

## Orphanages in Soviet Ukraine during the Holodomor

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In October 2019, the theme of political recognition—this time by Germany—of the Holodomor as a genocide led to another scandal in the Ukrainian public sphere. Another case of a situation where non-recognition of certain events as genocide at the international level is perceived by the initiator as a loss. The unclear criteria of the 1948 UN Genocide Convention do not allow for hasty campaigns, and require a serious political lobby and justification for the position. Instead, the Ambassador of Ukraine to Germany accused Ukrainian researcher Yaroslav Hrytsak of misinterpreting the tragedy as part of the work of the German-Ukrainian commission of historians. Again, it is not the first time that researchers have become hostages to a situation where a fine line between science and the dictate of ideological rhetoric must be sought.

In the Ukrainian intellectual tradition, there is a Holodomor paradigm that is represented, both in academic research and in the public domain: media publications and television programs, political statements, cultural products, performances, books, cinematography, etc. In all cases, the Holodomor is presented as an artificial famine, by means of which the Stalinist totalitarian system killed 3.9 million people in Soviet Ukraine in 1932-33<sup>1</sup>.

We argue that changing the optics in research regarding the Holodomor is a chance to deepen the discussion and complement our knowledge. The theoretical foundation for such a change is given to us by the work of Raphael Lemkin, a man whose efforts established the framework for genocide discourse. Lemkin's legacy and his idealistic humanist character have been the subject of attention from researchers in Genocide Studies<sup>2</sup>. At the same time,

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<sup>1</sup> Левчук Н. М., Боряк Т. Г., Воловина О., Рудницький О. П., Ковбасюк А. Б. "Втрати міського й сільського населення України внаслідок Голодомору в 1932-34 рр.: нові оцінки", *Український історичний журнал* 4 (2015): 84-112.

<sup>2</sup> John Cooper, *Raphael Lemkin and the Struggle for the Genocide Convention* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008).

a number of critical remarks have been made about Lemkin, representing him as “an outdated remnant from the interwar period.” His post-war activities have been presented as a search for particular incidents of mass violence that would illustrate specific articles of the 1948 Genocide Convention. Certainly, Lemkin had a political agenda in his activities that requires that there be some caveats to the use of his ideas. However, their conceptualization has allowed researchers to develop certain theoretical frameworks, the elaboration of which will undoubtedly require adherence to academic standards.

The Holodomor was one of the themes that caught the attention of Raphael Lemkin<sup>3</sup>. The notes of his report, which was to be publicly presented in the USA on the 20th anniversary of the events of the famine in Ukraine, allow the rethinking of the Holodomor. Repressive policies of the Stalinist regime, which lasted from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s and included repression against various groups of the population, fall within a framework for understanding the Holodomor. The Holodomor was not limited to the policy of killing peasants by famine, but was complemented by attacks against intellectuals, political, cultural and religious figures who were supporters of the Ukrainian national project for autonomy.

The main hypothesis of our study is that a similar genocidal pattern was common to the Soviet regime’s policy toward children in the orphanage system. The UN Convention, according to Article 2, Paragraph “e”, considers such cases, if they are confirmed, as Forcible Transfers of Children (FTC)<sup>4</sup>.

Lemkin's ideas were supported by Canadian researcher Roman Serbyn. Serbyn criticized scholars who denied that the Holodomor met the criteria of the UN Convention, widely promoting Lemkin's ideas. Undoubtedly, for Serbyn, the Holodomor went beyond the famine of 1932-33. The historian writes that genocide should be considered from national and ethnic perspectives. The first concerns the entire population of the USSR, with the inclusion of other ethnic groups who populated its territory; the second concerns ethnic Ukrainian groups outside the republic, primarily in certain regions of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic<sup>5</sup>. In Holodomor Studies, this idea does not exist, but in Genocide Studies

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<sup>3</sup> Рафаель Лемкін: радянський геноцид в Україні, упор. Олеся Стасюк (Київ: Майстерня книги, 2009), 21-30.

<sup>4</sup> Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, accessed April 7, 2017, <http://www.hrweb.org/legal/genocide.html>

<sup>5</sup> Roman Serbyn and Bohdan Krawchenko, *Famine in Ukraine: 1932-33* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1986); Roman Serbyn, “The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-1933 as Genocide in the Light of the UN

much research supports theoretical substantiation of the hypothesis and allows for comparative research<sup>6</sup>.

The text features two main actors of these events – the pupils of special children’s institutions and the staff of these institutions. Orphaned pupils as a differentiated group, trying to describe the multiplicity of experiences of an individual child, as well as the multiplicity of distress he/she experienced using intersectional theory<sup>7</sup>. The staff of orphanages, represented as “ordinary executors” of the Stalinist regime, were caregivers interpreted to some extent as perpetrators in the implementation of genocidal practices.

Who were the pupils of orphanages, and why did they get into special institutions? Who became the staff in the orphanages, and what was these people’s motivation? How did the officials understand the requirements of the orphanage system, and how did the institutions work? What practices of the orphanage system are hypothetically considered genocidal?

Soviet orphanages, with their practices of controlling and raising children, were a phenomenon of the interwar period, with a policy of state interventionism characteristic of Europe<sup>8</sup>. From the beginning, Soviet propaganda introduced the orphanage system as the primary means of overcoming large-scale homelessness. A representative of the Soviet government, speaking in Kharkiv in 1928, called homelessness a “legacy of the tsarist regime” and “a consequence of the civil war”<sup>9</sup>. Five years before, another Soviet leader had said similar words in his speech in Moscow. To understand the continuity of the policy that announced the beginning of a new phase to fight homelessness in 1928, one must take a closer look at the idea of forming a “new Soviet man,” extremely important to Soviet

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Convention of 1948”, *The Ukrainian Quarterly*, 2(Summer 2006):189-199; Роман Сербин, “Концепція злочину геноциду Рафаеля Лемкіна та його аналіз українського геноциду” у *Рафаель Лемкін: радянський геноцид в Україні*, упор. Олеся Стасюк (Київ: Майстерня книги, 2009), 21-30.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Ruth Amir, “Killing Them Softly: Forcible Transfers of Indigenous Children”, *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 9(2015):40-60; David B. MacDonald and Graham Hudson, “The Genocide Question and Indian Residential Schools in Canada,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 45(2012):427-449; David B. MacDonald, “First Nations, Residential Schools, and the Americanization of the Holocaust: Rewriting Indigenous History in the United States and Canada,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 40(2007):995-1015.

<sup>7</sup> Liam Bright and Daniel Malinsky, “Morgan Thompson, Causally Interpreting Intersectionality Theory”. *Chicago Journals*. 83(January, 2016):60-81; Bowleg, Lisa. “When Black + Lesbian + Woman ≠ Black Lesbian Woman: The Methodological Challenges of Qualitative Intersectionality Research”. *Sex Roles*. 59(2008): 312-325.

<sup>8</sup> *Советская социальная политика 1920-1930-х годов: идеология и повседневность*, под ред. П. В. Романова (Москва: ООО “Вариант”, ЦСПГИ, 2007), 358.

<sup>9</sup> Доклад о состоянии беспризорщины и борьбы с нею к “Месячнику помощи детям”, р. 1492, оп. 1, спр. 30, арк. 1, 7, 152. ДАХО.

discourse throughout its existence. Lemkin regarded the events of the Holodomor as a necessary step in the progression of the Soviet regime.

The onset of a new era proclaimed by Soviet ideology was to produce a new man: “The old one was destroyed... as it was supposed to turn it into a pile of rubble. ... Among the millions of builders (of communist society) that every young man, any young girl should be.” During the period of military communism, the idea of using orphanages as incubators for mass production of such people was suggested. Soviet ideologist Anatoly Lunacharsky wrote: “You can shape a small preschool child, a schoolchild can be bent, a young man can be broken, and an adult leopard doesn’t change his spots.” Accordingly, the basic idea was to get children as young as possible, preferably from parents after birth. Parents had to be prepared in such a way that they would hand over the child voluntarily, focusing on their own professional activity and self-development. Due to the catastrophic economic situation created by the events of 1914-1921, the lack of adequate material and intellectual resources, the Bolsheviks' dreams of realizing a plan of comprehensive placement of children in a network of special institutions remained unfulfilled. It did not stop them from declaring victory over homelessness in 1922-23, with the beginning of the New Economic Policy.

However, in 1928 a new phase of the struggle for a “new society” and a “Soviet man” was announced. Homelessness was again recognized as an existing problem that needed to be addressed as soon as possible. This campaign turned into a fight against the homeless, using the most brutal methods<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, as the focus of social policy of the period was filled with violent and utopian practices, these actions did not seem extraordinary. In the end, “the Soviet system turned deviance into a pattern of conduct ... establishing the dominance of unofficial criminal rules over formal legal ones<sup>11</sup>.” In 1935, the end of the fight against homelessness, which had apparently been overcome, would be proclaimed. The Stalinist Constitution would summarize the end of the period of struggle and announce the emergence of a new classless society.

By this time, a pyramid of Soviet socialization for children had been formed. Childhood was essentially limited to nine years. Already at this stage began the ideological indoctrination of a child, who from 1923 were included in the younger children's groups of the mother

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<sup>10</sup> Кривоносов А. Н. Исторический опыт борьбы с беспризорностью. *Государство и право* 7(2003): 92-98.

<sup>11</sup> Лебина Н.

organization – the Octobrists. The children of this organization participated in the authorities' political and military. From the age of 7 to 14, the child had to take his or her place in the ranks of the mother organization. The ideological and militaristic education of this group was the focus of attention. According to the bureaucracy, a well-coordinated staff and trained caregivers should have transformed a child of this age into an effective communist agitator who could be used both inside and outside the state<sup>12</sup>. Among other tasks of the mother organization was the work with the homeless. From the age of 14, a teenager would become involved in the Komsomol organization, which was the moment of initiation in the transition to adulthood and the prospects of becoming a member of the Bolshevik Party.

In 1928, the People's Commissariat for Education issued an order to eliminate homelessness<sup>13</sup>. Police units and OGPU (Joint State Political Directorate) snatched children, with the staff of special child custody inspections only playing a supporting role. Obviously, the authorities tried to be as efficient as possible, ignoring all other conditions. In 1929 the resolution on regular ideological work with children in all children's institutions was issued. The staff of the institutions was held responsible for carrying out this work.

Children from birth to the age of majority were placed in different types of special institutions. Forms for each child contained information about their age, marital status, nationality, social background, and reason for entering the institution. In the paradigm of the educational process at that time, the child seemed to be a passive object of the upbringing process. However, this was not the only pressure on the pupils of orphanages.

How many children were affected by this policy, having entered the orphanage system? In 1928 about 120,000 [one hundred and twenty thousand] homeless people in the republic were reported to be in Kharkiv. Already in 1923, there were almost 1,500 [one thousand five hundred] special institutions for children in Ukraine, however, a large part of them did not have adequate funding, and were not provided with material equipment and personnel. The industrialization that continued in the republic encouraged masses of peasants to move to

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<sup>12</sup> Татьяна Смирнова, "Отправлять детей физически здоровых, умственно развитых и морально безупречных..." Эвакуация голодающих детей Советской России за границу, 1921 год" в *Советская социальная политика 1920-1930-х годов: идеология и повседневность*, под ред. П. В. Романова (Москва: ООО "Вариант", ЦСПГИ, 2007), 358.

<sup>13</sup> Рожков А. Ю. Борьба с беспризорностью в первое советское десятилетие. Вопросы истории 11(2000): 134-139.

big cities. A lot of children from these families ended up on the street or were involved in criminal events – theft, robbery, even rape and murder. The repressive rural policy increased the number of peasants who wished to flee to the city. The catastrophe caused by the collectivization and subsequent actions of the authorities to remove grain and food from the peasants led to the intensification of this movement. Lemkin, based on rumors rather than documents or statistics he did not have access to, wrote about 18,000 peasant children who were abandoned by their peasant parents during 1932-33 in Kharkiv alone<sup>14</sup>.

The analysis of the pupils of individual orphanages of Kharkiv, Kyiv and Chernihiv according to the internal documents of the institutions, as well as the study of the general statistics of the children's inspection, the police, and the "Druh ditey" ("Children's friend") society regarding the pupils of special institutions between 1928-1934 makes it possible to refute the official position on the young homeless, as having been rescued by the Soviet state.

Official documentation represented the majority of orphans as locals, defining their social background as "worker." In 1928, 621 children were admitted to special institutions in Kharkiv; 324 of them were identified as working-class children. Only 51 children were from peasant families. In 1933, 288 children out of 545 in Kharkiv orphanages were of "proletarian" origin, while only 42 children were from the village. In both cases, the number of peasant children did not exceed 8%<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, experts from these institutions testify to the fictitiousness of these statistics, noting that the survey of children under the age of 12 does not give an opportunity to find out their real origin<sup>16</sup>. Children are confused by cities, they cannot name the region they come from. Thus, a pupil of the Kharkiv orphanage, Leonid Nabashov, in his words, came to Kharkiv after Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod and the Caucasus<sup>17</sup>. Usually the homeless travelled by train, and most of the "transit points" on their way to the orphanage were cities connected by rail. Also, train stations became the main focuses for the concentration of homeless children or children in (semi) criminal groups. It was in these places that major raids took place, during which even firearms were used against children.

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<sup>14</sup> Рафаель Лемкін: *радянський геноцид в Україні*, 40.

<sup>15</sup> Отчет о работе комиссии с мая по август включительно, 1933 г. р. 1745, оп. 1, спр. 8, арк. 36 – 36 зв. Державний архів Харківської області (ДАХО).

<sup>16</sup> Списки воспитанников городка и сведения о приеме и увольнении детей, р. 318, оп. 1, спр. 14. Арк. 68. ДАХО.

<sup>17</sup> Набашов Леонид, р. 1745, оп. 1, спр. 10, арк. 3 зв. ДАХО.

The fact that the share of peasant children in orphanages was higher is indicated by the report of the head of the Kharkiv Commission for Assistance to Children in 1930. Explaining the reasons for the increase of homelessness in the republic, an official calls the village the main source of its replenishment. According to him, 94% of the 559 children, who were sent to special institutions in the city that year were originally from the village<sup>18</sup>. The situation in Kyiv and Stalino looked similar.

Markers regarding the “right” social background were instilled in children as young as 4-6 years old. Peasant children were referred to in the documentation as “poor” (bidnyaky), “middle group (serednyaky),” or “kurkul.” A child from the city could be designated as belonging to a family of “deprived” (pozbavlentsy), “priest,” or “enemy.” At the same time, this personal information was not kept secret and was discussed in children's collectives with the participation of staff. Lessons, pedagogical meetings, and special internal courts of the collective became the grounds for such discussions.

The ethnic composition of the pupils of special institutions coincided with the general picture of the city population. From 1928-34, groups of Ukrainians and Russians were equally distributed - up to 40% each, up to 12% were Jews, with fewer than 8% Tatars, Latvians, Armenians and other nationalities<sup>19</sup>. In Kyiv institutions, the share of Ukrainians was up to 30%, Russians about 25%, Poles up to 20%, Jews up to 15%, and fewer than 10% Latvians, Armenians, Roma<sup>20</sup>. On the basis of ethnic origin, police documents or juvenile commissions had no grounds for discrimination. Certainly, this was facilitated by the policy of indigenization, which was still in progress in the late 1920s.

An important issue is the reasons why a child was put in an orphanage. Interestingly, only 15% of the pupils were orphans. Up to 30% were brought up by one of the parents, mostly by the mother. Up to 40% of pupils had two parents. The transfer initiative for institutionalized children belonged equally to special bodies that might find the living conditions unsatisfactory, and to the children's parents or relatives. “I am asking you to admit my younger brother to the institution... my salary is not enough to provide and raise him.” “Please accept my seven-year-old daughter... due to poor financial conditions.” Such

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<sup>18</sup> Доклад о состоянии беспризорщины и борьбы с нею к “Месячнику помощи детям”, р. 1492, оп. 1, спр. 30, арк. 1, 7, 152. ДАХО.

<sup>19</sup> Отчет о работе комиссии по делам несовершеннолетних, р. 1745, оп. 1, спр. 6, арк. 1 зв. ДАХО.

<sup>20</sup> Отчет о работе за 1928/29. р. 318, оп. 1, спр. 115. арк. 1-15. Державний архів м. Києва.

applications were filed in the seemingly quiet years of the NEP and the first Five-Year Plan. A person who had a job was unable to feed their children. The report of the commission that removed two daughters from their mother, a factory worker, indicates that she was sleeping with the children on the floor on the factory premises, which led to tuberculosis.

At the same time, only 30% of children came from non-wealthy families, and only 4% were referred to as children from “socially dangerous” families. The largest category, more than 50% of the “socially neglected,” children who had police records, had no place of residence, or were in teenage gangs. Overall, up to 60% of children in orphanages had a record for offenses, mostly theft<sup>21</sup>.

Based on the documents, it is impossible to see national discrimination, in particular due to the korenizatsya policy that lasted during the first years of the Holodomor. An interesting example of its implementation is Lenin Children's Town in Kiev. Orphanage pupils were divided into several national groups: Ukrainians, Russians, Jews. Work with children and internal documentation in groups were conducted in national languages – Ukrainian, Russian, Yiddish. Interestingly, the desire to become “useful citizens of the republic” was stated in Russian and Jewish groups. Employees were offered questionnaires that included questions about awareness of the political situation in the RSFSR and the Ukrainian SSR. Similar accents on the Ukrainian and Russian separation gradually disappeared from the documents at the end of the study period. The children's town was closed in 1931.

Social labelling, important for the Stalinist state, was also essential in the case of children. “Class origin” influenced the court sentence of the child, was interwoven into the educational process, and discussed publicly among the pupils. Four- to six-year-olds learned about “hostile attitudes” to them from priest's families or kurkuls. When we see a questionnaire of a child whose family is labelled “deprived,” “kurkul,” or “enemy,” why this child appeared in the orphanage seems rhetorical. Where did the family go? Children deprived of all prior social relationships suffered psychological trauma, which, according to their recollections, affected their later lives and social communication.

It should be noted that the Soviet power considered so many different social groups its enemies that a large proportion of the staff of the special institutions were not “socially close“

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in terms of ideology – bourgeoisie, intellectuals – these terms did not have a positive connotation in the Soviet lexicon. And for the employer-state, choosing the right staff was important. And the main criterion for selection, judging applicants on their questionnaire, was the awareness of the need for the indoctrination of orphans. The caregiver candidate had to understand the “nature of the political upbringing of children” and the importance of the “child movement,” to define the “engine of social progress.” Finally, the contest was won by the person who understood that “the political upbringing of children goes through the whole educational and upbringing process.” In view of this, for the applicants, having taken Soviet political courses was more important than receiving a high school education or graduating from a university in the empire. Accordingly, it favoured rather young people.

At the same time, other documents give us the opportunity to understand that the greater motivation for working in these orphanages was the opportunity to receive food rations – oil, flour, meat. In the Stalinist state, where the ration card system was reinstated in 1929, having access to a simple set of products was of real significance. The ethical option, if a person was faced with such a choice, receded in the face of the need to feed their own family. Orphan workers often tried to get their children into their institutions.

During the Nuremberg trial, an American prosecutor said about the Nazis removing children from Slavic families for their further upbringing: “It doesn't matter that they were treated well, the main thing was that they were raised as true Nazis.”<sup>22</sup> The Soviet orphanage system removed children from their parents, sometimes killing those parents. It raised these children to be real “Soviet people.” And the system always has people behind it, names—and it is not just Joseph Stalin, the names of the system and the caregivers who turned the child custody process into the production of the system's cogs.

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<sup>22</sup> Ruth Amir, “Killing Them Softly: Forcible Transfers of Indigenous Children”, *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 9(2015):43.

## **Bibliography**