

# STARVATION: THE HOLODOMOR

How the Man of Steel Broke the People, 1928-1933



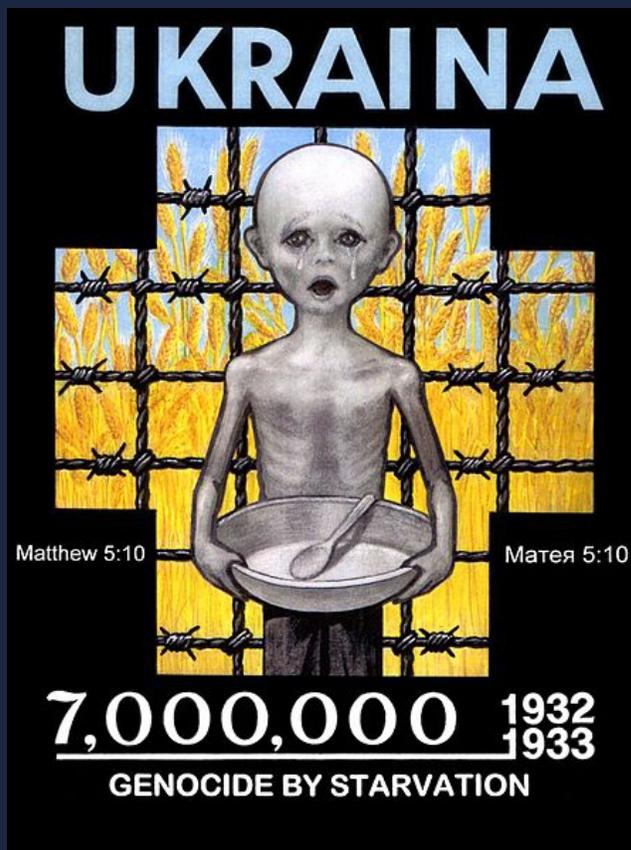
Word of the famine leaked out of the USSR, but Stalin denied the famine's existence and refused foreign aid.



At first, starvation victims garnered attention as people began to die.



As the famine progressed, death became commonplace. This photo shows starvation victims lying on the sidewalks in Kharkiv, Ukraine, while people walk by. At the height of the famine in June & July, 1933, 30,000 people died each day.



The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33 came to be known as the Holodomor, which means "extermination by hunger." It is also called the Terror-Famine and Famine-Genocide. It was a State-orchestrated famine in Ukraine in 1932 and 1933 that killed between 5 and 7 million Ukrainians.



Starving children in Ukraine, 1932-33.

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**H**olodomor,” comes from the Ukrainian expression *moryty holodom*, which means “to kill by starving to death.” It is the name given to the famine of 1932-33 in Ukraine and other parts of the Soviet Union. During those years, five to seven million men, women and children gradually starved to death as a direct result of Soviet policies.

Requisitioning continued all throughout 1932 and 33, leaving people in Ukraine nothing at all to eat. “The government took everything away. Everything! It was to torture the people. Nobody would dare say anything, because they were so afraid they would be sent to Siberia. Stalin knew exactly how to handle his people to keep them quiet and afraid, always afraid,” remembered Mennonite Anna Peters.

Left with no food, people ate anything they could find. Grass. Linden bark. Moss, acorns, leaves. Weeds like nettle and sorrel. Wild berries. Flowers such as geraniums, marigolds, acacia blossoms and dandelions. Anything that moved: dogs and cats, horses, squirrels, rats, ants, and turtles. “We were waiting for the grass to grow,” recalled Anna Peters, “and that’s what we were eating. And then...a horse drowned in a ditch. All the neighbors divided up that horse meat, and that saved us from starving to death. It’s terrible...it was a drowned horse! But we ate it anyways.” A family cow, if the requisitioning teams let a family keep it, made the difference of life and death for a family. Some



In Donetsk, a requisitioning brigade stands behind sacks of grain taken from starving peasants in 1932 for export. The barefoot peasant woman, seated in front, is probably starving.

villagers guarded their cow around the clock, lest another family steal it. Families sometimes sent children to live with relatives who had more food.

A member of a Russian requisitioning brigade later described the hunger he had witnessed in Ukrainian children. “The faces of those children were old, exhausted, as if they had already lived on the earth for 70 years. And their eyes, Lord!” And still, the requisitioning brigades took food from the people.

As the genocide continued in Ukraine, huge numbers began to die. People dropped in the streets.



**Black-listed.** Names of villagers discovered to have hidden food or supplies were written on blackboards at worksites, a crime punishable by death or exile. Kiev, Ukraine, 1932.



“The faces of those children were old, exhausted, as if they had already lived on the earth for 70 years,” said a member of a requisitioning brigade. And still, they took food from the people.

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**Deaths became commonplace.** “There were so many people dying...They were lying out in the streets, in the fields, floating in the flux,” remembers a survivor.

School children died at their desks or school yards. “There were so many people dying...They were lying out in the streets, in the fields, floating in the flux. My uncle lived in Derevka. He died of hunger and my aunt went crazy – she ate her own child. At the time, one couldn’t hear the dogs barking – they were all eaten up,” recalled Galina Smyrna of Uspenka, Ukraine.

Many fled to the cities in search of food. The government then erected military blockades around many Ukrainian villages, preventing food from being brought into those villages, and keeping the hungry from searching for food. On January 22, 1933, a Secret Directive closed the border of Ukraine and Kuban from the rest of the USSR, leaving the people locked in to die.

DYING FROM STARVATION is a terrible process. At first, the body uses up its glucose. During this phase, people are continuously hungry. Next, the body consumes its fat. This takes several weeks, and victims become very weak. Finally, the body metabolizes protein, including tissue and muscle. During this final stage, the skin thins, eyes protrude, legs and belly swell, and the body collects water. Victims are exhausted, and susceptible to all kinds of diseases: scurvy might cause night blindness or teeth to fall out; edema causes skin to become thin and translucent and legs to swell; infection causes sores to break out and ooze puss or blood.

**The pictures are heartbreaking.** A starving child victim of the Holodomor cries in a hospital.

In Ukraine, people began to go crazy with hunger. The instinct to eat was overwhelming, and caused people to revert to animal-like behavior. “In the evening and even in the daytime it is not possible to bring bread home uncovered. The hungry will stop and seize it out of your hands, and often bite your hands or wound them with a knife. I have never seen faces so thin and savage,” wrote an anonymous eyewitness to the Vatican. One woman, whose six children all starved in May, 1933, lost her mind and stopped wearing clothes.

In the interest of survival, peasants committed the most atrocious acts. They cast their own mothers out of the house, robbed their neighbors, made false accusations, or killed their children so they would not have to watch them slowly starve to death. Kolja and Agnes Nickels from the Mennonite Molotschna Colony wrote on June 5, 1933, “We have to face the possibility of starvation. People are being killed and eaten, children cannot run the streets without being escorted. In Cuchanybabeck there have been atrocities reported that make one shudder. Had such things occurred years ago there would have been such outrage. Now, whether a man is killed or lies dying in the street, or a father butchers his son, or grave-robbers slash the faces of the corpses to extract gold fillings, or a grown woman is killed and her body dissected and shared, such inhumane acts seem to have become the order of the day. We are becoming desensitized and too numb to be distraught over the indescribable horrors taking place... It would be possible to lose one’s mind if it becomes overburdened with such tragic horrors. That’s the way it is in the Ukraine.”





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Peasant rebellions against the government ceased, since the starving people were too weak to fight. "How could we resist when we had no strength to go outside?" asked Mariia Dziuba, Poltava province, in 1933. Malcolm Muggeridge, a foreign correspondent, wrote from Ukraine in March, 1933, "The little towns and villages seemed just numb and the people in too desperate a condition even actively to resent what had happened...Cattle and horses dead; fields neglected; meager harvest despite moderately good climatic conditions; all the grain that was produced taken by the government; now no bread at all, no bread anywhere, nothing much else either; despair and bewilderment."

Eventually, there was quiet. People were too weak to move. "It was a strange silence everywhere. Nobody cried, moaned, complained. Indifference was everywhere. People were either swollen or completely exhausted...even a kind of envy was felt toward the dead," said a survivor. "I sometimes think that dying wouldn't be so terrible," wrote Katja Nickel in 1932, "to see no more of the suffering around you, to have no more fear of the future..."

Dead bodies lay where they fell, along roads and highways, railroad tracks, and in villages. One railway employee, Oleksandr Honcharenko recalled his walk to work: "I would come upon two or three corpses daily, but I would step over them and continue walking. The famine had robbed me of my conscience, human soul and feelings. Stepping over corpses, I felt absolutely nothing, as if I were stepping over logs," he said.

The stench was terrible. "The air was filled with the ubiquitous odor of decomposing bodies. The wind



**Dying off.** Secret police arrived to load bodies into their wagons. They sometimes insisted on taking those near death for burial as well, since they were too busy to return for several days. They demanded two slices of bread for each body taken.

carried this odor far and wide, all across Ukraine," Tetiana Pawlichka remembered. "There were no funerals," recalled Kateryna Marchenko. "There were no priests, requiems, tears. There was no strength to cry."

In many places in 1933, graves could not be dug until the ground thawed in the spring. In Kharkiv, the OGPU (secret police) secretly burned 2785 corpses between February and June, 1933. In other places, organized teams collected the dead. Bodies were thrown into communal graves, buried without coffins. Since gravediggers received bread as payment for their services, they were motivated to increase their burial count. Occasionally, sick or nearly dead people were buried alive. "Good people, leave me alone. I am not dead," the 'corpses' used to cry. "Go to hell! You think we want to come back tomorrow?" the burial agents replied.



Collecting the dead.

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By late spring, 1933, accounts of cannibalism were reported. On Larysa Venzhyk's street, 6-year-old Misha ran away from home and begged in the village. When asked why he did not return home, he said he was afraid that "Father will cut me up." The police investigated, found that his parents had eaten his two sisters, and arrested them.

People sold gold and valuables. Some looted cemeteries, looking for gold buried on the dead. The Soviets didn't mind the desecration of Christian burial sites. The famine obliterated a community's family ties, religion, history, culture, and identity, all in the name of survival.

THE FAMINE PEAKED in May, June and July, 1933. During those months, 30,000 Ukrainians were dying each day, nearly a third of them children under 10.

A few foreign correspondents in Russia leaked the story of the famine to the outside world. The Red Cross requested permission to send famine relief, but Moscow declared that there was no famine and famine relief was not needed, even while producing propaganda posters for its citizens stating that cannibalism was wrong.

During the famine, Stalin exported 1.5 million tons of grain, more than enough to have saved the life of every starving person within his borders. Survivors tell of huge stores of wheat rotting at train stations rather than being given to the people to eat. Armed guards stood outside grain storage areas, refusing to allow the people access. Grain was all around the starving people, but they were



A cross made from spoons in 1933.

denied access to it. They people worked in the fields harvesting grain, watched and guarded so they would not eat it.

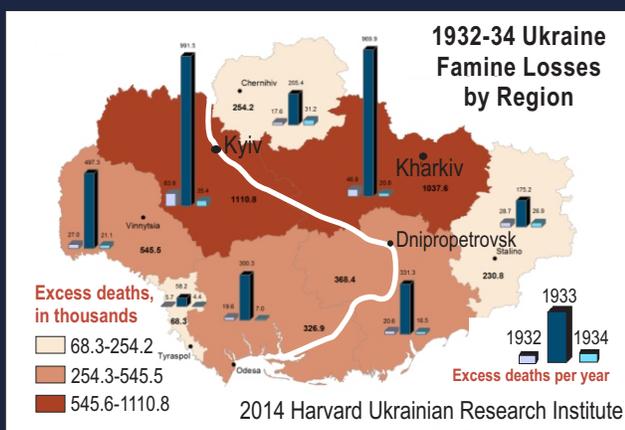
When the crop ripened in the summer of 1933, the rural population was too weak to harvest it. The Party recruited people from the cities – Party members, factory workers, and students – to help bring in the harvest. Because they were good communists, food was brought food out to feed them. Some of the starving peasants, when first given access to food, overate and their stomachs burst. The urban workers, who were shocked at the state of peasants in the countryside, were

instructed to keep quiet.

After the harvest in 1933, the government began to relent. Peasant resistance had vanished. Grain requisitioning continued that year, but quotas were reduced. Eventually, Ukrainians stopped dying of hunger. In the spring of 1934, people could retain and eat what they had grown in their private gardens. Stalin even loaned Ukraine seeds and food.

The results of the famine were devastating. Whole villages had been wiped out. In some provinces 25% of the population died. Kiev and Kharkiv had the highest death tolls. That was intentional: they had had the most peasant revolts in 1918-20 and as collectivization started in 1930-31.

Late in 1933, the government launched a resettlement program, bringing Russians to settle in decimated villages. In the fall of 1933, 117,000 settlers



Holodomor victims.

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**“300 Days Without Bread.”** Photographer Mykola Bokan took these photographs of the same family from Baturyn, Chernihiv, to document the famine. The photo above was taken in April, 1933, and was kept in Bokan’s police file.



**The same family three months later, in July 1933, with the mother and daughter both missing.** The memorial at the table reads “To Kostya, who died of hunger.” The photographer and his son were both arrested, and perished in the Gulag.

came from Russia and Belarus, and in early 1934, another 20,000 came. This helped the government “Russianize” the countryside, replacing Ukrainians with Russians. The new settlers had not been told about the famine, but they figured that something catastrophic had happened in the region, observing that the Ukrainians were half-dead, had no shoes, and were eating strange things like field mice and corn husks.

At first, the Soviet government recorded death statistics, but the numbers proved too embarrassing. The Party had predicted great success from collectivization and the First Five-Year Plan, and even anticipated population growth, but the census of 1937 showed 8 million people missing. Stalin suppressed the results, and ordered the head of the census bureau to be shot.

For many years, the Soviet Union denied the existence of the famine and buried evidence of it. Party officials followed suit. Newspapers ignored the entire event. During the Great Purge of 1937-38, the government executed those who had buried the dead during the famine. In 1938, all the staff of Lukianivske cemetery in Kiev were arrested and executed to prevent them from revealing their secrets.

Immigrants to Canada from the Soviet Union were the first to speak publicly about the famine. The first

public monument to the Holodomor was not in Ukraine, but in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, erected and dedicated in 1983 on the 50th anniversary of the famine. Since then, the fourth Saturday in November has been marked as the official day of remembrance for people who died due to the Holodomor.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, archives were opened in Russia and Ukraine, allowing researchers to study the famine in greater detail. On November 28, 2006, the Ukrainian Parliament passed a law defining the Holodomor as a deliberate act of genocide and made public denial illegal. Declaring it as genocide meant that it was an intended consequence, not a byproduct, of Soviet policy, a point historians still debate. In 2008, on the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor, the Memorial to Holodomor Victims was opened in Kiev, Ukraine. And as of 2006, more than 24 countries have recognized this event as a genocide of the Ukrainian people by the Soviet government. Monuments and remembrance days have occurred in Canada, the United States, and Poland.

Because of the cover-up, the Holodomor’s death toll is hard to calculate. Five to seven million is likely. The Ukraine’s population was 31 million, so 16-22% of Ukrainians died, most of whom were rural peasants.

Sources for this article include: Applebaum, Anne, “Red Famine,” 2017. Conquest, Robert, “The Harvest of Sorrow,” 1986 and “The Man-Made Famine in Ukraine,” 1984. Dolot, Miron. “Execution By Hunger: The Hidden Holocaust,” 1985. Mace, James, Man-Made Famine, 1990. Peters, Anna, interview by Anne-Marie Nakhla, 1997. Hamm Family Letters. Translated by Herbert Hamm, unpublished.

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Nina Marchenko's depictions of the Holodomor are painful but accurate. In this painting, villagers watch as their family members are thrown onto a burial cart to be taken to a mass grave.



"Mother of the Year, 1933" by Nina Marchenko. A mother has died of starvation, and her two children, both starving as well, try to wake her. The wheat crop is in the background.

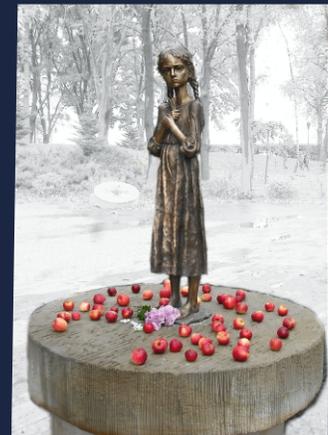
## Remembering...

"At that time I lived in the village of Yaressky of the Poltava region. More than a half of the village population perished as a result of the famine. It was terrifying to walk through the village: swollen people moaning and dying. The bodies of the dead were buried together, because there was no one to dig the graves.

"There were no dogs and no cats. People died at work; it was of no concern whether your body was swollen, whether you could work, whether you have eaten, whether you could – you had to go and work. Otherwise – you are the enemy of the people.

Many people never lived to see the crops of 1933 and those crops were considerable...Rye was starting to become ripe. Those who were still able made their way to the fields. This road, however, was covered with dead bodies, some could not reach the fields, some ate grain and died right away. The patrol was hunting them down, collecting everything, trampled down the collected spikelets, beat the people, came into their homes, seized everything. What they could not take – they burned." -- Galina Gubenko, Poltava region

*From the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium*



A statue in Kiev to remember victims of the Holodomor. People place flowers or wheat stalks in the girl's arms or leave tribute of apples or other food at the statue's base.



The Holodomor Genocide Memorial in Washington, DC. The first monuments to the Holodomor were outside the country by emigres. Acknowledgment of the famine inside Ukraine didn't happen until Ukraine became independent in 1991.

# DIZZY WITH SUCCESS

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Stalin, in his “Dizzy With Success Speech, 1934: “...it becomes absolutely clear that... the collective farms and the individual peasants have completely exchanged roles: the collective farms...have become the predominant force in agriculture, whereas the individual peasants have become a secondary force and are compelled to subordinate and adapt themselves to the collective-farm system. It must be admitted that the labouring peasantry, our Soviet peasantry, has completely and irrevocably taken its stand under the Red banner of socialism.”

How is one to explain these acts committed against the people of Ukraine? The reasons are complex. First, the Bolsheviks hated the peasant class, who didn't take to socialism as the Marxists thought they should; hence, they viewed them as uncivilized people who stood in the way of progress. Second, the communists held tightly to their ideas of class struggle. They blamed resistance to collectivization on the peasantry (or more specifically, on the “kulaks”), and encouraged the proletariat (working class) to fight rural resistance. Third, Stalin hated the nationalism of the Ukraine because the only nationality he wanted in the Soviet Union was Russian. Fourth, collectivization encountered setbacks in the Ukraine, and Stalin, irritated, needed a scapegoat to punish for the shortcomings of Soviet collectivization. Fifth, the growth of empire depended on the economic health of the Soviet Union; consequently, agricultural goods from Ukraine were a much-needed export so that Russia could obtain foreign fuel and raw materials to advance industrialization, the “real foundation of the communist state.” Finally, the Holodomor was intended to establish uncontested Soviet control in the Soviet Union. The Ukraine was an example of what happened to those who defied the government. Those who survived the famine learned the lesson that the state would always win.



Collectivization and modernization continued to take a great toll on Soviet agriculture for years. More than two decades after Stalin's inappropriate “Dizzy-With-Success” speech published in March, 1930, Krushchev admitted to the Central Committee that mechanized

Soviet agriculture produced less grain per capita and fewer cattle than had been achieved by the Russian peasant with his wooden plow under tsarism 40 years earlier.



“The Bitter Memory of Childhood,” a statue in Kiev to remember victims of the Holodomor.



The Holodomor Genocide Memorial in Washington, DC. The first monuments to the Holodomor were outside the country by emigres. Acknowledgment of the famine inside Ukraine didn't happen until Ukraine became independent in 1991.