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# The Big Lie aided coverup of Ukraine Horror

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This is the second of two excerpts from Mr. Conquest’s new book, The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine, published by the University of Alberta Press.

*In the early 1930s, Josef Stalin caused a famine in the Ukraine to crush an independently minded peasantry and push home his plans for collective farms. By imposing unrealistic grain quotas, Moscow starved five million peasants to death.*

Josef Stalin had a profound grasp of what Adolf Hitler approvingly called the Big Lie. The terror famine with which the Soviet leader killed millions in the Ukraine and other regions in the early 1930s was the first major instance of the exercise of this technique of influencing public opinion. Every effort was made to persuade the West that no famine was taking place, and later that non had taken place.

Even in 1932 it was not feasible to keep all foreigners out of the famine areas, and a number of true accounts reached Western Europe and the United States. In most cases, journalists could not both keep their visas and reveal the facts, although Malcolm Muggeridge, writing for the Manchester Guardian, sent some of his reports sub rosa through the British diplomatic bag. “The battlefield is as desolate,” he reported, “as in any war and stretches wider… on the one side, millions of starving peasants, their bodies often swollen from lack of food; on the other, soldier members of OGPU (Stalin’s secret police) carrying out the instructions of the dictatorship of the proletariat. They had gone over the country like a swarm of locusts and taken everything edible; they had shot or exiled thousands of peasants, sometimes whole villages; they had reduced some of the most fertile land in the world to a melancholy desert.”

In the Soviet Union, no word about the famine was allowed to appear in the press or elsewhere. People who referred to it were subject to arrest for anti-Soviet propaganda, usually being sentenced to five or more years in labor camps.

In 1933, a soldier serving in Fedosiya in the Crimea received a letter from his wife, describing the deaths of neighbors and the miserable condition of herself and their child. The political officer seized the letter and next day had the soldier denounce it was a forgery. The wife and son did not survive.

One agronomist, bullied for sending a sick messenger, replied that the whole village was starving. The response was: “There is no starvation in the Soviet Union.”

Writer Arthur Koestler, who was in Kharkov in 1932-33, reported that it gave him a most unreal feeling to read the local papers full of pictures of young people smiling under banners but “no one word about the local famine, epidemics, the dying out of whole villages… the enormous land was covered with a blanket of silence.”

Outside the Soviet Union, the denials were hot and strong. The Soviet Embassy in Washington claimed the Ukraine’s population had increased by 2 per cent per annum during the early 1930s, and it had the lowest death rate of any Soviet republic. Stalin also was abetted by many Westerners who for one reason or another wished to deceive or be deceived. In the huge work - Soviet Communism: A New Civilization? by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, which followed their visit to the Soviet Union in 1932 and 1933 - one finds a general hostility toward the peasantry matching that of the Bolsheviks. The Webbs wrote of the peasants’ “characteristic vices of greed and cunning, varied by outbursts of drunkenness and recurrent periods of sloth.” They also spoke approvingly of turning these backward characters “into public-spirited co-operators, working upon a prescribed plan for the common product to be equitably shared among themselves.”

In a significant statement at the time, M. M. Khatayevich, a leading Communist, told a party activist: “A ruthless struggle is going on between the peasantry and our regime. It’s a struggle to the death. This year was a test of our strength and their endurance. It took a famine to show them who is master here. It has cost millions of lives, but the collective farm system is here to stay. We’ve won the war.”

With the “victory” won, however, Moscow realized the disastrous agricultural situation could hardly be allowed to go on indefinitely. In February, 1933, a “seed subsidy” was authorized for the next harvest, with 325,000 tons to go to Ukraine. In the following month, the grain collection in the Ukraine was officially halted at last.

The debilitated peasants were now launched on a new harvest campaign. Neither they nor their surviving horses were capable of hard labor, yet the Ukrainian Government called for harder work. The sowing of 1933 was accomplished in various ways. The inadequate local work force was supplemented from outside. Students and others from the towns were “mobilized” to reap the harvest, and army squads were sent to help. In one village, where the whole population had either died or left, troops were kept in tents away from the village and told, as others had been, that there had been an epidemic.

The central fact of the whole famine is that the Soviet Union’s total grain crop for 1932 was no worse then that of 1931, and was only 12 per cent below the 1926-1930 average. It was far from famine level, but procurements were up to 44 per cent. There was no way in which local readjustments could have prevented the crisis and the famine, and it can be blamed quite unequivocally on Stalin and the Moscow leadership.

There has never been an official investigation of the rural terror in the Ukraine and neighboring territories in 1930-1933; no statement on the loss of human life has been issued, nor have the archives been opened to independent researchers. Nevertheless, we are in a position to make reasonably sound estimates of the numbers who died.

The casualty rate varied considerably by area and even village, from 10 per cent to 100 per cent. In villages of 3,000 to 4,000 people (Orlivka, Smolanka, Hrabivka), often fewer than 100 were left. Nowadays, the term “genocide” is often used rhetorically, but it certainly appears that such a charge can be levelled against the Soviet Union for its actions in the Ukraine.

It was the view of Nikolai Bukharin, a Bolshevik leader executed in 1938 during a Stalin purge, that the worst result of the events of 1930-1933 was not so much the sufferings of the peasantry, frightful though these were. It was the “deep change in the psychological outlook of those Communists who participated in this campaign and, instead of going mad, became professional bureaucrats for whom terror was henceforth a normal method of administration, and obedience to any order from above a high virtue,” diagnosing “a real dehumanization of the people working in the Soviet apparatus.”

The main lesson seems to be that the Communist ideology provided the motivation for an unprecedented massacre of men, women and children, and that this ideology, perhaps a set-piece theory, turned out to be a primitive and schematic approach to matters far too complex for it. Sacrifices of millions of people were made and they were in vain.

The question of whether the present leaders of the Soviet Union would be willing to kill tens of millions of foreigners in a war, or suffer a loss of millions of their own subjects, is sometimes canvassed. The fact that the older leaders were direct accomplices in the actual killing of millions of Ukrainians and others in order to establish the political and social order prescribed by their doctrine, and that the young leaders still justify the procedure, may perhaps be regarded as not without some relevance.

The events which took place in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s cannot be shrugged off as too remote to be of any current significance. So long as they cannot be seriously investigated or discussed in the country where they took place, it is clear that they are in no sense part of the past but a living issue very much to be taken into account when considering the Soviet Union as it is today. The present rulers remain the heirs and accomplices of that dreadful history.