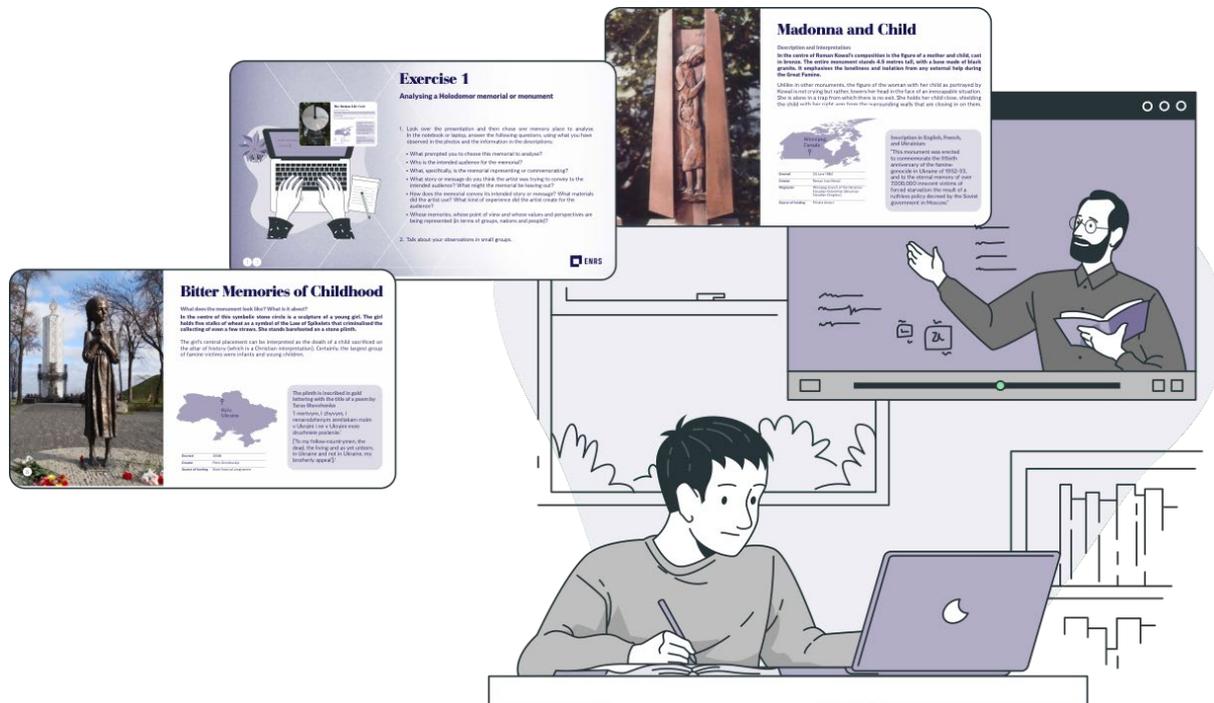


# Remembering the Holodomor

## Essay for teachers and students

by Wiktoria Kudela-Świątek



## Objectives



With this essay, a teacher can:

- introduce the subject of Holodomor into the classroom
- prepare students to talk about the remembrance of the Holodomor (through the presentation).



With this essay, students can:

- get basic information about the Holodomor
- reflect on why remembrance about the genocides is important.

## Preparation



With this essay, students can:

- the circumstances of the formation of the USSR
- the political system of the USSR and its policy towards the nations forming the union's republics
- Soviet totalitarianism –its scale and characteristics as well as the repressed groups and people involved.

# The essay

---

## The Great Famine

The history of the **Great Famine** of 1932–33, known as the **Holodomor**, started when the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin ordered the collectivisation of agriculture. The term ‘Holodomor’ is often used to encompass the starvation of the farmers as well as a broader assault on the Ukrainian nation, which included an attack on the cultural, religious and political leadership of Ukraine, most of which was under Soviet power at that time.

The majority of Ukrainians, who were small-scale or subsistence farmers, resisted. The state confiscated the property of the independent farmers and forced them to work on government collective farms. The richer farmers and those who resisted collectivisation were branded **kulaks** (rich peasants) and declared enemies of the state who deserved to be eliminated as a part of society. Thousands were deported to Siberia.

## Causes of the Holodomor: the quotas

In 1932 the Communist Party set impossibly high quotas for the amount of grain Soviet Ukrainian villages had to contribute to the Soviet state. When the villages could not meet the quotas, authorities intensified the requisition campaign, confiscating even the seed set aside for planting and taking meat and potatoes as fines for failing to fulfil the quotas. As a result, the many thousands of farmers who managed to leave their villages were arrested.

A law was introduced that made the theft of even a few stalks of grain an act of sabotage punishable by execution. Soldiers were sometimes posted in watchtowers to prevent people from taking any of the harvest. Although informed of the dire conditions in Ukraine, central authorities ordered local officials to extract even more from the villages and export it to the other countries.

In 1932, I was 10 years old, and I remember well what happened in my native village in the Kyiv region. In the spring of that year, we had virtually no seed. The Communists had taken all the grain, and although they saw that we were weak and hungry, they came and searched for more grain. My mother had stashed away some corn that had already sprouted, but they found that, too, and took it. What we did manage to sow, the starving people pulled up out of the ground and ate. [...]

**Extract from Tatiana Pawlichka’s testimony <sup>i</sup>**

## Lack of support

To escape death by starvation, people in the villages ate anything that was edible: grass, acorns, even cats and dogs.

That summer, the vegetables couldn't even ripen – people pulled them out of the ground – still green – and ate them. People ate leaves, nettles, milkweed, sedges. By autumn, no one had any chickens or cattle. Here and there, someone had a few potatoes or beets. People coming in from other villages told the very same story. They would travel all over trying to get food. They would fall by the roadside, and none of us could do anything to help.

**Extract from Tatiana Pawlichka's testimony <sup>ii</sup>**



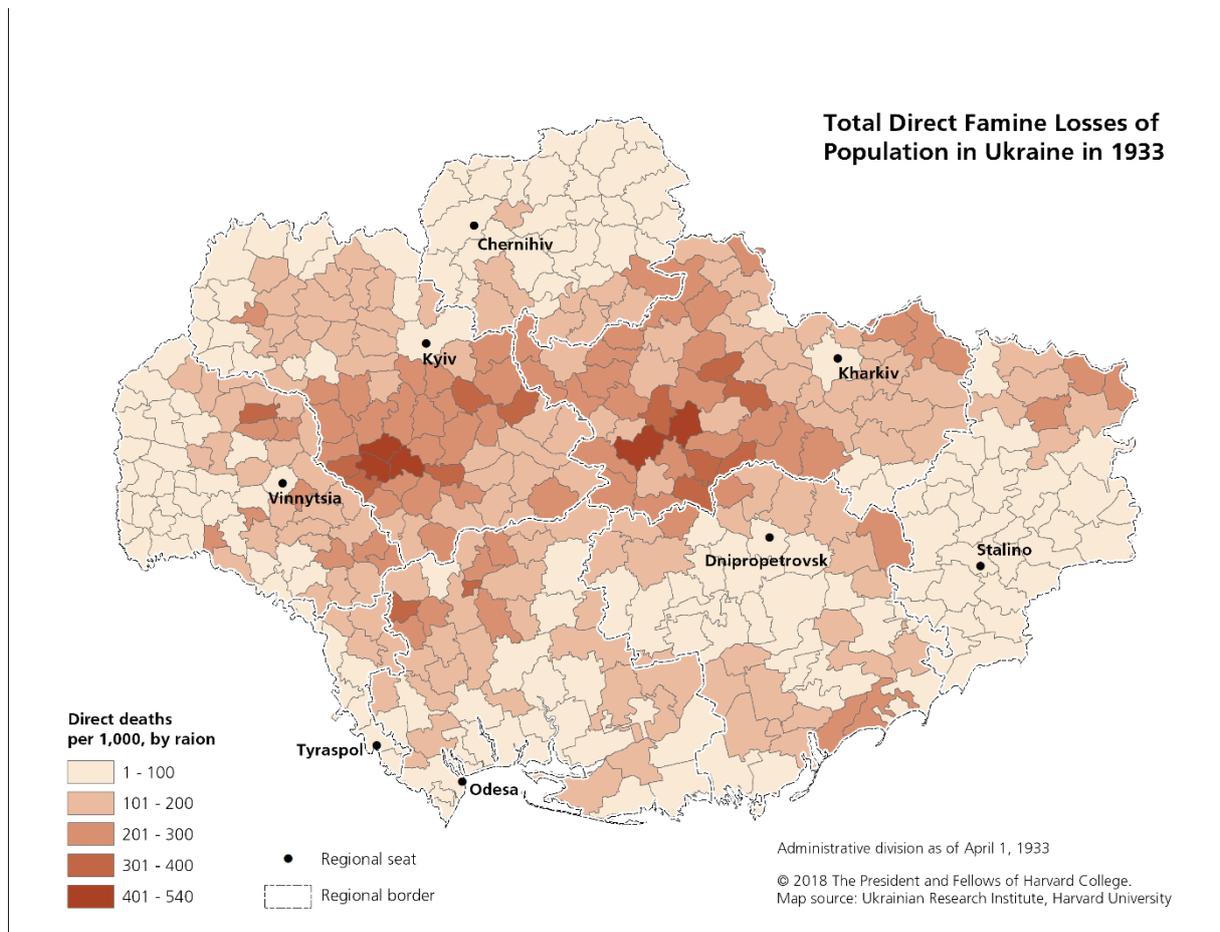
**An impoverished woman from the countryside seated by a fence in Kharkiv.<sup>iii</sup>**

The government could have organised famine relief and accepted help from outside the USSR. However, Moscow rejected foreign aid and denounced those who offered it, instead exporting Ukraine's grain and other foodstuffs abroad for cash. On an international level the Soviet state vigorously denied that the Holodomor had occurred.

## The victims of the Holodomor

The Holodomor resulted in widespread deaths and the digging of mass graves dug across the countryside. The official registers did not give a full account of what was happening throughout Ukraine – deaths often remained unregistered and the cause of death was missed out to conceal the true situation.

In 2015 the Ukrainian Institute of Demographic and Social Studies in cooperation with the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (USA) listed that **around 3.9 million Ukrainians** had died during the Holodomor of 1932–33.



**Map of total direct famine losses of population in Ukraine in 1933 by raion by The Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University (HURI).**

[Link to the map](#)

## The genocide

Most historians, who have studied this period in Ukrainian history, have concluded that the famine was deliberate and linked to a broader Soviet policy to subjugate the Ukrainian people. This was how the largest non-Russian ethnic group within the Soviet Union, the Ukrainians, were decimated, ending their aspirations for autonomy and independence for decades.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the archives of the Communist Party, secret police and government (including the archives of the security services) that have become accessible to researchers support the conclusion that Soviet state policies caused the famine and were intentionally intensified by the Soviet authorities.

The term 'genocide' was introduced by a Polish-Jewish lawyer, Rafał Lemkin, in 1944. It consists of the Greek prefix *genos*, meaning race or tribe, and the Latin suffix *cide*, meaning the act of killing. In 1948 the United Nations Genocide Convention defined genocide as any of five 'acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group'.

**See the on-line exhibition 'Lemkin. Witness to the Age of Genocide' by The Pilecki Institute. [Link to the exhibition](#)**

## The memory and struggle for truth

In independent Ukraine, it became possible to cultivate the memory of the Holodomor. Ukraine's parliament declared the Great Famine of 1932–33 an act of genocide in February 2003. Since this period, successive Ukrainian authorities have turned to the history of the Holodomor to strengthen the sense of national identity among Ukrainians. The places associated with its memory constitute a powerful force that binds historical memory and shapes the Ukrainians' national identity.

Since 2006, the Holodomor has been recognised by the European Union, and 27 other countries, as a genocide against the Ukrainian people carried out by the Soviet regime.

To know more about the historical fallacies perpetrated by communist propaganda read the article and lesson scenario. [Link to the teaching resources](#)

## Why should we remember?

Monuments to the Great Famine of 1932–33 are a noticeable element of Ukraine's cultural landscape today. They aim not only to recount a given event but to deepen **understanding** and give rise to the feelings of **empathy** and a sense of **mourning**.

The Holodomor memorials and memorials created in several countries by Ukrainian organisations and artists, however, raise the question: why should Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians remember the Holodomor?

We should remember the Holodomor **because it has happened**. Knowledge about the famine suffered gives us an insight into the systematic and state-organised evil that caused the Holodomor and the frequent use of famine as a weapon by the Soviet state in the 20th century. That, in turn, helps us to recognise that the lives and deaths of Holodomor victims were at the mercy of the Soviet Union and found no recourse in law or the courts.

The Holodomor memory helps us understand the circumstances of the **victims**, who had to make impossible choices under Soviet to fight the famine. Neutrality was a death sentence for the powerless victims in their struggle against an overwhelmingly powerful state machine. And in the face of suffering, **resistance** could take many forms and courage could manifest itself in many ways: taking up arms was a last stand.

Due to the Holodomor memory, we can recognise the fragility of **democracy** because it can be undermined at any moment if political leaders show a weak commitment to democratic rule. It can lead to democratic institutions being undermined, civil liberties being restricted and the toleration of violence in public spaces.

Unfortunately, all these issues raised by the Holodomor are not consigned to our past. **Genocides recur even today**. That is why the Holodomor's memory can also evoke trans-European empathy and solidarity, especially in times of the war in Ukraine.

---

<sup>i</sup> Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932–1933: First Interim Report of Meetings and Hearings of and before the Commission on the Ukraine Famine: Held in 1986: Organizational Meeting, Washington, D.C., April 23, 1986: Meeting and Hearing, Washington, D.C., October 8, 1986: Hearing, Glen Spey, New York, October 26, 1986: Hearing, Chicago, Illinois, November 7, 1986: Hearing, Warren, Michigan, November 24, 1986. Washington: US GPO, 1987, p. 75.

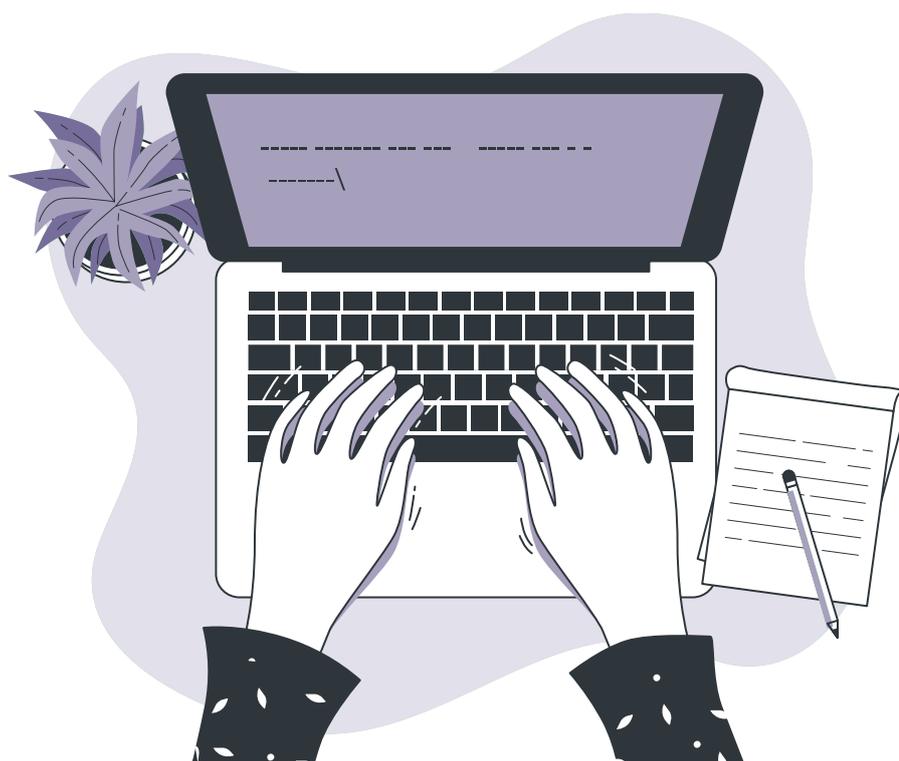
<sup>ii</sup> As above. Washington: US GPO, 1987, p. 76.

<sup>iii</sup> Wienerberger, Alexander (1933) 'Als Begleiterscheinung des Hungers und Träger der Epidemien – die Verlausung', in *Muss Russland hungern?: Menschen- und Völkerschicksale in der Sowjetunion*, edited by Ewald Ammende and Alexander Wienerberger. Vienna: W. Braumüller Universitäts-Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1935, fig. 8. Retrieved from: <http://vitacollections.ca/HREC-holodomorphotodirectory/3639067/data> (accessed 19 June 2023).

# Sources

---

1. Applebaum, A, *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine* (New York: Doubleday, 2017)
2. Kuryliw, Valentina, *Holodomor in Ukraine; the Genocidal Famine, 1932–1933: Learning Materials for Teachers and Students* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2018)



Co-funded by  
the European Union

Content editor: **Urszula Bijós**

Consultant: **Prof. Jan Rydel, Ewelina Szpak, PhD**

Editor: **Caroline Brooke Johnson**

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.