

STALIN'S CRIME IN UKRAINE

"Holodomor was genocide", states Italian parliament

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Ninety years on, the Italian Parliament has also voted to recognise the Holodomor as the genocide of Ukrainians, perpetrated by Stalin from 1932 to 1933. The Senate passed the motion with 130 votes in favour and 4 abstentions (plus all the absentees). The 4

abstainers were senators from the Italian Greens-Left Alliance and the 5 Star Movement.

On the Holodomor (Ukrainian: “death by starvation”) there was (true) denialism on the part of the Soviet regime, and even today the debate is difficult to address. It was undeniably a mass crime produced by communist ideology. In 1928, Stalin imposed his radical economic reforms after introducing the first Five-Year Plan. Agriculture, which was the main resource for Ukraine, as for southern Russia, was regarded as an auxiliary sector of industry. Feeding the workers: this was to be the task of the peasants. Then the greatness of the USSR would emerge through the industrialisation programme. Ukraine, in the early Soviet years, after the civil war (which had devastated it, with a first famine) had gained a certain autonomy, at least permission to use its own language and study its own national culture. The 1920s were a period of “Ukrainization”. Stalin, in his frenzy to centralise, wanted to destroy the Ukrainian identity that he himself, as former Commissar of Nationalities, had granted. Ukraine was a national enemy: with its identity it risked undermining the unity of the USSR. It was also a class enemy, where the New Economic Policy had made a class of enterprising landowning peasants, the “kulaks” as they were disparagingly called, flourish more than elsewhere.

Stalin's reasoned wrath fell upon the kulaks. Considered class enemies, the peasant masses were stirred up against them. With summary trials and outright lynchings, they were then all deported to Siberia, Central Asia, and the Polar Circle. The “de-kulakization” campaign made almost 2 million Ukrainians disappear and was devastating for the economy. By 1931, the Soviet authorities accelerated collectivisation. Land yields collapsed. The Soviet authorities, rather than agricultural 'experts' sent brigades of agit prop. Tractor and farm machinery stations were propaganda centres rather than service providers for the peasants. Collectivisation was a great ideological intoxication and caused the end of an agricultural society in what had always been the “breadbasket of Europe”.

But the Kremlin never admitted any mistakes, the model had to work. So when the first statistics appeared showing harvests far below the quotas set by the plan, Stalin reacted by punishing the peasants en masse. Anyone was suspected of hiding grain. The political police entered house after house, with iron poles with which they inspected (and destroyed) the peasants' miserable wooden huts, seizing every single grain of wheat. The peasants themselves were left with nothing. No one could escape. A very strict system of internal passports was reintroduced. No one was even allowed to go to the cities. In times of natural famine, the cities starve, while the peasants always have something to eat. In an artificial famine, like the one caused by Stalin in the Ukraine, the

countryside died, while the cities received supplies from the central authorities, enough to feed workers and officials. Those who tried to enter the cities, in search of some food, were chased away or arrested, or bludgeoned and left to die. Cases of cannibalism multiplied. Hunger caused a collective madness. Testimonies of survivors remind us of people completely transformed, reduced to starvation or to a condition of ravenous automatons, desperate, ready for anything. The whole of Ukraine was filled with mass graves.

No accounting of the Holodomor exists. There are only demographic estimates ranging from 3 to 7 million dead. The most probable is 4.5 million victims in a single year. A similar slaughter, in size (although in proportion to the population it was much greater) would only be seen, half a century later, in Cambodia, another communist regime that summarily collectivised the countryside.

In the letter of objection sent to the Italian government by the Russian Embassy, we read the classic three arguments against the definition of “genocide”: the same famine affected not only Ukraine, but also Kazakhstan and southern Russia. It was not deliberate, but the result of “management errors on the part of the regional administrations of the agricultural areas of the USSR”. And finally it took place in “unfavourable climatic conditions of the early 1930s”. The first objection does not deny the genocidal character of the extermination by starvation in Ukraine. The Ukrainian population was deliberately targeted and, at the same time as the starvation, a purge of all local national cultural figures was unleashed, a process of violent “de-Ukrainization”. If anything, it is Kazakhstan and the Russians in the Kuban and North Caucasus regions who would have every right to reclaim the memory of their genocide, but no one can deny that the Ukrainians suffered it. The dynamics of the famine show that it was a deliberate act. Not only was relief not sent, but all possible aid was banned and all escape routes closed. So these were not “management errors”. Finally, the “unfavourable” weather conditions did not prevent harvests elsewhere, in the USSR and abroad, they only selectively affected agricultural areas subject to forced collectivisation. Too much to be a coincidence.

The Holodomor is not talked about much, precisely because the Stalinist regime conducted a systematic campaign of denialism in real time. It didn't just close off access to the famine areas, it went so far as to organise tours for selected journalists to areas where a completely artificial Soviet countryside had been created: fake villages, extras, a prosperity constructed to be shown abroad. Many fell for it, one journalist in particular promoted Soviet disinformation: the British (Pulitzer Prize winner) Walter Duranty. It is

still unclear how much he did not know or how much he pretended not to know. He later confessed to a British diplomat that he knew that the Ukrainian population had suffered up to 5 million deaths as a result of the famine. Someone who did know was the Italian consul in Kharkov (present-day Kharkiv), Sergio Guadenigo, who sent Mussolini true and timely reports of what was happening. However, even fascist Italy chose not to protest, not to react, at a time when relations with the USSR were relaxed. The only independent journalist who faithfully documented the horror of the Holodomor was another Briton, Gareth Jones. However, his articles were not followed up and were contested by his country's own journalistic community. Jones died just two years later, in 1935, in Manchuria. He took to his grave the shocking truth he had seen in Ukraine. 1933 was the year of Hitler's rise in Germany. After that, there was no more important topic for the international press. What little attention there was for what was happening in the USSR quickly died out.

The vote in the Senate can be seen as a belated act, it can be seen as an interested act to motivate Italian foreign policy on the war in Ukraine. But in the meantime it affirms a truth that has been denied for too long.