



## Committee on Conscience

" Ukraine 1933: The Terror Famine"

Robert Conquest

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Delivered as part of the 1995 course

Genocide and Mass Murder in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Perspective

## **Introduction**

### **Lydia Perry:**

Tonight's program is the third of an eight part series: Genocide and Mass Murder in the Twentieth Century, An Historical Perspective. Tonight's talk, "Ukraine 1933: The Terror Famine," will be addressed by Dr. Robert Conquest.

It is my pleasure to introduce Dr. Conquest, senior research fellow and scholar-curator of the Russian CIS Collection at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. He has published works on Soviet history and international affairs including *The Harvest of Sorrow*, *Soviet Collectivization of Agriculture*, and *The Terror Famine*. He will discuss the Soviet man-made famine of 1932 to 1933 during which six to seven million people perished as a result of what Andrei Sakharov called Stalin's Ukrainiaphobia. He will take questions following the presentation.

### **"The Ukraine 1933; the Terror Famine"**

#### **Dr. Robert Conquest:**

The Holocaust Museum is being very generous and deeply humane in offering this series and the first thing to say, I think, is that the Jewish Holocaust was indeed unique as the only serious attempt to actually destroy an entire genetic or ethnic or religious group as done by the Nazis. But, of course, there are other massacres and they are criminal and they can be called 'genocide' depending on the definition.

There is a connection, an important one, between the Jewish and the Ukrainian massacres and that is in the person of Vasily Grossman, the Jewish Soviet author who was joint editor of the Soviet edition of the Black Book on Nazi crimes which didn't appear in the Soviet Union and was suppressed as being politically undesirable in the 1940's. It only came out a couple of years ago in Russian in Moscow. Grossman, whose mother died in the Nazi camps, was himself from Ukraine, a Jewish family in Berdichev, and his account of the Terror Famine and the collectivization which preceded it in a chapter in his book *Forever Flowing*, which is available in English in America, is, I think, the most clear and moving that has ever been written. He puts it in fictional form and I shall be quoting it several times.

Grossman would have been arrested in '53 if Stalin had lived another few months. He was down for being purged in the antisemitic terror of that time. And he died in the '60s, having written his master work, *Life and Fate*, about a later period, 1942 on, in which he directly compares the Nazi and Communist systems and gives moving accounts from the Nazi camps and from over the whole broad canvas of the war and the terrors in both countries.

He died believing that this book had been suppressed, that the KGB had got the only copy, and he died rather miserably thinking perhaps both his books but certainly his big one had fallen into the hands of the secret police and would never be seen again. By a stroke of luck a microfilm copy was brought out by the writer Voinovich and so it is available in the West. But it's sad to think of his

testimony to both Jewish and Ukrainian sufferings and that he did not survive to see himself justified and I'd like to dedicate this talk to his memory.

As Lydia Perry said, in the winter of 1932-1933, particularly in March '33, some seven million people are estimated to have died. (We'll go into the figures later. It's very difficult in all these genocidal cases to be absolutely exact.) Of these 7 million-odd 85 percent about were Ukrainian and almost all were peasants.

Now, how did this come about? To put it in its broadest form, the free peasantry, the individual peasant, were always thought by the communists to be incompatible with their idea of socialism. That goes right through the communist experience. And the Ukrainian national feeling was felt by Stalin to be incompatible in the long run with the unity of the Soviet Union. They were both right.

The free peasantry was indeed incompatible with their idea of socialism and, as you know, in the long run Ukrainian national feeling and other national feelings were indeed incompatible with the unity of the then Soviet Union, which is no longer, of course, a unity. Now, we want to deal separately to some extent with the matter of the peasantry against which the regime from the start was arrayed and of the Ukrainian nationality, which there was an earlier attempt to make use of which we'll come to later.

There is a unity between the two points, however, in that Stalin wrote, as the party's expert on nationalities before he came to power, that the national question is in its essence a question of the peasantry. And in a way he was quite

right. If you read about Eastern European history, for example, in Ann Applebaum's new book, you'll see how these new nationalities arose in Eastern Europe on the basis of, first of all, some intellectuals getting together with peasants who'd only thought of themselves as speaking a language or a dialect or coming from a certain area, but were thus gradually permeated by the "national" feeling based on the language they were actually using.

I want to go into the Ukrainian aspect later and deal first of all very briefly with the peasantry. The Bolsheviks started forming their impressions of what Russia should be like in the 1890's before the Bolshevik party formed and the early Leninists saw the peasantry as an individual class who could be used against the bourgeoisie but who were in the long run incompatible with socialism and you'll find a complete misunderstanding of what peasant life was like, what peasant feeling was like in this single word which Lenin and others more or less coined in the 1890s, "*kulak*." Now, "*kulak*" in those days, as used by the peasants, meaning fist, did not mean any peasant at all. It meant local moneylenders of whom there was one every two or three villages, perhaps.

When peasants were told that rich peasants were *kulaks* they answered no, they are just rich peasants. Lenin took this term of abuse and used it to say there is a class struggle in the villages between the richer peasant and the poor peasants. Of course, there was always minor friction between rich and poor, but the rich peasants were not all that rich and they were often the cousins of the poor peasants anyway.

But it became a dogma of the communists that in the countryside as well as in the towns the class struggle could be inflamed. And when they came to power in 1917-1918 they only had to legitimize the peasants' seizure of the land from the 200,000-odd landlords. That increased the peasants' share of the acreage to a very high proportion, around 90-something percent.

There were still about two million peasants who had an average of about seventy acres. That's to say -- small landlords you might almost call them. They were not regarded by the peasants themselves as landlords but they could be branded as rich peasants. They were all removed by the communists one way or another over 1917-18, 1919 at the latest.

The communists then, as you know, attempted, as Lenin put it, to bring in socialism straight away by what he described as a method of forcible requisition of the grain from the peasants to the amount needed for the cities.

This didn't work for several reasons, as you can imagine, and it resulted in peasant rebellion all over Russia, all over Ukraine, over the whole territory. Moscow, as one favored historian put it, was surrounded by a ring of peasant rebellion. We look at the Civil War, which was going on at the same time. That was quite small stuff in comparison -- it was more crucial in that if the White armies had captured Moscow that would have been a political decision, but these White armies never amounted to even 100,000 men, whereas the peasant rebellions went into millions and lasted much longer.

It's still difficult to say how many people perished in those rebellions, but there were five million fewer men than women in the census of 1926 and if you

leave out the two million who died in World War I that still leaves the Civil War and the peasants rebellion's three million men.

The famine of 1921 that inevitably followed was another matter; men and women died. It was the result of the requisitions, the faulty agricultural policy of the Lenin government, but it wasn't actually done on purpose. It was crazy but it hadn't got the *mens rea* of merely wishing to kill people. It was simply due to the total ignorance of economics and agrarian matters that marked the Communists. They thought they could get the product and they couldn't and, of course, although five million died in this famine many millions more were saved by American famine aid, which probably made a difference by another five or six million, saved five or six million lives.

Well, when all these disasters struck, the communist regime was on the point of disintegration marked particularly by the Kronstadt naval rebellion, in which, as Trotsky said, "the middle peasants spoke to us with naval guns," and one of their demands was that the persecution of the countryside should cease. And Lenin saw it was impossible to go on like this. Right almost to the last he said any free trade in grain will mean bringing back the bourgeoisie and the landlords. But he finally saw that if he didn't give way on that the regime was bound to fall one way or another. And he brought in the temporary New Economic Policy, which allowed free trade, reasonably free, in grain.

The communist regime had retreated to lick its wounds but had retained power and retained control over industry, and so far, had made a temporary halt in the attempt to control the countryside.

Now, if we turn to the nationality side a fairly similar move took place at this time. There were three attempts to impose Bolshevik rule on Ukraine. At first there was Lenin's idea that Ukraine was not a separate nation. In fact one of the leading secret police chiefs shot people in the streets of Kiev for speaking Ukrainian. But by the third time it had become obvious to Lenin and his whole group that it was necessary to make some sort of compromise. The whole country was against the takeover and the only way of softening it was to incorporate Ukrainian culture, to try and turn it into a socialist version of Ukrainian culture.

Ukraine had had its own culture and its own church and everything until the Russian annexation at the end of the 18th century, after which such institutions were suppressed. The language was suppressed as a literary form. You weren't allowed to print in Ukrainian by the last half of the century, and it looked as though, and Lenin believed, that Ukrainian had become simply a peasant dialect of Russian.

And then came this resurgence of the Ukrainian nation, pretty much paralleling other resurgences which were taking place on the Balkans and elsewhere, and by the time of the revolution the Ukrainian nation had re-emerged. And Lenin and the Bolsheviks of the '20s were finally forced to see this, and they thought, we can make peace with the Ukrainian nation on the principle that they accept communist rule. And they even allowed members of the old Ukrainian independent government, which had flourished in the Civil War period, to come back and take places in new administration, which was not done

in Russia, for example. Of course, Ukraine regaining its nationality did not prove an easy morsel.

So we approach 1929 on both fronts, as it were, with a certain element of peace. A retreat had been made both as against the peasantry and as against the nationalities. But in '29-'30 the questions rose again, first with the peasantry, can the regime call itself socialist if we do not destroy or reduce the last hostile class, the last class incompatible with the idea of the socialist method?

Stalin and his party wanted to create a state in which everything is run by the party: partly on socialist principles, partly, I think, just control for its own sake. What they ended up with was control both of the individual and of the crop, when they collectivized.

Collectivization in 1929-1931 had two aspects. First of all, there was the *dekulakization*, the deportation not only from Ukraine but from the whole Soviet Union of those who were now *kulaks*. By this time these were people with three cows and twenty acres.

They were in no real sense an exploiting class. But they were denounced as an exploiting class. They were denounced as Grossman says in terms of witch hunting and demoniac possession, of hysteria that prevailed through the party, partly, I think, because Stalin and the leadership felt that collectivization could not be carried out unless the peasant leadership, the strong men of the village, were crushed.

And the deportation of the "*kulaks*," which affected Ukraine more than most other parts, was a very brutal act. We still don't know the figures on this

exactly but at any rate a minimum of five million were deported from their homes and sent to the Arctic and some of them escaped and others died and others survived for the time being. Well, naturally they were sent to places which hadn't been farmed before because they weren't very farmable and the deportees were stuck on the Tundra. They started dying by the tens of thousands.

This was an extremely brutal operation carried out by communists from the towns called twenty-five thousanders who were sent to run the villages. I've got a quotation from Grossman about the *kulaks* and about the atmosphere in the villages at this time. He said, "They would threaten people, calling small children *kulak* bastards, screaming blood suckers. They sold themselves on the idea that the *kulaks* were pariahs, vermin. They wouldn't sit down at a parasite's table. The *kulak* child was loathsome, the young *kulak* girl lower than a louse. They looked on the *kulaks* as cattle, swine, loathsome, repulsive. They had no soul. They stank. They all had venereal diseases. They're enemies of the people. There was no pity for them. They're not human beings. What were they -- vermin."

Grossman goes on to make the analogy with the Nazis and the Jews. He said, "Who thought up the word '*kulak*'? What torture was meted out to them? In order to massacre them it was necessary to proclaim *kulaks* are not human beings just as the Germans proclaim the Jews are not human beings; thus, did Lenin and Stalin proclaim *kulaks* are not human beings."

That's Grossman's account of the feel in the villages at that time and, of course, those who were deported were not only the more prosperous. There

was a category called sub-*kulak* under which anybody could be counted in as a *kulak* and be deported.

Priests counted as exploiters on the grounds that they didn't work in the field -- but the party officials who were doing the same sort of thing did not count as exploiters. This was a huge part of the collectivization, which as you know took place January 1930. By March 1930 a very high proportion, in particularly in Ukraine and the south, had been collectivized. That is to say the peasant had lost his land. He'd lost control of the crop. The crop henceforth went into the barns which were under the control of the communist appointee and watch towers were set up in the fields over the main grain areas.

This didn't work. Within three months, according to figures published in Stalin's time, 26,000,000 cows were slaughtered by the peasant rather than let them be taken over by the state. The then commissar for agriculture, Chernov, said that for once in their wretched lives the Russian peasantry has eaten all the meat it wanted, a rather sour comment, and that applied to sheep as well. This is something like 42 percent of the total cattle in the Soviet Union and, as I said, that's the official figure at the time. It's probably higher still.

The horses were not eaten but let go wild. Their hides were sold for leather and so on and so on. And so by March 1930 the countryside was in a state of total disaster and at this point they retreated to Moscow again. The government allowed the collective farmers, the peasants, to leave. They almost entirely left the collective farms, but over the next few years, the next year in fact, different pressures were applied.

The peasants who had left the farms were not given their own land back. They were given marshes and such. Taxes were put upon them. They were gradually put under stronger pressure and more people who went into the cities were forced back into the collective farms over a period of about a year and a half. And, of course, many more of them were now discovered to have been *kulaks*. There were two other waves of deportation to the North.

So that's the situation which faces us on the run-up, as it were, to the famine. You may say, was there any resistance? The answer is yes, there were many risings, a great deal of fighting, and there was a great deal of resistance from within the communist party from the local level. They didn't want to see their villages ruined. They were expelled in a big way.

There is now a lot more information coming out about the number of rebellions which turns out to be a good deal higher than I suggested in my book on the subject, and there were in addition these curious "women's rebellions," where the women would go and prevent the communists carrying out certain measures. It was very difficult to get Russian soldiers or police to beat up women in those days. They learned how to later but those days they still had remnants of bourgeois feeling.

But you also found not only the lower level party but some of the higher level becoming much agitated by what they had to do. Isaac Deutscher, who was traveling in the Ukraine at the time, was sitting next to a senior secret police officer who broke down and said, "I was an old Bolshevik. I fought in the Civil War but did I do that so that I could surround villages with machine guns and

shoot down peasantry? Oh, no, no, no," he cried, and that was a feeling among much of the party. So the decent members of the party were getting thrown out, usually purged later, and the others, not unnaturally, became worse.

One of the stated aims of the collectivization was the destruction of Ukrainian nationalism's social base, individual land holdings, and that was one of the lessons Stalin took from the collectivization struggle, that he was having a great deal of trouble in Ukraine and Kuban, the other side of the Sea of Azov, which was also in those days Ukrainian-speaking, and to some extent on the Don and the lower Volga.

Andrei Sakharov spoke of Stalin's Ukrainiophobia and Khrushchev says the same thing. Khrushchev says, you may remember, that after the second war Stalin wanted to deport all the Ukrainians like he had the Chechens, but there were just too many of them. I don't know why that should have inhibited him but apparently it did.

So we come into 1932. And it shows how broad and ghastly some of these things are, when just as a footnote, almost, to put in the Kazakh famine of early '32. In fact more Kazakhs in proportion died than in any of the other of these events, certainly a million, probably more like a million and a half.

This was again not a planned operation, not as far as we know intended to kill these Kazakhs. They were nomads driving their herds and on purely dogmatic, doctrinal grounds, Moscow tried to settle them down into villages, agricultural villages. Well, in their area you can't carry out agriculture and they were settled with nothing to eat, no way of growing anything, and they died, as I

say, by the million. And that was a piece of criminal lunacy rather than a more planned effort: a thing one can only refer to in passing in the midst of other events.

Then in late '32 you get the beginning of the terror-famine proper. The crop was not good but it wasn't disastrous. Stalin transferred the highest proportion of requisition to Ukraine and the Kuban, and the lower Volga, and it's been estimated that if he had spread it levelly over the Soviet Union there would have been enough crop to prevent any famine anywhere. They were living in misery, of course, the peasantry everywhere, but there was not the question of mass starvation until it was artificially imposed on Ukraine and Kuban.

And in the middle of 1932 the Ukrainian Communist leadership said the plan is impossible. And there was a great deal of negotiation. Everybody complained, not only the Ukrainian leadership, the communist leadership, but also the economists concerned and all the people on the actual farms. And Stalin then said it is your duty. You are members of the parties. Do what you are told.

And they went and proceeded to do what they were told. By October or November the grain had all been gone. There wasn't any left. They'd asked for more grain than existed. There was already starvation in October-November and, again, there was some attempt to prevent the implementation of the plans. Stalin then reinforced the secret police service in the Ukraine, replaced many of the top party and police officials, purged about half of the district party secretaries, and insisted on more grain.

At this point you get these scenes in the villages where “brigades,” as they were called, would come around with probes on shafts of steel plunging them into the floors of all the village houses and the roofs trying to find the alleged hidden grain, the grain that had allegedly been stolen by the peasantry. The argument was that the peasantry had the grain and that they were activated by nationalism and by being *kulaks* into keeping it. By this time there was no grain left.

This went on over the period until April or May. No food was left in the villages at all and some whole districts were blockaded officially. It was published. No help of any sort should go into them, no goods of any sort, until they produced grain they didn't have. And meanwhile the rural population starved and I don't want to labor the human side of it because I think you all have some notion of these families dying one by one and attempting to swarm away.

There is said to have been up to three million people on the move trying to find better places. They were blockaded from going to the North. They weren't allowed into Russia proper when there was more food. They weren't allowed into the cities, where there was a little food. Some of them still got through to Kiev and other cities and they could be seen crawling on the roads dying with their babies in their arms and so on. Grossman says only one in a thousand managed to get to Kiev and even there they “found no salvation.” This was a very horrible type of death. Grossman adds, “When they couldn't get anything they'd crawl back to their houses and that means that starvation has won.”

He has some interesting things to say about other points. Every village had, as in the Black Death, carts sent around for the dead every morning and there were various attempts to get food. People in the Catholic villages, and there weren't many of those, would dig up the bodies of their former landlords and find rings on them, for example. There are hundreds of little stories like that. And by about February all the cats and dogs had been eaten and they were living on nettles and sorrel and things like that which don't provide much nutriment.

There was cannibalism. This was partly cannibalism in families, partly criminals kidnapping children, selling their bodies and so on. Again, I don't want to go into the ghastly detail but merely to say what sort of thing that was happening. But I can't forebear to read one of Grossman's points where he is saying that it had very different effects on different people. He says in the houses sometimes hatred would prevail, but sometimes they remained loving. He said people noticed that when there was hate people died more quickly, yet love, for that matter saved no one from later dying.

I wanted to go into the question of the figures. It's not very easy to get the figures for the famine as such but it is fairly easy to get the figures for the number who died prematurely between 1930 and 1937, that's to say including the dead of the *kulak* deportations. And that is fairly easy because we know the census taken in 1937 which was suppressed at the time, and the census board shot as spies for allegedly reducing the population of the Soviet Union.

They came to 162,000,000, for the whole Soviet Union, and it should have been about 178 or 179. It was a deficit of about 15, 16 million according to some

Soviet scholars. That doesn't mean all deaths because it includes the unborn. Naturally, there was a great falling off in the birth rate. When people are starving they're not producing children, though there are certain complications there because the Soviet method of counting births and deaths was never very full and they weren't registering in the famine areas. They didn't register between October 1932 until probably the spring of the next year and the child who was born and died didn't count to have been born or died so that adjusts the figures a bit.

Nevertheless, working on figures of other similar periods when the birth rates went down for similar reasons we can probably reckon that about 4 million of this figure account for unborn children. So we come to a figure of something like 11 million perished in between '30 and '37 in the villages or in exile in the North or in the labor camps and so on.

The probability that 7 million of those were accounted for by the famine is really due to deducting figures of the presumed deaths in the Kazakh region and in the deportation regions at about 4 million so we get a probable figure of 7 million. That's usually divided as 5 million in Ukraine, a million in the Kuban, then also Ukraine even though at this time they suppressed the Ukrainian language and turned the Ukrainian schools into Russian schools in the Kuban. And another million elsewhere, mostly in the lower Volga, which was also under similar pressures, not so great. Of these 7 million dead it is reckoned that about 3 million were children.

The other result of the famine and the collectivization was, as Bukharin, a leading communist, put it, it resulted in a further brutalization of the party. And as Pasternak put it, collectivization was a failure as well as a mistake. To conceal the failure people had to be cured by every means of terrorism of the habit of thinking and judging for themselves and forced to see what did not exist, to assert the very opposite of what their eyes told them, and hence, he says, the extreme viciousness of the terror of 1937-1939 which followed.

Now, this suppression of the truth, I think, is the crucial point in what led to what the Soviet Union ended up as for the last 50 years. There were two Soviet Unions, the real one, wonderful figures, wonderful population, wonderful production, happiness, workers waving banners, and the other one, the misery and terror. And when you come to the famine it was actually illegal to talk about it, to use the word "famine" or "starvation" even in the famine areas. Anybody who said that was accused of spreading Hitler's propaganda. People who were actually seeing people dying and said they're starving, were arrested.

This was reported on the spot by Arthur Keestler in Kharkov at the time. A blanket of silence was over the country. And of course, this also affected the image abroad. Not only the Soviet press but Soviet diplomacy denied that there was any famine at all. They didn't say that it was an accidental famine. They said it hadn't happened. Some correspondents, Western correspondents, gave very good reports. The truth was available. But others were twisted or bribed and reported that there wasn't a famine or not much of a famine. And there were denunciations of Western newspapers that did report it, saying that they were

trying to distract attention from the misery of the workers in their own country and so on. And so, as George Orwell said, some British intellectuals in England, for example, managed to be unaware of “huge events like the Ukraine famine.”

Some academics said I hadn't proved that Stalin was responsible. Well, we knew that he'd been told about the famine. He'd been told there would be a famine. He was told there was a famine by many of his leading figures and he went on extracting the grain. But they say there's no proof that the state was involved except indirectly.

Well, since I wrote there are several proofs. There's a document recently published in Russia -- a top secret order to the secret police of the Ukraine and Kuban on the one hand and the territories north of them on the other, saying the police are to intercept any peasants that try to go north for food. And in fact another document shows that over 200,000 peasants were in fact arrested coming from Ukraine northwards. That's signed by Stalin and Molotov. It shows clearly the state was involved directly in manipulating the famine.

The other thing is that we knew that at the time, though it's variously estimated, but at least one and a half million tons of grain were exported to the West to purchase various things. There was also a grain reserve kept in theory in case of emergencies like war, certainly at least as much again. You can work out for yourself that this would have saved the lives of everybody who died over that period.

So we're still in the position of learning about these economically disastrous, psychologically disastrous, and humanely disastrous events. I think

that these massacres all differ from each other. This is not the same as the Holocaust. It's not the same as the Cambodian slaughter. It was done in a more subtle way and one of the points that I think worth mentioning, as I said, quite a number of non-Ukrainians died. A percentage of the deaths were elsewhere and, of course, people in Ukraine who were not Ukrainians. There were Jewish villages. There were Russian villages. They died, too.

So some argued that Stalin wasn't picking on Ukrainians if he killed some Russians as well. That reminds me very much of the Doctor's Plot in 1952-1953, when, as you know, Stalin was launching his antisemitic terror and people said oh, not all the doctors were Jewish. Perfectly true. He arrested some gentile doctors as well. Stalin was a careful faker. He was not someone who would make himself look responsible for anything and his responsibility for the famine is now absolutely clear and I think accepted by everybody except maybe there are some Stalinists who don't accept it – though a really logical good Stalinist should, I suppose.

It shows how ruthless he was to obtain what he thought were his ends. And this is the awful thought that the motivations of the people who carried out these horrors are even more horrifying in some way than the actual physical sufferings.