

Roman Serbyn — “The Ukrainian Famine of 1933 in Light of the UN Convention on Genocide”

Definitions can be decisive, the verbal wrangles at the UN being a case in point. This year’s Ukrainian Famine Lecture focused on one such definition—genocide, and its relation to the events of 1932–33. Dr. Roman Serbyn (Université du Québec), speaking to a sizeable crowd on November 6, discussed this tragic occurrence with reference to the UN’s convention on genocide. The famine is not currently recognized as such, despite the magnitude of dead (estimates range from 3 to even 10 million), and the issue has been debated for years.

Though few would argue that the famine was merely an unfortunate incident, the burden of proof seems to be on those who advocate for the official “genocide” designation. Professor Serbyn made reference to the UN convention that identifies genocide as an act with the “intent to destroy” part or all of a national, ethnic, religious, or racial group through killing, physical pressure, birth control, and/or forceful displacement. The key word here is “intent,” which unfortunately in Soviet history can be a slippery thing. How much can be blamed on the caprices of nature and bureaucracy, on low-level functionaries “dizzy with success,” or on simple ineptitude? Without defined documentation, such claims have been easy to make. Another sticking point Professor Serbyn mentioned is the political status of Ukrainians, whose status as a “national” or “ethnic” group can be ambiguous.

Dr. Serbyn attempted to illustrate that the famine was indeed a deliberate policy. Its primary cause was of course forced grain procurement, when the Soviet authorities exported grain despite acknowledged scarcity. This was not just “terror by famine,” an effort to break the back of the peasants, Professor Serbyn argued, collectivization having been mostly accomplished during 1930–31. Rather, it was an effort to exterminate. Grain procurement was not a purely Ukrainian phenomenon, causing hardship in other Soviet regions, but effects in the Ukraine were much worse. Professor Serbyn argued that Ukrainians, even those living in Russian territories, were targeted specifically. Given the fluidity on the situation on the ground, the targeting of ethnic Ukrainians within Russia is a difficult assertion to prove, but Professor Serbyn did make some valuable suggestions.

Professor Serbyn stressed Stalin’s personal knowledge of events on the ground generally, pointing to documents showing his complicity in the purges. He showed one document in particular which seemed to illustrate Stalin’s aim to destroy Ukrainian nationalism, and noted a speech in which the *vozhd*’ referred to Ukrainians as the “agents of Piłsudski.” The crux of Professor Serbyn’s argument focused on the specifically anti-Ukrainian measures. The famine coincided with Russification efforts in schools and attacks on local intelligentsia. The OGPU made widespread arrests, particularly among desperate refugees fleeing afflicted areas. The magnitude and specificity of this persecution was, Professor Serbyn said, “clearly a genocidal measure targeting [the] Ukrainian national group.”

Revisiting the history of the famine is a valuable exercise, though actually getting recognition in the UN will be difficult. Academic consensus, Professor Serbyn acknowledged, is the first step, but Russia is unlikely to support any such motion, even if these grey areas are more clearly defined.

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