

HOLODOMOR MEDIA BRIEFING

Questions, Answers & Key Messages

Core Message

The **Holodomor was a genocidal famine deliberately inflicted by Stalin's Soviet regime on the Ukrainian population in 1932–1933**. It was not simply a famine caused by agricultural failure or natural conditions. Soviet policies of forced collectivization, confiscation of food, excessive grain procurement, punitive measures, restrictions on movement and the sealing of famine-stricken areas created conditions in which millions died.

The famine was also part of a broader Soviet assault on the Ukrainian nation, including the destruction of its political, intellectual, religious and cultural leadership.

Q: What is the Holodomor?

A: The Holodomor was a genocidal famine imposed by Stalin's Soviet regime on Ukraine in 1932–1933 that caused the deaths of millions of people.

The Ukrainian word **Holodomor** derives from words meaning hunger/starvation and death or extermination by hunger. It is commonly understood as “**death by starvation**” or “**murder by starvation**.”

The famine was not simply the result of poor harvests or natural disaster. Soviet authorities imposed extraordinarily high grain-procurement demands, confiscated food and livestock, conducted searches of households for hidden food, punished those who attempted to retain food for survival, and restricted the movement of starving farmers seeking food.

In January 1933, the Soviet government further restricted peasant movement from Ukraine and the Northern Caucasus. Villages were subjected to food blockades and other coercive measures. These policies intensified the mortality crisis.

At the height of the famine, demographic estimates indicate that approximately **28,000 people were dying each day in Ukraine**. (holodomorct.org)

The Holodomor must therefore be understood not merely as famine, but as **a man-made catastrophe produced by deliberate state policies and coercion**.

Q: What was the historical background leading up to the Holodomor?

A: To understand the Holodomor, it is important to understand Ukraine's struggle for national independence and the Soviet government's determination to consolidate control over Ukraine.

Following the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, Ukrainians established their own governmental institutions and, in 1918, proclaimed the **Ukrainian People's Republic**. Ukrainian forces fought Bolshevik forces during the ensuing revolutionary and civil wars, but by the early 1920s Soviet power had been imposed over Ukraine. The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic became one of the founding republics of the USSR in 1922.

During the 1920s, Ukraine experienced a remarkable cultural revival. Ukrainian language, literature, education, scholarship, theater and religious life expanded. This period is often referred to as the **Ukrainianization** or cultural renaissance of the 1920s.

By the end of the decade, Stalin's regime reversed this relative cultural opening. Ukrainian intellectuals, writers, clergy and political figures were arrested, imprisoned, executed or driven to suicide. Ukrainian cultural and religious institutions were dismantled.

At the same time, Stalin imposed forced collectivization on the countryside. Ukrainian farmers resisted the loss of their land, livestock, property and independence. Peasant resistance was widespread.

The Soviet leadership increasingly viewed Ukrainian national consciousness and resistance as a political threat.

The resulting assault therefore targeted not only agricultural production but the **social, political and cultural foundations of the Ukrainian nation**. (holodomorct.org)

Q: Why did Stalin and his regime deliberately starve millions of Ukrainians?

A: The Holodomor occurred within Stalin's broader campaign to destroy resistance to Soviet rule and to break the Ukrainian peasantry and Ukrainian national movement.

The Soviet government-imposed grain quotas that farmers could not meet without consuming their own food reserves. When quotas were not met, Soviet officials and Communist activists confiscated grain and other food from households.

Food searches became increasingly comprehensive. Authorities took not only grain but potatoes, livestock and other foodstuffs. Villages were placed on blacklists and subjected to restrictions that prevented food from entering.

In January 1933, Soviet authorities also restricted farmers from leaving Ukraine and the Northern Caucasus in search of food.

The notorious “**Law of Five Ears of Grain**” made the theft of collective-farm property punishable by severe penalties, including death. Even desperate attempts by starving farmers to obtain food could therefore result in arrest or execution.

The result was a situation in which people were surrounded by food-producing agricultural land but were prevented by the state from obtaining enough food to survive.

The evidence demonstrates that Soviet authorities knew that mass starvation was occurring and nevertheless continued policies that intensified it. Soviet leadership also used repression to prevent the population from escaping the famine and to suppress information about it. ([Encyclopedia of Ukraine](#))

Q: How many people died in the Holodomor?

A: There is no single universally accepted number because Soviet authorities deliberately concealed the famine, suppressed information about deaths, falsified demographic statistics and restricted access to evidence.

Scholars have produced different estimates depending upon the geographic boundaries, time period and demographic methodology used.

Modern demographic research has produced estimates of approximately **4 million famine-related deaths in Soviet Ukraine**, while other scholars and historical researchers have reached substantially higher estimates. Estimates of the total number of Ukrainians who died as a result of the Holodomor and associated Soviet policies have ranged from approximately **4 million to 10 million or more**, with some estimates reaching **10.5 million or higher**.

These differences should not obscure the central historical fact:

Millions of Ukrainians died as a result of Soviet policies during the Holodomor.

The difficulty of establishing an exact number is itself partly a consequence of the Soviet cover-up. Records were destroyed, altered or concealed, and discussion of the famine was suppressed for decades.

For this reason, we should not allow a debate over the precise number of victims to diminish the significance of the crime.

The Holodomor was devastating not only because of the number of people who died, but because of **who was targeted and what was destroyed**: Ukraine's rural population, families, communities, traditions and the social foundations of Ukrainian national identity.

Children were particularly vulnerable to starvation, and entire generations suffered the consequences.

Survivors also endured profound psychological trauma. For decades, Soviet authorities prohibited open discussion of the famine, even within families.

The Holodomor therefore inflicted damage that extended far beyond the immediate death toll. It altered the demographic, cultural and psychological fabric of Ukrainian society.

Q: Who was responsible for the Holodomor?

A: Joseph Stalin and the Soviet leadership were ultimately responsible.

The policies were implemented through the Soviet Communist Party and state apparatus at multiple levels.

Among the most prominent officials involved in implementing Stalin's policies in Ukraine were:

- **Stanislav Kosior**, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine;
- **Pavel Postyshev**, sent by Stalin to Ukraine in 1933 to enforce Soviet policy;
- **Lazar Kaganovich**, Stalin's close associate and senior Soviet official who played a major role in enforcing collectivization and grain procurement.

Thousands of Communist Party officials, activists, security personnel and local administrators participated in enforcing the policies.

Responsibility should therefore be understood as both **central and institutional**: Stalin was ultimately responsible, but the Holodomor required a vast state apparatus to implement the policies that caused mass death.

Q: Was the Holodomor a genocide?

A: Yes. Ukraine recognizes the Holodomor as genocide, and more than 30 countries have officially recognized it as genocide.

The genocide designation is supported by historical evidence concerning the policies imposed on Ukraine, the treatment of the Ukrainian peasantry, the simultaneous destruction of Ukrainian political and cultural leadership, restrictions on movement, confiscation of food and the Soviet leadership's knowledge of the resulting mass starvation.

Raphael Lemkin, the lawyer who coined the term “**genocide**,” analyzed the Soviet destruction of Ukraine as a genocide. In his 1953 presentation, he described the destruction of the Ukrainian nation as a Soviet genocide and identified the destruction of the Ukrainian intelligentsia, religious leadership, peasantry and national cohesion as interconnected elements of that assault. (holodomorct.org)

In **1988**, the U.S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine concluded that:

“Joseph Stalin and those around him committed genocide against Ukrainians in 1932–1933.”

The Commission's findings were submitted to Congress. ([The Library of Congress](#))

In **2006**, Ukraine formally recognized the Holodomor as genocide.

In **2018**, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives adopted resolutions recognizing the Holodomor and the findings of the U.S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine. ([Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov))

Today, **more than 30 countries recognize the Holodomor as genocide**. Because different organizations use somewhat different criteria for counting national recognitions, it is preferable in a media briefing to use “more than 30” rather than a potentially disputed exact number. ([National Museum of the Holodomor](#))

Q: What was the outcome of the Holodomor?

A: The Holodomor devastated Ukrainian society.

Millions died. Entire families and communities disappeared. Ukraine's rural population was traumatized and weakened, while much of its intellectual, political, religious and cultural leadership had already been destroyed through arrests, executions, imprisonment and deportations.

The Soviet regime subsequently facilitated the resettlement of people from other parts of the USSR into some of the villages devastated by famine.

At the same time, Soviet authorities intensified the suppression of Ukrainian language, culture and national institutions.

The result was not simply demographic loss. The Holodomor helped destroy the social structures through which Ukrainian national identity had been expressed and transmitted.

That is one reason the Holodomor remains relevant today.

Q: Why didn't anyone come to the aid of the starving Ukrainian people?

A: The Soviet government worked aggressively to conceal the famine.

Soviet authorities denied that a famine was occurring, restricted access to affected areas and suppressed information about the deaths. Foreign journalists and visitors were generally prevented from freely traveling through the worst-affected rural areas.

At the same time, the Soviet Union continued exporting grain and other agricultural products.

Nevertheless, some Western journalists and diplomats witnessed evidence of mass starvation. Most notably, **Gareth Jones** traveled through Ukraine and reported what he saw.

Others repeated or reinforced the Soviet narrative.

The most notorious example was **Walter Duranty**, the Moscow correspondent of *The New York Times*, who publicly minimized or denied the existence of mass starvation despite private communications acknowledging the severity of the situation.

Ukrainian communities outside the Soviet Union also attempted to raise the alarm. Ukrainian religious and political leaders, organizations and newspapers reported the famine and sought humanitarian assistance.

The Soviet government rejected or obstructed outside relief efforts.

The tragedy was therefore compounded by **denial, censorship and international indifference**.

Q: Why is the Holodomor relevant today?

A: The Holodomor demonstrates what can happen when an authoritarian regime treats a nation's identity, independence and resistance as threats to be eliminated.

The historical connection to Russia's war against Ukraine does not mean that the two periods are identical. The political and military circumstances are different.

But there are disturbing continuities in the methods used against Ukraine:

- denial of Ukrainian nationhood;
- suppression of Ukrainian language and culture;
- deportation and forced displacement;
- attacks on civilians;
- destruction of cultural institutions;
- propaganda and disinformation;
- attempts to control historical memory;
- and the use of hunger and destruction of food infrastructure as tools of war.

Russia's current war has also involved the forced transfer of Ukrainian children, attacks on civilian infrastructure and agricultural and food infrastructure, and systematic efforts to undermine Ukrainian identity.

The Holodomor therefore is not simply a historical subject.

It helps explain why Ukrainians view the survival of their national identity, language, culture and independence as matters of existential importance.

The broader lesson Ukrainians draw from the Holodomor is universal:

Starvation of civilians must never be used as a weapon, and the suffering of innocent people should never be ignored or denied.

HOLODOMOR MEDIA BRIEFING

KEY MESSAGES

THE CRIME

- The **Holodomor was a genocidal famine in Ukraine in 1932–1933.**
- Millions of Ukrainians died.
- The famine was created and intensified by **Soviet state policies**, not simply by natural causes.
- Soviet authorities confiscated food, imposed impossible procurement demands, restricted movement and prevented starving people from escaping famine areas.
- At the height of the famine, approximately **28,000 people were dying each day** in Ukraine. (holodomorct.org)

THE BROADER ASSAULT

- The famine was part of a broader assault on the Ukrainian nation.
- Ukrainian intellectuals, writers, clergy, political leaders and cultural figures were arrested, executed, imprisoned or deported.
- The Ukrainian peasantry was targeted through forced collectivization and the confiscation of land, property and livestock.
- The destruction of Ukraine's social and cultural leadership accompanied the destruction of its rural population.

THE DEATH TOLL

- Scholars have produced different estimates, ranging from approximately 4 million to 10 million or more deaths, depending on methodology and geographic and demographic definitions.
- What is not in dispute is that millions of Ukrainians died as a result of Soviet policies during the Holodomor.
- The Soviet government suppressed evidence and manipulated demographic records.
- **The exact number should never obscure the nature of the crime.**

RESPONSIBILITY

- **Joseph Stalin and the Soviet leadership were ultimately responsible.**
- Senior officials including **Stanislav Kosior, Pavel Postyshev and Lazar Kaganovich** played important roles in enforcing policy.
- Thousands of Communist Party and state officials participated in implementation.

GENOCIDE

- **Ukraine legally recognizes the Holodomor as genocide.**
- The **1988 U.S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine** concluded that Stalin and those around him committed genocide against Ukrainians. ([The Library of Congress](#))
- The U.S. House and Senate recognized the Commission's genocide finding in 2018. ([Congress.gov](#))
- **More than 30 countries** have recognized the Holodomor as genocide. ([National Museum of the Holodomor](#))

INTERNATIONAL DENIAL

- Soviet authorities denied the famine.
- Access to affected areas was restricted.
- Information about the famine was suppressed.
- Foreign journalists were sometimes prevented from seeing the worst-affected areas.
- **Gareth Jones** reported what they witnessed.
- **Walter Duranty** publicly minimized the famine and repeated Soviet claims.

WHY IT MATTERS TODAY

- The Holodomor teaches the world how **propaganda, repression, starvation and destruction of national identity can be used together against a people.**
 - Russia's current war against Ukraine has revived many of the same patterns of repression, disinformation, deportation and cultural destruction.
 - Remembering the Holodomor is therefore not only about the past.
 - It is about recognizing warning signs and preventing future genocides.
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SOUND BITES

“The Holodomor was not a natural famine. It was a man-made catastrophe created by Soviet state policies—and Ukrainians were deliberately denied the means to survive.”

“The Holodomor was genocide by starvation.”

“The Soviet regime did not simply take Ukraine's grain. It took away people's ability to survive.”

“The Holodomor was an assault on the Ukrainian nation—its farmers, its intellectuals, its religious leaders and its culture.”

“Stalin tried to break Ukraine by destroying its people and its national leadership. Ukraine survived.”

“The Holodomor teaches us that genocide does not begin with mass graves. It begins when a regime decides that a people has no right to exist as itself.”

“The Holodomor is not only a story about how millions died. It is a story about how Ukraine survived.”

“Memory is not about living in the past. It is about recognizing the warning signs of genocide before history repeats itself.”

“We remember the Holodomor because silence and denial protect perpetrators—not victims.”

ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

The Holodomor was the genocidal famine imposed by Stalin's Soviet regime on Ukraine in 1932–1933, in which millions died after the state confiscated food, restricted movement and used starvation alongside a broader campaign to destroy Ukrainian national, political and cultural life.

They tried to destroy the Ukrainian nation. They failed. Ukraine survived—and remembers.

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