

Introduction

by Adrienne Kochman

"Artists Respond to Genocide" was organized with a twofold aim: to commemorate the 80th Anniversary of Ukraine's *Holodomor* famine genocide of 1932-1933, and to explore the aftereffects of genocide universally. Its prevalence in the 20th century and continued orchestration across the globe is not only shocking, but begs one to question how such atrocity is enabled and implemented. The twenty artists participating in this exhibition have grappled similar concerns. Several are generational familial survivors, whose great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, and cousins suffered and lived, or died from genocide. Others, share a genocide history through their cultural heritage, or have witnessed or experienced discriminatory hatred of such proportions to identify with genocide's would-be victims. Global consciousness, individual awareness, social activism, and education offer some long-term preventative measures, as do reminders of such atrocities through recurrent memorialization.

The *Holodomor* – translated as 'murder by starvation' – was designed to break human will at its core, killing several million Ukrainians. It was implemented by Josef Stalin and his aides in Soviet Ukraine and the Kuban region in the North Caucasus, to eliminate resistance against his plan for creating a Soviet state of fully compliant citizens, and moving mass-scale industrialization and agriculture forward.⁽¹⁾ This signified diminishing those areas of indigenous culture – language, the arts, literature, - which had the potential of overshadowing, or at the very least, minimizing the effectiveness of Stalin's push to russify all cultures, in the name of Soviet solidarity.

This maneuver contradicted the Soviet government's *korenization* program initiated in 1923, permitting the use of indigenous language and cultural activity, as well as other concessions to pacify resistance in the non-Russian Soviet Republics. In Ukraine, this process of Ukrainization, as it was named, developed to a degree Stalin didn't expect 'in a land of peasants'. National self-awareness and identity increased rapidly, threatening to revive Ukraine's attempts at an independent state, which had been aborted by Bolsheviks just several years earlier, from 1917 to 1922. Indeed, by 1934, Ukrainian nationalism was Stalin's greatest fear, a risk to the integrity of the Soviet Union. ⁽²⁾

The *Holodomor* itself began in 1929, with the arrest of intellectuals en masse in Ukraine by the Soviet police. Non-Communists, government workers, cultural producers, as well as members of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church were imprisoned on false charges, accused of engaging in nationalist activities.⁽³⁾ Forced collectivization increased, including destroying the *kulak* peasant – independent farmers, whose successful self-enterprise proved too tempting a model for others to follow. State-imposed grain procurement quotas were set exceedingly high, leaving *kulaks* no choice but to join a collective farm, or suffer exile, beatings, or death. This policy continued, regardless of the size of the harvest, year after year. In 1931, a low harvest, high quotas, and other factors, thrust Ukraine into a famine, with deaths from starvation being reported early in 1932. Stalin ignored Ukrainian officials' attempts to ameliorate the situation, instead, taking advantage of the opportunity to encourage even more deaths from starvation.

(1) For readings in English on the *Holodomor*, see Bohdan Klid and Alexander J. Motyl, eds. *The Holodomor Reader: A Sourcebook on the Famine of 1932-1933 Ukraine*, (Edmonton, Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2012); Robert Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivisation and the Terror-Famine*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

(2) Klid and Motyl, eds. *The Holodomor Reader*, xli.

(3) *Ibid*, xl.

Those officials caught helping the hungry were fired, and typically shot. Ukrainian language speakers were now also victimized, as Stalin revoked Ukrainization's indigenous language policy in late 1932. The group ties of shared language were fractured, undermining communication and the possibility of aid, as well as cultural solidarity and the likelihood of resistance. The following season was again a famine year, with the death toll severely rising – as many as 25,000 died per day at the famine's peak during the 1933 winter. Peasants helping each other with hidden food provisions were tortured, and/or executed, including their unsuspecting children, as were peasants trying to leave their homes for other regions where food was available. Stalin added to their isolationism by prohibiting foreign journalists in the Soviet Union in 1933, filling the media with news that no famine existed.

News of the famine leaked into Western Ukraine, then under Polish rule. Some foreign journalists managed to enter Soviet Ukraine, reporting their accounts of starvation and famine to the west. When it finally ended is unclear, with some accounts citing Stalin's purges of 1937-38 – the Great Terror, as the final blow before the onset of World War II. Not surprisingly, the *Holodomor*, was officially suppressed by the Soviet Union, although its occurrence was known abroad from numerous sources, including accounts from survivors. Today, the *Holodomor* has been receiving greater world wide attention, owing in part to the accessibility of official documentation since the 1991

collapse of the Soviet Union, but also growing awareness of genocide as an ever-increasing global problem.

Several works in this exhibition directly address the *Holodomor*. Larysa Kurylas' Washington D.C. monument, "Field of Wheat" effectively represents what Ukraine was known and wanted for by Stalin – wheat – and what Ukraine couldn't have – it's own food. The wheat field's gradual recession into the sculpture's background evokes its gradual unattainability. One sees it, but cannot touch it. Pat Zalisko's painting "Holodomor X-1932", is more subjective, as she captures the frenetic, painful urgency of looking for something to eat – anything. The dirt and berries Zalisko uses to illustrate her subject replicate the foodstuffs peasants relied on to survive – scavenging outside their homes for whatever grew wild that was digestible. In "What Sits in My Guts" by Lydia Bodnar-Balahrak starvation's bodily manifestation is integrated with the Ukrainian identity of its youngest victims. The message, 'to be Ukrainian is to starve,' is coupled with the dual purposes of the axe from which the garment hangs: the axe the peasant uses to cut down trees to clear the farm field for planting, and the axe the Soviet government used to cut down Ukrainians.

Other genocides are articulated in such works as Erika Uzmann's "Reliquary", a memorial to the 15,000 children who died at Terezin concentration camp during the Holocaust. The motif of the child's soul housed within is based on her visit there, and the experience of Frantisek Bass, a Jewish boy deported there when he was 11 years old.

In "Operation Condor", Mandy Cano Villalobos focuses on the mass killings of thousands of people over two decades – the 1970s and 1980s – across the dictatorships of South America. The anonymity of so many victims is worked into the process of sewing a blank square over a photographed face, disappearing, as the artist finishes, and places them in a pile like so many corpses in mass graves. With a similar emphasis on process, the tactility of sewing and passing of time sewing offers, Bonnie Peterson's "Tutsi Testimony" records Tutsi accounts of survival in Rwanda's 1994 genocide. Colored ribbons flow like a fountain of water, a continuous stream of words to remind readers of this seemingly endless tragedy. The works of Harold Cohen, and Suzanne Slavick undertake the commonalities of several genocides simultaneously – Darfur, the Holocaust, Cambodia, Rwanda – and their corrosion upon nature and humanity, while Christine Forni and Marzena Ziejka refer to pain unspoken and apparent but unarticulated suffering.

Themes of violence, coercion, and other inhumane methods devised to sustain power over others recur in further works, with interpretations varying from the futuristic, and conceptual, to manifestations recalling scenes from *Dante's Inferno*. Jacqueline Moses' offers signs of hope and renewal in "Globalization Affects: Africa", as an island of survivors finds safety under the shade of a flourishing tree. We are offered signs of a future, and the possibility of lives restored again.