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# ‘I AM THE SOVIET AUTHORITIES’: COMMUNIST SOCIAL ENGINEERING AND HOLODOMOR PERPETRATORS IN SURVIVORS’ MEMORY

### Abstract

The article analyses the Holodomor and the instruments the authorities employed during the famine, through the prism of testimonies and memoirs about the famine by witnesses and survivors. The author focuses on how the authorities organised rural communities and their way of life before and during the man-made famine, and the perception by the survivors of this social engineering and the activities of the perpetrators of the Holodomor at the level of ordinary people. Archival and oral history data are used, and the source criticism method is applied. The author shows its limitations, and suggests options for further research on the perpetrators.

KEY WORDS: Holodomor, victims, perpetrators, communist social engineering, rural communities, Soviet totalitarianism.

### Anotacija

Straipsnyje analizuojamas Holodomoro liudininkų ir aukų valdžios institucijų ir priemonių, naudotų dirbtinio bado metu, vertinimas per jų liudijimų ir prisiminimų apie badą prizmę. Autorė daugiausia dėmesio skiria tam, kaip valdžia formavo kaimo bendruomenes prieš dirbtinį badą ir jo metu, jų gyvenimo būdą, kaip paprasti žmonės suvokė šią socialinę inžineriją ir Holodomoro kaltininkų veiklą, kurią apibūdina išgyvenusieji. Autorė naudoja archyvinius ir žodinės istorijos duomenis, taiko šaltinių kritikos metodą ir siūlo tolesnių tyrimų apie nusikaltimų vykdytojus ribas bei galimybes.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: Holodomoras, aukos, vykdytojai, komunistinė socialinė inžinerija, kaimo visuomenė, sovietinis totalitarizmas.

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## Introduction

The Holodomor (the man-made famine and genocide, as recognised by more than 30 states and also international organisations) is defined as the period from late 1932 to mid-1933, although for obvious reasons it does not have a clear chronological framework. The confiscation of food reserves orchestrated by the Kremlin was an instrument to deprive Ukrainian peasants of food. Starvation occurred in the context of the communist social engineering applied in Ukraine to solve both economic questions (the implementation of collectivisation, the development of industry, control over food production and distribution) and political ones (the subjugation of Ukrainians and the reshaping of their identity), in which state violence and fear played a pivotal role.

The actors of genocide usually have defined roles. However, when used as a tool of extermination, famine can blur the distinction between perpetrators and survivors, particularly in contexts where the state does not have a clear stable definition of the enemy (racial or ethnic), changing its connotations according to its needs. Denial of the famine lasted until 1987, by which point many of the perpetrators had already died. Research on the topic after 1991 revealed a lack of archival records. Most of the oral history was written up from the survivors, who were mostly children during the Holodomor, which imposed certain limitations on the content of the testimonies.

The article analyses the evaluation by witnesses and survivors of the Holodomor of the authorities and the instruments they employed during the man-made famine, through the prism of their testimonies and memoirs. The author focuses on the authorities' organisation of rural communities and their way of life before and during the famine, and the perception by survivors of this social engineering and the activities of the perpetrators of the Holodomor at the level of ordinary people.

One such attitude is reflected in the title of the research: 'I am the Soviet authorities' (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 177). This is how Vira Medvedeva, a Holodomor survivor born in 1920, recalls an activist in the small village of Hluschchenko, whom she describes as an 'idler-troublemaker', an initiator of 'theft or fight' and 'not attracted to work'.

The object of the article is society during the famine, and the authorities who shaped rural life during the famine.

The article's novelty and relevance are in its contribution to the understanding of Ukrainian society in the early 1930s, and the famine in particular, as seen through the eyes of survivors. Archival and oral history data are used, and the source criticism method is applied.

## Communist social engineering during the Holodomor: survivors' comprehension

The state existed in a paradigm of 'a system of dominance with a monopoly towards violence', which meant a monopoly on politics and information, with a network of agents that formed an image of the authorities that always protected the ordinary 'proletariat'. These were the Bolsheviks, who had invented the culture of violence (mass, individual and group/social) as an instrument of 'social engineering' and 'mass education' (Yefimenko, Kulchytskyi, Pyrih 2021, 378–379, 383).

Furthermore, the Bolsheviks' move to the countryside served to exacerbate the pre-existing antagonism between Bolshevik ideology and the Ukrainian countryside, thereby strengthening 'the artificial stratification of the village'. The Party was responsible for creating conditions that led to 'the demoralisation of the masses, social decay and the marginalisation of society', 'agency observation' and 'the purposeful division of a society, stirring up one stratum of society against another, extra-judicial violence, intimidation, compulsion, humiliation' etc. (Rafalskyi, Kalakura, Kalakura 2022, 287). State officials employed methods such as arrest, deportation, the division of peasants into two hostile camps, informing on peasants, searching for grain and food reserves and the confiscation of what was found, party purges with deprivation of access to food, and the breakdown of social ties.

Pavlo Postyshev<sup>1</sup> explained on 3 July 1933 that 'grain procurement is not only the procurement of bread by the state, but an instrument of re-education of collective farm members of huge importance, yesterday's individual peasants over the real workers of the socialist economy' (Visti VUTsVK 1933, 2). On the other hand, Stanislav Kosior<sup>2</sup> announced another instrument used in the grain procurement campaign of 1932 and 1933: starvation. 'The fact that starvation has not yet taught quite a lot of collective farm members sense (*umu-razumu*) shows the unsatisfactory preparation for sowing in exactly the most problematic districts' (Pyrih 2007, 771). The contents of these two instruments should be taken into account in order to comprehend the logic of the escalation of violence in the Ukrainian countryside.

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<sup>1</sup> Pavlo Postyshev was a Russian Soviet Party activist, one of the main actors in the implementation of the Kremlin's plans in 1932 and 1933, sent by Moscow to Ukraine to monitor the Ukrainian Party leadership during the Holodomor in January 1933 as a second secretary of the Central Committee (CC) of the Communist Party of Ukraine (CP(b)U).

<sup>2</sup> Stanislav Kosior was a Soviet and Ukrainian Party activist, general secretary of the CC (CP(b)U during the Holodomor, and a member of the politbureaus of the CP(b)U, the All-Union Communist Party (AUCP) and the CC AUCP.

Archival records show that extreme violence was the main tool for social engineering, involving and exploiting emotions such as hatred and fear. For instance, records include the account of Postyshev against enemies in 1933 and the strategies employed to combat them: 'And when [the Party] said beat him, a nationalist, beat this dirty scum, beat harder, do not be afraid, those activists, Party members, Komsomol members, got down to business, and collective farms went up' (Postyshev 1934). Such attitudes by senior officials were clearly evident on the ground. A teacher was present at a meeting when a secretary of a Party cell instructed village activists to 'Go, loot, use any means to get bread. If you do not do this you will die.' This secretary was respected even after the Second World War, and worked in the oblast department of agriculture (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009a, 456).

In late December 1932, the Party cell in Melitopol emphasised the necessity for directing 'against them [idlers, thieves and *sub-kurkul*] all the hatred of active collective farmers' (Tymofeiev 1993, 74–76). 'Hostility and war (*rozbrat*) were sown in the rural community. And this was also the goal of the representative' (Mytsyk 2008b, 307).

Not knowing the directives by the Kremlin and the top authorities, one respondent asked: 'From where and why did that desire to inform on each other appear? Where did that hatred and anger come from?' (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 230).

Melitopol district Party instructions from January 1933 ordered the complete utilisation of those who voluntarily delivered bread to the state (collected on a private plot and/or received as payment from the collective farms) in order to escape punishment for not fulfilling grain procurement, the widespread use of schoolchildren in searches (Tymofeiev 1993, 77), and the 'achievement of the stratification of collective farm members' (Tymofeiev 1993, 80).

The question therefore arises who constituted 'the enemy' to be fought, and who stood in the way of the 'sunny future' and the effective completion of collectivisation. The state came up with several definitions, *kulak*, counter-revolutionary, enemy of the people, saboteur, etc, and varied connotations,<sup>3</sup> allowing more space for repressions and the utilisation of fear and violence as instruments of social engineering blame. For instance, in the early 1930s, 71 types of enemy were identified in Ukraine, as detailed by Chekists (Vasyliiev, Podkur 2017, 53–54).

Despite these groups, the state employed games with the definition of '*kulak*' proven by the invention of the term '*sub-kulak*' after the deportation of successful and resistant farmers from the Ukrainian countryside before the Holodomor.

<sup>3</sup> For further details, see: Viola 2013, 15–16; Vasyliiev, Podkur 2017, 48–49.

So even belonging to a collective farm often did not guarantee a peasant's safety (Pyrih 2007b, 504–505, 621; Starovoitov, Mykhailychenko 2008, 42; 56–57; 66). The authorities ordered activists directly to seek approval for grain confiscation and repressions by collective farm members, and to unite executioners (Pyrih 2007b, 422), to divide a village into two opposing camps and make searches with the hands of the peasants (Pyrih 2007, 497, 612, 621; Starovoitov, Mykhailychenko 2008, 49, 66–68; Mytsyk 2008b, 228), and to prepare lists of collective farm activists in order 'to know these activists' main body, to work with it and rely on it' (Tymofeiev 1993, 65), etc.

Therefore, the countryside had to be divided into hostile camps: basically, every stratum of society was turned into a weapon against other groups, in order to achieve the goals set by the state. Peasants did not know the content of secret orders, but they observed their implementation. As one respondent says, 'the village was already divided by someone into three separate classes: poor, mid-level and *'kurkuls'* (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 565).

The state employed the tactic of 'fear' to communicate with its citizens (Rafalskyi, Kalakura, Kalakura 2022, 274). The latter obviously recognised this instrument, which became even more convenient during the Holodomor. One respondent (an activist during the famine) confessed:

It was even worse that we did not try our best with our own hands. We ensured that a neighbour liquidate a neighbour. And they, neighbours, *svaty*,<sup>4</sup> brothers, destroyed, treated badly, frightened [...] What force was it? [...] *Crazy fear* [in the text] Someone would say a word, a label: sub-kurkul [...] Immediately an article [criminal article], prison, deportation, Siberia, penal servitude, people went mad (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009b, 678).

The researcher Daria Mattingly draws attention to the theory of Stanley Milgram, who argued that two-thirds of people would obey orders, and concludes that 65% participated not because of 'fear but because of conformism' (Mattingly 2018). However, it is important to acknowledge that communist social engineering methods were not aligned with humanistic principles. By 1932, society had already become disillusioned with the deportations, deprivations, and the loss of private property in rural areas. For instance, one compendium of Holodomor oral history contains almost 150 expressions in various forms tied to fear (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 1480–1481). Much more can be found in the published compendiums of Holodomor survivors' oral history and testimonies.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Ukrainian tradition, the parents of a spouse became especially close after the marriage of their children, and were actually considered family members.

Mattingly posits the argument that, according to the estimations of Stanley Milgram and other genocide scholars and researchers, 60% of people become obedient instruments employed by the perpetrators of a genocide (Mattingly 2021). It is evident that no individual can accurately determine the percentage of people who were true believers (the number of true supporters of the Party is usually estimated by genocide scholars as 5% (Mattingly 2021) or propelled by fear.

The moral and ethical foundations of society were altered, thereby ceasing to serve as moral orientators, leading to what Lawrence P. Langer called 'choice without a choice' (Kozytskyi 2020, 23), and kindness and evil became opposites (Yefimenko, Kulchytskyi, Pyrih 2021, 383). The peasants agree with the historians: 'Lying and fear had become immutable companions of a "happy future", where lying replaces truth, and fear replaces freedom' (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009a, 541). With the advent of collectivisation, a paradigm shift occurred, resulting in turning the best farmers into 'class-hostile elements', and the worst idlers into 'highly principled' (Mytsyk 2010, 451).

One survivor suggested a comparison: on the one hand, his mother, who survived questioning by the local authorities and turned grey during it, refused to say where her husband had escaped to from the village; on the other hand, the glorification of the 'traitor' Pavlik Morozov, 'an example of a Soviet man for the people', concluding that 'a traitor is supported, and a brave person is humiliated and persecuted' (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009b, 506).

The Ukrainian historian Larysa Yakubova discusses the 'erosion of the mass and personal consciousness', noting that society was unable to resist this information pressure, being in a condition of 'chronic mass psychosis' (Yefimenko, Kulchytskyi, Pyrih 2021, 390). 'People were under a certain social hypnosis' (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009a, 469) is how a survivor tried to describe this decay of moral, legal, societal and human norms. 'It was then that mercy, sympathy, humanness were killed inside people. From childhood [people] were encouraged to inform, even over the corpses of their relatives' (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 498). Archival records demonstrate that from the 1930s, an 'all-pervasive and all-encompassing' network of informants was established to facilitate control over the countryside, particularly among kurkuls, individual peasants, and the rural administration (Podkur 2021, 343–356).

Such unlimited violence, willfulness and cruelty demonstrated a universal decomposing action that 'turned every human being into a predator' (Yefimenko, Kulchytskyi, Pyrih 2021, 418): 'People at that time did not differ much from animals, they lived by the principle "survival of the fittest"' (Mytsyk, Ivannikova

2007, 85); 'You could say nothing. People at that time were like cattle' (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 77).

Terror as a social tool (Yefimenko, Kulchytskyi, Pyrih 2021, 412) is a concept that refers to a period in which the state made wide use of aggression against some social groups of people, encouraging those who carried out orders with food ration cards, the chance to buy food in closed shops, to eat in closed canteens, and to improve their career prospects.

Peasants did not know about these privileges, but they saw the rewards for informing. Survivors recall that a system was built whereby one could easily inform (Mytsyk 2008b, 220; Mytsyk 2010, 65, 163) on another peasant and receive a reward (Mytsyk 2012, 160; Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 300): '[People] informed a lot! The lazy, those who did not want to work [...] They were rewarded' (Mytsyk 2012, 160). A neighbour wanted to take someone's two horses, which he refused to give to the collective farm; he informed on the person, accusing him of being 'an enemy of the people'. The man received ten years in a labour camp, and died there (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009b, 819–820). Informers were also rewarded with food (Mytsyk 2008b, 268).

### The actors in the genocidal landscape: the perception of the perpetrators by the victims

There were various groups of people actively (voluntarily or forced) involved in the Holodomor (often with unclear boundaries between the perpetrators and the victims): representatives of the state<sup>5</sup> (workers and Party members from Russia and Ukraine), village and collective farm heads, activists (peasants, teachers, children, rural administrators), and peasants (so-called kurkuls, poor and mid-level individuals) (Mattingly 2021).

It is impossible to provide detailed characteristics of all these groups in one article. Nevertheless, the testimonies that have been revealed will contribute to a more profound understanding of the motives and strategies that characterised the coexistence of victims and perpetrators in the same space and often in the same role.

Mattingly is correctly sceptical about the general image of the perpetrators as 'drunk, lazy and good-for-nothing', calling on us to take into account other motivations (Mattingly 2021). It is necessary to take into account numerous factors in the conditions of extreme starvation and cannibalism, which represent the pinnacle of any moral restraints that are lost by the absence of sustenance.

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<sup>5</sup> For further details, see: Filvarkova 2013.

The introduction of social engineering resulted in the dissolution of boundaries between perpetrators and victims, and the absence of clear distinctions between the two, leading to the simultaneous fulfilment of multiple roles. The most salient illustration of this phenomenon is provided by the testimony of a groom. He was a poor peasant, and participated in the search for food. Starving, he stole grain from the collective farm, asking a survivor's mother to cook it, and sharing some of the grain with her as payment. Consequently, he was apprehended, expelled from the collective farm, and died of hunger. The survivor concludes: 'He was poor, he was given instructions, but he was one of the first to become a victim of the system' (Mytsyk 2008a, 188).

The evaluation of perpetrators is a broad spectrum, and it highlights the complexity of the choice 'without a choice', from 'there were our own home-grown executioners' (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009a, 182), 'alcoholics, the debauched, thieves' (Mytsyk 2008b, 57), 'lazy and stupid' (Mytsyk 2008b, 164), everybody was trying to 'adjust' (Mytsyk 2008a, 188) and 'even among the activists there were better people' (Mytsyk, Ivannikova 2007, 51), to 'people forgave the activists, they were calmly among the other villagers' (Mytsyk 2008b, 545).

Mattingly argues that local authorities had fewer opportunities to die than their victims ('the pressure on officials to execute orders fades compared to the much greater possibility of a hungry death for peasants' (Mattingly 2021)). She further asserts that of the 27,000 perpetrators arrested for the non-fulfillment of grain procurement, a mere 0.6% were executed (Mattingly 2021) (162 people). However, there are other figures that indicate the scale of violence as part of the social engineering, and the potential scale of fear in Ukrainian society. From January to 15 March 1930, almost 37,000 peasants in Ukraine were arrested (Yefimenko, Kulchytskyi, Pyrih 2021, 386). In 1932, 71,500 residents of Ukraine were shot (Yefimenko, Kulchytskyi, Pyrih 2021, 389). From 1 November to 20 December 1932, 862 Party members were arrested in Ukraine (Yakubova, Prymachenko 2016, 90). From November 1932 to January 1933, the DPU liquidated 1,208 'counter-revolutionary' collective farm groups (Yakubova, Prymachenko 2016, 95). In the summer of 1933, only in the Chernihiv region, 224 Party officials, including heads of collective farms and village councils, were expelled from the Party (Lysenko 2013, 275; Yakubova, Prymachenko 2016, 89). During ten months of 1933, 644 Party members at the district level were expelled from the Party (Yakubova, Prymachenko 2016, 96). In general, in 1933 more than 100,000 Party members were expelled from the Party in Ukraine (some estimations point at 200,000 members) (Yakubova, Prymachenko 2016, 89).

The retrospective approach looking at the existing numbers of executed as an argument in favour of the obedient execution of orders does not seem to fit the realities of the social engineering at the beginning of 1930 and the weaponisation of the famine. Historical sources illustrate a more extensive range of sanctions for those who disobeyed the authorities, with starvation being the primary option. In my estimation, the situation was more intricate, due to the role played by starvation, which influenced choices that would probably not have been made in the absence both of such pressure from the state and the variable interpretation of the concept of 'the enemy'.

On the one hand, a series of Party directives emphasises the punishment of those Party members in rural areas who 'sabotage' and do not 'fulfil' grain procurement: 'severe Party and state repressions' (Pyrih 2007, 389), expulsion from the Party (Tymofeiev 1993, 65), and 'well-planned repressions applied to carefully selected collective farms' (Pyrih 2007, 422). On the other hand, the Ukrainian political police organ called the State Political Department (DPU in Ukrainian) reported that by the end of 1932, the DPU had documented instances of resistance to grain procurement in almost 400 villages of the UkrSRR, including district representatives (87 people), heads of village councils (49), collective farm heads and board members (139), secretaries of Party cells (80), and Party and Komsomol activists (149) (Danylenko, Aulova, Lavreniuk 2010, 58). The violence intensified: during ten months in 1933, in Ukraine 237 secretaries of Party committees, 249 heads of district executive committees, and 158 heads of control commissions were dismissed and replaced (Mace, cited in: Bilyi, Vasylenko, Kozytskyi 2021, 115). In general, out of 11,420 collective farms, 53% of their heads, 51% of supply heads, 40% of storehouse heads, and 32% of farm heads were 'cleansed' (Vasyliiev, cited in: Bilyi, Vasylenko, Kozytskyi 2021, 116).

There is a paucity of testimonies by the perpetrators themselves:<sup>6</sup> the overwhelming majority of Holodomor testimonies were provided by the victims. The following is an example of a 'twenty-five-thousander' testimony, in which an activist blames the Party:

Collective farm members think that I confiscated grain from them. They are mistaken. The government took the grain. That means, the Communist Party. I only fulfilled their orders the same way as those collective farm members fulfil [orders] of what to do. If I do not fulfil the order, in the best case, arrest, in the worst case, death (Mytsyk 2008a, 221).

Given the absence of direct interrogation, the real motivations behind such actions remain ambiguous. The intentions may pertain to the ideologically dri-

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<sup>6</sup> Many were published during the Soviet era, when supporters of collectivisation were glorified.

ven wish to build a bright future by the elimination of enemies, fear for one's life and the future of one's family, the desire to acquire food ration cards, or simple obedience.

Other survivors have also stressed the strictly centralised Soviet state system, with decisions made at the top, and have named Moscow as the centre of decision-making:

The authorities did [the searches]. A head ordered that [they] go and confiscate, and that is all. And the authorities, which is this, the top, obviously, Moscow or whatever. We lived with Moscow at that time. The authorities did everything. An order came to clean [to confiscate] [...] And that was all (Mytsyk 2012, 217).

We are aware of the persecution of tens of thousands of individuals during collectivisation and the Holodomor. Due to a paucity of evidence, it is often impossible to ascertain the subsequent fate of those individuals, and research in this area is severely limited, with the exception of some micro-historical research conducted at the level of the villages and regional ChK perpetrators.

Consequently, Mattingly's hypothesis that for 'perpetrators the risk of execution was much less than for the victims to die from repressions or death from hunger' (Mattingly 2021) appears less unambiguous and requires further substantiation. While direct execution may not have been the immediate punishment, the deprivation of access to food distributions, as well as deportation, could have resulted in death by starvation. The comparison with the case of Nazi perpetrators, from which the majority of genocide studies originate, probably cannot be completely applied here, taking into account the weaponisation of food in the USSR, and the strict dependence of obedience and allocation in the food distribution hierarchy. As one survivor described, a man responsible for collecting corpses also picked up dying people and took them to a cemetery, because he 'also wanted to live' (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 295). Considering the extreme levels of the famine, during which cannibalism took place, being unable to question him directly, it is difficult to ascertain the physical and moral health of this official. Probably, the suggestion by Andriy Kozytskyi to define 'privileged victims' (conformists, forced and voluntary collaborators), who tried to prolong their lives by collaborating with the perpetrators in various ways, would help us not to mix executioners and those who had been perpetrators (Kozytskyi 2020, 31).

The peasants were not privy to the specifics, but they did bear witness to the consequences of social engineering and the rationale behind the administration of Ukraine during the famine, which culminated in genocidal murder. Given that

village authorities compelled peasants to participate in the brigades (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 913, 945, 954), those activists who endeavoured to resist, albeit passively, by refusing to participate in the searches, were punished severely by the state. For instance, when an activist refused to part with 30 kilograms of rye to a family with many children, a representative denounced him as a 'ditherer' and demanded his expulsion from the Komsomol (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 128). A peasant was threatened with imprisonment if he did not participate in searches and find grain (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 1012). A survivor's father was forced to participate in a search brigade as a member of a village council. Once brigade members suggested he took a confiscated winter coat. The father refused. The following day he was sent on a business trip, from which he never returned: he was arrested as an 'enemy of the people' (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 1151).

The state implemented a multi-tier policy of final conquest of the Ukrainian countryside. This policy included numerous components, including 'black boards', the physical and informational blockade of Ukraine, direct governance by the Kremlin through special commissions, and the extortion not only of grain but of food reserves, among others. Evidently, the starving peasants were unaware of these clandestine directives, but they bore witness to the reality on the ground. The following aspects of the actions of activists during the famine have been preserved in the memories of survivors. Perpetrators were not a unified group consisting of many actors with various motivations.<sup>7</sup>

Firstly, the policy of limited social mobility resulted in the empowerment both of people with a low level of education, from the bottom of the social scale, and those who were highly ideologically driven. Representatives from outside the villages were unfamiliar to the peasants, while they knew local members of the search brigades. Consequently, there are numerous testimonies about local activists. The survivors recalled: 'The Soviet authorities in the villages were represented by almost illiterate and even completely illiterate people. There were among them sincere builders of the new [life, order] but without enough knowledge, it is very easy to end up on another road. They had power, "permission", or simply did not feel "prohibited", and were able to do anything not good' (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 565–566). One idler-activist in a village beat his breast and shouted: 'I am the Soviet authority' (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 177). Another said: 'We are good communists, and you are simple people' (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 865). Poor peasants went 'after the communists', 'supported dekurkulisisation' and voluntarily joined the collective farms, later participating in the searches, 'taking away everything' (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 945). There was a 'cruel' woman from Russia with a handgun. She 'picked "activists" out of

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<sup>7</sup> For further details, see: Filvarkova 2013; Mattingly2018; Mattingly2021.

the local population from poor people' (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 1326). Sometimes peasants were included as activists by force (Bilousova, Boriak 2024a, 780; Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 1246), otherwise their families would starve to death. For instance, after a survivor's father refused to participate in the searches, 'everything' was confiscated from the family (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 358).

Komsomol members were also mentioned among the idlers who did not want to work and searched (Bilousova, Boriak 2024a, 230). A Komsomol member, 19 years old, believed sincerely, as a passionate youth, 'in the need for older comrades to dekulakise. [I] visited houses, found stores with bread, if it is possible to describe a bucket or a pot with millet like this' and not always pointed at hidden grain (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009b, 466). However, data confirms the resistance of Komsomol members to the extortion of food: by the end of January 1933, around 200 Komsomol members had been arrested in Ukraine (Danylenko, Aulova, Lavreniuk 2010, 67–68).

Evidently, there existed other categories of rural heads based on their educational attainment, such as, for instance, Arkadii Blinov, the head of a village political department, 'a native of Moscow' with a 'white-tooth smile', who graduated from the Institute of Red Professors, and later, after the famine, became head of the department of the Kyiv Party *obkom* and was persecuted in 1937 (Orel 1989, 124, 127).

The state guaranteed the provision of food to representatives and local authorities. However, activists frequently found themselves at the mercy of fate, ultimately succumbing to starvation (either due to the absence of hidden food reserves or the discovery of such reserves by the authorities (Bilousova, Boriak 2024a, 219). Activists were instrumentalised by the authorities in their schemes, and many perished after assisting in the confiscation of grain from their neighbours and relatives. Sometimes peasants derided them: 'Why are you dying, you confiscated food?' (Mytsyk 2008b, 176). One activist confiscated grain, and told people not to cry because 'the Soviet authorities will not allow you to die.' As a result, he ate the corpses of his older sons. But he died, and his wife was taken to the grave half-alive (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009a, 582). Another account describes activists who 'did not think that that would end sadly for them. The authorities used them, and thereafter left them to the mercy of fate.' One such starving activist came to a respondent's house, took a glass of milk, drank it, and began screaming: 'It was not a scream, but a horrible roar' (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009a, 686).

There are numerous cases of help from activists. They pretended that they did not see hidden food. They gave it back to the family they had just confiscated it from (a neighbour took back a sack of grain after a search) (Mytsyk 2008b,

536). Some activists told a survivor's brother to put on his winter coat and so they did not confiscate it (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 901). One search brigade left some grain for the family of an activist (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 101). The heads of both the village council and the village Party cell warned people about future searches. People managed to hide grain, and so most survived. The head and Party cell members were executed (Mytsyk 2008b, 130).

The attitude towards the local authorities was best encapsulated as follows: 'They did what they wanted, some were exiled, others were arrested, and it was impossible to understand what was going on' (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 970).

Secondly, survivors frequently reveal the specificity of the searches, mentioning so-called cross-searches, when activists from one village were sent to do searches in another village, and activists from the other village came to the first village (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009a, 102), to avoid compassion and family ties. Activists demonstrated the logic of cross-searches: 'I had [food] taken away, and I will take away from others' (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009b, 579). Peasants in one village 'did not know where they were from, who they were that [they] took everything. They were not ours [from a survivor's village] but outsiders' (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 927). There were several brigades coming one after another: unknown people searched several times (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 927, 947).

Thirdly, special state representatives (workers and Party members from Russia and Ukraine) were sent to the countryside (the so-called twenty-five-thousanders). They directed the actions of activists, and were a low level authority with temporary emergency powers ('special detachments appeared in the village in the autumn guided by the communists from the Party dis[trict]com[mittee]' (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 1319). A first-hand account has been preserved from a former representative who was initially instructed in a district executive committee, and then in district departments of the DPU:

to search for enemies of the people, to look for people who would agree to inform, how to recognise those who were dissatisfied with the collective farms ... we were encouraged to do this [to accuse people of being 'enemies of the people']. If a certain amount of 'enemies' were not presented in a district, then the district workers would themselves become enemies (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 230).

Here are more examples of the representatives' activity. A respondent's uncle was a village council head from a neighbouring village. He gave 30 poods of grain to the peasants. However, he was denounced by a representative, arrested the following day, and exiled to the Donbas (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 229).

One MTS<sup>8</sup> member said that in 1933 his wife went to spend the night with a representative, and returned in the morning with some flour (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 230). It was noted that in one village, representatives were employed in searches, as villagers themselves were unable to confiscate food from their neighbours (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009b, 502). One survivor concludes that representatives played a special role in causing the famine: 'These people were especially in demand, cruel, stubborn, as if they were born to humiliate others' (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 230).

One former representative confirmed that there were 'honest' (*poriadochnye*) representatives (one representative, for instance, refused to obey, and committed suicide (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009b, 76), 'but they were quickly eliminated as "unsuitable"' (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 230).

Fourthly, teachers and children were actively involved in the searches, proving the aforementioned thesis on the ruin of horizontal ties and the incorporation of moral authorities (the rural intelligentsia, since the priests had mostly already been eliminated from the villages, together with community leaders, only teachers were left) in the genocide. DPU agents reported: 'We have to know through [school] students who and how many hide [grain]. A search in a school is organised perfectly' (Danylenko, Aulova, Lavreniuk 2010, 39). The state obliged collective farms to supply teachers with food, and so teachers were 'invited' to participate in the confiscation of food during the Holodomor, in order to save themselves (Yakubovskiy 2022, 77–78). The authorities created artificial tension between the peasants, the local authorities and teachers, and supported this tension by including teachers in various campaigns during the Holodomor (Yakubovskiy 2022, 80). Another instrument of pressure over the teachers was the investigation of disloyal origins: membership of organs of the Ukrainian People's Republic or the army, a rich landlord, or a rich peasant (Yakubovskiy 2022, 81).

There were two strategies for teachers to behave: to resist passively (by the end of January 1933, 316 village teachers had been arrested in Ukraine (Danylenko, Aulova, Lavreniuk 2010, 67–68); or to participate actively in the searches and the corresponding activities. The first strategy is described as the avoidance of searches (Yakubovskiy 2022, 80); not explaining 'the politics of the Party and the government' (Yakubovskiy 2022, 79); practising a play for the local theatre instead of membership in search brigades; riding horses (Yakubovskiy 2022, 79). Furthermore, there are numerous testimonies left by grateful students mention-

<sup>8</sup> Machine Transport Stations were created to supply collective farms with tractors and other agricultural machinery; from January 1933 political departments were created in them to strengthen control over rural community life.

ing their teachers or directors who helped them survive by procuring produce and preparing breakfast and/or lunch for students, or sharing their own food with students (Veselova, Nikiliev 2009a, 182, 456; Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 293, 295).

The second strategy included, for instance, declaring socialist competition with teachers from other villages; self-declaration of participation in the search campaigns, etc (Yakubovskiy 2022, 79–80); the questioning of students in schools by school directors or teachers on what the family was eating or where grain was hidden, with further searches based on the information obtained, and sometimes even promising a reward with gifts (Bilousova, Boriak 2024b, 521, 799, 906, 907–908; Mytsyk, Ivannikova 2007, 272, 357; Mytsyk 2012, 158).

One respondent was courageous enough to disclose that he had been included as a teacher, along with three others, in a search brigade. He admitted that, as an 18-year-old man, he believed in the need to extort as much grain as possible to complete industrialisation, and that the state would provide sustenance to those in need (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 128).

In addition to being questioned in schools about the family's hidden reserves (Mytsyk 2012, 158), children were included in the search brigades (Starukh, Frolov, Tymchenko 2008, 827; Babenko, Biloshapka, Kolesnichenko 2008, 1017). They marched along village streets, or entered households, screaming: 'Away with the kurkul as a class!' 'Up with Soviet power!' 'Get out of the house, kurkul!' (Mytsyk 2012, 157). Another survivor recalls that a teacher arrived with schoolchildren and incited them to scream: 'Kurkul, *hlytaj*, give us bread!' (Mytsyk 2008b, 287; Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 189). Children were also involved in guarding the fields, and a special song was written for them: 'We see from a watchtower how an enemy goes quietly towards grain, keeping a sack' (Kovalenko, Maniak 1991, 498).

## Conclusions

Communist social engineering that used the basic human need to eat, weaponising food simultaneously with the destruction of horizontal ties, ethical and moral norms, attained its goal. The peasants acquiesced to the Soviet policy of collectivisation, and rejected any further resistance, even partially embracing instruments of control, such as violence, fear, the concept of class enemies, and the class struggle. The CC CP(b)U gladly acknowledged that members of collective farms named 'stealing' grain, not extorting grain ('bread was taken away'), as the reason for their starvation, signifying a 'profound turn among collective

farm masses that influenced the attitude towards those who did not work' (Pyrih 2007, 771).

Surviving victims had to restore their feeling of dignity and combat their trauma and traumatic memories. Surviving activists either had to convince themselves that they were active builders of communism (one Party member believed to the end that 'enemies of the Soviet power did this [the famine] and in fact this is a system' [Veselova, Nikiliev 2009a, 520]) or to repent.

The intentional Party policy of involving as many peasants as possible, 15 years of communist social engineering projects, combined with extreme violence, deportations and conditions of extreme starvation (illustrated by cannibalism), created an unprecedented phenomenon in the 20th century (together with China, with its 20 to 40 million victims of the famine), a totalitarian system that in the famine 'reached everyone, made every person a criminal and a victim at the same time' (Kovalenko 1991, 81). This was the primary outcome of social engineering, which suggests numerous roles, motivations and survival strategies. Victims were forced to break the law to survive, while perpetrators often helped victims, and in the process became victims themselves. Many ideologically or personally motivated individuals participated in the search for food, while many others resisted the pressure of social engineering.

The tragedy of the Holodomor includes extreme starvation, with instances of cannibalism, half a century's Soviet denial of the famine, the destruction of archival records, the belated recording of oral history, and the use of famine as a weapon that eliminated without direct shooting. The time gap between the famine and the subsequent discussion and research further complicates the punishment and interrogation of perpetrators, as reliable statistical data on the perpetrators and their motives is not available. Consequently, micro-history research based on local perpetrators' lives might be the only viable option for understanding the broader implications of the Holodomor in the case of cautious extrapolation.

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## Tetiana Boriak

### „AŠ ESU TARYBŲ VALDŽIA“: KOMUNISTINĖ SOCIALINĖ INŽINERIJA IR HOLODOMORO VYKDYTOJAI IŠGYVENUSIŲJŲ ATMINTYJE

#### Santrauka

Autorė tiria du aspektus: Holodomorą išgyvenusių žmonių komunistinės socialinės inžinerijos atspindį ir išgyvenusių aukų supratimą apie nusikaltėlius. Straipsnyje gausu žodinės istorijos, paremtos jos argumentais apie pasirinkimų ir strategijų įvairovę ekstremaliomis bado sąlygomis, įrodančiomis tyčinę valstybės primesto smurto ir baimės įgyvendinimo politiką.

Yra keletas požiūrių į aukų ir nusikaltėlių santykių tyrimą. Autorė pritaria požiūriui, kad Holodomoras yra „pasirinkimas be pasirinkimo“ kaip žmogaus sukeltas badas. Bado sunkumą patvirtina aukų skaičius (mažiausiai 3,9 mln.) ir daugybė kanibalizmo atvejų. Autorė teigia, kad Holokausto tyrimų taikytas požiūris Ukrainos atveju gali nepasiteisinti dėl precedento neturinčio sovietinio socialinės inžinerijos projekto, kurio tikslas – naujo tipo žmonių iškilimas. Kartu su bado sukėlimu, trėmimais, represijomis, atviru ketinimu malšinti badą pačių valstiečių rankomis tapo nerealus tiek valstiečių, tiek ir pačių valdininkų pasipriešinimas, nors statistika skelbia apie suėmimus ir valymus.

Straipsnis rodo tyčinę kaimo padalijimo į dvi priešingas stovyklas politiką, bandant priversti valstiečius dalyvauti atimant maistą. Čia naudojami ir archyviniai įrašai, ir asmeninės kilmės šaltiniai.

Išgyvenusieji dažnai nežinojo direktyvų, kuriomis jie privalėjo vadovautis naujame gyvenime sovietmečio totalitarizmo sąlygomis, tačiau stebėjo tam naudojamą priemones. Čia pažymėtinas neapykantos stiprinimas, denonsavimas, pareigūnų lankymosi baimė kaimuose, bandžiusių vienaip ar kitaip pasipriešinti asmenų išvayimai / suėmimai / egzekucijos. Buvo kuriamos tam tikros socialinės struktūros, kuriomis būtų galima pasiekti aukščiau minėtų tikslų. Represuojančiųjų ir represuojamųjų asmenų stovyklos nebuvo izoliuotos ir jose dažnai vykdavo tarpusavio vaidmenų kaita.

Visa tai leidžia rekonstruoti nusikaltėlių portretus, jų motyvacijas, metodus, pasirinkimus, retkarčiais – ir aukų pusę. Jie prisimena to meto sovietinius akty-

vistus (ypač kaip nevietinius ir svetimus budelius), mokytojus, komjaunuolius, vaikų ir kryžmines apklausas.

Tyrėja siūlo toliau diskutuoti, kaip Stanley Milgramo paklusnumo koncepcija galėjo būti įgyvendinta Holodomoro kontekste, atsižvelgiant į ekstremalią bado situaciją. Autorė siūlo atsižvelgti į maisto rekvizavimą, ekstremalią bado situaciją su kanibalizmo atvejais, moralinių ir etinių pagrindų naikinimą, horizontalius ryšius tarp kaimo bendruomenių ir visuomenės apskritai, ir teigia, kad *pasirinkimo be pasirinkimo* (Lorence P. Langer) ir *privilegijuotųjų aukų* sąvokos gali būti vienintelė galimybė šiai Holodomoro studijų kryptčiai tęsti aukų / kaltininkų požiūriu.