

# **The Holodomor - how daring journalism exposed Stalin's silent massacre of Ukraine.**

*“Arise all down-trodden and hungry, you must  
Free land we will give you. This is our holy trust  
Hand all of your stores to the commune ‘kolhosp’  
Or we’ll drive you – we’ll grind you to Siberian dust.”*

These are the harrowing words of Michael Fediw in his poem ‘*Holodomor*’ based on his personal experience of the genocide at just five years old. He was one of around thirty-two million who were suppressed, starved and even murdered in the winter of 1932 and 1933.

## **Introduction**

Due to its incredibly fertile land, Ukraine was known as the ‘breadbasket’ of both the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. Despite the overwhelming majority of the population being peasants, many Ukrainians were able to live off the ‘fat of the land’. However, when Stalin took power in 1924, he outlawed these peasants as ‘kulaks’ and used their self-sufficiency as a weapon for his collectivisation propaganda. People started to resent kulaks, viewing them as greedy and selfish. This resentment turned peasants away from their individual farms and persuaded them to join Stalin’s state-run collectivised farms, Kolkhozes. These Kolkhoz farms were part of Stalin’s 1928 policy of collectivisation which aimed to forcibly combine individual farms into large state run farms within a five-year period. In reality this policy meant that peasants were forced to surrender their land, livestock and freedom in order to work for the ‘greater good’ of the republic.

It also meant that rather than having to reach their own personal harvest targets, they were forced to meet the ridiculously high targets of the state. However, one may assume if you managed to reach these targets you could keep the surplus grain to either feed yourself and your family or to sell it and buy essentials like food or clothes. This assumption would be wrong. In the first two years of collectivised farming excess grain was more common than one may think, mainly because the government didn’t know how much grain was available, thus targets were lower. However, this allowed the government to impose a 100% tax on grain, essentially killing all incentives to work at a maximum capacity. Consequently, harvests started to fall lower than expected,

especially in 1931 and 1932. Although harvests fell short government expectations rose higher and what had started off as a voluntary programme which brought farms together, was now being used as a soviet massacre machine, forcibly tearing families apart.

The western world's view of the Holodomor is heavily tainted due to the misinformation spread by The New York times journalist, Walter Duranty, who was heavily biased in his articles stating in one that "any report of a famine is today an exaggeration or malignant propaganda". The known Stalin sympathiser won the 1932 Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from the Soviet Union despite openly admitting that his articles "reflected the official views of the Soviet government" rather than his own. Consequently, the west didn't have access to a true representation of a genocide killing over three and a half million innocent civilians. However, two daring journalists challenged this status-quo. Their names were Malcom Muggeridge and Gareth Jones. Both were incredibly brave to expose the truth, however, this bravery resulted in Jones' assassination in 1935. Starting with Muggeridge we will explore how these heroes revealed that the soviets were exploiting their own population.

## Malcom Muggeridge.

It was via a three-day series of publications spanning between the 25<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> March 1933 that Muggeridge exposed the horrors happening in Ukraine. Not only did he publish his own opinions on what he had seen, he also spoke to the peasants and asked for their perspective on what was happening. One of the conversations is recorded as this:

*"How are things? I asked*

*"Bad," she answered.*

*Why?*

*"Only potatoes and millet to eat since August."*

*No bread or meat?*

*"None."*

*Were things better before you joined the collective farm?*

*"Much better."*

*Why did you join then?*

*"Oh, I don't know."*

This conversation highlighted not only the lack of food but that fact that this was the fault of collectivisation. In one of Muggeridge's' later articles we find out about his time in the more urban Russian city of Rostov.

*"Have you got bread here in Rostov" I asked weakly.*

*“Bread, of course we’ve got bread; as much as we can eat.”*

This conversation evidenced the stark contrast of living conditions throughout the Soviet Union but specifically in Ukraine. Although some may say the lack of bread and meat is due to environmental factors, accounts from survivors like Petro Mohilat, who recalls a “brigade of pitchforks” using “crowbars” to break into his locked house in order to steal extra grain, indicate that the famine was far more man-made than land-made. However, misinformation like calling the famine ‘natural’ could be spread easily, by soviet sympathisers like Walter Duranty. Therefore, honest investigative journalists like Muggerridge were vital in the exposure of the truth.

## Gareth Jones

Similar to Malcom Muggerridge, Jones also dared to defy Stalin. Between 1930 and 1933 he visited the Soviet Union thrice, the third being where he collected most of his data. One of his most significant articles, “Famine Rules Russia” published on March 31st, 1933, in the London Evening Standard, came days after Muggerridge’s series of publications in the Guardian and contains some incredibly poignant interviews.

*“I saw children with swollen bellies. I slept in peasants’ huts, sometimes nine of us in one room.”*

At the time, this type of vivid imagery would have paralleled that of what people had experienced in the trenches or reports from other famines like the great Irish famine in the mid- 19<sup>th</sup> century. I would also argue this description, especially the “*children with swollen bellies*”, would resonate with a modern reader in regard to the genocide happening in Gaza. Similarly to Muggerridge, as well as his own observation he also interviewed peasants themselves.

*“Have you potatoes?” I asked. Every peasant I asked nodded negatively with sadness.*

*“What about your cows?” was the next question. To the Russian peasant the cow means wealth, food and happiness. It is almost the centre-point upon which his life gravitates.*

*“The cattle have nearly all died. How can we feed the cattle when we have only fodder to eat ourselves?”*

*“And your horses?” was the question I asked in every village I visited. The horse is now a question of life and death, for without a horse how can one plough? And if one cannot plough, how can one sow for the next harvest? And if one cannot sow for the next harvest, then death is the only prospect in the future.*

*The reply spelled doom for most of the villages.*

Jones’ revelations perfectly illustrated the issues with collectivisation. The fact that they could “only fodder to eat ourselves” simply meant that any form of agriculture, Kolkhoz or individual, could not survive. Despite this, the soviet government still persisted in ‘eradicating the kulaks’ via their grain hunting brigades. The stubbornness of Stalin’s policies despite the fact that millions were dying is why this tragedy is a genocide and not just a famine. In the latter section of his article, Jones speaks on life in Moscow.

*“The people in Moscow warmly clad, and many of the skilled workers, who have their warm meal every day at the factory, are well fed. Some of those who earn very good salaries, or who have special privileges, look even, well dressed, but the vast majority of the unskilled workers are feeling the pinch.*

*I talked to a worker who was hauling a heavy wooden trunk. “It is terrible now” he said. “I get two pounds of bread a day and it is rotten bread. I get no meat, no eggs, no butter. Before the war I used, to get a lot of meat and it was cheap.”*

Personally, I find this section one of the most insightful. In the first paragraph Jones comments on how the skilled workers were not feeling the effects of the famine with most of them “having a warm meal everyday”. This may lead the reader to assume the injustice is only focused on the Ukrainian people. However, if you continue reading Jones speaks to an unskilled worker, who reveals how he is affected by famine in Moscow. This highlights the true extent of the failure of collectivisation as it was not only affecting the farmers in Ukraine; it was also affecting the workers in the heart of the Soviet Union. It could also be argued that Stalin is protecting his factory workers from the famine by providing them with a warm meal everyday compared to how he is seizing all food from the farmers.

## Soviet Journalism of the Holodomor.

There wasn't Holodomor coverage in Soviet newspapers. In fact, any form of public discourse on the genocide was banned until the glasnost period in the mid-1980's during the demise of the Soviet Union. Rather than looking at newspaper reports from the period we can instead look at collectivisation propaganda published at the time.



Figure 1 is from the 1920s translates to "why aren't you still in a kolkhoz?"

In figure 1 we see a happy group of farmers that appear to be part of a Kolkhoz and seem to be prosperous in their government ran farm. We also see a struggling individual farmer and his horse. This suggests that it is the individual farmers which are suffering and anybody in the collective farms is affluent and happy. This is a deliberate misrepresentation which further emphasises why the articles of Jones and Muggerridge are vital in dispelling the myths and denial surrounding the Holodomor.

Figure 2 was produced in 1930. We can see by the translation that the purpose of the five-year plan was to not only to rapidly 'modernise' Russian industry but also to eradicate any kulaks. This aligns with the Marxist ideology of class enemies as Stalin was weaponizing the proletariat by suggesting that kulaks were another form of bourgeois. This led to class conflict and fear of Kulaks leading to them being a viable excuse to starve and execute so many. This was branded as "true justice" by the party leader for North Caucasus, Shebboldaev.



*Figure 2 translates to "We will keep out kulaks from the collective farms".*

## Holodomor denial

Despite the compelling evidence of a genocide, Holodomor denial is still incredibly relevant. Not only through political leaders but also social media. For example, on Tik Tok there is a video series called "the Holodomor hoax" and on Instagram the third search result of 'the Holodomor' is a video which labels the genocide as "Nazi propaganda". These opinions are frighteningly common and due to high social media use amongst young people, it is vital for them to be exposed to the truth through the school curriculum as they are with the Holocaust.

## Conclusion

The word genocide combines the Greek word for race or tribe, "genos", and the Latin word "cide", which means to kill. Therefore, a genocide means to kill a race or tribe. The Holodomor, which means death by hunger, clearly involved Stalin killing a particular race or tribe: The Ukrainians. Despite this only thirty-two nations recognise the Holodomor as a genocide, a number that, in my opinion, should be much higher. However, it is up to us as young people to carry on the legacy left behind by both the victims of the horrors but also those brave enough to stand up for what is right, even if this cost them their life.

This research project and has opened my eyes to the horrors faced by millions in Ukraine, it has also made me question what I value in my life and has ultimately given myself a sense of thankfulness at the fact I have not had to experience anything like those in Ukraine both then and now.