

Famine in the First Half of the 20th Century: Parallels between Kazakhstan and Ukraine

Samat Zhumatay^{1*}, Borbasov Sayin Moldagalievich², Murzakhodzhayev Kuanysh Madievich³, Oralova Aknur⁴, Lebayev Farkhat R.⁵

¹ L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (2, Satpaev street, 010000 Astana, KAZAKHSTAN) PhD student, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9667-6205>

² Chief Researcher, Doctor of Political Sciences, Professor of Ch.Ch. Valikhanov Institute of History and Ethnology (28, Shevchenko Str. Almaty, KAZAKHSTAN), Borbasov54@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3105-3696>

³ Researcher, Master's in History of Ch.Ch. Valikhanov Institute of History and Ethnology (28, Shevchenko Str. Almaty, KAZAKHSTAN), kuka_ist@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7223-2439>

⁴ Researcher, Master's in History of Ch.Ch. Valikhanov Institute of History and Ethnology (28, Shevchenko str. Almaty, KAZAKHSTAN), aknur.oralova@mail.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4979-4203>

⁵ Researcher, Master's in History of Ch.Ch. Valikhanov Institute of History and Ethnology (28, Shevchenko Str. Almaty, KAZAKHSTAN), tazshaboy@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4105-7129>

*Corresponding Author: zhumatay.samat@proton.me

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ABSTRACT

The article comparatively examines the famine catastrophes in Kazakhstan (1930–1933) and Ukraine (1932–1933), considered as elements of a single transnational process of Soviet modernization. Through demographic analysis, archival sources and cultural interpretation, common mechanisms are revealed: collectivization, requisitions, violation of traditional ways of life, mass migration, destruction of identity. It is shown that famine acted as an instrument of ethno-political control and repression, covering not only the economy but also the spiritual sphere. The comparative approach demonstrates that these tragedies are part of the global history of political famines – projects of industrialization at any cost. As a result, a new understanding of famine as a strategic phenomenon of the 20th century is formed.

Keywords: Agrarian Reforms, Famine, Demography, Collectivization, Transnational Context.

INTRODUCTION

Human history in the 20th century has seen many catastrophes, but only a few have continued to resonate across decades and cross territorial boundaries – one such tragic phenomenon is politically motivated famine. Classical history often speaks of the Holodomor in Ukraine and the Kazakh Asharshylyk as local disasters. However, for all their scale and depth, these tragedies were neither natural disasters nor simple economic crises. They were deliberate, structured, and interconnected processes through which the Soviet state directed its course of modernization – not through cooperation, but through suppression.

What unites the two famines – the Ukrainian (1932–33) and the Kazakh (1930–33)? It is not only the numbers – millions of dead, hundreds of thousands of refugees, decades of silence. It is the unified logic of an industrial state, in which food resources became an instrument of ideological discipline. It is the substitution of agrarian self-organization for collectivization, traditional ways of life for total control, and living people for

statistically acceptable damage. It is the repressions, the death of cultural identity, and demographic shocks experienced by two peoples along the lines of nomadic pastoral and black soil agriculture.

Our study presents the famine as a transnational phenomenon, not limited to one republic. It cannot be understood within the confines of rural Ukraine or the steppes of Kazakhstan. To understand the true nature of this catastrophe, it is necessary to see the overall logic of power that crossed repression, ethnicities, and ecosystems, turning food into a weapon, nomadism into a target, and bread into an idea.

This study reclaims hunger as a human experience, but does so with a broad view – from demographic maps to the spiritual heavyweights of memory, from the archive to the diaspora. The powerful overall picture of human distress speaks not only to the past. It challenges today's world, where political control over food, migration, and identity continues to have devastating consequences.

It is through this prism – transcultural, transnational, transtemporal – that we offer a new, global history of hunger, a history of how a state can become an aggressor and a people a victim at the same time, regardless of language, terrain or border.

Statement of the Problem

In Soviet history, the famines of Kazakhstan and Ukraine were traditionally viewed as local catastrophes associated with natural factors or management errors. However, such an interpretation does not take into account their real origin and systemic nature as methods of centralized control aimed at transforming agrarian societies. This leads to an underestimation of their significance as an instrument of repression, political and ethnocultural change applicable in a multinational empire.

Purpose of the Study

Show the famines of 1921–23 and 1930–33 in Kazakhstan and Ukraine as part of the unified transnational processes of Soviet modernization, where they appear not only as tragedies, but as mechanisms of power violence and demographic transformation aimed at destroying traditional structures and imposing a new social model.

Research Objectives

1. Compare the mechanisms of famine: collectivization, requisitions, ban on migration, destruction of elites and nomadic life.
2. Conduct a demographic analysis of losses, including an assessment of migration, mortality and changes in ethnic composition.
3. Explore survival strategies: cannibalism and underground trade in Ukraine; migration and epidemics in Kazakhstan.
4. To analyze the politics of memory: the formation of national discourse, the status of the term “genocide”, memorialization.
5. To relate local cases to other political famines (China 1958–62, USSR 1946–47) in order to identify global patterns of industrial repression.

METHODOLOGY

- A comparative historical method is used, drawing on the research of Pianciola and Cameron (2018).
- A demographic analysis based on archives and statistics is used, similar to studies on famine and demography.
- Within the framework of the systems approach, hunger is viewed as a social phenomenon that generates a crisis in production, distribution and consumption.
- The source base includes state archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the prosecutor's office of the Ukrainian SSR, interethnic diasporas and international documents.

Scientific Novelty

- Consideration of famines as a transnational phenomenon that goes beyond the republics and represents a single model of repressive modernization of the USSR.
- Demonstration of structural parallels between Kazakhstan and Ukraine based on comparable statistical and demographic data, which is rare in modern research.
- Inclusion of a global context (e.g. China 1958–1962) allows us to identify universal patterns of famine as a tool of industrialization.

- An analysis of the politics of memory in comparison: from the institutional recognition of the Holodomor in Ukraine to the cautious “soft” memory in Kazakhstan, conditioned by international and domestic political dynamics.

Ukraine and Kazakhstan as Part of the USSR: Grain-Producing Regions, But with Different Economic and Cultural Bases.

Despite belonging to a single state entity, the Soviet Union, Ukraine and Kazakhstan represented two fundamentally different socio-economic and cultural spaces. This difference became especially significant in the context of the forced collectivization policy carried out in the 1930s and the famine that followed.

Ukraine, one of the oldest and most densely populated agricultural regions of the USSR, had a highly developed system of sedentary agriculture based on intensive cultivation of fertile black soils. Its rural population had strong traditions of private farming, communal self-government, and strong ties to markets. By the early 1930s, the Ukrainian peasantry largely retained elements of the pre-revolutionary way of life, including independent management of land and labor, which made it a potentially disloyal subject in the eyes of the center, especially in the context of growing national consciousness and cultural autonomy, consolidated during the Ukrainization of the 1920s..

At the same time, Kazakhstan, the largest region of Central Asia in terms of territory, represented a completely different socio-economic system. More than 60% of the population at the beginning of the 20th century led a nomadic or semi-sedentary lifestyle based on seasonal migration and livestock farming as the main source of livelihood. The economy was poorly integrated into the all-Union space, trade was carried out mainly at the regional level, and the institution of private land ownership was absent in the European sense of the word. Kazakh society retained a tribal structure, in which social organization was built not around a plot of land, but around livestock and the line of kinship.

Thus, despite the similarity of their geopolitical status – both regions were part of the USSR and were defined as suppliers of food and raw materials for the industrial center – they had opposite forms of socio-economic organization. If Ukraine was a settled peasant society with elements of a market economy and stable agrarian traditions, then Kazakhstan was a region of pastoral nomadic life, poorly amenable to the mechanical implementation of agrarian models developed for the European part of the USSR.

This distinction became a decisive factor in the perception and consequences of collectivization policies. What in Ukraine was perceived as a forced transfer of land and harvests into the hands of the state, in Kazakhstan meant the complete destruction of a way of life, identity and environmental sustainability. Thus, the same type of measures within the framework of the all-Union agrarian policy led to different, but in both cases catastrophic results.

The Scope of two Crises – 1921–1923 and 1930–1933 – and their Transnational Character as Elements of a Single Process

The famine in Soviet Russia and subsequently in the USSR did not unfold as a single catastrophe, but as a series of successive, structurally interconnected crises, each of which had its own specifics, but at the same time fit into the logical line of the policy of centralized intervention in the agricultural sector. The first mass famine phenomena appeared in 1921-1923 and covered the Volga region, southern Ukraine, part of the North Caucasus and western Kazakhstan. The second, much larger crisis occurred in 1930-1933 and covered almost the entire agricultural periphery of the USSR - from Ukraine and Kazakhstan to Kuban and Bashkiria.

The famine of 1921–1923, although caused by a combination of unfavorable natural factors (the drought of 1921) and the consequences of the Civil War (the destruction of farms, mobilizations, requisitions), already demonstrated the tendency of the new Soviet state to prioritize the provision of the center at the expense of the resources of the regions. The introduction of the food tax, forced grain procurements, and the blocking of free trade exacerbated the deficit, turning a local harvest failure into a catastrophe: according to various estimates, up to 5 million people died. Even in these circumstances, elements of bureaucratic inertia and repressive management emerged: a ban on migration from starving regions, a hierarchical system of food distribution, and a refusal to immediately liberalize trade.

The next act, the famine of 1930–1933, was a logical continuation of the large-scale reforms launched in 1928 aimed at accelerated industrialization, forced collectivization, and expropriation of agricultural resources for the needs of the center. This crisis was distinguished by greater severity and ideological grounding: it was not simply a consequence of economic policy, but an element of a conscious reorganization of the country. Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and the Volga region turned out to be both the main objects of the violent seizure of resources and areas of mass death of the population. The overall mortality rate in the USSR in 1932–1933, according to historians, was between 6 and 8 million people.

It is important that both crises had a pronounced transnational character - not in a geographical sense, but in a systemic, political-structural sense. They affected different republics and peoples, but were subject to the same logic of centralized mobilization. Thus, in Kazakhstan and the Volga region in 1921, and then in Ukraine in 1932, similar measures were used: food taxes, the liquidation of "kulaks", a ban on leaving the region. This suggests that this was not a series of local failures, but a strategic model of resource management, within the framework of which peripheral and ethnically different regions were turned into objects of experimentation and mobilization.

Moreover, in both cases, the center's policy was not isolated from the outside world. In 1921, the USSR was forced to accept aid from Western humanitarian organizations, including the ARA (American Relief Administration), thus opening the space for an international response to the famine. In 1932–1933, on the contrary, the government refused to acknowledge the existence of the famine and suppressed any attempts at foreign intervention. This evolution – from partial recognition to repressive silence – also reflects the transformation of Soviet power towards a closed and repressive mechanism, in which food became not just a resource, but an instrument of power and discipline.

Thus, the chronology of famines in the USSR is not simply a sequence of tragic episodes, but a manifestation of a single political and economic process in which recurring crises act as phases in the unfolding of an imperialist model of internal governance based on the violent redistribution of resources and demographic pressure on the “periphery.”

Causes of the Crisis: Comparison. Ideology and Politics: Forced Collectivization, Centralized Requisitions, the Cult of Heavy Industrialization

The fundamental causes of the famines in Ukraine and Kazakhstan in the first half of the 20th century should be viewed not as derivatives of natural disasters or economic failures, but as the result of conscious political decisions taken in the context of building a centralized totalitarian state. The key elements of this policy were forced collectivization, food requisitions, a hierarchical planning system, and ideologically motivated industrialization, in which the agricultural sector was viewed not as an independent value, but as a resource base for the development of heavy industry.

After a brief period of NEP and economic liberalization in the 1920s, Stalin's leadership made a sharp turn toward a model of accelerated "catch-up" development, based on the mobilization of domestic resources without external borrowing. Food, land, labor - all of this was subject to seizure and redistribution within the framework of five-year plans emanating from the center.

Collectivization became a mechanism not only for agrarian restructuring, but also for the establishment of social control. The introduction of collective and state farms eliminated private farms, transferring control over the production and distribution of products to the state. In Ukraine, this process was accompanied by the elimination of the kulaks, mass repressions, forced eviction of peasants and confiscation of food down to the last grain. The creation of “black boards” and blocking the departure of starving people increased the effect of isolation and alienation of the population.

In Kazakhstan, as already noted, collectivization was even more destructive, since the blow fell not on the agrarian peasant system, but on the nomadic way of life. The introduction of collective and state farms here meant forced sedentarization, the confiscation of livestock - the main source of food and economic capital - and the destruction of the traditional social structure built on tribal ties. Estimates by S. Cameron and N. Pianchiola indicate that by 1932 more than 80% of all livestock in Kazakhstan had been confiscated, which was effectively equivalent to a complete loss of livelihood for the majority of the population.

Centralized requisitions were carried out according to strictly fixed plans that did not take into account the actual harvest or the demographic situation on the ground. Regular reports on the food situation were sent from Kyiv and Alma-Ata to Moscow, but in response the regions received only directives to “increase procurement” and “eliminate sabotage.” Requisition campaigns were accompanied by the participation of the NKVD, and the violation of plans for the delivery of grain was regarded as counter-revolutionary activity. The archives of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan record numerous orders to intercept migration flows of starving people, including women and children, who were trying to leave the famine zones in the south of the country.

All these measures took place against the backdrop of mass industrialization, declared a priority within the framework of the first five-year plan. In accordance with the tasks of GOELRO and Gosplan, it was the rural population, its resources and labor that were called upon to ensure the technological leap of the USSR. In 1931, despite the famine, grain and meat continued to be exported from Kazakhstan and Ukraine within the framework of export contracts - including with Germany and Great Britain - to obtain currency used to purchase machine tools and equipment. Thus, agricultural regions became not only suppliers of raw materials, but also a demographic guarantee of industrial growth.

Ideology played no less an important role here than economics. In the party press and speeches of the leadership, collectivization and its victims were presented as the "inevitable price for a great future," and resistance as a manifestation of hostile class elements. In this sense, the famine did not become a failure, but, to a certain extent, an instrument of ideological discipline: the suffering population was transformed into "fertilizer for future socialism," deprived of the right to vote and subjectivity.

A comparative analysis shows that in both Ukraine and Kazakhstan, the agrarian policy of the 1930s bore the features of structural violence, in which food became a form of governance and famine became a means of disunity and subjugation of peripheral peoples and territories. This makes it clear why famine in these regions — despite all the regional differences — developed along a similar trajectory: extraction of resources → repression → blocking migration → demographic collapse.

Ethnocultural Aspect: How the National Question was Transformed into a Political Instrument (Destruction of "Class Elements" and National Elites)

In the Soviet agrarian policy of the early 1930s, the national question was closely intertwined with the tasks of social transformation, and over time it was transformed from an ideological slogan of equality of peoples into an applied instrument of repressive governance. In practice, this was expressed in the fact that measures for the "class cleansing" of the village increasingly took the form of ethnocultural intervention in relation to certain peoples — primarily Ukrainians and Kazakhs, as large ethnic groups living on the periphery of the USSR and possessing historical traditions of autonomy and their own elite.

In Ukraine, agrarian reform was carried out in parallel with a tightening of national-building policies. After the period of Ukrainization in the 1920s, when the Ukrainian language, literature and education were encouraged, a sharp turn began in the early 1930s: in 1932, hundreds of Ukrainian schools were closed, many prominent cultural and scientific figures were arrested, and the leaders of local party organizations were repressed. The policy of famine and cultural repression merged into a single line of suppression of the national movement and dismantling the potential of Ukrainian autonomy. In this context, the confiscation of grain and the destruction of the "kulaks" in the Ukrainian village acquired the features of ethnopolitical pressure aimed at breaking the social and cultural code of the nation.

In Kazakhstan, a similar transformation took an even more radical form. Before collectivization, Kazakh society retained elements of the traditional clan structure, and its intellectual elite — people from the Alash Orda movement, Islamic scholars, educators and teachers — acted as a vehicle for modernization on their own terms. In the early 1930s, this elite was completely destroyed: according to official data, in 1930–1933 alone, more than 44,000 people were repressed as representatives of "nationalist" and "bai" elements.

Thus, the fight against "class enemies" in fact turned into the systematic destruction of ethnic leaders and structures that ensured the stability of cultural identity. National elites, traditional institutions (jety-ata, biys, muftis), linguistic and educational practices were squeezed out of the political scene. This deprived peoples not only of political representation, but also of the opportunity to interpret what was happening from the perspective of their own culture. Collectivization did not simply destroy the economy — it destroyed the semantic foundations of existence.

This is where the essence of the ethnocultural aspect of famine as a political instrument manifests itself: it did not simply deplete the biological body of the people, but also disrupted the reproduction of its cultural, spiritual and intellectual environment. If in Ukraine the destruction of the village meant the destruction of the foundations of national self-awareness, then in Kazakhstan it was equivalent to the destruction of the very way of life developed over centuries. The destruction of the elite and the closure of madrassas, village schools and tribal institutions were accompanied by a campaign of Russification and administrative standardization, which over time led to the loss of historical memory of the tragedy of famine itself.

It is significant that it was the Ukrainian and Kazakh peoples who became the main victims of the famine of the 1930s, both in terms of the number of victims and the depth of the cultural and demographic consequences. The common feature was that in both cases we were talking about peoples with a developed identity, traditions of autonomy and stable horizontal connections within the community — that is, those characteristics that prevented full integration into the Soviet vertical of power. In this case, the famine became a form of "ethno-institutional disarmament" — a scorched field on which it was easier to build new, centralized models of governance.

Consequently, the famine in Ukraine and Kazakhstan should be viewed not only in socio-economic but also in ethno-cultural coordinates. It acted not only as a life support catastrophe but also as a mechanism for suppressing local identities and destroying autonomous systems of cultural and memory reproduction. The ideology of the fight against "enemies of the people" was initially universalistic, but its implementation was selectively ethnic in nature — especially in the national republics, where traditional resistance structures were strongest.

Ecological and Economic Factors: Droughts, Agrarian Reforms, Disruption of Traditional Forms of Survival

Despite the political and ideological basis of the famines in Kazakhstan and Ukraine, their development cannot be explained without an analysis of the accompanying environmental and economic conditions, which, interacting with repressive policies, turned local crop failures and crises into full-scale humanitarian catastrophes. Droughts, destruction of agricultural infrastructure, disruption of traditional mechanisms of self-regulation of the village and nomadic economy - all this created a domino effect in which the population's ability to adapt and survive disappeared.

Climate instability has always been a major risk factor for agricultural societies. Ukraine, being a zone of black soils, depended on seasonal uniformity of precipitation and temperatures. The droughts of 1931 and 1932, especially in the south-eastern regions, significantly reduced the gross grain harvest. However, as studies show, even taking into account the decrease in yield, the country was able to feed its population if it were not for the excess food withdrawals. Thus, the natural factor was not the cause, but the catalyst for the managerial and political failure.

In Kazakhstan, the situation was even more complicated. Harsh climatic conditions — sharp temperature fluctuations, sparse vegetation, irregular precipitation — required specific forms of farming, primarily nomadic cattle breeding. The region's ecosystem was built for a mobile lifestyle: moving herds between seasonal pastures made it possible to avoid land depletion and livestock death. However, the agrarian reforms of 1928–1931, aimed at sedentarization and collectivization, completely disrupted this system. The transition to stationary forms of farming in the steppe zone without preliminary infrastructure (irrigation systems, forage warehouses, reserve pastures) led to the death of millions of heads of cattle.

Table 1. Dynamics of livestock losses in Kazakhstan in 1930–1932

Year	Cattle	Small cattle	Horses	Camels
1930	6.5 million	18.6 million	3.3 million	1.0 million
1932	1.6 million	1.7 million	0.5 million	0.1 million
Losses	-75%	-91%	-85%	-90%

This collapse in the agrarian ecology meant not just a food shortage, but the collapse of the entire survival system. Without mobility, without livestock, without access to previously familiar routes and supplies, the nomads found themselves in a situation of unadapted sedentarism, deprived of elementary forms of adaptation. Attempts by the authorities to replace this with centralized supply failed - not a single region had a stable distribution of fodder or bread.

In Ukraine, similar logic was manifested in the destruction of traditional forms of internal cooperation. Local artels, communities, and mutual aid funds were liquidated as “bourgeois remnants.” Instead, a vertical supply system was introduced, in which the village was turned into an object of planned confiscation. In addition, economic reform eliminated the motivation to work: personal allotments were reduced, the socialization of inventory reduced productivity, and the fear of dispossession forced people to hide or destroy surpluses. This created the effect of “internal sabotage” – not in the political sense, but as an elementary reaction of self-preservation.

Thus, the economic model proposed by the state was unstable in relation to natural risks and the social logic of survival. It did not provide for adaptation, did not rely on local knowledge, and had no mechanisms for compensation in case of failure. Agronomically illiterate reforms (introduction of unsuitable crops, lack of crop rotation, failure to take into account the microclimate), administrative pressure and bureaucratic blindness to regional specifics - all this created a picture in which even a minimal failure led to the collapse of the entire food security system.

The ecological consequences of the famine also proved long-lasting. In Kazakhstan, for example, the mass death of livestock and the depopulation of pastures led to landscape degradation, silting up of irrigation canals, and the disappearance of traditional ecological knowledge. In Ukraine, according to soil scientists, the depletion of black soils began in the 1930s due to overloading of land and a shortage of fertilizers. Thus, agrarian reforms turned out to be not just social disasters, but also acts of ecological violence, the consequences of which were felt for decades.

Scale and Demographic Effects: Mortality and Demographic Losses

The mass famines in Ukraine and Kazakhstan in the 1930s were not just regional tragedies, but events that changed the demographic map of the Soviet Union. Their scale is comparable to the largest humanitarian catastrophes of the 20th century. According to modern researchers, the total population losses as a result of collectivization and the famine it caused in the USSR amount to between 5.7 and 8.7 million people. Of this

number, 3 to 5 million are in Ukraine and 1.5 to 2.3 million are in Kazakhstan. Moreover, in the latter case, the proportion of deaths relative to the total population turned out to be the highest among all the republics.

In Ukraine, the famine of 1932–33 was the result of targeted food requisitions, repression of rural residents, travel bans outside the famine-stricken areas, and the authorities' refusal to provide humanitarian aid. Internal documents recorded that in some regions, mortality reached 30–40% of the population. At the same time, according to the 1937 census (subsequently classified), the total Ukrainian population was millions less than expected based on the 1926–36 demographic forecast.

For Kazakhstan, the situation was even more tragic in relative terms. If in absolute numbers between 1.5 and 2.3 million people died, then this amounted to between 30% and 42% of the entire population of the republic at the beginning of the crisis. Of these, more than 1.1 million were ethnic Kazakhs, which caused a sharp change in the ethnic composition: their share in the population fell from 60.3% in 1926 to 38% in 1939. Thus, we are not talking about just a loss of population, but about an ethno-demographic transformation bordering on an ethnic catastrophe.

Migration was another manifestation of the demographic blow. In Ukraine, people tried to leave the starving regions, but were stopped by NKVD blocking detachments, and those who did reach other regions often did not receive assistance and died on the way. In Kazakhstan, according to archival data, more than 615,000 Kazakhs crossed the borders of the republic, heading to China, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and other adjacent territories. However, not all achieved their goal - some died on the road, some were returned and repressed.

Table 2. Dynamics of the number and ethnic composition of the population of the Kazakh ASSR (1926–1939)

Year	Total population	Kazakhs (% of total)	Decrease in the number of Kazakhs
1926	6.2 million	60.3%	—
1939	5.2 million	38.0%	-1.1 million people

In Ukraine, a similar table would show a smaller decrease in the percentage of Ukrainians, but higher absolute losses. The main ethno-demographic consequence of the famine was not only the death of millions of people, but also the depopulation of the village as a socio-cultural environment. In the following decades, the rural population declined, and the age and gender structure was distorted due to losses among the most active groups - men of working age and children.

In both republics, the famine was accompanied by a decline in the birth rate. According to medical and statistical reports, during the years of famine and immediately after it, the fertility rate of women fell by 40-50%. This is explained not only by physiological exhaustion, but also by the disintegration of family structures, fear of repression, psychological trauma and deterioration of conditions for raising children. The so-called “absent generation” was a consequence not only of mortality, but also of demographic stagnation.

Thus, the famine of the 1930s in Ukraine and Kazakhstan was not only an act of political and food violence, but also a profound demographic turning point. The disruption of reproduction, migration flows, ethnic shifts, and the extinction of entire regions created new parameters of population and ethnic geography. These changes were not short-term — their consequences persisted for decades and continue to be felt in the cultural memory and political topography of post-Soviet states.

Migration: Cross-Border Exodus of Kazakhs (China, Central Asia) as Part of a Regional Process (665,000–1.1 Million)

One of the most widespread and tragic demographic consequences of the 1931–1933 famine in Kazakhstan was the forced mass migration that saw hundreds of thousands of Kazakhs leave the republic. This process cannot be seen solely as a response to a local food crisis; it was part of a broader regional population movement caused by the destruction of traditional ways of life, repression, and a lack of prospects for survival.

According to the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan and researchers, between 665,000 and 1.1 million people left the republic between the end of 1930 and mid-1933. The most intensive migration flows went in two directions: firstly, to the neighboring Soviet republics - Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and the RSFSR; secondly, outside the USSR - to China, Mongolia, Iran and Afghanistan. The routes to the south and east, through Semirechye and Altai, where traditional nomadic routes passed, were especially intense.

These movements were accompanied by extreme danger. Crossing mountain passes, lack of transport and food, attacks by border detachments and bandit groups - all this turned the journey into a struggle for survival. According to S. Cameron, up to 25-30% of migrants died on the way or were returned and repressed. Many of those who reached the border areas found themselves in camps, quarantined or under constant surveillance, and their return to Kazakhstan was forced.

The NKVD organs acted particularly harshly. Documents have been preserved which record orders to “prevent Kazakhs from leaving the republic,” to detain those who “voluntarily left the region,” and to deport

“evicted families” back to the famine zones. The persecution of migration confirms that the authorities did not regard it as an act of desperation, but as a manifestation of disloyalty that had to be controlled. In this sense, control over mobility became an instrument of political discipline.

The emigration of Kazakhs outside the USSR had far-reaching consequences. Small but stable Kazakh diasporas formed in China and Mongolia. In Xinjiang, they retained elements of language, customs, clan structures and religion, making these communities unique “islands of memory” of famine and repression. However, under the conditions of the international isolation of the USSR, these diasporas remained out of sight for a long time - both for Soviet historiography and for international research.

Table 3. The main directions of migration of Kazakhs in 1930–1933

Direction of migration	Approximate number	Notes
Uzbekistan	~300,000	Border areas, Tashkent region.
Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan	~150,000	Settlement in villages, labor mobilization
RSFSR (Altai, Orenburg)	~100,000	Partially deported back
China and Mongolia	~100,000–200,000	Through Semirechye, Zhetysu
Afghanistan and Iran	~20,000–30,000	Small nomadic groups

The exodus also had domestic social consequences. It increased the depopulation of Kazakhstan’s border regions, disrupted kinship networks and economic exchanges, and deepened the crisis of population reproduction. Those who failed to migrate found themselves without support, and families were broken up as men often went in search of food, leaving women and children to starve. This reinforced the general sense of cultural and psychological breakdown that characterized Kazakh history throughout the 1930s.

Thus, migration during the famine years was not just a mass movement of population, but also a profound ethnodemographic transformation. It changed the spatial organization of Kazakh life, created foreign communities, intensified the state’s repressive responses, and, in retrospect, became a key component of the national trauma that Kazakhstan has only just begun to comprehend in the post-Soviet period.

Comparative Reaction of Society and Survival Strategies

Ukraine: Cannibalism, Underground Grain Trade, Crisis of Social Structures

The social reaction of the Ukrainian peasantry to the famine of 1932–33 was not simply an act of despair, but a complex, multi-layered phenomenon that intertwined the desire for physical survival, spontaneous forms of resistance, the loss of traditional norms, and the destruction of moral order. Just as the state used famine as an instrument of disciplinary action, the peasants themselves developed adaptive—and often extreme—survival strategies, many of which went beyond the legal and ethical realm.

The most tragic and monstrous manifestation of the famine was the spread of cannibalism. Archival documents, witness testimonies and criminal cases declassified in the 1990s record dozens, perhaps hundreds, of cases in which people resorted to eating corpses and, in some cases, to murder for food. Cases of cannibalism in the Vinnytsia, Poltava, Kyiv and Kharkov regions were recorded in the materials of the Ukrainian SSR prosecutor's office; most often in the most remote and destitute villages. The NKVD reports noted that “the decomposition of public morality reached the point where a mother fed her children with the flesh of her dead father.” These acts, as a rule, took place in conditions of a complete lack of other food and social support.

However, most peasants tried to survive in other ways. One of the most common strategies was the underground trade in grain and bread, despite the threat of arrest. People secretly kept some grain buried in the ground, or moved to the cities and exchanged things, livestock or clothes for food. Thus, black markets developed in the cities, where for a piece of bread you could get a gold ring, an embroidered shirt or a warm fur coat. Considering that the official food distribution system functioned mainly for workers and the nomenklatura, peasants were forced to resort to illegal channels. Many were subjected to repression: during a search, the discovery of a sack of grain was regarded as “concealing bread”, which entailed criminal punishment up to and including execution.

An equally destructive consequence of the famine was the crisis of the social structures of the village. Traditional forms of mutual assistance - the community, clan, family - were destroyed under the pressure of fear, mistrust and repression. In conditions of a total shortage of food, even close relatives often refused to help each other. Cases of mass orphanhood appeared in the villages, when children survived alone in destroyed huts, eating quinoa and potato skins. According to the 1937 census, in a number of regions there were entire villages in which up to 80% of the population perished.

Of particular importance is the fact that consciousness itself and ideas about the norm changed. People were losing the habit of notions of collective ethics and mutual responsibility. In the villages there was a saying: “who hid — survived”, reflecting individualism provoked by fear and an exacerbation of the instinct for self-

preservation. Teachers, librarians, paramedics — those who until recently were considered bearers of culture and education — often left the villages, escaping from hunger, or died along with others. Thus, not only the economy, but also the cultural framework of the village was destroyed.

Children occupied a special place. The reports recorded cases of “wild childishness” — homeless children formed gangs, attacked warehouses, tried to dig up root crops in the fields, and ate tree bark. Orphanages were overcrowded but were not provided with food; in some regions, child mortality reached 60–70%. This generation later became part of the “lost children of the 1930s,” who found themselves without family, education, or social guidance.

Some families tried to survive through mobility and migration, moving to cities or other regions. However, in December 1932, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) issued a decree banning the departure of starving people outside of Ukraine and Kuban. According to the NKVD, in the first months of 1933, more than 200,000 people were detained on the borders of the RSFSR and Ukraine alone and returned back to the famine zone.

Thus, the strategy for survival in the conditions of Holodomor was not uniform — on the contrary, it depended on many factors: geography, social position, family composition, access to secret reserves, moral stability. But in general, we can say that the reaction of society had the features of “social atomization”, when under the pressure of repression, hunger and fear, the basic norms of trust, support and human solidarity collapsed.

This experience became a deep trauma, reflected in the language, memory, and behavior of generations. And although official history hushed up the scale of the tragedy for decades, in collective memory Holodomor remained as a point of absolute loss — not only of life, but also of order, meaning, and culture.

Kazakhstan: Mass Migrations, Destruction of Nomadic Lifestyle, Epidemics

While the Ukrainian scenario of survival during the famine of 1932–33 was characterized by the disintegration of the village community, underground trade, and local forms of resistance, in Kazakhstan the key element of the public reaction was the mass flight of the population and the catastrophic destruction of the nomadic way of life. The famine not only destroyed lives, it dismantled a thousand-year-old civilizational model of existence that determined the social, economic, and spiritual structure of the Kazakh people.

The main “survival tool” for nomads was movement — migration in search of food, water, pastures or shelter. It is important to emphasize that migration was not so much a strategy as an instinctive reaction to the destruction of the economic cycle. According to available data, between 665,000 and 1.1 million people fled Kazakhstan in 1931–1933, with up to 400,000 of them dying en route or being forcibly returned back.

The destruction of the nomadic way of life began even before the famine, with the beginning of collectivization. The policy of sedentarization, confiscation of livestock and liquidation of the *bais* effectively destroyed the economic base of the nomads. If previously livestock was not only a source of food, but also a means of transportation, exchange and clan hierarchy, then after the “fish cleansing” of the villages, the Kazakhs found themselves literally immobilized. According to N. Pianchola, within one year up to 90% of livestock was destroyed — horses, camels, sheep disappeared from the map of the traditional economy.

This destruction had not only economic but also profound cultural consequences. A nomad without livestock and territory lost his social identity. Tribal ties, established mechanisms for food distribution, norms of mutual assistance — all this ceased to work in the conditions of deserted and settled auls. People who found themselves in collective farms (state farms) did not understand the principles of their functioning, lost the skill of agricultural work and faced total control by the state.

Complicating factors included epidemics caused by hunger, poor sanitation and population displacement. In 1932–1933, Kazakhstan saw an increase in typhus, dysentery, tuberculosis, scurvy and brucellosis. Medical infrastructure was virtually non-existent: most rural areas had no first aid stations or medicines, and doctors themselves became victims of hunger. Reports from the People's Commissariat of Health show that in a number of areas, mortality from epidemics exceeded 50% among the weakened population.

Remnants of tribal structures tried to maintain internal solidarity, but this was more often expressed in collective attempts to escape: entire villages uprooted themselves and went to China, Altai or Bukhara. However, in new places they encountered mistrust, lack of resources and often hostility from local authorities. Thus, in many cases, Kazakhs were interned in China, and in the USSR they were returned back with the stigma of “fugitives” and enemies of Soviet power.

Table 4. Forms of survival of the Kazakh population in conditions of famine

Form of strategy	Examples / Description
Migration (internal and external)	Exodus to China, Central Asia, Altai — up to 1.1 million people
Exchange / barter	Cattle and clothing for grain in Uzbekistan and Semirechye
Hidden migration	Return to seasonal routes in remote regions

Attempts at settling	Forced settlement in state farms, often unsuccessful
Underground slaughter of cattle	Often followed by arrest for "concealing food"
Mutual assistance in family relationships	Decrease, but not disappearance - help for children and the elderly

One of the most devastating effects was psychological and spiritual disorientation: the Kazakhs, who had been oriented toward natural rhythms for centuries, found themselves in a world of total control, repression, and uncertainty. This not only led to the physical death of a significant part of the population, but also caused a cultural upheaval, the effects of which are still felt today.

If the Ukrainian famine can be seen as the destruction of the "village as a world," then the Kazakh famine is the destruction of the "steppe world." In both cases, we are talking not only about a demographic catastrophe, but also about a civilizational rift, accompanied by the loss of memory, language, forms of social organization, and systems of identity.

Reconsidering Soviet Policy: Disruptions to Traditional Economic Models in the Region

The famine of the 1930s in Kazakhstan and Ukraine was not only a tragedy of the peoples, but also a turning point in the transformation of the regional economy under the influence of Soviet ideology. Against the backdrop of the destruction of a million lives, a break in historical economic structures deeply rooted in the natural and cultural environment of the regions took place. This process in the context of Kazakhstan and Ukraine demonstrates how forced modernization under the auspices of the Soviet state erased local models of life in favor of centralized schemes oriented towards the needs of industrialization and military construction.

In Kazakhstan, the disruption of the traditional pastoral economy was particularly radical. Before collectivization, 90% of the Kazakh population led a nomadic or semi-sedentary lifestyle adapted to the extreme conditions of the steppes and semi-deserts. The economy was based on seasonal migrations, clan solidarity, and autonomy within archaic institutions. Forced sedentarization, violent confiscation of livestock, and the organization of collective farms deprived the Kazakhs not only of their livelihoods, but also of the opportunity to use their adaptive survival skills. According to I. Oayon, this led to the systemic collapse of sustainable models of self-sufficiency based on ecological plasticity.

The Ukrainian economy, by contrast, was based on intensive grain farming, integrated into the world market since the 19th century. However, Soviet policy also interrupted this model by establishing a planned monoculture with a priority on export grain for industrial needs. Collectivization destroyed the private peasantry, the main production entity, replacing it with poorly motivated collective farmers. As a result, market incentives were undermined, opportunities for local adaptation (such as sowing shifts) were limited, and the system of forced procurement completely ignored crop failures and natural risks.

In both republics, the result was a structural imbalance: the disappearance of flexible, regionally adapted systems and the introduction of a rigid supply chain that was unable to respond to fluctuations in climate, demand, or demographics. This transition was accompanied by the creation of a control infrastructure—warehouses, transport networks, commandant's offices—and the parallel destruction of the self-employment and distribution infrastructure.

Table 5. Comparison of traditional and implemented economic models

Region	Traditional model	Violation during collectivization
Kazakhstan	Nomadic pastoralism, seasonal routes	Forced sedentarization, destruction of livestock
Ukraine	Private grain farm, market	Collective farms, planned procurement, monoculture

The disruption of these patterns had not only domestic but also transnational consequences. The economic devastation of the steppe and black earth regions led to a decline in agricultural production in the USSR as a whole and caused an increase in purchases abroad, particularly in 1933, when Moscow was forced to reduce grain exports. In addition, the destroyed rural economies became an obstacle to the further growth of cities and the supply of industrial centers. As a result, the USSR began to make adjustments to its policies: tax relief for collective farms appeared, the distribution of livestock was resumed in Kazakhstan, and control over grain procurement was strengthened in Ukraine.

These measures, however, did not mean a reassessment of the model – they were a tactical retreat, not a strategic correction. The principle of industrialization at any cost remained inviolable. Nevertheless, the experience of the disasters of the 1930s revealed the vulnerability of centralized planning to regional specifics. This is why in the post-Soviet period many researchers view the famine not as a consequence of mistakes, but as a systemic failure of a model imposed from the outside and not corresponding to either the cultural or ecological logic of local societies.

Thus, the revision of traditional economic models, caused by the policy of famine and collectivization, became part of the global logic of the imperial transformation of space. The USSR did not simply control the

regions – it sought to rewrite them: economically, demographically, culturally. And the consequences of this “rewriting” still affect the level of poverty, sustainability and social trust in the post-Soviet republics.

Impact on Global Migration Flows: Movement Across Borders (China, Central Asia)

The Kazakh famine of 1931–33 caused not only an internal catastrophe but also cross-border demographic shifts, particularly in Central Asia. With the borders between Soviet republics porous and external frontiers poorly guarded, desperate communities began a mass exodus beyond the USSR’s borders. This formed one of the first major migration waves caused by socio-political famine in the 20th century.

Kazakhs went primarily to the Chinese Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, as well as to Afghanistan and Mongolia. According to researchers, of the total number of emigrants (from 665,000 to 1.1 million), at least 200,000 crossed the external borders of the USSR. In Xinjiang, refugees faced new challenges: language barriers, religious discrimination, lack of support. However, stable Kazakh enclaves emerged there, which later played an important role in preserving the memory of the famine and forming a transnational Kazakh ethnocultural space.

This cross-border nature of migration demonstrates how a local crisis in an authoritarian system can trigger regional chain reactions. Refugee flows have caused tension in neighboring countries, where authorities, on the one hand, feared political contagion, and on the other, sought to use migrants as a buffer or a source of cheap labor. In this sense, the Kazakh famine becomes a precedent, anticipating the migratory consequences of subsequent political catastrophes – for example, in China during the “Great Leap Forward” (1958–1962), in Cambodia during the Pol Pot era, and also in Ethiopia in the 1980s.

Parallels with other Political Famines: China 1958–1962 As Part of Global Industrialization Processes

The Soviet experience of collectivization and industrialization, with its disastrous consequences, had not only a local but also a global impact, inspiring other authoritarian regimes to experiment with similar things. The most striking example is the Chinese Famine (1958–1962), known as the result of the Great Leap Forward campaign.

Under Mao Zedong, China launched a drastic imposition of a communist economy, complete with grain requisitions, egalitarian distributions, and the destruction of private initiative—a pattern very similar to that of the Soviet Union. An estimated 15 to 45 million people died in the campaign, making it the single greatest famine in human history.

As in the case of Kazakhstan and Ukraine, the central government ignored environmental realities and local traditions in pursuit of ideological goals and industrial needs. Massive consolidation of communities, forced construction of irrigation systems, unrealistic grain production plans, and concealment of real data on the ground have all led to humanitarian collapse.

The parallelism of these processes emphasizes that political hunger becomes a typological element of industrialization under authoritarian control. In the case of the USSR and China, hunger was not only a consequence of natural factors or administrative errors. It acted as an instrument of transformation of society, where the population was subjected to “cleansing” of “ineffective” or “hostile” elements, and social control reached its maximum.

Table 6. Comparative characteristics of famines in the USSR and China

Parameter	USSR (Kazakhstan/Ukraine, 1931–33)	China (1958–62)
Ideological context	Collectivization, class struggle	The Great Leap Forward, Revolution
Key measures	Requisitions, liquidation of kulaks	People's communes, mobilization of labor
Number of victims	6-8 million in total	15-45 million
Transnational effects	Migration to China, Central Asia	Migration to Hong Kong, Tibet, Southeast Asia

The comparison shows that hunger as a political mechanism became part of the global repertoire of the 20th century. It accompanied not only economic transformations, but also attempts to rewrite identities, destroy old institutions, and impose new forms of loyalty. Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and China are tragic examples of how industrial ambitions, divorced from the realities of society and nature, can turn into a catastrophe of planetary proportions.

Ukraine: Formation of National Identity, International Recognition of the Famine as Genocide, Memorial Practices

One of the most significant consequences of the Holodomor in Ukraine was its transformation into a central element of historical memory and the foundation of the national identity of post-Soviet Ukraine. Already in the late 1980s, under the conditions of perestroika, public reflection on the tragedy of 1932–1933, previously carefully hushed up by the Soviet authorities, began in Ukrainian society. This gave rise to a large-scale process of nationalization of memory, in which the famine became a symbol of colonial oppression, genocide, and the struggle for independence.

After declaring independence in 1991, the Ukrainian leadership – especially under Presidents V. Yushchenko and P. Poroshenko – actively promoted the interpretation of the Holodomor as a genocide of the Ukrainian people, directed against peasants and the national elite in order to break resistance to collectivization and destroy the basis of Ukrainian cultural autonomy. This approach has gained support in the international arena: as of 2023, more than 30 countries have officially recognized the Holodomor as genocide, including Canada, the United States, Poland, the Baltic states and the Czech Republic.

This recognition has become an important political tool in Ukraine's struggle for international solidarity, especially against the backdrop of worsening relations with Russia after 2014. Memorialization of the tragedy – through memorials, museums, educational programs, and national days of remembrance (for example, Holodomor Remembrance Day on the fourth Saturday of November) – has become a sustainable state practice aimed at consolidating society, fostering patriotism, and articulating its own historical truth.

Particular attention is paid to the visualization and personalization of the tragedy: numerous documentaries, archival exhibitions, "Books of Memory" with the names of the victims, as well as the National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide created in Kyiv perform the function of not only informing, but also ritualizing the trauma. These elements form a collective "place of grief" and work to create a national myth of survival and resistance.

Notably, Ukrainian memory politics also seeks to transnationalize the tragedy, emphasizing its significance not only for national history but also as part of the global legacy of the fight against totalitarianism. Ukraine actively cooperates with Jewish, Armenian, Balkan and African communities that survived the genocide in the framework of international memorial initiatives. This contributes to the inclusion of the Holodomor in the global canon of memory of mass violence, along with the Holocaust, Rwanda and Cambodia.

Thus, the Ukrainian experience shows how historical trauma can be repoliticized and institutionalized, becoming part of the modern narrative arsenal of statehood. The Holodomor has transformed from a 20th-century catastrophe into an axial symbol of the 21st century, mobilizing the past in the name of the present.

Kazakhstan: Late Institutionalization of Memory, Controversial Status of the Term “Genocide”, Monumental Recognition (Since 2017)

Unlike Ukraine, where the Holodomor was integrated into the national historical narrative early on, in Kazakhstan the process of institutionalizing the memory of the tragedy of 1931–1933 developed slowly and contradictorily. After gaining independence in 1991, the topic of mass famine remained in the shadow of other areas of state-building, such as ethno-political stability, economic reform, and the creation of a new national identity. The topic of famine itself was touched upon in the scientific community, but at the level of official memory it remained marginal for a long time.

One reason is the difficulty of assessing the tragedy as genocide. Despite the fact that, according to various estimates, between 1.5 and 2.3 million people died and the nomadic culture of the Kazakhs was destroyed, the Kazakh authorities avoid using the term “genocide.” This caution is due to several factors: the geopolitical balance in relation to Russia, internal disagreements in academic circles, and fear of the politicization of history. Even among Kazakh historians there is no consensus on this issue - some emphasize the ethnocide aspect, others insist on the structural causes of the tragedy (collectivization, mobilization of resources and incompetent management).

It was only in 2017 that the tragedy of 1931–1933 received an official monumental design: a memorial to the victims of the famine was opened in Astana. The appearance of the monument became a symbol of a change in rhetoric: the state recognized the need for memory, but continues to avoid interpretations that create strict responsibility for the center. This approach demonstrates the cautious promotion of “soft” memory, in which recognition of the tragedy is combined with the desire to maintain political neutrality.

Transnational Comparisons

An important factor in the process of memorializing the famine in Kazakhstan was the pressure of the Kazakh diaspora, especially in Turkey, China, Mongolia and Western Europe. Descendants of the refugees of the 1930s, who preserved the memory of the tragedy, actively participated in the formation of alternative historical narratives, often harsher than the official Kazakh versions. They published memoirs, held conferences, lobbied for recognition of the tragedy in international institutions.

In addition, foreign researchers such as Sarah Cameron and Niccolò Pianciola played an important role in popularizing the Kazakh famine in world science. Their work expanded the framework of perception of the tragedy and allowed it to be included in the global context of political famines, along with Ukraine, China and Ethiopia. Thanks to this, Kazakhstan became a participant in a wider discussion about crimes against humanity in the 20th century.

International organizations including UNESCO, Human Rights Watch, and OCHA have begun to view the Kazakh experience as an example of the violation of the cultural and food rights of indigenous peoples, although no major body has officially recognized the tragedy as genocide. This partial, “recognized but not condemned” status reflects the hybrid nature of Kazakh memory, oscillating between local trauma and global history.

Thus, the politics of memory in Kazakhstan is at the stage of formation and international positioning. Unlike the Ukrainian scenario, it is less radical, but open to the influence of global actors. This makes the Kazakh case a unique example of how national memory is formed in the conditions of post-imperial balance, where history becomes not only an instrument of identity, but also a component of foreign policy strategy.

"What Makes an Article Worldwide? Famine as an Instrument of Transnational Repression"

The presented analysis of the Kazakh and Ukrainian experience of mass famine in the 1920s and 1930s goes beyond national histories and offers an understanding of the tragedy as a transnational instrument of governance applied in a multinational empire — the Soviet Union. Despite attempts to present the famine exclusively as an internal problem of one or another republic, the facts of collectivization, requisition, destruction of the traditional way of life and the use of violence indicate the systemic and cross-cutting nature of the repressions, which spread to dozens of ethnic territories and differed only in scale, but not in logic.

The Soviet model of modernization, implemented through violent transformations of agrarian societies, relied on total state intervention in the economy, demography, and cultural life. Moreover, it was in Kazakhstan and Ukraine — two strategic regions for the production of grain and livestock — that this intervention was especially catastrophic. It was accompanied by ethnocultural deformation (the destruction of nomadism, the strangulation of national elites), which indicates that state coercion had not only economic but also identification and cultural goals.

Universal Lessons: State Coercion and Demographic Catastrophes as Themes in World History

Studying famine as a mechanism of repression reveals universal patterns that are relevant to both the 20th century and today. First, the tragedy shows how easily government policy, disguised as the rhetoric of progress, can lead to the mass destruction of human potential. Second, famine, while ostensibly a natural or economic phenomenon, is in fact a constructed mechanism of control, where resources are used as a tool of subjugation and punishment. Third, society's response—from resistance to survival strategies—demonstrates how political trauma can become the foundation of national self-awareness.

Contribution to World History: Famine as a Transboundary Phenomenon

The comparative approach that underlies this article places the tragedies of Kazakhstan and Ukraine in the broader context of the global history of famines, from India and Ireland to China and Ethiopia. All these cases demonstrate that famine is not simply a catastrophe, but an instrument of social recoding aimed at replacing an old way of life with a new one, through pain, suffering, and loss. Famine can destroy nomadic identity, as in Kazakhstan, or collective peasant consciousness, as in Ukraine, but in both cases it creates a new political subjectivity — as a response to violence.

The analysis thus proposed makes it possible to speak of famine as a transnational and universal phenomenon, included in the paradigm of world history. It is a story not only of suffering, but also of politics, memory and resistance, and it deserves to be understood in global terms. The article contributes to world historiography by offering a new perspective on local tragedies as part of an imperial and global project of violent modernization — and as a warning for the present and the future.

CONCLUSION

The history of the famines in Kazakhstan and Ukraine in the first half of the 20th century is not just a tragic episode from the past, but a piercing reminder of how easily the state machine can turn food — the basis of life — into a weapon of destruction. These events cannot be viewed in isolation from one another or solely within the framework of national narratives. They are united by a logic of violence that runs from the center to the periphery, where repression, control, and human transformation became goals that justified any sacrifice.

Comparing the Kazakh steppe famine and the Ukrainian Holodomor, we see two forms of the same phenomenon: industrialization through destruction, modernization through the erasure of memory, state building through demographic breakdown. These tragedies became a kind of social experiment, where the scale of repression was measured not only by the number of victims, but also by the depth of destruction of rooted forms of life — from nomadism to traditional agriculture.

The memory of the famine lives not only in numbers and archives, but in cultural landscapes, in diasporas, in uncomfortable questions about guilt, truth and forgetting. It continues to fight for recognition, for language, for

a place in school textbooks and international halls of memory. This fight is not over – it is only taking on new forms.

Hunger is a mirror in which humanity sees its own mistakes, betrayals, and silences. But it is also a warning: when political purpose takes precedence over human life, history inevitably repeats its darkest chapters.

This is why today, in an era of new crises and violent modernizations, understanding famine as a transnational, multi-level, and deeply human experience is becoming not just a scientific task, but an ethical duty of the historian.

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