

# Lesia Melnychuk and Phil Webster. Holodomor: Silenced Voices of the Starved Children

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**Lesa Melnychuk and Phil Webster.** *Holodomor: Silenced Voices of the Starved Children*. Foreword by Morgan Williams, Carina Hoang Communications, 2018. x, 176 pp. Illustrations. Additional Reading. Glossary. \$45.00, cloth.

When a small child dying of hunger took a few spikes in bony fists, the guard shot the child on the spot. (my trans.; Barka 32)

**I**n 1986, as the subject of the Holodomor, after having been cloaked for decades to hide the truth about the crime against the Ukrainian people, was gradually becoming known outside of the Ukrainian milieu and discussed in international political contexts, British historian Robert Conquest published the work *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (translated into Ukrainian in 1993), based on materials (eyewitness accounts) assembled by James Mace, the executive director of the US Commission on the Ukraine Famine. This book prompted Lesa Melnychuk (Lesa Morgan), a Ukrainian Australian researcher and author and representative of the Ukrainian diaspora in Western Australia, to ponder, “Why didn’t we know about this? Why didn’t we talk about it? Why didn’t the world talk about it?” (viii). In the wake of her reflections, she tried to find out as much as possible about the Holodomor—to investigate the question more thoroughly and to understand the realities of the time in which this tragedy took place.

With the works and public statements of foreigners—Gareth Jones, Malcolm Muggeridge, Raphael Lemkin, Conquest, Mace, and others—on record, members of the Ukrainian diaspora raised the alarm about the famine, repressions, and crimes undertaken by the totalitarian Communist regime. Many of them were Holodomor witnesses who had been forced to go abroad and remain there. They were often *Ostarbeiter*—workers forcibly deported to Germany by the Nazis during World War II who then remained in Western countries (such as Great Britain, West Germany, and France) after the war or moved to America and Australia, where they could speak freely about the Holodomor and other events occurring in the USSR. Such recollections are represented in Melnychuk and Phil Webster’s book, *Holodomor: Silenced Voices of the Starved Children*—the winner of an Independent Publisher Book Award (the IPPYs). The book contains a foreword by Morgan Williams (vi), an introduction by (Melnychuk) Morgan (viii-ix), and the stories of almost forty survivors—people who had been born in Ukraine, were forced to leave there in the 1940s, and eventually settled in Western Australia, particularly during the emigration wave of 1949 through the 1950s.

Melnyczuk began work on this grand project in 2003, setting down the recollections of people who as children had witnessed first-hand the horrific realities of the Holodomor and whose parents and/or relatives had died while waiting for a piece of bread. The geographic representation of the respondents was quite wide, and it corresponded to those regions of Ukraine that had suffered the most in 1932-33 (particularly the territories of the present-day Poltava, Kharkiv, Cherkasy, Zhytomyr, Zaporizhzhia, and Mykolaiv regions). The result of this fifteen-year project was an illustrated book in which "[t]he true story of what [had] happened in Ukraine during these years" (vi) was told in the survivors' own words—the testimony of those who had survived the Holodomor and eventually moved to Western Australia.

Despair, suffering, hopelessness, and death are the states of being that permeate Melnyczuk and Webster's book. Here, we find the stories of "poor souls" (13, 24)—victims who, having been left without property or any food, tried their best to survive on their own and save their children from starvation. This is the testimony of the children themselves—of how they were torn from their homes and from their parents, brothers, and sisters, whom they often never saw again. This is a requiem for the children's "[e]ndless tears and closed eyes" ("with swollen arms and legs, in many cases after being taken from their homes to die in the street" [12, 32]). These are the painful memories of people who, having experienced terrible events ("We were dying from hunger, but we had to give all our bread to the government and surrender the means with which to make anything for ourselves" [9]), found an inner strength and retained a sense of dignity and humanity—they "paid dearly but never became monsters" (162).

As we know, one of the policies of the ruling regime was the destruction of the backbone of the Ukrainian nation through the eradication of the *kurkuls*, who were the embodiment of resistance and disobedience. They were a medium for uniting like-minded people en masse, and this had the potential to lead to mass confrontation. In the memoirs presented in this work, there are extensive descriptions of dekurkulization and the extortion of property ("invade people's homes to determine which families were *kurkuls*, labelling them as 'potential threats' to the state" [23]). Information is recorded about people who were sent far from home not only for their refusal to join the Communist Party or to cede their possessions for the benefit of the state but even for wearing an embroidered shirt or playing the bandura. Some of them died on the long journey from Ukraine to the most remote parts of Russia, never reaching their destination, while others froze to death trying to return home. Those who remained alive—hungry, half-conscious, and exhausted people—were forced into hard labour in the fields, on farms, and digging trenches. Many of them left their families in search of

food and never returned home. These are stories of lost years that no one will ever get back (see 10).

The brutal atmosphere inherent in the stories in this book makes it impossible to read the work in one sitting. Careful consideration of its content requires one to take a break—the mind simply refuses to believe, and one cannot accept or comprehend, the indifference, cruelty, and inhumanity that is described and depicted therein. People who were hungry, desperate, and feeling utterly hopeless, as all of their food had been taken from them (even what was carefully hidden for the children), were sometimes placed in conditions in which they “had no choice” (38). The numerous stories of cannibalism during the Holodomor are striking. And one eyewitness, in particular, tells of a woman who, not having breast milk to feed her newborn baby, could not bear the suffering of the child and strangled her with her own hands (36).

This work is a collection of childhood memories of a shock that had an irreparable effect on the psyche—painful reminiscences that would never be forgotten (“It was a terrible time for our people, and even today it is difficult to bear memories” [70]). The survivors of these events were severely psychologically traumatized, and they had to live with the consequences. One person speaks of still being afraid to hear a knock on the window. Others relate their attempts to overcome an ingrained sense of feeling mute and useless. Melnyczuk and Webster’s book is a tribute to those who “have the right to be heard”—to those who “deserve recognition”—in the expression of historical memory (29).

Special mention should be made of the graphic design of this publication. The narrative stories are supplemented by illustrations of Holodomor monuments located in Ukraine and in other countries and by pictures of devastated Ukrainian villages and half-starved people. The book is predominantly black and white. This represents in tone the realities of the time described: it harks back to the starkness, blackness, and opacity of the half-starved existence of the witnesses and victims of the Holodomor—to the lives of people in extreme conditions. The black colour of the pages, where we also see the comments of both foreign citizens and the leaders of the totalitarian government, intensifies that suffocating feeling of death, and it evokes a comparison to the blackboards on which the names of blacklisted villages were written down.

The cover of the book depicts a monument to the victims of the Holodomor located in the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv. Here, we see a Ukrainian child, a girl, clasping ears of wheat tightly to her chest and fearfully awaiting those who would come to take her only food. The authors, it seems, deliberately chose to show the image of a child supplemented by a cluster of viburnum, as viburnum is a Ukrainian symbol of the timeless unity of the

people—living with those who have departed and those who are still waiting to be born. The combination of the dark bronze tones of the famous monument and the red-purple colour of the plant automatically brings to mind Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (based on the book *Schindler's Ark*, by Thomas Keneally, about the Holocaust)—that is, the moment when, according to the director's plan, a girl in a red coat appears and walks through the streets where an entire nation is being exterminated. Such a small but very meaningful artistic element can create a metaphoric link between various humanitarian tragedies, underscoring the need to remember them so that they will never be repeated.

I feel that the events of almost ninety years ago described in the book find their parallel in present-day Ukraine. The policies of the past that "brought Ukrainians to their collective starved knees" and the fear that Stalin "was able to instil in his own Ukrainian citizens [that] had them planning and carrying out monstrously cruel actions against their own people that lead to starvation and death" (ix) have crept into present-day realities. Today, the people of Ukraine are again living in a state of fear owing to encroachment not only on their territory but also on their feeling of dignity and their sense of national identity.

The book under review is a milestone work. It is a significant culmination of many years of examination of the greatest tragedy of the Ukrainian people and of Ukrainian history (in some villages, nearly forty percent of the inhabitants died). Conquest's Ukrainian-language book calls the Holodomor "perhaps the most horrific social catastrophe of our century" (my trans.; Konkvest [Conquest], *Zhnyva* i). Thus, Melnyczuk and Webster's book occupies a rightful place in the active treasury of literature on the genocide of the Ukrainian people.

The issues raised in this book give testimony to the Ukrainian historical memory, and they are the driving force behind the formation of national consciousness in Ukraine and among Ukrainians abroad. In my opinion, the collected eyewitness accounts are worthwhile reading for a wide audience—"This real story of human suffering must not be lost or forgotten" (vi). It is crucial that a broad public hear the silenced voices of the half-dead children muffled by the lack of a piece of bread. Everyone who does not believe needs to believe. Everyone who hears these stories should understand and empathize with them. Everyone who has survived must not forget. And there is no need to remain silent. May no one coming into this world ever experience such a tragedy.

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