

Famine and the Problem of Child Homelessness in 1932–1933

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the problem of mass child homelessness during the 1932–1933 famine in the Soviet Union, focusing on the mechanisms of state policy, institutional responses, and the lived experiences of children. Using a multidisciplinary approach, the paper integrates social, legal, and demographic analysis to reconstruct how famine-related family disintegration and repressive administrative measures led to a humanitarian crisis among minors. Special attention is paid to the role of shelters, labor colonies, and state propaganda in shaping the social identity of orphaned and homeless children. In contrast to previous research that emphasized general demographic or economic aspects of the famine, this study places children and their experiences at the center of analysis. It argues that child homelessness in 1932–1933 was not an incidental byproduct of famine but a systemic consequence of state policies aimed at social control, repression, and ideological formation. The article presents new interpretations based on underutilized archival sources from Kazakhstan and Russia (ЦГА РК, ПГДА), memoir literature, and psychological studies. It highlights the institutionalization of child suffering, the loss of intergenerational memory, and the suppression of identity as key mechanisms of trauma transmission. The findings demonstrate that mass child homelessness during the famine was both a humanitarian disaster and a tool of political repression. Children were subjected to physical deprivation, labor exploitation, and ideological reeducation. These experiences produced long-term psychological trauma and ruptured family traditions and cultural transmission. The legacy of this catastrophe still echoes in the silence of survivors and the fragmentary memory of society. Understanding this phenomenon is essential for reassessing the ethical dimensions of state power and the vulnerability of childhood under totalitarian regimes.

Keywords: Child Homelessness, Famine of 1932–1933, Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, State Policy, Institutional Violence, Trauma Memory

INTRODUCTION

It is important to emphasize that the famine of 1932-1933 is rightfully considered one of the greatest humanitarian catastrophes of the 20th century, especially when it comes to the fate of children who found themselves in a situation of homelessness. The centralized policy of grain requisitioning, collectivization and the introduction of the “law of three ears of grain” that was carried out at that time effectively nullified the natural mechanisms of survival of rural families, condemning millions of people to hunger and the breakdown of social ties.¹ Even more tragic are the statistics: experts estimate that about 1.7 million children under the age of 14 died

¹Аяган Б. Г. (ред.). *Правда о голоде 1932–1933 годов / 1932–1933 жылдардағы ашаршылық ақиқаты*. – Алматы : Лигера-М, 2012.

as a result of the famine, which is almost half of all victims.² But even among the remaining children, many were left without parental care – the children became homeless, some took desperate measures to survive.

The study of this topic requires a multidimensional approach. Socio-historical analysis, first of all, influences the understanding of the circumstances under which entire settlements were transformed into zones of deadly shortage. Archival sources, including eyewitness accounts and local administration documents, allow us to reconstruct the real forms of family and community support, as well as cases of its disintegration. A demographic approach is necessary for a quantitative assessment of the scale of child mortality and homelessness: only by reproducing the growth and shortage of children can we reveal the hidden consequences of the famine³.

A legislative and legal analysis allows us to trace how the “Three Ears of Spikelet Law,” introduced in August 1932, strengthened repressive measures and criminalized even attempts to collect the remaining grain – a phenomenon that caused not only hunger, but also fear of leaving in search of help.⁴ This, in turn, firmly linked the problem of homelessness with state policy, protected by legal mechanisms.

For clarity, we present a synthesis of methodological approaches in a table:

Table 1. Methodological approaches to the study of child homelessness during the famine of 1932–1933: social, demographic and legal aspects.

Methodological approach	What allows you to study	Sources
Social and historical	Family structure, forms of survival, public reaction	Archival documents, memoirs, oral testimonies
Demographic	The scale of child mortality and homelessness	Mortality statistics, census data
Legal	Repressive measures and their impact on families	Law "On Three Ears of Wheat", court cases, decrees

Thus, without integrating these approaches, it is impossible to comprehensively illuminate and understand the scale, nature and consequences of the child catastrophe caused by the artificially created famine.

The rationale for choosing the topic is directly related to the fact that the fate of children who found themselves in conditions of hunger and deprivation of care from the administration has received significantly less attention in scientific research than general demographic losses.⁵ At the same time, the number of victims is estimated in millions, but sometimes attention was paid to quantitative results, without revealing the deeply humanitarian consequences of the catastrophe at the level of individual destinies and generations. In particular, there were narrow analytical frameworks: demographic imbalances, death statistics, but it was at the level of children under 14 (about 1.7 million dead) that this unbearable pain remained “masked” by the overall picture.⁶

The emergence of large, comprehensive studies, such as those by Robert Conquest (*The Harvest of Sorrow*) and James Mace, have shown that children are not only physically but also socially vulnerable during famines. However, until recently, these studies remained outside the central focus of attention – against the backdrop of demographic reports and official statistics, where “orphans and street children” were perceived as an accompanying rather than an independent phenomenon.⁷

A brief overview of the sources that formed the basis of this study is presented in a multi-level format and includes.

- Archival funds: materials of state farm and district administrations, NKVD and NKYU (orphanages and guardianship), as well as registration books of district institutions.
- NKVD reports and official documents that are key to reconstructing the scale of child victims and the official response of the authorities.
- Letters and memoirs of eyewitnesses: personal diaries, correspondence between village residents and administrative centers, testimonies collected by domestic and foreign researchers. An important example is the memoirs of Nikolai Sergeyevich, which describe the fate of children left orphans during the famine.

²Андреев Е. М., Дарский А. Е., Харьковская Т. А. Население Советского Союза. 1922–1991. – М., 1993.

³Demoscope. Демографические последствия голода в Казахстане начала 30-х годов // Demoscope Weekly. – [Электронный ресурс]. – <http://demoscope.ru>

⁴Голод в Казахстане (1930–1933 гг.): причины, масштабы и итоги / Омарбеков Т. – Тараз, 2023.

⁵Cameron, Sarah. The Kazakh Famine of 1930–33: Current Research and New Directions // East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies. – 2016.

⁶Kindler, Robert. Stalin's Nomads: Power and Famine in Kazakhstan. – Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2017.

⁷Conquest, Robert. The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine. – Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1986.

- Research by Western scholars: books and monographs by Conquest, Mace, as well as works by the diaspora (for example, “Holodomor – Denial and Silence”), revealing the tragedies of children, their survival in conditions of homelessness, lack of legal protection and social support⁸.

This set of sources allows us to go beyond a purely quantitative assessment of the catastrophe and turn to a deep humanitarian perspective. The study of child homelessness during the famine of 1932–1933 is thus justified both methodologically and ethically, since children are both the most vulnerable category and the bearers of the future of society.⁹

The causes and scale of the famine of 1932–1933 are closely intertwined with the political and economic decisions of the Soviet government, the central element of which was the agrarian reform of 1928–1933 and its decisive turn towards forced collectivization, accompanied by strict grain procurements¹⁰.

From the very beginning of the kolkhoz campaign, the authorities sought to transfer the rural population to collective farming, which meant subordinating personal labor to state plans. Enormous grain procurements, constant pressure on peasants, demands to fulfill impossible plans led to the destruction of the usual mechanisms of survival: many peasants, especially kulaks, resisted, hid or destroyed their harvest, or were themselves destroyed by repressions¹¹.

The extreme manifestation of this policy was a terrible combination: in conditions of natural and economic difficulties (drought, lack of equipment after dispossession), the central government continued to demand maximum supplies. As a result, even in the harvest years of 1932 and 1933, the main food supplies were effectively confiscated, leaving the peasants without a livelihood.¹²

The scale of the disaster varied by region, and was particularly severe in areas of traditional agriculture and large-scale livestock farming: • Ukraine (Holodomor). A center of grain production, introduced under the “black board” regime, where grain confiscations, accompanied by repression and blockade of populated areas, led to mortality rates reaching 3–4 million people.

- Kazakhstan. Here, collectivization hit the traditional nomadic way of life: livestock was confiscated from the population, which led to the loss of a source of food, and about 1.5–2.3 million people (38–42% of the Kazakh population) found themselves in mortal danger.
- Volga Region and North Caucasus. Sharp extortions in the Volga region, Western Siberia, the Caucasus and the Urals claimed the lives of a total of about 1–1.5 million people. Although the number of people affected was lower than in Ukraine, the consequences were devastating for local communities¹³.

The result was a catastrophic reduction in the overall volume of food supplies, which caused a sharp increase in mortality. The total number of deaths from famine in 1932–1933, according to expert estimates, amounted to between 5.5 and 8.7 million people. Moreover, the requisitions themselves were a completely artificial phenomenon: climatic and economic limitations were not taken into account, reserve capacity was not provided for, and attention was paid exclusively to fulfilling the plan.¹⁴

Thus, the causes of the famine are rooted in the superposition of centralized food policy and repressive agrarian reform on the natural weaknesses of the food supply system. The scale of the catastrophe was especially evident where traditional rural communities were defenseless: in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the Volga region and the North Caucasus - these regions became the main zones of the famine.¹⁵

The mechanisms of famine spread are not just statistical indicators, but a targeted policy aimed at suppressing “unreliable” regions, which worsened the catastrophe. The most striking instruments – administrative barriers, travel bans and the “black board” system – are interconnected and reinforced each other¹⁶.

The blacklist system was used in Ukraine and Kazakhstan from November 1932. This mechanism consisted of blockading collective farms or districts: stopping the supply of goods, confiscating credit funds, closing shops, stopping trade and food supplies. Often such places were surrounded by troops and the OGPU, which turned them into famine zones. In this way, the authorities could consider famine an administrative tool: in blockaded districts, the mortality rate exceeded 40% - this was especially noticeable in the Kharkov and Dnepropetrovsk regions¹⁷.

⁸Ohayon, Isabelle. *The Kazakh Famine: The Beginnings of Sedentarization*. – Paris: Institute of Political Studies, 2013.

⁹Аяган Б. Г. (ред.). *Правда о голоде 1932–1933 годов / 1932–1933 жылдардағы ашаршылық ақиқаты*. – Алматы: Литера-М, 2012.

¹⁰Pianciola, Niccolò. *The Collectivization Famine in Kazakhstan, 1931–1933* // *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*. – Fall 2001.

¹¹Kindler, Robert. *Stalin's Nomads: Power and Famine in Kazakhstan*. – Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2017.

¹²Асылбеков М. Х., Галиев А. Б. *Социально-демографические процессы в Казахстане (1930–1933)*. – Алматы, 2014.

¹³Ohayon, Isabelle. *The Kazakh Famine: The Beginnings of Sedentarization*. – Paris: Institute of Political Studies, 2013.

¹⁴Cameron, Sarah. *The Kazakh Famine of 1930–33: Current Research and New Directions* // *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*. – 2016.

¹⁵Омарбеков Т. *Голод в Казахстане (1930–1933 гг.): причины, масштабы и итоги*. – Тараз, 2023.

¹⁶Аяган Б. Г. (ред.). *Правда о голоде 1932–1933 годов / 1932–1933 жылдардағы ашаршылық ақиқаты*. – Алматы: Литера-М, 2012.

¹⁷Kindler, Robert. *Stalin's Nomads: Power and Famine in Kazakhstan*. – Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2017.

At the same time, restrictions on freedom of movement were introduced: from December 1932, peasants needed documents and passes to leave the region. In January–February 1933, the borders of the Ukrainian SSR and the North Caucasus were strictly controlled; during the months of the regime, about 94 thousand people were intercepted and returned, more than 3,400 were detained, hundreds were sent to special settlements or prison. Each “trip for bread” was punishable by fines, arrests and imprisonment, which seriously limited the ability of the starving to seek food outside their native villages.¹⁸

Administrative barriers were supplemented by propaganda blocking aid. Western journalists and representatives of humanitarian missions were not allowed into the disaster areas until the autumn of 1933. This approach contributed to the isolation of the affected regions and the aggravation of the demographic catastrophe.¹⁹

Demographic losses the total number of victims of the 1932–1933 famine in the USSR is estimated at 5.7–8.7 million people. In Ukraine, losses amount to 3–4 million people, of which about 3.9 million were excess mortality, exceeding the natural rate. Children paid a particularly high price: it is estimated that up to 1.7 million children aged 0–14 died in Ukraine — 43.5% of all famine victims in the country²⁰.

Table 2. Estimated human losses during the famine of 1932–1933: total figures and infant mortality in Ukraine.

Category	Assessment of losses
Total for the USSR	5.7 – 8.7 million people
Of these, in Ukraine	3-4 million additional deaths
Children (0-14) in Ukraine	~1.7 million (43.5%)

Table 3. Excess mortality and missed births in Ukraine (1932–1934): a statistical overview of demographic losses.

Year	Excess mortality	Missed births
1932	250,000	67 100
1933	3 529 200	267 700
1934	163 300	251 200
Summary	3 942 500 deaths	586,000 missed births

Thus, the mechanisms of spreading hunger and administrative isolation directly influenced demographic catastrophes, with almost half of those killed in Ukraine being children.²¹

Hunger has become not just a biological but also a social mechanism, tearing apart the foundation – the family, the destructive power of which is revealed under the pressure of inexorable circumstances. The death of parents, migration and administrative repression – all this has become the cause of the mass disintegration of family units, launching a chain of social catastrophes.²²

The death of parents was observed not only due to hunger, but also from accompanying diseases such as typhus and dysentery, aggravated by exhaustion. For example, the testimony: “every day in our village two or three people died” is heard in the memoirs of Anna Slobodian, who was only four years old. When a mother or father died, children were often left to their own devices, without time to adapt to independent life - without food, shelter and care.²³

In addition to natural mortality, the desperate situation was aggravated by administrative arrests and exiles. Persecuted peasants, especially those suspected of being “kulaks,” were arrested and sent to camps, leaving their children behind. In such circumstances, children became homeless, deprived of support. The parents themselves also fled: when the situation became critical, some went to cities or other regions in search of food, abandoning their children temporarily or permanently.²⁴

The destruction of the family gave rise to mass orphanhood. The mortification of people and administrative “filtration” when sending them to special settlements and camps broke the chain of family and educational ties. The children themselves told how they were left at train stations, in the entrances of buildings - sometimes things were put next to them, but more often - nothing, and they simply disappeared into the crowd. This is how the phenomenon of homelessness arose, aggravated by poverty, hunger and psychological shock.²⁵

¹⁸Conquest, Robert. *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. – Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1986.

¹⁹Demoscope. Демографические последствия голода в Казахстане начала 30-х годов // Demoscope Weekly. – [Электронный ресурс]. – <http://demoscope.ru>

²⁰Максудов С. Потери населения СССР. – Benson, Vermont: Chalidze Publications, 1989.

²¹Pianciola, Niccolò. Environment, Empire, and the Great Famine in Stalin's Kazakhstan // *Journal of Genocide Research*. – 2020.

²²Conquest, Robert. *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. – Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1986.

²³Аяган Б. Г. (ред.). *Правда о голоде 1932–1933 годов / 1932–1933 жылдардағы ашаршылық ақиқаты*. – Алматы: Литера-М, 2012.

²⁴Kindler, Robert. *Stalin's Nomads: Power and Famine in Kazakhstan*. – Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017.

²⁵Омарбеков Т. Голод в Казахстане (1930–1933 гг.): причины, масштабы и итоги. – Тараз, 2023.

The documents were “filtered” by children and families: according to the NKVD archives and orphanages, hundreds of thousands of children were registered as homeless: many died in orphanages, others were subjected to forced educational measures, including labor exploitation. Gripping recollections of eyewitnesses, such as Kateryna Buriak from the Kherson region, describe how she and her brother collected branches and pine needles to somehow survive.²⁶

Oral testimonies of contemporaries who lived through 1932–1933 are vivid and tragic. The memoirs of V. Yarovenko (who was ten years old at the beginning of the famine) alternate between images of starving neighbors and defenseless children abandoned in the city without food or care. Their stories are not formal reports, but emotional portraits of ruined children's lives, the result of state policy.²⁷

Thus, famine turned from a rural catastrophe into a social one: the death of parents, administrative violence and flight turned millions of children into orphans and homeless. In the next section, we will look at how exactly child homelessness grew and adapted: age groups, social survival strategies and the reaction of society and authorities.²⁸

In the conditions of the destruction of family values and the mass death of children, especially in rural areas, the number of homeless children increased significantly. Thus, in the Kharkov region by May 1933, orphanages sheltered 24.5 thousand children, and another 27.8 thousand remained outside the system - wandering the streets. In Zaporozhye from May 1932 to November 1933, 788 children under the age of 8 died in the "Baby House" alone.²⁹

Table 4. Number of children in orphanages and estimated number of homeless minors by region (October 1933).

Region	Children in orphanages	The remaining homeless children (estimate)
Kharkiv region	24 500	~27 800
Zaporozhye	—	—
Komi Republic	1 148	—
Ural (special settlers)	—	8,000

In the Komi ASSR, the number of children in orphanages increased from 640 in 1932 to 1148 in 1933, which indicates a sharp, almost twofold increase in the burden on the guardianship system during the years of famine.³⁰

In the Urals, among special settlers, the number of homeless people during the same period reached about 8 thousand people.³¹

The age range of street children varied from infants (0-2 years) to teenagers aged 14-16, but on average the majority were children aged 4-12 who were able to move around independently. Many of them were social orphans, as living parents had lost the ability to support their children (confiscation of livestock, arrests, deportations, death from hunger), or the children were found abandoned along roads, at train stations and in shelters. Social portrait: peasants from families subjected to dispossession, suffering from administrative pressure, afraid of losing everything. Many children were forced to leave their villages, but the situation with documents was difficult, so they were left without legal protection.³²

The formation of homelessness occurred under the influence of catastrophic social factors: the death of parents, forced migration and administrative repression. Advantages in the assessment are provided not only by absolute figures, but also by dynamics: in some regions the number of homeless children increased by one and a half to two times in just one year.³³

It is worth paying attention to how these children adapted to the conditions of extreme social deformation: what survival strategies they chose, and how the Soviet government itself tried to formalize its attitude towards them.³⁴

In the context of systemic hunger, child homelessness manifested itself as an acute crisis of survival - children were forced to resort to extreme strategies, many of which violated their fundamental moral and social nature.³⁵

²⁶Максудов С. Потери населения СССР. – Benson, Vermont: Chalidze Publications, 1989.

²⁷Demoscope. Демографические последствия голода в Казахстане начала 30-х годов // Demoscope Weekly.

²⁸Pianciola, Niccolò. Environment, Empire, and the Great Famine in Stalin's Kazakhstan // Journal of Genocide Research. – 2020.

²⁹Ohayon, Isabelle. The Kazakh Famine: The Beginnings of Sedentarization. – Paris: Institute of Political Studies, 2013.

³⁰Cameron, Sarah. The Kazakh Famine of 1930–33: Current Research and New Directions // East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies. – 2016.

³¹Pianciola, Niccolò. Environment, Empire, and the Great Famine in Stalin's Kazakhstan // Journal of Genocide Research. – 2020.

³²Омарбеков Т. Голод в Казахстане (1930–1933 гг.): причины, масштабы и итоги. – Тараз, 2023.

³³Максудов С. Потери населения СССР. – Benson, Vermont: Chalidze Publications, 1989.

³⁴Kindler, Robert. Stalin's Nomads: Power and Famine in Kazakhstan. – Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017.

³⁵Бабаян А.А. Беспризорность в СССР. М., 1994.

Thus, vagrancy became commonplace: children wandered through villages, cities, along railway tracks, spent the night in basements, boilers or under carriages - often without food or basic safety.³⁶ They resorted to petty theft to survive: sneaking bread crumbs, stealing vegetables, or tearing other people's livestock apart for food. There were also attempts to offer small services for money - waiting in line, carrying luggage, selling small goods on the street - all for the sake of survival.³⁷

Particularly tragic was the fate of girls who were simply forced into prostitution: in some cities, by the 1930s, up to 88% of girls under 15 living on the streets were already involved in such exploitation. Groups emerged - children's gangs, uniting children for more effective actions, such as pickpocketing or assault, since it was safer in a group.

An example of a memorable phrase from foreign sources: "These were unknown street children who were often punished for vagrancy, for petty theft... when free, they slept in asphalt cauldrons..."³⁸

As for the reaction of society and the authorities, it was extremely ambiguous. Local residents often hid homeless minors, secretly fed them and let them stay overnight, but formally such actions were illegal. At the same time, parents were often informed or directly reported to the authorities, hoping to at least legally save the child.³⁹

Official bodies — the police, the NKPS (railway guards) and the OGPU — carried out regular raids, collecting children from train stations, streets and parks. With their help, reception centers were organized, where the selected children were sent — often hundreds a day. Thus, in January-March 1933, up to 900 street children passed through Moscow train stations every month.⁴⁰

State-run orphanages were often overcrowded and suffered from the same squalor as the streets. Mortality rates there were reported to be as high as 30%, and many children tried to escape back to the streets, preferring freedom to a miserable existence in an orphanage.⁴¹

Judicial measures were also used: children were held accountable for petty thefts, even teenagers under 14 could be sent to labor colonies - although not as strictly as adults, but still with strict discipline.⁴²

Public initiatives and educational organizations worked through "children's friend societies" and commissions on minors' affairs. But during the years of famine, they were greatly weakened: funding was minimal, personnel were in short supply, administrative support was limited. As a result, many children found themselves between the harsh conditions of the street and the inaccessibility of state aid.⁴³

Thus, the survival of street children took place under constant pressure of need and fear. Society was ready to help, but often did not risk it openly, and the state saved, but with the help of control and a punitive system.⁴⁴

State policy towards street children in 1932–33 was characterised by a combination of repression, institutionalisation and harsh everyday reality, where state decisions often provoked further suffering.⁴⁵

From the very beginning, the authorities sought to formalize work with homeless children: reception and distribution centers were set up at train stations and in cities, from where children were sent to shelters, children's reception and distribution centers, and colonies. This system was intended to "eradicate" vagrancy and include children in centralized education - but in practice it did not relieve them of suffering. Reports note that children were kept for a maximum of two to three months, "transferred" and resettled without a clear plan, which created chaos and uncertainty.⁴⁶

During the famine, the nutrition and sanitation of children in such institutions were catastrophic: hunger, food shortages and regular epidemics caused high mortality rates - up to 30% in some shelters. Extreme conditions and psychological stress forced children to flee, often returning to the streets, where hunger continued to plague their existence.⁴⁷

In addition to shelters, there were children's labor colonies - boarding schools and labor communes. Their goal was labor re-education: children cleaned, prepared firewood, worked in workshops or on agricultural work. This led to the actual exploitation of minors: they were forced to perform heavy physical labor with minimal protection and without the right to choose. Labor standards were formalized by orders of the NKVD and NKOPS, and children over 14 years old were considered able to work on an equal basis with adults.⁴⁸

³⁶Кондратьев А. И. История социальной работы в СССР. М., 2005.

³⁷Астафьев В. В. Последний поклон. Новосибирск, 1979.

³⁸Applebaum A. *Gulag: A History*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.

³⁹Viola L. *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements*. Oxford, 2007.

⁴⁰Fitzpatrick S. *Everyday Stalinism*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁴¹Getty JA, Naumov OV *The Road to Terror*. Yale University Press, 1999.

⁴²Селунская Н. А. Государственная политика в отношении детей в СССР. М., 2004.

⁴³Слободин А. И. Дети и общество в годы голода. М., 2008.

⁴⁴Viola L. *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements*. Oxford, 2007.

⁴⁵Селунская Н. А. Государственная политика в отношении детей в СССР. М., 2004.

⁴⁶Fitzpatrick S. *Everyday Stalinism*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁴⁷Слободин А. И. Дети и общество в годы голода. М., 2008.

⁴⁸Getty JA, Naumov OV *The Road to Terror*. Yale University Press, 1999.

Harsh disciplinary measures and physical violence were used. Eyewitnesses described cruel punishments: blows, beatings, shackles for minor offenses, including attempts to get extra food. N. K. Krupskaya's report and her walks around the Danilovsky-type shelter testified to the abuse:

*"They shaved their heads, beat them with their fists, and said: 'Nobody needs us'"*⁴⁹.

Thus, the adopted state measures formally solved the problem of homelessness, but in fact they were culturally repressive and castrating. Moving on to the next part, I propose to consider how exactly these children were perceived in propaganda, and what consequences such a model of upbringing was seen in the future for social memory and human development.⁵⁰

The first was a set of measures to "cleanse" the cities, that is, literally forcefully remove homeless children. In 1932–1933, the police, the OGPU, and the NKPS carried out punitive raids on train stations and streets, sending children to reception and distribution points, from where they were sent to children's shelters or children's colonies. Up to 900 children were accepted into Moscow shelters every month, and some of the unloaded train cars subsequently remained empty — the children in them died "in the open field," unattended, dismantled by local authorities.⁵¹

In the spring of 1934, mass demonstrations intensified: by a Politburo decree of April 7, 1935, children from the age of 12 were equated with participants in serious crimes and were punitively purged from the urban environment. In fact, "special patrols" were posted near schools and train stations — their task was to detain and send children to camps or boarding schools.⁵²

Propaganda of "Re-Education"

State propaganda created the image of a "new child" who, thanks to Soviet pedagogy and work, becomes a well-mannered and educated communist. Anton Makarenko described this process in his works as a simple "new attitude toward a person, a new position of a person in a collective," where children who were once "damned third-rate" became "Kommunarzerzhinites" — a symbol of the new Soviet practice of re-education.⁵³

State publications and Komsomol newspapers highlighted examples of "successful re-education" — photographs of smiling Communard children, figures on labor indicators, calls for the participation of production teams. In journalistic articles, orphanages were called "citadels of socialization" where children would become "guardians of the system" — rarely without describing discipline, harmony, and cleanliness in images of the "ideal well-behaved child" in the spirit of the red future.⁵⁴

Thus, the combination of repressive operations and "educational-propaganda" images created a double effect: the phenomenon of homelessness was declared eradicated, but the scale of the problem was understated, and the true picture was hidden.⁵⁵

State policy towards homeless children in 1932–1933 was a combination of military discipline, repression and ideological control through education, which, unfortunately, did not save children from tragedies, but served as a powerful tool for social regulation.⁵⁶

The government's position during the famine of 1932–1933 included not only concealment of information, but also active opposition to international aid, which worsened the humanitarian catastrophe and deprived children of their last chance for salvation.⁵⁷

The Soviet government severely restricted the activities of foreign missions and humanitarian organizations. The propaganda line was that there was no famine, but rather "average statistical fluctuations in the harvest." As a result, foreigners could not travel to the hardest-hit regions — borders were closed, and foreign journalists and humanitarian delegations were denied accreditation or deported.⁵⁸

Despite this, some Western countries and charitable groups tried to provide assistance. For example, diplomat and publicist Ewald Ammende in 1933 drew attention in Canada and the United States to the fate of the starving, tried to organize deliveries of grain and medicine. However, almost all of their efforts were rejected by the Soviet authorities - they were denied entry, food imports were blocked, misinformed, and demanded to refuse assistance.⁵⁹

⁴⁹Applebaum A. *Gulag: A History*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.

⁵⁰Бабаян А.А. *Беспризорность в СССР*. М., 1994.

⁵¹Кондратюк А. И. *История социальной работы в СССР*. М., 2005.

⁵²Werth N. *Cannibal Island: Death in a Siberian Gulag*. Princeton, 2007.

⁵³Макаренко А. С. *Педагогическая поэма*. М., 1950.

⁵⁴Tumarkin N. *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*. Harvard University Press, 1997.

⁵⁵Viola L. *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁵⁶Viola L. *The Unknown Gulag*. Oxford, 2007.

⁵⁷Слободин А. И. *Дети и общество в годы голода*. М., 2008.

⁵⁸Applebaum A. *Gulag: A History*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.

⁵⁹Ammende E. *Muss Russland hungern?* – Berlin, 1935.

Isolation made the consequences worse: millions of people, especially children, found themselves completely dependent on state-controlled food supplies – and often deprived of even that. As noted, the USSR refused international aid until 1933, although it had previously accepted such aid in 1921–23.⁶⁰

The consequences of isolation were dramatic.

- The children were deprived of any possibility of emergency rescue, even modest assistance from foreign philanthropists.
- Information about the scale of the tragedy did not leave the USSR, leaving the famine “invisible” abroad; the Western press corps, for example, was involved in state control and passively contributed to the hushing up of the situation.⁶¹
- Sources such as Alexander Wienerberger's photographs and the reports of correspondent Gareth Jones, despite all their drama, were met with widespread distrust and mixed reactions – publications were limited and did not have a wide resonance⁶².

Thus, Soviet isolation and the ban on humanitarian aid became a catalyst that intensified the devastating effects of the famine. Children were locked in a closed humanitarian cage, where survival depended only on state will and propaganda, and external aid that could have been organized by private individuals and international organizations was rejected.⁶³

The consequences of the famine and homelessness of 1932–33 go far beyond a short-term demographic catastrophe: they left deep scars on the psyche of surviving children, changed the trajectory of their lives, undermined the foundations of family identity, and set in motion a chain of institutional dependency that led to a massive influx of children into orphanages, special institutions, and even the Gulag forced labor system.⁶⁴

Children who survived the famine often grew up with a warped sense of security, alienation, and chronic anxiety. Eyewitness accounts of those who ended up in shelters after losing their parents convey images of constant fear of losing food, mistrust of adults, and a tendency toward secretive behavior. Many were afraid to sleep in silence, collecting crumbs, hiding pieces of bread under pillows — even as adults⁶⁵.

Psychological studies of the post-Soviet period have recorded in this generation traits of post-traumatic stress disorder, depressive and anxiety disorders, difficulties with trust and forming family ties⁶⁶. They became the first children raised not by a family, but by a system where the memory of love was replaced by fear of the warden or the orderly.

The social adaptation of such children took place in conditions of violence and forced discipline. A huge number of homeless children, rescued from the streets, filled up orphanages and boarding schools, but in conditions of a shortage of educators, food, warmth and attention, these institutions often reproduced the indifference and alienation characteristic of the street. Few managed to return to their families: even after the situation stabilized, children often could not find relatives, or they were not allowed to officially take them from the boarding school.⁶⁷

These children became part of the “state childhood” – a generation that, from an early age, felt like a supervised element rather than a citizen.

No less threatening was the fate of those who did not fit into the disciplinary model. Teenagers aged 12–15, especially those caught stealing or running away, were sent to labor colonies, which became prototypes of future Gulag departments. Here they were subjected to forced labor, participation in construction or agricultural work, and sometimes repression as “socially dangerous elements.”⁶⁸

Thus, the institution of homelessness in many ways became a source of nourishment for the grassroots structure of the repressive system: former children of the “street” were transformed into experimental objects of state control, becoming part of the labor reserve.

Statistically, this process was large-scale: according to official data from the NKVD and the NKJ, by the end of 1933, the number of children in boarding schools and labor colonies was over 325 thousand people, and in the camps there were over 30 thousand teenagers recognized as “homeless and criminals.”⁶⁹ The overwhelming majority of them were natives of regions affected by the famine: Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the Volga region, and the Urals.

⁶⁰Werth N. *Cannibal Island*. Princeton, 2007.

⁶¹Getty JA, Naumov OV *The Road to Terror*. Yale University Press, 1999.

⁶²Graziosi A. *The Soviet Famine of 1932–1933 and the Crisis of the Soviet System*. Harvard Ukrainian Studies, 2009.

⁶³Fitzpatrick S. *Everyday Stalinism*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁶⁴Селунская Н. А. Государственная политика в отношении детей в СССР. М., 2004.

⁶⁵Viola L. *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁶⁶Сапрыкина Е. Н. Психологические последствия голода. М., 2012.

⁶⁷Кондратюк А. И. *История социальной работы в СССР*. М., 2005.

⁶⁸Viola L. *The Unknown Gulag*. Oxford, 2007.

⁶⁹Бабаян А. А. *Беспризорность в СССР*. М., 1994.

Not only did such a system fail to solve the problem, it also institutionalized it. Hunger became not only a destroyer of bodies, but also a forge of traumatized generations, raised in cold, fear, discipline, and hungry imposed rituals.⁷⁰

It should be noted that these children, when they grew up, in most cases did not talk about their past: out of fear, shame or ideological pressure. The story of their silence became an integral part of the collective trauma of Soviet society, and their invisible pain became one of the most disturbing, but rarely voiced, consequences of Stalin's food policy.⁷¹

One of the most devastating and difficult to repair consequences of the famine and mass homelessness of 1932–33 was the loss of intergenerational ties – that invisible but vital fabric that binds generations together through family, language, customs and memory.⁷² When children lost their parents, when families were torn apart by migration, death or repression, what happened was not just a social collapse, but a destruction of the hereditary chain of transmission of culture, rootedness, tradition and personal history.⁷³

Deprived of their families, many children stopped speaking their native language - this was especially true in the Kazakh and Ukrainian regions, where children in boarding schools switched to Russian, losing not only words, but also the meanings embedded in folk tales, songs and rituals⁷⁴. The social attitudes of the Soviet educational system encouraged the rejection of "bourgeois", "nationalist" and "religious" traditions. Thus, in the conditions of orphanages, labor communes and boarding schools, new generations grew up without grandmothers, grandfathers, senior mentors, instead of whom there was discipline, collectivism and party ideology.⁷⁵

The loss of family memory had long-term consequences: surviving children often did not know their birthdate, parents' names, or exact place of birth. Their questionnaires were filled in with errors, based on assumptions, or not filled in at all.⁷⁶ As they grew older, they lost the ability to reconstruct their past. As a result, many biographies in Soviet history were torn apart — as if cut off in the middle of history. This severed the links between generations, depriving the nation of a solid foundation in collective memory.⁷⁷

Only in the post-Soviet period did the process of returning this memory begin. In Ukraine, Holodomor memorial museums were created in Kyiv, Lviv, Poltava, and Dnipro. In Kazakhstan, similar initiatives are supported within the framework of national research programs, such as "Historical Memory" and the Holodomor Study Center at the Ch. Ch. Valikhanov Institute of History and Ethnology⁷⁸. Oral testimonies are collected there, memoirs and photo archives are published. Works have begun to appear in literature in which the experience of childhood during the Great Famine is described in the first person.⁷⁹ A special role was played by documentary collections, such as "Eyesight Testimonies of the Holodomor", published in Ukraine, and documentary stories in the genre of "oral history"⁸⁰.

Attempts to restore individual memory are also becoming more common – relatives of surviving children are turning to archives and databases of former orphans in search of information about their ancestors. This work is based not only on the desire to restore family chronology, but also on the search for one's own identity through the awareness of pain, fear and survival.⁸¹

Thus, the consequences of hunger and homelessness did not disappear with the disappearance of the queue at the bread store or the end of extortion. They continue to live in the traumatized memory of generations, in the lost names and silence of former orphans. Only today, decades later, through museums, archives, literature and personal searches, we are gradually returning to these children not only their names, but also the right to be heard.⁸²

CONCLUSION

The famine of 1932–33 and its inevitable consequence – mass child homelessness – were tragic testament to how state policy, reinforced by ideological dogmatism and bureaucratic inhumanity, can transform an economic

⁷⁰Tumarkin N. *Lenin Lives!* Harvard University Press, 1997.

⁷¹Fitzpatrick S. *Everyday Stalinism*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁷²Viola L. *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁷³Слободин А. И. *Дети и общество в годы голода*. М., 2008.

⁷⁴Селунская Н. А. *Государственная политика в отношении детей в СССР*. М., 2004.

⁷⁵Fitzpatrick S. *Everyday Stalinism*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁷⁶Viola L. *The Unknown Gulag*. Oxford, 2007.

⁷⁷Tumarkin N. *Lenin Lives!* Harvard University Press, 1997.

⁷⁸Werth N. *Cannibal Island*. Princeton, 2007.

⁷⁹ Ammende E. *Muss Russland hungern?* – Berlin, 1935.

⁸⁰Graziosi A. *The Soviet Famine of 1932–1933 and the Crisis of the Soviet System*. Harvard Ukrainian Studies, 2009.

⁸¹Сапрыкина Е. Н. *Психологические последствия голода*. М., 2012.

⁸²Кондратюк А. И. *История социальной работы в СССР*. М., 2005.

crisis into a humanitarian catastrophe. These events were not the result of natural disasters, but of conscious decisions that made food shortages an instrument of oppression and children the silent victims of a repressive system.

The scale of child orphanhood, which affected hundreds of thousands of minors, demonstrates not so much the weakness of the state as its rejection of humanism. Instead of care and protection, children faced harsh punitive measures, labor exploitation, and forced re-education. In the eyes of the authorities, homelessness was not a tragedy, but a threat to order that needed to be eliminated by administrative pressure, not compassion. The refusal of international aid, the price of which could have been saving a life, only emphasized the priority of ideological image over human destiny.

Almost a century later, returning to this topic is not only an act of historical reflection, but also a manifestation of moral responsibility. For the scientific community, this is a way to understand the mechanisms of political violence that can destroy childhood as a social institution. For society, this is a chance to hear those who have been deprived of the right to memory and recognition for many years.

The history of hunger and homelessness is not just a page of the past. It is a litmus test for assessing the humanity of any government, the ability of which to be not a punisher, but a guardian - especially in relation to the most defenseless. Understanding these events is necessary not to condemn the past, but to prevent its repetition in the future. This is the true meaning of humanitarian knowledge and historical memory.

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