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**The Great Famine of 1932-33
A Symposium**

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‘Australia and the *Holodomor*: 50 Years of Remembrance’

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When the post-war Ukrainian migrants landed in Australia between 1948 and 1952 they came with baggage they couldn't leave behind. They had fled Stalin's Soviet Union. Their country continued to be occupied by a foreign power, and the families they left behind continued to be persecuted and sometimes executed. In many cases they themselves had been removed from their homes by the Nazis, packed into railway cars containing nothing but straw, and sent to Germany as slave labourers. Some had survived both Stalin and Hitler.

They had a story to tell the citizens of their adopted country: about what had happened to their own country under thirty years of Soviet rule; about the millions who had died in the labor camps; had been shot in remote forests or been buried in parks and playgrounds; and of those who had died an excruciatingly slow death by starvation in the Great Famine of 1933.

The Great Famine, or "Holodomor" as it has come to be called in Ukraine, was and continues to be seen as the single greatest crime of Stalinism – a crime that was committed primarily, though not exclusively, against the Ukrainian nation. That single word fully conveys the catastrophe, as it means literally "murder by starvation."

In 1953, the year of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation, the young Ukrainian migrants had barely filtered back into the capital cities after spending time in the DP camps at Woodside, Bonegilla and Bathurst. Most had just completed two years of work in the interior to pay back the cost of the fare from Europe. Ukrainian community life was still in its infancy, and the forerunner of the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations (AFUO) had just been established. However, a federal committee was formed under the chairmanship of Mr Fedir Melnykiw, to coordinate the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Holodomor (Boliukh, 1966, p.232).

The date set for the Australia-wide demonstrations was Sunday, 28 June, 1953, and significant effort was put into the preparation of what was termed "propaganda materials". Over 35,000 leaflets were to be handed out to the Australian population, and 5,500 copies of one 8-page brochure were printed. The brochures had titles such as: "Tragic anniversary," "Ukrainians commemorate an anniversary," "Systematic murder of Ukrainians by Russia" and "Soviet genocide in Ukraine." It was also in 1953 that a book edited by S.O. Pidhainy, and titled, *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin: A White Book*, was published in Canada by The Ukrainian

Association of the Victims of Russian Communist Terror; and the Democratic Organization of Ukrainians Formerly Persecuted by the Soviet Regime. Running to 1,250 pages in two volumes, it contained numerous eye-witness accounts of the 1933 Famine. In Australia, copies were gifted to public and university libraries only to gather dust on the shelves, or worse still, the compactus. There they would have to be “discovered” by a reader, since they were not set down as prescribed reading in university courses.

Dressed in heavy coats to guard against Melbourne’s winter chill and arranged in neat and orderly columns, 3,000 Ukrainians marched past Victoria’s Parliament House on the appointed day, and around the same number marched to the Domain in Sydney. In Adelaide the demonstration began in Victoria Square. Around 1,500 marched down King William Street to a service held in front of the War Memorial on North Terrace.

Writing 13 years later, Iuryi Havryshkevich (1966, p.414) lamented that the “demonstration took place on a Sunday, when the streets of Adelaide are deserted... Along the whole route, we were seen by 50 or 60 people. The following day only one newspaper mentioned the march with a few lines of text.” They could not understand why their demonstration should be relegated to a few lines of text, when the picture of a cat licking a tap occupied the front page of the same paper. According to AFUO public affairs director Oleksander Prestashevsky (1957), it was due to the fact that “intelligent Australians are not educated about Ukraine” and “the Australian press is closed to us.” Nevertheless, he went on (Prestashevsky, 1959) to set out the “mission statement” of the community as: “(1) to defend the interests of ‘Australians of Ukrainian origin’; (2) to inform the Australian public about the Ukrainian nation’s struggle for independence; and (3) to fight Communism as the enemy of the Ukrainian people.”

Over the next 30 years, the story of the Holodomor would, along with the Ukrainian dissident movement of the 1960s to 1980s, constitute a major part of the “information” offered to the wider Australian public in that “fight.” However, in the case of the Holodomor, the campaign was not sustained in between the commemorations taking place at each five or ten-year anniversary.

In 1963, at the 30th anniversary, the Ukrainian community was still heavily focused on the famine commemoration. In Sydney it was held in March, in the form of a public meeting that was attended by members of

the federal parliament (Iaskevych, 1966, p. 309). However, the 1973 anniversary was overshadowed by the latest developments in Ukraine. In 1972, the so-called “general pogrom” had taken place in Ukraine. The KGB had arrested hundreds of Ukrainian intellectuals and human rights activists, and the emphasis switched to commemorations, on 10 December each year, of the anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

For a number of reasons, the major turning point in international and - by extension - Australian, recognition of the Holodomor was the commemoration of 1983, which resonated with increasing pitch, right up to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the declaration of an independent Ukrainian State in 1991.

First, this was to be the 50th anniversary of the tragedy, a round number that had its own significance and focused people’s attention. Second, it coincided with the maturity of the generation of people of Ukrainian origin, who had been born or at least had grown up and been educated in the West. This was particularly significant in the United States, which hsets an agenda that is influential throughout the West, including Australia. As these people, who included educators, academics and journalists could “speak the language,” they were better able to supply the tools of modern media and communications, including well presented press kits and education materials for schools. For the first time, the Ukrainian Famine commemorations were coordinated world-wide.

A third important factor was the “legitimisation” of the 1933 Famine by the publication of a major monograph, *The Harvest of Sorrow*. Although finally published in 1986, the project was begun in 1980 by the Ukrainian Studies Fund, and was carried forward by the Harvard Ukrainian Studies Institute, which appointed sovietologist, Professor Adam B. Ulam, to nominate an author.¹ That author was the highly regarded scholar, Robert Conquest, of the Hoover Institute, and his junior collaborator was Dr. James Mace, who had recently completed a Ph.D. on Ukraine in the 1920s at the University of Michigan.

The 50th anniversary was coordinated by an Australia-wide committee chaired by Adelaide-based Mr Teodosi Andrushko. An “Australian Honorary Committee Commemorating the Ukrainian Famine Holocaust” was formed. It had 17 members, with several academics, including Marxist scholar Dr Agnes Heller, senators Lajovic, Missen, and Teague,

¹ Ukrainian Weekly (1982).

and Federal MPs Alan Cadman, Bruce Lloyd and Philip Ruddock. By contrast, Senator Olive Zakharov took the trouble to write back to Mr. Andrushko to inform him that in her opinion such a commemoration is “irrelevant to Australians.” In July 1983, Bob Santamaria’s *News Weekly* magazine published a centre-spread on “The Great Ukrainian Famine” by Andrew Pyrcz, which had been reprinted from the *Australian-Ukrainian Review*.

In the *Weekend Australian* of 8-9 October, Peter Day (1983) reported on the commemorations in Washington, announcing that, “Next Saturday, Australians will hold a day of remembrance for those who died in that terror.” On October 15, 1983, around 2,000 people from all over Australia marched from the National Library to the steps of Old Parliament House, where AFUO Chairman Jurij Denysenko addressed them. Then they marched to the Soviet Embassy, where the crowd stood on the wide nature strip. Black robed pallbearers carried seven coffins - each representing a million victims of starvation. Against the high embassy fence stood a large police cordon.

The demonstrators standing on the nature strip were addressed by Dr. Nina Strokata. She was a dissident, microbiologist and human rights campaigner from Odessa, who had spent most of the 1970s and 1980s incarcerated in the Soviet Gulag. As she concluded her emotional address, someone called out the idea of depositing the coffins in the front yard of the embassy. A cheer went up as seven “rugby teams” lurched forward across the road, to be met by blue uniformed defenders. In the excitement an elderly Canberra resident and Polish Solidarity Movement activist, Mr. Alexander Chmeil, collapsed with a heart attack. Unfortunately, he died despite prompt medical attention from one of the demonstrators, Dr Lev Havryliv of Sydney.

The scene was a confused tangle of people: ranging from young children to the elderly, police and television camera crews. My recollection is that most of the coffins were deposited in the embassy grounds, with at least one being an “assist” in which a young police officer helped an elderly woman with the final push. Never before had a Ukrainian issue captivated the Australian media as during the next three days, in which television news, radio commentaries and newspaper articles on the Canberra demonstration dominated news.² The most important, however, was the editorial of that Monday’s *Australian* (1983) newspaper, titled “Sad, but timely reminder.”

² For example, see Foster (1983), Sunday Mail (1983), Sunday Telegraph (1983).

The first speech on the Ukrainian Famine in an Australian Parliament was delivered by Senator Alan Missen on November 1, 1983. Keeping alive the memory of the Soviet genocide against Ukraine, he concluded, was imperative “so we can learn for the future.” In 1984 a powerful visual depiction of the Famine was provided in a documentary film, *The Harvest of Despair*, which was produced by the Toronto-based St Vladimir Research Institute. The documentary received considerable praise from critics and was screened by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.³

In October-November 1985 the *Harvest of Despair* was shown to a number of audiences around Australia, accompanied by the expert commentary of Dr James Mace. Senator Alan Missen sponsored a special screening of the film to parliamentarians in Parliament House. Around this time Mace gave a number of seminars at universities thanks to academics such as Robert Manne, Harry Rigby, Bob Miller and John Miller. He also provided numerous interviews to the media about the Famine.⁴

On October 10, 1985 over 600 people watched the then Leader of the Federal Opposition, Mr John Howard, MP open the Ukrainian Famine Memorial in Canberra. I’ll never forget the pride that glistened in the eyes of the elderly Fr. John Bowden, administrator of the Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral in Melbourne, as he watched John Howard deliver his speech. I’m sure that this gesture by the current Prime Minister will never be forgotten. The opening ceremony was attended by Senator Alan Missen, Mr Philip Ruddock MP, and a representative of Senator Don Chipp, leader of the Australian Democrats. Other dignitaries included John Howard’s senior adviser, Gerard Henderson and ANU academics Professor Jerzy Zubrzycki, Dr James Jupp and Dr Bob Miller. The building of the Ukrainian Famine Memorial was the culmination of the work of a committee chaired by Mr. George Mencinsky of Sydney.

Around this time Miron Dolot’s eye-witness account, *Execution by Hunger: the Hidden Holocaust*, was published and was reviewed in the Australian media.⁵ In the following year Robert Conquest’s book, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, was published. The reviews were generally positive.⁶ In 1986 Melbourne’s *Age* published a feature article by John

³ For example, Lungen (1984).

⁴ For example, Australian-Ukrainian Review (1985) and Masanauskas (1985).

⁵ See Dodd (1985).

⁶ See northern hemisphere reviews by Whitney (1986), Hosking (1987), Wiles (1987) and Hahaylo (1986), and Australian reviews by Barrett (1986), Christian (1986), Lawrence (1986) and Masson (1987).

Masanauskas describing the experiences of two famine survivors, Mrs. Evdokia Tkacz and Mrs. Tetyana Woly nec (nee Cherevan) – my mother-in-law – who is here with us today. The article was accompanied by Graham Barrett’s (1986) review of Robert Conquest’s book, complete with Spooner’s rodent-like depiction of Joseph Stalin.

Alec Nove (1986) furnished a critical review of Conquest’s book, and J. Arch Getty (1987) was downright insulting, comparing it to the work of “19th century idealist historians” churning out “tales of evil and omnipotent princes, innocent populations, and happy kingdoms ravaged by inhuman conquerors.” Conquest was able to respond in the Letters column of the *London Review of Books*. With classic British wit, he wrote from Stanford that:

“Getty belongs to a gaggle of ‘revisionists’ who have achieved, like David Irving in another sphere, a certain notoriety... They are for some reason concerned to deny that much of a terror took place in the USSR in the Thirties, a stance only achievable by rejecting ... the vast corpus of evidence to the contrary... But I am wrong in comparing Getty to David Irving. Irving, though perverse and absurd in his conclusions, does not lack a certain ability to discover and present facts. Come to that, there are pro-Soviet and even pro-Stalin writers who are, at least in this sense, qualified scholars. Getty is not among them.”

While this exchange was going on in the northern hemisphere, in March 1987 an article appeared in Melbourne’s *News Weekly* magazine asking, “Has ABC Spiked Ukrainian Famine Film?” The article claimed that “An award winning film about the famine in Ukraine ... has been in the hands of the ABC since last year, without any sign being given yet that it will be screened.” Around the same time Jill Kitson invited me to review *Harvest of Sorrow* on ABC National Radio’s *First Edition*, which I did on March 12. ABC Television did screen the film on April 28, 1987, but on a Tuesday night, at 10.30pm. No special advertising of the screening was undertaken, even though the topic was extremely timely given the critical state of demise of the USSR. It was only through the private efforts of Dr Lev Haryliv that a half page article on the documentary appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s media review, *The Guide*, on the Monday prior to the screening. In that article Alan Gill (1987) explained that, “the film, which has won a string of awards, replaces the advertised program in the Encounter Series.”

Seeing the documentary purely by chance that Tuesday night was enough to motivate journalist Pamela Bone to write up an article for *The Age*. Comparing the Ukrainian Famine to the Jewish Holocaust, she wrote: “It has been called ‘the forgotten Holocaust’ and indeed, this program made you wonder why one monstrous crime against a race is so much in the public mind but another of equal magnitude is almost unknown.” To answer that question one would need to understand why the ABC had not bothered to advertise a documentary that had won awards and so obviously affected that Australian viewer, and why it had not screened it at a more accessible time. A large part of the answer, of course, is that the Nazi regime had fallen whilst the perpetrator of the Ukrainian genocide, the Soviet Union, had survived as a major military power and a trading partner. Another part of the answer stems from the fact that the State of Israel came into existence in 1948. A review of the blatant and open anti-Semitism that existed in the West prior to the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel, including the “Jewish Commisar” slur, makes one speculate about what might have been, had a Greater Nazi Empire survived the war and Israel not been created.

A year later Conquest was in Australia at the invitation of the AFUO to deliver the keynote address at a major conference, “Russian Imperialism and the USSR,” which was held at Melbourne’s Regent Hotel (now the Sofitel) on 24-25 June, 1988. Participating Australian academics included Harry Rigby, William Maley, Bob Miller, Amin Saikal, Colin Rubenstein, Robert Manne, Frank Knopfelmacher, Ihor Gordijew, Laszlo Csapo and John Miller. Media commentary about the conference, including a focus on Conquest’s famine research, was generally positive, but the conference did have its detractors. Writing in the Melbourne Herald, Max Teichmann (1988) noted that, “the conference itself was very civilised and low key... But certainly one conference doesn’t make a summer.”

Compared with a decade before, the 1993 commemoration of the Famine anniversary passed relatively quietly, being overshadowed by the achievement of Ukrainian independence. For the first time, public observance of the Famine anniversary was taking place in Ukraine, and some large-scale research efforts were underway there to collect the testimony of thousands of survivors who were still alive. One substantial outcome of these research efforts was the book *Holod 33*, by Kovalenko and Maniak, (1991), which was published in Kyiv in the dying moments of the USSR, but unfortunately has not yet been translated into English. An international conference called “The Holodomor of 1932-1933 in

Ukraine: Causes and Consequences” was held in Kyiv on September 9-10. Mr. Michael Moravski, the then Chairman of the AFUO, addressed the participants.

The next few years saw the most intense discussion of the Ukrainian Famine yet in the Australian media. It arose in connection with the infamous “Demidenko Affair,” which raged between 1994 and 1996, spawning a string of commentaries, letters to editors, and books⁷ in response to a controversial book written Helen Darville, a young Brisbane woman who initially masqueraded as “Helen Demidenko,” a person of Ukrainian origin. In my view her book, *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, (Demidenko, 1994) was best summed up by Ivor Indyk, who labelled it as both anti-Ukrainian and anti-Semitic.⁸ The naive and simplistic thesis put forward by the book was that because Jewish Commissars had engineered the Great Famine that killed millions of Ukrainians, this motivated Ukrainians to become Nazi camp guards assisting in the murder of millions of Jews during World War II.

Helen Darville’s baseless assertions are patently wrong, but a full analysis would require more time than I have available. Instead, I would like to focus on just one episode of that debate that went unnoticed at the time, but if left unchallenged, paradoxically lends support to Darville’s thesis. It concerns the highly prejudiced account of the whole affair written by Andrew Reimer in 1996 and titled, *The Demidenko Debate*. Reimer was obviously disturbed by Darville’s prose, as exemplified by the following passage from her book:

“My mother went to the komissar’s house, to beg for milk as her breasts had none. The kommissar was not home, but his wife – a Jewish doctor – was... She said it would be good if a few more of us died, there were so many... Mrs Kommissar refused. ‘I am a physician, not a veterinarian,’ she said softly...” (Demidenko, 1994, p.15)

At the outset Reimer (p.2-3) admitted that he “had assumed, of course, as everyone else had assumed, that she had grown up surrounded by the passions, myths and hatreds of Ukrainians who had found their way to Australia after the war.” The book had confirmed to him that “there must be virulently vindictive pockets of Jew-hating among some Ukrainians –

⁷ See for example, Jost, Totaro and Tyshing (1996), Manne (1996), Prior (1996), Wark (1997), Manne (1998), and Gaita (1999).

⁸ See Ivor Indyk’s comments in “Literature, Lies and History,” *The Weekend Australian*, 26-07 August, 1995, p.21.

they would see that as a natural part of their heritage.” With that theory blown away by the shock revelation of Darville’s English heritage, Reimer searched for another explanation: it must, he thought, have come from her reading of anti-Semitic tracts about the Great Famine written by Ukrainians. Thus, on pages 205-6 he wrote:

“Another work from which Darville drew some of her material comes close to being propaganda of the kind her opponents accused her of promoting. It is a volume entitled *Black Deeds of the Kremlin – A White Book*, which contains accounts of the Ukrainian famine heavily slanted towards attitudes held by most of the characters in *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, and even perhaps the novel itself. Darville clearly made considerable use of this book in the episodes of her novel, as for instance on page 91 where Vitaly remembers the time his cousin Lara went begging for food.”

Craig Whitney, who reviewed Conquest’s *Harvest of Sorrow* in *The New York Times Book Review*, confessed “that the title of [*Black Deeds of the Kremlin* had] always put [him] off reading it, but it is not the least of Conquest’s merits to have ploughed ahead.” This is quite understandable, since the title and the text had mostly been translated from another language. It had been written by political emigres at the time of maximum Cold War tension and rhetoric. Stalin was still alive.

The excerpt from Reimer’s book demonstrates that like Whitney, and unlike Conquest, Reimer had not bothered to read *Black Deeds* in detail before laying pen to paper. Neither had I until quite recently – after I had read Andrew Reimer’s book. Having now examined *Black Deeds* very closely, I found nothing to substantiate Reimer’s accusations. While accusing the “Russian government” and “Russians in Ukraine” of “confiscating by force all grain that was in the hands of farmers” (Vol.1, pp.222-3), there is no hint at all of Darville’s thesis about Jews. Moreover, *Black Deeds* in parts lays some of the blame at the feet of the Ukrainians themselves. A witness identified by the initials V.L. from the Nizhen area stated:

“Later on, in 1934, after Skrypnyk’s suicide, [comrade Pirogov will] crucify them together with the whole Ukrainian communist party, professors, but just now traitors are useful. The successful execution of the famine pressure

on Ukraine depends to a great extent on such traitors.”
(Vol.1, p 266)

As for the “begging for food” and “Jewish doctor” scenes in Darville’s book, is it possible that she lifted these ideas from the following testimony by witness Natalka Zoltarevich recorded in Volume 2 of *Black Deeds* at page 575?

“In 1933 the superintendent of the district clinical hospital in Chornoukhy was a Jew named Moidei Davidovich Fishman. He and his wife, Olga Volkova, who was likewise a physician, never lost the milk of human kindness during those difficult years, and instead of carrying out the orders of the authorities, they courageously ignored them and helped the starving populace.”

Clearly, the causes, course and consequences of the Ukrainian Famine are more complex than a young writer like Helen Darville, or a seasoned critic such as Andrew Reimer could grasp given their own prejudices and limited knowledge of Ukrainian history.

Despite the fine start made by Robert Conquest, James Mace and a few others, scholarly treatment of the Ukrainian Famine is still relatively under-developed. However, there is hope on the horizon. World-wide recognition of the tragedy has grown markedly since Ukraine’s independence, with a proliferation of books about Stalin and the Soviet Union that contain more detailed evidence and show much less restraint than was evident while the USSR survived. The Ukrainian Famine receives much more attention in these treatments than it had previously, and Australian university courses on genocide now incorporate study of the Ukrainian tragedy. Perhaps some scholar will pick up the National Library’s research database on the Ukrainian Famine that was collected by Dr Jane Armstrong of the ANU, prior to her leaving the country. Even if that doesn’t happen, in future, I doubt that one will hear from Australian journalists the classic statement of incredulity that was made to me in 1983: “Such a famine couldn’t have happened. If it had, I would have heard about it.”

In his address to a Ukrainian community function in 1992, Australia’s Foreign Minister, Senator Gareth Evans publicly acknowledged that “during this century alone, the Ukrainian people have endured the horrific loss of millions of lives in the famine of 1932-33, repeated purges of its academic and cultural leaders, and the ravages of two world wars.” The

70th Anniversary that is being commemorated now has achieved bipartisan support that was lacking prior to Ukraine's independence. A tree-planting at the Point Cook Coastal Reserve in honour of the victims was widely supported. Kaye Darveniza, MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier of Victoria has raised the Famine issue in the State Parliament. On October 30, 2003, the Australian Senate passed a motion condemning "Stalin's communist government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" for perpetrating "one of the most heinous acts of genocide in history" against the Ukrainian people in 1932-33. To achieve this, Mr Stefan Romaniw, current Chairman of the AFUO worked together with Senator Bill Heffernan, a former Chair of the Australian Ukrainian Parliamentary Group, and Federal Arts Minister Senator Rod Kemp.

I would like to conclude by reading to you the final paragraph of the speech delivered by Dr James Mace at the opening of the Famine Memorial in Canberra in 1985. He was asked to speak at the last minute, and I watched him write this out on his knee, as if he were Lincoln sitting in a rail car on the way to Gettysburg. Concluding his speech, James Mace said this:

"We have gathered here today to join with [the survivors] in an act of remembrance, to pledge that even when witnesses of the Ukrainian genocide are no longer with us, their trauma shall not be forgotten. We pledge that their children, their children's children, and their descendants to the last generation will bear remembrance. We pledge ourselves to the memory of that crime and that tragedy, not in the spirit of hatred and lust for revenge, but as the trusteeship of a sacred duty. We shall testify that by his crimes Stalin showed himself to be the moral equal of Hitler, and his government the equivalent of the Third Reich. We shall demonstrate by the example of our memory that the crime of genocide – no matter when or where, by whom or to what purpose, despite even the most strenuous of denials – will always and inevitably be exposed. We pledge ourselves before God that until the end of days, we shall not forget."

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