

To what extent was the Holodomor famine (1932-1933) in the Ukrainian SSR caused by the Soviet Union's legal measures to enforce grain collection?

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Section A: Identification and evaluation of sources

The Holodomor famine in the Ukrainian SSR occurred during 1932-1933 and resulted in a death toll of approximately 4.5 million. The World Congress of Free Ukrainians claimed that the famine was caused by the attempt of the USSR to reform agriculture and by legal measures to aggravate the famine.¹ As an attempt to investigate this assumption, the following research question has been proposed to examine the responsibility of the Soviet state: **to what extent was the Holodomor famine (1932-1933) in the Ukrainian SSR caused by the Soviet Union's legal measures to enforce grain collection?**

The first source to be evaluated is the *Resolution of the CC AUCP(B) and CPC USSR on grain procurements in Ukraine*. The source is a government document regarding policy and is, therefore, a contemporary primary source. The origin is General Secretary Joseph Stalin and Chairman Vyacheslav Molotov from the year 1932. The source is relevant to examine the role of the Soviet state. Therefore the origin of the source is valuable as Stalin and Molotov were part of the decision-making process in the region's policy.

The source was created for the purpose of resolving the issue of completing the grain collection plan of 1933 in Ukraine. Therefore the purpose is also valuable as it provides guidelines for the governing state bodies of Ukraine where the Holodomor famine occurred.

¹ Sysyn p.194-195

However, the content of the source should be regarded as a limitation as the source is unable to provide information on how the policy was subsequently implemented.

Therefore certain intentions do not reflect the subsequent action of the Soviet state. For example, there is no mention of grain confiscations. This affects the investigation by the difficulty to examine how the Soviet upper command was involved.

The second source to be evaluated is *Fraud, Famine, and Fascism*. The source is a history book and is, therefore, a non-contemporary secondary source. The origin is labor journalist Douglas Tottle and was published by Progress Publishers in 1987. This proposes a limitation to the investigation as Tottle is not a trained historian. The source has however been considered relevant to the investigation as left-leaning organizations commend his publication such as the Swedish Communist Party.² This is significant as to include a pro-Soviet perspective.

However, the purpose of the source is a limitation as it was likely created to undermine the responsibility of the Soviet state. Tottle allegedly received assistance from the Soviet state to collect research material. Among those assisting him was Yurii Kondufor, a state historian of the Ukrainian SSR.³ Consequently, Tottle does not attempt to include factors that relate to the Soviet state such as the implementation of grain confiscations.

The content of the source is one-sided. The reason is that the content is affected by Tottle's political bias. The bias is emphasized by that there is little evaluation of reasons for causation that have been attributed to the Soviet state. The content has

² Svenska Kommunistiska Partiet, 2009

³ Sysyn p.7

nonetheless been considered valuable as relatively few scholarly sources provide a pro-Soviet perspective on the Holodomor.

Section B: Investigation

The causation of the Holodomor famine during 1932-1933 in the Soviet republic of Ukraine is subject to historical debate. The legal measures to impose grain collection by the Soviet Union were the primary factor for the causation of the famine while collectivization and drought had a secondary role.

Collectivization was a contributing factor to the Holodomor, which was introduced by the USSR to reform agriculture from 1928 to 1940. The previously independent landholdings were transformed into collective farms where land, equipment, and machinery were shared under state ownership.⁴ The consequence of collectivization was the deterioration of agriculture. As deterioration occurred, the Ukrainian countryside was more prone to famine, which caused a situation where potential pressure could result in a disaster such as the attempt by the Soviet state to implement legal measures to enforce grain collection.

The process of collectivization entailed the difficulty of organizing 25 million individual peasants into collectivized farms in Ukraine. The difficulty was exacerbated by the inability of the Soviet state to transform the countryside as appointed party members were inexperienced with agriculture.⁵ Expansion of the sown area was as well to occur simultaneously. This disrupted the traditional arrangement for the cultivation of the soil as it was not replaced by an improved cropping system.⁶ The aforementioned factors had detrimental effects on the efficiency of Ukrainian agriculture and the production of grain. As a result, the

⁴ Applebaum p.67

⁵ Davies & Wheatcroft p.462

⁶ Davies & Wheatcroft p.464

Ukrainian peasantry was increasingly unable to fulfill grain quotas and would be rendered unable if legal measures were imposed.

Consequently, the harvest of November 1932 did not fulfill the requirements of the plan set. Throughout the USSR, the harvest was 40 percent less than expected, while in Ukraine 60 percent lower.⁷ The process of collectivization and its detrimental effect on agriculture caused a fundamental problem where the peasantry would be unable to fulfill grain quotas as the harvest was reduced. Collectivization should be regarded as having a secondary role in the causation of the famine as it resulted in less grain being available for internal use. However, the legal measures to enforce grain collection by the Soviet state were the difference between decreased availability of grain and mass starvation.

The implementation of legal measures to enforce grain collection is linked to the phenomenon of Ukrainization. The process entailed the encouragement of usage of the Ukrainian language and other cultural elements in public life within the country. Ukrainian historian Stanislav Kulchutsky would argue that the Soviet crackdown on Ukrainization was caused by the fear that the movement would increase human and resource potential for the sovereignty of the Ukrainian SSR.⁸ Consequently, there is a notion that the potential for famine by legal measures was acknowledged by the Soviet state. This should be regarded as a pro-Ukrainian perspective as Kulchutsky proposed the possibility that the famine was man-made in a deliberate attempt to quell Ukrainian nationalism.

⁷ Applebaum p.126

⁸ Kulchutsky p.16

The incentive for Soviet blame of Ukrainization is evident when examining the government document *Resolution of the CC AUCP(B) and CPC USSR on grain procurements in Ukraine, the North Caucasus, and the Western Oblast* issued by the politburo of the Soviet Union on the 14th of December 1932. The resolution established that the failure of grain collection was the result of Ukrainization and its emergence of “bourgeois-nationalist elements” instead of strengthening the USSR.⁹ Consequently, legal measures to enforce grain collection were not only implemented to fulfill the actual quota of grain, but also to quell the aforementioned nationalism.

The legal measures to enforce grain collection were initiated by General Secretary Joseph Stalin and Chairman of the Sovnarkom¹⁰ Vyacheslav Molotov who affixed their signatures on a resolution by the central committee on the 14th of December 1932 to combat the revolutionary elements both in the rural and administrative structures.¹¹ The Radnarkom¹² of the Ukraine SSR as well issued a resolution published on the 20th of November that district executive committees were to “organize the seizure from collective farms, individual farmers, and state farm workers of grain stolen in the course of harvesting, threshing, and transportation”.¹³ What can be established is that the incentive of blaming Ukrainization for the failure of grain collection, and as a result initiating the confiscation of grain, were decisions that came from Soviet leadership, and thus their involvement is evident.

⁹ Holodomor CA p.24

¹⁰ ‘The Council of People's Commissars’ as an executive authority in the RSFSR and USSR

¹¹ Shapoval p.9

¹² ‘The Council of People's Commissars’ as an executive authority in the UkrSSR

¹³ Kulchytsky p.30

The confiscation of grain was appointed to Vsevolod Balytsky of the Joint State Political Directorate¹⁴ (OGPU). Balytsky was appointed deputy head in 1931¹⁵ and was assigned by Stalin in operational order no. 1 to the OGPU of the Ukrainian SSR dated December 5th 1932 to find and confiscate hidden grain as evidence of counter-revolutionary activity.¹⁶ In December 1932, 11,466,490 kilograms of grain were confiscated. Subsequently, in 1933, 16,380,687.2 kilograms of grain were confiscated.¹⁷ The excess mortality rose adjacent to grain confiscations with 207,000 deaths in the rural areas and 43,000 in the cities during 1932. The following year in 1933 the number increased to 3,335,000 in the rural areas and 194,000 in the cities.¹⁸ The registered deaths did not substantially increase during the introduction of collectivization that occurred previous to 1932 but during the period of legal measures to enforce grain collection from 1932 to 1933. Legal measures to enforce grain collection should be regarded as the primary factor for causation as it exacerbated the potential for famine caused by the inability of the Soviet state to introduce collectivization.

However, some scholars dispute the responsibility of the Soviet state such as Douglas Tottle in his book *Fraud, Famine and Fascism*. Tottle disputed the responsibility of the Soviet state for the famine and instead emphasized the factors of drought and kulak sabotage.¹⁹ Drought is a valid argument as the fluctuations of annual temperature and rainfall in the territory of the USSR were, according to historians

¹⁴ The Soviet intelligence service and secret police between the years 1923-1934

¹⁵ Shapoval p.3

¹⁶ Kulchytsky pp.32-33

¹⁷ Kulchytsky p.33

¹⁸ Kulchytsky p.36

¹⁹ Tottle p.99

Davies and Wheatcroft, greater than in any major grain-producing area of the world.²⁰

Davies and Wheatcroft argued that drought contributed to reduced harvest despite attempts by the Soviet Union to reduce the planned collections by 5 million tons between 1932 and 1933. However, they would regard these attempts as “insufficient” and consequently, the grain available for internal use was substantially less.²¹ Davies and Wheatcroft agreed that drought was a contributing factor, though nonetheless argued that the fundamental cause for the deterioration of agriculture was the unremitting state pressure on rural resources.²² The argument that drought could have caused famine without the state's pressure is therefore not proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

Tottle would also emphasize the factor of kulak sabotage. The word kulak refers to the upper-peasant class which was considered responsible for the failure of Soviet agriculture and food distribution.²³ According to Tottle, the kulak class organized campaigns of large-scale destruction, though Tottle provided no statistical data to support his argument.²⁴ However, according to the OGPU in 1930, 13,794 incidents of terror and 13,754 mass protests had occurred as a result of dekulakization; the process of removing the upper-peasantry class.²⁵ However, it is unclear whether these protests contributed to the famine or were expressions of preexisting

²⁰ Davies & Wheatcroft p.466

²¹ Davies & Wheatcroft p.467

²² Davies & Wheatcroft p.461

²³ Applebaum p.35

²⁴ Tottle p.101

²⁵ Applebaum p.102

discontent. The argument that kulak sabotage would have caused famine should be considered as unreliable as sufficient evidence is not provided.

This essay in history has argued that the primary factor in the causation of the Holodomor famine were the legal measures implemented by the Soviet state to enforce grain collection while collectivization and drought were considered as having a secondary role. The significance of kulak sabotage was disregarded as sufficient statistical evidence is not available. To emphasize why legal measures to enforce grain collection by the Soviet state were considered as the primary factor in causation, the different factors have to be put in perspective. The factor of drought contributed to pre-existing conditions that affected agriculture, while collectivization imposed difficulties and inefficiency, while the legal measures by the Soviet state aggravated the conditions caused by the aforementioned factors resulting in famine.

Section C: Reflection

A similarity exists between the scientific method of the natural sciences and the subject of history. A historian possesses methods and tools to acquire knowledge about the past similar to how scientists can conduct scientific investigations.

Knowledge about the past may for example be determined by the use of primary and secondary sources. However, the accessibility of such sources may be limited when a historian conducts research regarding the Holodomor famine. Several primary sources regarding the famine are only available at the Ukrainian archives and therefore investigating the compiled references in secondary sources may prove difficult.

For example, several sources throughout the investigation provided differing statistics on grain confiscations, death toll, and grain collections. It was, therefore, necessary to evaluate the reliability of each secondary source as an examination of the referenced primary sources was not possible. In the end, *The Years of Hunger* by Davies and Wheatcroft was deemed the most reliable because of its comprehensive data including several areas and time periods, whereas some sources presented data without context. However, the usage of secondary sources should not always be regarded as a limitation. The reason is that other historians may provide insightful interpretations of primary sources. Consequently, statistics and data may be utilized to examine key concepts of history, such as this investigation has done with *causation*.

The second issue that a historian may encounter when researching the Holodomor famine is the language barrier. Several accessible primary sources that were

considered for use in this investigation were only available in Ukrainian. The language barrier prevents a historian from examining the source if they're not proficient in the respective language. A historian may nonetheless utilize a translation. However, translation may distort the meaning conveyed through the original language, which may distort the historical knowledge that a historian tries to acquire.

The aforementioned language barrier also caused difficulties in this investigation when the alternative reasons for causation were to be examined. A small selection of pro-Soviet scholars exists that provides an alternative perspective on the responsibility of the Soviet state. For example, historian and member of the Ukrainian Communist Party Valerii Soldatenko considered the Holodomor as not deliberately created by the Soviet state.²⁶ However, his publications are in Ukrainian and were thus not included. Consequently, the investigation had to rely predominantly on Western scholars except for Tottle. It could be argued that equal representation does not always exist in history.

²⁶ Andriewsky p.23

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