Tragedies of the Holodomor: Give Me Bread or Give Me Freedom

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Tragedies of the Holodomor: Give Me Bread or Give Me Freedom

Cover Page Footnote
I would like to acknowledge that the motivations behind my research are from my family's experiences through the Holodomor.
Abstract

To effectively analyze the dimensions of the Holodomor, this research paper provides the historical overview of the Ukrainian state and nationalist developments. The overview shows the rise of Ukrainian nationalism and later, the problem that it would pose for Soviet leaders. Besieged by national tragedies and centuries of conflict, the Ukrainian people had emerged as the Ukrainian People’s Republic and embraced independence during the chaos of WWI. The Ukrainian government would lose to the Soviet Union and be incorporated as part of the Soviet Socialist Republic. Once Stalin consolidated power, he sought to industrialize the Soviet Union. However, since Ukrainians had recently tasted freedom, Stalin’s designs for the Soviet Union encountered a significant problem. The Ukrainian peasantry held much of the wealth and their nationalist dimensions threatened his greater plans and even the core of the Soviet Union. Under the pretense of rapid industrialization, Stalin committed genocide against the Ukrainians, and as a result, the desolation that was inflicted upon the Ukrainians had many ramifications for both the Ukrainian identity and the Ukrainian state.

Keywords: Ukraine, Holodomor, Genocide, Stalin, Nationalism
The Holodomor was an event that represents perhaps the darkest chapter in Ukrainian history. *Holodomor* is a Ukrainian word that translates into English as “death by hunger.” In 1932-33, there was a great famine in the Soviet Union that killed millions; unofficial figures show that around eighty percent of the mortality was in Ukrainian areas.¹ As a result of this event, older Ukrainians like my grandfather still retain a deep impression of the Holodomor.

Soviet leader Joseph Stalin manipulated famine through a policy of genocide to undermine the Ukrainian independence movement. His intention was to starve the Ukrainians into submission. To this day, the Russian government downplays the genocidal motivation of the Holodomor, and refuses to take responsibility for Stalin’s actions. The Russian government maintains that the Holodomor was a consequence of rapid industrialization, rather than the outcome of Stalin’s need to crush Ukrainian nationalism to remove any obstacles to his plans for the Soviet Union.

Under the pretense of rapid industrialization, Stalin committed genocide against the Ukrainians, and as a result, the desolation that was inflicted upon the Ukrainians had many ramifications for both the Ukrainian identity and the Ukrainian state.

This paper will look at the Ukrainian struggle for independence and explore why Stalin needed to crush Ukrainian hopes of nationalism. Therefore, the paper will focus on Ukrainian history and the struggle for self-determination, as well as Stalin’s five-year plan and the issue of how the Ukrainian independence movement interfered with Stalin’s broader plans for the Soviet Union and the broader implications for the Ukrainian identity and state. The information presented on the history of Ukraine is based on the books by Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History*, and Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*.

Historical Overview

A complicated intertwining of cultures, melded with labyrinthine events throughout the history of Ukraine, has resulted in a very complex story. Ukraine was once the core of the Kyivan Rus state, which flourished in Eastern Europe, and from which historians say that Russia, Belarus, and Modern Ukraine descended. In 1240, the Mongols launched an invasion directed toward the State of the Kyivan Rus. As a result, the Rus state was consumed into the Golden Horde of the Mongol Empire. Over time, Poland and Lithuania took back territories in Belarus and Ukraine while Russia remained under Mongol domination until the Muscovy state challenged the Mongol rule in 1480. Belarus and Ukraine developed a different path under Polish influence, differing from Russia under Mongol domination. Therefore, the East Slavic language and culture began to diverge into distinct spheres.

Towards the end of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th century, the region of Galicia-Volynia in the Western part of Kyivan Rus had become an independent region. It was far enough in the West that it survived the Mongol invasion. Over one hundred years later, however, Galicia-Volynia was wrested away from Ukraine. That period of self-rule by the Western Ruthenians in Galicia-Volynia had established a strong foundation for Ukrainian nationalism. During this same period, an adversarial Poland began expanding into areas of Ukraine over the next several hundred years.

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2 Kyivan Rus is used instead of the more mainstream “Kiev” pronunciation because “Kyiv” is worded in Ukrainian-English and Kiev is Russian-English.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
7 Ukrainians were once known as Ruthenians until they assumed the name of being Ukrainians in the 19th century. Therefore, references to Ruthenians are referring to the Ukrainian people from several centuries earlier.
The lower base of the Dnipro River was the Zaporizhska Sich, a fortified island community that would later form part of an independent seventeenth century Cossack state. The Cossacks were a group of people who were democratic and self-governing. This community received many people like runaway bandits, slaves, and refugees. People came to the settlement in search of freedom and to become Cossacks. During this time, Poland tried to tighten its control, and was met with resistance from the Cossacks who wanted self-determination. This led to the ultimately successful Cossack uprising beginning in 1648. In the end, to overthrow Polish control, Ukraine made an alliance with Russia that would eventually lead to Russia taking over Ukraine. But the Ukrainians crippled Poland during the seventeenth century and ended its golden age, leading to the partitioning of Poland in the next century. Aspiring to possess a state of their own, the Ukrainians had formulated the Ukrainian Cossack state known as the Hetmanate, but greater Russian influence over time would soon see the Hetmanate disappear.

Ukraine’s land was rich in resources and offered anyone who controlled it many advantages, such as access to the warm water of the Black Sea. Ukraine’s fertile soil established Ukraine as the “most fruitful land of Europe.” With this advantage, Ukraine was producing the overwhelming majority of grain that the Russian Empire exported. Commenting on Ukraine’s importance to the Russian empire, Paul R. Magocsi recounts that, “On the eve of World War I, Ukraine accounted for 98 percent of all wheat exports from the Russian Empire, and produced 84 percent of its corn, 75 percent of its rye, and 73 percent of its barley.” It was as vital for Russia to maintain Ukraine within the Soviet Union as it was essential to possess its agriculture and later

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Vladimir Lenin, the revolutionary who founded the Communist Party and led the Soviet Union, stated in 1918 that, “For us to lose Ukraine is to lose our head.”

During the nineteenth century, modern nationalism was spreading throughout Europe, and Ukrainians were experiencing a national revival and undergoing the processes of modern nationalism. As a result, the Tsarist authorities banned the Ukrainian language and worked against the Ukrainian cultural movement. After the collapse of the Russian monarchy, Ukraine had a chance at independence. In 1918, Kyiv witnessed the birth of the first Ukrainian Republic. A nation of 40 million people, the Ukrainian People’s Republic struggled to find stability as they fought wars on all fronts. Eventually, the Ukrainian People’s Republic succumbed to geopolitical pressure and was torn apart by foreign powers. The republic lacked the support of the international community, with states like France supporting Poland against Ukraine to keep Poland strong to serve as an Eastern buffer to Germany. Once the Russian civil war broke out, Ukraine was fighting wars with both Poland and Russia.

With the 1921 Treaty of Riga, Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia took portions of Western Ukraine, while the Soviet Union took control of the rest of Ukraine. Ukrainians had recently tasted independence, freedom, and self-determination, and they were craving it again. Once the independent Ukrainian Peoples’ Republic gave in after years of brutal struggles, the Soviet Union managed to secure Ukraine. Lenin had accepted the full independence of Ukraine

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12 Ibid, 19.
and granted it equal status in the creation of the Soviet Union. However, the Soviet Union had to give some concessions to the Ukrainians in the area of culture. Ukrainians began fostering this cultural autonomy and developing an identity separate from the ideals of the Soviet Union. Once Stalin consolidated power in 1928, he faced the issue of Ukrainian self-determination within the Soviet Union. The danger of losing Ukraine in the near future was a reality for Stalin.

**Analysis of Stalin’s Motives**

Stalin took Lenin’s place as supreme leader of the Soviet Union in 1924. Stalin picked up on Lenin’s policies and created his own doctrine of “Socialism in one country,” by which the Soviet Union would build its ideal socialist state without help from the workers of the world. By 1928, Stalin had successfully consolidated his power within the Soviet Union. During the years of 1924-28, the Industrialization Debates within the Communist Party mulled over the future of the Soviet Union. This resulted in Stalin’s putting together his first five-year plan. Russia failed to pay its foreign debts and did not have any credit. If the Soviet Union wanted to import anything, they would need cash. The five-year plan would organize agriculture so that the majority of the grain could be exported. Russia would need a way to become a self-sufficient socialist state, making the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. Stalin “proposed to seize farmland, force the peasants to work it in shifts under state control and treat the crops as state property – a policy of ‘collectivization.’” His plan was to extract surplus from the peasants which would be sold for foreign currency to import machinery and feed the growing

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17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
working class.24 This currency would allow for greater investment in industry and push the Soviet Union toward being self-sufficient as a socialist state.

However, about 80 percent of the Soviet Union’s population was made up of peasants.25 In Ukraine, peasants made up around 93 percent of the population.26 Therefore Stalin’s plan to take the peasants’ crops for export was destructive to the peasant population. The famine of 1932-33 was a result of Stalin’s action in his war against the peasants and their culture, life and values. Stalin equated peasant resistance in Ukraine with Ukrainian nationalism.27 The Holodomor, a forced starvation, was Stalin’s way of crushing any opposition. The forced collectivization that was carried out in Ukraine was more brutal, intense, and rapid than in other Soviet regions.28 The majority of both Western and Ukrainian historians hold the belief that “the Famine was caused primarily by the Kremlin’s ruthless policy of grain procurement.”29 To justify the forced collectivization, Stalin declared, “We are fifty to one hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must catch up in ten years. Either we do it, or they crush us.”30 While Stalin’s main goal was to industrialize Russia, he did have another problem in his midst: the unsettling issues of Ukrainian self-determination and nationalism.

**Ukrainian Dimensions**

Ukraine was of great importance to the Soviet Union because of its key resources. It was known as the “bread basket of Europe.”31 The key Ukrainian resources, such as wheat, were vital to the Soviet Union and posed an ongoing problem for Stalin. The implications of the Ukrainian

24 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Brenda Haugen, *Joseph Stalin*, 54.
resources and their connection to independent Ukrainian peasants were also a motivating factor for Stalin, driving his actions. His fixation on Ukrainian resources created an entanglement with the Ukrainian peasantry. The Ukrainian peasants were self-sufficient and had remained outside the sphere of the Communist economic system. Therefore, the peasants held a great deal of control over the important source of wealth in Ukraine. The Soviet Union’s wealth was dependent on agriculture, and in Ukraine that wealth rested with the peasants. The peasantry was the overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian population. With their independent wealth, the Ukrainians were able to “remain outside of the Communist economic system as they were largely self-sufficient.” According to author Lesa Melnyczuk:

At this time, Ukrainians were the largest single non-Russian national group within the Soviet Union, making up two-fifths of all non-Russian citizenry, and until the 1930’s, the peasantry made up ‘the overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian population’. The peculiarity of the peasants as a social stratum was their ability to foster traditions, language, and faith, preserving national and ethnic characteristics, in spite of the subjugation of powerful neighbors over long periods of time. In this manner, they resisted even the Soviet Union.

The Ukrainian peasants were a big problem for Stalin and his goals. They controlled the wealth in Ukraine. The Ukrainian peasants maintained their culture and they refused to bow down to the Soviet system. They were obstacles for Stalin as he needed to crush these ethnic groups in the Soviet Union to seize control of agriculture.

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
During the summer of 1932, Stalin was unhappy with the leadership of the Ukrainian party. He was worried about the situation in Ukraine, and wrote to Lazar Kaganovich, his companion in Moscow, that, “For us the Ukraine is the most important now.” Stalin spoke about how the current leaders in Ukraine were not ready to deal with a counter-revolution in Ukraine. He stated that if they did not reverse the Ukrainian tendencies then they could lose Ukraine. This became worrying for Stalin as he suspected that Ukraine was flirting with counter-revolution.

Stalin and the Soviet leadership believed that the status of the peasantry and Ukrainian nationalism were tied together. The collectivization campaign sought to undermine the economic autonomy and freedom of the Ukrainian peasants. In demonstrating the connection behind the policies enacted against Ukrainian peasants:

Collectivization subordinated Ukraine’s independent farmers to the party-state, establishing its control over most agricultural production, and thus potentially allowed the state to squeeze more grain from the peasantry. Although it was touted as fulfilling communist goals, collectivization also served to ‘destroy the social basis of Ukrainian nationalism – peasant agriculture.’

In a letter from Kaganovich, Stalin understood that Ukraine was a center of resistance and a separatist threat to the Soviet Union. Stalin’s intentions were clear; he was prepared to go to extreme lengths to hold Ukraine and repress Ukrainian nationalism. This is evidenced through “the fact that in the early 1930s the Stalinist leadership destroyed much of Ukraine’s national

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid, 184.
intelligentsia and national communist cadres – the cultural and political elites of the nation.”

Starving the Ukrainian people to death and eliminating any threat from them would crush any form of rebellion from the country. The result of the Holodomor is that Stalin achieved two primary goals: the smothering of the independent peasantries and the usurping of the peasants’ agricultural bounties, both of which were to be used for investing in industry. Therefore, it is apparent that Stalin saw a serious threat in the prospect of Ukrainian peasants becoming self-sufficient and gaining wealth from holding independent farms.

Critics of the very idea of the Holodomor and its intended starvation of the Ukrainians may point out that the vast amount of death in Ukraine was due to Stalin’s policies. These economic policies were meant to industrialize Russia and feed urban workers. As a result, he would need to forcibly take grain from peasants. Much of the grain happened to be held by the Ukrainian peasants and, as a result, they suffered the most. The famine could have simply been the result of Stalin’s trying to create the new Soviet system very rapidly. However, this viewpoint does not lay to rest the issue of Ukrainian nationalism. Stalin and his inner circle were very worried about how they might lose Ukraine and if they did not do something to prevent it. Stalin did not need to industrialize Russia at such a pace that he killed millions, and it seems too innocent to think that the Ukrainians were not a part of Stalin’s plan against counter-revolution. Ukraine was too important to the Soviet Union in regards of its wealth. Therefore, the main idea was to collectivize Soviet agriculture and industrialize. While under that pretext, Stalin proceeded to teach the Ukrainians a lesson and force them into submission by starvation. The Soviet Government would increase Ukraine’s grain quotas by 44 percent in 1932, which was an

43 Ibid, 184.
unbearable number for Ukraine.\textsuperscript{45} Ukrainian Communists tried to plead with Stalin, but their requests were ignored. The human cost was not important to Stalin. The Communist Party in Ukraine received the legal right to confiscate grain from peasants and a new law was enacted stating that anyone caught taking grain from the governmental fields would face the death penalty.\textsuperscript{46} The policy of confiscation was both deleterious and ruthless:

Gangs of party activists conducted brutal house to house searches, tearing up floors and delving into wells in search of any grain that remained. Even those already swollen from malnutrition were not allowed to keep their grain. In fact, if they did not appear to be starving, they were suspected of hoarding food in retrospect.\textsuperscript{47}

This level of inhumane activity against the Ukrainians was a cruel lesson from Stalin. In this manner roughly three to ten million Ukrainians starved to death, although exact numbers are still extensively debated.\textsuperscript{48} The cruelty of Stalin was seen in its finest display. It broke Ukrainians mentally and physically as they slowly starved to death for Stalin’s benefit. Any hint of resistance to the Soviet system was met with severe costs.

Stalin’s policies, such as \textit{dekulakization} and \textit{collectivization}, robbed the Ukrainian peasants of their land and livestock, so they were not able to support themselves anymore. Historians still debate how many Ukrainians perished from the Holodomor, but it is in the range of several millions. Under the mortal context of the Holodomor, it is evident that the famine was organized by one man to starve Ukrainians simply for being Ukrainian and carrying a longing for independence.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} William A. Dando, \textit{Food and Famine in the 21st Century}, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 266.
Yet, in an argument that is often used to dispel the notion of genocide, critics claim that many areas of the Soviet Union had alarming death rates and had also suffered from the famine. In Kazakhstan, “the death rate of about thirty five percent was even higher than in the rest of the Soviet Union as most of the 1.5 million victims were nomads.”

It is true that countries like Kazakhstan suffered greatly from the famine as they had a significant nomad population. However, Stalin did not need to forcefully starve the Ukrainian peasantry and hoard their grain. The deficit to the Ukrainian population from the famine was perhaps most significant as “unofficial figures imply that about eighty percent of the mortality was in Ukraine and the largely Ukrainian areas of the North Caucasus.” The Ukrainian areas had the most intensive resistance against collectivization. And in the early 1930s, “when the resistance took place in Ukraine, 45.1 percent of all mass revolts of peasants took place in Ukraine (which had 19.5 percent of the Soviet population). The state responded with deportation of whole villages.” The famine did break out in many parts of the Soviet Union; yet, the central government masterminded the starvation of peasants in the most important wheat-producing regions. The Soviet central government purposefully and tactically starved Ukrainian peasants into submission. The Ukrainian dimensions were far too great for Stalin for him not to consider resolving the issue of Ukrainian nationalism and counter revolution. The famine was used as a weapon against the Ukrainian identity and nationalism to safeguard the Soviet Union from internal collapse and dissent.

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50 Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, 302
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
Consequences

Stalin’s artificial famine could have destroyed the nationalistic mind of the Ukrainian nation. The nationalist aspirations might have never recovered if it had not been for the Western Ukrainians who would later join the Soviet Union after the Soviet Union invaded Poland and annexed select territories. The far Western regions of Ukraine that were under Czechoslovakia and Poland did not suffer through the Holodomor. Therefore, when the Soviet Union annexed these Ukrainian populations from other states, they held onto their ideals while mainland Ukraine was crushed and starved from the Holodomor. Initially, Stalin’s genocide was successful in taming Ukrainian nationalistic pride. But with the Western Ukrainians joining the Union, we would see the nationalistic pride rejuvenate. The Western Ukrainian People’s Republic was able to briefly establish independence while fighting wars on several fronts. Even today, the strongest proponents of Ukrainian Nationalism are in Western Ukraine.

Ukraine was a rich land where people throughout their history have shown an independent spirit and a taste for self-determination. Ukraine fought bravely for independence during wars with Poland and Russia, yet found itself betrayed by Poland with the Peace of Riga in 1921. Ukraine was divided between Poland, who took Western Ukraine, and the Soviet Union, who took the rest. Yet, Ukrainian nationalism remained strong with the peasantry in the Soviet Union, keeping their traditions and culture alive.

The Holodomor tells a horrifying story about the pain and suffering of a people. The Holodomor was a man-made famine that killed millions and yet, that truth has largely been

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56 Michael Palij, *The Ukrainian-Polish Defensive Alliance, 1919-1921*, 140.
ignored. Winston Churchill famously stated that ‘History is written by the victors.’ The Soviet Union was never forced to pay for its crimes under Stalin since it did not suffer any collapsing defeats. Unlike the Holocaust, the Holodomor genocide never had a Nuremberg trial or judgment to condemn the actions of Stalin and sentence him for his crimes against humanity. Raphael Lemkin, a renowned scholar within international law, stated in 1953 that the “Ukrainian catastrophe was ‘not simply a case of mass murder,’ but ‘a case of genocide, of the destruction, not of individuals only but of a culture and a nation.’”57

The Soviet Genocide in Ukraine had four underlying measures. First, it was the destruction of the Ukrainian intelligentsia: ‘the national brain, so as to paralyze the rest of the body.’58 The second measure was to liquidate the Ukrainian Orthodox church, the national soul of the Ukrainian people. The third measure targeted the Ukrainian peasantry and their culture as a way to destroy the national spirit of Ukraine. The fourth measure was targeted towards the fragmentation of the Ukrainian people. Foreign peoples were moved in to Ukraine to destroy ethnic unity.59 Foreign peoples, such as Russians, were encouraged to migrate into the now depopulated areas of Ukraine that resulted from the artificial famine.60 These measures served as the “‘chief steps in the systematic destruction of the Ukrainian nation in its progressive absorption within the new Soviet nation’.”61

The policies of Stalin can be seen today in the current war of attrition between Russia and Ukraine. Stalin’s measure of importing foreign peoples to destroy the Ukrainian ethnic identity

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58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 John Besemeres, A Difficult Neighbourhood: Essays on Russia and East-Central Europe since World War II (Acton: Australian National University Press, 2016), 338.
61 Agnieszka Bieńczyk-Missala, Sławomir Dębski, Rafal Lemkin, 205.
can be seen today in places like Crimea and Donbas, where there are significant numbers of
ethic Russians.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian leaders began to reconcile the past
and work to build legitimacy for the Ukrainian state.\(^6^2\) The leaders examined linking the
struggles of the past to the present state and linking the essential Ukrainian national question.
Various Ukrainian presidents such as Kuchma and Yushchenko “promoted the Holodomor as an
act of genocide in their national building and national identity policies.”\(^6^3\) However,
Yanukovych, the recent president who was removed by the Euromaidan protests, held a pro-
Russia line and downplayed the Holodomor as genocide.\(^6^4\) These contrasting cycles of national
building and identity policies are rooted in the struggles of the past. The overview on the
Holodomor can help explain Ukraine’s continued push for freedom and independence through
the Euromaidan movement and Ukraine’s current war with Russia. The Holodomor continues to
play a very important role in defining the Ukrainian identity, and it will continue to be used as a
building block for the Ukrainian state.

**Conclusion**

The Ukrainian peasantry posed a threat to Stalin and his plans. The peasants resisted the
Soviet system and without Ukraine, the Soviet Union would have lacked the food production
coming from Ukraine. Stalin felt he needed to give an iniquitous lesson to Ukrainians and force
them to accept Soviet rule. In the grand scheme of things, Stalin wanted to industrialize the
Soviet Union, but perhaps the biggest obstacles were the Ukrainian peasants who held much of
the grain and refused to bow down to the Soviet system. It was part of Stalin’s plan to crush the

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\(^6^2\) David R. Marples, *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine*, (Budapest: Central

\(^6^3\) Taras Kuzio, *Ukraine: Democratization, Corruption, and the New Russian Imperialism*, (Santa Barbara, Denver:
Praeger, 2015), 16.

\(^6^4\) Ibid, 15.
Ukrainians and progress with industrialization. As a result, the Ukrainians were slowly starved to death, children and adults alike. Stalin committed this most inhumane act, and yet so few know about this genocide committed against Ukrainians. To this day no one has been held accountable.

The Holodomor, “death by hunger,” displayed the cruelty and wickedness of Stalin and the Soviet Union. The actions of Stalin in the Holodomor equate to a genocide of the Ukrainian population, or something very close to it. There was a deliberately forced famine against the Ukrainian people that killed millions and intended to destroy the Ukrainian ethnic and cultural identity. Through these traumatic events, the Holodomor had profound effects on the Ukrainian identity and state as it remains a key piece in current Ukrainian state building.

Let us not forget the crimes of Stalin, even as we remember the millions who perished from hunger. May we find justice for those who suffered, as the struggle for Ukrainian freedom continues today.
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