Holodomor – a man-made Soviet famine

'Holodomor' was a man-made famine that struck the Soviet republic of Ukraine from 1932 to 1933, peaking in the late spring of 1933. It was part of a broader Soviet famine (1931–34) that also caused mass starvation in the grain-growing regions of Soviet Russia and Kazakhstan. The Ukrainian famine, however, was made deadlier by a series of political decrees and decisions that were aimed mostly or only at Ukraine. In acknowledgement of its scale, the famine of 1932–33 is often called the Holodomor, a term derived from the Ukrainian words for hunger (holod) and extermination (mor).

Causes of the famine

The origins of the famine lay in the decision by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to collectivize agriculture in 1929. The Communist Party forced peasants to relinquish their land, personal property, and sometimes housing to collective farms that would become property of the State. Collectivization led to a drop in production, the disorganization of the rural economy, and food shortages. It also sparked a series of peasant rebellions, including armed uprisings, in some parts of Ukraine.

The rebellions worried Stalin because they were unfolding in provinces which had, a decade earlier, fought against the Red Army during the Russian Civil War. He was also concerned by anger and resistance to the state agricultural policy. That autumn the Soviet Politburo, the elite leadership of the Soviet Communist Party, took a series of decisions that widened and deepened the famine in the Ukrainian countryside. Farms, villages, and whole towns in Ukraine were placed on blacklists and prevented from receiving food. Peasants were forbidden to leave the Ukrainian republic in search of food. Despite growing starvation, any food that was produced was taken away by the State and aid was not provided in sufficient quantities. The crisis reached its peak in the winter of 1932–33, when organized groups of police and communist apparatchiks ransacked the homes of peasants and took everything edible, from crops to personal food supplies to pets. Hunger and fear drove these actions, but they were reinforced by more than a decade of hateful and conspiratorial rhetoric emanating from the highest levels of the Kremlin.

The result of Stalin's campaign was a catastrophe. In spring 1933 death rates in Ukraine spiked. Between 1931 and 1934 at least 5 million people perished of hunger all across the U.S.S.R. Among them, according to a study conducted by a team of Ukrainian demographers, were at least 3.9 million Ukrainians. Police archives contain multiple descriptions of instances of cannibalism as well as lawlessness, theft, and lynching. Mass graves were dug across the countryside. Hunger also affected the urban population, though many were able to survive thanks to ration cards. Still, in Ukraine's largest cities, corpses could be seen on the street.

The famine was accompanied by a broader assault on Ukrainian identity. While peasants were dying by the millions, agents of the Soviet secret police were targeting the Ukrainian political establishment and intelligentsia. The famine provided cover for a campaign of repression and persecution that was carried out against Ukrainian culture and Ukrainian religious leaders. The official policy of Ukrainization, which had encouraged the use of the Ukrainian language, was effectively halted. Moreover, anyone connected to the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic—an independent government that had been declared in June 1917 in the wake of the February Revolution but was dismantled after the Bolsheviks conquered Ukrainian territory—was subjected to vicious reprisals.

All those targeted by this campaign were liable to be publicly vilified, jailed, sent to the Gulag (a system of Soviet prisons and forced-labour camps), or executed. Knowing that this Russification program would inevitably reach him, Mykola Skrypnyk, one of the best-known leaders of the Ukrainian Communist Party, committed suicide rather than submit to one of Stalin's show trials.

As the famine was happening, news of it was deliberately silenced by Soviet bureaucrats. Party officials did not mention it in public. Western journalists based in Moscow were instructed not to write about it. However, a young freelance reporter, Gareth Jones made a dangerous trip to Ukraine to see for himself what was really happening. Jones was murdered under suspicious circumstances in 1935. Stalin himself went so far as to repress the results of a census taken in 1937; the administrators of that census were arrested and murdered, in part because the figures revealed the decimation of Ukraine's population.

Discussion about the famine became taboo again during the postwar years. The first public mention of it in the Soviet Union was in 1986, in the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster. That disaster too was initially kept secret by Soviet authorities.

Monuments commemorating the Holodomor have been erected by the Ukrainian government as well as by the Ukrainian diaspora, and Holodomor Remembrance Day is observed around the world on the fourth Saturday of November. Ukraine has also invested in research on the famine.

https://www.britannica.com/event/Holodomor

Questions

1. Describe the 'Holodomor' event.

2. How did Stalin's new policy of collectivization change the traditional way in which agriculture was organized?

3. How do you think farmers felt about giving their produce to the government with the promise of being provided for by the government?

4. How successful was the policy? What evidence is there for that?

5. Why was Stalin particularly against Ukraine?

6. Explain how this is an example of totalitarianism.

7. Give evidence to show the disastrous effect of the famine.

8. Why didn't Stalin want others, including the international community, to know about the famine?

9. What do you think would happen to journalists who wrote publicly about the famine?

10. Describe Gareth Jone's role in exposing the truth. What happened to him?

11. Explain the similarities between this true event in history and the novel, Animal Farm by George Orwell.

More about Gareth Jones

Gareth Richard Vaughan Jones (13 August 1905 – 12 August 1935) was a Welsh journalist who in March 1933 first reported in the Western world, without equivocation and under his own name, the existence of the Soviet famine of 1930–1933, including the Holodomor.

Jones had reported anonymously in The Times in 1931 on starvation in both Soviet Russia and Soviet Ukraine. After his third visit to the Soviet Union, he issued a press release under his own name in Berlin on 29 March 1933 describing the widespread famine in detail. Reports also appeared in the Manchester Guardian (U.K. newspaper.)

After being banned from re-entering the Soviet Union, Jones journeyed to the Far East to report on the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, (far-east China). Ignoring warnings from the British Embassy of their presence, he was kidnapped by Chinese bandits and murdered in 1935 while investigating in Japanese-occupied Inner Mongolia. Upon his death, former British prime minister David Lloyd George said, "He had a passion for finding out what was happening in foreign lands wherever there was trouble, and in pursuit of his investigations he shrank from no risk. … Nothing escaped his observation, and he allowed no obstacle to turn from his course when he thought that there was some fact, which he could obtain. He had the almost unfailing knack of getting at things that mattered."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gareth_Jones_(journalist)