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Holodomor: Memories of Ukraine's silent massacre

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Nina Karpenko: "I remember bodies being swollen by hunger"

Eighty years ago, millions of Ukrainians died in a famine that many label a genocide by the Soviet regime of Joseph Stalin. As Ukraine prepares to embark on its annual memorial events, the BBC's David Stern finds that memories of the massacre are undimmed for many.

Nina Karpenko, an energetic 87-year-old, demonstrates what it took to survive Ukraine's Stalin-era famine, known as the Holodomor, or "death by hunger".

Some cheap cornmeal, wheat chaff, dried nettle leaves and other weeds - this was the essence of life during the horrific winter and early spring of 1932-33 in Ukraine.

As Ms Karpenko tells her story, she kneads the ingredients into a dull green mass, adding water and a little salt, which she then fashions into a patty. She calls it bread, though it barely fits this description.

Then she spreads wax shavings on a pan to keep the patty from sticking and burning, and places it in an oven.

Ms Karpenko's father died early on. His legs swelled up and he expired when trying to consume a small amount of food - a common occurrence among those close to starvation.

Her mother walked 15km (nine miles) to a nearby town to see if she could obtain something to eat for Ms Karpenko and her brother and sister. She exchanged her earrings and a gold cross she wore around her neck for about 2kg of flour.

Ms Karpenko takes the bread from the oven when it is ready. It is tough and tastes like grass.

But thanks to this weed loaf, and a horsehide that her mother cut into pieces and boiled for soup, the Karpenko family managed to survive until the spring, when they could forage in the nearby forest.

Others in their village, Matskivtsi, in central Ukraine, were not as fortunate.

"There was a deathly silence," she says. "Because people weren't even conscious. They didn't want to speak or to look at anything."

"They thought today that person died, and tomorrow it will be me. Everyone just thought of death."

Silent wasteland

Ukrainians mark a Holodomor Remembrance Day every year on the fourth Saturday of November.

Some historians, like Yale University's Timothy Snyder, who has done extensive research in Ukraine, place the number of dead at roughly 3.3 million. Others say the number was much higher.

Whatever the actual figure, it is a trauma that has left a deep and lasting wound among this nation of 45 million.

Entire villages were wiped out, and in some regions the death rate reached one-third. The Ukrainian countryside, home of the "black earth", some of the most fertile land in the world, was reduced to a silent wasteland.

Cities and roads were littered with the corpses of those who left their villages in search of food, but perished along the way. There were widespread reports of cannibalism.

Ms Karpenko says that when school resumed the following autumn, two thirds of the seats were empty.



But the pain of the Holodomor comes not only from the unfathomable number of dead. Many people believe the causes were man-made and intentional. A genocide.

They say that Joseph Stalin wanted to starve into submission the rebellious Ukrainian peasantry and force them into collective farms.

The Kremlin requisitioned more grain than farmers could provide. When they resisted, brigades of Communist Party activists swept through the villages and took everything that was edible.

"The brigades took all the wheat, barley - everything - so we had nothing left," says Ms Karpenko. "Even beans that people had set aside just in case.

"The brigades crawled everywhere and took everything. People had nothing left to do but die."

Genocide row

As the hunger mounted, Soviet authorities took extra measures, such as closing off Ukraine's borders, so that peasants could not travel abroad and obtain food. This amounted to a death sentence, experts say.

"The government did everything it could to prevent peasants from entering other regions and looking for bread," says Oleksandra Monetova, from Kiev's Holodomor Memorial Museum.



"The officials' intentions were clear. To me it's a genocide. I have no doubt."

But for others, the question is still open. Russia in particular objects to the genocide label, calling it a "nationalistic interpretation" of the famine.

Kremlin officials insist that, while the Holodomor was a tragedy, it was not intentional, and other regions in the Soviet Union suffered at that time.

Kiev and Moscow have clashed over the issue in the past. But Ukraine's present leader Viktor Yanukovich echoes the Kremlin line, saying it was "incorrect and unjust" to consider the Holodomor "the genocide of a certain people".

Mr Yanukovich's government still takes care to commemorate fully the destruction that the famine wrought.

This year's Remembrance Day will feature a number of different ceremonies and prayer services, as well as the world premier of a Holodomor opera, *Red Earth Hunger*, by Virko Baley.

Mr Baley, an American composer who was born in Ukraine, supports efforts to have the Holodomor recognised internationally as genocide.

"You have to admit that it was done, if you want to have any kind of human progress," he says. "You can't wrap it up and say that it wasn't."

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