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ORIGINAL PAPER

Witnesses, Deniers and Bourgeois Troublemakers. The Holodomor and Ukrainian-Canadian Collaboration in Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch's *Winterkill* (2022)

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Abstract

The article examines Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch's *Winterkill* (2022), a recent Holodomor middle-grade historical novel issued by Scholastic, and showcases that Skrypuch explores the implicated position of North Americans – especially Soviet collaborators and journalists – in the context of the famine and Stalin's collectivization. Most notably, *Winterkill* brings attention to the actions of Rhea Clyman, a Jewish-Canadian journalist who wrote factual articles about the situation in the Soviet Union but until the mid-2010s was largely forgotten. In the first part of the article, the author briefly introduces the historical background and points to the recent increase of Holodomor-themed Anglophone books. Then, close reading *Winterkill*, they argue that many characters in the novel, including the ones based on Clyman and Alice, a Ukrainian Canadian girl she met in Kharkiv in 1932, emerge as what Michael Rothberg has called "implicated subjects." The article demonstrates that at first the foreigners in the novel are enchanted with Stalinism, accept its benefits, and their actions – directly and indirectly – contribute to the destruction of the Ukrainian countryside. *Winterkill* showcases both the importance of recognizing one's implication *and* sharing the testimony of the Holodomor witnesses, hence keeping the memory of the famine and its victims alive.

Keywords Holodomor · Canada · Ukraine · Historical fiction · Memory · Genocide · Implication · Famine

Stalin was building Socialism in one country, and peasant children are eating grass outside the doors of his Socialist cities. After this we understood why the village children always sprang up with stones to hurl at us as we passed. It was their revenge at something that could move faster than those spindly legs could carry them. (Clyman 1933b, p. 36)

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The current socio-political situation in Ukraine has brought international attention to the country's present and past, subsequently leading to the appearance of various books in English, including historical novels. By showcasing Ukraine's complex relationships with its neighbors, especially Russia, the authors of such texts offer modern readers greater historical context needed to understand that Vladimir Putin's attitude towards Ukraine echoes that of another dictator, Joseph Stalin. The actions of the latter contributed to the deaths of at least 3.9 million Ukrainians during the Great Famine of 1932–1933, known as the Holodomor – the word comes from Ukrainian "морити голодом," that is "to kill by starvation." While the USSR tried to cover up the failure of collectivization during the first Five-Year-Plan and the occurrence of the famine, both were reported in the global press, appearing on the frontpages of newspapers in the USA, Canada, Britain, Germany, Poland, and other countries. Notwithstanding the evidence and the first-hand testimonies shared by journalists like Rhea Clyman, who was deported from the Soviet Union as a "Bourgeois Troublemaker," and Gareth Jones, who was banned from reentering the country, many Western journalists, most notably the Pulitzer-winning Walter Duranty, denied the occurrence of the famine and reported Stalin's unprecedented success. Although for many years it remained of limited interest to most non-Ukrainians, in the last decades, the Holodomor has become a central element of Ukrainian and diasporic historical memory and, as of early 2023, has been recognized as a genocide by twenty-two countries and the European Parliament.

This article examines Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch's *Winterkill* (2022), a recent Holodomor middle-grade historical novel issued by Scholastic, and showcases that Skrypuch explores the implicated position of North Americans – especially Soviet collaborators and journalists – in the context of the famine and Stalin's collectivization. Most notably, *Winterkill* brings attention to the actions of Rhea Clyman, a Jewish-Canadian journalist who wrote factual articles about the situation in the Soviet Union but until the mid-2010s was largely forgotten. In the first part of the article, I briefly introduce the historical background and point to the recent increase of Holodomor-themed Anglophone books. Then, close reading *Winterkill*, I argue that many characters in the novel, including the ones based on Clyman and Alice, a Ukrainian Canadian girl she met in Kharkiv in 1932, emerge as what Michael Rothberg has called "implicated subjects." Rothberg uses this notion to describe individuals who take part "in injustice, but in indirect ways" and "accept the benefits of evil," even when they do it unconsciously (2019, p. 20). I demonstrate that at first the foreigners in the novel are enchanted with Stalinism, accept its benefits, and their actions – directly and indirectly – contribute to the destruction of the Ukrainian countryside. *Winterkill* showcases both the importance of recognizing one's implication *and* sharing the testimony of the Holodomor witnesses, hence keeping the memory of the famine and its victims alive. Notably, the fact that Skrypuch intertwines fiction with the historical characters of Rhea Clyman and Alice, helps her to highlight the links between Ukraine and the North American diaspora and make the story more approachable to young readers with limited knowledge of Ukraine.

The Holodomor

The Great Famine is currently considered "a traumatic event whose collective memory has substantially informed post-Independence-era articulations of Ukrainian national identity" (Ulanowicz 2017, p. 91). Although the Holodomor is officially recognized as a genocide by Ukraine and many other states, Russia denies its occurrence. The Russian mnemonic discourse echoes the official Soviet narrative of erasure: talking about the famine, commemorating its victims, and researching it in Soviet Ukraine were not allowed. As Stanislav Kulchytsky argues, there was a "Stalinist taboo on the word famine," which was denied as early as the 1930s (Kulchytsky 2012, p. 28). Anne Applebaum observes that "some of those who survived sought to describe these terrible months, in written accounts and thousands of interviews. For others who managed to live through this period, the experience was so awful that they were later unable to recall anything about it all" (Applebaum 2017, p. 246–247). Moreover, during perestroika, the KGB misinformation campaigns in North America also refuted that the Holodomor – an artificial famine directed at Ukrainians – happened (Zhuk 2022, p. 83). Hence, despite the attempts of diasporic intellectuals, until the 1980s, the famine remained on the margins of world history.

The Holodomor was the aftermath of Stalin's collectivization and the first Five-Year Plan: "an economic programme that mandated a massive, unprecedented 20 per cent annual increase in industrial output, the adoption of the seven-day week" (Applebaum 2017, p. 89–90). Although joining the collective was supposed to be voluntary, soon, the peasants were forced to hand in their land. Collectivization was characterized by "conspiracy, hysteria, uncertainty, suspicion" and was accompanied by de-kulakization, that is, the elimination of wealthy peasants – labeled kulaks – and later all those who "refused to join the collective farm" (Applebaum 2017, p. 112, 124–125). Being called a kulak was synonymous with becoming "a traitor, an enemy and a non-citizen," as well as losing "property rights […] legal standing […] home and […] place of work" (Applebaum 2017, p. 127). More than two million kulaks were exiled to Siberia and other distant parts of the Soviet Union.

Stalin's legislations caused famine in many "grain-growing regions of the USSR," but as Anne Applebaum notes, in late 1932 the Soviet dictator "twisted the knife further in Ukraine, deliberately creating a deeper crisis […] targeted at Ukraine and Ukrainians" (Applebaum 2017, p. 193). As a consequence of requisitions of all food and unrealistic grain quotas, at least 3.9 million Ukrainian peasants starved to death, with Ukrainian scholars arguing that the number was significantly higher (Applebaum 2017, 285; cf. Yefimenko 2021; Malko 2021; Stasyuk 2019). Moreover, f Ukrainian life expectancy dropped drastically, and child mortality was extremely high. Calculating the actual number of casualties of the Holodomor is difficult because death certificates and the 1937 Soviet population census were falsified to cover up the actual scale of the famine (cf. Bertelsen 2022, pp. 203–240). While Ukrainian peasants starved to death, Soviet officials and Westerners stationed in Ukraine had access to various goods at Torgsin shops which did not accept the Soviet currency. Moreover, the USSR continued exporting goods abroad, including "eggs, poultry, apples, nuts, honey, jam, canned fish, canned vegetables and canned meat, food that could have helped to feed Ukraine" (Applebaum 2017, p. 196).

Although the Soviet mnemonic discourse was that of forced erasure, the famine never disappeared from the Ukrainian collective memory, especially in communities that fell victim to it and in the diaspora (Ulanowicz 2017, pp. 95–96). Undeniably, North American Ukrainians contributed to the growth of the consciousness of the famine among Western and Soviet historians, which resulted in the publication of numerous studies (Kulchytsky 2012, p. 27). However, with limited access to documents and statistics, for many years, the diasporic claims about the scale of the Holodomor were dismissed as exaggerated by pro-Soviet historians. Undoubtedly, the opening of archives, the subsequent appearance of scholarly publications in various languages (cf. Conquest 1986; Kulchytsky 2012, pp. 26–35; Marples 2007, p. 35–78), as well as the appearance of bestselling mainstream publications about the famine by scholars like the Pulitzer-winning Anne Applebaum (2017) and Timothy Snyder (2005, 2010) contributed to the growth in the global awareness of the 1932–1933 famine. The Holodomor remains a controversial topic among historians who argue over the actual number of casualties and whether the famine should be considered a genocide.

Winterkill and the Holodomor in Anglophone Literature

The change in the legal status of the famine in North America contributed to the appearance of Anglophone books about it. With its growing visibility, the number of books about the Holodomor in the last two decades, including Anglophone children's historical fiction, increased. Notably, the first Anglophone texts about the famine, published before it was recognized as a genocide in North America, sparked controversy. Skrypuch, a Ukrainian Canadian author of more than twenty bestselling books, including the critically acclaimed *Making Bombs for Hitler* (2012) and *Dance of the Banished* (2014), received death threats after the publication of *Enough*, a picturebook illustrated by Michael Martchenko (2000) and a short story titled "The Rings" (2006). The threats became less frequent only after Canada officially recognized the Holodomor as a genocide (Skrypuch 2022, p. 278). Although *Enough* and "The Rings" have not been published in Ukraine, President Viktor Yushchenko honored Skrypuch with the Order of Princess Olha, which is "the highest award given to foreign citizens" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 278).

Except for *Enough*, until recently most texts in English about the famine were issued independently or by minor publishers (Świetlicki 2023, pp. 133–167). However, the marginal status of the Holodomor in North American literature started to change with the growing interest in Ukraine and its history. Notably, the first Anglophone graphic novel about the Holodomor, *Five Stalks of Grain*, written by Adrian Lysenko and illustrated by Ivanka Theodosia Galadza, was published in late 2022. Erin Litteken's acclaimed *The Memory Keeper of Kyiv* (2022), a romance novel set during the famine, has already been translated into more than a dozen languages. Moreover, Skrypuch's latest novel *Winterkill* (2022) was published by Scholastic in the USA and Canada in various formats and received an enthusiastic review in *The New York Times* - reviewed with another mainstream children's book about the Holodomor, Katherine Marsh's *The Lost Year: A Survival Story of the Ukrai-*

nian Famine (2023). While all of the books discuss the Holodomor and point to the links between Ukraine and North America, it is Skrypuch's middle-grade novel which offers a more nuanced and thought-provoking account of the famine and the implicated position of foreigners living in the USSR. Furthermore, *Winterkill* demonstrates that despite the widespread belief that until recently Westerners were not informed about the famine in Ukraine, the truth was different. Thus, the focus on showcasing the presence of implicated foreign workers and journalists in the Soviet Union is the most significant difference between Skrypuch's novel and other texts about the Holodomor.

Winterkill is dedicated to the memory of Rhea Clyman, the aforementioned Jewish-Canadian journalist who for four years was a Moscow correspondent for *The London Daily Express* and *The Toronto Evening Telegram*. Before becoming a serious journalist, Clymanworked as an assistant of Walter Duranty, which helped her learn Russian. Although, at first, she was "sympathetic to the revolutionary society that Bolsheviks were promising to create as Stalin embarked on the First Five-Year Plan," she gradually grew disappointed with communism and Duranty's reporting (Balan 2014, p. 2). Thus, Clyman published a series of articles questioning the success of Stalin's policies. Moreover, her writing contained "a strong feminist perspective" and pointed to the difficult situation of working women in the USSR (Balan 2014, p. 3). Clyman also went on a car tour around the Soviet Union with two socialites from Atlanta which gave her the opportunity to witness the Holodomor. In late 1932, during the journey, Clyman was expelled from the Soviet Union for writing unfavorably about the USSR and accused of being a "Bourgeois Troublemaker" (Balan 2014, p. 1). Her expulsion became "a major international news story," and after coming back to Canada, Clyman published twenty-one frontpage pieces about the Holodomor. , Yet, until the mid-2010s, she remained a largely forgotten figure, and her death in 1981 was not even reported in the news (Balan 2014, p. 1).

Notably, *Winterkill* is loosely based on a scene from Clyman's article published in *The Toronto Evening Telegram.* The front-page piece from May 15, 1933, contains a reference to the journalist's meeting with a starving Ukrainian Canadian girl named Alice Mertzka, who "had come begging to [Clyman's] hotel for food" (Clyman 1933a, p. 1). The girl "had lived in New Toronto for nine years[,] her father worked for the Massey Harris Company," but three years before the encounter with Clyman, Alice Mertzka and her father moved to the USSR after he lost his job because of the Great Depression and was offered a position "at the tractor plant in Kharkov [sic]" (Clyman 1933a, p. 1). Using Alice and Rhea as characters in *Winterkill* provided Skrypuch with the opportunity to stay historically accurate while introducing a topic that most readers may not be familiar with *and* making it more approachable due to the focus on the links between Ukraine and North America.

Set in the Kharkiv[1] region between 1930 and 1932, *Winterkill* is focalized by a twelve-year-old Ukrainian boy named Nyl, who is the son of a windmill owner. In the summer of 1930, Nyl meets Alice White, who, together with her father George, comes to Ukraine to help local farmers with Stalin's Five-Year-Plan. Although Alice

[1] Kharkiv is the second largest city in Ukraine. Located in the east of the country, between 1919 and 1934 it was the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

initially believes in the Stalinist propaganda, similar to Clyman, throughout the book, she becomes increasingly disenchanted with her life in Soviet Ukraine. Nyl and Alice meet again when George White invites the local farmers to move to the city and help build the Kharkiv Tractor Plant. With his younger brother Slavko, Nyl decides to support their struggling family by escaping to the city. After the boys return, their starving community is destroyed, their sister joins the collective, and their parents are killed. Consequently, the boys return to Kharkiv. While Slavko decides to stay in the city and wait until the Tractor Plant starts working, Nyl is reunited with Alice, whose father is arrested for taking pictures of starving Ukrainians. Together Nyl and Alice try not to die of starvation in the inner city, where they eat garbage and beg. There they meet Rhea, a character inspired by Clyman, who encourages Alice and Nyl to escape to nearby Russia, where there is no famine. As Skrypuch admits in the novel's author's note, the children's last journey, during which they see numerous corpses, "is inspired by Welsh journalist Gareth Jones's trip a few months later, in reverse" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 276). Jones was the first Western journalist who "undertook a forbidden and dangerous journey on foot through Soviet Ukraine" and wrote about the artificial character of the famine in a series of twenty-one articles published between March 31 and April 20, 1933. "His direct eyewitness testimonies, which are written in straightforward reporting, revealed to the world the scale and atrocity of Stalin's Soviet regime's mass starvation of Ukrainian citizens" ("Gareth Jones"; cf. Applebaum 2017, p. 279). The novel ends with Alice returning to Canada and sending Nyl a letter suggesting that the pictures of starving Ukrainians will be published in Canadian press; thus, the world will learn about the famine.

The War of Tractors and Horses: Ukrainian Countryside, Soviet Plants, and American Tractors

Like other Canadian historical novels set in Ukraine in the early 1930s – for example, Gabriele Goldstone's *The Kulak Daughter*/*Red Stone* (2009/2014) and Valentina Gal's *Philipovna: Daughter of Sorrow* (2019) – *Winterkill*'s first chapters showcase the Ukrainian countryside's gradual destruction during collectivization and dekulakization. Praying and celebrating religious holidays are prohibited, and so are funerals and christenings. Thus, the Soviet officials demolish the local church and kill the priest. Skrypuch demonstrates that the devastation of the countryside was connected to the deliberate destruction of all traces of Ukrainian cultural distinctiveness. As Nyl observes, their "way of life was being erased" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 38). This is best expressed when the Soviets smash a bowl of pysanky, decorated Easter eggs, which are among the best recognizable symbol of Ukraine, and burn the "local variations of old folk songs" collected by Nyl's aunt and uncle, including "love songs, laments, and kolysankas, but also one jaunty tune that some people thought made fun of Stalin" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 35).

Winterkill addresses how Soviet propaganda contributed to the destruction of family ties. Yulia, Nyl's younger sister, betrays her family by joining the Young Pioneers. The girl tells them: "You are all traitors. I am bound by oath to report you when you commit treason […] Please know that I love you, but I love Stalin too" (Skrypuch

2022, p. 128). Yulia informs the Soviet official about where her parents hide the grain, which later leads to their death. Notably, Yulia's transformation starts at the novel's beginning when she gets a pin of Lenin from Alice. The Ukrainian Canadian girl "expertly tied the devil's noose around [Nyl's] sister's neck, then fastened the pin to the left side of her blouse. Yulia looked like she was about to burst with pride" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 6). While Nyl's sister gradually starts embracing the Soviet ideology, Alice, an outsider who comes from Canada and ties the symbolical "devil's noose" around Yulia's neck, grows disenchanted with the system and eventually recognizes her own responsibility role in the destruction of Nyl's community.

Winterkill highlights the implicated position of North Americans in the contexts of Stalin's collectivization and the Holodomor. In the novel, Skrypuch points to the role foreigners, mostly Americans and Canadians, played in implementing Stalin's policies. Moreover, she demonstrates that many people outside the Soviet Union ignored or dismissed the famine in distant Ukraine. Even after seeing evidence in the form of testimonies by journalists like Jones and Clyman, who tried to bring the Holodomor to the public consciousness, the majority of North Americans believed in propaganda spread by more famous correspondents like Duranty. Durany, the head of the Moscow bureau of *The New York Time*s who openly praised Joseph Stalin, attacked and discredited Jones and denied the occurrence of any famine. While Duranty spread misinformation in his publications, in private conversations, he admitted that millions of people starved to death in Ukraine. As Rothberg argues, "most people deny" or "look away from" both "extreme and everyday forms" of evil (Rothberg 2019, p. 20). However, all citizens are implicated in the policies of their governments (Rothberg 2019, p. 19)[2].

Initially, North American characters in *Winterkill*, like Alice and her father George White do not recognize this implication of collaboration with Stalin. As he tells Nyl's father: "Don't you understand that I'm trying to help you?" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 8). Indeed, helping to build a new communist state was the aim of many foreigners who came to the Ukrainian countryside from Russia and the West. As Applebaum notes, most of these outsiders "were unpopular not just because they seemed 'foreign,' but because their policy was unpopular" (Applebaum 2017, p. 120). Unlike the Ukrainian peasants, in *Winterkill*, these foreigners do not understand the needs of the farmers and farm animals and treat them as "just cogs in a machine for producing grain" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 18).

Tractors and the Kharkiv Tractor Plant in *Winterkill* represent the falsehood of the Soviet propaganda and the implicated position of North Americans. Although efficient collective farms and modern tractors are to replace individual farms and horses, it quickly turns out that the narrative of success and progress is a lie. When the first tractor is brought to Nyl's village, the Russian Comrade Tupolev says: "No other farmers in the world have tractors. Only Soviet farmers have tractors […] The Soviet Union is the only country in the world that manufactures modern farm equipment like this tractor. Our modern equipment will make it possible to transform small farms into food factories. There will be more grain for everyone" (Skrypuch 2022, p.

[2] Notably, the current "war fatigue" connected to the war in Ukraine further shows how easy it is to ignore the occurrence of a genocide (cf. Talant 2022).

20–21). However, as the protagonist instantly notices, this statement is a lie because the "Soviet" tractor was produced in the USA and has a label in English: "I had seen similar script on the packages Roman got from America" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 21). This provokes the boy to ask: "Why would a tractor made in the Soviet Union have a label in English on it? […] Did he think that anyone in this crowd would believe a Soviet tractor would be labeled with English letters? Why was he lying?" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 20–21). Soon, it turns out that there are no more tractors, and after the horses are taken from the farmers, they have to plow manually. When later some other tractors arrive, they "still had words in English stamped on them" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 72). Although some Ukrainians, like Nyl's classmate Fedir, are hopeful, saying, "We'll be making our own soon […] These American ones are good though. Stronger and more versatile than horses or oxen" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 72), no Soviet tractors come to their village that summer and the American ones break.

Skrypuch shows that despite the atrocities committed by Stalin in Ukraine and other Soviet Republics, Western countries continued trading with the USSR. Moreover, in *Winterkill*, it is Americans and Canadians who build, and later operate, the Kharkiv Tractor Plant in the southeast of the city. Unlike the starving Ukrainians, the foreign workers are paid and provided with accommodation and food. The managers consist of "mostly Americans" who "don't care who [the Ukrainian children] are" so they let them work (Skrypuch 2022, p. 107). One of them, Comrade Campbell, who speaks "stilted Ukrainian," tells Nyl that the plant is "just a shell" and no tractors will be produced "for another year" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 111, 116). The plant is "like a fortress, completely enclosed, with the only entry through a couple of guarded gates" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 117). Nevertheless, the Soviets organize "a ceremony with foreigners, journalists, and politicians right at the Tractorgavod" to celebrate the success of Stalin's Five-Year-Plan, which will be shared with the world (Skrypuch 2022, p. 116). Comrade Campbell, who "can hardly wait to get back to [his] own family in America," apologizes to Nyl and gives him "a roll of paper rubles," which seems like alms (Skrypuch 2022, p. 117–118). This gesture suggests that the sympathetic man is aware of the role he has played in spreading Stalin's propaganda. Although the money Campbell gives to Nyl before returning to America does not change the boy's situation, it helps *his* guilty consciousness.

The tractor plant in Skrypuch's novel symbolizes the Soviet Union as an empty shell only pretending what it claims to be. Notably, the actual plant built by Stalin operated until early 2022, when it was destroyed by Russians led by a different dictator, Vladimir Putin. Comrade Campbell is right, because initially the factory does not produce tractors, yet it remains open, employing "people from the city, or foreigners" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 164). When Nyl returns to Kharkiv, the local children call the tractor plant "the tractor lie instead of the tractor works" as "here, the tractors don't work" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 164). The foreigners who work at the plant and live in the new buildings surrounding it pay starving Ukrainian children "with food scraps" like moldy bread for doing tasks such as the laundry (Skrypuch 2022, p. 171)[3]. Skrypuch demonstrates that starvation also hit Kharkiv, as even the regular workers "could still

[3] In an article issued in *The Toronto Evening Telegram* Clyman wrote that in Soviet Ukraine, "peasant children [were] eating grass outside the doors of [Stalin's] Socialist cities" (1933a, p. 36).

starve to death" because they "weren't paid enough to buy much food" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 175). However, the foreign specialists were not among the starving and can also shop in the Torgsin shops, which carry luxurious goods; for example, candy with "a sketch of a well-fed comrade navigating a tractor through a lush field of wheat," or dine at a fancy restaurant, which "delicious trash" saves Nyl and Alice from starving (Skrypuch 2022, p. 206, 235). These people, as Nyl suggests, "were living in a fantasy world about what Stalin was up to" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 206). This fantasy was strengthened by the propaganda which covered up the Holodomor. However, the pro-Soviet Western specialists are not merely oblivious to the sufferings of the people they use as personal servants but emerge as implicated subjects directly benefitting from the oppression.

From Implicated Subjects to Witnesses

The evolution from a denier of the famine to a witness trying to spread awareness is best represented by the character of Alice. It is no accident that Skrypuch changed the girl's name to *White*, in the novel introduced as the English equivalent of the Ukrainian name Bialek. The surname of Nyl is Chorny, Ukrainian for *black*. Initially, as reflected by their names, Alice and Nyl appear to be contradictory characters. However, they eventually turn out to have a lot in common. When Alice and her father are first introduced in *Winterkill* as "company, all the way from Canada," Nyl assumes they are foreigners, similar to the Russian officials who will "t[ell him] how to live" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 2–4). Soon Nyl realizes that the Canadians are *Ukrainian* Canadians who, despite wearing visibly different, American clothes and being members of the party, "[speak] perfect Ukrainian, but with an odd accent" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 4). This provokes the protagonist to think, "It made no sense that they had come here. Living in America was the ultimate dream, yet they left it to come back here to help Stalin?" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 4). This question is one of a few references to the Great Depression, a historical period most North American readers may be familiar with.

Before escaping from the famine to Russia, Nyl meets Alice three times. During their first encounter, the girl emerges as a person enchanted with Stalin and his Five-Year-Plan, whom Nyl considers an outsider: "Her attitude was typical of all the pushy shock workers— those Russians sent from Moscow," thinks the protagonist (Skrypuch 2022, p. 7). Unlike them, however, Alice speaks Ukrainian, believing that "Russian feels funny on [her] tongue" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 10). Alice, who wears a Young Pioneer uniform, counts all of the possessions of Nyl's family and other villagers, including all grain supplies and decorative pysanky. Interestingly, Alice and her father replace the religious altar at Nyl's house with a picture of Stalin and "a miniature toy tractor," which makes Nyl's mother believe that the Canadian girl, "was trying to do [them] a favor so [they] wouldn't get in trouble" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 39). However, despite the singular good deed, the lists made by Alice contribute to the death of Nyl's uncle, the local priest, the loss of the folk songs collected by his family, and the destruction of the valued pysanky.

When Alice and Nyl meet again in the summer of 1930, the girl does not want to recognize her implication. The boy confronts her: "It was you who made the inven-

tory list […] And that killed my uncle" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 95). Instead of an apology, "[h]er eyes flashed with anger," and Alice says: "How is that my fault? […] All I did was note down what each household owned. It was up to the local authorities to decide what was fair" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 95). Moreover, the girl once again shows her fascination with Stalin when she says: "Everyone's suffering with Stalin's five-year plan, but our sacrifices in the end will all be worth it" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 95). Only after having witnessed the atrocities committed by the Soviets and herself suffering from starvation, does Alice realize that what she believed in was a lie.

Eventually, Alice apologizes to Nyl, but when she does, she compares her experience of moving to the USSR from Canada to the loss of his family: "our whole life has been turned upside down" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 98). While at first, Alice emerges blindfolded by Soviet ideology, she misses her former life in Canada: "I know all about lives being turned upside down […] It's been an adjustment for me, coming here, all the way from Canada" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 98). Remarkably, Alice equivalences the deaths of Ukrainians and the destruction of the countryside to her own predicament: "I left behind Gramma, and my best friend Emily, and my swing hanging from the oak tree behind our house. Now instead of going to a show with Emily or helping Gramma in her hair salon, I live in a cramped rooming house in Kharkiv, and we march and make lists" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 98). Later, Alice tells Nyl more about her grandmother, who "misses [her] terribly" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 182). Notably, this simple comment resonates with Nyl, who thinks: "I had been so focused on my own troubles that I hadn't bothered to think of all the sacrifices that Alice had made. She and her father had come here with good intentions but they were duped into helping with Stalin's murderous plans" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 181). Indeed, Skrypuch explains that some Ukrainian Canadians struggling with unemployment during the Great Depression believed in the propaganda of success and the possibility of returning to Ukraine. As Alice says, the prospect of "Papa getting a job and [them] helping Stalin build a world where everyone is equal" seemed like the perfect opportunity (Skrypuch 2022, p. 98). After talking with Nyl, the girl admits that she no longer thinks that coming to the Soviet Union was a good idea. Notably, this makes Nyl think, "how ironic it was that she and her father had come here in the hopes of a better life, yet my family needed to leave here for the exact same reason" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 99).

During their subsequent meeting in Kharkiv in the spring of 1932, Alice seems to be more aware of the privilege of living in Canada, a country which is "[n]ot perfect […] but at least the government isn't stealing food from starving people" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 183). She is not, however, aware of her own implication and the consequences the collaboration with the Soviets had on the destruction of the Ukrainian countryside. Nevertheless, throughout the novel, Alice begins to acknowledge the importance of her actions and wants to reconcile with Nyl – and symbolically with Ukraine in general – by helping the boy escape, sharing with the world the photographs of the starving people her father took, and bearing witness to the victims of the Holodomor.

Skrypuch suggests that reconciliation is only possible when both parties, represented by Alice and Nyl, accept and acknowledge their own *and* each other's position. When they meet for the third time, Nyl confronts Alice saying: "I wanted to let you know that all the things you and your father told us turned out to be lies […]

many in our village have been killed, starved to death, or deported. He promised we'd be able to grow more grain. That's the biggest lie of all. […] We've lost everything because of Stalin's useful fools. My parents are dead, Yulia betrayed us, and now we have no place to live" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 177). Alice replies that they "were only doing what [they] thought was right" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 177). However, their good intentions do not change the outcome of the situation and their implication. Interestingly, Nyl once again does not condemn Alice but understands that "[s]he and her father had been tricked into helping Stalin. They weren't bad people, just mistaken" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 177). What the boy expects, though, is the self-recognition of the role the Whites played in the implementation of Stalin's deadly policies. This time Alice instantly apologizes but once again compares Nyl's experiences to her own, "I'm sorry […] We should never have come here. They lied to us as well" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 177).

Alice changes from a denier and a *passive* implicated subject into a witness and a *conscious* implicated subject when she decides to do something to help starving Ukrainians by bringing the attention of North Americans to the famine. Alice's father secretly takes pictures to prove that "Stalin does not value the life of his people. The regular factory workers are being starved and worked to death while foreigners like us are given better food and more of it to bribe us into keeping quiet" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 183). George White is arrested, and Alice becomes the bearer of the pictures *and* the memory of the Holodomor. Notably, here Skrypuch suggests that White and his daughter make a sacrifice to symbolically repent for their implication: "All along, we knew the risk we were taking, but Papa and I both wanted to do the right thing" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 200–201). Interestingly, Alice gives Nyl a picture her father took of his family: "It had been taken on that day Alice and her papa had arrived in Felivka in the Packard. Mama, Tato, Slavko, Yulia, me, Auntie Pawlina, and Tanya, all lined up in front of our house and staring at the camera. So much had happened since this photograph was taken" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 219). This is of great significance, as it further points to the importance of the diaspora in keeping alive the memory of the victims of the Holodomor alive.

Alice seems to believe in the power of visual evidence and points to the Western governments' collaboration with Stalin: "I need to get the pictures out […] To the newspapers in America. Maybe if people saw with their own eyes what was happening here, there would be fewer useful fools like me and Papa coming all the way here to help Stalin. And if governments stopped buying Stalin's wheat, maybe he'd stop stealing it from people like you" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 201). By sharing the photographs with the world, Alice wants to "make it up to" Nyl and his destroyed community (Skrypuch 2022, p. 207). At first, Nyl is hesitant if the world is going to care about the fate of Ukrainians. However, when he sees the pictures and realizes that "the suffering in black and white made it all the more real," he agrees with Alice that "People won't ignore these photographs. They're proof of what Stalin's doing to his own people" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 219). This can only be accomplished when the children collaborate and support each other while trying to survive on the streets of Kharkiv dressed up as Young Pioneers and using documents forged by Alice's father.

What Alice and Nyl are trying to do is connected to keeping the memory of the future victims alive, not helping the starving people. After all, as Alice says, they need

"to change the future instead of sitting around and complaining about what already happened" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 207). One of these things is ensuring Alice returns to Canada, where she belongs and, unlike Nyl, has a home. Eventually, Alice and the pictures end up in Canada, where they provoke the interest of the local papers. While Nyl "[doesn't] want to be just a cog in Stalin's evil machine" and "[wants] to live in a world where people were equal no matter who their parents were or where they were born," a description which fits that of Alice's Canada, he stays in the Soviet Union (Skrypuch 2022, p. 189).

Soviet Propaganda and Western Journalists

In one of Clyman's articles published after her deportation from the USSR, the journalist writes that she asked "a high Soviet official in Moscow" about the real reason behind her arrest and, in response, she heard: "Truth—does it matter? Is it constructive?"(Clyman 1933a, p. 1). *Winterkill* echoes this approach when Alice and Nyl meet a Soviet official who tells them that the Soviet Union is "paradise for the common man" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 196–197). Moreover, the novel showcases how the Soviets refuted the famine and used Western journalists to spread propaganda and misinformation, positioning the country as paradise. While Duranty, the influential *The New York Times* correspondent, denied the occurrence of the famine in his widely-circulated texts, others, like Clyman and Jones, attempted to spread awareness of starvation in Soviet Ukraine. Their voices, however, were overtaken by that of the Pulitzer-winning Duranty. As Alice's father tells the girl and Nyl in *Winterkill*, "Foreign journalists are given all sorts of riches as bribery to write lies about Stalin's five-year plan" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 184).

Notably, denial suited the official and unofficial policies of many foreign governments which were afraid of going against Stalin. For example, the British refused to help starving Ukrainians and "actively discouraged several independent efforts to get food to the starving in 1933" (Applebaum 2017, p. 312). Wanting to maintain a good diplomatic relationship and continue trade with the Soviet Union, Western governments chose to look back and consider the rumors of the famine as overstated (Shkandrij 2019, p. 56). Despite organizing a man-made famine and killing millions of people, in 1934 the USSR was admitted to the League of Nations. During the meeting in Geneva, most countries voted for its acceptance – including Canada (Cipko 2018 loc. 92).

Before Skrypuch introduces the character of Rhea, a Canadian journalist based on Rhea Clyman, she demonstrates how the Soviet officials created Potemkin villages in Ukraine to misinform visiting American journalists and prevent them from seeing the scale of the famine in the countryside. Nyl and Alice are kidnapped by the officials cleaning Kharkiv before the arrival of the foreign journalists by "capturing all the homeless kids and dumping them outside the city" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 229–230). The protagonists are among just a few who manage to survive and the following day return to the market. The children are shocked seeing that instead of the long bread lines and practically empty stores, the officials install "dozens of colorful vendor stalls" selling products unavailable for the starving Ukrainians (Skrypuch 2022, p.

231). Notably, some of the food is wooden, for example bread, as "[t]here are just enough real ones in case the foreigners decide to buy them" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 234). The new "vendors" are Russian dancers who do not speak Ukrainian, "hop[ing] that these visitors don't know the difference" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 232). Alice and Nyl hear them saying that they got paid to come and perform for three Americans. They are wearing traditional Ukrainian outfits and look "like a postcard version of what village dancers really looked like" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 232). Moreover, instead of playing bandura, a typical Ukrainian instrument, the "vendors" carry Russian balalaikas, which, as Nyl notes, "no self- respecting Ukrainian musician would ever play" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 232).

In her portrayal of Soviet propaganda tactics, Skrypuch points to the naïveté and benightedness of the visitors. When the guests arrive, they are greeted with the sound of "a Russian folk tune" and see well-fed "Ukrainians" dancing (Skrypuch 2022, p. 234). Delighted with the performance, one of the tourists says: "she's so excited to witness how native Ukrainians spend their days and is particularly pleased that they happened to be here when the natives broke out in spontaneous dance" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 234). Nyl, seeing the propaganda performance and the cluelessness of the Americans, who do not recognize the differences between Ukrainian and Russian culture, tells Alice: "They'll go back to America with their 'authentic' pictures of what it's like here. There's no starvation or repression. I bet there are performances like that happening all over the countryside" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 235). His words echo the articles in Western press which denied the occurrence of the famine, especially those published by Duranty.

However, soon Alice and Nyl realize that not all foreign visitors are so easily fooled. They meet Rhea right after encountering the American tourists visiting the Potemkin village. She is driving an automobile with two other women, and after hearing Rhea speaking English, Alice instantly identifies her accent as Canadian. While at first Nyl thinks that probably "Stalinists put on some plays for her," Alice eavesdrops and learns that Rhea is not connected to the governments and interviews regular people (Skrypuch 2022, p. 237–238). Unlike the oblivious American tourists visiting the Soviet Union for staged propaganda trips, Rhea lived in the USSR for a few years and is aware of the famine. Although the journalist does not understand Ukrainian, she speaks Russian, which makes it possible for her to talk with Alice *and* Nyl, who had to learn the language after the beginning of Stalin's collectivization.

When Rhea meets the children at the hotel for American tourists, she admits her own implication: "I was idealistic just like you when I first came here […] It's been a shock to find out the truth" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 239). Initially, Alice and Nyl see her as a person who could help them escape from the Soviet Union and share the pictures taken by Alice's father. Although they want to leave with Rhea, she tells the protagonists that her trip cannot be stopped as it is *her* responsibility to witness what is happening and inform the world about Stalin's atrocities: "It's dangerous but important that I personally take photographs and write in the newspapers about what I see with my own eyes" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 239). Witnessing the famine and spreading awareness of it seems to be Rhea's way of symbolically repenting for her previous belief in Soviet propaganda.

Using the character of Rhea, Skrypuch not only points to the links between North America and Ukraine but also highlights that the famine was a genocide directed against Ukrainians. While Rhea is based on Clyman, it is worth noting that in her publications about the famine, the journalist used vocabulary typical of the period and referred to Ukraine as a part of Russia. However, in *Winterkill*, the woman is the one who informs Alice and Nyl that there is no famine "in the Russian parts, only in the parts where Ukrainians live" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 240). She also encourages them to escape to nearby Russia and then get to the British embassy in Moscow instead of traveling to Ternopil in Western Ukraine, which at that time was part of Poland (Skrypuch 2022, p. 240). Alice and Nyl are shocked when they hear: "Stalin is collectivizing farms all over, but he's targeting Ukrainians for extinction. They're being starved to death, executed, exiled to slave labor camps in the north […] He wants Ukrainian land, but not Ukrainian culture and traditions. He wants the Soviet Union to be Russian" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 241). Rhea's words clearly suggest that the famine was Stalin's deliberate attempt to destroy Ukrainians as a nation. Although she acknowledges her own initial enchantment with communism, like Alice, Rhea eventually recognizes her implication and wants to bear witness to the victims of the famine. Moreover, she encourages the children to do the same thing, aware that her singular voice may not be enough to spread awareness: "You are also a witness […] The Soviets are destroying photographs when they find them. The more that get out, the better" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 239).

While Skrypuch does not blame the famine on all Russians, she points to their implication. *Winterkill* features sympathetic Russian characters including Yelena, the wife of Comrade Chort (Ukrainian for "devil"), who is relieved when her vile husband is killed. She is the one helps Nyl and his brother by giving them some food which "probably saved [their] lives" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 157). When Nyl and Alice eventually get to Russia, they are greeted with several acts of kindness and hear: "Starving the Ukrainians, it's crazy" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 256) or "Ukrainians are our brothers and sisters" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 262). Moreover, considering the complex Ukrainian-Jewish dynamics and the allegation that many of the party members were Jewish, it is worth mentioning that in *Winterkill* a Jewish woman helps Ukrainian children and is "arrested for assisting kulaks" (Skrypuch 2022, p. 217). Clyman, to whom the novel is dedicated, was Jewish-Canadian. Since 2014, when Jars Balan brought attention to her publications, The Ukrainian Jewish Encounter initiative has organized a number of events dedicated to the Holodomor and Clyman's legacy (Ukrainian Jewish Encounter 2017a; Ukrainian Jewish Encounter 2017b).

Conclusion

For decades the truth about the scale of the Holodomor remained repressed, yet the famine has gradually become better acknowledged outside of Ukraine. As Anastasia Ulanowicz notes, "the voices of the repressed can no longer patiently await recognition: the muted sounds of the past demand to be decoded as articulate messages to the present and the future" (Ulanowicz 2017, p. 106). The fact that a major publisher issued Skrypuch's *Winterkill* proves that the Great Famine has become a more attrac-

tive topic for Anglophone readers. In the novel, Skrypuch positions the Holodomor as an event of great importance, not only to Ukrainians. She does so by structuring the plot around Canadian historical figures and showcasing the North American presence in Soviet Ukraine in the 1930s. Although this helps Skrypuch demonstrate the links between North America and Ukraine, it also positions Western workers, governments, and journalists as implicated subjects. This is particularly important considering that, although Alice and Rhea are hopeful the world will care about the fate of starving Ukrainians, publications like those authored by Clyman did not make it happen in the early 1930s. Photographic evidence and oral testimonies in the popular press were insufficient to make Westerners interested in the Holodomor, a famine in a little-known Soviet republic. Moreover, they were overshadowed by the propaganda of success and the voices of influential deniers like Duranty. Still, the writings of Clyman offer a valuable testimony of a "bourgeois troublemaker" who first-hand witnessed Stalin's genocide against Ukrainians.

According to various news sources, in their 2022–2023 acts of terrorism, Russians have destroyed numerous food storages and stolen tons of grain from Ukrainian farmers in the occupied areas (cf. Lister and Fylyppov 2022; Borger 2022; Applebaum 2022). Moreover, Russian soldiers have killed thousands of civilians, including at least a few hundred children, since the February 24, 2022 invasion. Despite the photographic and video evidence of the atrocities committed against the population of Ukraine, Russian propaganda still refers to the war as a special military operation. Although most governments seem sympathetic towards Ukraine, some continue trading with Russia and refuse to provide the invaded country with military help. Just as in the early 1930s, they seem unaware of their implicated position. The recent words of a Russian propagandist: "The famine will start now and they will lift the sanctions and be friends with us, because they will realise that it's impossible not to be friends with us," suggest that just like 1932–1933, Russia wants the West to ignore another genocide committed against Ukrainians and "be friends" with Putin's regime (Simonyan qtd in Borger). However, in the current sociopolitical situation, it is impossible not to recognize the transnational consequences of the ongoing war.

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