

Complex Social Memory: Revolving Social Roles in Holodomor Survivor Testimony, 1986-1988

During 1932 and 1933, a man-made famine struck Ukraine, and in its path of destruction, the famine took millions of lives. Not until the 1980s did the famine of, now known as the Holodomor, gain the attention of academic scholars. Dr. Robert Conquest's book, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, published in 1986, was the first detailed monograph to document the famine. 1986 also saw the birth of the United States Commission on the Ukrainian Famine, headed by Dr. James Mace. The Commission collected testimonies from Holodomor survivors and published two interim reports that captured everyday Ukrainian experiences during the famine. This paper focuses solely on Holodomor survivor testimony from the Commission's reports and examines the ways that survivors construct their social roles after the Soviet disruption of everyday life in Ukraine. Ukrainians constructed and adhered to various social roles during the famine and the complicated positions that many Ukrainians found themselves in due to food shortage, disease, and death forced them to alter their everyday roles. More specifically, this paper will emphasize the role of teachers and children during the famine, as survivors in their testimonies often identify the two groups when recalling the situations they found themselves in during the Holodomor. In short, survivor memory functions as social history. These survivors, using detailed language and rhetoric, employ their memories to break down common conceptions of social barriers that limit their role in participating, fighting, and surviving famine conditions.

The Ambiguous Role of Teachers during the Famine

One of the more common memories present in the testimonies of the Holodomor survivors is that of teachers. Several survivors, in their testimonies, expound on teachers and the types of roles they played in everyday life during the famine. In the eyes of Soviet policy during the 1920s, the Ukrainian teacher was responsible for integrating Ukrainian students into the

Soviet political system. Matthew Pauly argues, “The Soviet republican government had to conduct its affairs in Ukrainian if it was to justly serve the interests of the predominantly Ukrainian-speaking population and integrate Ukrainians into the new political order.”¹ Some survivors *were* teachers while others remember distinct moments concerning *their* teachers during the famine. Mr. Nicholas Chymych elaborates on the role of teachers in his testimony. He states, “I was a teacher, and all teachers were considered helpers in the socialization of the village, so that we were automatically recruited as activists to encourage people to join the collective farms.”² To understand the multifarious role of the teacher, Mr. Chymych’s statement must be broken down. He emphasizes that he was a teacher with his first statement, but he shifts from “I” to “all” to note he was not the only teacher involved in socialization. This important shift denotes an effort to tell the truth about the involvement of teachers in political affairs, but it also attempts to establish a sense of empathy because he states that “all teachers were considered helpers”, as if it was unavoidable. Memories like Mr. Chymych’s confront past themes in a present context, which can provide problems for memory as a source. Although memory provides challenges in circumstances like these, the benefits outweigh the negatives. As Lynne Viola argues, “And although memory is always a problematic vehicle for information, its weakness can be its strengths as it provides reflections of past and present and serves in a topic in

¹ Matthew D. Pauly, “Teaching Place, Assembling the Nation: Local Studies in Soviet Ukrainian Schools during the 1920s,” *History of Education* 39 (January 2009): 76. For further information on the use of Ukrainian linguistics within schools, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-39* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 75-121.

² U.S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine, *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33, Second Interim Report*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987-88), 126.

itself.”³ Memory, as a category, provides a new portal into the past that allows, rather than hinders, the development of new narratives based on ambiguous social roles.

Testimony by other survivors grounds Mr. Chymych’s memory with further evidence. If one calls Mr. Chymych’s testimony into question at all because of the problematic nature of memory as a source, then the hesitations become less burdening with the assistance of further testimony on the subject. Ms. Maria N. explains her role as a teacher in the assistance of the party: “The teachers were forced to enter into ledgers the amount of grain confiscated by the grain search brigade and name of the victim.”⁴ Her memory offers the same results as Mr. Chymych’s memory. Ms. N. describes her role as one that records the grain confiscation numbers, where as Mr. Chymych was forced to encourage people to join the collective farm. Both individuals, however, helped in the collectivization process, just in different ways. A third survivor further elaborates on the roles expected of teachers. Ivan Kononenko says, “In the Soviet political system, a teacher had to be a helper to political system.”⁵ Kononenko’s statement reflects an important reminder that teachers “had” to help the political system, indicating they had no choice in the matter. Mr. Chymych and Mr. Kononenko both gave testimonies that became a part of the second interim report conducted by the Commission. Ms. Maria N’s testimony became part of the first interim report. The Commission conducted the two reports in different cities across the United States, but also in different months and years. The continuity of

³ Lynne Viola, “The Cold War in American Soviet Historiography and the End of the Soviet Union,” *Russian Review* 61 (January 2002): 31. The memories present in these testimonies are important to the larger Cold War context present during the duration of the Commission’s work on the Holodomor between 1986 and 1988. The divide between American democracy and Soviet communism allowed memories to develop about each, and the Holodomor survivor testimonies capture such memories of the Soviet Union’s policies in Ukraine.

⁴ U.S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine, *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33, First Interim Report*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987-88), 151.

⁵ *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33, Second Interim Report*, 70.

the memories, however, survives the lapse in time and each individual felt this as an important topic to discuss during the hearings.

Other survivors recall how their teachers became more than educators during the Holodomor.⁶ In many ways, the mobility of teachers during the famine explains the ways in which individuals were able to navigate these social roles. Mr. Chymych remembers this role very clearly: “Yes, I could move freely from one village to another. I could go anywhere, including Moscow, as a teacher.”⁷ He uses the word “freely”, indicating there were no restrictions on his movement through Ukraine, which a great deal of scholarship argues otherwise.⁸ The progression of his testimony is important because his boundaries expand as he talks. First, he can move from village to village, then he says he can go “anywhere”. This term lingers because one might ask why he chose not to leave. Mr. Chymych finishes by saying that he can even go to Moscow. This is important for context because people living in Moscow between 1932-1933 did not suffer from famine, so it becomes an important detail in Mr. Chymych’s memory. In Mr. Chymych’s case, he voluntarily remembered the point about

⁶ Matthew Pauly examines the roles of Ukrainian teachers in the 1920s and 1930s in his article, “Teaching Place, Assembling the Nation”. Pauly notes that Soviet authorities allowed Ukrainian teachers some say in the development of curriculum. The freedom was little and Pauly notes, “There was a danger that educators’ emphasis on teacher self-training and independent activity in the schools might have negative consequences.” Pauly, “Teaching Place, Assembling the Nation,” 84.

⁷ *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33, Second Interim Report*, 127.

⁸ Numerous publications on the Holodomor insist that the Soviets hindered Ukrainian movement beyond borders in order to contain the knowledge of the famine. This is in juxtaposition to what testimonies have provided. Many Ukrainians, Russians, and members of the press all crossed Ukrainian borders during and after the famine, including Walter Duranty, the Moscow Correspondent for the *New York Times* who denied the existence of the famine. For more information on the borders and the famine, see Christian Noack, Lindsay Janssen, and Vincent Comerford eds., *Holodomor and Gorta Mór: Histories, Memories and Representations of Famine in Ukraine and Ireland* (New York, NY: Anthem Press, 2012), 38. For information on the ambiguity of Ukraine’s borders, see Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Moscow, which became the emphasis of his statement. This resulted from the involuntary memory of Mr. Chymych's point about mobility.⁹ Beginning in 1932, the Soviets hindered Ukrainian movement by introducing the passport system. The passport system required Ukrainians to obtain the passport document for identification and travel purposes, but such individuals could choose their own nationality. As Terry Martin states, "When passports were introduced in 1932, there was no special concern about nationality, and individuals were allowed to choose their own nationality when acquiring a passport."¹⁰ Many everyday Ukrainians, however, were not privy to that information.

Not all survivors who provide testimony remember the mobility of teachers, but many remember distinct details that allow them to recall a certain memory at a certain time. Ms. Lydia K. recalls the expression of her teacher: "Some, like my teacher, had sad faces and I knew that they did not want to do what they were sent for, but others in the group forced them."¹¹ Her testimony hints at a type of resistance, saying, "They did not want to do what they were sent for". Ms. K. took the time to present this detail in her testimony to explain that although some Ukrainians worked for opposing forces, their actions did not always represent their desires. She also notes that "others in the group forced them", which does not elucidate on who the "others" were. Although she most likely meant Soviet authorities, it could have been Ukrainians who

⁹ Involuntary memory does not necessarily mean the memory is unimportant, but the voluntary remembrance, which follows the involuntary memory, becomes the emphasis or main point after the recollection process has occurred. See John H. Mace, ed., *The Act of Remembering: Toward an Understanding of How We Recall the Past* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 48. For more information on this and the use of collective memory in the recovery process, see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992). The text is originally published in French, *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (The Social Frameworks of Memory, 1925).

¹⁰ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 450-451. Martin also notes that in 1938 the NKVD required that individuals register under the nationality of their parents, thus limiting choice in the passport system.

¹¹ *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33, First Interim Report*, 128.

were sympathizers, or Ukrainians who thought compliance was easier than resistance. After all, the famine forced diverse groups of people together in a ways in which they might not otherwise meet. Ms. N. remembers one such occasion where these different groups met: “One evening, the party leadership of the village ordered a meeting of party activists and school teachers to take place at the village Soviet.”¹² This short sentence from Ms. N.’s testimony reveals a great deal about hierarchy and the revolving roles of Ukrainians and others during the famine. She establishes a hierarchy by noting that “party leadership” ordered a meeting, purposely separating ‘party leadership’ from ‘party activists’. She groups “party activists” and “school teachers” together, indicating they share similar roles even though they have different titles. It is also important to note that schoolteachers were present at party meetings as other testimony highlights that teachers were often party workers by force.

Teachers played numerous social roles during the famine, not all of them by choice. The actions and roles of the teachers made a lasting impact on their pupils, which further muddled the lines of social identification. Ms. K. remembers what the students were forced to do in her school: “I also remember in 1932 they made the students in my school go around to various houses in the village and smear over whitewashed walls the following words in tan “*Zlisni nezdatchiki khliba*”, identifying the occupants as having maliciously failed to give bread to the State.”¹³ This testimony makes students active participators in party business, but on a social level, much like their teachers who taught socialist education on behalf of party members. Ms. K. does not make clear whether she was a teacher or student in this testimony, but it is more likely

¹² Ibid., 150.

¹³ *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33, First Interim Report*, 128. The Ukrainian phrase “*Zlisni nezdatchiki khliba*” translates into evil bread hoarders. Soviets and other provocateurs used this term to denounce Ukrainians who withheld bread from the collective drives and it was a humiliation tactic used by party members to influence Ukrainians to cooperate.

she was a teacher because she says “they made the students”, leaving the personal pronoun “I” out of her association with the students. Ms. K. also uses the word “they,” which does not directly answer who was at fault. It was most likely the party members and local authorities who encouraged this behavior from students. Teachers understood the circumstances surrounding their classroom. No longer was the classroom a place of proper education, but a space for political propagation. It is in this context that teachers take on another social role, that of a hero. During one survivor testimony, Mr. Michael Smyk recalled a scene in which he heard a teacher describe her role. The teacher said, “For the pupils in my class, I am not merely a teacher; I am a mother. These children grew up without affection. In addition to teaching them reading and writing, I must also read them fairy tales.”¹⁴ The teacher describes her role as that of a mother, but she is fully aware of the situations her students face. She says “I must also read them fairy tales” which shows her desire to not only care for her students, but also her desire to take them to a better place. This also references the parental roles many teachers often faced after parents were unable to care for their children. In some cases, teachers were helpers to political activism, other times they saved children from an unyielding fate, but nonetheless, they aided in the construction of new social roles based on the famine environment. The next section examines the complex social roles of children, often the hardest hit victims of the famine.

Social Roles of Children during the Famine

Another one of the most common memories of the Holodomor survivors in their testimonies is the memory of children. Although many were elderly at the time of the Commission’s work, many of them experienced the famine as children. In the summary of the public hearings, the Commission found that “The age of the witnesses at the time of the Famine

¹⁴ Ibid., 147.

varied, with most between seven and fifteen years old, but occasionally the age of a particular witness deviated drastically from the norm.”¹⁵ It is likely that the survivors remember a great deal about children during the famine because they were also children, and likely to be cognizant of the surroundings that affected their age group. In some instances the survivors remember children as victims, and in other testimony, survivors remember children as active participators in the local, Ukrainian social order.

One of the conventional ways that survivors remember children is as victims. In his comments on the conditions that children faced during the famine, Mr. Ivan Kasiianenko remembered the sobering details: “The children had nothing to eat. It was impossible to keep clean. We were literally eaten by lice. But nobody cared. We were the progeny of the defeated class enemy.”¹⁶ He notes not only the lack of food, but also the lack of hygiene. Ukrainians did not have enough to eat and they did not have access to proper health care. He also states that they were the offspring of the class enemy, hinting that the famine would harm future generations. Mr. Kasiianenko says, “We were the progeny of the defeated class enemy”, including himself in the group of children that became victims. The victimization of children took place outside of the villages and the countryside as well. Major cities, such as Kiev and Kharkiv also experienced child hunger: Mr. Oleksiy Keis remembers, “There were so many hungry children not only where I lived, but also in the city of Kharkiv, where I travelled once in a while.”¹⁷ This memory by Mr. Keis differs from Mr. Kasiianenko’s in the fact that Mr. Keis is describing children he saw, rather than describing his own conditions. Mr. Keis points out that children went hungry in

¹⁵ U.S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine, *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33, Report to Congress*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987-88), 187.

¹⁶ *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33, Second Interim Report*, 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

major Ukrainian cities, an idea that many believed only existed in the countryside. The cities allowed children to find each other, and it was the cities that allowed children to survive.

In the testimonies, the cities became a symbol of hope for children who were suffering from hunger in nearby villages because many children believed that the cities had foodstuff. One of the results of hunger in the cities was the abandoning of children due to lack of food, shelter, and safety. Mr. Danylo remembers, “Children were eaten, and human flesh was traded at the marketplace.”¹⁸ The amounts of abandoned children grew and orphanages became responsible for the intake of the children. Cathy Frierson and Semyon Vilensky note, “children lost their sense of social order, domestic security, and hope for adult protectors.”¹⁹ Frierson and Vilensky’s gulag description mirrored that of the famine conditions. In some cases, the orphanages transformed the children’s identity with a simple change of the name. Michael Smyk recalls the procedures in the orphanages: “Because they had been brought to the orphanage at such an early age that they did not know their own surnames, the children were given new names and surnames, mostly Russian, like Ivanov, Petrov, and so on.”²⁰ Mr. Smyk reveals that many entered the orphanages at an early age, indicating that many parents probably gave up their children early as a way of trying to save them as famine conditions became worse. The children were young enough to not know their names, which allowed orphanages (some run by the

¹⁸ Ibid., 121.

¹⁹ Cathy A. Frierson and Semyon S. Vilensky, *Children of the Gulag* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 90. Although some children in Ukraine did get deported to work camps such as the Gulag, many children just remained homeless and parentless. Conditions in the Gulag and conditions during the famine remained similar for children as they often took care of themselves and others with no parental supervision. For a survivor account of the Gulag system, see Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1973). For more information on how the gulag shaped Soviet citizens and attempted to reintegrate them into Soviet society, see Steven A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

²⁰ *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33, First Interim Report*, 139.

Soviets) to discretely alter their nationalities at a young age by giving the children Russian names. Those who did not make it into the orphanages became a common sight on the street. Mrs. Pawlichka remembers seeing the suffering children: “For 15 years, I, my friends, my sons, everyone who remembers the famine remembers the vivid pictures of children lying on the ground with their eyes open and glazed.”²¹ The personal recollection notes that Mrs. Pawlichka saw the children herself, but she expands the point by noting that her friends and family also saw suffering children on a regular basis.

Many of the survivors note the difficulties for children during the famine, but the memories of the children remain active in their present context. The memories outlast the delay of time between the famine and the testimonies, and it is clear that the memories of the children engrain themselves in the survivors’ memory almost permanently. Ms. Nina K. notes, “This moment, when I saw such a tragedy happening to little children, remained in my memory for my whole life. When I remember these events tears well up in my eyes.”²² Another survivor remembers a plethora of ways in which children suffered:

Children emerged as the most pathetic victims of Stalin’s policy of starvation. Not only did they suffer extreme privation and the premature loss of childhood, but they were also the victims of a particularly insidious policy orchestrated by the government, a policy of turning children against parents. As Mrs. Pawlichka noted, they would come to school, trying to seduce the children with candies and sweetmeats, in order to get them to betray their parents, to get them to tell the authorities where they had hidden the food.²³

²¹ Ibid., 76. Cathy Frierson and Semyon Vilensky argue, “As the most vulnerable members of society, children almost always suffer disproportionately in periods of famine, epidemics, internecine war, and profound social upheaval.” Frierson and Vilensky, *Children of the Gulag*, 4.

²² *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33, First Interim Report*, 137. These lasting memories can also be the result of the innocence image that children often carry. In her work on children after World War II, Tara Zahra asserts, “children sometimes appeared to be the only “innocent victims” left standing in 1945.” Although Zahra’s emphasis is on children post-1945, the innocent image of children is one that can apply universally, especially in the context of war, famine, disease, and other major catastrophes. Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe’s Families after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 241.

²³ *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33, First Interim Report*, 76.

This survivor notes the many ways in which children became victims of the collectivization process and the manipulative ways of those who collected the grain. The government would take advantage of the children's state of being and coax them with food in order to deploy their political intentions. Although these survivors recount the ways in which children suffered, others remember the children in a different way. Some survivors remember the children in a way that makes them active participants in the social order, rather than pawns shuffled by authoritative figures. Not often enough do adults think of children in mature mindsets, but it is important to remember that these children faced adult-like themes on a daily basis during the famine and they took it upon themselves to survive. Children banded together, stole, and looked after each other in an effort to provide a more communal, stable living environment.

One of the more social effects of the famine resulted in new family structures solely run by children. The older children, ages ten to fifteen, would care for the younger children and take over paternal and maternal roles when no one else would. The process of invoking *mentalités* of children is possible through these memories.²⁴ Children quickly faced adult themes, which they handled rather well for their age and circumstance. An Italian diplomatic and consular dispatch recorded a scene of children taking care of each other: "You could see ten-year olds playing mother to three and four-year olds. As night approached they would cover the little ones with

²⁴ Anthony D. Smith coins a type of national examination that he calls the ethno-symbolist approach. Smith argues that ethno-symbolism should consist of "long-term analysis of social and cultural pattern over the *longue durée*, i.e. analysis of persisting long-term structures and processes." Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 61. In this case, the survivors' *mentalités* come from memories in the form of testimony. This process is useful beyond the scope of nationalism and in regards to Holodomor survivor testimony. The focus on subjective elements presents a more complicated Holodomor narrative.

their own coat or kerchief and sleep on the ground with a tin can at their sides for a possible coin.”²⁵ This image described by the Italian dispatch notes the children taking on parental roles, and in essence, becoming adults. The description of a “tin can at their sides for a possible coin” also invokes the theme of homelessness, a difficult situation for anyone, let alone children. Although children did provide familial structures for others, the fact remains that these were children. Many remained young and naïve and typical rumors spread among younger generations as they would in any culture. These child rumors were innocent on the surface, but serious below. Children began providing their own remedies for illness due to lack of knowledge and basic human need for survival. An anonymous survivor remembers these circumstances: “And just imagine! Her friend, the children from the orphanage somehow got the idea that the cure for tuberculosis was to swallow raw eggs.”²⁶ This anecdote highlights the collective assumptions made by children when left to their own devices. These memories present rare and unique insights into the survivors’ *mentalités*, which is hard to come by in other types of sources

The particular emphasis on teachers and children in Holodomor survivor testimony reveal a specifically Ukrainian narrative that challenges common assumptions about everyday life during the Holodomor. The testimonies deconstruct standard social roles that many scholars and others have used to categorize Ukrainians during the famine. The testimonies allow Ukrainians a chance to share their narrative of events, which develops a rather sophisticated social history while maneuvering through political and economic events that continue to dominate Holodomor study. Although the testimonies are just one piece of the Holodomor story, they reveal important information concerning everyday life during the famine and invite us to rethink the labels that we so quickly apply to history.

²⁵ *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33, Report to Congress*, 426.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 380.