

FOI Request: The academic materials relating to the Holodomor

Internal Document – dated 30 November 2006

SUBJECT: UKRAINE: THE FAMINE (*HOLODOMOR*)

1. I attach a note which looks at the Ukrainian (Soviet) famine of 1932-3. I am grateful to for comments on an earlier draft.
2. Main points:
 - The famine has become a major political issue in Ukraine during the last 25 years, largely as a result of lobbying by the Ukrainian diaspora, the break-up of the USSR and its utility in support of nation-building in independent Ukraine (paras 2-3);
 - The consensus among historians is that the famine killed 3-6 million Ukrainians. Several factors caused the disaster. One was a policy of deliberate starvation by the Stalin leadership. The most controversial issue is whether the famine was an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people. The evidence suggests not (paras 4-8);
 - The Kremlin opposes Ukrainian calls for the famine to be classed as genocide. This is a sore point in the bilateral relationship. But Russian views are complex (para 9); and
 - HMG's line on the famine is sound, but will probably need up-dating. In terms of language and handling, the Armenian 'genocide' may offer lessons (paras 10-14).
3. Comments welcome, as ever.

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UKRAINE: THE FAMINE (*HOLODOMOR*)

1. This note looks at the Ukrainian (Soviet) famine of 1932-3. It covers the main areas of debate, in particular the question of whether the famine should be regarded as genocide. It also offers some thoughts on handling, drawing on the experience of the Armenian 'genocide'.

THE FAMINE AS AN ISSUE

2. **The Ukrainian (Soviet) famine (*holodomor*)¹ of 1932-3 attracted relatively little attention until the mid-1980s.** It had long been a rallying-point before then for the overwhelmingly anti-Soviet Ukrainian diaspora, who held it up as proof of the murderous and anti-Ukrainian nature of the Soviet regime. But successive Soviet leaderships denied that it had taken place. Little serious academic research was undertaken. Soviet historians, with a few exceptions, echoed the Kremlin line. Their Western counterparts were more active and inquiring, but were hamstrung by lack of access to sources. It is only during the last quarter of a century that the famine has become a major issue of historical and political debate. The initial impetus came from the West, largely as a result of lobbying by the Ukrainian diaspora, which focussed its activities on marking the 50th anniversary in 1983. The results included a series of US congressional initiatives (notably, a congressional resolution and a congressional commission of investigation). Serious academic studies began to appear. A watershed was the publication in 1986 of Robert Conquest's *Harvest of Sorrow*. A second factor was the process of political reform in Gorbachev's USSR which provided greater scope for hitherto taboo subjects to be examined with greater freedom. The relaxation of controls also fed an upsurge of national unrest across the Soviet Union, including Ukraine, where the famine became a symbolic issue for the independence movement. The rising nationalist tide forced the Soviet authorities to shift their position on this issue, as on many others.² It was generally accepted in Ukraine by the time the USSR broke up that the famine had indeed taken place.

3. After languishing as a public issue for several years in the 1990s, the question acquired renewed prominence towards the end of the decade, as the regime of President Kuchma sought to use it as a way of building domestic political support. Having introduced a day of commemoration (26 November) in 1998, Kuchma went further in 2002 and signed a presidential decree asserting that the famine had in fact been 'genocide' against the Ukrainian nation. A parliamentary resolution in 2003 reiterated this view. More controversially, Ukraine later that year tabled a resolution to the UNGA calling for the famine to be recognised as genocide under the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. (It withdrew the draft, following Russian counter-lobbying and expressions of EU disagreement. It instead agreed a joint statement, co-signed by 25 countries including Russia, which referred to the famine as a 'national tragedy'.) The Orange Revolution of 2004 brought to power individuals, notably President Yushchenko, who are

¹ Derived from a Ukrainian expression which means 'to inflict death by hunger'.

² The first official public acknowledgement of the famine came from Volodymyr Shcherbitsky, the hard-line First Secretary of the Ukrainian (Soviet) Communist Party, in a speech in December 1987.

convinced that the famine was genocide and who see this interpretation as a central part of their nation-building project (Yushchenko sponsored this week's Rada bill reaffirming the genocide line and condemning any public denial of the famine as illegal and sacrilegious). Opinion polls show that Yushchenko's view is not universally shared in Ukraine. According to a poll compiled earlier this month, 27.5% of people thought that the famine was an attempt to annihilate the Ukrainian people, whereas 45.5% blamed the Soviet authorities, but ascribed different motivations to Stalin and other leaders. It is interesting to note that Prime Minister Yanukovich, for example, referred to the famine earlier this week as a 'national tragedy'.

THE KEY HISTORICAL DEBATES: MORTALITY....

4. **There are two main areas of disagreement among historians of the famine. The first of these is mortality.** It is beyond doubt that the death toll was horrendous, but estimates vary. **The consensus is in the region of 3-6 million**, lower than the figure of 7-10 million given by Yushchenko at the *holodomor* commemoration on 25 November. Conquest arrived at a figure of 7 million deaths from famine throughout the Soviet Union in 1932-3, including 5 million in Ukraine itself, plus another 1 million Ukrainians elsewhere in the USSR. RW Davies and Stephen Wheatcroft believe that the death toll was lower: 5.5-6.5 million for the USSR as a whole and 3-3.5 million for Ukraine. According to the Ukrainian historian Stanislav Kulchytsky, outright deaths in Ukraine numbered 3-3.5 million, with 'aggregate losses' (ie deaths, plus an estimate for unborn children) of 5 million. While less than the figure quoted by Yushchenko, 5 million deaths would still represent more than 15% of the population of Ukraine at the time, a loss of life with few recent parallels in peacetime.

....& CAUSATION

5. **By far the most controversial issue is causality. There are two key issues in this connection. First of all, was the famine the result of a deliberate policy of starvation implemented by the Stalinist leadership? The answer seems to be: yes, in part.** There is now a powerful body of evidence which suggests that three factors brought about the famine. The main one, according to Davies and Wheatcroft, was the over-riding importance attached by the Kremlin to the policy of industrialisation at break-neck speed by ruthlessly squeezing the agricultural sector. This was to be achieved by stripping the countryside of food through forcible grain requisitions. The food would then be used to feed the USSR's rapidly-expanding urban work-force. A mixture of haste, ignorance, crude ideological fixations, incompetence, administrative chaos and mind-boggling cruelty caused the authorities to take way too much, thereby inflicting massive disruption on the rural sector, badly damaging crop rotations and the quality of cultivation, and forcing the peasantry to rely for food on their livestock, which in turn declined spectacularly. A second factor was unusually bad weather during the 1932 growing season. One historian, Mark Tauger, attaches primary importance to this, which in his opinion led to much lower output of critical foodstuffs and significantly higher levels of waste. (Most analysts do not agree, however. Even those who conclude that inclement weather did play a part, like Davies and Wheatcroft, do not see it as the most significant factor.) Finally, there is evidence which indicates that at least some famine deaths were caused by a deliberate policy of starvation. When confronted by opposition (and in some areas outright rebellion) by the peasantry to his policy of forced requisitions, Stalin's reaction was driven in part by a determination to punish their resistance and to subjugate

them by consciously denying them access to food. **Even if allowance is made for the weather, responsibility for the famine lay unequivocally with the Soviet leadership.**

6. **But was the famine a genocidal³ act directed against the Ukrainian nation? There is a widely-held belief, in Ukraine and elsewhere, that it was.** Advocates of this interpretation point to the profound hostility of the Soviet regime from the October Revolution onwards toward any manifestations of Ukrainian nationalism and autonomy, which were seen as mortal challenges to tight central rule from Moscow. They underline the extent to which Ukraine bore the brunt of the famine, as well as the ethnic Ukrainians who perished in neighbouring regions of Russia which were affected (in particular, the Kuban area of the northern Caucasus). Stalin, they argue, knew that the targets for grain collection which were imposed on Ukraine were draconian and that widespread starvation would be inevitable, especially as the USSR continued to export major quantities of grain throughout the crisis. Finally, they point out that the Soviet authorities closed Ukraine's eastern border in an attempt to prevent large numbers of starving peasants from entering Russia in search of food.

7. **There are two major problems with the genocide interpretation, however. One is the undisputed fact that the famine hit several parts of the USSR,** notably Kazakhstan, where the death toll as a proportion of the local population was even higher than in Ukraine, and certain agricultural areas of Russia, notably the lower Volga region and the northern Caucasus. Nor is there any evidence that non-Ukrainian peasants in Ukraine were singled out for better treatment. It therefore seems judicious to conclude, as one UK historian did several years ago, that Stalin 'starved to death those whom he believed to be recalcitrant peasants, many of whom were Ukrainians, rather than Ukrainians, many of whom were peasants.'⁴

8. **The other major problem with the genocide argument is its tendency to portray the famine implicitly, and sometimes even explicitly, as a crime inflicted on Ukraine by Russia.** Such a claim is deeply misleading. It suggests that the USSR was simply the continuation of the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire and that the non-Russian inhabitants of the Soviet Union were no more than victims of Russian imperialism. Yet one of the foundations of the Soviet system was a supra-national ethos, which aimed to foster a sense of 'Soviet internationalism' among its peoples and the eventual creation of a 'Soviet man'. This of course involved colossal hypocrisy and humbug, not least because of periodic bouts of russification of political and cultural life in the non-Russian republics, yet millions of Soviet citizens still genuinely saw themselves as more than their national and ethnic identities (although any sense of 'Soviet' identity would have been less well developed in the 1930s). Successive Soviet leaderships also hailed from a variety of backgrounds, not just Russian, although Russians, as the largest national group, tended to predominate. Many of those who

³ Defined in Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Prevention & Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as 'any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, such as: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.' For the full text, see <http://www.hrweb.org/legal/genocide.html>

⁴ Alec Nove, *The Stalin Phenomenon*, London, 1993, p.38.

did abominable things in Ukraine in 1932-3 were not ethnic Ukrainians, but many of them were. The point is that all identified with the USSR and acted in its name, not that of Russia.

RUSSIAN VIEWS

9. **The current Russian leadership is deeply critical of the Ukrainian claim that the famine was genocide.** Foreign Minister Lavrov recently identified it as one of the most serious points of friction in the bilateral relationship. **But Russian views are complex.** Many in Russia genuinely take deep offence at any suggestion that their country practised genocide against Ukraine, and with good reason. The Stalinist system slaughtered millions of their compatriots too, and the vast majority of Russians continue to think of Ukrainians as a people who are closely related, even identical, to themselves. Yet there is also a widespread reluctance in Russia to concede that the Soviet era as a whole was not a progressive experience, or at least that its achievements came at a catastrophically high cost, and that some of the Soviet-era values which many Russians still applaud led directly to appalling suffering and waste. Such resistance can reveal itself in stubborn reluctance to acknowledge the sins of the Soviet Kremlin. Equally, some Russians resent what they see as a double-standard: calls for them to confront an often dark past, yet a continuing refusal by many Ukrainians to face up to awkward chapters in their own history (eg the extent of collaboration in parts of Ukraine during the Nazi occupation, and the crimes of Ukrainian nationalist partisans during the Second World War). Finally, there is no doubt concern in Moscow that, as the successor State to the USSR, Russia might one day find itself liable for reparations.

HMG'S LINE: SOME THOUGHTS

10. **HMG's current line on the famine was drawn up as a response to Ukraine's draft resolution at the UNGA in 2003. It refers to the famine as 'one of Stalin's most terrible crimes', but does not describe it as genocide.** Nor is the UN 'the right forum in which to resolve complex historical issues, even though terrible crimes are involved.'⁵ (Dr MacShane made the same points in a letter to Lord Howe the previous month, but went a little further by adding that 'it is arguable whether the policy of enforced collectivisation which led to the famine (sic) was aimed at the elimination of all ethnic Ukrainians'.⁶) EU Partners took the same view. The EU also proposed that Russian and Ukrainian historians co-operate to investigate the famine and its causes. **In the light of paras 4-8, the substance of the UK's position remains sound.** As suggested in his note of 27 November (not to all), however, it probably needs reviewing, given events since the Orange Revolution and the imminence of the 75th anniversary commemorations (expected in either 2007 or 2008).

12. The UK's position on the Armenian massacres during World War One, another controversial case of alleged 'genocide', may offer ideas for an up-dated form of words:

The Government understands the strength of feeling about this terrible episode in history. The massacres of 1915-16 were appalling and tragic, and condemned as such by the British Government of the day. We fully endorse that view. However, neither this Government nor the previous British Government have judged that the evidence is sufficiently unequivocal to

⁵ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 18 December 2003: Column 1742.

⁶ Dr MacShane to Lord Howe, 4 November 2003.

persuade us that these events should be categorised as genocide as defined by the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide. The question remains a matter of debate amongst historians.

We extend our deepest sympathies to the descendants of the victims and give our assurances that the massacres will not be forgotten. We encourage the Governments of Armenia and Turkey to look to the future and build a better relationship between their countries. In the meantime, we will continue to work for peace, security and mutual understanding in the region.

13. In terms of handling official commemorations of the Armenian massacres, we tend to draw on the Defence Attache for the South Caucasus, who lays a wreath at the Armenian Genocide day ceremony in Yerevan on 24 April. On Holocaust Day, now marked in the UK on 27 January, we have invited the Head of the Orthodox Armenian Church as an 'observer' at the event, in spite of requests from the Armenian authorities to play a more active role.

14. A final consideration worth noting is that the Ukrainian famine, like the Armenian 'genocide' before it, pre-dated the first definition of genocide as a crime under international law. HMG has tended not to favour the retrospective application of international law.

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Sources

(Note: the literature on the famine is enormous. The following references merely scratch the surface of a rich vein of scholarship and research.)

Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow. Soviet Collectivisation & the Terror-Famine*, New York, 1986

RW Davies & SG Wheatcroft, *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia. Volume 5. The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931-1933*, Basingstoke, 2004

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Mark B. Tauger, 'The 1932 Harvest & the Soviet Famine of 1932-1933', *Slavic Review*, 1991, 1, pp.70-89

-- *Natural Disasters & Human Actions in the Soviet Famines of 1931-1933*, Carl Beck Papers in Russian & East European Studies, June 2001