



## UKRAINE 1932

### BEFORE THE GENOCIDE

The name 'Ukraina' means 'borderland', and was first given to the frontier lands round Kiev in the 12th century. Ukraine is now much bigger, a country of vast open plains lying between Russia to the east and Poland to the west. The position of Ukraine's frontiers changed many times. Control of the region was disputed between Poland and Russia over several centuries, and for some time it was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The Ukrainian people retained their sense of nationhood whatever regime was in power, and in the 19th century experienced a 'cultural awakening' as well. After the First World War, an attempt to form a republic of Ukraine was crushed by Russia's Red Army, and most of the country became part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. (Part remained with Poland to the west.)

Ukraine's natural riches are its 'black earth' - the fertile crop-growing soil - coal and iron. The great expanse of cornfields, 'Russia's granary', was of great value to the Soviet regime, who had little interest in the opinions or welfare of the people who farmed it. These peasant farmers, smallholders whose only substantial enemies had been natural pests and drought, were now ordered to adopt communist policies. In 1921-2 the attempt to impose this order, and the seizing of Ukrainian food supplies by force, coincided with a natural drought. The result was a famine in which a million people died.

In 1924 Stalin became the leader of the USSR. He was determined to crush nationalism in Ukraine, and also to break the resistance of the kulaks, the smallholders who had made a success of their farms (and therefore a profit). Their free market system was condemned by communists, whose ideal was 'collectivisation': ownership of land and its produce by the state, which was the workers' employer and paid them a basic wage. In itself, this move towards equality had its virtues. But in practice it's an arrangement that can work only by consent, not by force, and then only if efficiently and honestly run. The peasant farmers of Ukraine - nearly 90% of the population - didn't care for the idea, and resisted it as strongly as they could. Meanwhile, management was now in the hands of communist party officials, who had little or no experience or training, and even less understanding of farming; and not all were either efficient or honest. The Stalin-led regime ruled by fear and force, with the aid of ruthless party activists and the powerful and brutal secret police.

In 1928 the kulaks found that their taxes had been raised. Then they were asked to provide greater quantities of grain. Their farms were forcibly confiscated for collectivisation. In response, many rebelled violently; some slaughtered all their animals before handing over their farms; others destroyed their machinery. Punishment was severe, and many were shot.

### THE GENOCIDE

The central government now demanded impossibly high quotas of grain, forcing the

population to give up even the seed-grain supplies needed for next season's planting. There is no doubt that the regime's leaders knew that this would create a food shortage. Indeed, borders were closed and supplies cut off to ensure it; granaries and other food stores were hunted out and locked up under guard by soldiers and secret police units. A man-made famine was thus created deliberately to starve political resisters to death. Up to 7 million people in ethnic Ukrainian regions died of hunger. Some of the too-slow-to-die were shot in large numbers to hasten the genocide.

The quota demands were lifted in 1933, but until 1935 further millions of kulaks and their families were deported to labour camps in Siberia and Kazakhstan. Many died in the appallingly harsh conditions there.

## AFTER THE GENOCIDE

It took years for Ukraine to recover. Russian settlers were ordered in to replace (and bury) the dead and to revive the neglected farmlands.

In 1941, during the Second World War, Germany invaded Ukraine, where they too ruthlessly exploited the produce of the land and the workers who harvested it. Once again there was substantial guerrilla resistance. At the end of the war areas long held by Russia and Poland were at last restored to Ukraine: all ethnic Ukrainian land was united in one Soviet republic. In the 1980s there was a revival of Ukrainian nationalism; there was also a religious revival (the communist government had suppressed all Churches).

In 1991 the Republic of Ukraine declared independence. The transition from soviet-style government and economy to parliamentary democracy and capitalism began with difficulty and still needs time to achieve.

## WITNESS

'Dear Uncle, We have no bread or anything else to eat. Dad is completely exhausted from hunger and is lying on the bench, unable to get on his feet. Mother is blind from the hunger, so I have to guide her when she has to go outside. Please Uncle, take me to Kharkiv, because I too will die from hunger. I'm still young and I do so want to live. Here I will surely die, for every one else is dying.'

'On a battlefield men die quickly. Here I saw people dying alone by slow degrees, dying hideously, without even the excuse of sacrifice for a cause. They had been trapped and left to starve, each in his own home, by a political decision made in a far-off capital around conference and banqueting tables. There wasn't even the consolation of inevitability to relieve the horror. The worst sights were the little children with skeleton limbs dangling from balloon-like abdomens. Starvation had wiped every trace of youth from their faces, turning them into tortured gargoyles; only in their eyes still lingered the reminder of childhood. Everywhere we found men and women lying prone, their faces and bellies bloated, their eyes utterly expressionless.'

'We had a communal farm in Ukraine attached to my regiment. Everything was fine until last year (1932). Then we began to get letters asking for food. We sent what we could, but I didn't discover what had happened until I went to the farm only a month ago (March 1933). My God, you wouldn't believe it. The people were starving. Their animals were dead. There wasn't even a cat or dog in the whole village, and that was no good sign. Instead of 250 families there were only 73, and all of them were half-starved. They told me their seed grain was taken away last spring. "The order came that our farm must deliver 500 tons of grain. We needed 400 tons to sow our fields, and we only had 600 tons. But we gave the grain as ordered." And remember, these folks weren't kulaks, weren't class enemies. They were our own people. I was horrified.'

'When the first of the new grain was being delivered to the granary near the railroad station, I made a discovery which left me shaking. Stacked in the brick structure were the state reserves of grain ordered by the government for the previous year (1932), their existence hidden from the starving population by officialdom. Hundreds of men, women and children had died of hunger in these villages, though grain was hoarded almost outside their doors! The peasants who were with me when we found the 'State reserves' stared with unbelieving eyes. Later I found out that this had happened in many other parts of the country. Why it was done only Stalin's Politburo could tell - and it didn't.'

'Does Comrade Stalin - for that matter, does anyone in the Politburo - know what's happening in Ukraine? Well, if not, I'll give you some idea. A train recently pulled into Kiev loaded with the corpses of people who had starved to death. It picked up corpses all the way from Poltava to Kiev.'

'I'm of peasant origin myself and the sufferings of my people hurt me deeply. Tears, blood, death, exile. And why? The land is fertile, the people are hard-working. Why must we let them starve and die and perish? The more I think of it the more confused I get.'

## ISSUES

Ukraine today has a population of around 50m. Some speak Russian, some Ukrainian. There is a large minority who consider themselves ethnic Russian. There are Poles, Magyars, Moldovans, Bulgars, Belarussians, Romanians, Jews and Crimean Tatars with historic roots in what is now Ukraine. The strongest sense of Ukrainian identity is in the area separated from Ukraine for 200 years while under first Austrian and then Polish rule. Religion has been revived, but is also a divisive factor, since there is more than one branch of Christian Church. Some people, including the government, look towards the West and Europe. Some look towards the East and Russia. Ukrainians have little trust in their political leaders and lawmakers. The economy is in a mess. Criticism in the media is suppressed. The oldest Ukrainians can remember living through two world wars, a revolution, a civil war, three famines, violent occupation by 4 armies, and deportation to Siberian labour camps. Until 1991 they were forbidden to remember or speak about any of it.

1931: 'Laughter disappeared from the village. Only me and my little brother survived. It was a terrible time, terrible.'

1941: 'When the Germans came, we welcomed them with milk, bread, butter, eggs. They gave us cigarettes, chocolate, all the good that came from the West. Then one day when I was going to school I had to step over dead Jewish bodies: killed by German drunkards in the night.' In Babi Yar, a ravine outside Kiev, 33,771 Jews are murdered in 2 days. 77,000 more bodies are added over the next two years. Of 5.5m Ukrainians killed in the Second World War, at least 1m were Jews.

1995: 'Our organisation, Memorial, is excavating graves so we can begin the trials of perpetrators. We also help people find members of their family lost in World War Two or sent to Siberia. We also publish books by Ukrainian authors long forgotten.'

1997: 'Ukraine's history was forbidden and our art and literature was suppressed. But when we were in the Soviet Union we had social insurance. Now we get by only by selling eggs and planting our gardens. We're fed up with eating potatoes. It's very difficult for people to change their mentality.'

One way to exert power and deprive people of their human rights is to reduce them to weakness, disease and death: people who are feeling exhausted, ill and despairing have little will to resist. (The will to live, however, takes longer to weaken.)

There is also the issue of the power of authority, especially when it's exerted by a brutal police force. Can there be benign dictatorships? Do elected governments always act responsibly? The obedience of slaves is likely to end in rebellion and conflict. What other relationships can be achieved between 'authority' figures and the people who accept them as such? (Parents, teachers, councillors, managers, bosses; policemen, judges; generals; political leaders, religious leaders...)