Collectivization and the Holodomor

The 1930s saw many horrors in the Soviet Union. Joseph Stalin’s purges resulted in the execution of thousands, while millions more were sent to forced labor camps. The decade began with the forced collectivization of farms throughout the Soviet Union, a process that resulted in the deaths of millions by starvation. Ukraine, which suffered the most from collectivization, lost an estimated 3-5 million people to a famine that was entirely avoidable and likely at least in part deliberate.

FORCED COLLECTIVIZATION AND STARVATION
By the end of the 1920s, Joseph Stalin had consolidated power as the unchallenged leader of the Soviet Union. In 1928 he introduced a program to collectivize farms and end private ownership of land. Farmers in Ukraine, known as the “bread basket” of the Soviet Union for its fertile soil, resisted giving up their land to the state and joining collective farms.

The Soviet state under Stalin responded with a program called “dekulakization,” which evicted farmers and their families. The word “kulak” means “fist” in Russian and was used to demonize private farmers who refused to open their “clenched fists” and participate in building socialism. More than a million Ukrainian farmers were exiled to the far reaches of the Soviet Union or left without homes or work in the process.

In 1932, the Soviet state increased Ukrainian grain harvest quotas, even as collectivization policies led to much lower production levels. The impossibly high quotas meant grain that would be normally be eaten by farmers was confiscated and sent to other parts of the Soviet Union or sold abroad. As a result, millions, mostly rural Ukrainians, went hungry.

The state gave orders to the internal police, the NKVD, to arrest or execute farmers who tried to steal grain from fields or storage facilities. The so-called kulaks were also denied residency permits to gain access to housing in cities. Signs of agony became widespread as starving families moved to the streets of cities such as Kharkiv, desperate to find food.

In 1930, an estimated 30,000 people were dying of starvation per day, many of them children. Some resorted to cannibalism.

Because the USSR did not record deaths from the famine and attempted to cover it up, an exact number of victims is difficult to verify. However, scholars generally agree that millions lost their lives. Discussion of the Holodomor was banned until the final years of the USSR under Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika.

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Famine victims lie on the streets of Kharkiv
INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION OF THE HOLODOMOR

The Holodomor remains a sensitive and contentious issue in the former Soviet Union. Ukraine considers the famine a genocide perpetrated by Joseph Stalin and the Soviet state. However, the Russian Federation has been sharply critical of attempts to recognize the famine as a genocide, noting that ethnic Russians also died and disputing claims that it was deliberate. Several other nations, including Canada, Australia, Poland, and the Baltics recognize it as a genocide. The United States has not officially recognized the Holodomor as an act of genocide but has called it a man-made famine and an attack on Ukrainian nationalism.

FAMINE IN KAZAKHSTAN

A similar famine took place in the territory that is now Kazakhstan from 1930-1933. Forced collectivization and attempts to change the Kazaks’ primarily nomadic lifestyle into a culture based on agriculture and industry resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million people. The event primarily affected ethnic Kazaks and made them a minority in the territory, which became the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936. The famine is sometimes called the Goloshchekhin genocide, named after Filipp Goloshchchyonkin, who was responsible for carrying out Soviet policies there.

Monuments in Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv, commemorate victims of the Holodomor.

DISCUSSION IDEAS

What is a genocide? Does the Holodomor in Ukraine qualify as a genocide? Ask students to discuss reasons for and against.

Why did it take so long for knowledge of the Holodomor to become public? Have students talk about how other events, such as the Holocaust, were documented.

What were the goals of collectivization? Why did the process create a decline in agricultural production in the early 1930s?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


USEFUL LINKS

CIA World Factbook: Ukraine
BBC Country Page: Ukraine
National Geographic: Ukraine
Kyiv Post English