Ukraine’s Silent Genocide: An Assessment of International Responses to the Man-Made Famine of 1932-1933

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Father Stalin, look at this
Collective famine is just bliss
No cows left, no pigs at all
Just your picture on the wall

(A Ukrainian children’s song from the 1930s)

In 1933, there was a smell of death in Ukraine. While children sang about famine, corpses littered streets and cannibalism was rife. The Soviet Union denied that there was any starvation and Ukrainians were told to ‘sew up their mouths’; the mere utterance of the word, ‘famine’ would result in a three to five-year prison sentence. Nevertheless, international governing bodies knew about the famine, but, whether due to misreported information or a decision not to aggravate a potential ally, the rest of the world stayed silent whilst millions starved to death.

To better understand the global response, the famine itself must first be examined. Centuries of regional rule by Cossacks in Ukraine had led to an entrenched system of individual, small-scale farming in sharp contrast to Russian traditions of collective ownership of land. Consequently, in 1929, Russian peasants adjusted better than their Ukrainian counterparts to the re-introduction of collective farming.

Ukraine’s quotas of grain requisition were also much harsher than those of the other Soviet Republics. On the surface, these quotas appeared to be imposed solely as a means of maximally exploiting the fertile, black soil in Ukraine. This would enable the Soviet Union to rapidly industrialise as well as ensuring that there were sufficient supplies for large-scale mobilisation in the event of an invasion from the growing threats of Poland and Japan. However, when Stalin began responding coldly to pleas from local officials in Ukraine with, “Those who do not work deserve to starve”, the primary reason behind his indifference to starvation became clear. Stalin was exercising a famine to suffocate Ukraine’s fiercely nationalistic spirit and prevent a pro-independence uprising. Following this, he would be able to repopulate the area with Russian peasants, ending the Ukrainian Question.

The 1932-33 famine is now widely known as the ‘Holodomor’, translating roughly as ‘Hunger-Plague’. Casualties of the Holodomor range from 3.9 million to 7 million and today, it is accepted by

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4 Snyder, Blood Lands, p. 30
5 Ellman, ‘Stalin and the Soviet Famine’ p.689 in Naimark, Stalin’s Genocides p. 73
6 Applebaum, Red Famine p. 285
24 countries as a genocide. At the time, however, there was a stout denial of any famine in Ukraine by the Soviet Union both internally and externally which significantly contributed to the lack of global awareness about it. Arthur Koestler, a Hungarian and British journalist, lived in Kharkiv, the Ukrainian capital at the time of the famine. He observed that in his local paper, *Kommunist*, photographs showed people ‘always laughing’, but ‘not one word of dying out of whole villages’.

Externally, Stalin was looking to inspire communism in the West. Following the Wall Street Crash in 1929, capitalist countries began to question their economic and political structure and explore alternative forms of governance. Stalin saw the following decade of economic depression as the perfect opportunity to prove to the capitalist world that the communist ideology was superior. It was, therefore, essential for Stalin to ensure that as little information as possible about the famine escaped outside of the walls of the USSR.

Prior to the visit of a politician or journalist to Ukraine, preparations would be made to ensure that any trace of a starving nation was buried. In August 1933, Edouard Herriot, a former Prime Minister of France, arrived in Ukraine. The day before he was due in Kyiv, the city was transformed. Streets were cleaned, houses decorated and shop windows were filled with food. The purchase of this food was, however, forbidden and anyone who came too close to the shops was arrested. Herriot’s schedule was divided between official receptions and an intricately planned tour, bypassing any evidence of the famine. Herriot left Ukraine in September, convinced that there was no famine. Using this method of close surveillance and limited exposure, Stalin ensured that when visitors arrived home, they would share their account of witnessing no trace of a famine. This diluted any genuine accounts of the Holodomor.

Nevertheless, the secret of the famine crept its way out of the USSR. ‘Few of us were so completely isolated that we did not meet Russians whose work took them into devastated areas’ stated the United Press correspondent Eugene Lyons. Reports of the famine could be found in a wide array of newspapers; from the *Gazette de Lausanne* in Switzerland to the *Christian Science Monitor* in the United States. However, reporting the truth about the famine often came to journalists at the price of having their Russian visas revoked. This resulted in journalists attempting to find a ‘middle-ground’ by publishing information that emphasised the achievements of Soviet industrialisation while sporadically acknowledging food shortages. Honest accounts were scarce and found primarily by reporters who accepted that they would never be able to return to the USSR. Even these reports dwindled as the Soviet government gradually tightened regulations on the areas that reporters were allowed access to within Ukraine.

Among the last of the Western reporters able to capture the truth in the countryside was Gareth Jones. Fluent in Russian and a former secretary to the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, Jones wandered, unescorted, through twelve collective farms and, on the 30th of March 1933, reported in the *Manchester Guardian*, “Everywhere was the cry, ‘There is no bread; we are dying.’ “

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7 <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/p/5633.html>, [accessed 23rd July 2019]
10 Lyons, Eugene, ‘Assignment in Utopia’ p. 574. in Anna Reid, Borderland p.133
11 Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow* p. 309
12 Gareth Jones, ‘Famine in Russia’, *Manchester Guardian* (March 30th 1933) Available at:
following day came a condescending response in the *New York Times* from the more respected, pro-Soviet journalist, Walter Duranty. Duranty’s article: ‘Russians hungry but not starving’ mockingly referred to Jones as ‘a man of a keen and active mind’. Duranty added that, although ‘there is a serious food shortage throughout the country…there is no actual starvation or deaths from starvation’. He justified the food shortages with, ‘you can’t make an omelette without breaking any eggs’13, a remarkably insensitive way of referring to the millions of deaths caused by the famine which he was fully aware of14. Duranty was not the only journalist to defend the USSR against famine allegations, but his reputation allowed him to reach the greatest audience. Therefore, despite a plethora of truthful articles concerning the famine, their facts were polluted through articles by the likes of Duranty, causing the West to doubt the extent of the famine and adjust their response accordingly.

With a population of nearly five million ethnic Ukrainians and a lack of contamination by false accounts of the famine, Poland was one of the few countries that had both the information and incentive to aid Ukrainian peasants. However, from 1931, Poland’s diplomatic relationship with the USSR started to progress, leading to a discussion about a potential non-aggression pact. Poland was reluctant to jeopardise this diplomatic warming by intervening in the impending famine that Ukraine was edging ever closer to.

Newsletters such as *Kurier Warzawski*, *Kurier Poznński* and *Przegląd Powszechny*, all with relatively high readership, contained articles about the famine in Ukraine. *Bunt Młodych*, another popular newspaper, stated unequivocally that, in Poland, the Ukrainian famine was common knowledge. Despite this claim, the most widely circulated newspapers mentioned little of the famine. This included Gazeta Polska, the unofficial Polish government newspaper, which followed the government policy of very limited discussion regarding the famine. The *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny*, another widely-read newspaper, actively criticised the Ukrainian communities within Poland for drawing attention to the famine, arguing that this was straining the Poland–USSR relationship at a crucial time. Following the signing of the Polish-Soviet non-aggression pact on July the 25th 1932, the already somewhat controlled information about the famine in main-stream media was reduced to only the occasional allusion to it15. The decision of the Polish government to sacrifice its voice in return for a dubious non-aggression treaty with the USSR is even more striking considering that over twenty thousand ethnic Poles were victims of the famine in Ukraine.

The co-occurrence of the Holodomor with the rise of fascism in Germany played a key role in the international reaction to the Holodomor. Dealing with the threat of fascism was the paramount foreign policy priority for the West. In the Vatican, both famine relief and a public denunciation of the events in Ukraine were discussed, but decided against for fear that criticising the USSR would make the Pope appear in favour of Nazi Germany16. Furthermore, as the threat of the German military renaissance increased, France and Britain began to explore an alliance with the USSR and were prepared to overlook even the worst of the reports about Ukraine. Laurence Collier, head of the

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13 Walter Duranty ‘Russian’s Hungry but Not Starving’, *The New York Times* (March 31st 1933) Available at: 
<https://www.garethjones.org/margaret_siriol_colley/The%20exhibition/rebuttal_duranty.htm>, [accessed 8th July 2019]

14 Graziosi et al., *After the Holodomor*, p. 52-4

15 Snyder, *Blood Lands* p.56

Foreign Office Northern Department, replied to an enquiry about the famine, stating, ‘The truth of the matter is, of course, that we have a certain amount of information about the famine conditions...We do not want to make it public, however, because the Soviet government would resent it and our relations with them would be prejudiced’\textsuperscript{17}.

During the famine, the State Department of the US was also attempting to establish diplomatic relations with the USSR to help address the fast-growing threat from both Germany and Japan. The aforementioned journalist, Walter Duranty, helped to persuade Franklin Roosevelt that the USSR was experiencing great success economically and that a good relationship may result in a beneficiary trade deal\textsuperscript{18}. Diplomatic relations between the US and the USSR were established in November 1933, aided by the US policy of silence regarding reports of the famine\textsuperscript{19}.

As the beginnings of fascism lay in its cradle, international priorities lay with forming alliances with the USSR. Despite Stalin’s best efforts, truthful information regarding the famine was available internationally. However, it was heavily muddied with false accounts to the extent that no major political power was willing to risk destabilising diplomatic relations with the USSR in favour of providing aid to a famine that the USSR itself denied. Stalin succeeded in silencing a nation and the rest of the world to his genocide. In May of 1936, the German Consulate in Kyiv wrote: ‘Ukrainian Ukraine has been destroyed’\textsuperscript{20}.

Eighty-six years on from the Holodomor, over 20,000 books have been published about it\textsuperscript{21}. Eight-six years on from the Holodomor, Ukrainian Ukraine survived. Eighty-six years on from the Holodomor, it is at last receiving the international recognition that it deserved in 1933.

\textsuperscript{17} Carynnyk et al., eds., ‘The Foreign Office and the Famine, p. 329, 397 in Applebaum, Red Famine p. 324
\textsuperscript{19} Conquest, \textit{Harvest of Sorrow} p. 311
\textsuperscript{20} German Consulate, ‘A Report Based on Personal Impressions from a Multi-Week Trip throughout Ukraine: Ukrainian Ukraine?’ (Kyiv, May 1936), in Klid and Motyl (eds), \textit{The Holodomor Reader} p. 277
\textsuperscript{21} Makuch, Andrij and Frank E. Sysyn (eds), \textit{Contextualising the Holodomor: The Impact of Thirty Years of Ukrainian Famine Studies} (Toronto: Canadian Institutes of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2012) p. 88
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