The Holodomor in Collective Memory: Constructing Ukraine as a Post-Genocide Nation

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ABSTRACT *This paper concerns the role of genocide in collective memory and its function for national identity-building in post-Soviet Ukraine. Known as the Holodomor, Ukraine's famine of 1932-33 has become an important part of the country's national history. Upon gaining independence in 1991, the Ukrainian government set out to build and affirm a national identity distinct from Russia, grounded in Ukraine's unique history and national myths. The claim to have undergone genocide as a nation in the Holodomor comprised part of this state-building project, though whether this claim is appropriate under international law has long been disputed. This paper examines the ways in which the Holodomor-as-genocide thesis was embedded in Ukrainian national identity, particularly under the administration of Viktor Yushchenko. Through the creation of new institutions, campaigns, and laws, the Ukrainian government sought to have the Holodomor recognized as genocide at the international and domestic levels, and to make its sacred commemoration a cornerstone of Ukrainian society. This narrative was deployed to unite the nation under a shared history of suffering that effaced politically inexpedient realities, such as cases of complicity in the Holodomor and the Shoah by Ukrainian elites. Narratives assigning blame to Ukrainian Jews and Russians alike delineated a narrow conception of the true Ukrainian nation to the exclusion of the alleged perpetrators. Further, it served to distance Ukraine from Russia by emphasizing the consequences of Soviet colonialism and the importance of Ukrainian collective memory as a matter of political sovereignty and cultural emancipation.*

After genocide, memory remains. Yet as a province of the human mind, it does not endure stagnantly. It is anything but immutable and is continuously *re-remembered*, reconstructing the history and present at each iteration. Subjected as it is to competing political wills and projects, *collective* memory is all the more malleable, such that it empowers subjective narratives over truth. For Ukraine, the 1932-33 famine known as the *Holodomor* has borne out this phenomenon. The famine affected areas and peoples throughout the Soviet Union (USSR), with an estimated 2.6 - 3.9 million deaths in Soviet Ukraine.¹ Today, the question is not whether the famine occurred, but whether it constituted genocide.² From 1993 to 2010, particularly under Viktor Yushchenko after his election in 2005, the Ukrainian government's answer to this was

¹ John-Paul Himka, "Encumbered Memory: The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 14, no. 2 (2013): 426.

² Norman M. Naimark, "How the Holodomor Can Be Integrated into Our Understanding of Genocide" in *Contextualizing the Holodomor: The Impact of Thirty Years of Ukrainian Famine Studies*, eds. Andriy Makuch and Frank E. Sysyn (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2015), 112.

affirmative, and it accordingly embarked on a political project to fashion the Holodomor as a founding myth of Ukraine. Constructing Ukrainian national identity upon this foundation bound it with a sense of victimization, which erased Ukrainian perpetration of and complicity in genocide, replacing it with a narrative of homogenous national suffering. Concurrently, the identification of the Holodomor's perpetrators provided natural 'others' against which the Ukrainian nation could be defined, specifically in post-colonial terms. Taken in sum, it will be seen that the Holodomor was politically leveraged by the Ukrainian government as an instrument of building the nation while homogenizing and purifying its collective memory and, by extension, its identity.

The Famine of 1932-33 affected many areas of the USSR and was proximately caused by failed collectivization reforms and excessive grain appropriations by Soviet authorities.³ However, Holodomor-as-genocide advocates assert that the manifestation of the famine in Soviet Ukraine was sufficiently severe, intentional, and targeted to constitute genocide. Although hunger affected many regions, the majority of population losses occurred in Soviet Ukraine.⁴ Moreover, the famines in Ukraine and two other regions with significant Ukrainian ethnic minorities were exacerbated by Soviet actions, most notably the seizure of non-grain foodstuffs and the physical blockading of peasants trying to leave in search of food.⁵ Upon becoming aware of the famine, Moscow "took an increasingly hard line toward the peasantry."⁶ The intentionality suggested by these facts is made more plausible by the existence of motive. At this time, Stalin sought to eradicate alleged enemies of the USSR and destroy national resistance to its domination. In Ukraine, this meant eradicating the 'kulaks,' Ukrainian peasants⁷ who were considered counter-revolutionaries and secessionists.⁸ Stalin proclaimed in 1929 that the "kulaks" would be "liquidated as a class."⁹ While Stalin did not want to exterminate all

³ United States, Congress, International Commission on the Ukraine Famine, *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine 1932-1933* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1988), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d00831044s;view=1up;seq=3>, vii.

⁴ Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "'Capital of Despair': Holodomor Memory and Political Conflicts in Kharkiv after the Orange Revolution," *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 3 (2011): 600.

⁵ Stanislav Kul'chyts'kyi, "The Holodomor of 1932-22: How and Why?" in *Contextualizing the Holodomor: The Impact of Thirty Years of Ukrainian Famine Studies*, eds. Andriy Makuch and Frank E. Sysyn (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2015), 88-89.

⁶ United States, *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine 1932-1933*, vii.

⁷ David Marples, "Ethnic Issues in the Famine of 1932-33 in Ukraine," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 3 (2009): 513.

⁸ Naimark, *How the Holodomor Can Be Integrated into Our Understanding of Genocide*, 119.

⁹ Quoted in Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (N.Y.: Basic Books, 2010), 36.

Ukrainians, “he did want to destroy them as the enemy nation he perceived them to be and to transform them into a Soviet nation that would be completely reliable... and denationalized.”¹⁰ The ‘kulaks’ were the key to this objective. This element of intent is why the Ukrainian term Holodomor – meaning ‘murder by starvation’ – is favoured over *holod*, meaning famine.¹¹ As Holodomor refers to the famine as experienced and manifested particularly in Ukraine, it is the term used throughout this paper. Its usage is meant to emphasize the construction and perception of the Holodomor as genocide, without arguing that it was one.

Study of the Holodomor has been complicated by dissension over the definition of genocide. Although this paper does not seek to prove the Holodomor-as-genocide thesis, understanding the basis of the claim and the context surrounding it is crucial to a thorough treatment. The United Nations’ *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* defines genocide as acts committed with “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”¹² However, scholarly work on the question has recognized the restrictiveness of this definition and has consequently developed a broader understanding. Most famously, historian Norman Naimark argued for the inclusion of social and political groups as legitimate targets of genocide. Indeed, Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term, espoused this same view in his original definition.¹³ This more expansive conception of genocide has rightly enabled scholars to recognize and analyze as genocidal mass killings those which do not meet the legal definition under the *Convention*. This approach is all the more important in Holodomor scholarship, for it was owing to the Soviet Union – which sought to avoid its own prosecution – that political and social groups were ultimately excluded from the legal definition of genocide.¹⁴ Hence, to escape the political biases embedded in the *Convention*, it is necessary to look beyond the strict legal definition.

Proponents of the Holodomor-as-genocide thesis assert that the Ukrainian peasant class, a socio-political group, was subjected to a famine deliberately inflicted by Soviet authorities to eliminate said group. In characterizing the Holodomor, scholars emphasize that Soviet authorities did not seek to kill every Ukrainian, but rather to “destroy the Ukrainian nation as a

¹⁰ Norman Naimark, *Stalin’s Genocides* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2010), 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹² UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, 9 December 1948, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 78, p. 277.

¹³ Himka, “Encumbered Memory,” 423.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

political factor and social organism, a goal which could be attained far short of complete extermination.”¹⁵ According to Lemkin’s assessment, the kulaks held special significance to Ukrainian nationhood as “the repository of the tradition, folk lore and music, the national language and literature, the national spirit, of Ukraine.”¹⁶ From this perspective, the peasantry was uniquely important to the Soviet project of denationalizing and assimilating Ukraine, because if unchecked, it would be a major source of both political resistance and cultural durability. Thus, we might understand the kulaks as both the principal target of genocide and their annihilation as a means to the cultural genocide of Ukraine as a nation.

History is a critical part of national identity for most collectivities, and particularly so in Ukraine for its unifying and healing power. In general, “new nations develop identities based on their understanding of story. Foundation myths, heroes, villains, defeats, and victories are identified and sometimes invented” as part of this process.¹⁷ As this characterization suggests, histories – and the memories and identities that proceed from them – subverted to nation-building aims are frequently filtered or embellished to serve political aims.¹⁸ After gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine sought to revive its ‘authentic’ history, to fill in the ‘blank spots’ which had been actively repressed by the Soviet regime or overshadowed by dominant Soviet narratives.¹⁹ The Holodomor was one such event which had been painfully suppressed, and after independence it was revived as a founding national myth. As a historical marker, the Holodomor was intended first to consolidate the population into a national community by bridging regional and ethnic divisions.²⁰ Due to the long-time repression of the truth of the famine alongside genuine differences in Ukrainians’ experience thereof, independent Ukraine was born with a “split in collective memory,” manifested regionally in opposing perceptions by the European-leaning West Ukraine and the Russian-leaning East and South. Indeed, ‘skeptics’ in these regions

¹⁵ Rebecca Moore, “‘A Crime Against Humanity Arguably Without Parallel in European History’: Genocide and the ‘Politics’ of Victimhood in Western Narratives of the Ukrainian *Holodomor*,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 58, no. 3 (2012): 368.

¹⁶ Alexander J. Motyl, “Deleting the Holodomor: Ukraine Unmakes Itself,” *World Affairs* 173, no. 4 (2010): 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸ Lina Klymenko, “The Holodomor law and national trauma construction in Ukraine,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 58, no. 4. (2016): 351.

¹⁹ Georgiy Kas’ianov, “‘Nationalized’ History: Past Continuous, Present Perfect, Future...” in *A laboratory of transnational history: Ukraine and recent Ukrainian historiography*, eds. Georgiy Kas’ianov and Philipp Ther (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009), 9.

²⁰ Zhurzhenko, “‘Capital of Despair,’” 597-8.

were seen as “de-nationalized” and were thus specifically targeted to learn the new national history.²¹ Certainly, there was also a sincere desire for moral healing and historical truth.²² Soviet repression had largely prevented the discussion and recognition that would have given much needed catharsis and validation to the survivors of what was a horrific atrocity, regardless of its classification as a genocide. That Yushchenko’s government was so active in its affirmation of the Holodomor constituted a reconciliation of the long-concealed “private memory” of individuals with the official “public memory” of the nation.²³ State efforts to embed the Holodomor in national identity thus represented “an awakening from Communist amnesia, healing national wounds and restoring the continuity of Ukrainian history.”²⁴

Efforts to embed the Holodomor in Ukrainian national identity are seen in the government’s attempts at institutionalizing and sacralizing the Holodomor, drawing from collective history as a basis for national healing. Domestically, the Holodomor was first recognized as a genocide by the first President of Ukraine Leonid Kravchuk in 1993, but its instrumentalization for nation-building was undertaken in earnest after 2005 under President Viktor Yushchenko.²⁵ Yushchenko established the Institute of National Remembrance as the institutional home for archives, historical research, and publicization of the Holodomor, and ran an awareness campaign which intensified as the seventy-fifth anniversary of the famine approached in 2008.²⁶ The Holodomor featured in government-sponsored television programs, specially curated museum exhibits, and university essay-writing initiatives.²⁷ It appeared in Yushchenko’s foreign policy too, featuring routinely in his speeches to the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States (US).²⁸ He made it the mandate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to gain international recognition of the Holodomor and created a permanent working group to realize this ambition.²⁹ Hence, there was a concerted effort to gain recognition

²¹ Ibid., 604.

²² Mykola Riabchuk, “Holodomor: The Politics of Memory and Political Infighting in Contemporary Ukraine,” in *The Holodomor of 1932-33: Papers from the 75th-Anniversary Conference on the Ukrainian Famine-Genocide*, University of Toronto, November 1, 2007 (New York: The Harriman Institute, 2008), 6.

²³ Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), 204.

²⁴ Zhurzhenko, ““Capital of Despair,”” 601.

²⁵ Ibid., 602.

²⁶ Ibid., 599.

²⁷ Georgiy Kas'ianov, “The Holodomor and the Building of a Nation,” *Russian Social Science Review* 52, no. 3 (2011): 73.

²⁸ Ibid., 87.

²⁹ Zhurzhenko, ““Capital of Despair,”” 602.

of the Holodomor as genocide by both domestic and foreign audiences; this was, for Yushchenko, the “unconditional task... of Ukrainian politicians.”³⁰

This project of institutionalizing the Holodomor constituted an effort to entrench it in cultural memory. Unlike communicative memory, which endures over only several generations via direct interpersonal exchange, cultural memory spans the entire existence of a collectivity and requires institutions to uphold it.³¹ In this context, the Ukrainian state itself became the steward and curator of that cultural memory. The 2006 Holodomor Law, which recognized the Holodomor “as an act of genocide of the Ukrainian people,” exemplifies the strength of the institutional approach and proclaimed that denial thereof would “be recognized as desecration of the memory of [the victims] as well as the disparagement of the Ukrainian people and [would] be unlawful.”³² Notably, this law did not proscribe denial of the famine, but rejection of the specific *interpretation* of the Holodomor as genocide, an effort which Yushchenko later tried but failed to criminalize.³³ The law further asserted that the Holodomor had destroyed “the social foundation of the Ukrainian people and of its centuries-old traditions, spiritual culture and ethnic distinctive character,” marking the entire nation as uniquely and profoundly harmed.³⁴ This definition of the harm incurred was linked to the present by assigning to contemporary Ukrainians a “moral duty before the past and future generations” to “restor[e] historic justice” by “honoring the memory of [their] compatriots.”³⁵ Meanwhile, the duty of the state itself was to “restor[e] and preserv[e]... the national memory” and “to promote the consolidation and development of the Ukrainian nation [and] its historic self-consciousness.”³⁶ As Lina Klymenko observes, using law to reinforce a political claim in this way “provides legitimacy and an aura of objectivity to the claims posed,” entrenching them in society as fundamental, immutable truths which are also irrefutable “since, by definition, moral claims established by law cannot be contested.”³⁷ Law is thus a powerful tool for imposing a particular narrative of collective national memory, and it was

³⁰ Kas'ianov, “The Holodomor and the Building of a Nation,” 82.

³¹ Klymenko, “The Holodomor law and national trauma construction in Ukraine,” 350.

³² Ukraine, Verkhovna Rada, “On Holodomor of 1932-33 in Ukraine,” Kyiv, November 28, 2006. <https://canada.mfa.gov.ua/en/ukraine-%D1%81%D0%B0/holodomor-remembrance/holodomor-remembrance-ukraine/holodomor-law-ukraine>, art. 1 and art. 2.

³³ Kas'ianov, “The Holodomor and the Building of a Nation,” 84.

³⁴ Ukraine, “On Holodomor of 1932-33 in Ukraine,” preamble.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., art. 3.

³⁷ Klymenko, “The Holodomor law and national trauma construction in Ukraine,” 347-8.

used as such by the Yushchenko government.

In addition to its entrenchment in the state apparatus and legislation, the Holodomor has effectively become a civil religion in some areas. Under Yushchenko, official commemoration ceremonies such as nation-wide candle-lighting memorials and discourses of the Holodomor as a defining national tragedy sacralized it such that it became ineligible for debate. The National Museum, known at the time as the Memorial in Commemoration of Famines' Victims in Ukraine, is a prime example. In the museum complex, information about the Holodomor was accompanied by religious imagery and the symbolic veneration of Holodomor victims, with the National Books of Memory displayed on pillars “like prayer books.”³⁸ Traditionally considered a space for objective, academic history, the museum was instead transformed into a sacralized space serving a commemorative function while retaining its air of authority. Portraying the Holodomor this way transformed a state narrative into a civil religion and dissent into civil heresy.³⁹ The strong emotional charge associated with Holodomor remembrance at times produced an atmosphere of “social hysteria” wherein “scholarly appeals for a sober and rational examination [were] regarded... as a challenge to public opinion or as a show of disrespect for the memory of the victims.”⁴⁰ As such, sacralization and ritualization of Holodomor remembrance were additional state tactics to revive the Holodomor in collective memory and embed it in national identity.

Until 2010, the independent Ukrainian government sought to embed the Holodomor in the national identity through state institutions, law, and sacred rituals in order to foreground Ukraine’s history of genocide in the national collective memory. In turn, this conception of Ukraine as a post-genocide community had nuanced implications for the definition of the nation as a victim and the definition of ‘others’ as perpetrators.

Firstly, the association of Ukrainian national memory and identity with a history of victimization in genocide served to purify the historical narrative of the nation as a whole, thereby strengthening the sense of national honour and unity. Among these unsavoury histories was that of Ukrainian facilitation of the Holodomor itself. Many Soviet Ukrainian state

³⁸ Himka, “Encumbered Memory,” 428.

³⁹ Ibid., 427.

⁴⁰ Georgiy Kas'ianov, “Revisiting the Great Famine of 1932-1933: Politics of Memory and Public Consciousness (Ukraine after 1991),” in *Past in the Making: Historical revisionism in Central Europe after 1989*, ed. Michal Kopecek (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 201-2.

administrators and military personnel facilitated the famine, and still more passively enjoyed the privileges of their status at the expense of their so-called ‘compatriots.’⁴¹ This reality was problematic for the narrative of unified national suffering, and so it was hidden. Names of known Ukrainian facilitators were omitted from a July 2008 list which named ‘perpetrators’ of the famine, and, as Klymenko shows, the Holodomor law too “seemed to deliberately promote... national unity by omitting the alleged involvement of Ukrainians as perpetrators.”⁴² The Holodomor narrative also suggested that Ukraine’s history of genocide was to blame for contemporary political and social ills. For instance, then-Deputy Prime Minister Dmytro Tabachnik asserted that “[a] sociophysiological fear, created by mass repression and the Holodomors, lives in the consciousness of many generations. It has entered the genotype of the nation and is a significant impediment to... democratization.”⁴³ Victimization in genocide was claimed to have profoundly shaped Ukraine’s character, implying the unified suffering of the entire nation – including the contemporary ruling class – through history to the present. Expressing “unity with the people” in their tragedy was especially crucial for Presidents Kravchuk and Kuchma (1991-2005), as both had belonged to high levels of the Communist Party nomenklatura and accordingly sought to evade accusations by condemning the crimes of totalitarianism while emphasizing the nation-wide tragedy of the Holodomor.⁴⁴ This sense of unified victimization was also meant to bridge the previously discussed regional differences. With the creation of the National Books of Memory displaying a “martyrology” of victims’ names, the actual Holodomor victims came “to serve as metonyms for the broader martyrdom of the Ukrainian nation.”⁴⁵ It is seen that the Holodomor-as-genocide narrative served to foreground victimization in Ukrainian national identity in advancing a claim of extreme tragedy while de-emphasizing the conflicting realities of Ukrainians’ complicity in genocide and of the disunity of national suffering.

The claim to distinct Ukrainian victimization also served to minimize Jewish suffering in the Shoah and Ukrainians’ involvement as perpetrators. This implication is not inherent in Ukrainians’ claims of being victimized, but rather it resulted from the particular manner in which

⁴¹ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 66.

⁴² Klymenko, “The Holodomor law and national trauma construction in Ukraine,” 348.

⁴³ Quoted in Kas’ianov, “The Holodomor and the Building of a Nation,” 81.

⁴⁴ Riabchuk, “Holodomor: The Politics of Memory and Political Infighting in Contemporary Ukraine,” 4-5.

⁴⁵ Uilleam Blacker, “Martyrdom, Spectacle, and Public Space: Ukraine’s National Martyrology from Shevchenko to the Maidan,” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 270-1.

the claims to victimhood were asserted. As the most widely recognized genocide and indeed “the benchmark against which other atrocities are judged,” the Shoah has “produced a fair amount of resentment” from other groups seeking similarly widespread recognition of their own tragedies.⁴⁶ This so-called “Holocaust envy” has yielded a phenomenon termed ‘competitive atrocity’ wherein groups seek validation of their suffering by comparing it to Jewish suffering, at times asserting that the former was of greater magnitude.⁴⁷ In terming the famine variously as “Ukraine’s Holocaust,” or evocatively, “the Holocaust the West forgot,” Holodomor advocates engaged in this, allegedly “to make the suffering of Ukrainians understandable to other societies.”⁴⁸ State policy aligned with this endeavor. Namely, Yushchenko’s previously discussed “ideological and political campaign was initiated to interpret the famine of 1932–33 as the greatest humanitarian catastrophe of the twentieth century, exceeding in scale all other cases of genocide, *including the Holocaust*.”⁴⁹ Accordingly, publicists and politicians have used inflated statistics, with some claiming upwards of 10 million excess deaths, to legitimize the Holodomor as a genocide, but moreover to portray its harm to Ukrainians and broader humanity as greater than that of the Shoah.⁵⁰ To draw conclusions on the question here implied would be not only inappropriate but academically futile. However, to politically and socially win – as Peter Novick has put it – the “gold medal in the Victimization Olympics” means much indeed.⁵¹

Namely, for Ukraine, it meant erasing complicity in the Shoah, which was a stain on the national image. This was undertaken at the highest levels of government. For example, President Yushchenko had the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) expend “considerable effort attempting to clear [the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)] of complicity in the Holocaust, even to the point of publishing falsehoods.”⁵² This must be understood in the context of Yushchenko’s overarching campaign to strengthen Ukrainian nationalism by reviving symbolic nationalist heroes. In addition to venerating the OUN, Yushchenko also named as ‘Heroes of Ukraine’ Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych, who were prominent participants in anti-Semitic and

⁴⁶ Moore, “‘A Crime Against Humanity...’” 375.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 376.

⁴⁸ Klymenko, “The Holodomor law and national trauma construction in Ukraine,” 346.

⁴⁹ Kas’ianov, “The Holodomor and the Building of a Nation,” 85-6. Emphasis added.

⁵⁰ Naimark “How the Holodomor Can Be Integrated into Our Understanding of Genocide,” 123.

⁵¹ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 195.

⁵² Himka, “Encumbered Memory,” 430.

Nazi violence in the First and Second World Wars.⁵³ Another stark example is the Babi Yar ravine, the site of what is considered “the single largest massacre... of the Holocaust” with a death toll of 33,000 Jews.⁵⁴ Yushchenko’s policies shifted the commemorative emphasis away from these deaths and instead to “the hundreds of members of OUN who were also buried there.”⁵⁵ Johan Dietsch found that this practice was also represented in Ukrainian schools, which were seen as critical to “constructing a viable Ukrainian nation” and hence used textbooks that “downplay[ed] the Jewish experience in favor of the Ukrainian one.”⁵⁶ These cases exemplify a broader trend which was not limited to the state apparatus. In fact, these developments occurred against the background of Ukrainian diaspora members defending Ukrainians sought for extradition on Shoah-related criminal charges,⁵⁷ and a “troubling link” between Ukrainians glorifying the OUN and the Holodomor while downplaying Ukrainian participation in the Shoah.⁵⁸ Identification as solely a victim of genocide was a method of deflecting accusations of perpetration such that problematic nationalist symbols could be revived and purified. Ukrainian complicity in both the Holodomor and the Shoah was to be overshadowed by the identity of victimhood which would support claims of national unity and martyrdom.

At the same time as the Holodomor bound the nation internally through shared victimhood, it defined the nation *against* its ‘others’ – that is, the genocide’s perpetrators. Beyond minimizing their suffering, certain nationalist narratives have actually blamed the Jews for the Holodomor. These narratives stemmed from the anti-Semitism that proliferated throughout Europe for centuries and became associated with the Holodomor in Ukraine. In wartime Soviet Ukraine, Nazi occupiers enabled public accounts of the famine and harnessed anti-Semitism, which was otherwise latent, to blame the Jews for committing genocide against Ukraine as a means of securing local collaboration.⁵⁹ Since its inception in 1929, OUN also heralded ‘Judeo-Bolshevism’ as the enemy of Ukrainian nationalism and incited violence against

⁵³ Ingmar Oldberg, “Both Victim and Perpetrator: Ukraine’s Problematic Relationship to the Holocaust,” *Baltic Worlds* 4 no. 2 (2011): 43.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁵ Himka, “Encumbered Memory,” 430.

⁵⁶ Johan Dietsch, “Textbooks and the Holocaust in Independent Ukraine,” *European Education* 44, no. 3 (2012): 88-9.

⁵⁷ Kas’ianov, “Revisiting the Great Famine of 1932-1933,” 204.

⁵⁸ Himka, “Encumbered Memory,” 428-30.

⁵⁹ Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 207.

Ukrainian Jews on this basis.⁶⁰ This anti-Semitism contributed to a perception of Jews as having caused, profited from, or evaded the famine, a view that was shared by Ukrainian activists and politicians alike post-independence. Ukrainian Ambassador Levko Lukyanenko believed that the Jews had in fact been in control of the Soviet government when the genocide was committed.⁶¹ This narrative was also deployed in the Holodomor remembrance campaign. In analyzing the list of “Holodomor-Genocide” perpetrators published by the SBU in July 2008, Georgiy Kas’ianov argues that the decision to list the Jewish birth names of certain perpetrators rather than their Russian or Ukrainian names was a deliberate choice which put “indirect but powerful emphasis on their ethnic origin.”⁶² Without explicit accusations leveled by the editors, the National Books of Memory also portray Jews in a decidedly unsavory light. Featured prominently were testimonies recalling Jewish-run stores which “pumped gold and silver from the people” of Ukraine in exchange for desperately-needed food, suggesting that this is “from where the Jews have such large resources.” The carefully chosen testimonials ultimately suggest that it was the Jews “who fleeced Ukraine [and] drove its people to the grave.”⁶³

Thus, in prominent state documents explicitly proclaiming to constitute ‘national memory,’ the Jews were constructed as the perpetrators of genocide against the Ukrainian nation and were henceforth excluded from national membership. This extended the logic of crowding out and negating the Shoah, while simultaneously offering a justification for past Ukrainian anti-Semitic violence: Ukrainians were “not to blame for these acts of revenge” because they were “provoked by Jewish actions.”⁶⁴ Ostensibly, independent Ukraine could come to terms with its victimization without confronting this national guilt. Finally, throughout its history, Ukrainian society has comprised diverse ethnic groups such as Jews, each with “their own narratives of suffering which challenge the monopoly of the ethnic Ukrainians as a collective victim.”⁶⁵ The identification of Jews as perpetrators and the emphasis on the Holodomor’s distinctly Ukrainian character served to “ethnicize” the genocide, dismissing these competing narratives of suffering

⁶⁰ Himka, “Encumbered Memory,” 431.

⁶¹ Per Anders Rudling, “Organized Anti-Semitism in Contemporary Ukraine: Structure, Influence and Ideology,” *Canadian Slavonic Paper* 48 no. 1-2 (2006): 91.

⁶² Georgiy Kas’ianov, *Danse Macabre: The Famine of 1932-1933 in Politics, Mass Consciousness, and Historiography [1980s-Early 2000s]* (Kyiv: Nash chas, 2010), 196. Quoted in Himka, “Encumbered Memory,” 432.

⁶³ Himka, “Encumbered Memory,” 434.

⁶⁴ Rudling, “Organized Anti-Semitism in Contemporary Ukraine: Structure, Influence and Ideology,” 99.

⁶⁵ Zhurzhenko, “‘Capital of Despair,’” 598.

and placing the national narrative above all else. Circumscribing the ‘true’ Ukrainian nation to the exclusion of the Jewish perpetrator - the ‘other’ - centred collective memory and identity on exclusively Ukrainian suffering.⁶⁶

Blame was also laid at the feet of the Soviet Union and its Russian successor state, thereby distancing independent Ukraine from its former ruler. From the Tsarist empire to the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russia has an extended history of dominating and subjugating Ukraine. Particularly in the 1930s with the implementation of ‘Russification’ policies, Stalin sought to stamp out Ukrainian national culture and assimilate Ukrainians socially and politically as “subaltern subjects of a Russia-dominated centre.”⁶⁷ Even since Ukrainian independence, Russia “maintained a vast cultural influence in Ukraine,” which was exemplified by their shared religious practices and by the many Russian-speaking Ukrainians.⁶⁸ As the Soviet Union “made active use of history in establishing ideological uniformity” in the SSRs, the creation of a “national” and “sovereign” history separate from Soviet history naturally became a key instrument of asserting political sovereignty and cultural emancipation in independent Ukraine.⁶⁹ For Ukraine, true independence was a function of domestic control over the nation’s political, cultural, and historical narrative; for Ukrainian nationalists, that narrative was one of continual resistance to and suffering under Russian rule.⁷⁰ The Holodomor as a genocide featured in this narrative as an extreme example of the grave consequences of Soviet or Russian domination. Underscoring this, Kravchuk said of Ukraine, “if we lose our independence... we will always face the possibility of repeating those horrible pages in our history, including the famine, which were planned by a foreign power.”⁷¹ This exemplifies the particular denunciation of external influences, a critical element for ‘nationalizing’ the history of any formerly subjugated state.⁷² Reviving the truth of the Holodomor and embedding it in national memory could therefore be seen as dissolving pro-Russia sentiments which may lead Ukraine back under Russian

⁶⁶ Riabchuk, “Holodomor: The Politics of Memory and Political Infighting...” 7.

⁶⁷ Andreas Kappeler, “Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the imperial past and competing memories,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5 (2014): 110.

⁶⁸ Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Yuliya Yurchuk, “Memory politics in contemporary Ukraine: Reflections from the postcolonial perspective,” *Memory Studies* (2017): 4.

⁶⁹ Kas’ianov, “The Holodomor and the Building of a Nation,” 71.

⁷⁰ Kappeler, “Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the imperial past...” 112.

⁷¹ Marta Kolomayets, ‘Ukraine’s People Recall National Tragedy of Famine-Holocaust,’ *Ukrainian Weekly* 61, no. 38 (19 September 1993), 1. http://www.ukrweekly.com/archive/1993/The_Ukrainian_Weekly_1993-38.pdf.

⁷² Kas’ianov, “Revisiting the Great Famine of 1932-1933,” 207.

domination. In this way, Ukrainians were to identify with a distinctly national narrative to the exclusion of the Russian ‘other,’ even while many still felt an affinity for Russia. In this ideological context, Ukraine is reimagined as a post-colonial nation seeking emancipation from its former status as a subaltern within the Soviet Union and desiring recognition of the immense (i.e. genocidal) tragedy it endured due to that status.⁷³ Hence, the Holodomor-as-genocide thesis supported Ukrainian nation-building by constructing Jews and Russians as perpetrators and ‘others,’ thereby defining the true Ukrainian nation by its difference from these groups.

The case of the Ukrainian Holodomor reveals how, by the function of collective memory, historical realities may become political narratives which in turn forge national futures. This paper has sought to demonstrate how the post-independence, pre-2010 Ukrainian government, but particularly the Yushchenko administration, embarked on a project of embedding the Holodomor-as-genocide thesis in Ukraine’s national identity through its institutionalization, legislation, and sacralization, recognizing of the power of history and collective memory in this endeavour. The overpowering quality of victimization characterizing this identity served to minimize the perpetration and complicity of some Ukrainians with reference to both the Shoah and the Holodomor, thereby purifying and homogenizing the national narrative of suffering. Simultaneously, the identification of perpetrators served to define outsiders against which the true Ukrainian nation could be defined, – namely Jews and Russians – reinforcing the conceptualization of Ukraine as a post-colonial as well as post-genocide state. Cumulatively, these elements reveal the post-Soviet Ukrainian state’s interest in deploying the Holodomor-as-genocide narrative as an instrument of state-building. That these representations were carefully ‘constructed,’ however, does not prove that they were false. Some, such as the denial of Ukrainian complicity in genocide, certainly were, but other claims were more ambiguous. Our understanding of genocide-related political claims could benefit from an examination of the nuances of truth and falsehood therein, just as it does from examining the logic of deploying these claims in the first place.

⁷³ Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk, “Memory politics in contemporary Ukraine,” 3.

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