

German parliament declares 1930s famine in Ukraine a genocide: Falsification of history in the service of war propaganda

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On Wednesday, the German Bundestag approved without a dissenting vote a joint motion of the governing parties SPD, Greens and FDP as well as the CDU/CSU opposition, which recognizes the famine in Ukraine in 1932-1933 as a genocide and so-called “Holodomor.” The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Left Party (Die Linke) abstained from the vote.

The move came just a few weeks after the Bundestag amended the Paragraph 130 of the penal code on “the incitement of the people.” Anyone who “publicly or in an assembly” “condones, denies or grossly trivializes” genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes now faces up to three years in prison.

In other words, anyone who denies that the famine in Ukraine was a genocide now faces imprisonment. Taken together, the two decisions are not only an unprecedented attack on basic democratic rights but also on historical scholarship. They legitimize the historical lies of the extreme right.

The famine of 1932-1933: The state of historical research

The most important historians of the famine in recent decades, after evaluating thousands of documents and statistics, have concluded that the famine in Ukraine in 1932-1933 was not a genocide.

According to the United Nations,

genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

None of these facts is present in the case of the 1932-1933 famine in Ukraine. Historians have demonstrated this especially since the opening of the formerly closed Soviet archives after the destruction of the Soviet

Union in 1991 by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

First, despite the publication of thousands of pages of Soviet documents on the famine, not a single one has been found since 1991 that would prove the *intent* to kill by starvation—the basic condition for the designation as genocide—with respect to the Ukrainian or any other segment of the Soviet population. By contrast, a large number of such documents exist with respect to the Stalinist terror of the 1930s.

Second, the famine was not a phenomenon limited to Ukraine. With at least 3.5 million out of about 7 million deaths, Soviet Ukraine (whose borders roughly correspond to today’s eastern Ukraine) was admittedly more severely affected by the famine in absolute terms than any other region of the Soviet Union. Proportionally, however, the death toll was even higher among the Kazakh population, of which between 1 to 1.5 million died.

In any case, the famine was a phenomenon that extended throughout the Soviet Union. It affected numerous ethnic groups of the Soviet population and resulted in mass deaths in both rural and urban populations, although the rural population was undoubtedly more severely affected.

Historians Stephen Wheatcroft and Robert W. Davies, two of the best experts on the subject, concluded after analyzing Soviet-wide statistics on death rates and malnutrition in 1932-1933:

The Lower and Central Volga regions, including the German ASSR, together with the Bashkir ASSSR to the east of these regions, were also strongly affected by the famine. The population of these regions was about 14 million, and they covered an area equal to the territory of Ukraine. The rural death rate rose to nine times the normal level in the Lower Volga region, and to three times the normal level in the Central Volga. In the Central Black-Earth region, not generally listed as a famine area, the rural death rate reached over four times the normal level by July 1933. Serious food difficulties were also reported from the Ural region and the Far East. And the famine continued, and even intensified, in Kazakhstan.

Even excluding the Urals, Siberia and the Far East, the famine areas included over 70 million of the 160 million people in the USSR. (Stephen Wheatcroft, Robert W. Davies, *Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931-1933*, Palgrave Macmillan 2004, pp. 410-411.)

The famine was the result of the disastrous and irrational policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy that had usurped political power in the 1920s under conditions of the international isolation of the Soviet Union. In

1928-1929, after expelling the Marxist Left Opposition under Leon Trotsky from the party, the bureaucracy initiated a program of rapid industrialization of the predominantly rural Soviet Union.

After a massive grain crisis in 1927-1928, the bureaucracy began forcibly requisitioning grain from peasants. Then, in late 1929, Stalin announced the start of forced collectivization of the millions of smallholder farms that still dominated agriculture. Throughout, the bureaucracy proceeded from the reactionary concept of building "socialism in one country." All resources for the rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union were to be squeezed out of the domestic population, come what may.

The result was disastrous: As Trotsky had warned, neither Soviet agriculture nor industry were anywhere near the technological level necessary to collectivize agriculture on a large scale. A large number of small farms were thrown together without any regard for their stocks or production capabilities.

Masses of livestock and poultry were crammed together, resulting in the mass death from disease and poor hygiene. A significant portion of the livestock was also killed by peasants in desperate protest against collectivization. In Soviet Kazakhstan, where much of the population still led the lives of nomads, the mass deaths of camels and livestock were particularly devastating.

Customary cultivation and seeding methods were also destroyed by the bureaucracy's ruthless and ignorant intervention in agriculture. The harvests of 1931 and 1932, which were further worsened by bad weather, produced disastrously poor results. As early as 1930, peasant uprisings occurred en masse as a result of these disastrous policies. Significant parts of the Soviet Union, especially Soviet Ukraine, which was one of the most important agricultural regions, were on the brink of civil war.

The consequences of the famine were catastrophic and far-reaching. Seven million Soviet citizens died, and tens of millions more suffered from malnutrition. Livestock numbers did not return to 1914 levels until 1958. Politically, forced collectivization undermined the prestige of Soviet power and the October Revolution among millions of peasants and workers inside and outside the Soviet Union.

But as criminal and disastrous as the Soviet bureaucracy's policies were, it was not genocide. Wheatcroft and Davies conclude their study of the 1931-1932 famine by saying:

Our study of the famine has led us to very different conclusions from Dr. [Robert] Conquest's. He holds that Stalin "wanted a famine", that "the Soviets did not want the famine to be coped with successfully", and that the Ukrainian famine was "deliberately inflicted for its own sake". This leads him to the sweeping conclusion: "The main lesson seems to be that the Communist ideology provided the motivation for an unprecedented massacre of men, women and children."

We do not at all absolve Stalin from his responsibility for the famine. His policies towards the peasants were ruthless and brutal. But the story which has emerged in this book is of a Soviet leadership which was struggling with a famine crisis which had been caused partly by their wrongheaded policies but was unexpected and undesirable. The background to the famine is not simply that Soviet agricultural policies were derived from Bolshevik ideology, though ideology played its part. They were also shaped by the Russian pre-revolutionary past, the experiences of the civil war, the international situation, the intransigent circumstances of geography and weather, and the modus operandi of the Soviet system as it was established under Stalin. They were formulated by men with formal education and limited knowledge of agriculture. Above all, they were a consequence of the decision

to industrialize this peasant country at breakneck speed. (Wheatcroft/Davies, *Years of Hunger*, p. 441)

In the nearly 20 years since this study was published, not a single historian has provided viable evidence against their assessment.

The far-right origins of the claim of genocide

The Bundestag resolution explicitly places the "Holodomor" on par with the Holocaust and the Nazi crimes against the Soviet Union. It states that the Holodomor coincides with the time of "the most massive crimes against humanity on the European continent, unimaginable in their cruelty until then. These include the Holocaust against European Jews in its historical singularity, the war crimes of the Wehrmacht, and the planned murder of millions of innocent civilians as part of the racist German war of extermination in the East, for which Germany bears historical responsibility."

With this line of argument, the Bundestag places itself squarely in the tradition of the Ukrainian and international far right. Historically, the claim that a genocide took place in Ukraine in the early 1930s was associated not only with militant anti-communism but also with the relativization of Nazi crimes, especially the genocide of European Jews.

The claim of genocide dates back to propaganda under the Nazi occupation of Ukraine during World War II. During the course of the war, the Nazis murdered at least 5 million non-Jewish Ukrainian civilians and some 900,000 Ukrainian Jews who fell victim to the Holocaust. Tens of thousands of them were killed with the direct aid of the fascist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its paramilitary wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Members of the OUN were also involved en masse in the occupation apparatus, including as journalists.

Historians Tanya Penter and Dmytro Tyarenko recently wrote about this:

OUN members tried to exert influence on the newly created organs of local self-government, to initiate the establishment of occupation newspapers and to help shape their propaganda content. All this also served the purpose of promoting national consciousness among the Ukrainian population and popularizing Ukrainian statehood.

The famine of 1932-33 was an ideal topic for OUN activists to mobilize the Ukrainian population for the national liberation struggle; the OUN had used this topic for political purposes before. ... Many articles in the Nazi occupation press emphasized the character of the famine. [It claimed that] it had been "artificially created by the Bolsheviks," "wrought by the Red beasts," "deliberately initiated and diabolically directed by the occupying power of Red Moscow."

Some propagandists also highlighted the particular suffering of the Ukrainian nation in the famine, condemning the "criminal attempt to physically destroy the Ukrainian people" or denouncing the "systematic annihilation of the Ukrainian people." Another article stated, "We Ukrainians have a particularly large unpaid bill with Bolshevism."

Thus, some of the press publications were already, at least implicitly, advocating the argument of targeted Bolshevik genocide of Ukrainians without using the term genocide, which was not even in use at the time. (Tanja Penter, Dmytro Tytarenko,

'The Holodomor, Nazi Propaganda in Ukraine, and Its Difficult Legacy,' in *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 2021, Issue 4, pp. 646-649, translation from the German by this author.)

The OUN blamed not only the “Bolsheviks” but repeatedly “the Jews” for the famine. Thus, one article in the occupation press declared that the famine had been “sadistically devised and organized by the Moscow Jews.” (Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 650)

The lie of genocide in the postwar period

After the war, the lie of a genocide of Ukrainians continued to be spread by the extreme-right Ukrainian diaspora, which included former Nazi collaborators of the OUN. Thanks to the direct connections of the former Nazi collaborators to the intelligence services of the United States, Canada and Great Britain, as well as to the German BND, they were able to continue spreading their fascist propaganda and found access to academic institutions.

Nevertheless, for decades, the claim of a “genocide of Ukrainians” remained confined to these ultra-right circles. Its academic and political legitimization took place in the 1980s. In Germany, the far-right historian Ernst Nolte began to justify the crimes of National Socialism as a “fear-borne reaction to the acts of annihilation that took place during the Russian Revolution” and a “distorted copy” of the “acts of annihilation” by “Bolshevism.” One of these “acts of annihilation,” according to Nolte, was the “class war” against the kulaks and the collectivization of agriculture.

At the same time, the US ruling class increasingly legitimized Ukrainian Nazi collaborators. In 1983, US President Ronald Reagan received Yaroslav Stetsko at the White House and declared, “Your struggle is our struggle. Your dream is our dream.”

During the war, Stetsko had been Stepan Bandera’s deputy in the OUN, and on June 30, 1941, shortly after the Wehrmacht occupied Lviv, he announced the establishment of an “independent Ukrainian state” in alliance with Nazi Germany. Hours later, Ukrainian nationalists, in collusion with the Germans, began a brutal pogrom against the city’s Jewish population, killing between 7,000 and 8,000 people. After the war, Stetsko maintained close ties with the CIA and became chairman of the OUN in exile as well as of the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations, an organization composed primarily of former Nazi collaborators from Eastern Europe.

Then, in 1986, coinciding with the outbreak of the German historians’ dispute (*Historikerstreit*) over Ernst Nolte’s justification of the crimes of Nazism, American historian Robert Conquest published the book *Harvest of Sorrow*, in which he explicitly described the famine in Ukraine as “genocide” and “terror-famine” and placed it on par with the crimes of Nazism.

A US congressional commission in those years also concluded that the famine had been a “genocide.” Its executive director, historian James E. Mace, explicitly and falsely stated that this “genocide,” with an alleged 7 million Ukrainian victims, had been worse than the Holocaust, with 6 million Jews murdered.

The term “Holodomor,” which means “murder by starvation,” was used in a deliberate attempt to place the famine on the same level as the Holocaust. This was part of an effort by the fascist descendants of the OUN to downplay the involvement of Ukrainian fascism in the Holocaust and in the killings as a whole.

According to Canadian historian John-Paul Himka, one of the best

experts on the history of Ukrainian nationalism, the growing propaganda around a “Holodomor” by the Ukrainian diaspora in the late 1980s was in no small part an attempt to distract attention from Ukrainian Nazi collaborators, such as John Demjanjuk, and their crimes in the Holocaust. The start of the first trial of Demjanjuk also occurred in 1986.

Demjanjuk, a native of Ukraine, had been one of 2,000 to 3,000 members of the so-called Trawniki. The Trawniki, composed largely of Ukrainians, had been specifically trained by the SS since September 1941 to assist in Operation Reinhardt, during which 1.7 million Polish Jews were murdered in the gas chambers of Treblinka, Sobibor, Auschwitz and Majdanek. Himka writes in this regard:

Some thought that making the public aware that Ukrainians were also victims on a large scale “could blunt the force of the efforts made to portray Ukrainians as ruthless oppressors of Jews” during the Holocaust. Moreover, presenting the Soviet Union as an anti-Ukrainian, criminal regime could discredit the evidence that the Soviets were supplying to the prosecutors in war crimes hearing. (John-Paul Himka, “Making Sense of Suffering: Holocaust and Holodomor in Ukrainian Historical Culture, and: Holod 1932–1933 rr. v Ukrainiak henotsyd/Golod 1932–1933 gg. v Ukraine kak genotsid [The 1932–33 Famine in Ukraine as a Genocide] (review)”, in: *Kritika Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Summer 2007, pp. 687-688.)

The false narrative of a “Holodomor” against Ukrainians became increasingly dominant in Ukraine after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. All advances to legitimize the historical lies of the OUN and its fascist descendants were thereby closely linked to the intervention of Western imperialism in Ukraine, which—as in the 20th century—relied on the extreme right. Thus, in the context of NATO’s eastward expansion in the early 2000s, the US Congress, as well as the Canadian parliament, declared the famine a “genocide.”

In 2004, the imperialist powers supported the so-called Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which helped the pro-NATO government of Viktor Yushchenko to power. Under Yushchenko, a massive rehabilitation of the OUN took place. Streets were named after Bandera and Stetsko, and monuments to them were erected in numerous cities. The “Holodomor” became a compulsory subject of education. In contrast, there was not a single mention of the Holocaust or Ukrainian collaboration with the Nazis in Ukrainian history textbooks approved by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education since 1996.

Historical falsification to legitimize fascism and war

The origin of the “Holodomor” narrative in the ideology of Ukrainian fascism and the association of this tradition with efforts to justify the crimes of Nazism were certainly one reason why Germany’s ruling class long considered it unwise or infeasible to declare the famine a genocide in a manner similar to that in the United States and Canada.

The historical and political implications of this move are indeed enormous and represent a milestone in legitimizing the crimes of the Ukrainian fascists, Nazism and the Holocaust.

Professors of history at German universities have been striving for such legitimization for decades. Nolte still met with considerable resistance in the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s. But in 2014, Professor Jörg Baberowski of Berlin’s Humboldt University made a new attempt and received broad

support among the ruling elites.

In the same month that the German and US governments organized the 2014 coup by far-right forces against the Yanukovich government in Kiev, Baberowski declared in *Der Spiegel* that “Hitler was not vicious” and “Nolte was done an injustice. Historically speaking, he was right.”

At the same time, then-Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and other government officials announced the end of the “policy of military restraint.” Since then, German imperialism has been acting more and more aggressively abroad, while at home fascist forces, such as the AfD, are being built up. The reactionary Russian attack on Ukraine after years of military encirclement and provocation by NATO then served as a welcome pretext for the largest German rearmament program since the end of World War II.

In the process, Ukraine and Russia are once again the targets of German imperialism's geopolitical and economic interests, as they were in World War I and World War II. At the same time, the spread of historical lies serves to strengthen far-right forces in Germany itself.

The Bundestag's “Holodomor” resolution aims to criminalize political resistance to war propaganda and the legitimization of fascist forces. The same applies to historical research that runs counter to these reactionary political aspirations. The German ruling class is well aware that the return to an open policy of war and the associated social attacks will meet with broad resistance in the working class.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is the only political party that has for years consistently opposed both these falsifications of history and the return of German militarism and fascism, giving the working class opposition a voice and a perspective. Building the SGP is now the central task in the struggle against fascism and war.



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