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Nationalities and the Ukrainian Famine

The Stalinist policies which led to the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33 were intended to tame not only the peasants, but also the non-Russians, according to James Mace. In July of 1932, Stalin viewed the crisis in Soviet agriculture as "a window of opportunity in terms of achieving the dual goals of crushing the peasantry and crushing the nationalities."

Mace, who is Staff Director of The Commission on the Ukraine Famine in Washington, D.C., spoke about the relationship between the famine and the nationalities for students and faculty of the Harriman Institute March 21, 1989. The Commission is an agency of the U.S. Government, so Mace noted that his views were strictly his own.

Peasants and Ukrainians

Soviet policies toward the peasants, the nationalities, and the Ukrainians in particular were always closely related. First, the non-Russian nationalities were primarily rural. In Stalin's words, the nationality question was in essence "a question of the peasantry." Second, the 1926 census shows that forty-five percent of all non-Russians in the Soviet Union at that time were Ukrainians. Thus the nationality question during this period was also seen largely as a "Ukrainian problem — a problem of what to do about the Ukrainians."

During NEP (the New Economic Policy of the 1920s), peasants were basically left alone. They were allowed to farm on individual holdings, to pay taxes rather than submit to grain confiscations, and to sell their surpluses in a more or less free market. "The problem was that so many of those peasants happened to be non-Russians, and a large faction of them Ukrainian." Anti-Soviet guerrilla warfare continued in the Ukraine until the mid-1920s, and most of the "bandits" fought for some kind of Ukrainian national self-assertion.

In response to this persistent unrest, the Twelfth Party Congress in 1923 adopted *korenizatsiia*, a policy of "indigenization." In the Ukraine this policy amounted to a

series of concessions to Ukrainian aspirations, in the hopes that the republic government, imposed mainly by Russians, would gain greater legitimacy in the eyes of the Ukrainian majority. Measures included active recruitment of Ukrainians into Party and state apparatuses, the ordering of non-Ukrainian *apparatchiki* to learn the local language and culture, official promotion of the Ukrainian language and cultural activities, and efforts to favor the use of Ukrainian over Russian in the Ukraine's cities.

By the late 1920s, however, Moscow was growing increasingly skittish. Prominent Ukrainians had rallied to *korenizatsiia*, and the process was beginning to take on a momentum of its own. "What occurred in the Ukrainian SSR was an attempt to try to push the Ukrainization policy, the policy of concessions to Ukrainians, to its limits from within the Communist Party of the Ukraine," said Mace. Perhaps most threatening to the Soviet regime was the prospect of Ukrainians leading a bloc of other non-Russian nationalities to promote republic interests against the centralizing tendencies of the Union authorities.

Crack-Down

Beginning in 1929 and 1930, initial measures were taken against Ukrainian self-assertion, particularly arrests and show trials of some of the more outspoken advocates of Ukrainian culture. This crack-down was linked with collectivization. "If you're going to have a war against the peasantry, it doesn't make a lot of sense to have concessions to non-Russians, who are basically peasants." Thus Ukrainian intellectuals were attacked through the legal system, and the masses through collectivization.

Stalin's policies concerning both the nationalities and collectivization of the peasantry were characterized by alternating "thaws" and "chills" from 1930 to the May reforms of early 1932. But at the Third All-Ukrainian Party Conference in July 1932, despite the fact that several officials warned about food-supply difficulties and even used the term "famine," Stalin's representatives insisted that



procurement quotas be met at all costs. This moment marked a turning point.

Stalin decided "to make his move, not only against the peasantry, but against the Ukrainians as well." It was declared a capital offense to pilfer socialized property, including gleaning (gathering up leftover grain after the harvest). Distribution of foodstuffs to collective farms that had not met their quotas was stopped, and farms judged to have willfully failed to meet their quotas were punished. Under the direct supervision of Soviet Prime Minister Molotov, drastic grain seizures — which had been explicitly rejected the preceding spring — were reinstated. The result of these measures was a devastating famine which killed millions.

Anti-Ukrainization

At the same time, Stalin took on the urban Ukrainian elites. In an unpublished decree of December 14, 1932, he ordered the Ukrainian Party to turn serious attention to "overturning the mechanistic way in which Ukrainization had been carried out." The decree was tantamount to an announcement of a "witch hunt for abuses" in Ukrainization. On January 24, 1933, the All-Union Central Committee censured the Communist Party of the Ukraine for its "criminal laxity" and its failure to meet procurement

targets. Suspect party members were purged, and a rash of arrests was initiated. By the end of 1933, the policy of Ukrainization had been reversed altogether.

According to Mace, 1933 might be considered "the year of the great break" in Soviet nationality policy. It marked the transition from the policy of "national polycentrism" of *korenizatsiia* to "the russo-centrism of the high Stalinist period." Stalin's nationality policy was designed to suppress any autonomous aspirations among non-Russians, either in the countryside or the cities.

"In short, what happened in 1933 was first of all the destruction of the explicitly autonomous-minded faction of the Ukrainian communist leadership." The Ukrainization policy was dismantled and the national intelligentsia was crushed. As a result, Ukrainian culture was "pushed out of the cities into the countryside," where, as a consequence of the famine, its base constituency was crippled. "Russo-centric proletarian nationalism" was established as the official national ideology of the Soviet Union.

Its will broken and the assertion of its national distinctiveness nearly crushed, the Ukraine came to represent the Stalinist model of the national republic. This model set the standard for the Soviet nationality policies of the Stalin period.

Reported by Lolly Jewett

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