

“Ukraine Remembers, the World acknowledges” The Holodomor in Ukraine’s historical policy

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The recent celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor, the catastrophic famine of 1932–1933 which claimed the lives of several million Ukrainian peasants, as well as other actions undertaken by the Ukrainian state in connection with the anniversary (monuments to the Holodomor victims to be erected in all towns affected by the famine) prove that president Viktor Yushchenko seeks to establish the memory of the Holodomor as the fundamental experience constituting the Ukrainian national identity and, in the international context, to represent Ukraine as the victim of the greatest genocide in history. It has also been clear for some time that Kyiv’s historical policy (which the president alone is involved in) emphasises the aspects of martyrdom and also emphasises sensitive issues concerning Russia, whilst avoiding those sensitive to Poland.

According to Kyiv’s official doctrine, the Holodomor was not only an ‘artificial famine’ (which is beyond all doubt), but also a crime of genocide against the Ukrainian nation, which is highly dubious from the historical and legal point of view. For president Yushchenko, the recognition of the Holodomor as genocide by as many states and international organisations as possible, and especially the UN, is one of the main objectives of his presidency. The Russian diplomacy is opposing these efforts – in Moscow’s view, the disastrous famine had not been artificially provoked and certainly it was not intended to exterminate the Ukrainians. Russia is also concerned about the fact that, even though Kyiv’s official rhetoric blames the Holodomor on the “Communist regime”, the media and public discussions are dominated by anti-Russian rhetoric.

The slogan of this year’s celebrations of the Holodomor anniversary was “Ukraine remembers, the world acknowledges”

“Ukraine Remembers”

Throughout 1932 and 1933 a greater part of the steppe regions of the Soviet Union were affected by a catastrophic famine which occurred as a result of the collectivisation and the imposition of unrealistic, brutally enforced quotas on the supplies of agricultural products. In this sense, the famine was an ‘artificial’ occurrence and the repression involved in enforcing the supplies met the definition of a crime against humanity. However,

whether it had been 'planned' remains an open question (this issue, as well as the controversies concerning the number of victims, are discussed in the Appendix). The famine, which was particularly severe in Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus and Kazakhstan, claimed millions of lives. The Communist regime banned the memory of the disaster and for decades, the Holodomor would only be mentioned by those in emigration (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was the first to remind the world of the famine in *The Gulag Archipelago*). Around 1989, Ukraine started to rediscover the Holodomor¹, which from the very start provoked criticism from the authorities of first, the Soviet Union and then, the Russian Federation. In 1998, the Holodomor and Repression Victims Remembrance Day was established in Ukraine, celebrated every year on the last Sunday of November. However, it was only president Yushchenko who elevated the memory of the Holodomor to the level of the key element of national memory. He also took very active measures to make other states and international organisations recognise the Holodomor as a crime of genocide against the Ukrainian nation, and in 2006, had the Ukrainian parliament adopt a resolution recognising the Holodomor as genocide and providing for criminal liability for Holodomor denial. Nevertheless, the dynamic development of historical studies of the famine has not led to any trials of the perpetrators and participants.

This year's celebrations were organised with particular splendour for several reasons including the fact that the construction of the Holodomor mausoleum in Kyiv was completed. In his statements during the celebrations and in interviews preceding the anniversary Yushchenko emphasised the exceptional and genocidal character of the Holodomor, claiming that "it had been a planned murder (...) intended to eradicate this nation"² or that "the famine had been a staged murder of 10 million people"³.

It is also doubtful if the focus on martyrdom of the celebrations will help Ukrainian society overcome its deep trauma related to the events of 1930s, or, on the contrary, perpetuate and deepen this trauma.

In his statements, Yushchenko also mentioned other victims of the Communist

terror (including the Polish victims of the Katyn massacre), however, the unofficial rhetoric of the celebrations was clearly anti-Russian, and not anti-Soviet (especially since the moment when the president of the Russian Federation refused to take part in the celebrations, which Yushchenko took to be an "insult to the memory of the victims"⁴). The Ukrainian president also emphasised the exceptional character of the Holodomor and argued that restoring its memory was a precondition of "national purification"⁵. Even though the Party of Regions boycotted the Kyiv celebrations, no-one dared criticise the idea to pay respect to the Holodomor victims. However, criticism was often expressed concerning the huge cost of this year's celebration, as well as the way the tragedy was discussed in schools, the outcome of which was that ten-year-olds participating in art contests would draw scenes of cannibalism. It is also doubtful if the focus on martyrdom or in some cases the macabre tone of the celebrations will help Ukrainian society overcome its deep trauma related to the events of 1930s, or, on the contrary, perpetuate and deepen this trauma.

President Yushchenko's historical policy

Ukraine has been independently building its national identity, and therefore also its collective memory, for less than twenty years. The country is deeply divided in this respect: different regions have different histories, use different languages and profess different religious denominations. There are two opposing 'narratives' in the way the Ukrainians look at their

¹ Most authors use the terms "Great Famine", "hunger plague" and similar. Here, we will stick to the direct Ukrainian term as a proper name designating only one event: the disastrous famine of 1932–1933 in Ukraine. Ukrainian studies sometimes mention "holodomors" in the plural, which includes the famines of 1920–1921 and 1946–1947.

² Interview for *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 20.11.2008, quoted after the original text published on the Ukrainian president's website at <http://www.president.gov.ua/news/12096.html> Yushchenko used the word 'natsiya', which means nation in the ethnic, not in political sense.

³ Interview for *Dziennik* of 20.11.2008 quoted after the original text published on the Ukrainian president's website at <http://www.president.gov.ua/news/12094.html>

⁴ Interview for *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, see footnote 2.

⁵ Cf. the speech delivered during the opening ceremony of the Holodomor victims mausoleum in Kyiv at, <http://www.president.gov.ua/news/12121.html>

history and national identity – the post-Communist narrative oriented towards the country and the people rather than the state and the nation, which emphasises the importance of social (class) and ethnic bonds over ethnic relations, and the nationalist narrative oriented towards the nation in the strictly ethnic sense (with language as the essence of the nation's existence), in which political ties are of lesser importance. Because of this 'structural' dispute, a conscious formation of a national-civil community by the state authorities, including 'historical policy', is of enormous importance.

The famine was an experience shared by all peasant families of the Soviet Ukraine in the 1930s. The memory of the Holodomor does not provoke any disputes with Poland.

While president Leonid Kuchma paid little attention to this set of issues, making instrumental use of them but at the same time refraining from intervening in the social process of national memory reconstruction, his successor seems to consider historical policy as the most important domain of his activities. For example,

Yushchenko has established the Ukrainian National Memory Institute, tried to rehabilitate the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and reconcile its veterans with Red Army veterans, etc. However, he has focused his main efforts on promoting the memory of the Holodomor, correctly recognising that no other historical event provides an opportunity to unite the nation and build a shared identity so effectively.

One of the few things which are common for the whole of Ukraine is that a massive majority of ethnic Ukrainians have relatives in the countryside and largely share the values associated with agricultural life, and most of the citizens of Ukraine have origins in rural areas no more than three generations back. For these reasons, they inherit the trauma of the 1930s famine to a smaller or larger extent (even if they do not always inherit a conscious memory of these events).

The experience of the Holodomor truly unites Ukraine (i.e. mainly, though not exclusively, the Ukrainians). The famine was an experience shared by all peasant families of the Soviet Ukraine in the 1930s, i.e. nearly all families in the whole country, given the fact that the continuity of Ukraine's urban populations was interrupted before and during World War II, and that after the war massive migration from the countryside to the cities took place. And even though the Western districts, annexed by the Soviet Union during the war, did not experience this disaster, their inhabitants feel solidarity with the victims. The memory of World War II, on the other hand, is a divisive factor (a greater part of the country celebrates the memory of the Red Army, while the western districts remember the Ukrainian Insurgent Army), just like the memory of the still insufficiently studied struggle for independence of 1917–1921 (at that time, too, the West and the East of Ukraine fought separately and some episodes bore the features of a Ukrainian civil war). Finally, the memory of the Cossack times is too distant to serve as a foundation for the building of a shared national memory.

The memory of the Holodomor does not provoke any disputes with Poland, which Yushchenko seems to be trying to avoid. It is notable that while massive celebrations were organised in early 2008 to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Kruty⁶, no central events were held in November to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the creation of the West Ukrainian National Republic⁷, an event of much greater significance which, however, marked the start of the war with Poland. Likewise, in 2008 the anniversary of Khmel'nitsky's victorious 1648 campaign, Ukraine's greatest ever military success, was practically ignored, while the anniversary of the destruction of Baturyn by the Russian army was officially celebrated⁸.

It appears that the vision of Ukraine's history developed by Yushchenko's circle is intended to purge the national memory of recollections of the conflicts with Poland (the UPA is

⁶ The battle that took place on 29 January 1918 near Kruty, north-east of Kyiv when improvised military units of the Ukrainian People's Republic strove to stop the Bolshevik army heading towards Kyiv. That skirmish, which was of little military importance, was elevated to the rank of the symbol of the first Ukrainian-Bolshevik war already in 1918.

⁷ The state of the Galicia Ukrainians with the capital in Lviv, which existed between November 1918 and July 1919. On the anniversary day, Yushchenko arrived in Lviv and placed flowers on the graves of the fallen Ukrainian soldiers buried in the Yanov Cemetery, but not at the Ukrainian army mausoleum in the Lychakiv Cemetery. The central media did not report on this event.

⁸ Baturyn was the capital of the hetmans of Left-Bank Ukraine. When hetman Ivan Mazepa struck an alliance with Sweden, on 2 November 1708 the Russian army destroyed the city killing most of its civilian inhabitants.

represented solely as an enemy of Russia and Germany, while its anti-Polish activities are ignored), and to represent Russia as the eternal and unrelenting enemy of Ukraine and the Ukrainians. The Holodomor serves this purpose perfectly as long as it is represented as a crime against the Ukrainians, committed by the Russians. And even though Volodymyr Fesenko's view that in Yushchenko's opinion "the theme of the Holodomor will help to form the modern Ukrainian nation in a way similar to the one in which the modern Jewish nation has been formed by reference to the Holocaust"⁹ seems exaggerated, the claims that the Ukrainians have been the victims of the greatest genocide in history (and the overstating of the number of victims to this end) does appear to be an effort to compete with the memory of the Holocaust.

"The World acknowledges"

During Yushchenko's presidency Ukraine became strongly committed to convincing the international public opinion that the Holodomor meets the definition of genocide, and started to actively encourage the parliaments of successive states, as well as successive international organisations, to adopt declarations recognising the Holodomor as an act (crime) of genocide. So far, the Holodomor has been recognised as genocide in one way or another by the following states (in chronological order): Estonia, Australia, Canada, Hungary, Lithuania, Georgia, Poland¹⁰, Peru, Paraguay, Equator, Columbia, Mexico and Latvia, as well as the House of

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Representatives of the US Congress and, indirectly, The Holy See¹¹. The European Parliament, sticking to the letter of the convention, recognised the Holodomor as a crime against humanity, but not as genocide. Also the United Nations, UNESCO, the OSCE, Argentina, Spain, Chile, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the Russian Federation issued documents commemorating the Holodomor victims (in the case of Russia, "the victims of the 1930s famine").

It appears that the objective behind the Ukrainian leadership's efforts is to build an international image of Ukraine and the Ukrainians (in the ethnic sense) as a country and nation particularly affected by the crimes of Communism, and therefore deserving a special status and special support and, perhaps, special compensation (although the latter idea has as yet never been officially formulated).

It should be added here that the Holodomor was first recognised as genocide in the 1970s by Ukrainian émigrés (who were following the example of the Armenian diaspora)¹², and that it was this group which implanted the concept in independent Ukraine. One could therefore ask if Kyiv's current measures are not perhaps an implementation of the long-term strategy of the Ukrainian nationalist movement.

The tendency is unacceptable for the Russian Federation which is trying to prevent the Holodomor from being recognised as genocide by the international community. It is doing so because, for the wider world, Russia is the Soviet Union's successor and therefore 'inherits' the responsibility for Soviet crimes just as the Germany inherits the responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich, but also because Russia is reluctant to discuss the crimes of the Communist regime against the Russian nation itself, including the famine of 1932–1933 in the Volga region, the Caucasus, Western Siberia and Kazakhstan. Paradoxically, the necessity to contest the Ukrainian 'Holodomor doctrine' has forced Russian politicians and historians to raise the subject and finally break the silence.

⁹ www.for-ua.com/news_print.php?news=325957

¹⁰ Resolution of the Polish Senate of 16 March 2006 on the anniversary of the Great Famine in Ukraine and Resolution of the Polish Sejm of 6 December 2006 commemorating the victims of the Great Famine in Ukraine.

¹¹ The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* published in 2004 contains the following passage on p. 506: "The twentieth century bears the tragic mark of different genocides: from that of the Armenians to that of the Ukrainians, from that of the Cambodians to those perpetrated in Africa and in the Balkans". According to Kyiv, this is equivalent to recognition of the Holodomor as genocide.

¹² The diaspora started to refer to the Holodomor as the 'Ukrainian Holocaust', e.g. in the title of Myron Dolot's book *Execution by Hunger. The Hidden Holocaust* (New York 1985). Since 1995 the term has been gaining currency in Ukraine as well.

APPENDIX

The Holodomor as genocide

The Ukrainian diaspora and the patriotic elite of independent Ukraine which follows the diaspora's example, are convinced that the Holodomor was genocide, deliberately planned and carried out by the Soviet Union's leadership in order to exterminate the Ukrainian nation as such. This view, which has recently been represented as an obvious and undisputable truth, is neither obvious nor generally accepted by historians.

It is beyond all doubt that the catastrophic famine of 1932–1933 had not been occasioned by natural disasters but was a consequence of the Soviet agricultural policy which sought to maximise agricultural exports (especially cereal exports) without taking any account of the consequences. It has also been sufficiently demonstrated that the repressions against the regions that failed to meet their cereals supplies obligations were much more severe in the Ukrainian SSR and in Krasnodar Krai of the Russian FSSR (which at that time had a predominantly Ukrainian population) than in ethnically Russian areas¹, and that it was precisely those repressions that caused the famine to transform into the Holodomor, a catastrophe that claimed millions of lives. It is therefore justified to claim that the Soviet authorities used the famine as an instrument of a repression campaign designed to break the resistance of the Ukrainian rural population against communism, and to refer to the repressions as a crime against humanity.

However, it is neither certain nor sufficiently probable that the Soviet leadership assumed from the start that its agricultural policy would trigger a massive famine among the rural population, i.e. that the famine was provoked deliberately. This view seems to stem, on the one hand, from a demonization of the Stalinist regime, and on the other, from an overestimation of its efficacy and planning capacity.

It is even less clear if the repression was directed against the Ukrainians as a nation (ethnic group), or against the peasants of the steppe areas as the last force capable of opposing the regime. The famine and repression affected the inhabitants of all steppe regions of the Soviet Union, and even though undoubtedly they were much more severe in Ukraine than elsewhere, they were not directed only against ethnically Ukrainian villages and the Russians, Poles, Germans, Greeks, Moldovans, etc. who were numerous in the Ukrainian peasantry also fell victim to the Holodomor. Many Ukrainian historians support the former view, while a majority of historians in the West argue that the latter is true.

Under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948, genocide means "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" (article II). Therefore, in order for an act to be recognised as the crime of genocide it has to be demonstrated, firstly, that the victim was a group possessing the features mentioned in the convention (one cannot commit genocide against a social class or political group), and secondly, that the perpetrator acted with the intention to destroy that group in whole or in part (there can be no such thing as 'nondeliberate genocide').

The number of Holodomor victims

Different numbers of Holodomor victims are quoted in Ukrainian publications and public statements, ranging from 3 to 4 million to 8 to 10 million or even 12 million². Since before the famine Ukraine had a population of around 32 million, the highest numbers cannot be substantiated demographically: it is certain that the Holodomor did not kill a fourth, and certainly not a third, of Ukraine's population.

¹ The events in Kazakhstan have not been sufficiently studied as yet and it is therefore not possible to assess the local repression policy.

² e.g. *Holos Ukrayiny* (the official newspaper of the Ukrainian parliament) featured the range 7.5-12.5 mln on its cover on 6 April 2006.

Systematic studies of the subject did not start until the 1990s (the numbers quoted before were estimates derived using methodologies that were sometimes vague). Already in 2002 Stanislav Kulchytsky, a distinguished Ukrainian historian, concluded that the number of the Holodomor victims ranged between 3 and 3.5 million (excluding Krasnodar Krai)³. Similar results were published on the eve of this year's celebrations by the Demography and Social Research Institute of the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences, according to which the famine had claimed 3.2 million lives, including around 800 thousand children⁴. The lists of names compiled in particular districts identified 800 thousand Holodomor victims whose names are known.

³ Stanisław Kulczycki, Skolko nas pogibło ot Gołodomora 1933 goda? *Zierkato Niedieli*, nr 45, 2002.

⁴ According to a dispatch of UNIAN agency, www.unian.net/news/print.php?id=283901

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