

# In the shadow of famine: How do Russo–Ukrainian and Russo–Kazakh relations impact memorialisation of the Holodomor and Kazakh famine?

Grace Vanderkolk  
The University of Melbourne  
gvanderkolk@student.unimelb.edu.au

## Abstract

*The trajectories of public memory and memorialisation of the famines of the 1930s have been vastly different for Kazakhstan and Ukraine, despite the common causation of these national tragedies. Many of the disparities between memorialisation of these events emerge from these nations' different post-collapse trajectories. A not insignificant amount of vacillation on memory policy occurred as both nations grappled with the past, owing to the various orientations of national leadership and popular sentiment as contexts shifted. While Ukraine sought to forge an independent path quickly post-collapse, Kazakhstan maintained close relations with Russia until recently. Changes to Kazakhstan's foreign policy spurred, in part, by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine have in turn prompted a reevaluation of famine memory. This article seeks to illustrate the complexity of nations coming to terms with their Soviet pasts alongside new domestic and international concerns and illustrate the value of comparative analysis of famine memory through a post-colonial lens.*

**Keywords:** Famine, memory politics, post-soviet space, Kazakhstan, Ukraine

## Introduction

The impact of the Soviet man-made famines of the 1930s, including the Ukrainian Holodomor of 1932–1933 and Kazakh famine of 1930–1932 (*Asharshylyk*), reverberate in the minds of survivors and their descendants, as well as in politics and society globally. Contemporary interpretation and memorialisation of these famines emerged in diaspora and, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, have become firmly rooted in both Ukraine and Kazakhstan's evolving relationship with the successor to the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation. Differing post-collapse contexts in Kazakhstan and Ukraine have seen the use of famine memory differ accordingly. With the decolonial shift in scholarship, amplified by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, narratives surrounding these famines have become more mutually intelligible. Although both Ukraine and Kazakhstan have dealt differently with Russia with regard to the legacy of famine, as tensions in the post-Soviet space endure, growing mutual intelligibility of famine interpretations and memorialisation can aid both Ukraine and Kazakhstan in coming to terms with their Soviet pasts.

## Famines of the 1930s: Holodomor and *Asharshylyk*

The transition from the New Economic Policy to the first Five Year Plan, implemented in 1929 to 1932, saw state sanctioned private trade quickly eliminated with all resources directed towards industrialisation. This subjugation of all facets of governance to industrialisation informed the policy of collectivisation, within which

peasants were strong-armed into joining collective farms to produce grain to further fund industrialisation.<sup>1</sup> Key here, in terms of collectivisation's role in creating famine in Ukraine was its kneecapping of peasant self-sufficiency.<sup>2</sup> Under the NEP, peasants were able to farm and sell produce independently to support themselves, while the ever-increasing quotas imposed by the Five Year Plan were impossible to fulfill.<sup>3</sup> In the face of unfulfilled quotas, state authorities forcibly seized food from peasants' homes using increasingly harsh means and looked to kulaks as saboteurs, rather than to themselves and their policy, in explaining shortfalls in quotas.<sup>4</sup> These deliberately unrealistic expectations, and relentless grain seizures including seed stock, begot further shortfalls in fulfillment and created hunger for peasants, collective farmers and city-dwellers which in Ukraine escalated to famine conditions by late 1932, particularly in Kharkiv and Kyiv oblasti.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly to Ukraine, the policy of collectivisation forced Kazakhs onto collective farms and violently enforced collection quotas. In the Kazakh case, the concurrent policy of sedentarising previously nomadic people prompted destabilisation of power from Kazakh clans and elites, adding a unique dimension to the famine which also facilitated cultural destruction.<sup>6</sup> This differs from the Ukrainian case in which cultural destruction occurred with the purge of elites in the mid-1920s and the abandonment of korenizatsiia, rather than at the same time as famine emerged. Kazakhs, with little instruction as to how sedentarised farming and livestock grazing operated and particularly given the harsh environment of the steppe which made these practices untenable, found that the unrealistic quotas set by Soviet authorities were impossible to fulfill.<sup>7</sup> Common periodisation of the Kazakh Famine states it began in 1930 or 1931, though hunger had set in by 1929 and 1930. By late 1932, some relief efforts were made

<sup>1</sup> Arup Banerji, *Merchants and Markets in Revolutionary Russia, 1917-30* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1997), 149-150; Elena Osokina, *Our Daily Bread: Socialist Distribution and the Art of Survival in Stalin's Russia, 1927-1941*, ed. Kate Transchel, trans. Kate Transchel and Greta Bucher (New York: Routledge, 1999), 23, 25-27; Nicolas Werth, et al., *The black book of communism: crimes, terror, repression* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 167.

<sup>2</sup> Osokina, *Our Daily Bread*, 4-5, 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> R. W. Davies, *The Socialist Offensive: The Collectivisation of Soviet Agriculture, 1929-1930* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 348-349; Stanislav Kul'chyts'kyi, "To assess the situation in the agricultural economy of the Ukrainian SSR in 1931-1938 [Do otsinky stanovnyshcha v sil's'komu hospodarstvi URSS u 1931-1938 rr.]," *Ukraïnc'kyi ictopychnyi zhurnal*, no. 3 (March 1988), 16; Elena Osokina, *Our Daily Bread*, 4-5, 33-34.

<sup>4</sup> Hryhory Kostyuk, *Stalinist Rule in the Ukraine: A study of the Decade of Mass Terror (1929-1939)* (London: Stevens and Sons, 1960), 5-6; Lewis Siegelbaum, "Collectivization," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, accessed 19 August, 2023. <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1929-2/collectivization/>; Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 236; On saboteurs in Kazakhstan: Sarah Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2018), 135.

<sup>5</sup> Nataliia Levchuk, Oleh Wolowyna, Omelian Rudnytskyi, Alla Kovbasiuk, and Natalia Kulyk, "Regional 1932-1933 Famine Losses: A Comparative Analysis of Ukraine and Russia," *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 3 (2020), 499; 1932-1933 is the accepted date range for the Holodomor specifically though some variation on this can be found in Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine* (Penguin, 2018) and Stanislav Kul'chyts'kyi, *The Famine of 1932-1933 in Ukraine: An Anatomy of the Holodomor*, trans. Ali Kinsella (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2018), who claim an all-Soviet nature of the famine until 1933.

<sup>6</sup> Niccolò Piancola, "Ukraine and Kazakhstan: Comparing the Famines," *Contemporary European History* 27, no. 3 (2018), 440. 10.1017/S0960777318000309; Robert Kindler, *Stalin's Nomads: Power and Famine in Kazakhstan*, trans. Cynthia Klohr (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), 68; Further reading on the purge of elites in context of the Holodomor: Applebaum, *Red Famine*.

<sup>7</sup> Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe*, 9; Niccolò Piancola, "Sarah Cameron. The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan. Robert Kindler. Stalin's Nomads: Power and Famine in Kazakhstan. Translated by Cynthia Klohr," *American Historical Review* 125, no. 2 (April 1, 2020), 637; Stephen G. Wheatcroft, "The Complexity of the Kazakh Famine: Food Problems and Faulty Perceptions," *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no.4 (2021), 593, 595.

including freeing of remaining nomads from procurement quotas and organising seed assistance, as well as a slowing of the collectivisation effort.<sup>8</sup>

Loss of life resulting from both the Kazakh and Ukrainian famines was significant. Common estimates for Ukraine suggest 4.5 million, and in Kazakhstan, estimates suggest 1.5 million.<sup>9</sup> Interesting to note here is the proportion of deaths in these regions, because while Ukraine experienced, numerically, the greatest number of famine deaths, in Kazakhstan the proportion of death was highest, at 30% of the population.<sup>10</sup> These numbers do not account for other forms of population loss which arose from the famine and adjacent phenomena like dekulakisation and deportation which saw swathes of people from both countries flee or be forcibly removed from their homes.<sup>11</sup>

The brutality of the famine is not only found in the resulting loss of life, but the violence through which it was created. Though all famines have a human element to their causation, the requisitioning of increasingly significant proportions of the harvest, the increasingly violent means of requisitioning in order to meet quotas, and brutal punishments for hoarding of grain, either in reality or in the eyes of Soviet authorities whose views were further skewed by the threat of unfulfilled quotas, point undeniably to the man-made nature of these famines.<sup>12</sup>

As well as this reality, the lengths people resorted to in order to survive have created a distinct impression in the collective memory of survivors and their families. People were forced to migrate and resorted to trading family heirlooms, scavenging, consumption of surrogate foods, and cannibalism to sustain themselves. These stories have come to serve ‘as a powerful metaphor for horror and disaster’ of the famine within a cultural context.<sup>13</sup> As such, they have been shared in memoirs and interviews since at least the early 1950s and inform a significant proportion of the memorial space of the Holodomor and Kazakh famine.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe*, 154.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Cameron, “Questioning the Distinctiveness of the Ukrainian Famine,” *Contemporary European History* 27, no. 3 (2018), 462.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Kindler, “Victims without perpetrators: Kazakh and Ukrainian memories of the 1932/33 hunger [Opfer Ohne Täter: Kasachische Und Ukrainische Erinnerung an Den Hunger 1932/33],” *Osteuropa* 62, no. 3 (2012), 115.

<sup>11</sup> For more on population loss through deportation and flight see: Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe*, 115-116, 122, 133-134.

<sup>12</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *Famine: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ó Gráda, *Famine*, 64; Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, 227-232, 260-264; Zhulduzbek B. Abylkhozhin, Manash K. Kozybaev, and Makash B. Tatimov, “The Tragedy of Kazakhstan [Kazakhstanskaya tragediia],” *Voprosy istorii*, no.7 (1989), 54-55.

<sup>14</sup> HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 8, Case 110; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 36, Case 333/(NY)1582, 24; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 17, Case 332, 9; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 26, Case 513, 5; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 5, Case 58, 22a; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 32, Case 91/(NY)1124, 65; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 36, Case 333/(NY)1582, 25; HPSSS, Schedule B, Vol. 7, Case 67, 31; HPSSS, Schedule B, Vol. 20, Case 356, 21; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 12, Case 149, 9-10; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 26, Case 513, 6; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 1296(NY)/mismatched against #93, 28; S.O Pidhiany, *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin: A White Book* (Toronto: Ukrainian Association of Victims of Russian Communist Terror, 1953); Miron Dolot, *Execution by Hunger: The Hidden Holocaust* (W.W. Norton, 1985); Nicolas Werth, et al. *The black book of communism: crimes, terror, repression* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 161-168; Mehmet Volkan Kaşıkçı, “Making Sense of Catastrophe: Experiencing and Remembering the Kazakh Famine in a Comparative Context,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 58, no.2 (2023).

## Officially sanctioned and collective memories in Ukraine

News of ‘famine in Russia’ made international headlines as it unfolded throughout the early 1930s, despite Soviet and socialist aligned propaganda efforts which depicted the collectivisation effort as wildly successful.<sup>15</sup> Coverage typically focussed on famine in the western Soviet Union, and particularly Ukraine, likely due to the presence of Ukrainian diaspora abroad who could have received correspondence from loved ones at home.<sup>16</sup> Contrastingly, Kazakh flight over the Chinese border meant that there was less opportunity given for Western media to hear of famine outside Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> In the aftermath of the famine, enforced silence prevented its discussion in the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> This aimed, dually, to deflect from the state’s responsibility in manufacturing the famines and to legitimise the society which emerged post-famine through this regime of forgetting.<sup>19</sup> The cost of breakneck collectivisation, which saw 50 percent of farms collectivised by 1931 and 60 percent the following year,<sup>20</sup> was the lives and livelihoods of those who were worst affected, particularly in Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Admitting to this fact would have delegitimised the sanctioned narrative of success regarding the collectivisation effort.<sup>21</sup> Only in 1966, under the authorisation of the First Secretary of Ukraine, Petro Shelest, was a qualified mention of the Holodomor given official sanction in an article in the newspaper *News From Ukraine*.<sup>22</sup> In Kazakhstan, discussion of famine only emerged on the eve of the Soviet collapse, and unlike the Ukrainian case, little memorial culture emerged before 1991.<sup>23</sup> Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, as the legal successor to the Soviet Union, has made no effort to acknowledge the impact of the Holodomor in Ukraine and stands

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Russia’ is used here in inverted commas to reflect terminology used in the cited articles and to illustrate the lack of differentiation often made between different Soviet republics; Nigel Linsan Colley, “Famine Exposure Newspaper Articles relating to Gareth Jones’ trips to The Soviet Union (1930-35),” *Gareth Jones* [website authored by estate of Gareth Jones] (accessed 21 August 2023).

[https://www.garethjones.org/soviet\\_articles/soviet\\_articles.htm](https://www.garethjones.org/soviet_articles/soviet_articles.htm); Whiting Williams, “My Journey Through Famine-Stricken Russia,” *Answers* (London, February 24, 1934), p.16-17, 28. [MSS 3580, container 12, folder 1.] Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

<http://vitacollections.ca/HREC-holodomorphotodirectory/3645637/data>; Whiting Williams, “Why Russia is Hungry,” *Answers* (London, March 3, 1934), p.3. [MSS 3580, container 12, folder 1.] Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH. <http://vitacollections.ca/HREC-holodomorphotodirectory/3645664/data>; Alexander Wienerberger, *The Famine-Tragedy in South Russia (Die Hungertragödie in Südrussland)*, Archdiocese Diocesan Archives, Vienna. <http://vitacollections.ca/HREC-holodomorphotodirectory/3636252/data>; Paul Vaillant-Couturier, *On the Steppes of the Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Moscow: Co-Operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R.; The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1932), Archives Unbound. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/SC5110236629/GDSC?u=unimelb&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=d8ba52be&pg=1>.

<sup>16</sup> For a good explanation of the intricacies of the prevalence of early Ukrainians in diaspora: Wsevolod W. Isajiw, “The Ukrainian Diaspora,” in *The Call of the Homeland* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 292-293.

<sup>17</sup> For more about flight over the Sino-Kazakh border: Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe*, 122-142.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Edele, *Debates on Stalinism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 237-238.

<sup>19</sup> Dario Paez, Nekane Basabe and Jose Luis Gonzalez, “Social Processes and Collective Memory: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Remembering Political Events,” in *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives*, eds. James W. Pennebaker, Dario Paez, Bernard Rim, and Dario Paez (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997), 147-184.

<sup>20</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 62, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Oksana Zhukoval, ““Forward to the bright future of socialism!”: the role of images and symbols in promoting collectivization in Soviet Ukraine,” *SHS Web of Conferences* 63, no. 10003 (2019), 8-11.

<sup>22</sup> Marples, *Heroes and Villains*, 35; Boriak, Tetiana. “The Toolkit of Oral History in the Formation of a Mass of Oral History Sources for the Holodomor in Ukraine in 1932–1933,” *Scientific Journal of Polonia University* 52, no.3 (2022), 28.

<sup>23</sup> Zhulduzbek B. Abylkhozhin, Manash K. Kozybaev, and Makash B. Tatimov, “The Tragedy of Kazakhstan [Kazakhstanskaya tragedia],” 54-55; Isabelle Ohayon, “The Kazakh Famine: The Beginnings of Sedentarization,” *Mass Violence & Résistance* (28 September, 2013), 9-10; ‘Memorial culture’, here, refers not just to that in Ukraine, but that produced in diaspora which will be discussed in subsequent sections.

increasingly against commemoration efforts with this national angle.<sup>24</sup> Contrastingly, in the Kazakh case, reticence about the famine's impact has been, to an extent, self-imposed, although Russia's reluctance to acknowledge the national aspects of its causation also contributes to this silence.<sup>25</sup>

Enforced silence in the Soviet Union regarding the Holodomor was sharply contrasted by the collective memories and memorial culture which emerged in diaspora, particularly in the US and Canada. Early efforts of the 1950s, helped by the post-war context in which ex-Soviet refugees found themselves outside the bounds of the Soviet Union, allowed for the collection of testimony from famine survivors.<sup>26</sup> Testimonies collected by Oseredok, as part of a competition in the late 1940s, and the Harvard Interview Project on the Soviet Social System (HPSSS), completed between 1950 and 1951, and the two volumes of *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin* are notable examples of the early efforts to collect testimony of ex-Soviet citizens' lives in the USSR.<sup>27</sup> Though none of these projects sought specifically to collect famine testimony, the prevalence of accounts of famine spoke to its impact on their life trajectory and allowed famine survivors to give voice to their experiences and begin to make meaning from them.<sup>28</sup> Here, narratives of the Holodomor as genocide emerged.<sup>29</sup> These frequently connected the man-made nature of hunger, along with its brutal enforcement tactics, with the longer history of repression of Ukrainians under Soviet governance. For example, the walking back of korenizatsiia which allowed for a flourishing of Ukrainian culture in the 1920s, peasant resistance against collectivisation, dekulakisation, the anti-religious campaign as well as the terror of the late 1930s all form a complex within which emerges a concerted plan to cow the Ukrainian nation.<sup>30</sup>

These sentiments flourished in diaspora, especially into the 1980s when non-Ukrainian scholars, most notably James Mace and Robert Conquest, began investigating and championing the famine-as-genocide interpretation. Mace's efforts

<sup>24</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Is Ukraine Next?" *Slate* (23 February, 2009). <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2009/02/is-ukraine-next.html>; Ben Johnson, "Russia still denies the Holodomor was 'genocide'," *Acton Institute* (27 November 2017), <https://www.acton.org/publications/transatlantic/2017/11/27/russia-still-denies-holodomor-was-genocide>.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Cameron, "The Kazakh Famine of 1930-33 and the Politics of History in the Post-Soviet Space," Woodrow Wilson Centre, 28 September 2013, YouTube video, 57:50. <https://youtu.be/Q93qSC5b7To>.

<sup>26</sup> Volodymyr V. Kravchenko, *Ukrainian Historical Writing in North America During the Cold War: The Struggle for Recognition* (United States: Lexington Books, 2022), 3; Tetiana Boriak, "Holodomor Oral History: Formation, Content and Problems of the Sources," (paper presented at the Narrating the Holodomor conference, Holodomor Research and Education Consortium, 10 December 2021). <https://holodomor.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Narrating-the-Holodomor-program-with-zoom-links.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> For further information about the value of the Oseredok and HPSSS: Olga Andriewsky, "Bearing Witness to the Holodomor: Eyewitness and Survivor Collections of the Early Cold War Period (1947-55)," *New Research on Government Responses* 30-31 (April, 2021); For contemporary assessment of the value of *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin*: Bohdan Klid, "The Black Deeds of the Kremlin: Sixty Years Later," *Genocide Studies International* 8, no. 2 (2014).

<sup>28</sup> Serhy Yekelchuk, [Review of *The Famine of 1932-1933 in Ukraine: An Anatomy of the Holodomor*, by S. Kulchytsky, translated by A. Kinsella and *The hungry steppe: Famine, violence, and the making of Soviet Kazakhstan*, by S. Cameron], *The Journal of Modern History* 90, no. 2 (June 2021), 497. <https://doi.org/10.1086/713859>.

<sup>29</sup> Edele, *Debates on Stalinism*, 236-237.

<sup>30</sup> Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, 217-219; For background on korenizatsiia: George Liber, "Korenizatsiia: Restructuring Soviet nationality policy in the 1920s," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 14, no.1 (1991); The Harvard Interview Project on the Soviet Social System (hereafter HPSSS) houses a number of testimonies elucidating the connections between famine and other phenomena, including dekulakisation: HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 2, Case 18, 46; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 10, Case 128, 31; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 26, Case 513, 4; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 15, Case 284, 24; the anti-religious campaigns: HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 34, Case 104/(NY)149, 11; HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 26, Case 513, 43; HPSSS, Schedule B, Vol. 9, Case 427, 11; Korenizatsiia: HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 35, Case 118/(NY)1517, 70; HPSSS, Schedule B, Vol. 8, Case 252, 21; HPSSS, Schedule B, Vol. 9, Case 383, 30-32; Terror: HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 31, Case 102/(NY)1011, 73-74.

were particularly influential. His work at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (HURI), beginning in 1981, followed by the 1984 documentary *Harvest of Despair* and then the US Commission on the Ukrainian Famine between 1986 and 1990, through which he collected 204 testimonies about the famine, as well as Conquest's 1986 book *Harvest of Sorrow*, one of the first comprehensive scholarly accounts of the famine, saw both these scholars and the Holodomor—as-genocide interpretation rise to public knowledge and increased scholarly scrutiny.<sup>31</sup> On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union the Holodomor—as-genocide interpretation championed by these scholars was brought back to Ukraine.<sup>32</sup> The enforced silence of earlier decades faded in the face of the liberalising reforms of the Gorbachev era allowing for newspapers and magazines to publish stories about the famine and for Gorbachev himself to acknowledge the famine's occurrence.<sup>33</sup> In the lead-up to the referendum for independence in December 1991 this new environment allowed attention to be given to the famine which 'was obviously intended to remind the Ukrainian population what Soviet rule had brought them.'<sup>34</sup> With the 60th anniversary of the famine in 1993, the genocide interpretation in Ukraine was consolidated.<sup>35</sup> This shifting environment was made evermore complex by Russia's role as legal successor to the USSR and Ukraine's unclear role as a nation between Europe and Russia. The shadow of famine loomed large over Ukraine's perception of Russia and, given Russia's unwillingness to acknowledge its effect over Ukraine, Russo-Ukrainian relations on the issue remained tense.<sup>36</sup>

The first presidents of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma, made little effort to memorialise the Holodomor as genocide.<sup>37</sup> However, Viktor Yushchenko's election in 2004 sought to enshrine a narrative of Ukraine's suffering at the hands of successive Soviet and Russian regimes. The Holodomor became the key episode exemplifying this suffering and became juxtaposed with resistance against Soviet repression by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), particularly during World War Two. Here emerged an absolutist narrative aimed at fostering a clear distinction between the 'memory community' of Ukraine and those outside, and therefore antagonistic towards, it.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Edele, *Debates on Stalinism*, 243-244; "Profile: James Mace, junior collaborator of Robert Conquest," *The Ukrainian Weekly* (20 March, 1986). <https://subscription.ukrweekly.com/1983/03/profile-james-mace-junior-collaborator-of-robert-conquest-2/>; James Mace, Olga Samilenko and Walter Pechenuk, *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine 1932-1933: report to Congress* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, April 19, 1988).

<sup>32</sup> Edele, *Debates on Stalinism*, 246.

<sup>33</sup> Edele, *Debates on Stalinism*, 250.

<sup>34</sup> Frank Sysyn, "The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-3: The Role of the Ukrainian Diaspora in Research and Public Discussion," *Studies in Comparative Genocide*, eds. Levon Chorbajian and George Shirinian (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 199.

<sup>35</sup> Edele, *Debates on Stalinism*, 250.

<sup>36</sup> Karina V. Korostelina, "Conflict of National Narratives of Ukraine: Euromaidan and Beyond," *Die Friedens-Warte* 89, no. 1/2 (2014): 269-90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24868496>.

<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting that during Kuchma's presidency, the United Nations General Assembly released a joint statement on the Holodomor, and other famines of the 1930s, as national tragedies, United Nations General Assembly, 2003, *Letter dated 7 November 2003 from the Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General*, fifty-eighth session, A/C.3/58/9.

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/505743>; Furthermore, Kuchma made some attempts domestically to memorialise the Holodomor as a national tragedy and genocide, but the main swing of this was championed by Yushchenko. For more on this: Georgy Kasyanov, "Ukraine: The Holodomor and Nation-building," *Engaging History: The problems & politics of memory in Russia and the Post-Socialist Space*, Carnegie Moscow Centre Working Papers, no. 2 (2010), 40.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (eds), *Twenty Years After Communism* (New York; Oxford Academic, 2014), 4; James Richter, "Famine, Memory, and Politics in the Post-Soviet Space: Contrasting Echoes of Collectivization in Ukraine and Kazakhstan," *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 3 (2020), 481-482.

Rejection of this state-sanctioned narrative was interpreted as a rejection of Ukraine's new path as an independent nation moving away from Russia's influence. These efforts created significant political upheaval, particularly in Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine like Kharkiv, due to its strong potential for alienating Russia.<sup>39</sup> With the end of Yushchenko's presidency in 2010, Viktor Yanukovich quickly backpedalled on this narrative to the position of Holodomor as a tragedy, foreclosing genocide. Key here is Yanukovich's desire to remain tied to Russia,<sup>40</sup> which led some to criticise his view as 'another betrayal of Ukrainian interests for the sake of "cheap Russian gas" and a betrayal of the Ukrainians destroyed by dictators under the communist regime,'<sup>41</sup> in the style of the Yushchenko-style narrative already discussed. At this point, the Holodomor entered into an ideologically hot war where shifting political allegiances with differing interpretations were operationalised towards incommensurable ends.

Following this period, particularly sparked by the Maidan Uprising and Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, the dominant pattern of public memory shifted to favour the Yushchenko-style narrative as invasion galvanised nationalist sentiment.<sup>42</sup> Monuments to the Holodomor, which had been erected under Yushchenko, coupled with this renewed sentiment, worked to resurrect this pattern of memory which could not hold commemorative space under Yanukovich.<sup>43</sup> The positioning of Ukraine, in this conception, as a victim at the hands of the Other – Soviets and now Russians – afforded political capital in their efforts against Russia.<sup>44</sup>

In light of the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022, the Holodomor-as-genocide narrative has, again, been employed to illustrate the long history of Russian violence in Ukrainian territory. Parallels between Stalin's tactics of starving Ukraine have been compared to Putin's grain blockade on the Black Sea and the memory of the Holodomor as the epitome of tragedy in Ukraine has been compared with the tragedy of the present war.<sup>45</sup> The idea of a common aggressor in both the Holodomor and the current war affords Ukraine its due support through the exercise of political capital; but, the use of the Holodomor-as-genocide narrative, imbued with the presentism necessary to draw parallels with the current war, reduces memory and history of the Holodomor to its social and political functioning, therefore barring critical engagement with debates about this event. Furthermore, this sacralisation encourages

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<sup>39</sup> Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "Capital of Despair: Holodomor and Political Conflicts in Kharkiv after the Orange Revolution," *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no.3 2011, 611.

<sup>40</sup> Luke Harding, "Viktor Yanukovich promises Ukraine will embrace Russia," *The Guardian*, 6 March, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/05/ukraine-russia-relations-viktor-yanukovich>.

<sup>41</sup> Interfax-Ukraine, "Sobolev: Yanukovich's Refusal to Recognize Holodomor as Genocide Against Ukrainians a Betrayal," *Kyiv Post*, 27 April, 2010.

<https://www.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/sobolev-yanukovichs-refusal-to-recognizeholodomor-65180.html>; Popular opinion of this period in Ukraine saw that either narrative was acceptable to ordinary citizens, thus the political element is of note here. For further on this: Oxana Shevel, "Memories of the Past and Visions of the Future: Remembering the Soviet Era and Its End in Ukraine," in *Twenty Years after Communism*, 161-162.

<sup>42</sup> Volodymyr Kulyk, "Shedding Russianness, Recasting Ukrainianness: The Post-Euromaidan Dynamics of Ethnonational Identifications in Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, no. 2-3 (2018).

<sup>43</sup> Richter, "Famine, Memory, and Politics in the Post-Soviet Space," 483.

<sup>44</sup> Camilla Orjuela, "Remembering/forgetting hunger: towards an understanding of famine memorialisation," *Third World Quarterly* no. 0 (2023), 12.

<sup>45</sup> Marc Santora and Cassandra Vinograd, "On the Anniversary of Ukraine's Famine, Parallels to Russia's Strikes," *The New York Times*, 26 November, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/26/world/europe/ukraine-war-holodomor-strikes.html>; Greg Myre, "Ukraine remembers a famine under Stalin, and points to parallels with Putin," *NPR*, 28 November, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/28/1139402378/ukraine-holodomor-famine-stalin-parallels-putin-russia-war>.

cursory scholarly engagement, limiting discussion about the use of this history in society.<sup>46</sup>

## Officially sanctioned and collective memories in Kazakhstan

Politicisation and memorialisation of the Kazakh famine differs significantly from that of Ukraine despite their shared causation and parallel effects. ‘Holodomor’ has been instantiated as the English–language name for the famine in Ukraine since the 1980s.<sup>47</sup> For the Kazakh case, Asharshylyk, Kazakh for ‘hunger’, has come into scholarly parlance recently.<sup>48</sup> Prior to this, the term “Goloshchekin’s genocide” was sometimes used, however this was also a Soviet era term used to deflect responsibility from central Soviet authorities to Kazakh leaders themselves and thus only plays into Russia’s unwillingness to account for the famine’s occurrence.<sup>49</sup>

Little mention of the Kazakh famine, unlike the Ukrainian case, emerged in the Soviet period, even in diaspora.<sup>50</sup> Only on the eve of the Soviet collapse was this famine brought to mainstream consciousness.<sup>51</sup> A 1992 presidential commission authorised by Nursultan Nazarbayev saw that this famine ought to be considered a genocide, which bears resemblance to the case of the Holodomor, however into the 2000s the impetus for this faded.<sup>52</sup> This disinterest was prompted by a desire to remain on friendly terms with Russia.<sup>53</sup> Owing to Russo–Kazakh economic entanglement, the cultural predominance of Russia through media, as well as their proximity and therefore vulnerability to Russian incursion, instantiation of a famine–as–genocide narrative seemed counter intuitive, particularly when looking to Ukraine as an example.<sup>54</sup>

Some of this lack of mention in the Soviet period may be owing to the flight of Kazakhs into China,<sup>55</sup> rather than into other areas of the Soviet Union as the famine raged, or into Europe, during and after World War Two whereupon there was a concerted effort to collect testimony from émigrés, such that Western observers did not have the opportunity to engage with Kazakh perspectives of the famine. Thus, rather than a lack of memorial culture surrounding the famine, this serves as an acknowledgement of bias within Soviet history writing which privileges the narratives of the European regions of the Soviet Union and often discounts perspectives from Central Asia and its neighbours, although there has been a shift in focus towards Central Asia in recent years aided by the emergence of decolonial lenses.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>46</sup> John-Paul Himka, “Encumbered memory: the Ukrainian Famine of 1932–33,” *Kritika* 14, no. 2 (2013), 426.

<sup>47</sup> Edele, *Debates on Stalinism*, 246.

<sup>48</sup> For example: Marlene Laruelle, *Central Peripheries Nationhood in Central Asia* (London: UCL Press, 2021), 180; Vera Grantseva Ageeva, “Russia’s exceptional role in managing Kazakhstan’s postcolonial identity,” in *Exploring Russia’s Exceptionalism in International Politics*, ed. Raymond Taras (London: Routledge, 2023), 130; Ainash Mustoyapova, *Decolonisation of Kazakhstan* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2023), 245.

<sup>49</sup> Cameron, “The Kazakh Famine of 1930–33,” 121.

<sup>50</sup> This is likely due to the small size of the Kazakh diaspora in the West.

<sup>51</sup> Cameron, “The Kazakh Famine of 1930–33 and the Politics of History in the Post-Soviet Space,” 37:11.

<sup>52</sup> Cameron, “The Kazakh Famine of 1930–33,” 21:00.

<sup>53</sup> Serhy Yekelchuk, [Review of *The Famine of 1932–1933 in Ukraine* and *The hungry steppe*], 496.

<sup>54</sup> Maxat Kassen, “Understanding foreign policy strategies of Kazakhstan: a case study of the landlocked and transcontinental country,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 31 (2018), 325–326; Charles McGrath and Nygmet Ibadildin, “Kazakh Famine 1928–1932,” *Ukrainian Policymaker* 2 (2018), 6.

<sup>55</sup> Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe*, 122.

<sup>56</sup> Kaşıkçı, “Making Sense of Catastrophe,” 225–228; Aminat Chokobaeva, Botakoz Kassymbekova, Sevinj Samadzade, Bahruz Samadov, “History in Times of War. Part 1: Central Asia and the South Caucasus,” Research Initiative on Post-Soviet Space (seminar, the University of Melbourne, 24 March, 2023, virtual).



Additionally, the society created by the Kazakh famine influenced the way famine narratives emerged. Much of the previously nomadic population perished during the famine, which saw with it a loss of oral culture and, alongside this, the function of the policy of sedentarisation was to transform Kazakh society.<sup>57</sup> This latter goal was successful and though it is incorrect to assert the Soviet policy erased all traces of Kazakh traditional pastoral nomadism, it is important to understand the shift this created in post-famine society. These rapid and traumatic changes at all levels of society, local to national, shaped the lens through which this period is viewed such that it is decidedly more favourable than the Ukrainian account of famine.<sup>58</sup> Notably, the extent of population loss does explain some of the lack of oral history about the Kazakh famine, particularly in comparison to the Ukrainian case.

More recently this culture of silence has begun to shift. The mid-1990s, with its comparative flourishing of discussion about the famine, compared to the later backpedalling, saw a plaque placed in Almaty promising a monument to victims of the famine.<sup>59</sup> This lay untouched for a number of years until 2017 when a 3 metre statue of a starved woman and child was erected in its place.<sup>60</sup> Alongside this, the film *The Crying Steppe*, released in 2020, seeks to reveal the turmoil of the famine, despite its potential to stir Russo-Kazakh relations.<sup>61</sup> The recent decolonial turn in scholarship within post-Soviet space has also allowed greater discussion of the consequences resulting from subsequent Imperial, Soviet and Russian entanglement with Kazakhstan, though particularly in the realm of Soviet history writing, the actions of Soviet rather than Kazakh actors frequently predominates.<sup>62</sup>

The increased recognition of decolonial perspectives on the famine, as distinct from predominating silence in place since the mid-1990s, alongside practical foreign policy concerns on Kazakhstan's part, have allowed for a shift in practices of memorialisation in a manner which reflects changing Russo-Kazakh relations. Particularly in the context of escalating tensions in Ukraine, a fellow post-Soviet state with famine in its past, these new interpretive approaches have prompted Kazakhstan to reevaluate its goals in cordial relationships with Russia.<sup>63</sup> Kazakhstan's multi-vector approach to foreign policy means that peaceful relations with Russia are fundamentally based in pragmatism. Particularly due to their being landlocked and therefore requiring cordial relations in order to transport goods through Russia, the cost of jeopardising these trade routes and partners for the opportunity to investigate one facet of the Soviet past has been too great as yet to be justified.<sup>64</sup> Thus with the continuation of Russian

<sup>57</sup> Cameron, "The Kazakh Famine of 1930-33 and the Politics of History in the Post-Soviet Space," 36, 41.

<sup>58</sup> Kaşıkçı, "Making Sense of Catastrophe," 245.

<sup>59</sup> Cameron, "The Kazakh Famine of 1930-33 and the Politics of History in the Post-Soviet Space," 36, 41.

<sup>60</sup> Kazakh Service, "Kazakhstan Unveils Monument To Victims Of Soviet-Era Famine," *Radio Free Europe*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-unveils-monument-victims-soviet-era-famine/28520523.html>.

<sup>61</sup> John Higgins, "New Kazakh film the crying steppe world premiered as part of asian world film festival's sneak screenings series," *Film and TV Now*, 8 November 2020. <https://www.filmmandtvnow.com/new-kazakh-film-the-crying-steppe-received-world-premiere-as-part-of-asian-world-film-festivals-sneak-screenings-series/>.

<sup>62</sup> Botakoz Kassymbekova and Aminat Chokobaeva, "On writing Soviet History of Central Asia: frameworks, challenges, prospects, *Central Asian Survey* 40, no.4 (2021), 486; This is not to insinuate that Kazakh and Soviet authorities acted independently, as local implementers were vital to the collectivisation and sedentarisation drive. Rather it reflects a difference in focus from actors' political, compared to national, identification, as well as a shift in responsibility for the famine — the centre or the periphery.

<sup>63</sup> Chokobaeva, Kassymbekova, Samadzade, Samadov, "History in Times of War. Part 1: Central Asia and the South Caucasus."

<sup>64</sup> Kassen, "Understanding foreign policy strategies of Kazakhstan," 321; Yulia Mager, 'How the multi-vector foreign policy of independent Kazakhstan was formed - an overview [Kak formirovalas' mnogovektornaya vneshnyaya politika nezavisimogo Kazakhstana - obzor],' *Kazakhskaya Pravda*, 16 December, 2021.

aggression in Ukraine, space has been carved within Kazakh national memory to investigate the famine's role in their history more fully. Similar mechanisms as in the Ukrainian case, associated with greater pushes to foster national consciousness among Kazakh people, make use of the famine-as-genocide interpretation, though this comes at the disapproval of Kazakh governance who, with an eye for pragmatism, hope not to create fissures along ethnic lines based on shifts in famine memory and memorialisation.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

Russo-Kazakh and Russo-Ukrainian relations have been shaped by the experience of the 1930s famines in extremely disparate ways. Ukrainian famine memory is firmly rooted in diaspora, but was exported back to Ukraine, where it became embroiled in continuing political debate about the role of Russia in Ukrainian affairs. In the Kazakh case, the government has taken a more complicit approach to the institution of memory in public life, on account of their pragmatic foreign policy, though in the context of the Russian full-scale invasion, space has opened to challenge those prior conceptions and take a more critical stance. In both cases, the role of the famine is unique and opens a window to the disparate use of history and memory in public and political life of post-Soviet space.

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<sup>65</sup> Richter, "Famine, Memory, and Politics in the Post-Soviet Space," 484.

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