

How has genocide as it pertains to the 1932-33 Ukrainian famine been used as a political tool?

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# **How has genocide as it pertains to the 1932-33 Ukrainian famine been used as a political tool?**

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**Abstract**

The question of whether or not the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33 was genocide has generated a fierce debate, both scholarly and political. The uncertainty of the facts surrounding the famine years, coupled with the vagueness of the official genocide definition given by the United Nations Genocide Convention, gives rise to a very mutable case. This essay aims at illustrating how in taking advantage of such flexibility, the genocide question as it pertains to the Ukrainian famine has been politicized. It explores the famine and its bid for official recognition as a genocide, as an excellent example of just how politically charged genocide labeling can be. From the origins of the official genocide definition, to the basic history of the famine years and the scholarly debate that has grown out of fitting the former into the latter, the aetiology of the politicization of the famine is traced. The political dimension itself is explored looking at two periods in the fight to have the famine recognized which have been distinctly political: the renewal of the Cold War in the 1980s in America under the Reagan administration, and, more recently, post "Orange Revolution" Ukraine under the Yushchenko presidency. Both periods have encompassed increased public attention to the famine and augmented efforts to seek out its recognition as genocide. Whether such efforts were purely for the sake of having a tragedy recognized, or whether the political climates of the time managed to motivate such crusades is an important question that is evaluated. In taking important factors into consideration such as, anti-soviet sentiments during the second Cold War, the role of the Ukrainian Diaspora in publicizing the famine, and Ukrainian nationalism in "Orange" Ukraine, this essay argues that the labeling of the famine as genocide has become innately political.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The 1932-33 famine that took hold of Ukraine stands as one of the most painful memories of the past century in the Ukrainian conscience. Since genocide is widely conceived of as the most reprehensible of crimes, the labelling of a tragedy as genocide is perhaps the most momentous gesture of official atonement.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, there has been an ongoing push to have the famine officially recognized as genocide. Much debate and controversy has surrounded this push, namely for two reasons: (1) very little concrete evidence of the famine years is available, making for a multiplicity of subjective sources and interpretations of the famine; (2) because the definition of genocide set out by the United Nations Genocide Convention (UNGC) is fairly generalized and flexible in its interpretations, it can accommodate either side of the argument. The ambiguity surrounding the genocide question in relation to the Ukrainian famine, has added a particularly political dimension to discussions, and has led it to be used as a particularly effective political tool.

This essay aims at evaluating why and how the labelling of the 1932-33 Ukrainian famine as genocide has been used for political ends. An overview of the UNGC will provide the official framework for evaluating potential cases of genocide. A brief account of the history of the famine years will contextualize the issue. An evaluation of the scholarly debate surrounding the genocide question and the famine will outline both sides of the argument. Finally, focus will be drawn to the politicization of the genocide question in relation to the famine, by looking at two significantly political periods of the debate: the renewal of the Cold War in the 1980s under the Reagan Administration in the United States of America (USA); and during the revival of Ukrainian nationalism under the Yushchenko presidency in post-Orange Revolution Ukraine.

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Fein, 'Genocide, Terror, Life Integrity, and War Crimes: The Case for Discrimination', in George J. Andreopolous, (ed.), Genocide: Conceptual and Historic Dimensions (USA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), p. 95.



## **SECTION 1 The Framework: The UNGC**

### **Defining Genocide: A Fuzzy Concept<sup>2</sup>**

Much debate surrounds the defining of genocide. Since the concept officially originated with the adoption of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide 1948 (UNGC), countless 'alternative definitions and typologies have been offered. Controversy continues not only because genocide is hard to differentiate categorically but because most definers have normative or prescriptive agendas; research is activated by what one feels genocide should encompass—often not wishing to exclude any victims.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the definition of genocide as given by the UNGC remains official and ultimately determines the proceedings of the International Court. For this reason, all mentions of genocide within this essay will pertain specifically to the definition given by the UNGC.

### **Raphael Lemkin and the origins of the UNGC**

Genocide discourse originated primarily in the sphere of international law. It was Raphael Lemkin, a Polish jurist, who laid the foundations for the UNGC. As early as 1933, Lemkin began developing the conception of genocide at the Fifth International Conference for the unification of Criminal Law in Madrid, where he submitted a proposal "to declare the destruction of racial, religious or social collectivities a crime under the law of nations."<sup>4</sup> This idea was further developed in his seminal work *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944) in which the term genocide is coined.<sup>5</sup> The word genocide is a hybrid of the Greek *genes* meaning race, nation or tribe, and the Latin *cide* meaning killing.

<sup>2</sup> Fein, 'Genocide, Terror, Life Integrity, and War Crimes', p. 98, comment made by Morton Winston in a session on definition of genocide at the conference convened by the Institute for the Study of Genocide, Genocide Watch, John Jay College for Criminal Justice, New York City, 22-23 May 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Fein, 'Genocide: A Sociological Perspective', *An Anthropological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002), p. 76.

<sup>4</sup> Raphael Lemkin, 'Le terrorism', in *Actes de la Ve Conference pour l'Unification du Droit penal* a Madrid (14-20.X.1933), and in particular by the same author the supplement to the above report entitled *Les actes constituant un danger general (interetatique) consideres comme delites des droit des gens*, (Paris: Pedone, 1933).

<sup>5</sup> Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944).

In his book, Lemkin essentially defined genocide as the coordinated and planned annihilation of a national, religious or racial group by a variety of actions aimed at undermining the foundations essential to the survival of the group as a group.<sup>6</sup> When brought to the General Assembly of the United Nations, there was the possibility of including a new category of victims “political and other groups” to Lemkin’s list, but this was abandoned when delegates from Great Britain and the Soviet bloc argued that “because of their mutability and lack of distinguishing characteristics” the inclusion of political groups would blur and weaken the whole convention.<sup>7</sup> It was on 9 December 1948, after much political compromise, that both governments and international lawyers agreed upon a definition of genocide and the UNGC was adopted.<sup>8</sup>

Setting the boundaries of a subject is always accomplished with a set of objectives in mind and thus, because of its legal origins, a legitimate definition of genocide needed to be suitable in the context of legal persecution, with special attention paid to intention and to the responsibility of a well-defined perpetrator. A key aspect of Lemkin’s understanding of genocide was thus “the criminal intent to destroy or to cripple permanently a human group.”<sup>9</sup> While Lemkin attempted to come up with a universal definition that could apply to future atrocities, the historical and political context of his work strongly indicates that his definition emerged largely from an attempt to explain and impeach the policies of Nazi Germany. In aiming to formulate a generalized definition, an over identification of similarities and an assumed coherent and common objective regardless of specific context are the result of his definition and the subsequent UN definition.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Frank Chalk, ‘Redefining Genocide’, in George J. Andreopolous, (ed.), Genocide: Conceptual and Historic Dimensions (USA: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 47-48.

<sup>7</sup> Leo Kuper, Genocide: It’s Political Use in the Twentieth Century (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), p.26, quoting the Polish delegation.

<sup>8</sup> The definition, as stated in Article II of the UNGC:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

United Nations, Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 9 December 1948 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, March 1966).

<sup>9</sup> Lemkin, ‘Axis Rule in Occupied Europe’, p. 81-88.

<sup>10</sup> Fein, ‘Genocide: A Sociological Perspective’, p. 76.

Since its inception, the narrow yet somewhat ambiguous UNGC definition has given rise to highly controversial fights for the official recognition of tragedies, the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33 being one of many.

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## **SECTION 2 The Context: The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33**

While famine raged throughout the Soviet Union in 1932-33 it was with particular severity that it hit Ukraine. Both peasantry and national sentiment proved problematic to the Communist revolution in this region. According to Marxist theory, small scale peasant productions flew in the face of the idealized collectivized farm, just as nationalism came into conflict with the interests of the development of the proletarian movement.<sup>11</sup> Stalin saw the two as linked stating that, "The nationality problem is, in its very essence, a problem of the peasantry."<sup>12</sup> Thus, the Ukrainian peasant suffered in double guise—as peasant and as a Ukrainian.<sup>13</sup>

While harsh collectivization and dekulakization programs were carried out from 1929-32 throughout the USSR, it was with an extra militancy that they were effected within the Ukraine and the largely Ukrainian Kuban (along with the Don and Volga regions). By mid-1932 70% of Ukrainian peasants were in collective farms, as compared to the 59.3% in Russia.<sup>14</sup> Stalin justified this increased severity because earlier attempts to collectivize were largely thwarted by uprisings in Ukraine and the North Caucasus.<sup>15</sup> The 22 January 1930 issue of *Proletarska pravda* officially states that one of the aims of collectivization in Ukraine was "the destruction of Ukrainian nationalism's social base—the individual land holding."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I.V. Stalin, *Works*, (Moscow :1953-5), v.2, p. 321.

<sup>12</sup> I.V. Stalin, *Works*, (Moscow :1953-5), v.7 p.71.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.4.

<sup>14</sup> Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow* p. 220.

<sup>15</sup> Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow* p. 220.

<sup>16</sup> *Proletarska pravda*, 22 January 1930, quoted in Dmytro Solovey, 'On the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Great Man-made Famine in Ukraine' *The Ukrainian Quarterly* 19, 1963, p.7.



Targeting the peasantry proved decisive in combating Ukrainian nationalism, however Stalin also deemed necessary an attack against the intelligentsia who voiced it.<sup>17</sup> While collectivization and dekulakization was being carried out in the rural areas, many distinguished academics, former political figures and priests were arrested, tried and sentenced for attempting to seize power and to distinguish Ukrainians from Russians. Along with these sentences came the closing of the linguistic department at the Ukrainian Academy and additional arrests of scholars and students.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond the peasantry and intelligentsia, the Ukrainian Communists were also suppressed. The Ukrainian Party and Soviet organizations could not fulfill the impossible grain quotas set by the Politburo; both complaints about unfeasibility and failure to fulfill the requirements were met by extensive Party purges. The Kremlin believed that the inability to fulfill the grain delivery requirements was because peasants wanted to withhold grain from the State, failing to sow and reap, and relying on personal stores. Ukrainian Party officials knew that no such stores of hidden grain existed, however the voicing of such concerns resulted in further Party purges.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the class reaction deemed appropriate for the situation at hand was to remove all grain from the peasant and let him starve to death instead.

The policies and practices of 1929-32 only foreshadowed the bleak future of Stalinist programs in the years to come. The countryside was already showing signs of exhaustion and some areas were seriously short of food, yet impossible grain requisitioning was again put in place. This time, the failure to meet the procurements resulted in the removal of all food from the villages and the implementation of an internal passport system, blockading the Ukrainian peasantry from fleeing the famine ravaged areas and preventing any outside aid from reaching the starving. There is much debate about the actual death toll of the famine years. Many factors make it difficult to ascertain just how many Ukrainian deaths were caused by the famine itself: the multiplicity of tribulations experienced by the peoples in the Soviet Union at large and suppressed Soviet census data to name but a few. Estimates range from the complete denial of the famine to a soaring figure of 10

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<sup>17</sup> Conquest, The Harvest of Sorrow p. 219

<sup>18</sup> Conquest, The Harvest of Sorrow p. 218.

<sup>19</sup> Conquest, The Harvest of Sorrow p. 221.

million at the extreme.<sup>20</sup> Generally, more accepted figures range anywhere from 4.5 to 7 million. It is important to note this range accounts for about 20% of the total population of the Ukraine and about a quarter of the rural population.<sup>21</sup> Despite not having a completely accurate figure, it is reasonable to say the impact was severe. As Khrushchev states in his memoirs, "I can't give an exact figure because no one was keeping count. All we knew was that people were dying in enormous numbers".<sup>22</sup>

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### **SECTION 3 Scholarly Debate: Was the Ukrainian famine 'genocide'?**

A lengthy scholarly debate surrounds the famine with view points ranging from outright denial of its existence to it being a full fledged genocide against Ukrainians. While the actual occurrence of a famine is generally accepted, historians are far from unanimous in their interpretations of its causes. The ambiguity of the facts surrounding the events of 1932-33 in Ukraine and in the Soviet Union at large is responsible for providing perhaps the most fodder for the debate. Among many contributing factors, the widespread censorship of Soviet authorities, misleading and highly limited press coverage, and the general policy of hypocrisy and deception prevalent throughout Stalin's years, have prevented the formulation of a clear understanding of what exactly took place. The consequent mutability of not exactly reliable sources, allows for the stretching of facts to accommodate virtually any version of what exactly happened and why. For those who agree that the famine was indeed engineered, the most controversial question rests in determining whether the plan was directed at the peasants of the entire Soviet Union, or aimed specifically at Ukraine as part of a campaign to subdue the Ukrainian nation.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Stanislav Kulchytsky, 'Holodomor-33: Why and How?', *The Mirror Weekly* (November 25-December 1 2006), speech of Stepan Khmara to the Ukrainian parliament, from <http://www.zn.kiev.ua/ie/show/624/55147/>, in Ukrainian, accessed on February 10, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow* p.306.

<sup>22</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), p. 124.

<sup>23</sup> Frank Sysyn, 'The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-3: The Role of the Ukrainian Diaspora in Research and Public Discussion' in Levon Chorbajian and George Shirinian, (eds.), *Studies in Comparative Genocide*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999), p.182.

As it stands the UNGC exclusively offers the relevant criteria, that is the definition of genocide as a crime under international law, and therefore, the question whether the famine was a genocide can only be answered along its guidelines.<sup>24</sup>

Those who reject the famine as genocide, justify their stand by claiming that it does not fit the criteria set out by the Convention.<sup>25</sup> However, those who reject the famine as a genocide, often acknowledge that its case "touches on a crucial problem of the genocide definition: due to the Soviet-UN policy it doesn't protect social and political groups."<sup>26</sup>

Despite this weakness in the definition, the UN has adopted this stand, and thus, the international body does not officially recognize the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33. What is also interesting to note is the fact that many of those who see the famine as genocide, have used the very same UNGC definition to justify their stand.<sup>27</sup>

It is evident that the crux of this debate ultimately stems from the application of a stretchable set of criteria to a series of events whose interpretations are equally as mutable. With no concrete

<sup>24</sup> ICCEES VII World Congress Abstracts, "Europe - Our Common Home?" (Berlin, 25-30 July 2005), pp. 247-248.

<sup>25</sup> For example, the summary Otto Luchterhadt's, Professor of Law at the University of Hamburg in Germany, argument, printed in the Congress Abstracts of the VII World Congress of the International Committee for Central and East European Studies, reads as follows:

While the objective elements of the offence were completed without any doubt by state terrorist measures against a substantial part of the Ukrainian population during the so-called Dekulakization, the subjective element was not fulfilled, because killings, deportations, and mistreatments were not committed with the required specific 'intent' to destroy, in whole or in part, the Ukrainians as a national group as such. The victims of the Dekulakization policy were defined by a social approach, not by a national one.

ICCEES VII World Congress Abstracts, pp. 247-248.

<sup>26</sup> ICCEES VII World Congress Abstracts, pp. 247-248.

<sup>27</sup> For example, Roman Serbyn, Professor-Emeritus of History at University of Quebec, convincingly argues that the criteria set forth by the convention can indeed be applied in a way that proves that the famine was a genocide. He states that:

The crucial element of the definition, the question of intent to destroy in whole or in part, is demonstrated by Stalin's decision to close internal Soviet borders thus isolating peasants of Ukraine and the Kuban to prevent them from seeking refuge in the more benign conditions of Russia and Belarus.

Roman Serbyn, 'Famines in Ukraine: Induced Starvation, Death for Millions, Genocide', *Action Ukraine Report*, No. 791, Article 1, Kyiv, November 19, 2006, from [http://action-ukraine-report.blogspot.com/2006\\_11\\_01\\_archive.html](http://action-ukraine-report.blogspot.com/2006_11_01_archive.html), accessed on February 15, 2007.



grounds for application, the weaknesses of the UNGC are exposed, setting up the question of whether the Ukrainian famine was a genocide as an ideal political tool.

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## **SECTION 4 The Politicization of the Genocide Question**

### **A Political Tool**

The debate surrounding the famine has by no means been restricted to the academic sphere. Discussions surrounding it have had, and continue to have, undeniable political undertones; the question of genocide as it pertains to the famine becoming more of a political tool than anything else, and making the debate all the more complex and fierce. Those claiming the famine was indeed genocide have been accused of being biased and anti-left.<sup>28</sup> Equally, those denying the famine's status as genocide have been seen as blinded by leftist convictions. Within the ongoing debate, there have been two peak periods, when the issue has boiled up into public consciousness and political interests have dominated the discourse and actions surrounding it: during the 1980s with the renewal of Cold War tensions in the United States of America (USA) and during the years following the recent Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

### **The Ukrainian Diaspora, Ronald Reagan and the 'Second Cold War'**

1979-1985 signaled a reawakening of Cold War tensions and is a period of time often termed the 'Second Cold War'.<sup>29</sup> In 1980, Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter, vowing to increase military expenditure and to confront the Soviets at every point possible.<sup>30</sup>

The 1980s were also of importance as it was the first time the famine was brought to the attention of the North American public. A number of factors led to this increase in awareness. The approach

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<sup>28</sup> Sysyn, 'The Ukrainian Famine of 1933-32', pp.186-187.

<sup>29</sup> Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Cold War* (London: Verso, 1983), pp.234-264.

<sup>30</sup> Edward Judge & John Langdon, (eds), *The Cold War: A History Through Documents* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999), pp. 204-206.

of the fiftieth anniversary of the famine in 1983 and the persistent denial of its existence on the part of the Soviet government concerned the large and well established Ukrainian communities within Canada and the USA. Acutely aware that the number of survivors able to recount first hand stories of what actually happened were rapidly diminishing, a wide-spread campaign to register the famine in public consciousness was launched by the Ukrainian Diaspora.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide were gaining public attention, setting a particularly conducive environment for survivors to speak out, but equally for promoting political goals. Paul Robert Magocsci stated that:

...part of the logic behind the public relations efforts of Ukrainians in the West is based on the successful experience of the Jews. If Jews have been able to gain the sympathy and support for Israel through constantly reminding the world of Jewish suffering during World War II, then Ukrainians hope to do the same through publicizing 'their holocaust'—the famine of 1933.<sup>32</sup>

While the need for a public recognition of the famine may have been solely to bring closure to a tragedy that marked the consciences of many Ukrainians, potential political motivations behind such a need cannot be overlooked. In terms of political orientation, the Ukrainian Diaspora community was by and large, rightist, fiercely nationalistic and vehemently anti-Soviet. Thus, the framing of the famine as a Soviet engineered genocide was in their interest, gaining them recognition as a distinct national group and further enflaming anti-USSR sentiments already present in society at large.

As part of the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the famine in 1983, official recognition of the event by Western governments was sought after. The Reagan Administration was conducive to this effort. The fact that Ukrainians had failed to obtain such recognition in the 1930s heightened the importance of this issue. In addition, attention to Western governmental failure to act during the Holocaust created a new sensitivity to the issue of genocide that transcended party politics.<sup>33</sup> Thus, House

<sup>31</sup> Sysyn, 'The Ukrainian Famine of 1933-32', p. 188.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Robert Magocsci, 'Famine and Genocide', *The World & I* (April 1987), p. 422

<sup>33</sup> Sysyn, 'The Ukrainian Famine of 1933-32', p. 194.

Concurrent Resolution 11 describing the famine as a man-made genocidal act against the Ukrainian people was passed by US Congress on November 17 the same year.<sup>34</sup>

In 1984, the production of a feature documentary entitled *Harvest of Despair* was commissioned by the Ukrainian Famine committee of Toronto. With powerful footage of interviews with survivors, estimates of death the toll stated in 7-10 million range and the exposé of the cover-up of the famine by New York Times reporter Walter Duranty, the film generated international attention, winning many awards at notable film festivals.<sup>35</sup> While the film was shown across Canada, Public Broadcasting (PBS) affiliates were reluctant to broadcast it.<sup>36</sup> Yet again, the Ukrainian community capitalized on the political climate to their favor and accused PBS of being leftist.<sup>37</sup> After Peter Paluch, a member of the Ukrainian Studies Fund of Harvard University wrote an article in the *National Review* which raised the issue of airing the film *Harvest of Despair*, PBS agreed to broadcast the film.<sup>38</sup> The film was met by the American public with a favorable response, spreading awareness of the famine but, also, inevitably fueling prevalent anti-Soviet attitudes.<sup>39</sup>

In 1985 the Reagan Administration backed by the American-Ukrainian community launched a US Congressional Commission to investigate the famine. Three years later the findings of the commission were presented to Congress stating, among other things, that Joseph Stalin and those around him committed genocide against Ukrainians in 1932-1933.<sup>40</sup> Despite the findings of the US Commission, Soviet authorities continued to deny that a famine had occurred, and this pushed the Ukrainian Diaspora to seek recognition on an international level. The World Congress of Free Ukrainians approached prominent jurists to establish an International Commission of Inquiry into the famine. After two evidence taking sessions in 1988, a deliberating session in 1989 and the issuing of its final report in 1990, the Commission affirmed many of the claims of the Diaspora.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Roma Hadzewycz, 'A Look Back Activity on Capitol Hill', *The Ukrainian Weekly*, December 25, 1983 No. 52, Vol. LI 1983, from [www.ukrweekly.com/Archive/1983/528313.shtml](http://www.ukrweekly.com/Archive/1983/528313.shtml), February 19, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Sysyn, 'The Ukrainian Famine of 1933-32', p. 189.

<sup>36</sup> Sysyn, 'The Ukrainian Famine of 1933-32', p. 190.

<sup>37</sup> Sysyn, 'The Ukrainian Famine of 1933-32', p. 190.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Paluch, 'Spiking the Ukrainian Famine, Again', *National Review*, April 11, 1986, p. 33-36.

<sup>39</sup> Sysyn, p. 190.

<sup>40</sup> U. S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine, *Report to Congress* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), p524.

<sup>41</sup> Sysyn, 'The Ukrainian Famine of 1933-32', pp. 294-95.



However, when it came to the question of genocide, contrary to the Congressional Resolution of 1983, the Harvest of Despair of 1984 and the US Commission of 1985, no outright conclusion was reached. The final report states that it is “plausible that the constituent elements of genocide were present at the time”, but also recognizes that “history has since largely confirmed that Stalin’s hatred extended beyond the Ukrainians”.<sup>42</sup> This discrepancy could suggest a political bias on the part of the Reagan Administration and the Ukrainian Diaspora in their framing of the famine as genocide. Yielding the moral opprobrium generated by the term genocide it seems both groups made use of the Ukrainian famine as a means to gain support and promote public responses conducive to their political agendas.

### **‘Orange’ Ukraine and Nationalism**

After the second round of a falsified election in 2004, the Orange Revolution took hold of Ukraine. When it became clear that the old regime had stolen the election, a massive peaceful protest in downtown Kyiv demanded a new legitimate election. Under such social pressure authorities complied and through a carefully monitored third round, the favored, west-leaning candidate, Victor Yushchenko took control, signaling a new chapter in Ukrainian politics. However, this victory was not as overwhelming as one might think. With a narrow majority of 52%, Yushchenko received all his votes from the western and central territories of Ukraine, while the eastern parts of Ukraine voted in favor of the old regime candidate, Victor Yanukovich. Dominique Arel, Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Ottawa, argues that because Ukrainians in Central and Western Ukraine have a more cohesive view of their identity and a greater sense of solidarity, their ability to undertake collective action was facilitated.<sup>43</sup> Their sense of nationalism and cultural distinctiveness, in contrast the highly Russianized east, brought the Revolution into action and led to the election of an essentially nationalist government. With the old regime out of power, Moscow’s ever present grip over Ukrainian politics was suddenly loosened and an independent political nation was born.

<sup>42</sup> International Commission of Inquiry into the 1932-33 Famine in Ukraine, The Final Report: 1990, (Toronto: International Commission of Inquiry into the 1932-33 Famine in Ukraine, 1990), p.61.

<sup>43</sup> Dominique Arel, ‘The “Orange Revolution”: Analysis and Implications of the 2004 Presidential Elections in Ukraine’, from the Third Annual Stasiuk-Cambridge Lecture On Contemporary Ukraine, 25 February, 2005, p. 6.

After the Revolution, there was a renewal in the push for international recognition of the famine as genocide by the Ukrainian parliament. In September 2006, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk urged the 61st session of the UN General Assembly to recognize the famine of 1932-33 in Ukraine as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian nation. He appealed that such recognition would be of great importance for all the countries that observe the principles of democracy and respect for human beings and would confirm their loyalty to international commitments and readiness to resist any act of totalitarianism, mass-scale and gross violations of human rights and new cases of genocide.<sup>44</sup> In October, Yushchenko set out a list of measures to the 2006 commemoration of the famine's anniversary. Among such measures was a call for the Foreign Affairs Ministry "to be more active in seeking international recognition of the 1932-1933 famine in Ukraine as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people" and "to study the possibility of erecting a monument to this famine in other countries".<sup>45</sup> On November 28, three days after the official anniversary ceremonies, a bill declaring the Soviet-era famine an act of genocide was passed in the Ukrainian parliament. Much discussion preceded the decision, the pro-Russian party advocating the term 'tragedy' over genocide, but the ultimate passing of the bill served as a symbolic victory for pro-Ukrainian president Yushchenko.<sup>46</sup>

In the midst of all such diplomatic maneuvering the Ukrainian government had been accused of "politicizing" a human tragedy, using the genocide debate yet again as means for a political end.<sup>47</sup> Even after the Orange Revolution, the threat of Russian influence looms over Ukraine, and is a major concern for pro-nationalist Yushchenko and his supporters. Tarasyuk's implication of democracy and totalitarianism in his appeal to the international community, was strategic considering the current climate of global politics, namely in relation to the ongoing War on Terror. In this regard, it is interesting to note that following Tarsyuk's appeal, the United States Senate passed by unanimous consent a resolution authorizing the Government of Ukraine to construct a monument in Washington, D.C. to the victims of the Ukrainian Genocide of 1932-1933 on

<sup>44</sup> BBC, 'Ukraine Asks UN to Recognize 1930's Famine as Genocide', BBC Monitoring Service, United Kingdom, September 26, 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Presidential decree No. 868/2006 of October 12 as obtained by the Ukrainian News Agency, 'Ukraine President Yushchenko Lays Out Large Program To Commemorate Victims of Famine & Political Repression', Kyiv, October 13, 2006, from <http://action-ukraine-report.blogspot.com/2006/10/aur774-oct-14-genocide-most-heinous.html>, accessed on February 19, 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Helen Fawkes, 'Ukrainian Famine was 'genocide'', BBC News, Kyiv, November 28, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Dominique Arel, 'Holodomor Buried in Semantics' Kyiv Post, Kyiv, December 6, 2006.

September 29, 2006.<sup>48</sup> International recognition of the famine as a genocide would be effective in asserting Ukraine as a nation in the sphere of global politics, a desirable position for a country hoping to move in the direction of joining the European Union. Within the nation itself, a worldwide acceptance of a national tragedy, would only further the Ukrainian nationalism of the small and geographically polarized majority to which Yushchenko largely owes his presidency. Hence, whether calculated or inadvertent, there is an innately political dimension to the measures taken by the Ukrainian government, which leads to an inevitable politicization of the famine.

## CONCLUSION

Arel claims that, while facts can be attained and are objectively investigated by historians, it is in categorizing that one necessarily enters the realm of the subjective and, therefore, of the political.<sup>49</sup> Thus, it is impossible to leave out political dimensions when discussing genocide.

The debate surrounding the nature of the Ukrainian famine is particularly complex and political. First and foremost, the ambiguity of all facts and figures and the multiplicity of sources, allows for drastically different interpretations that can be equally substantiated by one source or another. Coupled with the fairly vague UNGC, this flexibility can be yielded to suit different agendas, making it easy to build a case either for or against the famine being recognized as genocide. Second, popular understanding of the famine is far behind the scholarly, which makes for an audience willing to accept almost any verdict concerning the genocide question. This lag can thus be taken advantage of to promote a particular political agenda, making this specific tragedy convenient for political uses. Third, there is a definite fear of trivialization surrounding genocide. The belief that the confusion of genocide with other violations of human rights and other forms of destruction will dilute the severity and importance of the term, generates a certain exclusivity that surrounds the concept. This exclusivity makes the term all the more sought-after and thus powerful as a political tool.

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<sup>48</sup> Ukrainian National Information Service (UNIS), 'Ukrainian Genocide Memorial Authorized by U.S. Congress', October 4, 2006, from <http://www.ucca.org/uccanews/story/1004061317.shtml>, accessed on February 19, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Arel, 'Holodomor Buried in Semantics'.



At the base of all petitions for or against having the Ukrainian famine recognized as genocide, is a tragedy. Along the road to recognition, discussions have become very technical, theoretical and, above all, political. The fundamentally human element at hand is somehow lost in the debate, the actual tragedy getting buried in definitions, semantic games, and political interests. It is crucial that a genocide convention with a definition be in place as an outlet to try and punish perpetrators, as well as for preventing future occurrences of genocide. However, it is equally important not to let a terminology determine the legitimacy or harshness of a crime, as has become the case with the Ukrainian famine.

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