



Генеральне консульство України в Торонто
Consulate General of Ukraine in Toronto
Consulat Général de l'Ukraine

PRESS-RELEASE

26 грудня 2007 року

№ 23

Генеральне консульство України в Торонто розповсюджує статтю Президента України Віктора Ющенка «Пам'ятати Голодомор», надруковану в газеті «Відомості» від 30 листопада 2007 року.

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The article of the President of Ukraine

"Vidomosti", November 30, 2007

TO REMEMBER HOLODOMOR

By Viktor Yushchenko

Seventy-five years ago the Ukrainian people fell victim to a crime of unimaginable horror. Usually referred to in the West as the Great Famine or the Terror Famine, it is known to Ukrainians as the Holodomor. It was a state-organized program of mass starvation that in 1932-33 killed an estimated seven million to 10 million Ukrainians, including up to a third of the nation's children. With grotesque understatement the Soviet authorities dismissed this event as a "bad harvest." Their intention was to exonerate themselves of responsibility and suppress knowledge of both the human causes and human consequences of this tragedy. That is a reason enough for us to pause and remember.

During the long decades of Soviet rule it was dangerous for Ukrainians to discuss their greatest national trauma. To talk of the Holodomor was a crime against the state, while the memoirs of eyewitnesses and the accounts of historians like Robert Conquest and the late James Mace were banned as anti-Soviet propaganda. Yet each Ukrainian family knew from bitter personal memory the enormity of what had happened. They also knew that it had been inflicted on them deliberately to punish Ukraine and destroy the basis of its nationhood. It is to honour the victims and serve the cause of historical truth that independent Ukraine is today working to promote greater understanding and recognition of the Holodomor, both at home and abroad.

We are not doing so out of a desire for revenge or to make a partisan political point. We know that the Russian people were among Stalin's foremost victims. Apportioning blame to their living descendents is the last thing on our minds. Our only wish is for this crime to be understood for what it truly was. That is why the Ukrainian Parliament last year passed a law recognizing the Holodomor as an act of genocide and why I am asking our friends and allies to endorse that position. A world that indulges historical amnesia or falsification is condemned to repeat its worst mistakes.

Genocide is a highly charged term, and there are those who still dispute its applicability in the case of Ukraine. It is therefore worth looking at how the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention legally defines the issue. It describes genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" including "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life, calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." The Holodomor falls squarely within the terms of this definition. Significantly, that was also the opinion of Raphael Lemkin, the legal scholar who conceived the Genocide Convention.

There is now a wealth of historical material detailing the specific features of Stalin's forced collectivization and terror famine policies against Ukraine. Other parts of the

Soviet Union suffered terribly as well. But in the minds of the Soviet leadership there was a dual purpose in persecuting and starving the Ukrainian peasantry. It was part of a campaign to crush Ukraine's national identity and its desire for self-determination. As Stalin put it a few years earlier: "There is no powerful national movement without the peasant army...in essence, the national question is a peasant question." In seeking to reverse the policy of "Ukrainianization" that promoted limited cultural and political autonomy during the 1920s, Stalin decided to target the peasantry, representing as it did 80% of the population. His solution to the national question in Ukraine was mass murder through starvation.

Stalin's cruel methods included the allocation of astronomic grain requisition quotas that were impossible to meet and which left nothing for the local population to eat. When the quotas were missed, armed units were sent in.

Toward the end of 1932, entire villages and regions were turned into a system of isolated starvation ghettos called "black boards." Throughout this period, the Soviet Union continued to export grain to the West and even used grain to produce alcohol. By early 1933, the Soviet leadership decided to radically reinforce the blockade of Ukrainian villages. Eventually, the whole territory of Ukraine was surrounded by armed forces, turning the entire country into a vast death camp.

The specifically national motive behind Stalin's treatment of Ukraine was also evident in the terror campaign that targeted the institutions and individuals that sustained the cultural and public life of the Ukrainian nation. Waves of purges engulfed academic institutions, literary journals, publishing houses and theatres. Victims included the Ukrainian Academy of Science, the editorial board of the Soviet Ukrainian Encyclopaedia, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and ultimately the Ukrainian Communist Party. This was a systematic campaign against the Ukrainian nation, its history, culture, language and way of life.

The Holodomor was an act of genocide designed to suppress the Ukrainian nation. The fact that it failed and Ukraine today exists as a proud and independent nation does not make this crime less grave and devastating. Nor does it acquit us of the moral responsibility to acknowledge what was done. On the 75th anniversary, we owe it to the victims of the Holodomor and other genocides to be truthful in facing our past.

The author of the article is the President of Ukraine.