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**Б. Клід**

*Канадський інститут українських студій  
Альбертського університету*

**Б. Клід**

*Канадський інститут українських студій  
Альбертського університету*

**WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO STUDY THE HISTORY  
OF THE HOLODOMOR — THE GENOCIDE  
OF THE UKRAINIAN PEOPLE**

***Чому важливо вивчати історії Голодомору — геноциду  
українського народу***

*The article covers the main stages of research in the Ukrainian Diaspora of the Holodomor of 1932–33 and its influence on the formation of Ukrainian identity. The main directions for further study of this important scientific problem for Ukraine are indicated*

Keywords: The Holodomor of 1932–1933, Identity, Ukrainian Diaspora.

*В статті висвітлюються основні етапи дослідження в українській діаспорі Голодомору 1932–1933 рр. та його впливу на формування української ідентичності. Визначені основні напрями подальшого дослідження важливої для України наукової проблеми.*

Ключові слова: Голодомор 1932–1933 рр., ідентичність, українська діаспора.

The death by starvation of about four million people in the Ukrainian SSR in 1932–1933 was one of the most traumatic and significant events in the history of Ukraine and its people of the turbulent twentieth century. The Famine occurred as a result of decisions taken by the top leadership of the Communist Party and Soviet state, which were carried out by lower-level officials. The Famine was thus man-made and artificial. Moreover, the deaths by starvation constituted an act of mass murder, which should be regarded as genocide because the Soviet top leadership used the Famine as an instrument to subdue and punish Ukraine's peasantry and to terrorize its people. The fact that the Holodomor took place in the context of Stalin-led repressions of Ukraine's intellectual figures and political leadership, and that the social and national questions in Ukraine were closely linked, confirms in my mind that the interpretation of the Holodomor as genocide is correct.

The effects of the Holodomor have been long-lasting. The late James Mace characterized Ukraine as a post-genocidal society, implying that the Holodomor had long-term negative consequences for Ukrainians. Many of the victims who survived the Holodomor suffered physical ailments afterward, and were traumatized by their ordeals. Some survivors heard of or knew about desperate acts that were committed by some of the starving people, such as the eating of carrion and even human flesh. During the collectivization campaign and the Holodomor, the traditional social fabric in the countryside broke down: the social group consisting of independent farmers was destroyed; theft and crime increased as starving people became desperate; families disintegrated, and others died off. The sense of community belonging and understanding, and morality withered away along with people's health and wellbeing.

Recognizing the depth and scope of this atrocity and crime, and its overall importance, though, took much time for me, personally. As my parents' origins are in Western Ukraine, near Ivano-Frankivsk, reminiscences in family circles focused on events during World War II and its immediate aftermath. This included stories about life under Polish and Soviet rule (from 1939–1941), and especially resistance to Soviet rule of the Ukrainian nationalist underground in the village where my parents lived in.

I only learned about the artificial famine, or the Great Famine, as it was then called, during commemorative events held by the Ukrainian diaspora community in the Detroit area when I was a high school. I became aware of some of the survivors, who were from the Ukrainian Orthodox community of the Detroit area. My parents were from the Ukrainian Catholic community, and I attended a Catholic school, so my knowledge of that community was superficial. The Holodomor, therefore, was an event that I became aware of, but it was not a part of my Ukrainian identity, nor did I recognize it at the time for its critical historical importance.

More awareness of the Holodomor and the problem of its recognition occurred after beginning university studies in fall 1969. One of the fellow student activists of Ukrainian origin with whom I became acquainted with, Borys Potapenko, mentioned that he had tried to bring up the issue of the Famine to a professor at Wayne State University in Detroit, where he was studying. According to Potapenko, the professor dismissed the famine as, basically, irrelevant, and considered the materials in the collection *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin*, containing testimonies on the Famine, which Potapenko showed him, as propaganda.\*

The issue of recognizing the importance of the Holodomor as a great crime and a great tragic event worthy of academic study was part of a larger problem that existed in mainstream North American academia of the period: basically, the history of Ukraine was unknown, or it was hidden and subsumed, largely within the history of Russia and the Soviet Union. It was difficult to get professors to even acknowledge or recognize the importance of the Ukrainian or nationality question in the Soviet Union. One felt obliged to stress over and over again to professors that Ukrainians were a separate people, distinct from Russians. To me, it seemed that although Ukraine and Ukrainians existed, in the consciousness of most Americans I met we did not exist at all, or at best we existed as an ethnic group in the United States! In textbooks of Russian history used for university courses Ukraine's history was generally not treated at all, or was seen as part of Russia's.

At that time as well (early 1970s) a good number of university students of Ukrainian origin were involved in learning about and supporting the dissident movement in Soviet Ukraine. Many of us, including myself, were interested in learning about this movement by reading dissident texts smuggled out of Soviet Ukraine, and then distributed in the West. Following the crackdown and arrests of Ukrainian dissidents by Soviet authorities in early 1972, we also began to organize protests, prepared and distributed leaflets and other information on Ukrainian dissidents. Basically, our attention was focused on contemporary affairs and politics, on recognition of Ukraine and Ukrainians. Thus historical problems, like the Holodomor, were pushed into the background.

Awareness of the Holodomor rose again in the early 1980s. I was living in Edmonton and was enrolled as a graduate student in the Department of History at the University of Alberta when in 1983, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary

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\* The second volume of *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin* was published in Detroit in 1955, a testament to the significant support from the Detroit-area community of ?migr?s from central-eastern Ukraine. I recently learned that in a 1979 publication on Ukrainians in Detroit, three pages are devoted to the Famine, including excerpts of testimonies. See Myroslava Stefaniuk and Fred E. Dohrs, *Ukrainians of Detroit* (Detroit: Center for Urban Studies, Wayne State University, 1979), p. 20–22.

sary of the Famine, the first monument to the memory of the Famine victims was erected in a public space, in front of Edmonton's city hall. In conjunction with the unveiling of the monument, a special insert on the Famine appeared in the city's newspaper, *The Edmonton Journal*.<sup>\*</sup> That same year I learned about the organization of an academic conference on the Famine in Ukraine of 1932–1933, by Roman Serbyn, which took place at the Université du Québec à Montréal. I also learned about the research work on the Famine being done by Bohdan Krawchenko, who became director of the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (CIUS) in 1986.<sup>\*\*</sup> The publication of Robert Conquest's study *The Harvest of Sorrow* in 1986 and of James Mace's work with the US Congress's Commission on the Ukraine Famine furthered my knowledge and awareness of the topic.

Although in the 1990s and first decade of the twenty-first century I also became aware of works by Stanislav Kulchytsky and other Ukrainian historians, such as Yurii Shapoval, on the Famine, I was not at that time following the topic closely. It was not until the adoption of the 2006 law on the Holodomor, recognizing it as genocide, the appearance of opposition to the law, and especially after the fall 2009 lecture by Andrea Graziosi at the University of Alberta, where he discussed his views on the Holodomor as genocide, that I began to explore the topic in depth, and began to read primary source documents from collections published in Ukraine and Russia.

When I learned in 2010 that Alexander Motyl was interested in compiling a book of readings on the Holodomor, I quickly contacted him and we discussed the possibility of collaborating on compiling a book of sources in English on the topic. It was around this time as well that the first issues of the journal *Holodomor Studies*, edited by Roman Serbyn, began appearing, indicating renewed interest in the topic. Work on the *Holodomor Reader* opened my eyes to new sources on the Holodomor, such as works of literature written mostly in the diaspora that

<sup>\*</sup> Prepared by the Ukrainian Canadian Committee, the forerunner of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, the eight-page insert containing original articles and reprints of excerpts of texts on the Famine was titled «Ukraine Famine 1933», *The Edmonton Journal*, October 14, 1983, p. 5–12.

<sup>\*\*</sup> The results of Bohdan Krawchenko's research was published in his study *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine* (London: Macmillan Press, 1985). It contains several pages describing the causes and course of the Famine. Selected papers from the 1983 conference held in Montreal were published in Roman Serbyn and Bohdan Krawchenko, ed., *Famine in Ukraine, 1932–1933* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1986). In the early 1980s, I also became familiar with the English-language translation of an article by the economist Vsevolod Holubnychy, «The Causes of the Famine of 1932–33», *Meta* 3, no. 2 (1979), pp. 22–25. Holubnychy's article was probably the best available on the causes of the Famine into the early 1980s. See Vsevolod Holubnychy, «Prychyny holodu 1932–33 roku», *Vpered* 10 (94), October 1958, p. 6–7.

I had not known. I learned that there were poems and lyrics to songs dedicated to the Holodomor. In 2012 Motyl and I wrote the introductory article and completed our work on the collection that was published later that year as *The Holodomor Reader: A Sourcebook on the Famine in Ukraine of 1932*. It was the work on *The Holodomor Reader* which confirmed in my mind that the topic was indeed critically important and relevant, today, and for years to come. From 2012 I have continued research and editing work on topics related to the Holodomor through my involvement with the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium (HREC) at CIUS.

One could begin to address this question by looking first at how the topic was studied in the past. Considering that the Famine in Ukraine of 1932–1933 was such an immense, horrific atrocity, it is surprising that most scholars in North America specializing in the Soviet Union did not write about it until the 1980s. Part of the explanation for ignoring or bypassing the topic by mainstream academics for so many years lies in the success of the Soviet Union in suppressing information about it until the late 1980s. Incredibly, it took efforts spearheaded by the Ukrainian diaspora (which lobbied for the establishment of the US Congress's Commission on the Ukraine Famine, headed by the James Mace, and supported the publication of Robert Conquest's *The Harvest of Sorrow* to bring the scholarly world's attention to the Holodomor and other Soviet famines as important topics of study. Serious study of the Holodomor, then is a relatively new phenomenon, although in the last twenty-five years much has been written, especially by Ukrainian scholars.

In so far as new directions of research, there still is a need for regional studies of the Holodomor, focused on oblasts, groups of oblasts constituting a larger region of Ukraine. In depth and detailed micro studies are also needed. Regional and local studies could show variations in death rates and thus could contribute to our understanding of why in certain regions or localities mortality rates were particularly high, or low. More studies of national minorities during the Holodomor need to be written, such as on Jews, Poles, and Greeks. There are some studies of the German minority in Ukraine. Such studies would be useful in comparing population losses among national groups and also help explain the fate of Ukraine's national minorities during this horrendous period. The study of medical aspects of the Holodomor seems to be an area worthy of attention. This could include studies of diets, including what was eaten by people to survive, as well as the range of illnesses and diseases that afflicted people during the famine period, including mental illnesses. The Holodomor's impact on social and family bonds requires further study. The fate of children, including those abandoned by their parents or who were orphaned, requires further study. Detailed studies of pop-

ulation movements during the famine years are needed. Good biographies of the Soviet Ukrainian leaders could also prove helpful in understanding the conduct of the Ukrainian Soviet and Communist Party leadership during the Holodomor years, such as that of Stanislav Kosior, who headed the Communist Party of Ukraine during the Holodomor. It would be desirable to have more studies of topics related to the Holodomor, such as on the Torgsin system, the anti-religious campaigns, and of the suppression and destruction of Ukrainian elites and intellectuals in the early 1930s.

Studies are still needed about the policies of foreign governments toward the Soviet Union and on what they knew about the Holodomor. We have some documentary publications from British, German, Polish, and Italian diplomatic sources, but scholarly studies are needed, and more documentary sources from other countries need to be published. The role of the Ukrainian diaspora in trying to aid those starving during the Holodomor is somewhat known, but more needs to be researched and written.

A useful approach to studying the Holodomor is to study it in a comparative context, such as comparing it to other famines or to other genocides. HREC has organized such conferences and has afterward published papers presented at these conferences. One conference was the Holodomor in the context of Communist famines. The most recent conference looked at famines in the context of imperialism and colonialism. It is evident that the conduct of the leadership of a state can be crucial in both causing and alleviating famine and famine conditions. A conference on the state and famines would seem to be a good way to compare the role of the Soviet state to other governments in causing famines as well as in alleviating them.

The study of the Holodomor in the context of genocides and crimes against humanity still needs to be pursued, although much has already been written on the question of whether the Holodomor should be considered a case of genocide. These efforts are needed in part because most Western scholars still remain skeptical of the genocidal nature of the Holodomor. Many scholars and students of the Soviet Union subscribe to the views of Robert Davies and Stephen Wheatcroft, who in their study *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture 1931–1933* (2004), while acknowledging the brutality and repressive nature of Stalin's rule, interpret the famine as caused largely by incompetence and as an unwanted consequence of breakneck industrialization.

The 1930s was a critically important and tragic decade in Ukraine's history. This is the decade during which many of Ukraine's intellectuals were subjected to arrests and repressions, the independent, small-holding peasantry was destroyed as a social group, and crash industrialization was undertaken. Most of the popu-

lation endured years of deprivation, and the Holdomor occurred. These events were due to the policies and actions taken by the top leadership of the Soviet state and its officials. Stalinist rule was consolidated, creating the totalitarian state. This had profound implications for Ukraine. The free and unhindered study of this period in which the Holodomor took place and genocide was committed is still in its early stages. Any young scholar looking at the Holodomor or related topics can still contribute to a better understanding of what took place and why. Ukraine was a key region for Stalin, and this still needs to be studied and explained well to the Ukrainian and wider scholarly communities.

My current research interests are focused on studying and learning more about early memoirs and testimonies on the Holodomor and more widely Stalinist repressions and crimes in Ukraine. These were recorded (some, but not all being published) in the second half of the 1940s and early 1950s by diaspora Ukrainians, recent ?migr?s from Soviet Ukraine. As the testimonies and memoirs were produced in the period soon after leaving the Soviet Union, the memories of what had taken place or lived through were still quite fresh. Related to this research is the study of activities diaspora Ukrainians undertook to commemorate and preserve the memory of this tragic event in the first period of ?migr? life, including the study of the early historiography of the Famine by Ukrainian scholars in the diaspora. Taken together, all of these activities represented early attempts to preserve the memory of what took place as well as to bring Ukraine's national tragedy to the attention of the wider political and scholarly communities in the West. While memoirs and testimonies should be treated cautiously by researchers, information contained in them sometimes provides evidence not available in traditional sources used by historians, such as Soviet government and Communist Party documents. In the case of the Holodomor, the confiscation of all food items by activists and search teams in early 1933 is documented quite well in memoirs and testimonies, but not in official documents.