

# VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE HOLODOMOR

## FROM COMMEMORATION PRACTICES TO CONTEMPORARY ART

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Fig 1. Alexander Wienerberger. Hungry girl from Kharkiv, 1933.

PHOTO: DIOCESAN ARCHIVE OF VIENNA (DIOZESANARCHIV WIEN)/BA INNITZER, PUBLIC DOMAIN

“Why did you take a photo of a pauper in 1933?” – I’m looking through one of the numerous cases from the Soviet Great Purge of 1937<sup>1</sup> and suddenly this interrogator’s question catches my eye. I cannot yet understand why he is suddenly asking about a photo taken four years previously but I do have my reasons for wanting to know the answer. The idea of the visual representation of what happened in Soviet Ukraine in 1932 and 1933 has been one of the focal points in my research for the past couple of years.

“I took a photo of this pauper to have a piece of documentary evidence of how hard life was in 1933.” Life was hard indeed, to put it mildly. In 1932–1933 Soviet Ukraine had suffered from a man-made famine (later it was given the name *Holodomor* – derived from “to kill by starvation” in Ukrainian). The estimates of its death toll, the more reasonable of them varying between 3.3 and 4 million people, are still the subject of fierce discussion. The countryside took the biggest blow as food supplies were taken from rural areas by force and more or less successfully rationed in urban areas. By 1933 many villagers were trying to reach bigger cities in a desperate attempt to survive<sup>2</sup> – one of them was the “pauper” in the photo mentioned by the interrogator.

This act of documenting the atrocities of 1933 was not the main reason for the prosecution of the unfortunate photographer, though the Soviet government definitely did not approve of this (even the use of the word “hunger” to describe those events was shunned until the very end of the USSR). Accusations, real and invented by the investigators, piled up and eventually led to a death sentence. The photo in question was not among the case files and it’s very unlikely that it survived at all. We cannot see now what exactly was on that photo, but we can extrapolate based on a few other pieces of photographic evidence of the Holodomor that exist – despite all the measures taken to cover everything up.

PROBABLY THE MOST famous existing photographic archive of the Holodomor is that of Alexander Wienerberger, an Austrian chemical engineer who spent many years working in the USSR. In 1933, he was working at a factory in Kharkiv (the same city where the “pauper’s” photo was taken) where he secretly took about 100 photographs of starving people in the streets.<sup>3</sup> Later the negatives were also secretly transported to Austria where they were published.<sup>4</sup>

This particular image of a starving girl in rags circulated widely and is often considered the iconic photographic representation of the Holodomor. Some of Wienerberger’s other photos show corpses of people who died of hunger lying in the streets in plain sight, often with passers-by who don’t seem to be paying much attention to the dead bodies.

There were also a few Ukrainians who managed both to photograph the Holodomor and to preserve their pictures through

the years. Hunger in the Donetsk region was documented on film by an amateur photographer, Marko Zhelizniak.<sup>5</sup> His photographs show groups of state “activists” posing with grain confiscated from peasants, and children in the fields digging out frozen potatoes bare-handed.

In addition, several years ago photographs by another amateur photographer, Mykola Bokan,<sup>6</sup> were discovered by chance among the archived cases of repressed people. Bokan had witnessed the Holodomor in the Chernihiv region. His photo documentation tells a very intimate tale, a sort of a visual diary from the life of a single family, members of which suffer and eventually die of hunger. The author has written inscriptions directly on the images, giving some additional context to the pictures. We see a family with children at the table: “300 days (three hundred!) without a slice of bread to add to the meager dinner, 2/VI 1933”. In another picture we see the rear view of one of his sons sitting in a field: “The place where Kostia died. His brother sits to the left; two hours before his death they were both chatting here”. This striking gap between seemingly peaceful images and the author’s notes, full of pain and grief, creates a very powerful emotional statement, expressing anger and despair. While Wienerberger’s depiction of the Holodomor gives the perspective of a bystander who pities the people suffering from hunger but sees

them as personifications of the catastrophe unfolding around them rather than as personalities, Mykola Bokan photographs his own family, people from his closest and most intimate circle.

MYKOLA BOKAN WAS accused of counter-revolutionary activities and sentenced to imprisonment in labor camps where he eventually died. His son Borys who helped him print the photos shared the same fate.

In October 1932, when hunger was already ravaging neighboring villages, an opening ceremony was held for the gigantic Soviet industrial project – the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station – and a number of foreign journalists and photographers were invited. The project’s opening was intended to show to the whole world the immense technical progress of the Soviet state. An American photographer, James E. Abbe, published a picture of the newly finished dam in his illustrated guide *I Photograph Russia* (1934). But there is more to this picture – the dam itself is shown far away in the background, to reveal the long queue for bread on the shore. This counterposition encourages the reader to consider the price of the Soviet accomplishments and achievements. Towards the end of his book, Abbe also lists the “photographs he didn’t take” – moments important to the author that for some reason he couldn’t film. Among others in this list there is a description of a death due to hunger: “The main street of this small Ukrainian village, some 8 kilometers from the lavish Dnieper dam. A hunched figure on the sidewalk rests – eternally. Was just too hungry.”<sup>7</sup>

As the Soviet Union’s politics of memory was suppression

**“SOME OF WIENERBERGER’S OTHER PHOTOS SHOW CORPSES OF PEOPLE WHO DIED OF HUNGER LYING IN THE STREETS IN PLAIN SIGHT.”**



Fig. 2 (left). Mykola Bokan. 300 days (three hundred!) without a slice of bread to add to the meager dinner, 2/IV 1933.



Fig. 3. Mykola Bokan. The place where Kostia died. His brother sits to the left; two hours before his death they were both chatting here.

and denial of the Holodomor, the first monuments dedicated to the famine appeared abroad. The world's first monument to the victims was unveiled in Edmonton, Canada at the initiative of the Ukrainian diaspora on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the famine in October 1983.<sup>8</sup> Later, such monuments were erected in Winnipeg, London, Los Angeles, and many other places.

In Ukraine, commemoration of the Holodomor began in the late 1980s after the process of identifying the burial places had started. The first monuments were inaugurated in the Kharkiv region in 1989.<sup>9</sup> One year later, a number of monuments and memorial signs in the Poltava region followed. Since then, numerous monuments have been built across the territory affected by the famine. In most cases, the initiative and the funding of these monuments and memorial signs came from local activists and communities.

The visual language of commemoration of the Holodomor widely uses Christian symbols such as crosses and bells which, apart from commemorating the victims, also refer to the Soviet ban on religion and the use of religious symbols. For example, one of the monuments to the victims of the Holodomor placed over a common grave in a village in the Dnipropetrovsk region was topped with a restored cross that was removed from a church demolished in Soviet times.<sup>10</sup> Similar cross-shaped monuments later were erected in Kharkiv, Kherson, Kyiv, and many other places all over Ukraine. Another widespread commemorative symbol is a bell – for example, in the Poltava region there is a monument in the shape of 30 bells under another huge, dome-

like bell topped with a cross, in the Kirovograd region there is a memorial sign in the shape of a cross and a bell, and so on.

Other images widely used for commemorating the Holodomor are those of a hungry, exhausted child and of a mother either holding a dead child or lowering her hands in despair.

This image of a *Berehynia* (protector) mother is used to symbolize Ukraine's tragic state, and is often a reference to the image of the Mother of God, her child in such cases being a symbol of baby Jesus.

**ONE MORE GROUP** of symbols in the Holodomor commemoration has a strong connection with bread and its production: ears of grain, quern-stones, etc.

These groups of symbols are also often mixed together. For example, in the Chernihiv region there is a monument to the victims in the shape of a cross of barbed wire with a sculpture

of an exhausted mother holding a dead child. In Zaporizhia, a monument to the victims of the Holodomor was erected in 2007 in a shape of 6 m tall marble cross with the inscription: "To the victims of hunger and Stalinism". Somewhat later this sculptural composition was updated with a figure of a mother – a symbol of mother-Ukraine mourning her children.<sup>11</sup> In 1993, a memorial sign was installed in Kyiv next to St. Michael's Monastery, consisting of a granite slab with a cross-shaped opening and a stylized Mother of God sculpture with an opening in the shape of a child with outspread arms.

In general, visual codes of the Holodomor commemoration are deeply rooted in Christian symbolism. Thus, commemora-

## "IN UKRAINE, COMMEMORATION OF THE HOLODOMOR BEGAN IN THE LATE 1980S AFTER THE PROCESS OF IDENTIFYING THE BURIAL PLACES HAD STARTED."



Fig. 4. Memorial for the Holodomor victims in Kyiv, Ukraine.

tion is equalized with religion and the return of the memory of the hunger's victims into public space is performed through the visualization of that specific part of their identity that relates to Eastern Orthodoxy (inadvertently excluding those victims with different religious beliefs).

Artists referring to the Holodomor issues also often used symbols originating in Christian iconography in their works. For example, Viktor Tsymbal's painting *Year 1933* depicts a starving mother with a child flying in the endless skies. The painting's composition draws on Renaissance paintings of the Ascension of Jesus or the Dormition of the Virgin by Italian masters. Aside from Christian motifs, Lida Bodnar-Balahutruk also uses photographs published in Robert Conquest's book *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. In her painting *The other crucifix* (1993) the artist copies the cross of the Italian master from Arezzo but replaces Jesus with photocopies of the photographs of actual hunger victims.<sup>12</sup>

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**WHEN WE WERE** beginning to think about what we as artists and also the third generation of survivors can tell about the Holodomor we fully realized that visual representation of mass starvation in the arts is not easy. Depiction of violent events and historical traumas is already hard enough because it demands from the artist not only talent but also a deep understanding of historical context and an ethical approach to the sensitive topic. Famine is an invisible enemy. How to show the total lack of something? How to visualize very slow death, extended in time?

What do you think of when someone says, "I am hungry"? Can you imagine the feeling of being hungry? Most likely, you can: your stomach growls and feels empty. Even if you are not

sure how to describe this verbally, you know how a body reacts to hunger. Hunger, like physical pain, is a very basic feeling which can cross language or cultural barriers. We know how it feels and we can understand when someone else feels that way. The right to food is a human right and we can easily empathize with those who suffer from malnutrition and food insecurity. As Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman put it in *The Empire of Trauma*, because of the universal qualities of trauma, we as observers and witnesses are secure in our ability to know it when we see it and to feel empathy with those who suffer it in "a sort of communion in trauma".<sup>13</sup>

Unlike other contemporary artists who had worked with the Holodomor issues and referred to the direct experiences and feelings of those who had personally experienced the Holodomor (e.g., Roman Pyatkovka's photographic series *Phantoms of the 30's*<sup>14</sup> or Lesia Maruschak's project "Maria"<sup>15</sup>) we wanted to analyze the experiences of our contemporaries – the third generation of survivors that had no personal experience of hunger and grew up in more or less favorable conditions.

**IN OUR PROJECT** "I still feel sorry when I throw away food – Grandma used to tell me stories about the Holodomor" we turn to postmemory about trauma. According to Marianne Hirsch, "postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right, so the connection to the past that she defines as postmemory is mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present.<sup>16</sup> Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation – often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible.<sup>17</sup>

We mention the stories heard from grandmother in the project's title because these stories were one of the most important channels of experience transmission and transfer of memory about trauma and had an immense personal impact. However, we intentionally never tell those stories directly. Such stories bear particular significance, but it is also important to hear them from those people whose experience they belong to. In Ukraine there are several institutions working on collecting and recording testimonies of Holodomor witnesses, e.g. the Holodomor Museum in Kyiv and the Territory of Terror museum in Lviv. While the former focuses specifically on Holodomor related testimonies, the latter in their umbrella project #unheard (#непочути) aims to preserve the testimonies of witnesses of both Nazi and Soviet violence in Lviv and the whole of Ukraine in the



Fig. 5. February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018 – one big flaccid carrot.



Fig. 7. March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018 – breakfast: lost appetite and didn't finish my omelet.



Fig. 9. April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018 – raw salmon fillet – didn't like the smell of it.



Fig. 6. March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018 – dinner: brown rice with sausage.



Fig. 8. March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018 – old, dry rocket leaves.



Fig. 10. April 21<sup>st</sup> 2018 – stale bread.

## “THE CONSEQUENCES OF HOLODOMOR MANIFEST THEMSELVES IN VIEWS, BELIEFS, BEHAVIOR, AND COGNITIVE DIRECTIVES OF THE SECOND AND THIRD GENERATION REPRESENTATIVES.”

1930s–1950s.<sup>18</sup> The stories they have in their recorded collections might differ in details from the stories of our family members but the impression they produce is exactly the same.

The influence of the collective traumatic experience on behavioral strategies of subsequent generations was analyzed among others in the research project “Holodomor 33: to break the silence” by Vitalii Klymchuk and Victoriya Gorbunova.<sup>19</sup> The researchers have demonstrated how the consequences of Holodomor manifest themselves in views, beliefs, behavior, and cognitive directives of the second and third generation representatives. As they have shown, among these traumatic manifestations are popular statements “If the child is skinny it must be sick”, “You need to store food supplies, you should always have a stock of food at home”, “Do not throw away bread and other food”, etc.

Or, as Cathy Caruth noted during the discussion on the effects of national traumas on the lives of contemporaries at the Holodomor Victims Memorial, the habit of elderly relatives to begin a telephone conversation with their children with the words: “Have you eaten?” is the first manifestation of trauma in the public consciousness since the Holodomor. This reaction is not always conscious, especially if it occurs in people who do not have a direct relationship to Holodomor.<sup>20</sup>

**THE TABOOS RELATED** to the throwing food away and the resulting behavioral changes that affect our generation to this day became the starting point for our project. It's obviously almost impossible to avoid throwing food away in our lives and we started to record it in a sort of a visual diary. We aimed to give material form to (and thus to highlight the presence of) our subconscious frustrations and psychological discomfort caused by the necessity to throw away even a small portion of potentially good food – meal remains on the plate, failed culinary experiments, or some slightly expired products. Each time, before taking this food to the waste bin we would cover it in black Indian ink and make a print of it on a sheet of gray paper, also noting the date and sometimes also the reason why we were throwing it away.

Fig. 5–10 Andrii Dostliev, Lia Dostlieva, from the project “I still feel sorry when I throw away food. Grandma used to tell me stories about Holodomor”, 2018.

When we had accumulated almost 50 prints, we started to collage them with tiny fragments of landscapes cut out of old photographs bought at flea markets. These landscape fragments, devoid of people and man-made objects and too small for the landscape to be recognizable or even vaguely attributable, were there to symbolize the impossibility of representing landscape in the memory about the Holodomor. Because mass deaths by hunger leave no traces in the landscape – unlike many other massive collective traumas which have their exact geographic locations and the traces of which can still exist in the landscape in the form of ‘places of memory’.

When we started to work on “I still feel sorry when I throw away food – Grandma used to tell me stories about the Holodomor” project, the key question for us as artists was finding a suitable contemporary language of visual representation which would be appropriate for working on such sensitive and important topic as the Holodomor mass trauma. In our project, we tried to work on a different visual language that could be used to speak about the Holodomor without employing traditional commemorative means and without using the most widespread images mentioned earlier. We believe that these symbols of commemoration are too emotionally saturated to use them when speaking about the experiences of the subsequent generations like ours. Therefore we went on a quest for other visual media suitable for expressing our personal experiences.

**WE FINISHED WORKING** on the project in 2018 and since that time had the opportunity to exhibit it in several places in Ukraine and Western Europe. Judging from the feedback we've received from the exhibition visitors we can tell now that the form of the visual representation that we had chosen really allows viewers to relate to our narrative. The visual language of our project speaks directly to their personal experiences as the subsequent generations of survivors. And in the case of those who do not have a direct familial relation to the Holodomor trauma, the visual language that we used – among other things, through its resonance with the ideas of responsible consumption – allows them to easily discover an entry point to the story that we tell. Altogether, the possibility to perceive the project's narrative without any pressure creates a shared space of understanding that allows empathy and can serve as a starting point for discussions. ✖

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- 2 For example, see Arthur Koestler's account: “At every [train] station

there was a crowd of peasants in rags, offering icons and linen in exchange for a loaf of bread. The women were lifting up their infants to the compartment windows – infants pitiful and terrifying with limbs like sticks, puffed bellies, big cadaverous heads lolling on thin necks.” in Marton, Kati *Great Escape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 98.

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- 9 Veselova “Pam'yatni znaky”, 435.
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