

Holodomor Conference in Toronto

The University of Toronto's Munk Centre was the site of a special event, "The Holodomor of 1932–33: A 75th Anniversary Conference on the Ukrainian Famine-Genocide" on Thursday, November 1, 2007. The conference featured four speakers from Ukraine, three commentators from North America, and several short addresses. The event was sponsored by the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, the Petro Jacyk Program for the Study of Ukraine (University of Toronto), and the Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre in cooperation with the Buduchnist Credit Union Foundation and the Toronto Branch of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress.

The conference participants were greeted first by Dr. Wsevolod Isajiw, the head of UCRDC and chair of the organizing committee. He then gave the floor to Dr. Zenon Kohut, director of CIUS, who examined how the Holodomor issue had been politicized within a Russian-Ukrainian context and reflected on how the reality of the Famine had been disputed for many years because of ideological reasons. He also noted CIUS's long-term commitment to bringing the Holodomor to the attention of both academia and the public. Ihor Ostash, the ambassador of Ukraine to Canada, then spoke. He expressed his gratitude to the organizers for inviting him and putting together the event. He noted how for decades people in Ukraine were unable to speak openly about the Holodomor. But, even though the truth was concealed, every family knew about it. The ambassador also announced that copies of a booklet on the Holodomor (published recently by the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory) would be made available to conference participants.

The first session, "Archival Sources," included papers by Drs. Hennadii Boriak (Deputy Director, State Committee on Archives of Ukraine) and Iryna Matiash (Director, Ukrainian Research Institute of Archival Affairs and Document Studies) and Dr. Lynne Viola (University of Toronto) as a commentator. Dr. Boriak spoke during his presentation, titled "Holodomor Archives and Sources: The State of the Art," about the significant gains made with respect to opening up the archives in Ukraine—and the

wealth of information they contain about the Famine. He added a note about the paucity of verifiable photographs of the Holodomor itself, which regrettably has led to the much-criticized practice of substituting images of the 1921–22 famine in their place. He then provided a characterization of the known extant documents regarding the Holodomor, based largely on a scheme proposed by Ruslan Pyrih, the author of an extensive compilation of documents, which was recently published (*Holodomor 1932-1933 rokiv v Ukraini: Dokumenty i materialy* [The Holodomor of 1932–33 in Ukraine: Documents and Materials]). He also noted some possible additional sources of information about the Holodomor. The first was material from the local press, which provides *very* detailed information about events at the local level. The second was Vital Statistic Registers, of which 3,500 will be released in the near future from the archives of the Ministry of Justice following a 75-year period in which by legislation they were closed to researchers.

Dr. Matiash provided an overview of the main archival holdings in Russia with material related to the Holodomor, including the Russian State Archive of Social-Political History, the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, the Russian State Archive of the Economy, the State Archive of the Russian Federation, and the Central Archive of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation. She also touched briefly at what could be found in other federal repositories such as the Russian State Archive of Literature and Culture and the Russian State Military Archive as well as the regional archives for Sverdlovsk oblast, Voronezh oblast, and Krasnodar krai.

Dr. Viola led off her comments with considerable praise for the two presentations. She acknowledged the considerable degree of success Ukraine has had in opening up its archives, but expressed reservations as to whether they are actually all that accessible (this point came up again in a later session, when the difficulties in accessing certain collections—openness legislation notwithstanding—was noted). She expressed some reservations about a suggestion by Dr. Boriak that the existing source base of 70,000 to 80,000 documents within 2,000 archival fonds and collections was exhaustive, pointing to the fact that the archives of the Russian Federation have not been fully examined. Dr. Viola also underlined the value of materials found in regional archives, especially since local officials tended to be quite frank in their assessments of situations.

The second session, “Historiography,” featured a paper by Liudmyla Hrynevych (Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine) and Dr. Terry Martin (Harvard University) as a commentator. Ms. Hrynevych focused less on historiography per se and more on the social and political aspects of writings about the Holodomor. She led off with a brief overview of how the Holodomor had been treated in the Soviet period, starting from its total denial (an “imposed amnesia”) in Stalinist times to its emergence as an issue during the days of glasnost. Nevertheless, following independence there was a general indifference to the matter of the Holodomor—an “inert ignorance” (“*v’iale ignoruvannia*”) as termed by the speaker—as the country’s political elite did not care to pursue the issue with great zeal and economic circumstances limited work that could be done in the field. Moreover, the Communist left was particularly hostile to the issue, and the speaker dealt with its views at length. Nevertheless, dedicated scholars persisted and the matter moved forward. Ms. Hrynevych also included a brief discussion about how anti-Semitism has played itself out around the fringes of the Holodomor discourse, most notably through the activities of the Inter-regional Academy of Personnel Management (Ukrainian acronym: MAUP).

Dr. Martin’s comments included an interesting autobiographical aside regarding the genesis of his own understanding of the Holodomor. It developed in the 1990s, as he explained it, as a halfway point between the contemporary “all-Union” position on the issue (i.e., that this was a matter related to peasant policy in all parts of the USSR) and the “Ukrainian” position of the day (namely, that the Holodomor was an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people). So, while he disagrees with the idea of the Famine as a planned genocide, he is quite ready to accept the idea that Ukraine was treated differently than other parts of the Soviet Union at that time. Stalin may not have wanted to cause a famine, but he certainly did as an off-shoot of his collectivization policy. Dr. Martin also suggested that it would be useful and fascinating to study the psychological effects of the Famine. He then called for a study of the lower-level perpetrators of the Holodomor—the cadre-activists sent from the city to the countryside as well as the lower-level functionaries, such as village soviet chairmen, who received instructions to carry out measures that invariably, would lead to the deaths of many neighbors. He ended off by asking whether perhaps too much scholarly attention is being granted to the Holodomor,

given the host of other cases of mass violence on the territory of Ukraine in the 20th century (which he then listed) that remain to be studied in detail.

The third session saw Mykola Riabchuk (journalist and social critic) speak about “The Famine in Contemporary Ukrainian Politics and Society,” followed by a commentary by Dr. Dominique Arel (Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Ottawa). Mr. Riabchuk noted the ambiguous and opportunist approach to the Holodomor issue by the Ukrainian authorities in the post-independence period, recognizing it as an issue, but pursuing it half-heartedly. This was particularly evident in the commemorations of the Famine in the fall of 2003, when many of the official events were “export-oriented” or limited to Kyiv rather than truly nation-wide—at a time when the government had the means to create a successful country-wide observation. He also noted that all official documents related to the event contained not a single word about the Communist nature of the Holodomor and that the lukewarm commemorations went hand-in-hand with celebrations of Soviet-era leaders (e.g., Volodymyr Shcherbytsky) or landmark events (e.g., the so-called “re-unification of Western Ukraine). Mr. Riabchuk gave President Yushchenko credit for pursuing the Famine issue in a far more principled manner, even at the risk of a political cost. The Party of Regions, on the other hand, maintains an opportunistic position reminiscent of the Kuchma regime. It acknowledges the existence of the Famine, but emphasizes that it was not directed against Ukrainians exclusively and stresses that there are perils in pursuing a strong line on the Holodomor in terms of threatening social cohesion as well as possibly damaging relations with Russia (commonly presented euphemistically as “with neighbors”).

Subsequently, Dr. Arel, in his comments, examined the politics of memory against a number of subjects, including regime type, nation building, the Famine and Ukraine. Regarding the first, he noted that in a closed society certain topics are illegal, while in an open society they might be avoided (as with the question of Germany and the Jews for many, many years), but they can be raised. Regarding nation building, he noted that political players generally try to use the past to their advantage. In Yushchenko’s case, he has no specific need to pursue the Holodomor issue, as it could prove a political liability. All the same, his actions may have some political benefit insofar as strengthening his stand with his supporters and his ability to “mobilize the troops.”

Regarding the Famine, Arel started by noting that the modern famine is never a matter of production, but rather one of allowing access to food. It follows that the Holodomor is an excellent illustration of this maxim. As for Ukraine itself, Dr. Arel noted that the Orange forces in Ukraine have done well in terms of driving the democratic process and making the regime more open—necessary pre-conditions for confronting the past. At the same time, they have called upon their political opponents to examine the question of the Holodomor, which they are reluctant to do. It follows from this, Arel stated, that Yushchenko and his supporters themselves should not be reticent to discuss other aspects of national memory in the recent history of Ukraine (specifically the Holocaust, but also some of the topics cited earlier by Terry Martin). This would demonstrate democratic credibility: a willingness to address openly other issues from the past would ultimately make the cause of the Holodomor more powerful.

Each of the sessions allowed time for rebuttals by the speakers to the commentators' remarks as well as question-and-answer sessions. Space does not permit coverage of these comments here. Interested parties can view these on a Webcast of the entire conference proceedings, which can be found at the Munk Centre site (see <http://webapp.mcis.utoronto.ca/Webcasts.aspx>).

Concluding remarks were offered by Yuriy Sergeyev, Ukraine's ambassador to the United Nations. He noted that the passage of legislation in Ukraine recognizing the Holodomor as genocide has put the entire matter on a firmer footing, adding that the increasing international acceptance of this idea has also aided the cause. He then outlined the general course of argumentation that will be used in a campaign to have the United Nations recognize the Famine as genocide. He concluded by noting that Ukraine is not looking for revenge in this matter and is not accusing any other country, but rather the totalitarian Stalinist regime, for the execution of the Holodomor.

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