

# A MISLEADING MEMORY

## USING THE HOLODOMOR TO VILIFY SOCIALISM

Written for POL S 459

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**ABSTRACT** This paper explores the way that the Holodomor – the famine-genocide that took place from 1932-1933 in Soviet Ukraine under Stalin’s rule is remembered in contemporary contexts. To this end, it analyzes how the opposing systems of capitalism and socialism are portrayed through this memory to answer the question: how has the Western memory of the Holodomor been used to invalidate or vilify the idea of socialism? The paper analyzes the rhetoric used in academic settings, political discourse, and international relations, to conclude that the Holodomor has become a ‘living’ history and a constant reminder of the supposed dangers of communism in any form as the villain is no longer Stalin’s regime, but the entire ideology

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### OVERVIEW OF THE HOLODOMOR

The Holodomor – a Ukrainian word meaning “causing death by starvation” – refers to the famine-genocide that took place from 1932-1933 in Soviet Ukraine under Stalin’s rule (Powers 2013b, 165; Ponedilok and Bukhta 2020). While there is no consensus on the cause of the famine, many scholars cite a combination of natural causes, mismanagement of the collective farms, and excessive grain exportation (Cheng 2012, 209–11). Independent Ukraine saw a division between the Communist Party, who claimed the famine was purely due to the recorded drought, and the Nationalists, who declared the Holodomor a man-made famine (Riabchuk 2008, 6). In addition to the causes of the famine, the nature of victimization is contested: some believe that it was a deliberate attempt to destroy Ukrainian peasants who resisted Soviet rule, whereas others do not differentiate Ukrainian suffering from that of other USSR states (Klymenko 2016, 353–54). Despite Ukraine officially classifying it as a genocide – emphasizing the artificial nature of the famine – in 2006, the Holodomor continues to be

contested in Ukrainian and international politics (Klymenko 2016, 342, 356).

### RESEARCH QUESTION

The focus of this paper is on the most common understandings of the causes of the Holodomor and how these narratives are used to serve contemporary political goals. Specifically, I am going to explore how socialism is discussed through memories of the Holodomor, given that the socialist Soviet Union is blamed. This will involve an exploration of how the Holodomor is cited as ‘evidence’ for socialism’s failure. Ultimately, I will be analyzing how the opposing systems of capitalism and socialism are portrayed through this memory, answering the question: how has the Western memory of the Holodomor been used to invalidate or vilify the idea of socialism?

### METHODOLOGY & APPROACH

This research is primarily qualitative and conducted through theoretical engagement with existing literature. Given that I hope to expose the misguided ways in which the memory of the Holodomor is used to invalidate socialism, I will be researching through a

democratic socialist lens. Democratic socialist theory rests on the principles of democracy – freedom, equality, and the rule of law – as well as the moral and political goals of socialism, which are centred on equity and the fulfilment of basic human needs (Schwartz and Schulman, n.d., paras 1–4). This lens allows me to understand the merits of socialism that are invalidated through the most common narrative of the Holodomor. My approach involves comparing the perceived causes of the famine that are widely discussed to the more nuanced causes that are less likely to be remembered. In addition to this, I will analyze the discourse that surrounds those who diverge from the dominant narrative of Ukraine and the West, which argues that the Holodomor was a man-made genocide caused by the socialist Soviet Union. This paper will specifically analyze how the ideological background of a denier can receive this negative connotation to the detriment of educated supporters of the same ideology. Finally, I will be employing social justice theory, which seeks to realize the innate dignity of all human beings, to produce work that honors the lives that were harmed and lost during the Holodomor (Walker 2006, 164).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned, there is no universal acceptance of the cause of the Holodomor, however, most scholars acknowledge that the famine was at least partially fabricated by the Soviet Union. The International Commission of the Inquiry into the 1932-1933 Famine in Ukraine states that the causes were “[an] unrealistic grain procurement plan, forced collectivization, dekulakization, and the desire of the central Soviet government to defeat ‘traditional Ukrainian nationalism’” (Ponedilok and Bukhta 2020). Cheng (2012) affirms this, explaining that, because of ‘misinformation’ – a tactic frequently used by Stalin to ‘justify’ his

oppressive reign – Stalin assumed that the Ukrainian collective farms should be producing more grain and thus imposed higher quotas, suspecting that farmers were hoarding grain (209). This suspicion is connected to the belief that ethnic Ukrainians were “nationalists and counter-revolutionists”, meaning that Stalin had the motive to eliminate them (Cheng 2012, 212). Additionally, Cheng (2012) recognizes that “Stalin’s resolution to compete with the West” took the form of incessant grain exportations, which helps explain the national grain shortage (211). This point is confirmed by Powers (2013a), who explains that “while the peasants were dying of hunger after their grain harvests were stolen, Stalin was selling hundreds of thousands of poods – over a million tons, of that same grain on the world market” (163). Thom (2015) reaches similar conclusions, but focuses specifically on Stalin and his quest for power (87). Under this interpretation, Ukrainians were targeted due to their believed loyalty to Poland and the West, making them a threat to Soviet unity (Thom 2015, 88).

Other scholars confirm the idea that Ukrainians – specifically peasantries – were deliberately targeted because of their opposition to the Soviet Union (Graziosi 2015, 55; Klymenko 2016, 354; Ponedilok and Bukhta 2020). However, Klymenko (2016) explains that this view is not unanimous: the Communist Party of Ukraine argues that there were famines in other regions at the time, and the Socialist Party argues that all victims of Soviet crimes need to be included in these memories (352-352). Additionally, Russia claims that Ukraine’s suffering is not unique in comparison to other post-Soviet states (Klymenko 2016, 353). The idea that ethnic Ukrainians were targeted also ignores the roles of Ukrainian communists who supported Soviet activities (Klymenko 2016, 349).

A third area addressed by scholars is the ways in which the Holodomor was silenced by Soviet authorities, contributing to the widespread understanding that the Holodomor was, in part, deliberately fabricated by Stalin. Graziosi (2015) explains that the topic was considered taboo in Ukraine well into the 1980s (65). Riabchuk (2008) confirms this, arguing that Soviet authorities were able to maintain the silence into the 1990s and that the event was not openly discussed until Ukrainian independence in 1991, and no official statement was released until 2003 (3-4). Ponedilok and Bukhta (2020) add to this by reiterating how Russia claimed that people were “hungry, but not starving” during the 1930s, as a way to validate communism (para. 11). Russian officials stated that it was Nazis who uncovered the Holodomor as a way to undermine communism, rather than to support the rights of the peasants who were starving (Ponedilok and Bukhta 2020).

Due to the nature of the empirical example chosen for this paper, it is necessary to cover how scholars discuss the concept of historical denialism, a term which refers to the vocal rejection of a well-known historical fact typically expressed through the claim that a historical event never actually occurred (Parisi 2020, 41). There is no international framework that criminalizes historical denialism; however, it is widely considered to be offensive (Parisi 2020, 48; Smith 2009, 128). In specific reference to the denial of the Holodomor, Riabchuk (2008) calls it “morally and intellectually untenable but also politically unproductive” (7). Due to this negative connotation, those labelled as historical deniers are rarely viewed positively, with their ideas or opinions are often outlawed.

#### EMPIRICAL EXAMPLE

In November 2019, a lecturer at the University of Alberta, Dougal MacDonald, made a post on

his personal Facebook page stating that the Holodomor is a myth fabricated by the Nazis (Dawson 2019). Given that the denial of crimes against humanity is universally considered to be disrespectful to survivors and their descendants, there was an outcry from students and other Albertans (Smith 2009, 128; Fida 2019). The conversations that followed offer insight into how the memory of the Holodomor is used to pursue political agendas.

MacDonald asserted that the statements were within his right to free speech and that he had done prior research on the event (Fida 2019; Lachacz 2019). His claim is based on the fact that the Holodomor remained a Soviet secret until after a Nazi invasion in 1941, when it was used to undermine the communist Ally power (Ponedilok and Bukhta 2020). MacDonald ran for the Marxist-Leninist Party in Canada’s federal election and clearly presented a narrative that supported his ideology: to redeem communism, MacDonald attempted to discredit any evidence that suggested it was the cause of these deaths (Cook 2019). MacDonald, therefore, claimed that the Holodomor is an alt-right myth created to vilify the alt-left (Lachacz 2019).

While there may be a way to redeem communism through a certain narrative of the Holodomor, MacDonald failed to do so. His comments were labelled as denial, and, although there is no international consensus on how to respond to deniers of mass tragedies, they are generally considered threatening to international peace. (Smith 2009, 131; Fida 2019). Holodomor denial may be seen as exceptionally harmful since the Soviet Union was able to conceal it for nearly a decade, and it is now recognized as genocide by the United Nations. (Ponedilok and Bukhta 2020). The event was an undiscussed topic even in the 1970s and 1980s and the Ukrainian diaspora

are credited with advancing global knowledge of the Holodomor (Graziosi 2015, 65). The tragedy has touched people who now live across the globe and who were responsible as eyewitness accounts of the event, meaning that denial of the event could be viewed as a direct attack on the integrity of survivors (Ponedilok and Bukhta 2020). Additionally, it is unlawful to deny the Holodomor in Ukraine, – a law created to empower those who were oppressed in the past (Lina Klymenko 2016, 342, 344–45). Essentially, the Holodomor is a national trauma for Ukraine, something that bonds people through a common suffering and narrative of resilience, and demands international recognition for the fate of Ukrainians (Klymenko 2016, 343).

In discussions of historical traumas, it is crucial to analyze how both sides present the narrative to support a certain ideology. The Holodomor may leave little room for debate due to the serious implications of denial; however, this event is rarely used to present a neutral viewpoint given its ability to represent the polarization between the political left and right.

## DISCUSSION BEYOND ACADEMIA

The response towards deniers can be used to push a biased narrative and should not always be regarded as an objective truth, with the labels used to describe deniers often stereotyping larger ideological groups. Alberta Premier Jason Kenney responded to MacDonald by blaming “the communists and their ‘useful idiots’ in the West” for “cover[ing] up the famine-genocide”, effectively accusing all far-leftists of being liars (Fida 2019, para. 20). This is harmful because it villainizes an entire ideological group for the opinions of one member and distracts from the fact that it was specifically Stalin’s regime that caused the Holodomor, not communism in general (Thom 2015, 87). Others who attended protests

against MacDonald expressed similar views to Kenney, suggesting that the post was indicative of pro-communist sentiment in Canada (Labine 2019). Once again, this comment suggests that all those in favour of communism also support historical denialism.

Mainstream media may prove to be more vocal about who is supposedly to blame for the famine-genocide, as exemplified through the right-leaning magazine *Forbes*. Simon Constable’s (2017) article “Ukraine’s Famine Shows Deadly Socialism At Its Core” bluntly states that the Holodomor exemplifies “how bad such a centrally planned society is” (para. 2). Once again, there is no reference to the specific system of central planning that was in power at the time, meaning that the author is attempting to use Stalinism as a proxy for all forms of communism. Additionally, Constable (2017) supports the narrative that all socialists are historical deniers who “li[e] about it” because “lying, cheating, and corruption” are “endemic to communism or collectivism,” (paras 8, 10). While this is an extreme example of the Holodomor being used to justify anti-leftist rhetoric, it may be more indicative of the opinions held by the general public.

## SUBTLETIES OF BLAME

Premier Jason Kenney’s response is an example of an entire ideological group being explicitly blamed for the actions of one member. In the more general case of the Holodomor, most scholars avoid placing the blame in such definitive terms, opting for a more subtle approach, such as using the Holodomor as a space to question the ‘viability’ of the Soviet system (Graziosi 2015, 59). While one could argue that this statement does not involve modern socialists because the word ‘Soviet’ situates it within a certain geographical and temporal location, the lack of clear specificity allows people to interpret this as a

question of communism's viability. Thom (2015) explains this as the narrative of revisionists, who utilize a structural approach to blame the system for deliberately causing the famine-genocide (89). This can be contrasted with the totalitarian narrative, which focuses on Stalin's reign of terror as the cause (Thom 2015, 89). Both narratives carry bias and neither should be understood as neutral or objective – the intention of this paper is not to suggest that there exists a perfect narrative of the Holodomor, but rather to illuminate how this memory is used to vilify the entire far-left. Thom (2015) also alludes to a potential reason for this use of the Holodomor's memory: Stalin's propaganda claimed that this model of collectivism was grounded in social justice (84). Given that this turned out to be a battle against the peasants, it is understandable for some to be suspicious of any socialist movement claiming to be socially just.

#### THE HOLODOMOR & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The memory of the Holodomor is contested on an international scale, largely due to the "efforts of the Ukrainian diaspora" who are credited with advancing global knowledge of the event (Graziosi 2015, 65). Given that Stalin succeeded in silencing the narrative for nearly a decade, eyewitnesses and their descendants – who now live across the globe – played a crucial role as preservers of the memory (Ponedilok and Bukhta 2020). This is a pivotal part of creating global memories, since memories are "brought into new social constellations and political contexts" through migrants, thus allowing them to be shared, transformed, and referenced in new contexts (Assmann and Conrad 2010, 2). Additionally, since the Holodomor serves as a national trauma for Ukrainians, it can be understood as the foundation for both a national and ethnic identity; as such, there is a call to "mobilize the

international community to recognize the tragic fate of Ukrainians" (Klymenko 2016, 342-343). As Becker (2013) explains, national trauma can be instrumental in foreign policy (63). Essentially, the narrative of the Holodomor argues for inclusion "within a broader narrative of trauma", hence why many ethnic Ukrainians insist upon the famine being labelled as a genocide as it makes their suffering comparable to others (Becker 2013, 64; Klymenko 2016, 347). Such a label reinforces its ability to cross geographical boundaries and form "local resonance[s]" in different countries, as others can identify with the Ukrainians who suffered during the Holodomor (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 92).

The Holodomor is used to represent the opposition between socialism and capitalism, demonstrated by the exchanges between MacDonald – a member of the Marxist-Leninist Party – and Jason Kenney – the leader of Alberta's United Conservative Party. This is a unique way for its memory to remain internationally relevant, given that it has been used to invalidate the entire socialist ideology (Graziosi 2015, 59). This is evident through the frustration expressed by Riabchuk (2008) over explicit focus on Stalinism as the cause, while "not a single word was said about the Communist nature of the Famine-Genocide" (5). In claiming this, the author can universalize the perpetrator as existing beyond any temporal or spatial boundaries – a key aspect of memory politics (Riabchuk 2008, 3). The Holodomor then becomes a 'living' history, serving as a constant reminder of the supposed dangers of communism in any form as the villain is no longer Stalin's regime, but the entire ideology.

#### CONCLUSION

The Holodomor is a contested memory to which there is no consensus on the causes,

intentions of the perpetrators, nor identity of the victims. Due to the multitude of 'unknowns', many have used this event to pursue a political agenda. A common version of such a narrative often results from the political right and labels the entire ideology of communism as the perpetrator, that we could all be victims should socialism ever prevail. There are also attempts to redeem the Soviet system by questioning the accuracy of this memory, although this is rarely considered to be a valid opinion given the serious implications of historical denialism. The extremity of this example of a socialist narrative makes it easier to identify the bias, whereas, in the example of the right-wing narrative, the bias is subtle and often viewed as objective. While it may be impossible to offer a completely objective narrative, it is crucial to

identify the biases that exist and recognize how the historical event is situated in the contemporary political sphere.

### ADDENDUM

The author wishes to acknowledge the renewed relevance of this paper, which was written in the spring of 2021, in light of the recent Putin-led Russian attacks on Ukraine in early 2022. Once again, we are witnessing aggression against Ukrainians at the hands of a Russian and it is crucial that we pay close attention not only to the events that occur, but to the way they are going to be remembered. It is imperative that we acknowledge and honour the resiliency of Ukrainians while recognizing the patterns in this dark history.

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