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The Holodomor National Awareness Tour: *A Reflection on Teaching about Genocide*

Alexandra Marchel, PhD

The Holodomor National Awareness Tour
(Canada-Ukraine Foundation)¹

“Does anyone have any questions?” I asked after finishing my introduction to the lesson. Several students put their heads down and promptly looked at their phones. My eyes must have revealed some concern. Their teacher explained: “They are using Google Translate to help with their English. They recently moved to Canada from Syria.” One student waved me down to show what she had written: “I understand this history. My government is trying to starve our population into submission.”

Since 2018, I have been working as program manager and lead educator for the Holodomor National Awareness Tour on their Holodomor Mobile Classroom (HMC). The Tour is an umbrella project of the Canada-Ukraine Foundation, financially supported by the Canadian Federal Government and provincial governments of Ontario and Manitoba, as well as by private donors. The HMC is a 40-foot RV that has been transformed into a multi-media learning environment, with over 30 seats and electronic tablets, and a 24-foot high-definition video wall. The HMC travels across Canada educating the public on the Holodomor genocide, the state-induced famine that occurred in Soviet-occupied Ukraine in 1932-1933.

‘Holodomor’ is a word that in the Ukrainian language means “death inflicted by starvation.” It was the culmination of an assault by the Communist Party of the USSR on the Ukrainian peasantry, who tended to resist Soviet policies, and against the Ukrainian political, religious, and intellectual leadership, who posed as a threat to Soviet rule. Years before the Holodomor, Stalin made it clear that he viewed Ukrainian farmers, who made up roughly 80 percent of the Ukrainian SSR population, as the driving force of the national movement in Ukraine. He feared that this nationalism would lead to a revolution and an

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autonomous state. It would be through his collectivization policies in Ukraine, the “breadbasket of Europe,” known for its fertile black soil that he would seek to break the backbone of Ukrainian national consciousness.

The Holodomor had its beginnings in Joseph Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan, which called for rapid industrialization and the forced collectivization of agriculture across the Soviet Union. Announced in 1928, Stalin’s plan was to be financed largely by the export of grain from Ukraine. Collectivization meant that independent farmers were forced not only to surrender their land, livestock, and farming tools but to become labourers on state-owned and state-run collective farms. Stalin’s brutal policies created famine across the grain-growing regions in the Soviet Union, including in Kazakhstan. But it was in Ukraine that Stalin and his leadership used the crisis, stemming from his failing collectivization policies, to accomplish broader goals – the famine would be deliberately intensified to crush the Ukrainian peasantry. Soviet authorities set impossibly high grain requisitions and then forcibly removed grain and foodstuffs from farmers, and borders were closed to prevent people from seeking food beyond Ukraine. Millions of people starved to death.

Crucially, this assault occurred in the larger context of Stalin launching a campaign of arrests and repression against the Ukrainian intelligentsia: professors, teachers, writers, artists, religious leaders, public officials, and bureaucrats – individuals who were seen as undermining the Soviet Union’s ideological and state-building aspirations. Ukrainian churches, historical buildings, monuments, and artworks were physically destroyed. Ukrainian schools, books, and theatres were banned; and the Ukrainian dictionary was altered to appear closer to Russian (see, e.g. Applebaum 2017; Graziosi 2004-2005; Klid and Motyl 2012; Kulchytsky 2018; Kuryliw 2018).

While mass starvation unfolded, the Soviet Union went to great lengths to deny and conceal the famine, while promoting the USSR as a socialist utopia and worker’s paradise. The Soviet government manipulated and censored foreign journalists, banned humanitarian aid, and later, destroyed documentary evidence. For decades, the Soviet leadership enforced silence about the famine. Anyone caught speaking about the horrors was accused of ‘anti-Soviet’ behaviour and arrested. Eventually, public discussion of the famine began in the final years of the USSR, in the wake of President Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms of *glasnost* and *perestroika*.² It was also during this period in the 1980s, that Ukrainian communities in North America began successfully bringing the famine to the public’s attention.

² Glasnost and perestroika (meaning “openness” and “restructuring” respectively) were a series of reform programs implemented in the 1980s that were meant to transform Soviet economic and political policy and permit open discussion of political and social issues.

In 2006, the Ukrainian Parliament formally declared the 1932-1933 famine as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian nation. Two years later Canada recognized the famine as an act of genocide, and enacted federal legislation to commemorate the Holodomor annually on the fourth Saturday of every November. In recent years, there have been increased efforts to raise awareness of the Holodomor through academic scholarship and advocacy. This ranges from the publication of collections of survivor testimonies, to the production of films, to museum exhibits, to the erection of monuments, to its inclusion in school curricula, to the establishment of research institutes, and the lobbying of international governments to recognize the Holodomor as genocide.³

The Holodomor Mobile Classroom is part of this process in bringing the Holodomor into public discourse, using the mobile classroom as a literal vehicle to educate people across Canada about this history.

As an HMC educator, a typical day begins with meeting our driver on the grounds of a high school. After the RV is parked, we set-up the vehicle: the sides are extended, the stairs are inserted, and all of the technological equipment is turned-on. We then are able to commence our programming, which consists of delivering 60-minute lessons to four separate classes in a day. Since its inception in 2015, the HMC has been invited to over 400 schools coast-to-coast and has had over 53,000 students, teachers, and the general public visit the HMC.

Before moving our work to an online platform in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the HMC's programming consisted of two interactive lessons taught in the mobile classroom; both of which utilize cutting-edge technology and custom-made applications developed by Forge Media + Design, a multidisciplinary design firm based in Toronto, Ontario. The first lesson, entitled "The Historian's Craft," offers a hands-on approach in exploring the history of the Holodomor. Students are tasked to do the work of an historian, examining a wide array of primary and secondary sources, and experience some of the methods of analysis that historians utilize to make sense of the past. After being introduced to the concept of 'genocide' and an overview of the 1932-1933 famine, students participate in an activity. Divided into groups, they are asked to analyze decrees, photographs, letters, academic quotations, and survivor accounts on digital tablets that are handed out to them, and answer questions exploring the 5 W's framework (who, what, where, when and why) of the Holodomor. Their answers are

³ The project partners of the Holodomor National Awareness Tour (the Canada-Ukraine Foundation, the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, the Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre, and the Holodomor Research and Educational Consortium) have been instrumental in creating and supporting many such initiatives, both within Canada and internationally. Please see their websites for more information. Respectively: holodomortour.ca; cufoundation.ca; ucc.ca; ucrdc.org; holodomor.ca.

submitted to me on my personal tablet to review before I post them on the video wall for everyone to see. I then invite students to discuss their answers.

Following these presentations, I explain to students how genocides are not spontaneous or isolated events, and that to understand why such violence occurs, we must understand the warning signs of this human phenomenon, such as hate speech. Hate speech has the potential of influencing and inciting people to accept or commit violence against targeted groups. While not on the scale of genocide, we can see recent examples of xenophobic and racist language being an instrument of hate in the United States. The Southern Poverty Law Centre, a US-based organization that monitors hate groups, surveyed 10,000 kindergarten through 12-grade educators in the US, and found that in 2016 there was an uptick in incidents of racial and ethnic harassment during the candidacy and election of Donald Trump (Southern Poverty Centre, 2016 p. 4). In the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic, various reports have shown an increase in racist and xenophobic violence and discrimination against Asians and people of Asian descent. One survey published by the Chinese Canadian National Council documented 1,150 cases across Canada of racist attacks between March 10, 2020, and Feb. 28, 2021, with many of the incidents involved blaming Asians for COVID-19 (Nicholson, 2021, para. 5). This is reflective of what United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated in 2020, when he declared that “the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering,” and called the international community to “strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate” (Guterres, 2020, par. 3). The “Historian’s Craft” lesson highlights that countering the dissemination of inflammatory language provides one pathway to preventing racist violence.

The second lesson given on the HMC is “Breaking the Sound Barrier: Raising Voices Out of Silence.” This lesson unfolds from the perspective of several individuals, notably journalists, who share how they defied Soviet censorship to alert the world of the forced famine in Ukraine. After hearing these stories, students create digital posters in an activity called “The Wall of Truth.” Using tablets, they write text and select pre-downloaded photographs to produce collages that make connections to the Holodomor to other atrocities, past and present – helping students understand that a set of circumstances occur to build the climate in which human rights violations can take place. The images range from contemporary examples of protests from people across the globe demanding political reform, to images of propaganda used during various genocides. There are also images of authoritarian states applying brute force to quash domestic dissent, and more generic images of the kinds of tools that journalists use to document human rights abuses, such as cameras, computers, and pens. The end result is a visual representation of actions students can take to be advocates of human rights who call out hate speech, misinformation, and genocide denial.

In the case of the Holodomor there remains ongoing denial from Russia that the Holodomor was an intentional assault on the Ukrainian people. This narrative has been fueled by

contemporary politics; namely, Russian aggression in Crimea and Donbas, where, starting in 2014, Russia has openly demonstrated its contempt for the principles of international law to pursue its geopolitical interests and territorial ambitions. Using social media trolls and bots, Russia continues to spread false stories that seek to undermine the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government and to divide and polarize Ukrainian society (see, e.g. Hurska 2020). Narratives of denial of the Holodomor, however, are also present in Canada. In November 2019, sessional lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, and former candidate for the Marxist-Leninist Party, Dougal MacDonald, posted a diatribe dismissing the Holodomor as a myth created by the Nazis on his personal Facebook page. Widespread condemnation and calls for his resignation by the university's student union and other groups did not lead to MacDonald facing disciplinary action, but the University of Alberta did respond with a letter citing its commitment to raising awareness of the Holodomor. Bringing the HMC to the University of Alberta campus has been identified as one initiative that can do this work (Balan 2019; Lachacz 2019).

In the last minutes of my time with each attending class, I ask students to consider why it is important to learn about the history of the Holodomor. Often, they reply with the anticipated "So it doesn't happen again," and when they do, I am quick to counter that food is still being used as a weapon by governments to control and colonize lands. For example, this is a lived experience for some of the students from Syria who visited the HMC when it was in Manitoba. I also share the uncomfortable truth that Canada has in its past used state-supported starvation to subjugate Indigenous peoples. For example, Canada's first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, deliberately used starvation and the spread of disease in western Canada to clear the way for mass settler settlement and for the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (Daschuk 2013).

Although the primary focus of the HMC is to raise awareness of the Holodomor, the lessons provide a platform to bring into conversation other examples of human rights abuses. While I find that more often than not, students arrive at the mobile classroom not knowing about the Ukrainian famine, I regularly meet students eager to share their knowledge of the residential school system in Canada. In the "Historian's Craft" lesson, one of the slides that are shown is the United Nation's 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which defines genocide as a crime under international law. When I reach the fifth point of the Convention (point e) – "Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" – I ask students to reflect on the history of an estimated 150,000 Indigenous children taken from their families and placed into residential schools, where the government's policy of 'civilising' Indigenous peoples was practiced from the 1870s into the 1990s (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

I then help students draw parallels between how the Soviet regime and British/Canadian governments turned to policies of assimilation to achieve their goals in destroying languages and cultures, and accumulating and exploiting land and resources in violent nation-building projects.

When teaching on the mobile classroom my pedagogical aim is to help students nourish and harness their intellectual curiosity, so that their education facilitates personal development and social transformation. I fervently believe that it is the role of educators to transmit skills of critical thinking and effective communication so that students can apply this knowledge in their personal, academic, and professional lives. I strive to create a positive environment that fosters respectful dialogue and personal reflection, where students feel valued, supported, and heard. With each and every lesson, it is my hope that students walk away feeling that the skills they have strengthened while on the HMC have value and significance in their everyday lives, so that they can become better thinkers, leaders, and global citizens.

Former UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova stated that, “The prevention of genocide starts on the benches of schools” (UNESCO). The work of the Holodomor National Awareness Tour shows that it can also start on the seats of a mobile classroom. When I visit high schools, I have no idea who will be sitting across from me. I have met students whose grandparents survived the Holodomor, students whose family survived the 1994 Rwandan genocide against the Tutsis, intergenerational survivors of the residential school system in Canada, a Uyghur student who has a family member in a Chinese “re-education camp,” and a human rights activist who fled Turkmenistan after being arrested. These encounters have never left me. Meeting these students has been a powerful reminder that human rights are not an abstract idea to be taken for granted. Being informed and engaged is a civic responsibility that requires daily reiteration, and is needed now more than ever in these precarious times.

**** In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Holodomor National Awareness Tour has created a pre-recorded online adaptation of its first lesson, entitled “Introduction to the Holodomor: A Virtual Lesson for Schools.” Please visit www.holodomortour.ca for more information.*

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