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The Gene of Holodomor as a Component of Post-1991 Ukrainian Identity: Literary Reminiscences

Abstract

This paper explores how the consequences and trauma of the Holodomor are manifested in the generation of children and grandchildren of those who endured the Great Famine. By analysing the works of contemporary Ukrainian women writers, the study investigates how these authors engage with the legacy of the Holodomor in their literary creations and identify the central reference points that shape their narratives. This paper situates these literary representations within the broader context of postmemory and intergenerational trauma, offering insights into how Holodomor has been a part of Ukrainian identity and cultural memory.

Keywords: Holodomor, Great Famine, intergenerational trauma, postmemory, Ukrainian literature, national identity, cultural memory, Ukrainian contemporary women writers

Introduction

The legacy of the twentieth century provided a crucial backdrop for the events shaping the Ukrainian state in the late 1980s and early 1990s, fuelling intense discussions about modern Ukrainian identity¹. The formation of this identity would not have been possible without extensive efforts to reconstruct national history and cultivate historical memory. It was only after the fall of the Soviet Union that topics previously prohibited began to emerge in public discourse. As part of revisiting historical memory and addressing previously suppressed events and figures from Ukraine's history, significant efforts were made to reconstruct the events of the 1930s, including the Great Terror, repressions against Ukrainian intellectuals, and the Great Famine (Holodomor) of 1932–1933. Moreover, the Holodomor

¹ G. Kasianov, *Holodomor and the Holocaust in Ukraine as Cultural Memory: Comparison, Competition, Interaction*, "Journal of Genocide Research" 2021, 24(2), pp. 218–219.



and its lasting consequences remained significant to Russian-Ukrainian disputes over identity after 1991².

The aim of this paper is to investigate how the consequences of the Holodomor manifest in the generation of children and grandchildren of those who experienced it. To achieve this, this article analyses whether and how Ukrainian contemporary female authors reference the trauma of Holodomor in their works, identifying the central points of their engagement. The authors of the works analysed (Oksana Zabuzhko, Tanja Maljartschuk) portray their protagonists as civic and nationally conscious individuals who seek the foundations of their identity in the national and familial past. This is particularly significant in the context of theories of the intergenerational transmission of trauma, as well as the role of the Holodomor's trauma as one of the factors shaping modern Ukrainian identity after 1991.

Holodomor 1932–33: The Enduring Legacy of Trauma

Research on trauma in Central and Eastern Europe is gradually expanding to include the tragic events experienced by communities and nations in these territories during the Soviet and communist periods³. Simultaneously, ongoing efforts seek to examine how artistic expressions encompass the experiences of individuals and communities shaped by the intergenerational trauma of preceding generations. In her study on the inheritance of trauma, Jadwiga Joško-Ochojska writes that:

Research on intergenerational transmission indicates that individuals who survived traumatic events in concentration camps exhibit a different pattern of stress hormone secretion compared to those without such experiences. This altered profile, characterized by lower cortisol levels, predisposes survivors to various anxiety disorders later in life. However, lower cortisol concentrations can also facilitate a quicker return to normal functioning after subsequent trauma. Among those survivors diagnosed with PTSD, cortisol levels are even lower than in those who survived but did not develop PTSD. Additionally, Holocaust survivors also exhibit reduced levels of the enzyme responsible for breaking down cortisol. According to Rachel Yehuda, this adaptation serves an important function: reduced enzyme activity leads to increased free cortisol in the body, which in turn helps maintain higher glucose reserves in the liver to address prolonged periods of starvation and other threats. Furthermore, studies show that the younger a person was at the time of experiencing trauma, the lower their enzyme levels in adulthood. This research underscores that the effects of traumatic experiences during childhood

² For more, see M. Makhortych, A. Urman, R. Ulloa, *Memory, counter-memory and denialism: How search engines circulate information about the Holodomor-related memory wars*, "Memory Studies" 2022, Vol. 15 (6), pp. 1330–1345.

³ Trauma in Central and Eastern Europe was described i.a. in the following works: *Między pamięcią a zapomnieniem. Trauma (Between Memory and Forgetting. Trauma)* A. Matusiak (ed.), "Miscellanea Posttotalitarna Wratislaviensia" 2013, No. 1; *Trauma kulturowa jako palimpsest: (post)komunizm w kontekście porównawczym nowoczesności, totalitaryzmów i (post)kolonializmów (Cultural Trauma as a Palimpsest: (post)Communism in the Comparative Context of Modernity, Totalitarianisms and (post)Colonialisms)* M. Świetlicki and D. Kołodziejczyk (eds.), "Miscellanea Posttotalitarna Wratislaviensia" 2017, No 6; Dietsch, *Making sense of suffering. Holocaust and Holodomor in Ukrainian Historical Culture*, Lund 2006.

and adolescence can be long-lasting, impacting an individual throughout their life and even being passed down to subsequent generations⁴.

Physical changes in the body caused by stress are intertwined with psychological changes. In the context of both individuals and society, an important consequence of trauma is the one Joško-Ochojska highlights in the concluding sentences of her study: the persistence and continuity of trauma's impact throughout a person's life and the potential for that trauma to be passed on to the next generation. Thus, trauma is intergenerational, persisting beyond the transition from one generation to the next.

Vitalii Ogiienko observes the following about cultural trauma and the far-reaching consequences of silencing the Holodomor:

The true tragedy of Holodomor survivors lay not only in their tendency to forget or semi-consciously suppress the memory of this catastrophe – doing so made everyday life easier – but also in their deliberate decision to remain silent. This choice was driven by the need for safety, both for themselves, their families, and others. Individuals became their own censors, further distancing themselves from these events by relegating them to parts of their consciousness that were not accessed in everyday life. [...] In this way, they lost both the ability and the desire to independently construct a memory of the Holodomor. Fear and shame associated with these events served as gatekeepers, preventing the release of these memories⁵.

The attitude of (self-)censorship, fear, anger, and shame⁶ is an integral component of trauma. Research on trauma in CEE should encompass not only an analysis of the content conveyed by witnesses to history but also how these accounts are interpreted today, the context in which these experiences are (not) discussed, and the intentions of the authors behind these narratives⁷. Silence or the marginalization of traumatic experiences also has consequences for the psychological and physical well-being of the individual. According to Ogiienko, silence and guilt existed on the individual level for several generations and ultimately passed onto the collective level of cumulative trauma maintained by social practices of amnesia⁸.

In the USSR, stories about the Holodomor were preserved within families but forbidden in public and official spheres. According to Agnieszka Matusiak, the memory of the Holodomor is one of the foundational elements of post-Soviet national consciousness: it serves as a means for Ukrainians to distinguish themselves from the “great Soviet nation” and to highlight the repressive and colonial nature of Ukraine's existence within the USSR⁹.

⁴ J. Joško-Ochojska, *Dziedziczenie traumy. Epigenetyczny 'list' do przyszłych pokoleń*, in: J. Joško-Ochojska (ed.), *W przestrzeni stresu i lęku. Medyczne i społeczne aspekty traumy*, Katowice 2016, p. 27.

⁵ V. Ogiienko, *Kulturna travma Holodomoru* <https://old.uinp.gov.ua/publication/kulturna-travma-golodomoru> (date accessed: 04.01.2025).

⁶ B. Bezo, S. Maggi, *Living in "survival mode": Intergenerational transmission of trauma from the Holodomor genocide of 1932–1933 in Ukraine*, “Social Science & Medicine” 2015, vol. 134, p. 90.

⁷ A. Matusiak, *Wyjść z milczenia. Dekolonialne zmagania kultury i literatury ukraińskiej XXI wieku z traumą posttotalitarną*, Wojnowice–Wrocław 2020, pp. 24–25.

⁸ V. Ogiienko, *The memorial topography of the Holodomor between cumulative and cultural trauma. A genealogical approach*, in: *Image, History and Memory. Image, History and Memory. Central and Eastern Europe in a Comparative Perspective*, M. Haake, P. Juskiewicz (eds.), London 2022, 139.

⁹ A. Matusiak, *Wyjść z milczenia. Dekolonialne zmagania kultury i literatury ukraińskiej XXI wieku z traumą posttotalitarną*, op. cit., pp. 170–171.

However, at the state level in Ukraine, it was not until 2006 that the Ukrainian Parliament, under the initiative of then-President Viktor Yushchenko, passed legislation addressing the Holodomor of 1932–1933¹⁰.

Dana Dolghin, in her article *Institution and Inclination in the Post-Socialist Space: Genocide as “Memory Intervention”*, draws attention to the use of the term genocide in the context of tragic events that befell the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. Dolghin emphasizes that in Ukraine, one of the key issues constituting historiography and the collective historical memory of the nation after 1991 became the efforts to have the Holodomor recognized internationally as genocide¹¹. In this context, such recognition holds profound symbolic significance, as it represents an acknowledgement of the injustices endured by the victims, ensures their rightful commemoration, and serves as an act of restorative justice. According to Timothy Snyder, it is reasonable to estimate the number of deaths caused by Holodomor and related diseases in Soviet Ukraine during 1932–1933 at least at approximately 3.3 million¹².

In 2005, one of Ukraine’s leading historians, Stanislav Kulchytsky, published a monograph on the Famine Genocide of 1932–1933. Titled *Holodomor 1932–1933 iak henotsyd: trudnoshchi usvidomlennia* (Eng. *The Holodomor of 1932–1933 as Genocide: Challenges of Recognition*), the work examines the complexities of the artificially engineered famine in a country where most peasants relied on their own land or home gardens for subsistence. To understand this phenomenon, Kulchytsky traces the origins of Holodomor to the early years of the formation of the communist state in 1917. The state of agriculture was deeply influenced by social transformations within rural structures, which could only be implemented through extensive collectivization¹³. Moreover, according to Kulchytsky, post-Soviet Ukrainian historiography has focused particularly on the Holodomor and overlooked the related problem of collectivization¹⁴. This perspective is crucial for understanding the dynamics of responsibility in implementing the Soviet regime’s central political objectives at the local level, the competitive pressures among local leaders to meet assigned tasks or unrealistic quotas, and the intergenerational trauma that remains one of the lasting consequences of the Holodomor.

In the 1930s, famine caused solely by poor harvests was improbable, as Ukraine had been one of Europe’s largest grain producers for many years. This only changed after the Bolsheviks assumed power: in 1929, they began implementing disastrous agricultural policies, including collectivization, dekulakization, and excessive grain quota demands¹⁵.

¹⁰ *Zakon Ukrainy Pro Holodomor 1932–1933 rokiv v Ukraini (Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy, 2006, No. 50, p. 504) <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/376-16#Text> (date accessed: 15.12.2024).*

¹¹ D. Dolghin, *Institution and inclination in the post-socialist space: Genocide as “memory intervention”*, “Miscellanea Posttotalitariana Wratislaviensia” 2017, No. 6, p. 62.

¹² T. Snyder, *Skrwawione ziemie. Europa między Hitlerem a Stalinem*, tr. B. Pietrzyk, Warszawa 2011, p. 75.

¹³ S. Kulczycki, *Hołodomor. Wielki Głód na Ukrainie w latach 1932–1933 jako ludobójstwo – problem świadomości*, tr. B. Salej, Wrocław 2008, p. 29.

¹⁴ S. Kulchytsky, *The Famine of 1932–1933 in Ukraine: An Anatomy of the Holodomor*, tr. A. Kinsella, Toronto 2018, p. 38.

¹⁵ R. Kuśnierz, *Propaganda radziecka w okresie Wielkiego Głodu na Ukrainie (1932–1933)*, „Dzieje Najnowsze” 2004, 36/4, p. 29. http://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Dzieje_Najnowsze_kwartalnik_poswiecony_historii_XX_wieku_/Dzieje_Najnowsze_kwartalnik_poswiecony_historii_XX_wieku_-r2004-t36-n4/Dzieje_Najnowsze_

Testimonies and recollections of the Holodomor and the research conducted on this subject both in Ukraine and internationally play a crucial role in shaping the national consciousness and identity of Ukrainians, with the memory of the Great Famine being an integral component. This also encompasses understanding the consequences these events had on social and familial spheres. As Miron Dolot, an eyewitness¹⁶ of the Great Famine, writes in his memoir *Execution by Hunger: The Hidden Holocaust*:

By this time—after only two years of compulsory collectivization—normal human relations had broken down completely. Neighbours had been made to spy on neighbours; friends had been forced to betray friends; children had been coached to denounce their parents; and even family members avoided meeting each other. The warm traditional hospitality of the villagers had disappeared, to be replaced by mistrust and suspicion. Fear became our constant companion: it was an awesome dread of standing helplessly and hopelessly alone before the monstrous power of the State¹⁷.

To understand how the trauma of Holodomor affects subsequent generations, it is essential to consider the complexity of this phenomenon, which encompassed not only the deprivation of food but also the destruction of existing communities and the disruption of relations within the family. As Dolot recalls:

Now it began to dawn on everyone why there wasn't any food left in the village; why there weren't any prospects of getting any more; why our expectation that the government would surely help us to avert starvation was naive and futile; why the Bread Procurement Commission still searched for "hidden" grain; and why the government strictly forbade us to look for means of existence elsewhere. It finally became clear to us that there was a conspiracy against us; that somebody wanted to annihilate us, not only as farmers but as people – as Ukrainians¹⁸.

The mechanisms of the totalitarian state were also effective in concealing the intentionality of the famine. Even under more favourable circumstances, it would have been difficult to keep an accurate record of the vast numbers of people dying on the roads, at train stations, or on the streets¹⁹. This was especially true when written evidence containing political directives or private letters about the famine was deliberately destroyed.

These events were confined to the discourse of private memory, with the tragic truth often remaining unspoken or even repressed from the collective consciousness. Nevertheless, as Ukrainian history demonstrates, and as Anne Applebaum emphasizes:

In the end, Stalin failed too. A generation of Ukrainian intellectuals and politicians was murdered in the 1930s, but their legacy lived on. The national aspiration, linked, as in the past,

kwartalnik_poswiecony_historii_XX_wieku_-r2004-t36-n4-s29-46/Dzieje_Najnowsze_kwartalnik_poswiecony_historii_XX_wieku_-r2004-t36-n4-s29-46.pdf (date accessed: 04.12.2024).

¹⁶ The testimonies of those who survived the Great Famine and studies on this topic constitute a significant part of historical publications in Ukraine. It is also worth noting the reissued edition in 2019 (first published in 2008, later in 2016) of the memoirs of one of the witnesses to these events, Anastasia Lysivets (1922–2011): A. Lysyvets, «Skazhy pro shchaslyve zhyttia...», Kyiv 2019. See also V. Ogiienko, *Holodomor ochyma zhertvy: immobilizatsiia ta upokorennia pratseiu yak stratehiia vyzhyvanni* <http://uamoderna.com/md/ogienko-holodomor> (date accessed: 15.11.2024).

¹⁷ M. Dolot, *Execution by Hunger: The Hidden Holocaust*, New York–London 1990, p. 92.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 175.

¹⁹ A. Applebaum, *Red Famine. Stalin's War on Ukraine*, London 2018, p. 284.

to the aspiration for freedom, was revived in the 1960s; it continued underground in the 1970s and 1980s; it became open again in the 1990s. A new generation of Ukrainian intellectuals and activists reappeared in the 2000s²⁰.

The aforementioned new generation of intellectuals and activists feels a moral obligation to their nation and the victims of the Holodomor to restore the memory of these events. This topic often finds expression in the works of contemporary authors, becoming a significant component of modern Ukrainian culture. Such an approach entails considerable responsibility, high expectations, and the need to carefully navigate this sensitive subject matter.

The Echoes of Holodomor as a Component of Family Relations Exemplified by Contemporary Ukrainian Women's Prose

Over the years, many texts have been created referring to the Holodomor and its consequences. The most prominent and significant were *Mariia* by Ulas Samchuk (1934) and *Zhovtyi Kniaz'* by Vasyl Barka (1962) – *Zhovtyi Kniaz'* adapted into the 1991 film *Holod-33*. The novel *Mariia*, structured as the life story of the titular protagonist, a peasant woman from a poor family, tells the story of the forced collectivization in Ukraine during the 1930s, culminating in the summer of 1933. Meanwhile, *Zhovtyi Kniaz'* is a chronicle of the life of a three-generation peasant family during the implementation of the new (communist) order in their village and the collectivization.

In the 2010s, the topic of the artificial famine of the 1930s continued to engage and inspire creators, as evidenced, for example, by the political thriller *Mr. Jones* (2019), directed by Agnieszka Holland, which has been described as an elaborate historical spectacle²¹. It is based on the true history of a Welsh journalist who, in the 1930s, was the first to inform Western societies about the Holodomor, exposing Stalin's inhumane policies. He contradicted Soviet propaganda, for which he was later kidnapped and murdered in Manchuria, with his death most likely being orchestrated by the NKVD²². These examples of literary and cinematic works and memoirs of eyewitnesses published in recent decades (also in English²³) demonstrate that the tragic events of 1932–33 continue to emerge in the public sphere, shaping the contemporary narrative about the Holodomor.

Personal narratives play a crucial role in the discourse on the Holodomor. The writer Oksana Zabuzhko, in an interview titled "Algorytmy głodu" (Eng. "Algorithms of famine"), shares that the memory of the famine of the 1930s was passed on to her by her mother, who was a witness to Holodomor²⁴. Reflections on this tragedy of the Ukrainian people can be found in Zabuzhko's debut novel, *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, and *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets*. The characters in her novels, having various levels of awareness, attempt to come to terms with the memory of the Great Famine, particularly because:

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 356.

²¹ J. Wróblewski, *Człowiek z mediów*, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/film/1929044,1,recenzja-filmu-obywatel-jones-rez-agnieszka-holland.read> (date accessed: 16.11.2024).

²² B. Staszczyszyn, *Zniewoleni przeszłością – co się kręci w polskim kinie A.D. 2018* <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/zniewoleni-przesloscia-co-sie-kręci-w-polskim-kinie-ad-2018> (date accessed: 10.10.2024).

²³ See for example: V. Ogiienko (ed.), *The Holodomor and the Origins of the Soviet Man: Reading the Testimony of Anastasia Lysyvets*, Berlin 2022.

²⁴ U. Pieczek, O. Zabuzhko, *Algorytmy głodu. Oksana Zabuzhko w rozmowie z Urszulą Pieczek*, op. cit.

The Great Famine was completely silenced for three generations of Ukrainians. Until the late 1980s, it was forbidden even to mention it. Even during my [i.e. Zabuzhko's – A.R.] childhood in the Soviet Union, people were sent to forced labour camps simply for talking about the Great Famine²⁵.

The fact that the suffering of Oksana Zabuzhko's family during the Holodomor is a crucial aspect of her identity is clearly demonstrated in her frequent references to it, not only in her essays and interviews but also in the way she incorporates these experiences into her literary works. In the *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, the protagonist identifies her relationship with her mother, as well as the legacy of that relationship tied to the trauma of the famine, as one of the pivotal factors shaping her character:

[...] Mother was, in fact, frigid, and obviously out of it, a black windowpane deflecting all light [...]. And what else could she have been if not frigid, a child-survivor of the Famine (a three-year-old in 1933, she stopped walking, while Grandmother made her way to Moscow in freight cars, switching from train to train, in order to exchange her dowry – two thick strands of Mediterranean pearls – for two bags of dry bread). A child nourished on single stalks of wheat stolen from the field, for which the collective farm guard, catching her once, cut her across the face with a whip – you can still see a thin white thread of a scar even now – and it was lucky to have ended with that [...]²⁶.

The protagonist, aware of the consequences of breaking the prohibition on possessing even a few ears of corn, knew that a guard could have shot her own mother; in that case, she would never have been born. This refers to the “Law of Five Spikelets” that was in place at the time: the authorities, aiming to prevent peasants from acquiring grain for personal use (e.g. by collecting and keeping them for themselves), enacted Draconian laws allowing the confiscation of property and the execution of anyone, from children to the elderly, regardless of gender, if they were caught “stealing” crops. It is important to note that in 1933, peasants were deprived of any food they possessed – regardless of its source. The goal of such actions could only have been one: a deliberate attempt to starve people to death²⁷.

The spectre of the terror of that time and the fear of hunger never left the protagonist's mother, even many years later, when she was an adult woman. The scar, a physical reminder of those events, was nothing compared to the burden that weighed on her throughout her life, closing her off from the experiences of the outside world, which is why she could not build a healthy relationship with her daughter. According to Oksana Kis, motherhood is often overlooked by researchers of the Holodomor²⁸. Kis analyses the conditions and consequences of being a mother during the Great Famine in Ukraine, including the total collapse of normal mother-child relationships when starving mothers became cruel or completely indifferent to their children's suffering²⁹.

²⁵ I. Chruślińska, O. Zabuzhko, *Ukraiński palimpsest. Oksana Zabuzhko w rozmowie z Izą Chruślińską*, Wrocław 2013, p. 293.

²⁶ O. Zabuzhko, *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, tr. Halyna Hryn, Las Vegas 2016, p. 148.

²⁷ S. Kulczycki, *Holodomor. Wielki Głód na Ukrainie w latach 1932–1933 jako ludobójstwo – problem świadomości*, op. cit., p. 279.

²⁸ O. Kis, *Women's Experience of the Holodomor: Challenges and Ambiguities of Motherhood*, “Journal of Genocide Research” 2021, vol. 23, No. 4, p. 527.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 539.

Tanja Maljartschuk also explores the topic of the Holodomor, focusing, like Oksana Zabuzhko, on ancestors who endured the famine. In her novel *Forgottenness*, Maljartschuk constructs the protagonist's genealogy by tracing one ancestral line from Eastern Galicia and the other from the Dnieper region of Ukraine. The protagonist's grandmother, Sonia, coming from the Dnieper region, was abandoned as a little girl by her father on the doorstep of an orphanage, and the father – like many others during those months – set out in search of food but died of starvation before he could find help. This was not an isolated case – according to Kis, state-run “children's homes” sheltered both actual orphans and many abandoned children from areas severely affected by hunger. In order to save their starving children, some desperate mothers attempted to get them out of starving villages and closer to orphanages, believing that the children would have a better chance of survival there. In some rural areas, as of mid-July 1932, over half of the population had left in search of food³⁰.

Sonia, as a young girl, escaped from an orphanage and wandered through the village, unable to find a place for herself:

Her father forevermore remained nameless. She herself always remained nameless too – merely “that girl,” “the girl from there,” Sonia the Strongwoman. A dove egg tossed out of the nest, some miracle didn't break³¹.

The above quotation reveals she was a girl from nowhere, devoid of identity and roots, a miraculous survivor. Someone gave her a piece of bread, but she could not find shelter anywhere in the village. It would have been no better in the orphanage, as there was also a lack of food there, and such places were slowly turning into collective deathbeds³². Sonia continued wandering through the village until she ended up at a cemetery, where she curled up by her mother's grave:

Nearby, members of the Sanitarian Service were digging a large pit into which they were piling locally gathered corpses of the starved. Grandma Sonia lay face down on the ledger stone (or on the bare earth) and, if I recall correctly, began screaming very loudly. [...] Abandoned and ignored, Grandma Sonia screamed so hard that she forever strained her voice, which must have been just as pretty as her mother's. From then on, she spoke softly, almost inaudibly, her voice more like the rasp of an old wooden door³³.

The voice lost during the Great Famine, buried in the mass grave along with the famine's victims, holds symbolic significance: it was lost by an entire generation – millions of victims of the man-made famine – as well as by those who managed to survive. The shock experienced by a child witnessing this scene in the cemetery (where, in many cases, the prepared graves held not only the bodies of the deceased but also those buried alive, deemed unlikely to survive) caused a tangible loss of voice and contributed to a trauma that endured for generations.

³⁰ S. Kulczycki, *Holodomor. Wielki Głód na Ukrainie w latach 1932–1933 jako ludobójstwo – problem świadomości*, op. cit., p. 189.

³¹ T. Maljartschuk, *Forgottenness*, tr. Zenia Tompkins, New York 2024, p. 158.

³² T. Snyder, *Skrwawione ziemie. Europa między Hitlerem a Stalinem*, op. cit., p. 73.

³³ T. Maljartschuk, *Forgottenness*, op. cit. p. 158.

The operations of state institutions, including civil registry offices, were severely limited during this period. Yet, in May and June 1933, they still recorded hundreds of thousands of deaths³⁴. Expecting that the truth would never emerge, the Soviet authorities relied on the silence of the remaining survivors. Today, according to Zabuzhko, it is increasingly evident that:

[...] the Russian authorities still cannot reconcile themselves with the fact that, despite everything, Ukrainians managed to preserve and safeguard the memory of the Great Famine. They did so in silence... in silence, within their families, without shouting, but together. This is where the dividing line lies – the one that became evident in 1991: we are not, and never were, one Soviet nation. Ukrainians, despite two generations of silence, demographic shifts, and societal blending, managed to preserve this memory, and that is why the Russians cannot believe it³⁵.

Grandmother Sonia, in the novel, towards the end of her life, might have been able to speak about her trauma without fearing consequences from the authorities. However, she only whispered about it, and her suffering remained unheard, not to mention the countless silent victims of the Holodomor. This whisper represents the political prohibition on speaking about the tragedy of the famine and the harsh enforcement of this by the authorities during Soviet times. Hence, it is in the third generation that this tragedy may be heard and presented in order to commemorate the victims. However, the question remains: how will this generation, burdened with the complex legacy of the 20th century, address this challenge? Examples from contemporary women's prose illustrate that this generation has become entrapped by this inherited legacy. The weight of this burden can, in extreme cases, result in psychological instability, as shown by the protagonist of *Forgottenness*:

Time had stopped. The end had arrived and begun to stretch into eternity. I couldn't breathe; I couldn't scream. Grandma Sonia had screamed everything out before me. Her tragedy hung on to the living and refused to reach its end. It refused to let us, its prisoners, go³⁶.

Systematically silenced and repressed from the consciousness of eyewitnesses and victims for decades, the tragedy of the Holodomor also weighs heavily on subsequent generations. The consistent, years-long silence about the famine, the "overfeeding" of the generation of children and grandchildren³⁷, the storing of bread crusts and bags of peas (stockpiling³⁸) – these behaviours influence the second and third generations, serving as a foundation for depressive states, periods of numbness, and helplessness.

The reflections of Maljartschuk's protagonist on being enslaved by trauma prompt the question: why does her generation remain hostage to the trauma of the Great Famine? Overwhelmed by her family's history and the broader national historical legacy, the protagonist finds solace only in routine activities, particularly in mopping floors – a coping mechanism she observed her grandmother used. To contend with recurring anxiety and

³⁴ S. Kulczycki, *Holodomor: Wielki Głód na Ukrainie w latach 1932–1933 jako ludobójstwo – problem świadomości*, op. cit., p. 308.

³⁵ U. Pieczek, O. Zabuzhko, *Algorytmy głodu. Oksana Zabuzhko w rozmowie z Urszulą Pieczek*, op. cit.

³⁶ T. Maljartschuk, *Forgottenness*, op. cit. p. 161.

³⁷ B. Bezo, S. Maggi, *Living in "survival mode:" Intergenerational transmission of trauma from the Holodomor genocide of 1932–1933 in Ukraine*, op. cit., p. 91.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

a loss of control over her life, the protagonist decides to seek therapy. However, this decision is met with a lack of understanding from her closest ones – her partner and parents, who distance themselves from her. Therapy remains yet another taboo. According to a study conducted by Benzo and Maggi on intergenerational transmission of trauma from the Holodomor, all female grandchildren who noted stress and anxiety also commented on its negative impact on self-worth. Specifically, the stress and anxiety of the “survival mode” were noted as being responsible for feelings of regret and doubt associated with perceptions of not being able to do “more” and the lack of successful stockpiling³⁹.

The *Forgottenness* protagonist conveyed to her mother that grandmother Sonia bore a psychological wound resulting from her experiences during the Great Famine; however, this acknowledgement was met with denial. The generation of descendants, often characterized by overcompensation in their attitudes towards food, distanced themselves from the tragedy, frequently failing to recognize that memory and vigilance safeguard against the recurrence of historical atrocities. This denial or suppression amplifies the resonance of the trauma within the generation of grandchildren, a phenomenon that Marianne Hirsch examines through the framework of postmemory⁴⁰.

The echoes of the Holodomor are also present in *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets* by Oksana Zabuzhko. In the book, the characters consistently engage with the traumatic events of 20th-century Ukrainian history, mirrored in contemporary elements such as objects, architecture, memories, and archival materials. Only by collecting and organizing these elements can the narrative of the Ukrainian nation be reconstructed. According to the novel’s protagonist, Daryna Goshchynska, the tragedy of the Great Famine is imprinted on the very existence of every Ukrainian, as evidenced by the obsessive stockpiling habits observed among the generation of her grandparents:

And that’s why now we take such pride in what we eat, I think but do not say out loud – 1933, 1947 – it’s all stowed away somewhere inside us, coded into our cell memory, and the children and grandchildren, delirious with the sudden abundance of the nineties are now busy growing new segments, like the earthworms – catching up for everything uneaten in the generations before them⁴¹.

The cellular and genetic memory of the Great Famine ensures that each successive generation subconsciously retains its imprint – whether by revelling in abundance or indulging in the wild consumerism of the 2000s. Hence, in Maljartschuk’s novel, this idea is represented through the metaphor of the “*pampushky* gene”, symbolizing an inherited protective instinct tied to food, a poignant reflection of the enduring impact of famine on familial and cultural memory:

In any case, little Sonia was dropped off on the steps of an orphanage by her father, who then ran off to fetch some plum-butter *pampushky*. [...] In telling her tale, she never forgot to mention the *pampushky*, as if they were the main protagonists of the whole story and not the little girl in the first hours of orphanhood. It was then that this little girl – and, by an automatic

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 91.

⁴⁰ See Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York 2012.

⁴¹ O. Zabuzhko, *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets*, tr. Nina Shevchuk-Murray, Las Vegas 2012, p. 502.

process, all of her progeny – developed the protective *pampushky* gene. The gene lets itself be known at those moments in life when something so horrific is transpiring that you could die from a surplus of emotion⁴².

The seemingly ordinary, everyday act of preparing jam-filled *pampushky* (doughnuts) – crafted identically by the grandmother, mother, and protagonist – is a poignant symbol of continuity and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. This ritual links back to the orphaned girl who first lost her parents and then her voice, becoming a silent witness to the Holodomor. According to Maljartschuk, the “*pampushky* gene” has been imprinted in the cultural and genetic fabric of the Ukrainian nation and transmitted across generations.

The trauma of famine extends beyond the direct victims and their children. It also manifests within the postmemory of the third generation⁴³. The protective gene described by Maljartschuk shields individuals from painful emotions and prevents repeating traumatic past events, yet paradoxically, it perpetuates the trauma. Making hearty *pampushky* sustains loved ones, offering a brief reprieve from the shadow of hunger while simultaneously evoking painful memories.

Conclusions

The generations that endured the Holodomor – represented by characters such as Oksana’s mother in *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* and Grandma Sonia in Maljartschuk’s *Forgottenness* – were left incapable of experiencing security and building familial relationships. Moreover, the messages conveyed by parents often consisted mainly of directives and prohibitions (“trust no one”, “be cautious”, etc.)⁴⁴, making it difficult to establish healthy and stable parent-child relationships. The fragmentation of families, the atomization of society, and alienation were some of the consequences of the Holodomor, all intended to facilitate the creation of a mass society in the Soviet Union⁴⁵. This generation was marked by emotional detachment in their interactions with children and grandchildren, characterized by coldness and an inability to express tenderness or affection. As Oksana Kis rightly notices, the Holodomor proved an extraordinary challenge to normative ideas and practices of mothering and ultimately undermined the popular belief of an unconditional, selfless maternal instinct⁴⁶.

The Great Famine and its aftermath constitute a generational experience. When the memory of these events was finally “liberated”, many victims remained anonymous, or only the names of witnesses to these events were known⁴⁷. Addressing the trauma brought

⁴² T. Maljartschuk, *Forgottenness*, op. cit. pp. 152–153.

⁴³ B. Bezo, S. Maggi, *Living in “survival mode:” Intergenerational transmission of trauma from the Holodomor genocide of 1932–1933 in Ukraine*, “Social Science & Medicine”, op. cit., p. 90.

⁴⁴ V. Ogiienko, *Kul’turna travma Holodomoru*, op. cit.

⁴⁵ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, London 2017, p. 423.

⁴⁶ O. Kis, *Women’s Experience of the Holodomor: Challenges and Ambiguities of Motherhood*, op. cit., p. 545.

⁴⁷ W. Kudela-Świątek, *Pamięć i „miejsca pamięci” Holodomoru. Krajobraz po bitwie*, „Nowa Ukraina” 2008, No. 1–2, pp. 109–110.

about by the Great Famine of 1932–33, a burden passed down to successive generations of Ukrainians, requires a multifaceted approach. The resonance of this traumatic experience in literature and other realms of contemporary Ukrainian culture not only deepens understanding of the events of the 1930s but also sheds light on Ukraine's current position in Europe and its relations with Russia⁴⁸.

The years of censorship in Ukraine, along with the repression of those who possessed knowledge of events such as the Great Famine, resulted in the exclusion of this issue from the collective consciousness and official narrative. The year 1991 officially abolished censorship and restrictions, yet it did not provide answers to the most pressing questions, leading to a sense of disorientation for the individual. The cellular, genetic memory passed down as a legacy of trauma from generation to generation is revived in the generation of grandchildren, who entered Ukraine's independence and the new millennium burdened by the tragic experiences of their ancestors. Both Zabuzhko and Maljartschuk depict the tragic events of the Great Famine from the perspective of subsequent generations – the children and grandchildren, burdened with the legacy of 20th-century traumatic experiences inherited from their parents and grandparents. Addressing the source of trauma and confronting it on both an emotional and intellectual level remains an essential step in moving towards decolonization. An open question remains as to whether these generations can confront the trauma and take concrete actions towards its resolution, a process that would include restoring historical justice for the victims as well as engaging in national critical self-reflection.

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⁴⁸ In the context of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, it is particularly significant to examine how the restriction of food access on territories temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation is being employed as a tool of warfare. For more, see O. Khodakivska, et al. 'Echoes of the Holodomor under Russian occupation', "International Journal of Environmental Studies" 2024, 81(1), pp. 102–110.

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