

Whisk of the Red Broom

STALIN & UKRAINE, 1928–1933

M. Andrew Holowchak

Series in World History



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To my longest and closest friend, Charles, ever in charge.

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Preface

Ukrainian Ivan Bahryany relates a singularly frightful event, ineffaceably imprinted in his mind as a boy of 10 in the year 1920. A band of Russian soldiers came to his home, spoke threateningly to his uncle and grandfather—the latter, a man of 92 years and with one arm—and then thrust their bayonets repeatedly into the two men, after which they “shot at the bloody bodies on the ground [with] their pistols and roared with laughter.” All of that was under the old linden tree, under which were the icons of his grandfather’s beloved St. Zozym and St. Savativ and near his grandfather’s beloved apiary. On that same day, all the old peasant-farmers of the village were murdered along with the village’s priest by members of the Soviet Cheka.¹ Bahrayany’s grandfather was singled out because he, owning almost 100 acres of land, was a well-to-do farmer and openly against the socialization of Ukraine. His uncle was singled out because he was a Ukrainian soldier in Ukraine’s struggle for independence in 1917 and 1918. Bahryany and the rest of his family would later be arrested and sent, without trial, to the prison camp, Solovky.²

What happened to Bahryany and his family was occurring throughout Ukraine after the fall of the tsars. Ukrainians were arrested, exiled, and murdered, and millions were forced to try to suffer through, in some measure, two famines in successive decades—the second, State-sanctioned. What was happening in Ukraine was happening also, but to a much lesser extent, in other parts of Soviet Russia.

According to official Soviet records, adds Bahryany, Soviet Ukraine had a population of 32 million people in 1927, and yet, in 1939, there were only 28 million Ukrainians. The natural increase in the span of 12 years, without some cataclysm, ought to have been some seven million, but there was a decrease of four million. In a union of Soviet republics in which, according to the Russian Party’s line, industry in Soviet cities had been flourishing and peasant-farmers

¹ Established in December 1917, the Cheka was the commission for protection against counter-revolution—the Bolshevik Secret Police, or formally, the Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage by Officials. It would become the State Police Directorate (GPU) in 1922. In 1917, the Peoples’ Commissar for Internal Affairs (NKVD) was formed to conduct policing and oversee prisons. The GPU became part of the NKVD in 1930, though it was common for people to refer to it as Cheka or GPU.

² Ivan Bahryany, “I Accuse,” in *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin: A White Book*, ed. S.O. Pidhainy, Vol. 2 (Detroit: The Basilian Press, 1955), 4–5.

in the countryside had been, with a little encouragement, gleefully forming thriving collective farms, a marked decrease in the population of Ukrainians ought not to have happened.³

While punitive measures were not exclusive to Ukraine, Ukrainians were especially targeted, once Bolsheviks assumed control of Russia and its republics, because Ukraine was rich in natural resources. Its large and fertile steppe could, when cultivated, provide grain for much of the Soviet Empire. Moreover, it was a natural buffer to any hostilities of Western nations toward Russia, and there was always antagonism, given the Bolsheviks' insistence on fomenting a global revolution to overthrow Western capitalism. Like other Russian rulers before him, Stalin generally considered Ukraine to be part of Russia and Ukrainians to be Russians—albeit, Little (uncultured) Russians. The Ukrainian language, for Stalin, was merely a vulgarization of the Russian tongue. Thus, Stalin was ever agitated by many Ukrainians' mulish insistence that they were culturally distinct from Russians. They had, Ukrainian intelligentsia insisted, their own religion, their own traditions, and their own language, and that culture was rooted in the rural villages of peasant-farmers, scattered throughout Ukraine.

Ukraine's peasant-farmers would ever pose a problem for Stalin—especially from the year 1928 to the year 1933, when Bolshevik activists, “brigadiers,” on account of directives by Stalin, pressed aggressively to collectivize the Ukrainian countryside and the lands, arable or not, of all the USSR's member republics. Stalin uniquely maintained, *pace* fellow Bolshevik Leon Trotsky, that Russia and its republics were not such backwaters that they could not be socialized without the contagion of socialism in heavily industrialized Western nations like Germany. Heavy capitalist Western nations, for Stalin, were far from embracing Marxism, and thus, after the death of Lenin in 1924 and Stalin's sly boots assumption of the lead of the Party—one could viably argue that he was already directing matters of the Party in 1922 as Secretary-General with Lenin's debilitation after a stroke—Stalin pushed to socialize Russia and its post-war republics independently of the West. He quickly socialized many Soviet cities—in some instances, he created cities where there was nearby, abundance of natural resources—and pressed for great improvements in heavy industries in those cities. The lofty aim was gigantism: to do what the Western capitalist nations were doing but to do it better and bigger to prove the superiority of socialism. Stalin wished, through socialism, to industrialize to bring economically Russia into the twentieth century and to guard against the possibility of a war with the West. Western nations, as I have already noted, were

³ The numbers are roughly correct. Ivan Bahryany, “I Accuse,” in *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin: A White Book*, ed. S.O. Pidhainy, Vol. 2 (Detroit: The Basilian Press, 1955), 3.

ever suspicious about the USSR, given the “inevitability” of Marxist socialism as a global phenomenon—*viz.*, the unavoidable demise of capitalism.

With Stalin’s push to industrialize the USSR, there was a considerable migration of peasants from the countryside to the growing Soviet cities, though some two-thirds of the population was still rural. To feed the laborers in the cities, the peasant-farms needed to up agricultural production. With the socialization of cities leading to large increases of the production of goods like military vehicles and weapons as well as tractors, plows, and all sorts of materials for building, Stalin wished to “urbanize” the rural farms throughout the USSR—Ukraine especially. In short, Stalin aimed to impose the model of a large, “efficient” factory in the country. He aimed for peasant-farmers to give willfully their possessions—land, buildings, animals, tools, and so on—to the State, and the State would then turn the numerous individual farms into large and efficient collective farms, State-owned and State-run. That, at least, was the plan.

Stalin, from the beginning, recognized two difficulties: the independent spirit of peasant-farmers and cultural differences among peasant-farmers in different regions or different republics. Collectivization, he was often to say, could only work if peasant-farmers willfully collectivized and if activists of the Party were respectful of cultural differences in different republics when aiming to rally peasants to collectivize.

The first difficulty was gargantuan. Peasant-farmers, after the break with the feudalism under the tsars, were accustomed to farm as they saw fit to farm and did not take kindly to Bolshevik urbanites, who were sent to oversee collective farms and who had, most often, little knowledge of farming, telling them what crops to grow and how to grow them to maximize yield. Moreover, they were unwilling to give all that they had over the years worked so hard to acquire—grubbed acreage, plows, and other tools, animals, barns, and perhaps even their tractor—to the State, which in return promised them in return nothing substantial. Again, peasant-farmers were averse to sell their grain at State-fixed prices, substantially lower than market prices. They rightly recognized from the start that Stalin aimed to fatten the State at their expense, while to Stalin, peasant-farmers, especially the successful ones, were but liberal capitalists and were albatrosses to Soviet socialism.

The second difficulty was not as weighty as the first, but it needed to be addressed. Different republics of the USSR and even different regions of a republic were in some measure culturally distinct, and any attempt to impose a one-size-fits-all model of agricultural production, indifferent to cultural differences, might meet with staunch opposition. Stalinist Marxism, for instance, was secular and religiosity-intolerant. It would thus have to face the difficulties that God-fearing peasants presented, such as time away from agricultural

concerns to attend religious ceremonies and festivals throughout the year. The nodus of removing God from peasants' itinerary would prove Bunyanesque.

Stalin, however, was wont not to address possible nodi until they were actual nodi. He merely assumed that once a collective was running, its efficiency of yield soon would make all, or most at least, eager to join the collective. There was never the consideration that socialism, which seemed to be taking root in urban areas, might be ill-suited for rural areas. Stalin merely followed the gospel of Marx. Capitalism, which followed neatly and inevasibly after the collapse of feudalism, would itself implode and socialism would inevasibly take its place. That is how things had to be, because that is what Marx said. There could be no concord between capitalism and socialism—*viz.*, no halfway Marxism, no proletariats in the cities and classes of capitalist peasants in the countryside.

Resistance to socialism, rife in rural areas, was sensibly enough strongest from the wealthiest peasant-farmers, whom Stalin derisively called kulaks (Ukr., kurkuls). The wealthy peasant-farmers formed the backbone of every village and their well-being sustained their village. They, for instance, governed the village, offered loans, shared tools, and gave advice to farmers, poorer and less knowledgeable. In short, villages thrived when their best farmers thrived. No farmer, say, with 100 acres of land, with many domesticated animals, and with steel plows or perhaps even with a tractor was willing to give everything to the State, at the discretion of one official or a few urban officials from the Party.

Because they formed the backbone of each village, Stalin came to grasp that collectivizing agriculture could not occur without sanction of the wealthiest farmers, who firmly opposed collectivization. And so, Stalin quickly turned to aggressive measures of dealing with kulaks, on the assumption that once the wealthiest peasants' resistance was overcome, all peasant-farmers would readily collectivize. Stalin imposed heavy, crippling taxes on the wealthier peasant-farmers and soon brought in Soviet collectors of grain to search farms for hidden grain that might be sold at market prices, instead of to the State. Meeting still with stiff resistance from peasant-farmers, collectors turned to doubly aggressive, even violent measures. Peasant-farmers with hidden grain were exiled, even shot.

Imposing a Marxist grid on the peasant-farmers, Stalin divided them into classes: wealthy farmers, poor farmers, and farmers neither wealthy nor poor. He then tried to incentivize, through material gain or merely eschewal of disfavor of the Party, the non-wealthy peasant-farmers, chiefly the poorest through poor-peasant committees, to turn against wealthy peasant-farmers by becoming activists of the Party, e.g., informants or collectors of grain.

The policy of classifying peasants and turning peasant against peasant was only partly successful. For one, the division into classes was more contrived

than it was clean, so it was difficult to discern who was to turn against whom. Moreover, there was perhaps jealousy of, but seldom enmity toward, the wealthy farmers by the less wealthy, for the relationship between the two was more symbiotic than frictional. Finally, a poor peasant who gained materially from turning against wealthier farmers might find himself to be considered in time wealthy, and thus, an enemy of the Party—a kulak. Therefore, many peasant-farmers turned to sabotage: destroying grain, killing farms' animals, or refusing to work their fields in resistance to the aggressive, often sanguinary, Stalinist measures.

The scenario in Ukraine was decupled, and that is the focus of this undertaking. In Ukraine, Stalin faced the problem of resistance to collectivization as well as the problem of many Ukrainians' wish for independence. His shock-brigadiers, the most unscrupulous of his collectors, hit Ukrainians hardest of all, and that led eventually to the Great Famine of 1932–1933, what is commonly called by Ukrainians *Holodomor* (death by starvation). Millions of Ukrainians died from want of food—the scenario was so dire that parents sometimes ate their own children—as well as from the harsh conditions of exile to the Russian gulags of the nether-regions in the frigid Northeast, where Ukrainians, along with other enemies of the Party, were forced to labor in squalid conditions and without sufficient food or drink. Along with the push to liquidate the Ukrainian kulaks “as a class,” the Ukrainian intelligentsia—philosophers, poets, novelists, scientists, professors, politicians, bishops and priests, and former high-ranking officers in the Ukrainian Army, or anyone who might justifiably be accused of nonconformist thinking—were gathered up, interrogated, tortured, and sent to prison camps such as Kolyma, Solovky, and Franz Joseph's Land, or simply shot. In effect, any Ukrainian thought capable of non-conformist or independent thought was suspected of inciting nationalist sentiments among Ukrainians.

Stalin consistently denied, we shall see, that there was any such widespread famine in Ukraine or elsewhere in 1932–1933. It was a Trotskyian ruse, he said, thought up by enemies of the Party. Those who died from want of food were the indolent, the ignorant, or the intransigent: the counter-revolutionists, who deserved to die.

Yet today, it is well-known that Stalin knew of the famine. Moreover, the famine was all the while, in some measure, I shall argue, planned, not an accidental consequence of strategies concerning the aggressive collection of grain. It could not have been otherwise. The belligerent Bolshevik steps in seizing the grain of member states of what was then called the Russian Socialist Federative Socialist Republic (RFSFR) in 1921 had resulted in a large famine and the deaths of millions in the “federative.” Stalin could not have not known that aggressive, crash-collective policies beginning as early as 1928, would lead

to widespread famine. He likely thought that the deaths of numerous Ukrainians in the early 1930s might serve as lessons to other Ukrainians not to resist collectivization and to push no longer for independence or nationalization.

This book is a critical analysis of Stalin's Ukrainian policy with a focus on the span from 1928 to 1933, from the year that begins Stalin's Five-Year Plan, a reversal of Lenin's New Economic Policy, to what is generally considered to be the end of the Great Ukrainian Famine. It comprises 14 chapters. Chapters 1 through 3 cover the development of Stalin's Marxism, prior to and just after the death of Lenin, and the immediate problem that Ukraine posed for socializing the USSR. In chapters 4 and 5, I discuss Stalin's plan for collectivizing Soviet farms and his movement toward ever aggressive, heavy-handed means of achieving complete collectivization. Chapters 6 through 9 are a critical analysis of Stalin's strategy for dealing with what he perceived to be the main obstacle to success at collectivizing: the pesky wealthy farmers or capitalist kulaks. Stalin settled on "dekulakization," which aimed at riddance of kulaks as a class, and the means included intra-peasant antagonism, aggressive measures of "appropriating" grain and other foodstuffs, and dispossession of kulaks' property as well as exile or even extermination of kulaks. Peasant-farmer mightily resisted collectivization. I pepper those chapters with numerous illustrations of Stalin's tactics and Ukrainians' means of resistance. The focus throughout is on Ukraine. In the next chapter, I look at and analyze the thorny problem of Ukrainian nationalism and why Stalin thought that eradication of nationalism and dekulakization in Ukraine were mutually entailing. Chapters 11 through 13 deal with the Great Ukrainian Famine of 1932–1933—a natural result of Stalin's aggressive, often sanguinary measures of collecting Ukrainian grain and eventually all foodstuffs that could be found on a farm. Millions of Ukrainians died from want of food, which was readily and relatively cheaply available in Russia, while Stalin and other high officials merely turned a blind eye to the calamity. I end in chapter 14 with some discussion of Stalin's vision of the socialist utopia through a critical look at his theoretical writings on Stalinism. I follow with an afterword.

While there is today widespread acceptance that Stalin was a brutal, unfeeling tyrant whose hostility to Ukraine was strong because Ukrainian peasant-farmers were reluctant to collectivize and because many Ukrainians, in some measure, considered themselves to be culturally distinct from Russians, there has been much too little written on Stalin's Ukrainian policies prior to and during the Great Ukrainian Famine of 1932–1933. Stalin hated Ukrainians not because they were ethnically distinct—Stalin was never vitally pushing Russification of the Soviet republics because he considered Russia culturally superior to other republics—but because of Ukrainians' united unwillingness to accept socialism, which entailed cultural uniformity of some sort for

maximal economic efficiency. Failure of Ukraine, the largest and most resource-rich Soviet republic and the one dearest to Russia, to accept Stalinist Marxism would disincentivize other Soviet republics to follow the Stalinist model. That was the greatest obstacle that Stalin faced early in his tenure as dictator of the USSR. That is why Stalin hated Ukrainians.

Of the books written on Stalin and Ukraine with a focus on the years prior to and through the Ukrainian Famine, not enough attention has been given to Stalin's speeches and writings that have a bearing on those policies. This book draws plentifully from Stalin's speeches and writings to show the vacillating mind of an increasingly paranoid, self-indulgent autocrat. Much more than other early Bolsheviks—e.g., Vladimir Lenin, Nikolai Bukharin, Grigori Zinoviev, and Lev Kamenev—Stalin was driven by titanolatry, or love of power, as well as by the ideals of Marxism, personalized to suit his tastes. In time, acquisition of and maintaining power became more important than the triumph of socialism. Unwilling to lose what he so cunningly acquired, he trusted no one.

Once firmly at the head of the Bolshevik Party—he was never titular head—Stalin was wont to remove all officials of the Party who might conceivably pose a problem for his dictatorship—especially in the final years of the 1930s, the focus of the epilog. Though he was more than anyone else unofficially running the Party by the time of Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin, some years after Lenin's death, became the Party, and he habitually acted inconsistent with principles that he, early on, deemed axial for the rooting and spread of socialism. Wishing to hold on to and increase his power, rivals were forced to submit to his will, or face potentially fatal consequences. Stalin knew only one method, force, and when force failed to produce results, he tended to apply greater force. Failures along the way—and failures were much oftener than successes—were always on account of saboteurs: the ever-present “kulaks,” “counter-revolutionists,” “anti-Leninists,” or “enemies of the Party.” The verdicts of the Party, which were in time Stalin's verdicts, were infallible. We shall see this application of force-failure-blame, and then, when the time was kairotic, application of greater force at play in his attempts to collectivize Ukrainian farms and to discourage Ukrainian nationalism.

One of the unique features of this book is that the historiography is unabashedly “analytical.” My decades of experience both as an analytic philosopher and as a historian of psychoanalysis give this book, I hope, a critical, analytic dimension that other books that treat Stalin and Ukraine do not have. For instance, in Chapter 1, I proffer an account of Stalin's early chaotic years to help us understand his lust for power and control, his relative disdain for quiet, and his unconcern for the wellbeing of anyone except himself.

Before ending, I add four procedural points. I am wont to capitalize “Party” and “State” throughout this book, because Stalinist Marxism would become, certainly by the time of the Great Ukrainian Famine of 1932, the great Soviet religion, with Stalin as the godhead. Next, all references, with assumption of Stalin at the head of the Bolshevik Party, to “socialism,” “Stalinist Marxism,” “Stalinist Leninism,” and “Stalinism” should be taken identically, to indicate Stalin’s take on socialism, rooted in Marx and Engels, and the Marxism that was adopted by Lenin. Third, all Russian and Ukrainian terms have been Romanized. Finally, I make large use throughout of an invaluable source of first-hand testimonies in a two-volume collection of testimonies by Ukrainians who had suffered through Stalin’s challenges concerning collectivizing Ukrainian peasant-farms and especially the *Holodomor*: S.O. Pidhainy’s *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin: A White Book*.⁴

⁴ For a critical analysis of the books and Pidhainy’s motivation for collecting the testimonies, see Bohdan Klid, “*The Black Deeds of the Kremlin: Sixty Years Later*,” *Genocide Studies International*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2014: 224–235. Klid makes the persuasive argument that despite the “political objectives” of the editor, the collection does a service invaluable to the English-speaking audience, largely in profound ignorance of the goings on just prior to and during *Holodomor*.

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