 1.3 million during World War I; 2.3 million during the Russian Civil War and the Polish-Soviet War of the early 1920s; 4 million during the Holodomor; 300,000 during the Great Terror

and annexation of western Ukraine; 6.5 million during World War II; and 400,000 during the postwar famine and Stalin's campaign against Ukrainian nationalism.

According to Yale University historian Timothy Snyder, "The peoples of Ukraine and Belarus, Jews above all but not only, suffered the most, since these lands were both part of the Soviet Union during the terrible 1930s and subject to the worst of the German repressions in the 1940s. If Europe was, as [Columbia University historian] Mark Mazower put it, a dark continent, Ukraine and Belarus were the heart of darkness." That darkness continued until Stalin's death in 1953. Although everyday violence disappeared and the death camps were disbanded, totalitarianism as a system of pervasive, oppressive rule stayed intact for three more decades, surviving long enough to mold a new type of human being. What Soviet propaganda called "the new Soviet man" is precisely the voter who supports Yanukovich and Putin, yearns for the good old days of Soviet greatness and cheap vodka, overlooks Stalin's crimes against humanity, and cannot imagine Ukraine as having an identity different, or separate, from Russia's.

As the excess deaths suggest, however, the Holodomor's "murder by starvation" remains the single greatest catastrophe endured by Ukraine during Soviet rule. Any attempt to reconstruct a national Ukrainian narrative must take a stand on a trauma of such proportions—especially since all Soviet historians, propagandists, and officials assiduously ignored the famine or dismissed it as an émigré delusion for decades. Unsurprisingly, the first Ukrainians to draw attention to the tragedy of the Holodomor were survivors who had fled to the West. In the mid-1950s, they compiled two major volumes of survivor testimony and other documentary materials called *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin: A White Book*. They were dismissed as rabid anti-Communists and cold warriors by much of the Western political and intellectual establishment. They continued their efforts in the decades that followed, but with very little resonance outside their own immediate émigré communities.

Things began changing by the early 1980s. Soviet studies had discovered the "nationality question," and academic research increasingly shifted to the USSR's non-Russian republics, including Ukraine. At the same time, "revisionist" social historians were reassessing Stalin and investigating the origins of Stalinism in the early 1930s. As the fiftieth anniversary of the famine in 1983 approached, it became impossible for Western scholars not to recognize the tragedy. Some continued to view it as the consequence of Stalin's policy of forced collectivization of the peasantry. Others insisted that it was not just a by-product of agricultural policy gone haywire, but a conscious political act that had to be viewed in the context of Stalin's vicious crackdown on Ukrainian national identity.

In 1986, the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University published Robert Conquest's pathbreaking *The Harvest of Sorrow*, the first systematic scholarly study of the Holodomor as a weapon of Stalin's terror. In 1988, the American historian James Mace, who explicitly argued that the famine was an anti-Ukrainian measure, compiled three volumes of documentation and testimony in the U.S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine, a report delivered to Congress. Conquest and Mace were denounced as anti-Communists, but this effort to marginalize their work was subverted by Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy, which exposed many black holes in Soviet history to scrutiny not only by Russians but also by Ukrainians and other non-Russians. Once Soviet historians began examining the horrors of the Soviet past and concluding that Stalin was a monster, the famine could no longer be claimed to be a conspiracy of Western anti-Communists and disgruntled Ukrainian émigrés.

Following Ukraine's independence in 1991, the quest for a distinctly Ukrainian historical narrative and identity took on a new urgency, especially as Ukraine became open to Western intellectual debates and testimony by the remnants of the generation that had survived the famine. As the

number of books and articles published in Ukraine about the Holodomor grew exponentially, it became an established historical reality: today almost no one denies that a terrible human tragedy took place and that millions died. But while the issue of whether or not the Holodomor happened was settled, the question of *why* it happened developed into an even more contentious issue argued by two opposing camps. Following in the footsteps of James Mace (who settled in Kiev, where he continued to write about the Holodomor until his untimely death in 2004), Ukrainian national democrats generally argued that the famine was a genocide. Their pro-Soviet, pro-Russian, and anti-democratic opponents, most of whom eventually grouped around Yanukovich and the Party of Regions, rejected this claim and the idea that the famine had been explicitly anti-Ukrainian in favor of the more anodyne view that, as Yanukovich's minister of education and science, Dmytro Tabachnyk, succinctly put it, "the Holodomor of 1933 was a general tragedy of the peoples of Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan."

Reflecting the time lag between Ukrainian and Western intellectual currents, Ukrainians began debating the Holodomor-as-genocide thesis just as Western scholars were moving to accept it. A recently discovered 1953 speech by Raphael Lemkin, the Jewish-Polish scholar who coined the term genocide, contributed to the shift in the debate; Stalin's famine, he said, was "not simply a case of mass murder" but "a case of genocide, of destruction, not of individuals only, but of a culture and a nation." According to Lemkin, the Ukrainian genocide consisted of four components: "The first blow [was] aimed at the intelligentsia, the national brain, so as to paralyze the rest of the body." The second was "an offensive against the churches, priests, and hierarchy, the 'soul' of Ukraine. . . . The third prong of the Soviet plan was aimed at the farmers, the large mass of independent peasants who are the repository of the tradition, folk lore and music, the national language and literature, the national spirit, of Ukraine. The weapon used against this body is perhaps the most terrible of all, starvation. . . . The fourth step in the process consisted in the fragmentation of the Ukrainian people . . . by the addition to the Ukraine of foreign peoples and by the dispersion of the Ukrainians throughout Eastern Europe."

Just as the earlier debates in the West over the famine had been politicized, pitting "anti-Communists" against their critics, so too did the debate over the Holodomor-as-genocide thesis in Ukraine become profoundly political. First, it challenged the nature of Soviet reality. Second, it became the centerpiece of Yushchenko's nation-building project after the Orange Revolution. And third, it undermined Russia's hegemony over Ukraine.

On the first point, if the national democrats were right to say that the Holodomor was genocide, then Stalin, Communism, and the Soviet Union were to blame, and the construction of a democratic and pro-Western Ukrainian identity must necessarily entail rejection of all three as comparable in their evil to Hitler and Nazi Germany. So the opponents of the national democrats, whose identity remained pro-Stalinist, pro-Russian, and pro-Soviet, were bound to struggle against such an interpretation. Their battle was fought not only in large abstract arguments but in small linguistic skirmishes. While national democrats began referring to the war against Hitler as "World War II," the Yanukovich camp stuck to the Soviet term, "The Great Fatherland War," with the "Fatherland" being the Soviet Union, and not Ukraine. Since the debate also reflected popularly held attitudes—according to a 2009 InterMedia survey, eighty-three percent of Ukrainians in the west, fifty-eight in the center, twenty-eight in the south, and fifteen in the east accept the genocide thesis—the Holodomor quickly became the main focus of efforts by both national democrats and their opponents to mobilize voters in the recent elections.

Complicating the issue was the fact that Yushchenko had made the Holodomor-as-genocide thesis a central tenet of his nation-building efforts, which mostly consisted of affirmative-action programs for promoting Ukrainian as the country's constitutionally recognized state language, in public education and the thoroughly Russified media. Yushchenko supported the construction of

Holodomor monuments throughout Ukraine, introduced the Holodomor into school textbooks, founded the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory to research the Holodomor, built the Holodomor Memorial (down the street from Kiev's ancient Monastery of the Caves and the Soviet-era complex celebrating the "Great Fatherland War"), initiated a series of celebrations to coincide with the famine's seventy-fifth anniversary in 2008, and sought international recognition of the Holodomor as genocide. Fourteen countries agreed, while the European Parliament stopped short, calling it a crime against humanity.

As the political tussle between Yushchenko and Yanukovich heightened, especially in the run-up to the presidential election of 2010, opposition to Yushchenko translated into opposition to his nation-building project. Besides promoting awareness of the horrors of the Holodomor, that project consisted of several other important historical dimensions. The first was the claim that Ukrainian history included the history of the state of Kievan Rus, which one thousand years ago was one of Europe's largest and most powerful polities. The second was the rehabilitation of Ivan Mazepa, the Cossack hetman (or leader) whose desire for greater independence from Russia led him to join Sweden's Charles XII against Peter the Great in the disastrous Battle of Poltava in 1709. The third was the reassessment of three controversial leaders of Ukraine's anti-Soviet national liberation struggles during the twentieth century: Symon Petliura, Roman Shukhevych, and Stepan Bandera. Petliura was a democratic socialist and lifelong philo-Semite who happened to head a thoroughly ineffective government in 1918 and 1919, at just the time that terrible pogroms swept the country. Shukhevych and Bandera were both leaders of the interwar Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, a radical nationalist movement—similar in structure, tactics, and ideology to the Algerian National Liberation Front, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Jewish Irgun—that first tried to carve out an independent Ukrainian state with the help of Nazi Germany and then, after Berlin cracked down in 1941, conducted a hopeless struggle against both the Germans and the Soviets.

National democrats argued that Ukrainians could not have a history and an identity if they did not look for their roots in the distant past and come to terms with events and individuals demonized by Russian imperial historiography and Soviet propaganda. Supporters of the Party of Regions and the Communists rejected the whole package of proposed changes, insisting that Mazepa, Petliura, Shukhevych, and Bandera were unmitigated "enemies of the people," "fascists," and "traitors," and that the Holodomor was a generalized human tragedy. When the Ukrainian parliament voted in November 2006 to declare the Holodomor genocide, the votes split predictably: the national democrats voted for the motion, while the Party of Regions and the Communists voted against it.

History and historical interpretation entered the contemporary political dialogue. Yushchenko's opponents understood that in attempting to rewrite Soviet and Russian versions of Ukrainian history, rehabilitate those who had traditionally been seen as proto-fascist, and carve out a distinct Ukrainian identity rooted in a democratic and pro-Western political culture, the president was effectively challenging Soviet and Russian identity as well as Russian claims to political hegemony over Ukraine. As the Kremlin's unofficial Ukraine spokesman, Konstantin Zatulin, noted with alarm in 2010, "A significant portion of Ukraine's citizens has accepted nationalist clichés. These people quite sincerely believe that Ukraine should have a language, history, and heroes that are necessarily separate from Russia's." Russian policymakers were fully aware of the ideological and political implications of what Yushchenko and the national democrats were up to. Putin expressed alarm and the Russian Duma passed a resolution in 2006 denying that the famine was genocide. Russian historians were mobilized to produce textbooks emphasizing Ukraine's common history with Russia and to deny the Holodomor's Ukrainian specificity, and the Kremlin began funneling substantial sums of money to its supporters and intelligence operatives in Ukraine.

It made perfect sense for Yanukovich to delete the Holodomor from the presidential Web site in his first act as president: it was a silent gesture, signifying to both the Kremlin and his own countrymen that his Ukraine, unlike Yushchenko's, would adopt pro-Soviet and pro-Russian stances. The next logical step was for Yanukovich to inform the world of his intentions. While attending an April 26 meeting in Brussels of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, he stated that "it would be wrong and unfair to recognize the Holodomor as an act of genocide against one nation." One day later, at a press conference in Strasbourg, he gave an authoritarian definition of democracy as "order." Once those discursive adjustments had been made, the door was open for Yanukovich and Russia's president, Dmitry Medvedev—who had pointedly refused to attend the national seventy-fifth anniversary observances of the Holodomor in 2008—to visit the Holodomor Memorial in Kiev on May 17. They were now commemorating an act of God, not an intentional genocide.

The Yanukovich regime has also signaled that it regards genocide discourse as a political act. The minister of education and science has already announced that he intends to purge history textbooks of "delirious hyperbolization" about the Holodomor. The minister of humanitarian affairs has ominously suggested that the Institute of Historical Memory may need to undergo official review. In turn, the newly appointed director of the institute, a Communist sympathizer from the Donbas, has publicly stated that the famine was the "the result of difficult circumstances" and intends to promote "a national memory" that "unites" Ukrainians. The head of Ukraine's Security Service has closed the secret police archives, while another leading official has stated that "people know all they need to know." The Holodomor has thereby been transformed into a touchstone of political *loyalty* and a code for what is permissible in talking about the Yanukovich regime. To maintain that the famine was genocide or an anti-Ukrainian crime is effectively to engage in dissent and declare one's political opposition to Yanukovich. And in Yanukovich's Ukraine, as in Putin's Russia, dissent is risky business.

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