

Category: OPINION

03 Oct 2002

Soviet crimes remain unpunished

By Taras Kuzio

Kyiv Post, 3 October 2002

Ukraine's ambiguous relationship to its Soviet past is nowhere more apparent than on the streets of downtown Kyiv.

A small monument to the artificial famine of 1932-33, which caused upwards of 7 million deaths in Ukraine, has stood on Mykhailivska Square in central Kyiv for over a decade. However, it was not until 2000 that the hammer and sickle insignia was finally removed from the facade of the parliament building. To this day, a similar insignia remains prominently visible on a building overlooking Independence Square. The massive Lenin statue that formerly dominated the square (when it was still named after October) was quickly removed after independence and has now been replaced by a grandiose monument to independence. At the other end of Khreshchatyk, though, a smaller, "more artistic" Lenin statue continues to preside over Bessarabsky Square.

In fact, statues of Lenin still stand in countless Ukrainian towns. The "Black Book of Communism. Crimes, Terror, Repression" published in France in 1997 and then by Harvard in 1999 provided evidence that the victims of Lenin's party exceeded those of the Nazis. While neo-Nazi parties are banned in Germany, a fifth of Ukrainians still vote for the Communists. The Soviet system has never been denounced in total, the way the Nazis were in Germany and Austria. In fact, this would probably be impossible given the former Soviet Ukrainian nomenklatura still rules Ukraine.

More than a decade after the USSR collapsed, dealing with Soviet crimes against humanity – an issue first raised in the glasnost era of the late 1980s – remains unfinished business.

Soviet famine denial

In an open letter to Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1987, the veteran dissident Vyachaslav Chornovil wrote, "The biggest and most infamous blank spot in the Soviet history of Ukraine is the hollow silence for over 50 years about the genocide of the Ukrainian nation organized by Stalin and his henchmen ... The Great Famine of 1932-33, which took millions of human lives. In one year - 1933 - my people lost more than throughout all of World War II, which ravaged our land."

Not surprisingly, the Communist Party of Ukraine was unwilling to come to terms with the famine. In a speech devoted to the 70th anniversary of Soviet rule in Ukraine, CPU leader Volodymyr Shcherbytsky admitted that famine had occurred as a consequence of collectivization, but he attributed the "serious food problems" to an "unforeseen drought." Only in 1990 did the CPU, admit that the famine had taken place - and to this day, it denies that it was the result of deliberate policy.

During the Gorbachev era, it was liberal Moscow publications such as Ogonyok that first covered the famine as a "man-made" Stalinist crime. Yury Shcherbak, then head of the Green World Association and now Ambassador to Canada, said in a 1988 interview: "The famine of 1932-33 was definitely not due to any natural disasters. There was no drought, no hurricanes which could have provided the reason." In his view, there was no doubt that "the famine was organized from above."

The Writers Union of Ukraine produced the most revealing accounts of the famine and Great Terror. In early 1988, the famine was first described as a "holodomor" (terror famine) directed at the peasants and leading to a "holocaust of millions." The famine was followed by the "Great Terror," which targetted the cultural-political elites who had spearheaded Ukrainianization in the 1920s.

At the time, the poet Borys Oliynyk called for the publication of a "white book," in which "not only is Stalin fully exposed with stenographic clarity and precision, but

also the degree of guilt of every member of his coterie is defined, and not only are the victims identified by name, but those who planned and carried out illegal acts."

The confusion surrounding attitudes to the Soviet past in post-Soviet Ukraine is exemplified in Oliynyk himself. He continues to be a member of the Communist Party, which consistently ignores the famine and other Stalinist crimes. Not surprisingly, Ukraine's post-Soviet authorities have never published a "white book."

Western denial

It was not only the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that denied – and whose successors continue to deny – that artificial famine had killed millions of Ukrainians, Kazakhs and others in 1932-33. Right through to the late 1980s – and in some cases still now – Western textbooks of Soviet history and politics tended to ignore the famine and downplay the brutality of the Soviet collectivization campaign. Some of the authors were simply apologists of Stalinism. Others were admirers of the "progressive" nature of the USSR. Bedazzled by the achievements of Soviet modernization in the 1930s, they would admit only begrudgingly that some "unfortunate mistakes" were made. To this day, many scholars continue to play down the total numbers murdered under Stalinism and deny Ukrainians were targeted in the famine. The peasants died not because they were Ukrainian, but because they were peasants – and anyway the famine struck throughout the USSR.

Even after the Gorbachev-era Soviet press published death toll figures for the 1930s which exceeded Robert Conquest's conservative estimates in his "Harvest of Sorrow. Soviet Collectivization and the Terror Famine," the book was dismissed as "rubbish" by Moshe Lewin, an American academic. Alexander Dallin, who many view as the father of modern Soviet studies, dismissed the idea that the famine was artificially planned. Writing in the *New Republic* in 1986, Alec Nove, a respected expert on the Soviet economy, accused Conquest of "accepting the Ukrainian nationalist myth."

The widespread antipathy for Conquest among mainstream academics echoed the views of Western Communists such as Canadian Douglas Tottle, who wrote "Fraud, Famine and Fascism. The Ukrainian Genocide Myth From Hitler to Harvard" during the late 1980s. Writers in New York's Village Voice and the London Review of Books claimed that the mythical famine was part of the anti-communist campaign against the Soviet Union unleashed by Ronald Reagan. Conquest's book was placed on a par with Hollywood films like "Rambo" and "Red Dawn."

Although Stalinism is undoubtedly a discredited ideology, few in Ukraine or the West wish to equate it with Nazism. Western academics still see Nazism as intrinsically evil, while insisting communism always had good intentions. Soviet crimes against humanity are the fault of "Stalinism" or "mistakes," not the Communist Party or Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Counting the cost

Discussion of the famine and Great Terror in the Gorbachev era press produced a wide range of death toll estimates. Dissident historian Roy Medvedev believed a fifth of the Soviet population, 38 million people, suffered under Stalinism. Of these, 12 million died, including 6 million in the famine in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the North Caucasus and Volga region. Another 10 million were deported or dekulakised. Other figures gave 25 million dead or imprisoned before 1935 and the same number from 1935-1953, a total of 50 million dead and repressed. Conquest gave the total dead resulting from the famine and dekulakisation as 14.5 million, 80 percent of whom were in Ukraine. New research in the 1990s produced even higher figures.

During the 1930s, the population of the Russian SFSR increased by 28 percent. In the same period, the Ukrainian population lost upward of 10 million people, 5-7 million due to the famine. According to demographic projections, Ukraine's population should have reached 38 million by 1939. The results of the falsified Soviet census of 1939 showed only 31 million. Accordingly, Ukraine's population growth in the twentieth century has been much slower than Russia's. By the 1989 Soviet census, ethnic Ukrainians represented only 40 out of the Ukrainian SSR's 52

million (12 million Russians had migrated to Ukraine during the Soviet era). Since 1992, the population has declined by another 3 million. The left accuse Ukraine's new ruling elite of a new "genocide," but they refuse to acknowledge guilt for the 1932-33 famine.

Stalinism and Soviet nationality policies produced a divided Ukraine and a hobbled peasantry. While Ukrainians were demographically dominant in all urban centers, they were culturally dominant only in western regions. Stalinism also ethnically cleansed the Ukrainian presence from the Kuban region of the North Caucasus. Since the 1930s, Sovietization and Russification in eastern Ukraine has produced a passive population where civic activity is low and oligarchs hold sway, opposed only by the hard line Communists. It is not coincidental that three out of four opposition forces (Our Ukraine, Yulia Tymoshenko and the Socialists) have their roots in the more active, nationally conscious and less sovietized western and central Ukraine.

Punishing Soviet crimes

Calls by writers in the late Soviet era for those who were responsible for Stalinism to be brought to trial have fallen on deaf ears. Lazar Kaganovich, one of the Soviet leaders closest to Stalin in the 1930s, was allowed to live in peace and obscurity in Moscow until his death in 1991 at the age of 98. Medvedev wrote, "He had quite as many crimes on his conscience as those hanged at Nuremberg."

The only former Soviet countries to have put former members of the secret police on trial are Latvia and Estonia. This has provoked a furious reaction from Russia, which has itself been exhibiting an increasingly confused attitude to the Soviet past since it adopted the old Soviet anthem with new lyrics.

Back in the Gorbachev era, Ukrainian writer Volodymyr Musienko called upon his countrymen to "clear themselves of the nuclei of slavery that have eaten their way into the cellular tissue of our bones, of the slime of conscious deceit, of fear, servility and lack of self-esteem." Nearly two decades after Gorbachev introduced perestroika

and glasnost in the USSR, this worthy call has still to be acted upon by Ukraine's leaders.

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