

THE CANADIAN MUSEUM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

By Peter Goldring
Member of Parliament
Edmonton East

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) has been the subject of controversy since its first conception due to its apparent focus more on one specific historical tragedy over all others.

On April 23, 1999 I spoke in the House of Commons about the Holodomor, the planned famine inflicted on Ukraine by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin in 1932-33. I said "Civilization's failure must be put on public display so that we can all see the dark side of humanity and hopefully learn."

We have a duty to remember, to speak out when we become aware of genocidal acts, and the Holodomor has been mostly misunderstood and ignored for far too long. In the terrible days of 1932-33, when millions of Ukrainians were dying, politicians from countries around the world chose not to speak. They were silent while millions suffered and perished.

We must speak out, at every opportunity.

In July 2008, representing Canada, I was in Kazakhstan, a former Soviet Union country, attending the annual Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), a 56-country group.

A delegate from Ukraine had introduced a resolution to recognize the Holodomor as genocide, something the Parliament of Canada had already done.

I was informed that Russia, through Turkey and acting with other countries, was working to have the resolution watered down – to either have the Holodomor declared an act of nature, a simple natural famine, or have the resolution defeated completely.

I asked Member of Parliament Oleh Bilorus, head of Ukraine's OSCE delegation, if he wanted some help in dealing with the resolution.

At the outset of the debate in a Committee meeting, a delegate from France declared “We are politicians, we are not historians! Why should we know of such things?” It apparently seemed to him that evidence from the past was not relevant to today’s issues.

In the Committee session I addressed the French delegation first. I reminded them that a knowledge of history should be an essential for all politicians.

Then I challenged the Russian and Turkish delegations, reminding them, and all the Assembly, this genocide was not caused by an act of nature, a drought, nor pestilence. This Holodomor, this “murder by starvation of some eight million persons,” this genocide was by the hand of one man – Joseph Stalin, just as the Holocaust murder of some eight million persons was by the hand of one man, Adolf Hitler.

In my visits to Ukraine I have found that the land there is not unlike the land of northern Alberta, which explains why so many Ukrainian immigrants to Canada have settled there. The rich, fertile soil must have reminded them of their homeland. On such rich land, crops do not fail so catastrophically as to cause starvation in such unimaginable numbers. To even suggest that the famine of 1932-33 was caused by an act of nature is wrong. Yet this misunderstanding was repeated in a Montreal newspaper just two years ago.

The OSCE Committee agreed with my comments, and the resolution passed, sent to the full Assembly in its original form.

But in the final plenary session of the full Assembly, Russia again mounted a strong attack on the resolution. The United States delegates had left the Assembly early in order to return home for their Independence Day celebrations, and the Russians felt that, with the Americans gone, they would have enough support.

Again I spoke forcefully, this time before the full Assembly, and in great detail in support of Ukraine and historical truth. After a heated debate the Assembly passed the resolution, to the great pleasure of the Ukrainian delegation.

This attempt to re-write the historical record took place in a far corner of our earth. Russia could have had their way and could have interpreted the Holodomor the way they wished. They had the advantage – and the support of the home country, Kazakhstan. However on this occasion at least the truth prevailed.

When the CMHR was first planned, Ukrainian Canadians were led to believe there would be a permanent exhibit about the Holodomor a horrific time which saw some eight million people die. But apparently plans changed and now there will only be two human rights tragedies with their own permanent display.

Certainly we should not be somehow ranking examples of man's inhumanity to man. The issue is not eight million dead Jews and others in the Holocaust of World War II, as many as eight million during the Holodomor or the 1.5 million dead in the "killing fields" of Pol Pot's Cambodia or the million killed in the Rwandan genocide.

The Holodomor was a genocide on the size, scale and relative duration of the Holocaust. It does make sense that this atrocity that impacted so many Canadians (1.2 million of whom are of Ukrainian ancestry, my wife included) be on permanent display at the CMHR – particularly due to the lack of knowledge of this genocide, even by politicians.

For more than 10 years I have been working to educate Canadians of the importance of remembering the Holodomor. I spoke in the House of Commons on the topic on April 23, 1999, November 24, 2005, November 23, 2006, November 28, 2007, May 27, 2008, and November 26, 2009. On November 30, 2010, for example, I rose in the House of Commons to say:

We remember today the 8 million who perished in Ukraine's Holodomor, brought on by Stalin in the 1930's.

The bitter irony for Ukrainians was that they were murdered by starvation in a land so bountiful that it's called the 'Breadbasket of Europe'.

Shamefully, as millions perished in Ukraine, Western nations were silent and some unconscionably even purchased from the Soviets crops that were stolen from Ukraine's starving farmers.

The importance of speaking about and remembering the truth of the

Holodomor, of the Genocide continues here today.

If we do not speak up to support historical truths of mankind's failings, the dark side of humanity, in Canada and around the world, we risk to repeat, and the former Soviet Union revisionist historians will educate the world with their version of the truth.

We remember today and for all time the Holodomor, the Genocide in Ukraine.

The evil that was the Holodomor is as an example of man's depravity that must be recognized. Too often our world has repeated the mistakes of history, as politicians and leaders have failed to learn from history.

If anything, the importance of a major display is greater, given that even French politicians don't know of the issue of the Holodomor, of the genocide in Ukraine. The information on the Holodomor has never had the widespread public awareness of that of the Holocaust due to it happening behind the Iron Curtain of the Soviet Union and being suppressed by Russia to this day, yet it has nearly identical significance. It is up to all of us to properly portray this genocide that we call can learn to do better for mankind.

Those involved in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights need to revisit the issue and give the Holodomor the permanent exhibit of equal significance to the Holocaust exhibit in order for the world to learn. To do otherwise risks having those that do not remember, repeat history's crimes, or for the world to accept the false history propagated by former Soviet Union historians.