

The Holodomor: combatting genocide denial through stratcom



WHAT WAS THE HOLODOMOR?

- From approximately 1930-1933, Josef Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union, announced a collectivisation plan to boost agricultural production by grouping private farms into state-owned conglomerates with set output types and quotas.
- The result was a disaster, leading to the violent persecution of private land owning farmers (dubbed 'Kulaks') and a famine that is believed to have killed up to six million people. In Ukraine, it would become known as the Holodomor (from the Greek: death by hunger).
- While the deaths and persecution of Ukrainians has not been disputed in genocide studies, there was debate as to whether it was part of a systematic campaign against Ukrainians that would mark it as a genocide.
- Evidence suggests that while Stalin may not have originally set out to starve Ukraine, it is almost certain that he used the famine as an opportunity to forcibly assimilate it and repress its national identity in order to prevent so-called "Ukrainian national counter-revolution".
- This, and the widespread characteristics of the campaign, match the Genocide Convention's definition of the term (see above). Despite this, Ukrainians have faced a long struggle for official recognition of the Holodomor.

THE DEFINITION OF GENOCIDE

The Genocide Convention defines genocide as "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group", including:

1. Killing members of the group;
2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
4. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
5. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

A 90 YEAR STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION AND THE THREAT OF GENOCIDE DENIAL

- The disinformation employed by the Soviet Union during the Holodomor reflects many of the tactics in the Kremlin's 'information-psychological operations' today. Diplomats acting as propagandists; doctored imagery to present a different reality; and the cooption of pro-Soviet agents and 'useful idiots' in the press to lend credibility.
- A succession of Soviet governments maintained formal denial that the Holodomor had occurred. Meanwhile, in Ukraine it was impossible to speak publicly about the Holodomor, discuss it openly, or teach it until the late 1980s.
- While authorities of the Russian Federation now admit that there was a famine, they continue to obfuscate its deliberate nature - part of a wider campaign by the Kremlin to whitewash Soviet crimes.
- The release of 'Mr Jones' (see right) - a film about the struggle of a western journalist to expose the Holodomor to the world - saw an outpouring of nationalist anger in Russia that denounced the film as "lies", while former Soviet citizens are shown to "simply not know the truth about the famine". This has largely been attributed to the Kremlin's "geology of lies".
- Throughout these years, activists and Ukrainian administrations have consistently pushed for recognition, with steady but undeniable success. After the onset of the Kremlin invasion of Ukraine, a growing number of states have started to recognise the Holodomor as a genocide.
- The Kremlin is hardly alone in genocide denial. The Chinese Communist Party continues to scrub any information regarding its ethnic repressions in Tibet and Xinjiang (2020 to present). Likewise, Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists Organisations (REMVEOs) actively pursue online campaigns of Holocaust denial.
- Genocide denial is an existential threat to international security. It foments a false sense of grievance among audiences that can be utilised for indoctrination by malign regimes and VEOs. Furthermore it allows malign regimes and VEOs to perfect disinformation operations domestically before deploying them internationally. This undermines public discourse (on which democracy relies) and can create pretexts for non-aligned governments to avoid joining international pressure against regimes.
- The key to counter-acting it, as proven by the Holodomor, is consistent and persistent challenging through a range of mediums.



Mr. Jones: the horrors of the Holodomor, witnessed by a Welsh reporter (Source: BFI). Trailer [here](#)

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THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN COMBATTING GENOCIDE DENIAL AND ENCOURAGING ATROCITY PREVENTION

- In his study of International Human Rights Pressure, Jamie Gruffyd-Jones identified several key variables that dictate the successful pressure of a campaign among domestic audiences of the target state. The same principles can be applied to genocide denial:
 1. **Where the pressure comes from** (i.e. who is the messenger) - If the main messenger is a figure from a perceived hostile force, it will convey less authority and credibility. By contrast, 'neutral' or 'positive' figures (e.g. respected domestic public figures) are more likely to encourage greater engagement and accepting of criticism.
 2. **What is under scrutiny** - The more sensitive the issue, the more pushback from a domestic audience it is likely to receive. genocide is a highly sensitive issue, the acceptance of which carries a legacy of guilt.
 3. **The form and presentation of the pressure** - Overly combative stances, while understandable in the case of genocide, can sometimes be counter-productive by encouraging psychological retrenchment. By contrast, a well laid out, evidence-based approach is shown to better hold audience attention and encourage engagement.
 4. **Who is implicated** - The legacy of guilt that genocide conveys often leads audiences to the mistaken implication that the whole of a society is guilty. Clearly implicating the prime initiators and implementers of the crime is shown to allow audiences to disassociate themselves from regimes and be more open to genocide acceptance and further criticism of regimes.
- One aspect that Gruffyd-Jones fails to identify is the medium of the presentation. Not all audiences consume information in the same way; it is effected by media ecology and story-telling cultures. Therefore the best way to deliver the message must include an understanding of people and culture as much as technology and political environment. Furthermore, such campaigns cannot be one way; engagement must be a two-way process to encourage lasting acceptance.
- Strategic Communications is critical in combatting genocide denial, but can also play an important role in atrocity prevention by creating platforms and forums for engagement. Doing so prevents the 'othering' of communities that can create potential spirals of recrimination and violence.
- On the UN's International Day for the Commemoration of Genocide, a war has been initiated against Ukraine based on denials of Ukrainian culture and statehood. At the same time, we live in an era of persistent misinformation and state-sponsored disinformation that distorts current genocides, while past genocides start to pass from living memory. With this in mind, it is more critical than ever to understand how to combat genocide denial.