

# Hunger as a form of violence

*The Man-made famine in Soviet Ukraine*

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For the course

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The debate on what constitutes violence is still very much ongoing ([van Mourik, 2022](#)). With different ideas on what is and what is not violence. There is a general distinction between normal and slow violence. The understanding of normal types of violence includes acts like dropping bombs, murder, rape ([van Mourik, 2022](#)). Slow forms on the other hand can be acts like deforestation, pollution, or hunger. In this essay I will be exploring hunger as a form of violence. And the application of theories on mass violence to this form of slow violence. My argument here is that hunger, as a form of violence, fit many of the characteristics as more normal forms of violence.

Of inspection in this essay is the case of the *Holodomor* famine, meaning as much as “*deliberate death by hunger*” in Ukrainian ([Mattingly, 2018](#)). Scholars generally agree the Holodomor to be a man-made famine, and it to be an issue of distribution rather than availability ([Sen, 1981](#); [Snyder, 2010](#)). The famine killed roughly 3.3 million people in the Soviet Union between 1930 and 1933, but with the fast majority of cases in Soviet Ukraine ([Snyder, 2010](#)). The occurrence of the famine according to Snyder, can be explained by the urge for collectivization of agricultural land, and the subsequent campaign against many peasants that owned land ([Snyder, 2010](#)). This urge for collectivization, lead to bad harvests, and despite many peasants dying of hunger, these policies were never changed. Instead, they were doubled down on. ([idem](#))

Snyder’s book ([2010](#)) has a puzzling element: “*Stalin never personally witnessed the starvations ... but comrades in soviet Ukraine did: they had to somehow reconcile his ideological line to the evidence of their sense*” (p. 41). This essay explores this element and asks how is it possible for these and other rank-and-file perpetrators to reconcile these two different realities?

Employing the arguments that **Slim** brings forward in his book ([2008](#)), the aim is to search is for ways that Stalin and other high elites, were able to instrumentalize “ordinary men” by either inflaming, or cooling their emotions. Slim puts emphasis on the situationist perspective and mentions ten pre-conditions that when met, will almost certainly mean “ordinary men” can and will commit such acts, regardless of the agency and moral decision making of the individuals. Applying these pre-conditions to the rank-and-file perpetrators of the Holodomor, many pre-conditions can be spotted. Example of this is the de-humanization of

peasants (Snyder, 2010, p. 25), making the perpetrators believe they were doing good (idem, p. 46) and a general denial of what was going (idem, p. 43).

De Swaan in his book (2015) on the other hand is critical of this notion that “ordinary men” would always follow. Instead, he argues, that this pure focus on the situation leaves out differences between personalities and the moral choice these perpetrators still have. By analysing various novels from this period in the Soviet Union, Mattingly (2018) also touched upon these ideas. In her article she points out that there was agency involved by stating that many “*wanted to believe [in the state propaganda] as it made their live safer*” (Mattingly, 2018). There was thus indeed this moral choice.

De Swaan and Slim both see violence as a “*breakdown of meaning*” (Whitehead, 2007). Whitehead (2007) on the other hand argues that violence is a form of cultural expression that gives rise to political power and should thus not be seen as a breakdown. Whitehead brings the legitimacy of violence and the discursive practices into the focus. Stalin and other elites in the Soviet Union indeed did not view these deaths as a form of violence, but instead saw the events as a necessary step towards a pure socialist state (Snyder, 2010). So, for Stalin and co. this famine was seen as a meaningful tool to reassert their political agenda.

To conclude, this essay showed that various theories on mass killings are also applicable to other forms of violence like hunger. De Swaan (2015), Slim (2008) and Whitehead (2007) all contribute to different aspects of mass killings and have their own ontological and epistemological stances. Questions of agency vs structure are certainly very visible in this debate. This debate furthermore again shows that that studying violence from all possible angles is a useful endeavour.

A final personal conclusion from this essay is that it highlights the disconnect in some ways, between the researcher, and the researched. How is it possible to truly fathom and study such horrendous acts from the conform of your home? (word count: 736)

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