

Medvedev's Refusal To Attend Famine Commemorations Worsens Already Poor Relations

Ukraine's relations with Russia have deteriorated to their lowest level in two decades, with *Zerkalo Nedeli* (November 22) stating that the Russian authorities and society have never been as negatively disposed toward Ukraine as now, even during the Orange Revolution. The deterioration has taken place not only in the traditional areas of energy (with another gas war looming), the Black Sea Fleet, NATO membership, and the status of the Russian language, but also in attitudes toward the past.

The latest deterioration in relations came during the week in which Ukraine held official commemorations for the 75th anniversary of the artificial famine in 1933. Russian President Vladimir Medvedev refused to attend the commemoration, which was attended by 44 delegations, including four EU leaders.

Medvedev's refusal was condemned by President Viktor Yushchenko and the Ukrainian intelligentsia in a protest statement (www.korrespondent.com.ua, November 20). Ukraine's Ambassador to Russia and Foreign Minister of the Party of Regions Kostyantyn Hryshchenko expressed widespread disappointment over Russia's refusal to denounce even the Stalinist crimes and famine that took place on Russia's own territory. "Until this topic was raised by Ukraine, nobody in Russia or other post-Soviet republics raised it," Hryshchenko said (www.pravda.com.ua, November 19).

On October 26 Russia's RTR television network broadcast a report that distorted the famine and Yushchenko's publicizing of it. The program alleged that the famine issue was dreamed up in the 1980s by Cold war Warriors, such as U.S. President Ronald Reagan, and implemented by their supporters, such as Katia Chumachenko (now the Ukrainian First Lady). The purpose, RTR alleged, was to sow enmity between Ukrainians and Russians. Ukraine's campaign to call attention to the famine has "become deeply politicized" and the genocide concept "is based on narrow nationalism," Russian political technologist Sergei Markov claimed. The SBU was giving a falsified interpretation and making a subjective analysis of real documents," Markov said (www.pravda.com.ua, November 17, 22).

Ukrainian authorities have faced two difficulties in raising the issue of the famine.

First, although 13 countries—including six post-communist states, Canada, and Australia—have supported Yushchenko's call for the famine to be defined as "genocide," most countries still remain reluctant to use this definition. The 17th session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the European Parliament voted in July and October, respectively, to recognize the Ukrainian famine; but both refrained from describing it as

“genocide.”

The U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill on September 23 to commemorate the famine but used the word “genocide” carefully, citing the U.S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine, formed on December 13, 1985. The U.S. resolution pointed to the October 13, 2006, Public Law 109-340 that authorized Ukraine, “to establish a memorial on Federal land in the District of Columbia to honor the victims of the Ukrainian famine-genocide of 1932-1933.”

Russian officials gloated over the lack of support from the UN General Assembly in September, when Yushchenko outlined Ukraine’s case for the body to acknowledge the famine as genocide. Yushchenko described the famine as a genocide accompanied by the “total elimination of the national elite, public leadership, and priesthood” (www.president.gov.ua, September 23).

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued that the UN was “not the venue for pushing through biased and distorted views of historical events” (www.mid.ru, September 24). Russia’s Permanent Representative to the UN Vitaliy Churkin said that the October 23 statement on the famine by Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) did not contain a grain of truth. It was a “unique diplomatic document” that “contradicts the real state of affairs.”

Ukraine’s MFA had condemned Russia’s UN delegation for using “pressure and blackmail” to stop the famine from being discussed at the UN (www.pravda.com.ua, October 29). Ukraine’s (MFA) had earlier condemned Russia’s unwillingness to support Ukraine’s condemnation of the famine, pointing to November 2003 when Russia had supported a UN resolution on the “70th anniversary of the Ukrainian tragedy” and two years later when Russia backed a UNESCO resolution “commemorating victims of the great famine [*Holodomor*] in Ukraine in 1932 and 1933” (www.mfa.gov.ua, September 29).

Second, the number of victims continues to be debated. Yushchenko always uses the figure of 10 million deaths, making it “one of the greatest humanitarian catastrophes in the world” (www.pravda.com.ua, November 20). Yushchenko included the famine with Russification and deportations to Siberia as part of a package of repressions aimed at destroying “our culture, our identity, and our strivings to be an independent country” (www.pravda.com.ua, November 20).

Ukrainian and Western academic studies give lower estimates of 2.6 to 5.2 million deaths with most citing between 3 and 3.5 million. Added to this should be the one million Ukrainians who died in the Kuban region of the northern Caucasus, which destroyed Ukrainian identity in the area.

The “10 million” figure is, in fact, the demographic loss rather than the death toll and ignores the calculations of Ukraine’s foremost scholar in the field, Stanislav Kulchytsky, who arrived at an estimate of 3,238,000 deaths (see John Paul Himka in *The Kyiv Post*,

May 15). The overwhelming majority of the famine victims were Ukrainians (despite Chernomyrdin's protestations), as the famine devastated the countryside. Russians and other non-Ukrainian ethnic groups populated the urban centers.

The famine has become another of the many issues contributing to poor Ukrainian-Russian relations. On May 15, 2003, the Ukrainian Parliament issued a strong condemnation of the famine as being directed against Ukrainians and called for international recognition of the *Holodomor*. Although the issue has been raised by all three Ukrainian presidents, Yushchenko alone has been accused by the Russians of nationalism for raising the issue of the famine. The fact that Russia is fiercely antagonistic to the famine issue today, in contrast to five years ago, says more about the speed of Stalin's rehabilitation in Russia than it does about Ukraine. Yushchenko's call to Medvedev jointly to "condemn Stalinist crimes and the totalitarian Soviet Union" will never happen while Putinism continues to rejuvenate Stalinism.

—*Taras Kuzio*