

# The Famine of 1932-33 in the Discussion of Russian-Ukrainian Relations

Frank E. Sysyn

The commemoration in 2003 of the seventieth anniversary of the Great Ukrainian Famine has brought the tragedy to the forefront of Ukrainian domestic and foreign affairs. Despite the opposition of the Communists and the indifference of much of the former Soviet nomenklatura, the parliament passed a resolution recognizing the famine as genocide and placing blame on the Soviet authorities.<sup>1</sup> The Ukrainian government had initiated an action in the United Nations to recognize the genocidal nature of the famine. Here, however, the Russian delegation seems to have opposed the Ukrainian initiative behind the scenes. Calls from civic organizations, such as Ukraine's Memorial, that Moscow issue an acknowledgment and an apology have met with dismissal and even derision by the Russian ambassador to Ukraine, Viktor Chernomyrdin, and by Vladimir Putin. As in so many questions of Ukrainian-Russian relations, dialogue has not even begun.<sup>2</sup>

The relatively short time since the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening up of archival materials explains why attention has focused on gathering new evidence and studying specific events in Soviet history rather than on constructing new syntheses and tackling complex abstract issues, such as the nature of Russian-Ukrainian relations.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> On the parliamentary hearings, see *Parlamentars'ki slukhannia shchodo shanuvannia pam'iaty zherty holodomoru 1932-1933 rokiv 12 liutoho 2003 r.* (Kyiv, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> On discussions of international recognition of the Famine as genocide, see *Ukrains'ka pravda* www.pravda.com.ua, 25 September 2003, "Kuchma ziznavsia, shcho ne khoche `zvodyty rakhunky' za Holodomor-33."

<sup>3</sup> Some of the questions of Ukrainian-Russian relations in the Soviet period are addressed in the introduction and essays in Andreas Kappeler, Zenon E. Kohut, Frank E. Sysyn, and Mark von Hagen, eds., *Culture, Nation, and Identity: The Ukrainian-Russian Encounter, 1600-1945* (Toronto-

At the same time, the emergence of independent Russian and Ukrainian states has focused attention in both states on writing national history rather than on re-examining the relations of the two peoples and cultures within the Soviet Union. Indeed, the breakdown of scholarly contacts and even the exchange of literature has discouraged such discussions between what are now two historiographies that have developed out of the disintegration of Soviet historiography. The remarks that follow are intended to raise some of the issues of Russian-Ukrainian relations that should be examined in discussions of the Famine of 1932-33. They aim to provoke discussion rather than to present a hypothesis.

Perhaps no event in Soviet history has been transformed as rapidly from a "white spot" into a major focus of popular consciousness as the Famine of 1932-33. In contrast to events such as the purges, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and the Katyn massacre, which have long received scholarly and popular attention outside the Soviet Union, the Famine had been relatively neglected by academics and by the Western public until the 1980s. The Famine became a subject of scholarly study and public attention in the West largely through the efforts of the Ukrainian diaspora communities centering on the fiftieth anniversary of the Famine in 1983.<sup>4</sup> The film, *Harvest of Despair*, the US Congressional Resolution and the Commission on the Ukrainian Famine, and the International Commission of Enquiry on the Ukrainian Famine brought the event to public attention. Robert

---

Edmonton, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Frank E. Sysyn, "The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-3: The Role of the Ukrainian Diaspora in Research and Public Discussion," in Levron Chorbajian and George Shirinian, *Studies in Comparative Genocide* (New York-London, 1999), 182-215.

Conquest's monograph *Harvest of Sorrow* and the publications of James Mace placed the Famine on the Western scholarly agenda.<sup>5</sup>

The period of glasnost in the USSR permitted the Famine issue to emerge among the numerous historical revelations and re-evaluations of the late 1980s. The issue was first broached in Moscow, but by 1989 it took on widespread popular resonance in Ukraine. The public manifestations, erection of monuments, international conferences, and scholarly publications of the 1990s have made the Famine one of the central issues of historical discussion in contemporary Ukraine.<sup>6</sup>

For both the Ukrainian diaspora and the Ukrainian national movement in Ukraine, the Famine issue has functioned as a rallying point. From the 1930s to the 1990s, anti-Soviet Ukrainians outside the USSR pointed to the Famine as proof of the criminal and anti-Ukrainian nature of the Soviet regime. Within these circles, the Moscow government held responsible was seen as both Communist and Russian. The lesson drawn was that only an independent Ukraine would have guaranteed against such tragedies and could avoid them in the future. The refusal of the Soviet government to admit that a famine had occurred, much less to admit that it bore responsibility, transformed all discussions of the Famine into an ideological confrontation. The issue was particularly important in right-left polemics, because if the Soviet Union was seen as comparable in evil to Nazi Germany, all discussions of the Eastern Front of World War II took on a different coloration. At the same time, Ukrainians in the diaspora found the Famine an important means of questioning the stereotype of "Ukrainians" as victimizers (Nazi collaborators, pogromists) rather than victimized. Attention to the Famine also made more explicable why some Ukrainians would have little loyalty to the Soviet

Union in 1941 or might at first have viewed German rule as even a possible improvement. The debate on the Famine also influenced discussions of the Holocaust for these issues, as well as for the significance of the tragedy in explaining the brutalization and demoralization of Ukraine's population prior to the war.

By the 1980s the Famine had become a central focus of identity and rallying point for diaspora Ukrainians who aspired to establish an independent Ukrainian state. At the end of the decade, it played a similar role in Ukraine. As the degree of mendacity of the Soviet propagandists about numerous issues became known to wider circles of the population of Ukraine, the official negation of the Famine crumbled before a groundswell of eyewitness testimony. At the same time, the Soviet demonization of "Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism" lost potency as voices were raised against the Russification of Ukraine and the sham nature of Soviet internationalism. In 1988-91 a general oppositional groundswell arose in Ukraine that combined anti-totalitarian, democratic, ecological, cultural, religious, and national issues. Its influence extended far beyond Rukh, the organized oppositional movement that had its main base in western Ukraine. Distrust of the authorities and the Moscow-center was intensified by the experience of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986. This recent catastrophe made plausible the allegations about the Famine and the arguments that the Soviet authorities cared little for the people and that the Moscow-center treated Ukraine with little regard. For the Ukrainian national movement, the Famine issue served as an effective vehicle for undermining the Communist authorities and the Soviet mythology in eastern Ukraine. The national interpretation of the Famine current in the Ukrainian diaspora spread in Ukraine as the country opened up to contacts with the West, and the projects of the 1980s in the West legitimized and served as models for activities in Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> By 1991 even the authorities had come to acquiesce that a man-made Famine had occurred in Ukraine, though they were reluctant to deal with the issue of responsibility.

The August 1991 coup in Moscow and the shift of the authorities in Ukraine to a pro-independence stance radically changed the political climate in Ukraine. The ruling former Communist elite adopted many of the symbols of the Ukrainian national movement (the blue-

---

<sup>5</sup> Robert Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror Famine* (New York-London, 1986) and James Mace, "Famine and Nationalism in Soviet Ukraine," *Problems of Communism* (May-June, 1984): 37-57 and "The Man-Made Famine of 1933: What Happened and Why," in Israel W. Charny, ed., *Toward the Understanding and Prevention of Genocide: Proceedings of the International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide* (Boulder, CO, 1984), 67-83.

<sup>6</sup> Of great importance was the official and still Soviet *Holod 1932-1933 na Ukraini: Ochyma istoriykiv, movoiu dokumentiv* (Kyiv, 1990) and the Memorial "opposition" volume L. Kovalenko and V. Maniak, *Holod 33. Narodna knyha-memorial* (Kyiv, 1991).

---

<sup>7</sup> Conquest's book was published in translation in fragments in the early 1990s and in full in 1993 in Kyiv as *Zhnyva skorboty: Radians'ka kolektyvnyzatsiia i Holodomor*.

and-yellow flag) and elements of the Ukrainian national historical vision, including the view of the Famine. Attention to the Famine in the Ukrainian media before the December 1, 1991, referendum was one of the means the government used to build pro-independence sentiment. The banning of the Communist Party removed the organization that could be seen as bearing the responsibility for the Famine from Ukrainian public life. However one evaluates the adoption of Ukrainian national positions by the old elite and its cooptation of the agenda of the Ukrainian democratic national movement, the government in Kyiv did make the commemoration of the Famine one of its elements in establishing the identity of the Ukrainian state.

By the time that the Ukrainian government organized the commemoration of the Ukrainian Famine's sixtieth anniversary in mid-1993, the economic crisis in the new state and its failure to find adequate support in the West had made an increasingly weary population wary of Ukrainian independence and apathetic toward public issues. The re-emergence of the Communist Party and of pro-Russian and pro-Soviet sympathies in late 1993 and 1994 also changed the political and cultural climate in Ukraine. Those forces that had found the commemoration of the Famine inconvenient and the interpretation of the event by the Ukrainian national movement unacceptable had more influence at a national level. Certainly, the Famine had receded as a public issue by 1995 as the Kuchma government returned to many of the propagandists of the old order for setting the cultural-political agenda. Despite the financial crisis in Ukrainian scholarship and publishing, scholarly and popular writing on the Famine, including indictments of the tragedy as a Soviet or even Russian genocide against the Ukrainian nation, continued.<sup>8</sup> With the subsequent falling out of the Communists with the Kuchma regime and the oligarchs in the late 1990s, the Famine issue could be more readily embraced by the government, even if only as a way of dealing with the patriotic segment of the Ukrainian electorate. Hence the presidential ukaz on the Famine in 2002 opened the way for greater attention to the Famine in 2003 as part of presidential political tactics.

Discussions of the Famine have centered on a number of controversies. Arguments that a Famine did not occur, that it was the result of drought or poor harvests, or that it

---

<sup>8</sup> See the report on the Second Congress of Famine Researchers in December 1994 in *News from Ukraine* 1995, np. 1.

was the result of anarchy during the collectivization drive have generally been discredited.<sup>9</sup> Although assertions that deaths from the Famine losses were limited have been abandoned, the number of millions of demographic losses is still debated. Intentionality and responsibility for the disaster remain disputed. While assertions that the Famine had no specific geographic limits have ceased, debates continue over whether it resulted from similar policies in all grain-growing regions in the Soviet Union. In particular, assertions that it occurred because of specific policies toward Ukraine, that anti-Ukrainian attitudes explain the failure to render assistance or that the Famine was planned are still hotly debated.

In the initial controversies in the West, the debates were largely between representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora and scholars who defended some of their viewpoints, and representatives of the Soviet government and scholars who opposed these views, some of whom held pro-Soviet, Ukrainophobe, or Russophilic views. The Famine also became a point of controversy in the debates of the Revisionists and their opponents. Of late, the increasing scholarly attention to the Famine and the ability to research specific topics with access to archival materials and demographic data in the former Soviet Union have reduced the ideological heat surrounding the topic. More and more of the scholarship is written in Ukraine and Russia. While the Famine is not a major public issue in Russia, Russian scholars have taken positions on the issue of whether the Famine had a specific Ukrainian character.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the issue of the Famine has emerged as an incident of Russian-Ukrainian issues in the 1930s as well as in contemporary relations.

The demographic consequence of the Famine is an essential issue for Russian-Ukrainian relations. The twentieth century was a period in which the demographic balance of Ukrainians and Russians shifted drastically in favor of the latter. In 1926, there were 78,453,000 Russians and 34,882,000 Ukrainians in the territories of the former Soviet Union (as well as the western Ukrainian territories

---

<sup>9</sup> One scholar making some of these arguments is Mark B. Tauger. See his *Natural Disaster and Human Actions in the Soviet Famine of 1931-1933* (Pittsburgh, 2001) (The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies, no. 1506).

<sup>10</sup> V. P. Danilov, "Diskussii v zapadnoi presse o golode 1932-33 gg. i 'demograficheskoi katastrofe' 30-40kh godov v SSSR," *Voprosy istorii*, 3 (1998): 116-21.

later annexed), a ratio of 2.25 Russians to one Ukrainian.<sup>11</sup> By 1959, there were 114,114,000 Russians and 37,253,000 Ukrainians (a ratio of 3.06 to 1), and by 1989 there were 145,072,000 and 44,136,000 (a ratio of 3.29 to 1). In other terms, while Ukrainians were outnumbered by Russians by 2.25 to 1 in 1926, for every one addition to the number of Ukrainians over the next 63 years (a total of 9,254,000), there were an additional 7.2 Russians (66,619,000). The fighting of World War II on Ukrainian territories, resulting in large civilian casualties, partially explains this phenomenon. Events such as the Famine of 1947 encompassed all of Ukraine and only parts of Russia. The emigration of many Ukrainians to Russia and the assimilation of the Ukrainian communities in Russia, particularly rapid since the abolition of Ukrainian cultural institutions in the 1930s and the arbitrary reclassification of Ukrainians as Russians in Kuban and other regions, also offer a partial explanation. In addition, numerous Ukrainians in Ukraine in those years designated themselves as Russians and the children of mixed marriages showed a preference for Russian nationality. Yet these factors are not sufficient to explain the relative demographic decline of Ukrainians, particularly in Ukraine itself. From 1926 to 1959, within the borders of the pre-1939 Ukrainian SSR, the Ukrainian population increased by only 1,879,000 (from 23,219,000 to 25,098,000), while the Russian population increased by 3,160,000 (from 2,676,000 to 5,836,000).<sup>12</sup>

The Famine of 1932-33 played a significant role in this relative decline of Ukrainians within the Soviet Union as a whole and in Soviet Ukraine in particular. The exact figures of the victims of the Famine are still being disputed, but by the mid-1990s the new sources and research in Ukraine showed how disproportionately Ukraine had suffered during the Famine. Robert Conquest had estimated 5 million losses in Ukraine and 2 million in Russia, of whom, he estimated, probably 1 million were Ukrainians because of the geography of the Famine in

Russia. (He also estimated 1 million Kazakh losses in 1932, but did not see this tragedy as part of the policies that brought about the Famine.) In his studies in the mid-1990s, Stephen Wheatcroft raised his estimate of mortality from the Famine of 1932-33 upward from 3-4 million to 4-5 million.<sup>13</sup> While he did not give absolute figures for Ukraine, he estimated that the elevation of mortality in Ukraine in 1933 was 189.5 percent compared to 51.7 percent in Russia and 23.6 percent in Belarus, that the Ukrainian oblasts of Kyiv and Kharkiv had the highest rates anywhere in the USSR (respectively 268.4 and 281.3 percent), and that it was high even in non-grain-growing regions of Ukraine such as Chernihiv (111 percent).<sup>14</sup> Stanislav Kul'chyts'kyi contended that Wheatcroft underestimated the number of deaths, and on the basis of the 1937 census argued there were 3 to 3.5 million deaths in Ukraine and 1 to 1.3 million unborn children because of the Famine.<sup>15</sup> A. Maksudov estimated 4.5 to 5 million demographic loss in Ukraine and a Soviet total of 7 million, in which he included Kazakh losses, while Alec Nove accepted Conquest's figure as essentially correct if "somewhat too high for the Ukraine, but somewhat too low for Kazakhstan."<sup>16</sup> In sum, the demographic losses variously estimated as 4 to 7 million were predominantly in Ukraine, which had less than a third of the population that Russia did. In addition, many of the areas of Russia affected by the Famine such as Kuban had high percentages of Ukrainian population. In essence, the Famine represented a demographic disaster for Ukraine and the Ukrainian population of the Soviet Union on a scale that it did not for Russia and the Russian population. Therefore, the Famine provides an important part of the explanation of the decline of Ukrainians in relation to Russians within the entire former Soviet Union.

---

<sup>11</sup> Population statistics come from Ralph Clem, "Demographic Change among Russians and Ukrainians in the Soviet Union: Social, Economic, and Political Implications," in Peter Potichnyj et. al. eds., *Ukraine and Russia in their Historical Encounter* (Edmonton, 1992), 288.

<sup>12</sup> Data is taken from Bohdan Krawchenko, *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine* (n.p., 1985), 176, with the population of Crimea, taken from the article in the *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, subtracted from the southern region.

---

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Wheatcroft, "More Light on the Scale of Repression and the Excess Mortality in the Soviet Union in the 1930s," in J. Arch Getty and Roberta Manning, eds. *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1993), 280.

<sup>14</sup> Wheatcroft, 282.

<sup>15</sup> Unpublished paper "Ukrainian Demographic Losses from the Famine in 1932-33 according to the General Census of the Ukrainian Population in 1937" (1994).

<sup>16</sup> Alec Nove, "Victims of Stalinism: How Many?" in Getty and Manning, *Stalinist Terror*, 266,274.

Within Soviet Ukraine, the Famine reduced the Ukrainian and increased the Russian percentage of the population. The relatively high Ukrainian birthrate made for a rapidly growing Ukrainian population in the republic and an increase of their percentage throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s. Yet from 1926 to 1937, Ukrainians decreased by 433,000 (1.9 percent), while Russians increased by 904,000 (39 percent).<sup>17</sup> This represented a shift from 1 Russian for every 9.77 Ukrainians to 1 Russian for every 6.89 Ukrainians. The rural-urban difference of national composition ensured that Ukrainians made up a higher percentage of victims of the Famine than was their percentage in the general population, while the more urbanized Russians in Ukraine were likely to have a smaller proportion of victims. (In 1926, 77 percent of Jews and 50 percent of Russians lived in the cities, but only 10 percent of Ukrainians.)<sup>18</sup> Some of this change occurred because of migration into Ukraine after the Famine, including into rural areas.

By a rapid decimation of the fecund Ukrainian village, the Famine reduced its potential to serve as the source of urban migrants in the future. While it is difficult to differentiate the impact of the Famine from that of World War II on the Ukrainian village, the reasons for the massive Russian influx into Ukraine from 1926 to 1959 can only be explained by the reduced population increase in the rural areas that were in pre-1939 Soviet Ukraine. Had it not been for the west Ukrainian village as a source of population growth and migrants, that influx might have been even greater. Nevertheless, by 1959 there were only 4.30 Ukrainians in the area of pre-1939 Ukraine for every Russian (3.79 if Crimea is included).<sup>19</sup>

The Famine also had significant impact on the nature of Ukrainian-Russian linguistic and cultural relations in Ukraine. The demographic change only partially explains this shift. The cessation of Ukrainization and the attacks on Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism undermined the position of the Ukrainian language and the status of Ukrainians. They accompanied the collectivization and assault on the Ukrainian village, the traditional bearer of

the Ukrainian language and culture. This would have favored the Russian language and the Russian-based Soviet proletarian culture in any case. Nevertheless, had the Famine not decimated the village, wiped out so many bearers of Ukrainian language and traditional culture, produced a generation of orphans who did not remember their elders, issued forth a stream of refugees to the industrial centers who wished to forget the horror they had endured in the villages and in many cases had no relatives left there, Ukrainian language and identity would have been more resilient and Russification would have proceeded more slowly.

Discussion of the Famine also involves the question of whether Ukraine and Ukrainians were targeted for persecution and discrimination by the Soviet system as well as the degree to which this system and its elite should be seen as Russian. Three issues remain at the core of the question of special treatment of Ukraine before and during the Famine.

The first is whether Ukraine was treated differently than other republics of the Soviet Union in the apportioning of grain requisitions. Some scholars argue that Ukraine was treated no differently than other grain-growing regions of Russia. This contention must demonstrate that all grain-growing regions of Russia were affected to the degree of grain-growing regions in Ukraine. It also must explain why the non-grain-growing areas of Ukraine seem to have been affected more than the non-grain-growing regions of Russia were, and in some cases more than grain-growing regions were.

The second issue involves the question of whether the refusal to listen to the Kyiv leadership's pleas on the Famine and the willingness to permit massive losses of life constituted a Moscow-centric indifference or even an anti-Ukraine or an anti-Ukrainian bias. The question of the place and treatment of Ukraine and Russia within the Soviet Union during the Famine must be examined. Central to this discussion is the question of closing Ukraine's borders. This question initially evoked much controversy in the West, including the dismissal of survivor testimony, and has ultimately been proven by documentary evidence. This issue also involves the attitudes of the Soviet elite and, above all, of Stalin toward Ukraine and Ukrainians.

The third issue relates to whether or not the actions of the Kremlin or of the Soviet government can be seen as Russian, especially in light of Stalin's Georgian origins. This issue involves the complex gamut of questions of the

---

<sup>17</sup> "National Composition of Ukraine," *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, 3 (Toronto, 1993), 542. The statistics for both Ukrainians and Russians in 1926 are somewhat smaller than in the data taken from Krawchenko above, presumably because of a different interpretation of the borders of Ukraine.

<sup>18</sup> Krawchenko, 50.

<sup>19</sup> Krawchenko, 176, see note 2.

degree to which the Soviet Union was a successor to the Russian Empire and maintained Russian imperialist or nationalist policies. The question has become even more complicated with the emergence of a Russian state that is viewed and often views itself as the successor state of the USSR. In popular perception in the former non-Russian republics, the wedding of Russian identity and Russian language to Soviet identity and pro-Communist sentiment in the post-independence era has strengthened this view. In examining the situation in Ukraine in the 1930s, “Russian” and “Ukrainian” relate to complex social (urban-rural), political (the national composition and linguistic characteristics of the CP) and cultural characteristics. In examining the Famine of 1932-33, topics such as the national composition of the twenty-five thousanders relate to the question of Russian-Ukrainian relations, and in particular stereotypes.

Numerous questions remain unresolved in the study of the Famine of 1932-33. As they are studied, the research will permit more informed discussion of the relevance of the Famine for Russian-Ukrainian relations. Clearly the Famine had a great impact on the demographic relations of Ukrainians and Russians and on the linguistic and cultural situation in Ukraine. More complex is the significance of the Famine as an event in Russian-Ukrainian relations and the attitudes of various groups of the two peoples toward each other. Differing interpretations of the Famine and its differing function in popular consciousness also affect Russian-Ukrainian contemporary relations. Examination of many of these topics will assist in our conceptualization of Russian-Ukrainian relations in the Soviet period.

**Frank E Sysyn** is the Director of the Peter J. J. J. Center for Ukrainian Historical Research, University of Alberta. Professor Sysyn was named the J. J. J. Visiting Professor of Ukrainian Studies at the Harriman Institute for the spring 2004 semester. Sysyn's recent publications include *Religion and Nation in Modern Ukraine*, co-authored with Serhii Plokhy, and *Mykhailo Hrushevsky: Historian and National Awakener*; both published in 2003. He is co-editor of *Culture, Nation and Identity: The Ukrainian-Russian Encounter* (2003) and editor-in-chief of the English translation of Hrushevsky's multi-volume *History of Ukraine-Rus'*.