



Halyna Hryn, ed.. *Hunger by Design: The Great Ukrainian Famine and Its Soviet Context*. Cambridge: Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University, 2008. xii + 150 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-932650-05-1.



Reviewed by Yana Pitner

Published on H-Russia (October, 2010)

Commissioned by Teddy J. Uldricks (University of North Carolina at Asheville)

Surgically employing historical drama as a means of achieving political aims has been a very popular tactic in almost all European post-communist states. Very often, the sentiment of being victimized by the Soviet regime became grounds on which national unification was shaped. Leveraging emotional historical triggers helped make the inevitably difficult and complicated transitional periods much easier. Focusing on “national sufferings” caused by the Soviet power eventually gave rise to anti-Russian feeling in the newly independent states, becoming a powerful political tool.

Using “historical policy” as an ideological platform to build national support is precisely what Ukraine’s ex-president Viktor Yushchenko recently did, placing at the center of his campaign the famine of 1932-33. This policy can be considered a factor in reconstructing the moral-political unity of Ukraine. Moreover, the president’s appeal to this problem coincided with the intense strug-

gle for the redistribution of power in Ukraine from 2006-08.

The Holodomor issue (i.e., the Ukrainian famine issue) has created a heated debate within Ukrainian, Russian, and world political and academic societies. It has basically divided the societies into two major camps. The first camp includes the supporters of the theory that famine in Ukraine was designed by the Soviet power and was aimed at the extermination of part of the Ukrainian nation, thus preventing an opportunity for Ukraine to secede from the USSR. The second camp consists of the proponents of the view that 1932-33 was a tragic period for the USSR, and famine embraced not only Ukraine, but other territories of the USSR as well (where about 50 million people lived). According to their view, famine was a result of the ill-planned policy of collectivization and may be considered a crime against the Soviet people, but it was not a policy aimed at the extermination of the particular Ukrainian nation.

Part of the problem results from the tendency of expert communities basically to follow the official political lines of their leaders without investing much in the dispassionate consideration of the problem. Accordingly, it is critically important that we objectively examine the famine of 1932-33 as professional historians, not politicians.

Reading *Hunger by Design: The Great Ukrainian Famine and Its Soviet Context* left me with conflicting impressions. There is no doubt that it contains valuable historical material pertaining to the sufferings and death from hunger in Ukraine and Kazakhstan. It offers unique primary sources, which are critically important in objectively assessing the problem. I would indeed recommend that specialists in Soviet history and the history of the famine read this volume. However, for the unsophisticated reader, this collection may leave the false impression that only people in Ukraine and Kazakhstan died from the famine. This is not so—famine beyond these republics was also widespread and dire.

The work presented by Andrea Graziosi, “The Soviet Famines and the Ukrainian Holodomor,” already draws a distinction between the situation in Ukraine and Russia. On p. 1 the author claims that the Russians “suffered from famine too, even though on a lesser scale.” This assumption definitely needs better support. The situation in Povolzhye, for example, proves that people were dying from famine there on the scale comparable to that in Ukraine.

What I found very interesting and appealing within this chapter is that the author conditionally divides academic society into the “A” group, which supports the genocide thesis and sees in the famine an event that was organized intentionally, and the “B” group, which considers this event on a pan-Soviet scale. Graziosi objectively considers the arguments of both groups, their strong and vulnerable sides. This approach has the potential to open an opportunity for representatives of both groups to consider the positions of their

counterparts seriously and provoke them to revise their arguments. I submit that this chapter could become a brilliant platform for dialogue among specialists of the famine of the 1930s.

At the end the author finally arrives at the conclusion that what was going on in Ukraine in 1932-33 was indeed genocide. He reaches this conclusion based on the comparison of the official definition of genocide adopted by the UN with the events in Ukraine. In his arguments, the author accents the fact that genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, but at the same time he agrees that the famine of 1932-33 was a “*deliberate* [my italics] destruction of a national group.” I suggest that “deliberate” is a key word in this debate. I personally did not find direct evidence in the chapter of the deliberate extermination of the Ukrainian nation, or parts of it. Thus, I do not believe that we should label this tragedy a genocide.

It was not by coincidence that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which traditionally does not miss an opportunity to criticize the policy of the USSR and its successor, the Russian Federation, twice declined to recognize the Holodomor as genocide against Ukrainian people, in 2008 and 2010.[1] Recently (April 28, 2010) the assembly adopted Resolution 1723, commemorating the victims of the Great Famine (Holodomor) in the former USSR. The resolution acknowledged that millions of innocent people in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine, which were parts of the Soviet Union, lost their lives as a result of mass starvation caused by the cruel and deliberate actions and policies of the Soviet regime. It encouraged the authorities of all these countries to agree on joint activities aimed at commemorating the victims of the Great Famine, regardless of their nationality. However, the resolution did not acknowledge this policy as one directed specifically towards the extermination of the Ukrainian nation.[2]

In the context of this debate, I also consider it very important to identify the precise number of famine victims (to avoid falsifications). According to the research of the Institute of Demography and Social Studies of the National Academy of Science of Ukraine, 3.5 million people died in Ukraine in the period 1932-33.[3] George Grabovicz, the author of the chapter “The Holodomor and Memory,” claims a figure of “five million to seven million or indeed more” (p. 132), without referring to any source. This is exaggerated data. Viktor Yuschenko, the ex-president of Ukraine, went even further and falsely claimed 15-16.5 million victims. Why was this not criticized? Operating with such numbers, Yuschenko dangerously claimed to consider the denial of the Holodomor as “genocide of the Ukrainian nation” as “a criminal act.”[4] Who knows how far that idea would have gone if Yuschenko had been elected to a second term? To make the volume more objective and give the reader an opportunity to examine the 1932-33 crisis more fully, the editor should have included a paper relating to the situation in the Volga basin (Povolzhye), in addition to those devoted to the Ural region.

The chapter by Gijs Kessler, “The 1932-1933 Crisis and Its Aftermath beyond the Epicenters of Famine: The Urals Region,” is very well organized and relies on both primary and secondary sources, and actually describes the real picture of the situation in the Urals. However, the situation in the Urals could not be a pattern of what was going on in the rest of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR). The author asserts, “As the example of the Urals eloquently demonstrates, this set of policies alone was enough to produce famine and starvation within three years. In regions where further complicating factors were added in, like the ‘denomadization’ in Kazakhstan or the antinationalist campaign in Ukraine, it produced mass famine” (p. 127). I do not find this thesis persuasive. It should be better supported with evidence from the other regions of the RSFSR. Certainly, this article is well developed. However, its

inclusion without articles from other regions seems to be an editorial tool to advance the theory of purposeful extermination of the Ukrainian nation through famine.

Hennadii Boriak’s chapter, “Sources and Resources on the Famine in Ukraine’s State Archival System,” claims to be a comprehensive study of documents from the tragic years 1932-33. However, it leaves the distinct impression that the author wishes to accuse the Soviet regime of deliberately targeting Ukrainians in the Holodomor. I do not feel there is enough evidence presented to warrant accusations of a government-led terror campaign against the Ukrainian peasantry specifically. In this paper, I did not find any examples of methods used by the Soviet power against Ukrainian peasants that were not also used against Russian peasants.

Like many Ukrainian historians, Borak quotes the famous letter from Stalin to Kaganovich from August 11, 1932, in which Stalin demanded that Ukraine not be lost. Borak considers this letter to be openly anti-Ukrainian (p. 31). Another author of this volume, Graziosi, also cites this quotation (p. 7). Interestingly, however, these authors (proponents of the Holdomor theory) do not quote the document in its fuller context, in which Stalin continued, “Our aim is to turn Ukraine to the true fortress of the USSR, to the model Soviet republic. We should spend as much financial resources as necessary to achieve that.”[5] Why conveniently leave this important context out of their argument? Considering Stalin’s statement in full context opens a totally different perspective on the situation.

Throughout the majority of the papers, I noticed the very serious claim that the famine in Ukraine was an anti-nationalist campaign—but where is the evidence supporting this assertion? We know there is no direct evidence supporting this claim. According to the supporters of this theory, the absence of documents may be evidence in and of itself: we can assume that Bolsheviks de-

stroyed them because the documents would have proven the anti-nationalist motive behind collectivization. I do not want to deny this possibility, but it should be properly presented as such. Part of the problem may stem from the fact that the central Soviet power in the republics was associated with the Russians, although if one considers the nationalities of the people who held that power one finds great diversity: Georgians, Ukrainians, Jews, Armenians, etc. Accordingly, the policy which was applicable to the whole Soviet territory was anti-class (in this case a war against the peasantry) and was viewed as anti-nationalist in the republics.

Sergei Maksudov's study, "Victory over Peasantry," reads very well. In contrast to other authors, Maksudov does not mention the word "genocide" once in his chapter, but instead develops a very thorough study of the 1931-33 famine in Ukraine and brings much evidence of individual and family tragedy caused by collectivization. I consider his to be the most appropriate approach to the topic. He does not throw unsubstantiated accusations at Stalin's regime of intentions to kill the Ukrainian nation, but instead collects and organizes evidence of the suffering caused by the ambitious policy of collectivization.

The chapter by Niccolo Pianciola also made a positive impression on me. The author uses both primary and secondary sources to reveal the situation in Kazakhstan (which proportionately suffered most from the consequences of collectivization). He justly accuses the Soviet regime of the policy of "denomadization" of Kazakhs, which broke their cultural traditions and led to numerous deaths.

The last chapter in the volume, "The Holodomor and Memory" by George Grabowicz, presents an emotional appeal versus a factual one, opening the door to justified criticism. For example, the author writes, "In Ukraine there is ... neither a museum where one can actualize memory and give voice to grief, nor exhibits, nor a gen-

erally known narrative of the events" (p. 131). This is not factual. Indeed, the Holodomor memorial opened in Kiev in 2008 and monuments to Holodomor victims in other Ukrainian cities (Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Poltava, Vinnitskaya oblast) opened in 2006.[6] During the Yushchenko presidency, whenever foreign official delegations came to Ukraine, they had to pay a visit to the memorial. The exhibition "We Accuse. Holodomor of 1932-1933. Genocide of Ukrainian People" was prepared by the Security Service of Ukraine and opened in Kiev in 2008. Student visits to this exhibition became a mandatory feature of the curriculum in Ukrainian schools. The same exhibition opened in other Ukrainian cities as well. Additionally, the film *Holodomor: Ukraine of the XX century: Technology of Genocide* was made and broadcast in Ukraine in 2008.

Admittedly, the quality of the exhibitions and the film was not very good. The film about the Ukrainian famine showed footage of a 1920s famine filmed in the Volga basin (Povolzhye), but the accompanying commentary suggested that these tragic events were filmed in Ukraine in 1932-33. It also cynically asserted that while people in Ukraine were "dying" from famine, people who lived in the Volga basin were only "suffering" from famine. This situation caused great distrust regarding the whole idea of the Holodomor.[7] It was also revealed that some pictures of the "Ukrainian Holodomor" presented at the exhibitions were in actuality photos taken in the United States during the Great Depression and in Povolzhye in the 1920s.[8] These findings obviously damage the credibility of the Holodomor theory. The author also attempts to convince the reader that what went on in Ukraine during 1932-33 should be considered genocide against the Ukrainian nation, but fails to offer any supporting evidence.

In summary, I conclude that while interesting and thought-provoking, this collection is underresearched. Some claims and assertions by such au-

thors of the volume as Graziosi, Boriak, and Grabowicz are not supported with verifiable evidence and thus are debatable. That said, the fact that this collection sparks such debate serves ultimately to enrich critical analyses of Soviet history.

Notes

[1]. “PASE ne pozvolila Ukraine natsionalizirovat Holodomor,” <http://lenta.ru/news/2008/05/16/golodomor/> (accessed April 4, 2010).

[2]. “Commemorating the Victims of the Great Famine (Holodomor) in the Former USSR,” Resolution 1723 (2010), <http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?Link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta10/eres1723.htm> (accessed May 17, 2010).

[3]. “Na Ukraine podschitali tochnoe chislo zhertv Holodomora,” <http://lenta.ru/news/2008/11/12/total/> (accessed April 4, 2010).

[4]. Expert: Trebovaniya k OON po Holodomoru – avanturism, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/2007/10/26/425827.html> (accessed April 4, 2010).

[5]. *Holodomor 1933: Nevyiuchennyye uroki istorii*, telecast, dir. Alexei Denisov, Russia (2008), <http://www.etvnet.com/golodomor-1933-nevyiuchennyye-uroki-istorii/53905/> (accessed March 25, 2010).

[6]. “Holodomor,” Wikipedia entry, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holodomor#Remembrance> (accessed May 17, 2010).

[7]. *Holodomor 1933: Nevyiuchennyye uroki istorii*.

[8]. “SBU poymali na falsifikatsii: v vistavke pro Holodomor ispolzuyutsya fotografii Velikoy Depressii v SSHA,” photograph, <http://www.nr2.ru/crimea/223417.html> (accessed April 4, 2010).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Yana Pitner. Review of Hryn, Halyna, ed. *Hunger by Design: The Great Ukrainian Famine and Its Soviet Context*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. October, 2010.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30622>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.