

“A Crime Against Humanity Arguably Without Parallel in European History”: Genocide and the “Politics” of Victimhood in Western Narratives of the Ukrainian *Holodomor*

REBEKAH MOORE

University of Western Australia

In the West, discussion about the *Holodomor* — the name given to the Ukrainian experience of the deadly famine which spread across several regions of the Soviet Union between 1932 and 1933 — has proved to be highly contentious.¹ Much of the debate has focused on the genocidal “status” of the famine in Ukraine, with sharp divisions between the particular “schools” of thought. While many scholars have concluded that the famine was not a genocide, a significant body of literature has emerged which argues the opposite. In arguing for this genocidal interpretation, certain narratives about the *Holodomor* have developed which highlight important concerns about the “politics” of genocide and victimhood. One historian has suggested that “the word genocide has to be applied to the Ukrainian famine, the *Holodomor*”, otherwise “the word genocide loses all useful meaning”.² The definitional parameters of the term are highly contested, however, and precisely what qualifies as “genocide” remains controversial. Furthermore, the discourse surrounding the *Holodomor* raises questions concerning the “attractiveness” of this classification, and the desire, as one commentator has phrased the issue, to “benefit from history” through claiming a particular type of victimisation.³ This paper will explore the nature of these “politics” and how they have found expression in the genocidal interpretation of the *Holodomor*. Overall, it cautions against allowing the agendas of the present to obfuscate ongoing efforts to adequately and appropriately come to terms with past atrocity.

¹ There are many different discourses on the *Holodomor*, including Western, diaspora, Ukrainian, and Russian, with further divisions existing between public and scholarly discussion. This paper, however, restricts itself to the Anglophone literature (including both diaspora and non-diaspora work), as an adequate consideration of all these different discourses is well beyond the scope of the present investigation. Additionally, many of the themes of *Holodomor* literature which we will explore, such as claims of genocide, uniqueness and Holocaust comparisons, actually began with the diaspora, and later informed the discussion which started in Ukraine itself following the collapse of the Soviet Union. See D.R. Marples, *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (Budapest, 2007), p.xii. In this sense, the English-language literature represents a natural starting point for tracing the development of the different discourses surrounding the *Holodomor*.

² D. Rayfield. “The Ukrainian Famine of 1933: Man-Made Catastrophe, Mass Murder, or Genocide?” in L.Y. Luciuk, ed., *Holodomor: Reflections on the Great Famine of 1932-1933 in Soviet Ukraine* (Kingston, 2008), p.93.

³ See C.S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*, (Cambridge, 1988), p.161.

Before considering the “politics” surrounding the genocidal interpretation of the *Holodomor*, we must first begin with an examination of the arguments which have been advanced, and how this discourse has developed. For those who argue in favour of this view, the famine constitutes an act of genocide in the sense that it was deliberately planned on the part of the Soviet authorities, and aimed to “destroy the Ukrainian nation as a political factor and social organism, a goal which could be attained far short of complete extermination”.⁴ There are also several other factors which are emphasised by those who hold this view. Firstly, it is argued that the famine was wholly “man-made” and did not result from any natural causes. The harvests of the time were at least adequate, and famine instead resulted from the regime’s unrealistic grain requisitions from the Ukrainian peasantry, which occurred alongside a simultaneous assault on Ukrainian nationalism.⁵ Soviet leaders were therefore fully aware of the situation they had fostered, but refused any assistance to the starving, including rejecting international aid.⁶ While grain reserves were available, exports continued, and the borders of the affected areas were closed, leaving the starving to die.⁷

This interpretation of the famine began to be “popularised” in the West during the 1980s, emerging alongside a “rediscovery” of these events.⁸ Before this time, the *Holodomor* had received little attention from both scholars and the public. The official Soviet line was a denial that the famine had ever occurred, and as a result, it was an event about which very little was known in the West. While the famine was taking place, some foreign journalists and officials, such as Malcolm Muggeridge and Gareth Jones, had published accurate eyewitness accounts.⁹ Despite these efforts, however, it was the work of other foreign correspondents such as Walter Duranty, which concealed the full extent of the famine, that came to shape understandings of it outside the Soviet Union.¹⁰ Until the 1980s, the majority of publications about the famine in the West

⁴ J.E. Mace, “The Man-Made Famine of 1933 in the Soviet Ukraine. What Happened and Why?” in I. W. Charny, ed., *Toward the Understanding and Prevention of Genocide: Proceedings of the International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide* (Boulder, 1984), p.67.

⁵ F. Sysyn, “The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-3: The Role of the Ukrainian Diaspora in Research and Public Discussion” in L. Chorbajian and G. Shirinian, eds, *Studies in Comparative Genocide*, (London, 1999), p.191. For a classic study on the “national factor” in the famine of 1932-1933, see T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (New York, 2001).

⁶ See, for example, R. Conquest, D. Dalrymple, J. Mace and M. Novak, *The Man-Made Famine in Ukraine* (Washington, 1984), pp.6-7; and J.E. Mace, “Famine and Nationalism in Soviet Ukraine”, *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 33, 3 (1984), p.38.

⁷ See N. Werth, “A State Against Its People: Violence, Repression, and Terror in the Soviet Union” in S. Courtois et al., eds, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes Terror Repression*, trans. J. Murphy and M. Kramer (Cambridge, 1999), p.164. Werth, however, ultimately endorses the non-genocide argument. See Werth, “A State Against Its People”, p.168.

⁸ See S.G. Wheatcroft, “Towards Explaining Soviet Famine of 1931-3: Political and Natural Factors in Perspective”, *Food and Foodways*, Vol. 12, 2-3 (2004), p.117.

⁹ Examples of Muggeridge’s reports include a three-part series entitled “The Soviet and the Peasantry: An Observer’s Notes”, the individual articles of which were “Famine in North Caucasus”, *Manchester Guardian*, 25 March 1933, pp.13-14; “Hunger in Ukraine”, *Manchester Guardian*, 27 March 1933, pp.9-10; and “Poor Harvest in Prospect”, *Manchester Guardian*, 28 March 1933, pp.9-10. For Jones’ reporting, see “Famine in Russia”, *Manchester Guardian*, 30 March 1933, p.12.

¹⁰ For examples of Duranty’s selective reporting on the famine, see W. Duranty, “Soviet Acts to Spur Basic Industrialization”, *The New York Times*, 4 October 1932, p.11; “Soviet in 16th Year: Calm and Hopeful”, *The New York Times*, 13 November 1932, p.E4; “All Russia Suffers Shortage of Food:

were the result of efforts by the Ukrainian diaspora, with some Western scholars of the Soviet Union making only brief references to a “man-made famine” in their work.¹¹

The 1980s proved to be a decade of transformation regarding how the famine was discussed and commemorated in both scholarly and public forums. To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the famine, the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (HURI) launched the Famine Project between 1982 and 1983, and the first international conference on the famine was held in Montreal in 1983. From these beginnings, the story of the famine soon found a much wider audience. In 1984, the documentary film *The Harvest of Despair*, which was produced by Ukrainian émigrés in Canada, was widely screened in North America. The next year, the famine began to feature in American public high school history curricula as part of wider studies on human rights and genocide.¹²

These more public initiatives were soon reflected within academic discourse, including the view that these events constituted an attempted genocide. The famine was first described as “an act of genocide” in 1984 by James E. Mace, an American historian working as a junior research fellow at HURI.¹³ Perhaps the most significant development of this period was the 1986 publication of Robert Conquest’s *The Harvest of Sorrow*, which was the first in-depth scholarly account of the famine. Like Mace, Conquest presented the famine as being planned by the Soviet authorities, and suggested that it was a genocide against Ukrainians even if he did not explicitly make this statement in his book.¹⁴

By the end of the 1980s, the genocidal view of the famine was receiving considerable support from various groups and bodies, including legal and political forums. In April 1988, the United States Commission into the Ukrainian Famine submitted its final report to Congress. Declaring the famine to be man-made, the sixteenth finding of the report concluded that “Joseph Stalin and those around him committed genocide against Ukrainians in 1932-1933”.¹⁵ The final report of the United States Commission was followed by that of the International Commission of Inquiry

Supplies Dwindling”, *The New York Times*, 25 November 1932, p.1; and “Food Shortage Laid to Soviet Peasants”, *The New York Times*, 26 November 1932, p.9. Duranty remains a highly controversial figure. For biographies, see, J.W. Crowl, *Angels in Stalin’s Paradise: Western Reporters in Soviet Russia 1917-1937, A Case Study of Louis Fischer and Walter Duranty*, (Washington, 1982); S.J. Taylor, *Stalin’s Apologist: Walter Duranty, the New York Times’s Man in Moscow* (Oxford, 1990). In 2003 an ultimately unsuccessful campaign was launched to have Duranty’s Pulitzer Prize revoked. See C. Young, “Remember the Holodomor”, *The Weekly Standard*, 8 December 2008.

¹¹ See, for example, D.G. Dalrymple, “The Soviet Famine of 1932-1934”, *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 15, 3 (1964), pp.250-284; Dalrymple, “The Soviet Famine of 1932-1934: Some Further References”, *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 16, 4 (1965), pp.471-474; M. Lewin, “Taking Grain: Soviet Policies of Agricultural Procurements Before the War” in C. Abramsky, ed., *Essays in Honour of E. H. Carr* (London, 1974), pp.291-296; and A. Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR* (1969) (Harmondsworth,1972), pp.177-181.

¹² J. Coplon, “In Search of a Soviet Holocaust: 55-Year Old Famine Feeds the Right”, *Village Voice*, 12 January 1988, p.32.

¹³ See Mace, “Famine and Nationalism in Soviet Ukraine”, p.37; and Mace “The Man-Made Famine of 1933 in the Soviet Ukraine”, pp.67-83.

¹⁴ R. Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, (New York, 1986), p.272.

¹⁵ United States Commission on the Ukrainian Famine, “Executive Summary: Commission Efforts and Accomplishments” in *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-1933: Report to Congress* (Washington, 1988), p.vii.

into the Ukrainian Famine in 1990. Like the United States Commission, the establishment of this Inquiry had resulted from the efforts of the Ukrainian émigré community in North America.¹⁶ The Inquiry's report demonstrated that all commissioners agreed that "the Soviet authorities, without actively wanting the famine, most likely took advantage of it once it occurred to force the peasants to accept policies which they strongly opposed".¹⁷ Nonetheless, they did not unanimously endorse a genocidal interpretation of these events, with two commissioners dissenting on this point.¹⁸

Following from these developments in the 1980s, a broad discourse has now emerged in the West concerning the most adequate way to explain the *Holodomor*. The "rediscovery" of the famine in the early 1980s and the disagreements concerning its genocidal nature encouraged other scholars to explore its origins and consequences. We have already examined the "standard" arguments from those who claim that the famine was a genocide. For those who hold the counterview, a point which is particularly emphasised is that the population of Kazakhstan was, proportionately speaking, worst affected by the famine.¹⁹ As a result, given that the famine stretched beyond the geographical confines of Ukraine, it is argued that it cannot necessarily be viewed as a concentrated assault against only Ukrainians. Similarly, a distinction is often made between the different impacts of the famine on rural and urban areas, in that Ukrainian (and other) peasants starved while Ukrainian (and other) workers received better provisions.²⁰ In this sense, many who argue against the genocide view suggest that the famine is most illustrative of the regime's ruthless and callous approach to the peasantry as a whole, rather than one particular ethnic group.²¹ Furthermore, some historians have argued against claims that environmental factors were not a cause of the famine,²² while others have suggested that political elements such as peasant resistance were the key causal factors.²³

Some eighteen years after *The Harvest of Sorrow* first appeared, a second English-language monograph on the famine was published. R.W. Davies' and Stephen Wheatcroft's 2004 study *The Years of Hunger* has been widely regarded as authoritative, and represents an important contribution to the ongoing debate

¹⁶ I.A. Hunter, "Putting History on Trial: The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-1933", *Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, Vol. 15, 2 (1990), p.47. On the establishment of the United States Commission, see Wheatcroft, "Towards Explaining Soviet Famine of 1931-3", p.117.

¹⁷ International Commission of Inquiry into the 1932-33 Famine in Ukraine Final Report, 10 March 1990, as cited in L.Y. Luciuk, ed., *Holodomor*, pp.268, 271-272.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.282-285.

¹⁹ See H. Kuromiya, "The Soviet Famine of 1932-1933 Reconsidered", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 60, 4 (2008), p.667; and A. Nove, "When the Head is Off", *The New Republic*, 3 November 1986, p.37.

²⁰ See J. Himka, Review of J. Dietsch, *Making Sense of Suffering: Holocaust and Holodomor in Ukrainian Historical Culture* and S.V. Kul'chyts'kyi, "Holod 1932-1933 rr. v Ukraini iak henotsyd/Golod 1932-1933 gg. v Ukraine kak genotsid", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 8, 3 (2007), p.693; and Kuromiya, "The Soviet Famine of 1932-1933 Reconsidered", p.668.

²¹ See, for example, Wheatcroft, "Towards Explaining Soviet Famine", p.120.

²² See M.B. Tauger, "The 1932 Harvest and the Famine of 1933", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 50, 1 (1991), pp.70-89; and M.B. Tauger, "Natural Disaster and Human Actions in the Soviet Famine of 1931-1933", *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 1506 (The Center for Russian and East European Studies, 2001).

²³ See D.R. Penner, "Stalin and the *Ital'ianka* of 1932-1933 in the Don Region", *Cahiers du Monde russe*, Vol. 39, 1 (1998), pp.27-67.

concerning the *Holodomor*. Viewing the famine as complex and multi-causal, Davies and Wheatcroft rejected a genocidal interpretation of these events:

We do not at all absolve Stalin from responsibility for the famine. His policies towards the peasants were ruthless and brutal. But the story which has emerged in this book is of a Soviet leadership which was struggling with a famine crisis which had been caused partly by their wrongheaded policies, but was unexpected and undesirable. The background to the famine is not simply that Soviet agricultural policies were derived from Bolshevik ideology, though ideology played its part. They were also shaped by the Russian pre-revolutionary past, the experiences of the civil war, the international situation, the intransigent circumstances of geography and the weather, and the *modus operandi* of the Soviet system as it was established under Stalin. They were formulated by men with little formal education and limited knowledge of agriculture.²⁴

The famine was, Wheatcroft and Davies ultimately argued, “a consequence of the decision to industrialise this peasant country at breakneck speed”.²⁵

Following the publication of *The Years of Hunger*, the *Holodomor* continues to be a source of interest for scholars in the West. English-language publications about the famine appear with regularity, and in 2009 the academic periodical *Holodomor Studies* was founded.²⁶ Additionally, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the famine in 2008 was marked with large conferences and events held by HURI and other bodies. Importantly, the debate concerning the famine’s genocidal nature remains unclosed in the West, and despite a general consensus from many scholars that it was not a genocide, those who argue the counterview remain equally steadfast.²⁷ The broader “politics” of this debate highlight wider concerns about the process of addressing past atrocity, and it to these “politics” that we now turn.

The question of genocide, it is clear, lies at the heart of the discussion about the *Holodomor* in the West. As we have seen, the genocidal interpretation emerged simultaneously with the “rediscovery” of the famine in the early 1980s. In assessing the “politics” which have shaped this discussion, several questions arise. Firstly, what informs the commitment to attain the particular classification of genocide for the Ukrainian experience of the famine? What role do the Holocaust and claims of “uniqueness” play in attempting to legitimate this point of view? And, most importantly perhaps, why does this “famine-as-genocide” interpretation persist even when much of the scholarship on the subject argues against it?

Amidst the historical, political and moral concerns which have influenced the discussion about the *Holodomor*, the “politics” of victimhood — namely the means through which the historical experience of victimisation can be put to use by various

²⁴ R.W. Davies and S.G. Wheatcroft, *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture 1931-1933* (Basingstoke, 2004), p.441.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.441.

²⁶ For recent publications on the *Holodomor* which support the genocide view, see A. Graziosi, *Stalinism, Collectivization and the Great Famine* (Cambridge, 2007); H. Halyna, ed., *Hunger By Design: The Great Ukrainian Famine and its Soviet Context* (Cambridge, 2008); W.W. Isajiw, ed., *Famine-Genocide in the Ukraine: 1932-1933: Western Archives, Testimonies and New Research*, (Toronto, 2003); P. Kardash, *Genocide in Ukraine*, trans. D. Myrna (Melbourne, 2007); and Luciuk, ed., *Holodomor*.

²⁷ See Wheatcroft, “Towards Explaining Soviet Famine”, p.117. Of course, even while agreeing the famine was not a genocide, there is considerable disagreement amongst these scholars regarding its precise causes. See Kuromiya, “The Soviet Famine Reconsidered”, pp.663-675; and D.R. Marples, “Ethnic Issues in the Famine of 1932-1933 in Ukraine”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 61, 3 (2009), pp.508-510.

groups in the present — are clearly visible.²⁸ Narratives about past atrocities possess a certain potency in the present, which those surrounding other historical events do not seem to share to the same degree. The moral power of these pasts, along with an elevation of the status of victimhood and persistence of a “culture of complaint”, lends them a certain “usefulness”, and many aggrieved groups have attempted to gain from their earlier experiences of victimisation.²⁹ It has been suggested that “all history is contemporary history”, and this insight rings particularly true when confronted by the “politics” of victimhood.

Understanding these “politics” in the debate concerning the *Holodomor* must begin with an examination of the highly contested concept of “genocide”. While the definitional parameters of the term have long proved a source of heated disagreement, it is generally agreed that it constitutes a particularly heinous crime. For many people, “genocide” conveys a particular power which “mass death”, however horrible, simply does not. As philosopher Berel Lang has noted, “the term ‘genocide’ has come to be used when all other words of moral or political opprobrium fail, when the speaker or writer wishes to indict a set of actions as extraordinary for their malevolence and heinousness”.³⁰ Ironically, however, it is this dramatic moral power — along with the prominence of the Holocaust, “the genocide of genocides”,³¹ in discussions of atrocity — which has helped fuel the “politics” of victimhood. It has rendered genocide “an attractive concept”³² for would-be victims, and has allowed “a genocidal past [to become] an obvious political asset”.³³ Indeed, this perceived “worth” of the concept may help explain why, in addition to the *Holodomor*, attempts to declare the 1921-1923 famine a genocide against the Ukrainian people have also been made.³⁴

While the moral meaning of genocide is quite clear, its scholarly and legal definition has proved an ongoing source of controversy. What exactly is “genocide”? Equally importantly, what is it not? Part of the problem in finding satisfactory answers to these

²⁸ For discussion of “the politics of victimhood” from an anthropological perspective, see L. Jeffrey and M. Candea, “The Politics of Victimhood”, *History and Anthropology*, Vol. 17, 4 (2006), pp.287-296.

²⁹ See R. Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York, 1993). See also R.J. Evans, *Rereading German History 1800-1996: From Unification to Reunification* (London, 1997), p.168. Several commentators point to a shift in the status of victimhood with the rise of “identity politics”. See, for example, O. Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York, 1996), p.8; O. Bartov, “Reception and Perception: Goldhagen’s Holocaust and the World” in G. Eley, ed., *The “Goldhagen Effect”: History, Memory, Nazism — Facing the German Past* (Ann Arbor, 2000), p.38; N.G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London, 2000), p.32; M. Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State, Volume I: The Meaning of Genocide* (London, 2005), p.6; and P. Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, 1999), p.8.

³⁰ B. Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago, 1990), p.3. For similar arguments, see Himka, Review of Dietsch and Kul’chyts’kyi, p.689; and D. Moshman, “Conceptual Constraints on Thinking About Genocide”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 3, 3 (2001), p.431.

³¹ Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*, p. 1.

³² S. Straus, “Contested Meanings and Conflicting Imperatives: A Conceptual Analysis of Genocide”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 3, 3 (2001), p.359.

³³ G.D. Rosenfeld, “The Politics of Uniqueness: Reflections on the Recent Polemical Turn in Holocaust and Genocide Scholarship”, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 13, 1 (1999), p.46. On this point, see also S.D. Stein, “Conceptions and Terms: Templates for the Analysis of Holocausts and Genocides”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 7, 2 (2005), p.190.

³⁴ See W. Veryha, *A Case Study of Genocide in the Ukrainian Famine of 1921-1923: Famine as a Weapon* (Lewiston, 2007). See also M. Edele, *Stalinist Society 1928-1953* (Oxford, 2011), p.237.

questions is, as one recent scholar has recognised, the "politics" themselves: "the very term has become so charged and carries such a weighty emotional load, that almost any attempt at definition is likely to run up against any number of interest groups demanding their pet issue for inclusion or exclusion".³⁵ These concerns, however, have plagued discussions of genocide since the term was first coined by the Polish legal scholar Raphaël Lemkin in 1943. Noting that this new phrase "denote[d] an old practice in its modern development", Lemkin had sought to give a name to the Nazis' programmes of systematic violence in their occupied territories, particularly the mass murder of Europe's Jews.³⁶

Lemkin was later instrumental in the creation of the United Nations' *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide*, which was approved by the U.N. General Assembly on 9 December 1948 and provided a legal definition of the term. Genocide is therein defined as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group".³⁷ The adoption of this definition by the U.N., however, was not itself without controversy, and, as one commentator has recognised, might be seen as the product of "political compromise".³⁸ Original drafting of the Convention had included social and political groups as potential victims of genocide, but this element was eventually withdrawn after vigorous protests by some delegates, among the most vocal of which was the Soviet Union.³⁹

This initial controversy concerning inclusion and exclusion has persisted, and many scholars have suggested alternate definitions of genocide since 1948. An early example was the more inclusive classification offered in 1959 by the legal scholar Pieter Drost, who declared it to be "the deliberate destruction of physical life of individual human beings by reason of their membership of any human collectivity as such".⁴⁰ By this formulation, political and social groups can be considered victims of genocide. Drost's view has found echo in the work of sociologist Leo Kuper, who defines genocide as a "crime against a collectivity, taking the form of mass slaughter, and carried out with explicit intent".⁴¹ More inclusive still is the approach suggested by noted genocide scholar Israel Charny, who has classified the term as "the mass killing of substantial numbers of human beings, when not in the course of military action against the military

³⁵ Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*, p.203. For a similar view, see A.D. Moses, "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the 'Racial Century': Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust", *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 36, 4 (2002), p.28.

³⁶ R. Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (Washington, 1944), p.79. For discussion of how the Nazis' programmes prompted Lemkin's development of the concept of genocide, see, for example, L. Kuper, *Genocide* (Harmondsworth, 1981), pp.22-23.

³⁷ United Nations General Assembly, "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide", approved by the General Assembly 9 December 1948, as cited in L. Kuper, *Genocide*, p.210.

³⁸ F. Chalk, "Redefining Genocide" in G.J. Andreopoulos, ed., *Genocide: Conceptual and Historical Dimensions* (Philadelphia, 1994), p.48.

³⁹ For discussion of the various political influences which shaped the adoption of the Convention, see, for example, Kuper, *Genocide*, pp.24-26; N.M. Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides* (Princeton, 2010), pp.4, 9, 15, 21-24; and R.J. Rummel, *Lethal Politics: Soviet Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1917* (New Brunswick, 1996), pp.xiv-xv.

⁴⁰ P.N. Drost, *The Crime of State Volume II: Genocide* (Leyden, 1959), p.125, as cited in F. Chalk, "Redefining Genocide", p.48.

⁴¹ Kuper, *Genocide*, p.86.

forces of an avowed enemy, under conditions of the essential defenselessness and helplessness of the victims".⁴²

Meanwhile, other scholars have continued to champion a more exclusive understanding of genocide. Sociologist Irving Horowitz has cautioned against an overly inclusive definition, noting that "[b]roadening the concept so that everyone somehow ends up a victim of genocide only leads to a tautological reasoning".⁴³ Expanding upon this view, Horowitz argued:

[T]here is a danger in broadening the concept of genocide so that it becomes symbolically all-embracing and hence meaningless [...] A deflated, pessimistic, and ultimately confused concept of genocide deprives the very people who are presumably genocide victims of the capacity to resist and retaliate. For that reason, I have come to believe that a restrictive rather than an omnibus concept of genocide is the most operationally valid.⁴⁴

Other researchers, however, have defended a broader definition of genocide, claiming that it is far more dangerous to be too exclusive in conceptualising the term. Charny, for example, has argued that genocide should refer to "all known types of mass murder and mass deaths that are brought about at the hands of man", so that atrocities will not "fall by the theoretical wayside" as a result of a definition that is too restrictive.⁴⁵ In response to these difficulties and lack of consensus regarding what should be excluded or included under the banner of "genocide", scholars have proposed a variety of subcategories and separate words to denote different kinds of mass killing, such as "politicide",⁴⁶ "cultural genocide", and "democide".⁴⁷

In contrast to this ongoing controversy regarding inclusivity and exclusivity, the notion that intention on the part of the perpetrators is a necessary condition to the commission of genocide has proved less contentious. The formulation set out in the official UN definition, namely that genocide entails "acts committed with intent", seems to be generally accepted by most scholars.⁴⁸ For the debate surrounding the genocidal status of the *Holodomor*, however, the question of intent has become an important point of contention. If Stalin consciously inflicted the famine on Ukrainians, it can be more easily classified as a genocide. If he did not intend it, however, but did not act to stop it once started, or it was caused by largely natural factors (and thus wholly unintended), the case for genocide becomes much weaker, and the already murky issues of blame and responsibility are further clouded.

⁴² I.W. Charny, "Classification of Genocide in Multiple Categories" in I.W. Charny, ed., *Encyclopedia of Genocide: Volume I* (Jerusalem, 1999), p.7.

⁴³ I.L. Horowitz, *Taking Lives: Genocide and State Power* (New Brunswick, 1997), p.81.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.80-81.

⁴⁵ I. Charny, "Toward a Generic Definition of Genocide" in Andreopoulos, ed., *Genocide*, p.91.

⁴⁶ Charny uses the term "politicide" to mean "intentional mass murder of people defined as political enemies or threats to the regime in power or seeking power". See Charny, "Classification of Genocide", p.8.

⁴⁷ The term "democide", proposed by Rudolph J. Rummel, is defined as "murder by government agents acting authoritatively". See R.J. Rummel, "The New Concept of Democide" in Charny, ed., *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, p.20. "Genocide" thus becomes a subcategory of "democide".

⁴⁸ Of course, there are scholars who argue against the necessity of intention in deeming acts or events genocidal. See, for example, J. Balint and I.W. Charny, "Definitions of Genocide" in Charny, ed., *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, p.14. For further discussion about the issue of intention, see F. Chalk and K. Jonassohn, "Conceptualizations of Genocide and Ethnocide" in R. Serbyn and B. Krawchenko, eds, *Famine in Ukraine 1932-1933* (Edmonton, 1986), pp.180-181; and N. Finzsch, "If It Looks Like a Duck, If It Walks Like a Duck, If It Quacks Like a Duck", *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 10, 1 (2008), pp.119-126.

The absence of any written document which suggests Stalin purposefully ordered and oversaw the famine has often been cited in arguments against the genocide interpretation. Davies and Wheatcroft, for example, stated their conclusions plainly: “we have found no evidence, either direct or indirect, that Stalin sought deliberately to starve the peasants”.⁴⁹ Others, however, have not found this absence of evidence to be a necessary indication of the famine’s non-genocidal nature. Historian Norman Naimark, for example, has made the following observations on this particular issue:

There is not a lot of evidence that Stalin himself ordered the Ukrainian killer famine, but there is every reason to believe he knew about it, understood what was happening, and was completely indifferent to the fate of the victims. This may not be enough evidence to convict him in an international court of justice as a genocidaire, but that does not mean that the event itself cannot be judged as genocide. Recent international jurisprudence concludes that a historical event — such as the massacre in Srebrenica in July 1995 — can constitute genocide without the demonstration that specific perpetrators were guilty of the crime.⁵⁰

While Naimark’s points are certainly valid, they do raise more questions than answers and thus serve to further highlight the lack of clarity and consensus in much of the scholarly discussion of genocide. In these spaces of ambiguity, the “politics” of victimhood have thrived.

In any discussion of genocide and the “politics” it has produced, reference to the Holocaust remains unavoidable. This centrality of the Nazis’ destructions of the Jews has resulted in what one scholar has termed “a Holocaust-based conception of genocide”, meaning that “[w]e think more about the Holocaust than any other genocide, and we understand other genocides by analyzing their similarities to and differences from the Holocaust”.⁵¹ While, as many researchers have documented, this narrow view has repercussions for our understanding and knowledge of such events, it has also seriously impacted the “politics” which surround discussions of genocide.⁵² As historian Peter Novick has recognised, “the success of the Jews in gaining permanent position of center stage for their tragedy, and their equal success in making it the benchmark against which other atrocities were judged, produced a fair amount of resentment — ‘Holocaust envy’”.⁵³

This “envy” has produced persistent attempts to demonstrate how particular atrocities “measure up” to the Holocaust, through drawing comparisons and highlighting similarities in order to emphasise the enormity of the comparative case.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ R.W. Davies and S.G. Wheatcroft, “Stalin and the Soviet Famine of 1932-1933: A Reply to Ellman”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 58, 4 (2006), p.628. See also T.W. Simon, “Genocides: Normative Comparative Studies” in J.K. Roth and E. Maxwell, eds, *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, Vol. 1 (Basingstoke, 2001), pp.108-109.

⁵⁰ Naimark, *Stalin’s Genocides*, p. 77.

⁵¹ Moshman, “Conceptual Constraints”, p.435.

⁵² See H.R. Huttenbach, “Locating the Holocaust on the Genocide Spectrum: Towards a Methodology of Definition and Categorization”, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 3, 3 (1988), pp.289-303; Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas”, pp.7-36; Moshman, “Conceptual Constraints”, pp.431-450; Rosenfeld, “The Politics of Uniqueness”, pp.28-61; D.E. Stannard, “Uniqueness as Denial: The Politics of Genocide Scholarship” in A.S. Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide* (Boulder, 1996), pp.163-208; and D. Stone, “The Historiography of Genocide: Beyond “Uniqueness” and Ethnic Competition”, *Rethinking History*, Vol. 8, 1 (2004), pp.127-142.

⁵³ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, p.192. See also Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*, pp.2-3.

⁵⁴ Rosenfeld, “The Politics of Uniqueness”, p. 34.

Some scholars writing about the *Holodomor* have been explicit in making these connections. Historian Stanislav Kulchytsky, for example, has declared of the aims behind the genocide recognition campaign:

Ukraine is not laying blame on any modern country or political force for this act of genocide that destroyed millions of its citizens. The country only wants the international community to know about and to acknowledge this tragedy appropriately, just as it knows about and acknowledges as genocide the tragic destruction of the Jewish people during the Second World War, the Holocaust.⁵⁵

There exists, however, a further distasteful undertone to such comparisons. Many have also sought to draw moral distinctions between the Holocaust and various atrocities, suggesting that the comparative event was “worse” and the victims suffered accordingly. Confronted with this tendency, we are forced to consider the discomfiting and highly problematic idea of “competitive” atrocity, and a “hierarchy” of suffering and victimhood.

The English-language discussion of the *Holodomor* has demonstrated many of these dynamics of comparison with the Holocaust, and the emphasis on parallels with the Nazis’ mass murder of the Jews is a recurring feature of the “famine-as-genocide” discourse.⁵⁶ These have included the assumption of terminology normally associated with the Holocaust, as well as highlighting the numbers of victims and the nature of their suffering. The purpose of drawing such parallels, however, appears not only to demonstrate that the *Holodomor* was an event morally commensurate with the Holocaust. Instead, many have used a comparative approach to present the former as a “worse” atrocity than the latter.

In seeking to present the *Holodomor* in this manner, the language of “uniqueness” has proved an important factor. While the famine has been variously described as “a Holocaust the west forgot”, “the hidden Holocaust”, “Ukraine’s Holocaust”, “the early Holocaust”, and “the holocaust-famine”,⁵⁷ other writers have specifically emphasised its horribly exceptional character. The *Holodomor* has been classified as “the greatest genocide of the century”⁵⁸ and “the most brutal ethnic genocide in history”,⁵⁹ while another commentator has claimed that “[h]istory has not recorded another such crime as the famine perpetrated against an entire nation, nor one ever carried out in such a

⁵⁵ S. Kulchytsky, “Defining the *Holodomor* as Genocide” in Luciuk, ed., *Holodomor*, p.129.

⁵⁶ Of course, this impulse is not limited to the discourse surrounding the *Holodomor*. Drawing comparisons and parallels with the Holocaust is a feature of countless groups’ attempts to characterise and articulate their own experiences of suffering and injustice, and are often used as a means to draw attention to a particular cause. For various comment and criticism of this practice, see Y. Bauer, “Whose Holocaust?”, *Midstream*, Vol. 26, 9 (1980), p.42; L. Dawidowicz, *The Holocaust and the Historians* (Cambridge, 1981), pp.16-17; B. Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven, 2007), p.37; Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, pp.191-195, 230-231; and Rosenfeld, “The Politics of Uniqueness”, pp.34, 38-41.

⁵⁷ See A. Karatnycky, “Forced Famine in the Ukraine: A Holocaust the West Forgot”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 July 1983, p.22; M. Dilot, *Execution By Hunger: The Hidden Holocaust* (New York, 1985); S. Weatherbe, “The Ukrainian Holocaust”, *Ukrainian Review*, Vol. 32, 2 (1984), pp.18-25; F. Kapusta, “The Early Holocaust in Europe: Collectivization and the Man-Made Famine in Ukraine, 1932-33”, *Ukrainian Quarterly*, Vol. 37, 4 (1981), pp.369-382; and G.V. Mylton, “Books Expose Famine-Genocide”, *Ukrainian Weekly*, 8 October 2000, respectively.

⁵⁸ E.H. Methvin, Review of R. Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, *National Review*, Vol. 47, 23 (1995).

⁵⁹ P. Borisow, “Holodomor: Metagenocide in Ukraine – Its Origins and Why It’s Not Over”, *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, Vol. 42, 3 (2008), p.251.

cold-blooded manner".⁶⁰ A similar view has been argued by historian Lubomyr Luciuk, who has suggested that "the intensity of mortality in Soviet Ukraine over a duration of less than a year confers upon the *Holodomor* the unenviable status of being a crime against humanity arguably without parallel in European history".⁶¹

This concept of "uniqueness" represents an important contributing factor to the "politics" which have raged around the concept of genocide and other historical atrocities. As we have seen, Novick's invocation of "Holocaust envy" offers an effective description for the seemingly relentless phenomenon of comparison/competition amongst those who desire a like degree of recognition for their own experiences of victimisation. He makes the equally salient point, however, that "'Holocaust envy' contends with 'Holocaust possessiveness'".⁶² The latter refers to those who argue that the Holocaust is a distinctly Jewish experience, a terribly unique event in the catalogue of genocide and human iniquity, and who have generally responded negatively to attempts by others to "appropriate" its symbolism, rhetoric and meaning.⁶³ For historians trying to navigate their way through the moral complexities which attend any engagement with past atrocity, this "possessiveness" proves to be as problematic as the "envy", and these two concepts shape and inform each other in a perpetually futile cycle. The "uniqueness" argument is, as one scholar has recognised, "exactly what makes the Holocaust the archetypal and defining member of the greater concept which includes it, the standard against which all other genocides, and purported genocides, are measured".⁶⁴ As we have seen, however, it is this "status" of the Holocaust which feeds the "envy", and those who take issue with its centrality simply try to claim it for their own atrocity.⁶⁵

The moral implications of the "uniqueness" argument also raise troubling questions. Novick has again proved vocal on this point, arguing that "[t]he assertion that the Holocaust is unique — like the claim that it is singularly incomprehensible or unrepresentable — is, in practice, deeply offensive". He continues, "[w]hat else can all of this possibly mean except 'your catastrophe, unlike ours, is ordinary; unlike ours it is comprehensible; unlike ours is representable'".⁶⁶ Nonetheless, it is clear that important distinctions *do* exist between the Holocaust and other atrocities like the

⁶⁰ Dolot, *Execution By Hunger*, p.xv.

⁶¹ Luciuk, "Foreword", p.v. Emphasis in original.

⁶² Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, p.197.

⁶³ See Rosenfeld, "The Politics of Uniqueness", pp.29, 35-37. While contentious in more general discussions of genocide, the "uniqueness" argument has also proved to be a source of controversy within Holocaust historiography itself. For various expressions of the argument, see, for example, Y. Bauer, "A Past That Will Not Go Away" in M. Berenbaum and A.J. Peck, eds, *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed and the Reexamined* (Bloomington, 2002), pp.12-22; Dawidowicz, *The Holocaust and the Historians*, pp.11, 13-15; and S.T. Katz, "The Uniqueness of the Holocaust: The Historical Dimension" in Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, pp.19-38. For various critiques of the "uniqueness" argument, see Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry*, pp.42-55; V. Lal, "Genocide, Barbaric Others, and the Violence of Categories: A Response to Omer Bartov", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 103, 4 (1998), pp.1187-1190; A. Ophir, "On Sanctifying the Holocaust: An Anti-Theological Treatise", *Tikkun*, Vol. 2, 1 (1987), pp.61-66; and Stannard, "Uniqueness as Denial", pp.163-208.

⁶⁴ Moshman, "Conceptual Constraints", p.433.

⁶⁵ See Stone, "The Historiography of Genocide", p.133.

⁶⁶ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, p.9. For similar views, see, for example, Moses, "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas", pp.14, 16; and Stone, "The Historiography of Genocide", p.130.

Holodomor. Historian Richard Evans, for example, has pointed out that “[t]here was no Soviet Treblinka, built to murder people on their arrival”.⁶⁷ Can these distinctions be drawn without resort to the morally-loaded language of “uniqueness”, thus begetting the cycle of comparison and competition? In theory, it certainly seems possible — as one scholar has noted, “there is no reason why empirically distinguishing the Holocaust from other genocides is synonymous with declaring it a greater evil”.⁶⁸ As we have seen, however, the practical realities have proved far more difficult. The most profitable way forward, as one scholar has suggested, is “to dispense with the vocabulary of uniqueness” and begin to draw distinctions in a manner which encourages openness as opposed to closure.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, stuck between these dual process of “envy” and “possessiveness”, much discussion of genocide and atrocity has been compromised by a “dreary spectacle of assertion and counter-assertion”⁷⁰ in a competition for absolute primacy — “the gold medal,” to borrow from Novick, “in the Victimization Olympics”.⁷¹ Much of the discourse surrounding the *Holodomor* has, as we have seen, proved no exception. Apart from being distasteful, it is clear that this enterprise is counterproductive and does little to enhance our understanding of these events. As one historian has observed, “a crime does not cease to be a crime just because a worse one has been committed elsewhere”.⁷² While the centrality of the Holocaust in discussions of genocide and atrocity more generally has proved problematic, simply displacing it with another event (such as the *Holodomor*) as the archetypal standard with which all other atrocities must be shown to be morally commensurate only perpetuates the same difficulties. Historians need to approach these deeply troubling yet hugely important events from a different perspective, and work to change the terms in which they are conceptualised and categorised. As historian Mark Levene has noted of past experiences of victimisation, “entitlement to a hearing should not have to be dependent upon an unseemly jockeying for position on the hierarchy of suffering”.⁷³

⁶⁷ R.J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (London, 1989), p.88. Similarly, historian Charles Maier has argued that “[n]o Soviet citizen had to expect that deportation or death must be so inevitable by virtue of ethnic origins [...] Nor did the Soviets establish facilities purely for extermination. The conditions of labor in the Siberian camps were lethal enough that only a quarter of inmates might survive. But no camp such as Treblinka existed, precisely just to kill masses of human beings on arrival. Nor did the Soviet regime dedicate itself to the dragnet of victims, wherever it might reach them.” See Maier, *The Unmasterable Past*, pp.76-77.

⁶⁸ Rosenfeld, “The Politics of Uniqueness”, p.47. See also Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow*, p.79.

⁶⁹ Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas”, p.18. Alan Rosenbaum has outlined the ultimate “middle ground” which would be ideal to achieve on this highly vexed issue: “[A]ny presumption about the uniqueness of the Holocaust may be entirely warranted provided that, upon proper scrutiny, it does not in any manner diminish or still the certain moral authority that must be accorded to other groups whose members have also been forced to endure unspeakable atrocities during their history. And yet any acknowledgement of the persecutions and mass deaths endured by members of other groups should not be construed as vitiating or denying, in the absence of honest and rational debate, claims as to the uniqueness of the Holocaust.” See A.S. Rosenbaum, “Introduction” in Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, p.3.

⁷⁰ Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas”, p.18.

⁷¹ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, p.195.

⁷² T. Todorov, *Hope and Memory: Reflections on the Twentieth Century*, trans. D. Bellos (London, 2003), p.236.

⁷³ Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*, p.6.

Finally, a strange irony of the “politics” of victimhood is that the actual victims often get lost amid the clamour for recognition and importance.⁷⁴ In attempting to show how the *Holodomor* “measures up” to the Holocaust, the most profound similarity they share — namely that both involved the terrible mass suffering and death of innocent people — is often overlooked.⁷⁵ Restoring the humanity of the victims, and ensuring an adequate recognition of their suffering, are among our most important tasks as historians of atrocity. With an acknowledgement and adoption of this approach, the “politics” of victimhood can recede and the victims themselves find space for the respectful commemoration they deserve.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Noted Holocaust historian Michael Marrus has made the salient observation regarding much of the *Holodomor* discourse that “[i]n my view, formal classification of the famine [as a genocide] matters less at this point than the appreciation of the limitless cruelty and anguish it entailed”. See M.R. Marrus, “Foreword” in M. Carynyk, L.Y. Luciuk and B.S. Kordan, eds, *The Foreign Office and the Famine: British Documents on Ukraine and the Great Famine of 1932-1933* (Edmonton, 1988), p.xv, as cited in Y. Bilinsky, “Was the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-1933 a Genocide?”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 1, 2 (1999), p.147.

⁷⁵ On this point, Wheatcroft’s observation of the *Holodomor* that “[i]t deserves condemnation for what it was. And not for what it was not” rings particularly true. See S.G. Wheatcroft, “Causation and Responsibility in the *Holodomor* Tragedy”, *Holodomor Studies*, Vol. 1, 2 (2009), p.27.

⁷⁶ As Finkelstein has noted of Holocaust victims, “[t]he noblest gesture for those who perished is to preserve their memory, learn from their suffering and let them, finally, rest in peace”. See Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry*, p.150. Such sentiments are equally applicable to all victims of atrocity.