Was Marxism the cause for the Holodomor or its excuse?

By Rachael Ward

The Holodomor was the ‘manmade famine’ in the USSR, whereby around seven million innocent Soviets were starved out of existence, or had their identity purged until motivation to live or a sense of belonging had been utterly destroyed. This is suspected widely to have been a genocide on the Ukrainians; consciously formed policies, by Stalin, as a means of getting vengeance and tightening control over the ‘Greens’ of the Red Army. On prima facie, this makes perfect sense, Stalin was evidently an intensely paranoid and undeniably power-hungry figure, so of course he would provoke a manmade famine on a potential threat to his power. However, some questions can be raised as to whether this really was Stalin’s aim. Perhaps the urgent times meant that collectivisation was necessary to tighten control of the peasants and force productivity, to modernise the USSR so it could protect itself from the dangerous and undoubtedly powerful force of Conservative Europe.

We are led to believe that in his rise to power, Stalin adopted Lenin’s legacy as a pure and dedicated Marxist, intent on diverting his undivided attention to the Comintern. With this in mind, policies like collectivisation and dekulakisation, that led to the Holodomor were ideologically seen as the perfect step towards this paradise on earth that a holistic Marxist longed to create. However, beneath the surface lies a more complicated and devious plan, devised by an even more complex, calculating and power-hungry figure. On the 27th December 1929, Stalin voiced his opinion at a Marxist Agrarian Conference on the future of Soviet policy towards the Kulaks: ‘That is why we have recently passed from the policy of restricting the exploiting tendencies of the Kulaks to the policy of eliminating the Kulaks as a class’. This is significant, as ‘the definition of a Kulak was flexible enough to fit anyone who dare oppose party policy’. The elimination of Kulaks tied in perfectly with ‘Socialism in one country’, as Stalin claimed this rich breed of peasants prevented modernisation by hoarding grain. However, while Stalin used the word ‘Kulak’ to define who he wanted to eliminate, in reality, a Kulak was quite literally any opponents to Stalin’s insufferable regime. The way Stalin used this word; ‘Kulak’ reflects how he used Marxism to excuse the Holodomor, to the Soviets and wider Comintern. The word Kulak acted as a mask to cover up his true intentions of eliminating opposition to make his power absolute, similarly to how Marxism was a mask placed over Stalin’s true politically driven aims.

Stalin and the party leadership vigorously denied that the Holodomor was a genocide on the Ukrainians. They insisted that harshness was justified and necessary, to protect the USSR from Conservative Europe. However, this cruelty was far from justified and Stalin’s methods of modernisation made little sense. In order to rally support from the Soviets and wider Comintern, that Stalin’s power depended on, he had to present his industrialisation and collectivisation ideas as if they were in line with Marxism, to build loyalty to his absurd plans. Consequently, Marxism was

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used as the excuse for the Holodomor, as without it, it would have been devastatingly difficult for Stalin to claim the power he did and justify his actions.

Was Stalin’s sole aim to create an authoritarian state and make his power absolute? If this is true, then perhaps Stalin, under the misleading propaganda and layers of lies, was not the Marxist he claimed, rather a power-hungry dictator, who would assert his dominance and gradually abandon the principles of an ideology he doesn’t truly care for. Marxism had allowed Lenin to gradually overthrow the Russian government and substitute himself for the party, in a one-party state. It had already been evidenced to Stalin that Marxism was the perfect power tool to make him answerable to no one. So, this was Stalin’s aim, and his method was Marxism, which he used to cloud over his true intentions. Conquest reveals that ‘In July 1932, targets of grain delivery from the Ukraine were set’, grain requisitioning was clearly a mechanism for purging the Ukrainians, whom posed a threat during the Civil War and contained the highest peasant population. ‘Stalin insisted on targets that could only lead to famine’

3. Famine would inevitably demotivate peasants, reduce incentive to work and morale, contradicting the sense that the Holodomor was ideologically driven to advance Communism, this would slow modernisation down. Stalin was unconcerned about modernisation, and certainly unconcerned about Marxism, his ‘targets’ were focused on solidifying his own power, Marxism was merely the convenient excuse he could use to disguise his intentions from the Soviets and the Cominterm.

Deportation was a key element of collectivisation, Sheila Fitzpatrick argues ‘tens of millions of peasants moved to towns and became workers in the 1930’s’ and the ‘...general trend of mobility in the Stalin period was upward’

4. Increasing mobility supports the sense that the Holodomor was the cause of Marxism and an ideologically driven leader, influenced by ‘Socialism in one country’, to fulfil his urgent desire to modernise the state he claimed to be ‘100 years behind’. However, the idea that mobility increased is a major distortion of reality. Censorship and freedom had never been tighter. Stalin’s Draconian policies strongly portray the inhumane and unjust treatment by the authorities, during the Holodomor. A Ukrainian villager and observer of this insane brutality recalls the effect of these policies; “A woman went to collect wheat stalks. She collected some stalks and put them in her apron... She was walking and chewing the grains. A brigadier saw her, and she got ten years [in the prison camps] for collecting and eating wheat stalks.”

5. Persecution was not a penalty for criminals, but a daily occurrence that invaded innocence and put the population under direct control of dictatorship.

Robert Conquest accurately stated, ‘Stalinism is one way of attaining industrialisation as cannibalism is one way of attaining a high protein diet’. Stalin’s methods of modernisation were somewhat understandable, as the USSR were *ipso facto* in urgent need of reform. However, the methods were unnecessarily harsh and unlikely to work. Stalin was motivated by power, resent and paranoia, all inflated wider by his ‘gross personality disorder’

6. Therefore, Marxism became the instrument to fulfil his endless power aims, and the excuse for the Holodomor, rather than the cause.

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5 Evhenia Bozhenko, villager in the Mykolaiv oblast, 2009
The international situation at the time was a potent threat. It was enough to trigger an extreme response, from even a sane leader. The USSR was the only country thriving with Communism, and after years of oppressive tsarist tyranny, Stalin perhaps didn’t want to see the success of his ideology crumble, after the Marxists had come so far. If it did not modernise, Communism in the USSR had no hope of defending itself against Capitalist Europe, who could try to squeeze the Communism out of the USSR, if it was weak enough. Stalin’s desperation to modernise, and protect his ideology was exhibited by his extreme methods. Collectivisation would allow Stalin to gain the authority he needed to lead Marxism to victory, and he couldn’t afford to approach the situation lightly. Hiroaki Kuromiya of Indiana University expresses this in Stalin’s Great Terror and Espionage: ‘True, threat was ever present. Stalin and his followers believed, based on their ideological convictions, that the capitalist system was inherently inimical to the Soviet Communist system. Ignoring this would have been tantamount to political suicide’. Stalin’s methods were somewhat understandable, if he hadn’t acted with such urgency, then he would have to painfully watch Marxism collapse, when he’d worked so hard to implement it. With this in mind, Marxism could be seen as the reason for the Holodomor, as extreme pressure demanded extreme methods and response.

However, rather than being logical, Stalin’s methods were unreasonable and caused unnecessary suffering, conveying that his central focus was on strengthening his own power at the expense of the population and the ideology he cared little about. The US Senate Findings in 1988 express that Stalin’s predominant focus was elimination of his opponents, at all and any costs; ‘Stalin further stated that the collective farms should not accept any kulaks; that kulaks only need to be dekulakised and banished’. Stalin’s viscous methods could be somewhat justified by his urgency to modernise, as it was the only realistic way to protect communism in the USSR. However, it is explicit that the nucleus of Stalin’s thoughts and actions was dekulakisation, and making his power as stable and unquestionable as possible. Modernisation was not at the forefront of Stalin’s mind, nor was Marxism, so it became the excuse he would use to the supporters of the Comintern and the Soviet population, to allow him to persist with his evil intentions.

It is overwhelmingly clear that the Holodomor, was most certainly a politically driven genocide. Of course, the Soviet Union were facing a time of severe pressure and terror. Stalin was undoubtedly paranoid, threat of an invasion was certainly realistic, and coming from more than one direction. Japan were posing a serious concern, while the USSR were definitely not spilt for choice in terms of allies. However, the pure motivations of Stalin’s master plan were unwaveringly concentrated on eliminating the kulaks and Ukrainians. The Director of the Ukrainian Institute for National Remembrance reveals this: ‘They (the Ukrainians) were killed as individuals, as they became people without a sense of dignity and turned into cogs in the totalitarian machine. The Result of the Holodomor was millions of dead…but also the empty souls of those who survived 1933’. Stalin, without an ounce compassion, treated the Ukrainians with utter disregard, they became submissive robots under his regime. Stalin effectively killed the entirety of the Ukraine. Everything that made them who they were was stolen, if it wasn’t their life, it was their identity. If the Ukrainians weren’t left dead, their lives were no longer worth living. Stalin’s impact is emphasised by the notion that he controlled who died, the living and also the future, as he purged the Ukrainians of their identity and

8 US Senate Findings, 1988, Oral Testimony of Fedir Pavlovych Kapusta
made their lives a soulless existence. It is not a coincidence that his plans to protect communism allowed him to take absolute control, Marxism was clearly not the driving force behind modernisation, it was his greed for power. He used Marxism to excuse the Holodomor to the population, so he could claim the power he so desperately wanted.

In conclusion, while the international situation was a threat to Communism in the USSR, Stalin’s crucial intentions were to liquidate opposition and substitute himself for the whole state, to make his power absolute. The ‘Greens’ and profiting peasants were deemed a threat to Stalin’s ruthless regime. Ukrainians had cultural identity, strength and independence, all things that Stalin wanted to see diminished. It is by no means a coincidence that Stalin’s methods to protect the USSR from invasion, led to power falling into Stalin’s hands, certifying his dominance as his policies proceeded. Stalin used the Holodomor to achieve revenge and solidify his own power, and Marxism was the excuse that allowed him to do so.