

The Holodomor through the Prism of the Canadian Press in 1932–34

(Serge Cipko)

Abstract

In 1993 an article in the *Edmonton Journal* entitled “The Politics of Famine” quoted the Harvard University economist Amartya Kumar Sen: “There has never been a famine in any country that’s been a democracy with a relatively free press.” Sen provided the example of India, which he said had no episodes of mass starvation since independence in 1947 despite experiencing occasional years of food shortages. “My point really is that if famine is about to develop, democracy can guarantee that it won’t. When newspapers are controlled, it’s amazing how ignorant and immune from pressure the government can be,” Sen contended. In 1934 *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent William Henry Chamberlin, who witnessed and wrote about the famine in Ukraine and Kuban, posed the following question: “Is it conceivable that the famine of 1932–33 could have taken place if civil liberties had prevailed in the Soviet Union, if newspapers had been free to report the facts, if speakers could have appealed for relief, if the government in power had been obliged to submit its policy of letting vast numbers of the peasants starve to death to the verdict of a free election?”

Although newspapers in the Soviet Union were “not free to report the facts” and in spite of Soviet attempts to suppress news about the famine, stories about mass starvation traversed its borders and reached countries such as Canada. Canadian newspapers were among those outside the USSR that were trying to make sense of the sometimes contradictory information about mass starvation in the Soviet Union. This paper discusses the coverage accorded to the famine in Canadian newspapers. This includes news drawn from the Associated Press and other

international news agencies, reprints from other newspapers, but also stories contributed by Canadian journalists who had travelled to Ukraine.

Canadian newspapers also contained the accounts of visitors to Ukraine and of individuals who were able to leave the USSR in 1933 and settle in Canada. During 1933 and 1934 Ukrainian organizations and others staged rallies across Canada, and reports about the resolutions on the famine that were passed at the meetings appeared in the Canadian press.

Canadian elected representatives heard about the famine in the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan (March 1933), Legislative Assembly of Manitoba (May 1933), and the House of Commons in Ottawa (February 1934). The discussions on the famine in the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan resulted in the adoption of a resolution about trade with the USSR, and both the discussions and the resolution were extensively reported and commented upon in the press.

In 1933 there were a number of editorials about the Soviet Union, including some specifically about the famine. An editorial in the *Edmonton Journal* on 1 September 1933 was prompted by statements made about the famine by Edmonton barrister Peter J. Lazarowich, who had recently returned from a visit to Europe. Later, in October 1933, the *Edmonton Journal* published an article by Lazarowich about the famine. Among many other things, Lazarowich made reference in his article about a Ukrainian Canadian offer to send aid to Soviet Ukraine and the decline of that offer by the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR.

A number of letters to the editor on the subject of the famine were also published in newspapers across Canada. Remarks made by George Palmer in November 1933 (“I never saw so many healthy, robust men and women as I did [in the Soviet Union]”), who had worked as a

reporter for *Moscow Daily News*, occasioned an exchange of letters in the *Edmonton Journal*; he was also later mentioned in an editorial in the *Lethbridge Herald*.

Readers of newspapers in Canada also shared translated excerpts from letters they had received from the Soviet Union, which described famine conditions. Such letters drew the curiosity of the *Calgary Herald*, which observed that not all news from the Soviet Union came by cable. The Soviet authorities allowed letters to go out which told a different story, it said, and printed extracts from one of them.

Finally, a word or two will be said about the Ukrainian-language press in Canada and about what was not recorded in the mainstream press.