

Motives for Silence and Denial of the Great Famine (Holodomor) of 1932-33

Myroslav Shkandrij, Dept. of German and Slavic Studies

Although it is now generally accepted that millions died in the famine of 1932-33, for over fifty years the tragic event remained practically unanalyzed and largely absent from the awareness of the international community. This paper explores some reasons for silence and denial.

It begins by examining the phenomenon of “true believers.” Many of these were Marxists and communists, who viewed the Soviet Union as socialism’s fatherland and the Bolshevik Revolution as the first great experiment in creating an egalitarian and just society. Their refusal to criticize the regime was grounded in tactical reasoning, the conviction that one had to break eggs in order to make an omelette.

A sub-category of these enthusiasts are the cheerleaders, whose long history dates back to the first Red Terror that began in 1918. They spoke of a the Soviet Union as a utopia and turned a blind eye to repression and violence.

After the Second World War, even when information concerning the Famine and the nature of the Soviet state was available, many individuals in the West preferred silence. This was seen as a necessary tactic in order to bolster anti-fascist resistance and solidarity with opponents of capitalism. Sartre is a prime example.

Such conscious denials can be attributed to various motives. Various forms of blackmail inhibited those who might have spoken out is another reason for silence. One form of blackmail or another could be used, depending on the nature of the individual. Reporters needed access to authorities, interviews with leaders. They were tempted to underplay or to avoid clearly stating the scope of events. This is applicable to much of the press corps, who, for example, hung out to dry its own, when they knew better. Walter Duranty was a prime example, and was probably being blackmailed.

A second major group are the dupes (sometimes dubbed “useful idiots”). Even if Lenin did not use the term, there is every indication that he and the Bolshevik leadership felt this way about some of their Western friends. The writings of these figures, especially their denials of the Famine, exerted a strong influence in the West. This category also encompasses Western ambassadors and diplomats, who sometimes were unable to credit the possibility of such an enormous event or the brazenness of the official denials.

But there were gentler, less evident ways of influencing attitudes. Western diplomats and governments were sometimes charmed by Soviet officials. Diplomatic-state reticence was secured in this way in some cases. It is perhaps understandable in some cases, but this hardly makes it forgivable.

There is also the issue of greed and the prospect of gain. The Western business lobby that hoped to secure contracts with the Soviet Union influence their diplomatic representatives.

The effectiveness of Soviet disinformation and propaganda cannot be doubted. Soviet authorities even banned use of the word famine, according to Stanislav Kulchytsky. It made strenuous efforts to control the flow of information and spread counter-propaganda. These denials continued until the fall of the Soviet Union. The note of the Soviet embassy in Canada, produced in 1983, still denies the event. This blanket denial also caused the refusal to accept aid. The “counter-propaganda” should also not be underestimated. Robert Service has described Soviet rule as from its inception sometimes “brilliantly devious” (Service 52).

Given these factors it is not surprising that there was a sense of disbelief in the general public. This comes through repeatedly in major events, from responses to the postwar trial of Victor Krawchenko in Paris to the publication of Rober Conquest’s book.

There are other motives that are less frequently noted. Realpolitik has also been a consideration. It should be recognized, for example, that if the tragedy is characterized as a genocide, the successor state, Russia, has to accept a greater burden of liability. This is particularly true especially if this state accepts the legacy of Stalin and Stalinism.

Another less often mentioned motive is the sense of embarrassment felt by the victims. The Famine tends to cast them in the role of helpless victims and a powerless people. The writings of the OUN in the thirties rejected such an image of the nation and hence tended to avoid describing the tragedy in these terms.

Finally, there is perhaps a less tangible motivation, the deep-seated Russophilia that has been built into much academic study in the West, where Russian studies have traditionally dominated the field.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union this has begun to change. Moreover, in recent years the opening of archives has given a powerful impetus to change. Our perception of events and our understanding of Soviet society is now shaped by this avalanche of newly available material.