
Stalin's Intention and Lemkin's Silence

Roundtable on Soviet Famines

ALEXANDER ETKIND

Can we distinguish between those historical events – wars, revolutions or man-made catastrophes – that were intentional and those that were not? Does this distinction matter, and in what way? Somehow the issue of intention has become central in the debates about the Ukrainian Famine. Writing her review in *The Guardian*, Sheila Fitzpatrick puts the question in the title: ‘Did Stalin Deliberately let Ukraine Starve?’. In this forum J. Arch Getty pronounces that ‘the question of *Holodomor* is a question of intention’. Since ‘we still do not have a single document directly stating [Stalin’s] motivations and intentions’ – we cannot blame him of this catastrophe. The historians of the Soviet Union cannot use the concept of genocide because the Soviet leaders did not articulate their intention to kill the millions of their compatriots.

But they were not that silent. Stalin and other leaders repeatedly said that they wished to exterminate their class enemies. When they were changing their definitions of these enemies, which also happened many times, they were very eloquent. But they also said that they were internationalists, believed in the free federation of equal republics within their country and supported democratic governance and political self-determination of these and other nations. They wrote or voiced many beautiful words about equality and freedom and justice – and killed many people for the sake of these words.

In their internal policies as much as in international affairs, Stalin and his comrades were skillful politicians whose words nobody took at face value. Their partners, for example, other politicians or diplomats, did not. Their subordinates, including local administrators or perpetrators, did not. Their victims, whether prisoners of the Gulag or peasants in the collective farms, did not. Believing that the statements of these personalities somehow might – directly or not – express, reflect or signify their intentions reveals a peculiar naiveté that is worthy of analysis.

In his speeches and essays Stalin said that he was fighting for peace, was going to liberate neighboring countries and promised to realise his five-year plans. With the possible exception of those Soviet scholars who were on his payroll, no historian mistook these statements for his intentions. This is not just an issue of political

suspicion; there is a logical problem as well. In relation to the *Holodomor* and other Soviet catastrophes, statements of intentions were clearly non-existent; we are talking not about trust in the statements of intentions but about trust in the absence of such statements. There is a meaningful asymmetry here. If I say, 'this is a stone', you can believe me or not, but you could check it. If I do not say, 'this is a stone', it does not mean that there are stones around, or that there are no stones. There is nothing to verify.

Holocaust Studies differentiates in a more sophisticated way between the functionalist and intentionalist explanations for the extermination of the Jews. Referring to a few statements of intention that Hitler and other top Nazi leaders produced over decades, intentionalists claim that the Holocaust was the realisation of their long-held desires. Functionalists, on the other hand, believe that these statements cannot explain the Holocaust; they feel that the event gradually developed from a series of technical solutions for functional problems of the regime. However, neither of these respected schools of thought deny Hitler's and his party's responsibility for the Holocaust. Such a move would be equal to Holocaust denial, which is a different story. This is because responsibility is not the same as intention, and intention is not the same as its public articulation. A political leader could wish certain effects of his policies or not, and could say it or not, but he is responsible for these effects, including the unintended ones.

Fitzpatrick states that 'what Stalin wanted was not to kill millions', even though he said many times that he wished to exterminate his social enemies, who were many. Instead, Stalin wanted to 'get as much grain out of them as possible'. He did not want to kill, he wanted to steal; it just so happened that he killed while stealing. Boldly, Fitzpatrick tries to help her case by the next statement: 'nobody knew how much [grain] it was possible to get without starving them [Ukrainians] to death and ruining the next harvest'. This 'nobody knew' is truly astonishing. Grain in Ukraine had been harvested, taxed and consumed for many centuries, and everyone concerned knew the subsistence level of the local peasants. If these issues were unknown to Stalin, he had many experts he could have turned to who could have indicated what was too much. Confiscating grain was not a technical but a political decision, a matter of priority. To claim ignorance on behalf of Stalin is definitely wrong – even more so than to speculate about his intention or the absence of such.

True, in Raphael Lemkin's classical definition of genocide, intention was important. Anne Applebaum demonstrates that the Soviet officials edited Lemkin's text of the UN Convention on Genocide in 1948 in the hope that the concept would not be applied to the events in the Soviet Union. It is important to understand, however, why Lemkin, with his lifelong determination to reveal and persecute the crime of genocide, gave up and accepted the modified text of the Convention. I see here just another realisation of a deeper, longer problem of Lemkin's intellectual itinerary that shaped the concept of genocide: his long-standing resistance to the inclusion of the Soviet mass murders, and specifically the Ukrainian famine, into his public consideration. As far as we know (I would be happy to learn that I am wrong), he broke this silence only in 1953, when he eloquently wrote about the

Soviet policies in Ukraine: 'this is not simply a case of mass murder. It is a case of genocide, of destruction, not of individuals only, but of a culture and a nation. . . . For the Soviet national unity is being created, not by any union of ideas and of cultures, but by the complete destruction of all cultures and of all ideas save one – the Soviet.' In this essay, he presented a big picture of the long genocide of the Ukrainians that, according to Lemkin's account, started in 1920 and ended in 1946. Lemkin estimated the losses of the *Holodomor* at five million; according to his analysis, this famine was a step in the long sequence of genocidal events that also included forced emigration, destruction of the intellectual elite, religious persecution and mass shootings of the people of Ukraine. Lemkin read this text as an address on 20 September 1953 at the Manhattan Center rally, which was held immediately after a protest march of American Ukrainians that marked the Famine's twentieth anniversary. There were 15,000 people present at the rally, and they applauded Lemkin's speech. The event was reported by the Ukrainian press in New York. But only in 2009 was the text of the speech finally published, by the Canadian scholar Roman Serbyn.

Why did Lemkin not publish this text himself? Moreover, why did he not say and write it all much earlier? I am convinced that the events in the Soviet Ukraine, and especially the Ukrainian famine, were the focus of his lifelong interest in genocide. Moreover, I submit that it was the Ukrainian famine that was the central but hidden – no doubt, intentionally so – case for Lemkin's development of the concept of genocide. While this forum discusses whether the Ukrainian famine was a genocide, I would claim that the very concept of genocide was elaborated in order to describe the Ukrainian famine.

Born as a Russian subject, Lemkin studied in Lviv and practiced law in Warsaw. During his lifetime his parents' farm near Vawkavysk in contemporary Belarus passed from the Russian Empire to Poland to the Soviet Union, and his home university in Lviv in contemporary Ukraine passed from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Poland to the Soviet Union. In Warsaw, the capital of the recently independent Poland that had just won the Polish–Soviet War (1919–21), he started his career as an expert on Soviet law. In 1926 he translated the Soviet penal code, in 1927 he published a study of the Soviet legislation of the crimes against the state and in 1938 a book on Soviet law. As Timothy Snyder demonstrated in his *Sketches from a Secret War*, when Lemkin was an attorney in Warsaw, both the Polish intelligence and the intelligentsia were highly interested in the news from the Soviet Ukraine, actively pursued information about the situation there and were well-informed about the catastrophic events of the collectivisation. An accidental survivor of the catastrophe whose parents remained in close proximity to its epicentre, a legal scholar with a particular interest in the Soviet law and a politically engaged intellectual, Lemkin knew about the Ukrainian famine. Moreover, he developed his concept of genocide, or the act of state barbarism, during or immediately after the Ukrainian famine. Although Anson Rabinbach in his 2005 work has discussed this fact, it has not received adequate attention. Lemkin's insistence on 1933 as the date of the original formulation of his concept of genocide sounds 'curious' to Rabinbach. But this date is meaningful if we see Lemkin's concept as growing out of the news from the starving Ukraine. Still, we need to explain Lemkin's

reasons for concealing this connection; even in his speech of 1953, which revealed his uniquely rich competence about the Soviet Ukraine, he did not acknowledge the Ukrainian impact on his old concept of 'genocide'. Why did he keep silent about the local origins of his global concept?

An author with big ambitions, Lemkin could believe that revealing the local roots of his concerns would disappoint the reader. Writing for the American audience, he preferred to emphasise the genocides that were better known to this audience and could evoke more sympathy for the victims – the Huguenot, Armenian or Jewish massacres. A pragmatic lawyer, Lemkin could feel that for his lifelong aim, the international acceptance of the law on genocide, it was better to suppress its roots in the Ukrainian experience. After the Second World War, the Soviet Union held a central role in the United Nations and other international organisations. Lemkin was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize many times, but he remained insecure and unemployed; financed by private funds, which are still unknown, he taught at Yale as an adjunct. In the US academia of the Cold War, demonstrating his anti-Soviet sentiments could only worsen his position. And as a survivor of the Holocaust, Lemkin was grateful to the Soviets for his personal salvation.

It is not the intention to kill but silence about the murder that should be the subject of this debate. Silence is not the same as ignorance; in fact, these two phenomena are opposite. Bakhtin, Heidegger and Derrida preferred silence in dark times. Some of these intellectuals pursued survival and some, career; silence about the most important issues enabled them to do or to say something else that they deemed possible and realistic. With his once broken silence about the Ukrainian famine, his lifelong project of the genocide law, and his failed ambition to teach both these subjects as an American professor, Lemkin belonged to this silent community. Silence is not the worst that happens to intellectuals; living a lie is.