

TAKING MEASURE OF THE HOLODOMOR:

Towards a Social History of the Terror-Famine of 1932-33

OLGA ANDRIEWSKY

TRENT UNIVERSITY

(NB: This is a Draft Copy. Not to be Reproduced/Cited without the Author's Permission)

Much of the scholarship on the Holodomor over the past thirty years—both in Ukraine and beyond—has centered on the policy, intentions and methods of the Soviet leadership. Among historians of Ukraine, the primary focus of research has been on “seeing like a state”, to use the James C. Scott’s celebrated phrase.¹ So much of the story has been about Stalin and Molotov and Kaganovich and Kossior and Chubar’ and what they thought, how they spoke, and what they did.² Curiously, what has largely been missing from the *academic* literature are Ukrainians themselves, the millions of ordinary men and women who experienced collectivization, de-kulakization, and the *Holodomor*.

That may seem like an outrageous statement in light of the enormous efforts that have been made to gather eyewitness testimonies, to collect and publish the names of people who died during the Holodomor.³ The most ambitious of these projects was,

¹ Scott cites Soviet collectivization as a notable example of high modernist ideology. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State : How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).

² The need to understand the intentions of the Soviet authorities was also keenly felt among survivors. *Who Killed Them and Why?* is the name of an essay by Miron Dolot, a famine survivor and author of a rare full-length memoir of the Holodomor. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Ukrainian Studies Fund, 1984). Even in his personal account, *Execution by Hunger*, Dolot could not resist interpreting the motives and intentions of the authorities. Miron Dolot, *Execution by Hunger : The Hidden Holocaust* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985).

³ In the summer of 1991, two journalists, Volodymyr Maniak and Lidia Kovalenko, published the first major book of interviews with survivors in Ukraine, «33-Й Голод: Народна Книга — Меморіал» first

no doubt, “The National Book of Memory” (*Національна Книга Пам’яті*), prepared, on the initiative of President Yushchenko, for the 75th anniversary in 2008. It was, as the name indicates, a nation-wide project, engaging the efforts of thousands of local historians, archival workers, teachers and students. The National Book of Memory consists of 19 volumes, a general volume as well as one volume for each of the 17 oblasts/regions affected by the Terror-Famine. There is a separate volume on the city of Kyiv. Each regional volume includes an introductory article by a local historian, documents relating to events in the region, eyewitness testimony, photographs, newspaper accounts as well as the names of Holodomor victims. To date, researchers have identified the names of some 882,510 victims of the Terror-Famine of 1932-33. President Yushchenko himself wrote the introduction to the main volume, referring to the Holodomor of 1932-33 as genocide, “the greatest tragedy in the history of the Ukrainian people”.⁴ This is one many, many memory projects that have been undertaken in the last twenty years.

Yet we still know *relatively* little about the lives of these people beyond the names. One of the—no doubt unintended—consequences of the genocide debate that has come to dominate scholarship in recent years is that it continues to marginalize the people who experienced the Holodomor, rendering them into ghosts who silently

(Київ.: Рад. письменник, 1991). In the West, some of the earliest survivor accounts were published in 1953, in connection with the 20th anniversary of the Holodomor. See for example, S. Pidhainyi, ed., *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin; a White Book* (Toronto: 1953); L. R. Suslyk, *Sumni Spohady : 1933 Rik Na Poltavshchyni* ([Na chuzhyni, Germany?: s. n.], 1951); D. F. Solovei, *The Golgotha of Ukraine; Eye-Witness Accounts of the Famine in Ukraine Instigated and Fostered by the Kremlin in an Attempt to Quell Ukrainian Resistance to Soviet Russian National and Social Enslavement of the Ukrainian People* (New York.: Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, 1953); Oleksa Voropaï, *V dev'iatim kruzi* (London: SUM., 1953).

⁴ *Національна Книга Пам’яті* (Київ: Видавництво імені Олени Теліги, 2008). The 18 other volumes were prepared by the respective oblast/city administrations under the direction of the Institute of National Memory. Electronic versions are available at

<http://www.memory.gov.ua/ua/publication/content/1522.htm> The Institute of National Memory maintains a database where one can do searches by family name and village (Геоінформаційна система: "Голодомор 1932-1933 років в Україні").

<http://194.44.219.55:8099/m?ls=Ground,Regions,Lakes,RegBounds-33,CouBounds-33,Roads2,Roads1,Cities,Points&fl=2&dl=12&x=0&y=0&w=759&h=513&z=7&s=82>

haunt our work.⁵ Their accounts as yet remain distant from the academic literature, summoned—if summoned at all—mainly as witnesses to the terrible deeds committed by “others”. Indeed, much of the academic debate remains enmeshed in a discourse on the nature of communism and the Soviet state. What we lack, for the most part, is a rich, full-blooded, detailed social history—a full account of collectivization, de-kulakization, and the Holodomor “from below”.

It is not my intention to disparage the efforts of my colleagues who work on Soviet policy and intentions. Nor is it my intention to discount the work of all of those many, many individuals who have collected oral histories of the *Holodomor*. This sort of research is vitally necessary and important—in ways that go well beyond scholarship. Indeed, one of the hidden casualties of the Holodomor, I believe, was *social memory*. After 1929, the Ukrainian village lost, among other things, its autonomous capacity to tell stories, to relate its own collective history, to construct its own portrait of itself.⁶ In this respect, oral history is a way of restoring that capacity, of building collective memory and identity, a way of healing what James Mace called a “post-genocidal society”. The very act of consulting elderly rural residents—often women, the most impoverished and neglected segment of the population—is in itself a powerfully transformative exercise.

My larger point here, however, is that there is a crucial difference between collecting oral history and writing social history, between gathering evidence and relating that evidence to larger social patterns of history. And when it comes to the latter, we still have a very long way to go. Social history, I believe, is the new frontier in *Holodomor*

⁵ This is also true of the textbooks in Ukraine, which largely focus on the number of deaths.

⁶ On the social importance of oral history for group identity, see Paul Richard Thompson, *The Voice of the Past : Oral History*. 3rd edn (Oxford England ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Studies. What I would like to talk about is the work that has been done in this field to date—to take measure of what we know about the *Holodomor*.

Perhaps the first real glimpse into the enormous possibilities of a decentred history—and of the very significance of this approach—was the research done in the 1990s by Andrea Graziosi (*The Great Soviet Peasant War*), Lynne Viola (*Peasant Rebels under Stalin Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance*), and, later, Liudmyla Hrynevych on resistance to state policies in Ukraine between 1928 and 1933.⁷ Ukraine, during collectivization, as Lynne Viola noted in her book *Peasant Rebels under Stalin Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance*, “led [the Soviet Union] in revolt”. The revolts in Ukraine tended to be frequent, large, and occasionally violent, especially during periods of grain requisitioning. In 1930, at the height of resistance, according to OGPU sources, the participants numbered close to a million. “Throughout Ukraine,” as Viola describes, “peasants rose up in defense of their property, neighbours, and culture, displaying a sense of political and national outrage and purpose unparalleled in the [Soviet Union].”⁸ Liudmyla Hrynevych’s work picks up where Lynne Viola’s left off and provides a fuller picture of the nature of these protests, the degree to which they became more organized and overtly anti-Soviet and anti-colonial during this period.⁹

⁷ Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Andrea Graziosi, *The Great Soviet Peasant War : Bolsheviks and Peasants, 1917-1933, Harvard Papers in Ukrainian Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University, 1996); Людмила Гриневич, 'Сталінська «Революція Згори» Та Голод 1933 Р. Як Фактори Політизації Української Спільноти', УІЖ (2003).

⁸ Viola, pp. 158-159. Among her sources on Ukraine, Viola cites the work of the Ukrainian historian Valerii Vasil'iev (“Krest'ianskie vosstania na Ukraine,” *Svobodnaia mysl'*, no. 9 (1992).

⁹ Virtually every author writing on collectivization and the Holodomor now makes reference to peasant resistance. For specialized studies, see В.Ю Васильєв, 'Селянський Опір Колективізації В Україні (1930-Ті Рр.)', *Історія України: маловідомі імена, події, факти* 31 (2005), 140-50; Станіслав

The real breakthrough of this work was in their approach, in their foregrounding of previously marginalized actors. They were histories of ordinary people, how they thought, how they behaved, and how they attempted to survive under extraordinary circumstances. It was a history that exposed the uneven character of Soviet power. Collectivization, as Viola explained, was not just an economic policy, it was a “clash of cultures”, “a wholesale assault on the cultural traditions and institutions of the village”, most notably the church. This is how the peasants understood it, “as a battle over their culture and way of life, as pillage, injustice and wrong.” It was a struggle for “power and control”, an attempt to subjugate them.¹⁰ And the Holodomor, if we take Viola’s argument to its logical conclusion, was the climax of this life-and-death struggle.¹¹

This theme—the Holodomor Era as a “cultural war”—has begun to receive greater attention in recent years and represents a crucial trend in the scholarship. In particular, it is ethnographers in Ukraine who have led the way in attempting to assess the cultural impact of collectivization, de-kulakization, and the terror-famine. It is ethnographers who have also—not surprisingly—made the greatest use of eyewitness accounts. In the remainder of my presentation, I would like to discuss what I believe are two of the more important studies in this area that have been published in recent years.

Кульчицький, 'Опір Селянства Суцільній Колективізації', in *Голод 1932–1933 Років В Україні: Причини Та Наслідки*, ed. by В. А. Смолій (Київ: Наукова думка, 2003). For the NEP period, there is also О. І Ганжа, *Українське Селянство У Боротьбі Проти Тоталітарного Режиму. Сутність І Особливості Нової Економічної Політики В Українському Селі (1921-1928 Рр.)*. (К.: Інститут історії України НАН України, 2000).

¹⁰ Viola, p. 14.

¹¹ I make no claim to originality here. Most historians argue in some form that the Holodomor is the culmination of events set in motion in 1929 and it must be understood in a broader context.

The pioneering work in this field was done by William Noll, an American ethnomusicologist, and his team of Ukrainian researchers in the early 1990s.¹² Between 1993 and 1995, they conducted interviews with 450 elderly rural residents in eastern and southern Ukraine in an attempt to understand how village life changed in the 1920s and 1930s. As described in their book, *Трансформація Громадянського Суспільства. Усна Історія Селянської Культури 1920-30 Років*, the *Holodomor* Era not only resulted in the deaths of millions of people. It radically changed the Ukrainian village—it led to the material impoverishment of the peasantry. It did away with entire categories of craftsmen, village residents and artists (icon painters, fiddlers, and other itinerant musical performers like the blind *startsi*). And, ultimately, it led to the decline, indeed destruction, of many traditional practices and institutions.

Village churches, as we know, were destroyed, church property was confiscated, and priests and other church personnel were repressed. Cultural practices associated with the church and religious holidays also were targeted—not just baptisms, church weddings, and church funerals which were central events in the life of country folk, but also *koliadky* (Christmas carols) and *vesnianky* (spring songs).

Indeed, as Noll and his colleagues discovered, the very tenor of every day life was transformed during the *Holodomor* era. Even the seemingly innocent traditional practices like the *Dosvitky*—the ritual gatherings of young unmarried women who met every evening in the winter to sew and embroider and sing—were suppressed. They were replaced by village clubs organized and managed by Party officials. In

¹² Вільям Нолл, *Трансформація Громадянського Суспільства. Усна Історія Селянської Культури 1920-30 Років*. Київ: Родовід, Центр досліджень усної історії та культури, 1999.

the final analysis, Noll argues, collectivization, de-kulakization, and the terror-famine were a “cultural catastrophe”.

More recently, Olesia Stasiuk has published a far-reaching study of the Ukrainian village during the Holodomor era entitled *Геноцид Українців: Деформація Народної Культури* (*Genocide of Ukrainians: The Deformation of National Culture*).¹³ In contrast to Noll, Stasiuk was interested in the larger social consequences of collectivization and the terror-famine, in the way in which individuals and families were affected. In often harrowing terms, she describes the violence with which the policy of collectivization and grain requisitioning was often implemented—the ways in which ordinary people were humiliated, ostracized, and terrorized. She discusses the mass flight from the countryside and the breakdown and destruction of the family. But Stasiuk was also interested in the effects of the Holodomor on social mores—the rise of the culture of denunciations (*donosy*), the increase in petty theft. *Геноцид Українців*, perhaps more than any other academic work to date, illustrates what it meant to live through the *Holodomor*.

The work of Willian Noll and Olesia Stasiuk, I think, point the way towards a different understanding of the *Holodomor*—the *Holodomor* as social history, the *Holodomor* as social experience. As someone who comes to the subject from the 19th century—from the study of this world *before* the Soviet Union—I am struck by the enormity of the rupture that the period of collectivization and terror-famine represents. In terms of patterns of migration, family structure, religious practices, rituals of courtship and marriage, names and naming practices, in terms status and ranking, in terms of attitudes towards power, authority, and political participation,

¹³ О. Стасюк, *Геноцид Українців: Деформація Народної Культури* (Київ: ВД «Стилос», 2008).

in terms of social identity, the era of the Holodomor represents a radical break. It was the end of a social order—the end of a set of social structures, social institutions and social practices—that had evolved and endured over the course of several centuries.

There is, in other words, still much work to be done. Both Noll and Stasiuk focused on the Ukrainian village. But the village represents only one dimension of the social history of the *Holodomor*, albeit a crucial aspect. We have learned much over the course of the last twenty years about the policies that led to the terror-famine, but we as yet know little about how policy was put into practice on the local level and how diverse groups and individuals, including local Party officials and non-Ukrainian minorities (Mennonites, French colonists, Jewish farmers, and Crimean Tatars) responded to the severe challenges posed by the *Holodomor*. We do not have a systematic study of the strategies that people used to try to survive *Holodomor*. Aside from Lynn Viola's book, *The Unknown Gulag*, we know little about de-kulakization in Ukraine and what happened those people who were arrested and/or exiled in 1929 and later. There is very little work on the urban experience.¹⁴ There is very little work on gender and the Holodomor, Oksana Kis's excellent research on this subject notwithstanding.¹⁵ And, of course, there is no serious work that I am aware of on the psychological consequences of the *Holodomor*.

This, I believe, is an exciting agenda for future research on the *Holodomor*.

¹⁴The exception here is the work of the Kyiv University folklorist, Valentyna Borysenko, who participated in William Noll's project and has continued to research and write about the Holodomor. See Валентина БОРИСЕНКО, "Голодомор 1932 – 1933 Років У Місті Києві Та Передмісті." *Етнічна історія народів Європи* 25 (2008).

¹⁵ Oksana Kis, "Agency Vs. Victimhood: Women's Experience of the Holodomor, 1932-33," *Seventh Annual Danyliw Research Seminar in Contemporary Ukrainian Studies*. Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Ottawa (Canada), 20-22 October 2011.

