CHOSEN TRAUMA OR CHOSEN AMNESIA:

THE UKRAINIAN AND KAZAKH FAMINES OF THE 1930S AND THE POLITICS OF GENOCIDE RECOGNITION

By

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Abstract

The dissolution of the Soviet Union gave rise to 15 independent republics, each grappling with the legacy of their Soviet past. This task proved particularly challenging due to geopolitical tensions and Russia's efforts to reframe the Soviet and Communist histories in these newly independent states. Among the contentious issues was the Soviet Famine of the 1930s, which significantly impacted regions including Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the North Caucasus, and areas within today's Russian Federation. Notably, the populations of Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Kazakhstan suffered profoundly, with Ukraine's 1932-33 famine, known as the Holodomor, officially recognized as a genocide both domestically and internationally. In contrast, Kazakhstan's 1930-33 famine, referred to as the Asharshylyk, has not garnered similar acknowledgment and remains unrecognized on both levels. This thesis explores the divergent recognition of these famines through the lens of genocide recognition politics, proposing that variations in political opportunity structures and the utilization of historical analogies are pivotal in facilitating recognition both domestically and internationally. Employing structured, focused comparison and process-tracing methods, this study elucidates the causal mechanisms underlying genocide recognition in Ukraine and its absence in Kazakhstan. The findings reveal that shifts in Ukraine's political opportunities precipitated the Holodomor's recognition as a genocide. Further, historical analogies, particularly those marked by Russian aggression and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have enhanced its recognition both within the country and globally. Conversely, in Kazakhstan, although the Holodomor serves as a significant historical analogy influencing the perception of the Asharshylyk, the country's limited political opportunity structure—rooted in its dependency on Russia—have led Kazakh authorities to adopt a *chosen amnesia* strategy. This approach allows for local interpretations of the famine as a genocide while avoiding this rhetoric at the international level.

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Introduction:

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, political elites across the post-Soviet space actively engaged in nation-building, utilizing various approaches. Strengthening national historical narratives has become a key strategy for promoting national consolidation. However, due to a lack of a shared historical perspective among post-Soviet nations, national histories and collective memories often become central points of political contention, both domestically and internationally.

The Soviet Famine of the early 1930s has sparked controversy and discussion among scholars, politicians, and the general public across former Soviet Republics. Although the famine inflicted tragedy across large territories in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the North Caucasus, and certain other regions within the present-day Russian Federation, the population losses in Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Kazakhstan were among the most severe. According to the most reliable estimates, the Ukrainian famine of 1932-1933, also known as the Holodomor[1], led to the deaths of approximately 2.4 to 3.9 million people (Snyder, 2011; Himka, 2013; Wolowyna, 2020). Similarly, the Kazakh famine from 1930 to 1933, known as Asharshylyk[2], claimed the lives of about 1.3 to 1.5 million individuals (Pianciola, 2004; Kindler, 2014; Cameron, 2016), accounting for a third of the total Kazakh population at the time. Furthermore, between 600,000 (Ohayon, 2013) and 1.1 million Kazakhs sought refuge in China, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Iran, and other Soviet Republics (Cameron, 2016), thereby forming diasporic communities abroad.

Given the significant losses suffered by Ukrainian and Kazakh populations, the official commemoration and national and international acknowledgment of these historical events diverge significantly. In November 2006, the Ukrainian Parliament passed legislation

[1] When translated from Ukrainian, Holodomor means 'death by hunger'.
[2] When translated from Kazakh, Asharshylyk signifies 'mass hunger' or 'famine', but certain writers also describe it as Zulmat, which translates to 'tragedy' in Kazakh.

recognizing the Holodomor as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people (Verkhovna Rada, 2006). Over the years, international recognition[3] of the Holodomor as a genocide has grown, reaching a peak in 2022 alongside Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Conversely, despite public advocacy, the Kazakh Famine, or Asharshylyk, has not received any formal acknowledgment. Moreover, Asharshylyk was not even commemorated in the first two decades following Kazakhstan's independence, with discussions over it only beginning to occur in 2012. Evgeny Finkel (2010) argues that post-communist countries in the former Soviet Union and Central Eastern Europe adopt historical policies that portray past tragic events as genocides, viewing them solely through the lens of national history. But that does not explain why Kazakhstan has not followed this path.

This study examines the politics of genocide recognition related to the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33, known as the Holodomor, and the Kazakh Famine of 1930-33, referred to as Asharshylyk. Both events are linked to Stalin's policies of collectivization and are characterized by their origins in policy decisions, significant demographic losses, and the large size of diaspora communities. However, they differ in terms of official recognition efforts both within their countries and internationally, the mobilization and lobbying efforts of their diasporas, and their geopolitical contexts. The central research question in this study is: why has the Ukrainian Famine been recognized both domestically and internationally, while the Kazakh Famine has not?

The study aims to explain the differing recognition of the Ukrainian famine as a genocide by the Ukrainian government and the absence of such recognition for the Kazakh famine by the Kazakhstani government. I argue that changes in political opportunity structures were the primary reason the Ukrainian government recognized the famine as a genocide,

[3] By recognition, I refer to state officials adopting the genocide narrative in their discussions about the Holodomor and passing solidarity resolutions that label the event as genocide. This classification uses a broad interpretation of genocide, going beyond the narrow legal definition.

whereas Kazakhstan, reliant on Russia, avoided such recognition due to its closed opportunity structure.

Using structured focused comparison and process-tracing methods, I first conduct a within-case, over-time analysis of both cases individually through a periodization strategy based on critical junctures. This is followed by a cross-case analysis to address the variation and its causes in recognition in detail. Applying the concept of *chosen trauma*, I demonstrate how the genocide interpretation of the Ukrainian famine began in the Ukrainian diaspora in North America and was later introduced to Soviet Ukraine. In independent Ukraine, shifts in opportunity structures led to the adoption of the genocide narrative, thus embracing the *chosen trauma* to establish a clear identity and distinguish between friend and foe. In this context, I also argue that the Holodomor analogy helps reinforce the enemy image of Russia as the perpetrator of past and ongoing crimes. This is especially relevant in light of Russian aggression and the full-scale invasion, which serve as critical junctures in this development.

For the Kazakh case, I argue that while the Holodomor analogy influenced the recognition of the Kazakh famine, the Kazakhstani government has not recognized it as a genocide due to its closed political opportunity structure. However, due to rising nationalistic trends and alignment with Russian rhetoric, the Kazakh government has adopted a strategy called *chosen amnesia*. This tactic involves 'remembering what to forget,' allowing for local genocide interpretations of the Kazakh famine while avoiding genocidal claims at the international level.

The study is divided into three sections. The first section examines the recognition of the Holodomor first in Soviet Ukraine and then in independent Ukraine. It aims to unpack the causes behind the mechanisms and processes that led to Holodomor's recognition. The second section investigates the commemoration of the Kazakh Famine in Kazakhstan. It aims to

answer why any discussion regarding Asharshylyk was silenced and what led to breaking this silence. The final section provides a discussion of the findings and concluding remarks.

Research Design:

Case selection:

The selection of the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33, known as the Holodomor, and the Kazakh Famine of 1930-33, is motivated by several factors. First, there is a noticeable gap in research on the politics of genocide recognition concerning the early 1930s Soviet Famines in Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan, with most existing studies focusing on memory politics rather than on the causes leading to the recognition, or lack thereof, of genocide claims. Secondly, the comparison gains importance in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has prompted a reevaluation of historical narratives connected to Russian and Soviet imperialism and colonialism, particularly for nations still economically and politically reliant on Russia. Lastly, despite the apparent similarities between the two cases, comparative studies addressing contemporary mechanisms and practices of recognition regarding these events remain scarce.

In navigating these complex historical events, this research does not aim to delve into the causes of these famines nor does it aim to assert what constitutes genocide and what does not. Instead, the focus is on exploring the dynamics around genocide recognition claims and their consequential impacts at both the state and international levels. This approach aims to shed light on the multifaceted process of genocide recognition and the various forces that influence it, offering insights not only into the specific cases of the Holodomor and Asharshylyk but also into the broader implications of genocide recognition practices.

Structured Focused Comparison and Process-tracing:

This study employs ‘structured focused comparison’ and ‘process tracing’ methods (George & Bennett, 2004). It investigates two specific cases: the recognized Ukrainian Famine Holodomor and the unrecognized Kazakh Famine Asharshylyk. The research is structured around these two cases—the former being an instance where genocide was acknowledged, and the latter where it was not. This structuring helps isolate the phenomenon of genocide recognition for detailed examination. The approach is focused, enabling detailed within-case analysis that offers deeper insights into the dynamics and mechanisms influencing genocide recognition in the first case and its absence in the second. The ultimate step involves comparing these cases to identify the underlying mechanisms and causal pathways that elucidate the politics of genocide recognition.

For within-case analysis, I use the 'process-tracing' method. This approach entails a detailed examination of how events unfold over time within a single case. It is especially effective for revealing the intermediate causal mechanisms that might influence outcomes. Process tracing also allows for an exploration of reciprocal causation, where causes and effects may influence each other, and the impact of endogeneity, where internal factors within the case may affect the variables under study. This method is adept at dissecting complex causal relationships within the historical and contextual confines of each case, providing a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play (Levy, 2008).

Semi-structured interviews:

Given the relatively unexplored terrain of genocide recognition within the specific contexts of the Ukrainian and Kazakh famines, my research incorporates an additional data collection method through semi-structured interviews. This approach targets experts in the

Soviet history surrounding these famines, as well as directors and researchers affiliated with museums in Ukraine and Kazakhstan that are dedicated to commemorating these events. The interviews, conducted in Ukrainian, Kazakh, and English, aimed to gather a wide array of insights, such as critical junctures that constituted changes in the dynamics of recognition, as well as other conducive developments in genocide recognition or the lack thereof. The rationale behind selecting such a diverse group of interviewees lies in the objective of triangulating sources, thereby enriching the research with a multifaceted perspective on the subject matter (Van Puyvelde, 2018). This strategy is particularly pertinent in light of the increased international recognition of the Holodomor following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has potentially influenced shifts in narrative framings and official stances regarding these historical tragedies.

The questions I asked include: What critical junctures can you identify in the development of academic, public, and official attention to the topic of the Holodomor/Asharshylyk? How did the dynamic change considering the fall of the Soviet Union, the independence of Ukraine and Kazakhstan, Russian aggression in 2014, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022? How did each country approach the enemy image framing, and what changed throughout? Why did the government of Ukraine recognize the Ukrainian famine as a genocide, whereas the government of Kazakhstan did not recognize the Kazakh famine as such? Additionally, I asked a representative of the Museum of Political Repression in Kazakhstan whether the Kazakh famine constitutes a genocide and, if so, why there is no official recognition.

List of the interviewed experts in the field of Holodomor and Asharshylyk studies:

Name of the interviewee	Affiliation	Research Focus	Date of the interview
Prof. Artem Kharchenko	Professor at the Kharkiv I. Kotlyarevsky National University of Arts in Ukraine	Jewish History of Eastern Europe, Genocide Studies, Holocaust Studies, Holodomor Studies	15.02.2024
Lesia Hasydzhak	Director of the Ukrainian National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide in Kyiv, Ukraine	Holodomor Studies, History of Ukraine	19.02.2024
Botagoz Nurkulova	Senior Researcher at the Museum of Victims of Political Repression in Shymkent, Kazakhstan	Asharshylyk Studies, History of Soviet Kazakhstan.	22.02.2024
Prof. Robert Kindler	Professor at Freie Universität Berlin in Germany	Stalinism in Central Asia, History of the Russian Empire, Post-Soviet Cultures of Remembrance	26.02.2024
Dr. Tatiana Zhurzhenko	Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS in Berlin, Germany	Memory Politics, Holodomor Studies, Gender and Feminism	29.02.2024

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework:

Chosen Trauma and Chosen Amnesia:

In his influential 1882 seminal work "What is a Nation?", Ernest Renan explores the foundational elements that define a nation. Renan presents the idea that a nation is more than just a political state; nation is “a soul, a spiritual principle". According to Renan, the essence of a nation is deeply embedded in the collective memory and shared experiences of its people. He argues that what truly binds a nation together is not just the history that people remember, but also the events they mutually decide to forget. This selective memory, involving both remembrance and forgetting, forms the unique spiritual fabric of a nation, distinguishing it from a mere political entity.

Vamik Volkan's concept of 'chosen trauma' (2001) helps understand the dynamics of how and why nations decide what to remember. Chosen trauma illuminates the significant role that the collective memory of a traumatic event plays in defining a group’s identity. When a large group experiences regression, it often reactivates its chosen trauma to bolster the group's threatened identity and to clearly delineate who is a friend and who is an enemy. There are also transgenerational transmissions that bolster a group's resistance to cultural assimilation of a more dominant group.

Buckley-Zistel (2006) introduces the concept of ‘chosen amnesia’ to illustrate the reverse process of Volkan's notion of chosen trauma. In her study, chosen amnesia represents a strategy for local coexistence in post-genocide Rwanda. It involves the practice of "remembering what to forget" to reconcile the tension between the Hutu and Tutsi populations. Chosen amnesia highlights the importance of remembering tragic events, with political elites or the public playing a mediating role in deliberately omitting certain aspects from the discourse for peaceful coexistence and reconciliation among conflicting groups.

Historical analogy:

The practice of drawing parallels between a past event linked to something unfamiliar and a current event viewed as similar in some respects, is referred to as a historical analogy. In political science and international relations, historical analogies are commonly categorized as either *literal* or *within-domain* analogies. An example of this would be likening the 9/11 attack to the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. In contrast, *metaphorical* or *between-domain* analogies draw comparisons across more semantically distant domains, such as comparing the 9/11 attack to a move in a chess game (Ghilani et al, 2017).

There are typically four recognized effects associated with the use of historical analogies. These include: representing the current situation, defining the roles of actors, aiding in decision-making, and persuading others. The first category, "representing the current situation," is fairly self-explanatory. Analogies such as comparing the 9/11 and Pearl Harbor attacks, or the 2004 Madrid attack to Pearl Harbor, serve to frame these incidents as war-like scenarios. The second category, "defining the role of the actors," helps to delineate group identities by specifying who belongs to the ingroup and who does not, as seen in the Crusader analogy post-9/11. The third category, "making decisions," involves using historical analogies to guide the decision-making process, thereby helping to formulate policy options and assess risks. The final category, "persuading others," relies on evoking a sense of 'historical truth' to bolster the legitimacy and feasibility of a course of action, often appealing to emotions (ibid).

Politics of Genocide Recognition:

Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish lawyer, coined the term "genocide" in his 1944 work, "Axis Rule in Occupied Europe," defining it broadly as 'the destruction of a nation or an ethnic group'. This concept was later formalized in the United Nations Genocide Convention in 1948, which provided a legal definition of 'genocide'. However, this legal definition diverged from

Lemkin's original conception. Lemkin's broader definition included not only the physical destruction of a group but also its culture, language, and identity.

Political elites often employ genocide narratives to interpret historical events. Stated reasons include domestic political pressure, historical accountability, legal and ethical obligations, symbolic and moral considerations, cultural and historical ties, strategic and geopolitical interests. As Maja Catic (2009) emphasizes, genocide claims carry significant moral and normative weight. In ethnically divided nations like Bosnia and Herzegovina, groups that have suffered mass atrocities, such as the Bosniaks, leverage these claims to make demands of other groups like the Serbs and Croats. State leaders may use genocide allegations as a strategy to counter powerful regional influences or respond to secessionist or other movements aiming to redraw national boundaries or gain independence. Secessionist groups may use genocide narratives to support their autonomy claims, portraying themselves as victims (Grodsky, 2012).

The scholarly work holds that diaspora communities are important actors, who engage in this arena by highlighting the traumatic events that led to their displacement from their 'homeland'. These communities, consisting of ethnic or religious groups, strive to preserve their identities through commemorations of the tragic events that they classify as genocides (Baser & Toivanen, 2017). A collective trauma interpreted as genocide serves as a unifying element and a mobilization tool against past aggressors, shaping hybrid diasporic identities linked to their ancestral lands. It should be emphasized that the distinguishing feature of a classical diaspora, compared to other migrant groups, is the experience of a traumatic event linked to their dispersal from their ancestral homeland, whether this homeland is real or imagined (Safran, 1991; Reis, 2004).

Martin Sökefeld (2006) in his study of Alevi and various South Asian diasporas challenges the classical conception of diaspora as merely a result of dispersion, suggesting that

the formation of a diaspora stems not just from involuntary or voluntary migration but also from a deliberate process of mobilization for a specific cause, including ‘chosen traumas’ and genocide recognition claims. In the field of diaspora studies, this practice is known as 'boundary maintenance' which refers to the act of resisting assimilation within a host country to safeguard their collective group identity (Brubaker, 2005). This is echoed in the Armenian-American community, where the collective memory of genocide provides a foundational ideological framework, with religion significantly influencing ethnic mobilization both in the homeland and among the diaspora (Paul, 2000).

Investigating the connection between the politics of genocide recognition and diasporas offers a nuanced understanding of the transnational politics of genocide recognition. This helps us to scrutinize the impact on diplomatic ties and accountability frameworks, as seen in the Armenian example, which illuminates the diplomatic interactions between Armenia and Turkey (de Waal, 2015). Furthermore, tragic events, or specifically 'chosen traumas' not only aid in mobilizing and maintaining group identities within diasporas, but also highlight how the timing of genocidal claims and the shifting dynamics of opportunity structures[4] in host nations and/or homeland are crucial. For instance, the activities and organization of the Circassian diaspora within Georgia and for the outcome on a global scale resulted in a notable victory in 2011 when Georgia officially recognized the 19th-century Circassian massacres and deportations by Tsarist Russia as a genocide. This acknowledgment was a significant win for the Circassian diaspora's efforts to uphold their identity and offered Georgia a strategic edge in its diplomatic dealings with Russia. However, Georgia's decision was influenced not solely by moral factors, but also by the changing geopolitical landscape and the strategic priorities of the Georgian state. The campaign for recognition gained considerable momentum after the

[4] According to Peter K. Eisinger (1973), the term "political opportunity structure" refers to “elements in the environment which impose certain constraints on political activity or open avenues for it.”

International Olympic Committee's 2007 decision to hold the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, a city deeply significant to the Circassians. This event provided the Circassian diaspora with an opportunity to spotlight their historical sufferings on a global stage, especially during the remembrance of their historical tragedy (Catic, 2015).

In certain cases, diaspora communities unite not only around shared identities and 'chosen traumas', but also against a common adversary, forming coalitions to advocate for genocide recognition, as seen with Armenians, Assyrians, and Kurds in their unified opposition to modern Turkey. The effectiveness of these movements largely hinges on the political environment in both the diasporas' host countries and their countries of origin, requiring a liberal setting and international political influence from one or both (Koinova, 2020).

In essence, the politics of genocide recognition is a complex interplay of historical memory, political strategy, and identity preservation. Raphael Lemkin's pioneering work laid the groundwork for understanding genocide, but it is the political utilization of this concept that drives contemporary recognition efforts. Genocide recognition claims serve as powerful tools for political elites and diaspora communities to navigate and influence domestic and international arenas. These claims are leveraged for various purposes, including addressing historical accountability, shaping national and group identities, and exerting geopolitical influence. Through their collective memory and mobilization efforts, diasporas play a crucial role in maintaining and promoting these narratives, often in opposition to more dominant groups or states. The recognition of tragic events as genocides not only underscores the enduring impact of historical traumas but also reflects the strategic considerations of states in the ever-shifting geopolitical landscape. This dynamic underscores the importance of understanding genocide recognition politics as a transnational phenomenon, deeply intertwined with issues of identity, memory, and power.

Ukraine, Chosen Trauma, Russian Aggression and Crimes Against Humanity:

The role of the Ukrainian diaspora in memorializing Holodomor:

During the 1930s, the Ukrainian North American diaspora began to discuss the early stages of the Ukrainian famine through their newspapers and magazines, depicting it as a criminal act by the Soviet government, with the accounts often taking the form of memoirs. This rhetoric extended into the 1940s and 1950s within the nascent Ukrainian national historiography, interpreting the Holodomor as part of the broader spectrum of Soviet communist atrocities, though it was not yet labeled explicitly as genocide (Nazarova, 2013).

In the 1960s, there was a notable shift when many Ukrainian intellectuals fled the communist regime to North America. Ukrainian historiography then started to focus on the narrative of the Ukrainian struggle against Russian imperialism, increasingly representing the Holodomor as a genocidal act. This interpretation presented Soviet domination as a continuation of Russian imperial efforts to annihilate the Ukrainian identity. Driven by a fear of cultural assimilation and the loss of their homeland, Ukrainian diaspora intellectuals intensified their efforts to promote this genocide narrative, reinforcing their identity based on these historical events (Kasianov, 2010). This focus also served as a way to manage the stigma associated with Ukrainian nationalism, shifting the perception of them as aggressors to victims, contrasting with previous associations of Ukrainian nationalism with pogroms (Sysyn, 2005; Himka, 2005).

It is crucial to recognize that the Holodomor's impact was less severe in Western Ukraine compared to the East, which mirrors the present regional divisions within Ukraine and divisions among diaspora groups. This division is essential for understanding the heterogeneous nature of the Ukrainian diaspora, primarily composed of individuals from Western Ukraine, who generally maintained weaker connections to the East. This division

between Western and Eastern Ukraine can be attributed to their distinct colonial legacies. Specifically, Western Ukraine was under Habsburg rule, which significantly influenced the region's cultural and religious composition. The Habsburg influence introduced more Central European perspectives, fostering a unique cultural identity shaped by the predominance of the Catholic and Greek-Catholic Ukrainian Churches. In contrast, Eastern Ukraine fell under the sway of Tsarist Russian governance, where the cultural milieu was decidedly more Eastern European and was predominantly influenced by Orthodox Christianity, which played a central role in shaping its religious and cultural expressions. The dichotomy between these regions is not merely a reflection of geographical division, but also of deep-seated historical and cultural legacies that continue to influence regional identities and socio-political dynamics in contemporary Ukraine (Szpurluk, 2001; Zhurzhenko, 2011).

Understanding the distinction is important for highlighting the role of religious institutions in preserving the Holodomor's memory in diaspora communities. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, established in New Jersey in the 1950s, became a central institution for Ukrainian Holodomor survivors coming from the East, playing a significant role in commemorating the event. The Ukrainian Orthodox Churches in the United States, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada, and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church throughout Europe, South America, and Australia were also key in memorializing the Holodomor (Sysyn, 2016). Drawing on Paul's (2000) analysis of the impact of a genocidal memory in the context of the Armenian-American diaspora, the Holodomor as a genocidal memory similarly established a unified ideological framework for the Ukrainian diaspora, where religion significantly influenced ethnic mobilization.

The transition from mere commemoration to official recognition campaigns became apparent in the 1980s, making the Holodomor a focal point incorporated into the Cold War narrative about the Soviet Union. In 1982, the Ukrainian diaspora mobilized to mark the 50th

anniversary of the Holodomor, initiating significant research and funding efforts for the production of the first documentary about the famine. As a result, the 1983 release of the "Harvest of Despair" movie drew considerable attention in the West, translating the movie into multiple languages helped spread its message globally, enhancing international awareness and understanding of the Holodomor's historical importance (Ukrainian Canadian Congress, 2011). A year later, in 1983, the Ukrainian World Congress—an organization founded in 1967 to represent the Ukrainian diaspora in the Western hemisphere—held its annual meeting. For the first time, the recognition of the Holodomor was included on the leaders' agenda (Ukrainian World Congress, 2017).

The political use of the Holodomor intensified in the 1980s, driven by advocacy from the Ukrainian diaspora. The U.S. Congress established a commission in 1985, headed by historian James Mace, to investigate the famine and the Soviet system's role in it. By 1987, the Harvard Institute of Ukrainian Studies' efforts culminated in the publication of "Harvest of Sorrow" by Robert Conquest. This pivotal historical work greatly influenced both academic and public views on the famine, solidifying the genocide narrative in the West (Sysyn, 1999; Zhurzhenko, 2011).

Breaking the Silence: Holodomor in Soviet Ukraine

Discussion of the Holodomor was heavily suppressed in Soviet Ukraine, mostly limited to private family conversations. However, mirroring the politicization of the famine in Cold War politics, the situation began to change in the late 1980s. In 1986, in response to the U.S. Congress and the Ukrainian diaspora, the Communist Party of Ukraine assigned a group of Soviet Ukrainian historians to produce studies aimed at debunking the so-called "falsifications of Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists". Granted access to previously restricted archives and other classified collections for their research, these historians ultimately concluded that the famine indeed warranted recognition. The unexpected outcome led to a significant development: the

first secretary of the Communist Party of Soviet Ukraine, Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, during the commemoration of the establishment of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, broke the silence on the Holodomor, bringing it into public discourse for the first time (Kulchytsky, 2018). Reflecting on this shift, Dr. Tatiana Zhurzhenko noted that, "Professional historians were not ready, and so there were more Soviet Ukrainian writers and journalists—essentially activists—people who acted not as academic historians but as activists. There were [civil society] organizations like Ukrainian Memorial and Russian Memorial [5]; there were associations with victims of political repression, so a kind of new emerging civil society was taking shape. People from these groups began to raise questions and write about it. And the books published by the Ukrainian diaspora were republished in Ukraine in the 1990s" (Zhurzhenko, 2024).

Given the political atmosphere during perestroika and the growing secessionist movements within the Soviet Union, bringing the Holodomor into public discussion provided activists with a fresh rallying point to advance a national independence agenda. It is important to note that efforts to raise awareness of the Holodomor were primarily led by activists rather than academic scholars, particularly in Soviet Ukraine. Serious institutional academic interest in the topic only began to increase after Ukraine gained independence. As Lesia Hasydzhak emphasized "Before Ukrainian independence, the topic of the Holodomor was a component of every rally, every public gathering—specifically during the period when the Ukrainian Memorial and the Ukrainian Helsinki Union[6] were active. These groups later formed the Ukrainian Republican Platform. Then, [in 1992], the Research Association of Ukrainian Scholars of the Holodomor was established, which later invited all local historians to join the association" (Hasydzhak, 2024).

[5] Memorial is an international human rights organization, initially founded in the mid-1980s in the Soviet Union, aimed to raise awareness of historical abuses within the Soviet system. However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, this organization transitioned into an international non-governmental organization.
[6] Civil society organizations.

From Memory Politics to Politics of Genocide Recognition:

Once Ukraine became independent, the commemoration of the famine began to take on a distinctly political dimension. President Leonid Kravchuk, who served from 1991 to 1994, issued the first decree for the official commemoration of the tragedy. This decree was accompanied by other initiatives aimed at internationalizing the memorialization of the famine, including efforts through UNESCO and various international conferences, albeit unsuccessful. His successor, Leonid Kuchma, who was president from 1994 to 2004, officially designated the last Saturday in November as the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Famines in Ukraine in 1998. This was later expanded in 2000 to become the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holodomor and Political Repression. During his presidency, multiple memorials dedicated to the victims of the 20th century famines and political repression were established across the country (Klymenko, 2016).

It is important to note that the Day of Remembrance was originally established to commemorate all the famines that occurred in Ukraine during the 20th century under communist rule. This included the Ukrainian Famine of 1921–1923, the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33—the Holodomor—and the post-World War Famine of 1946-47. In 2000, the government made a significant decision to specifically distinguish the Holodomor from other famines, emphasizing its political nature as an artificial, human-made famine. Lesia Hasydzhak explains the distinction: "The famines of the 1920s and 1940s are referred to as singular famines in Ukrainian [academic] circles. Why singular? It is because it is evident that they were naturally induced and had affected individual families in some villages and cities. In the 1920s, there was a drought that affected regions in Ukraine, and in the 1940s, it was the post-war period—a period of climate degradation, and the lack of men as a result of the war. […] Those singular famines, sometimes referred to as the Holodomor by people, should not be called the Holodomor from the perspective of history" (Hasydzhak, 2024).

Although previous presidents contributed significantly to the official recognition and commemoration of the Holodomor, a substantial transformation in memory politics occurred under the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko, who entered the office following the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine. Yushchenko's predecessor, Leonid Kuchma adopted a pragmatic approach in both domestic and international affairs, balancing pro-Russian and pro-European narratives. In contrast, Yushchenko elevated memory politics, positioning Ukraine as a post-genocidal nation with the Holodomor playing a central role in Ukrainian memory politics. In November 2006, driven by Yushchenko's initiative, the Ukrainian Parliament enacted a law recognizing the Holodomor as an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people. This included proposed amendments to the Criminal Code to prosecute the public denial of the Holodomor as genocide, though these amendments were not successfully adopted (Zhurzhenko, 2011).

After the famine was officially recognized as genocide, the campaign to promote this narrative intensified but encountered resistance both domestically and internationally. The same month that the Ukrainian Parliament discussed passing the law, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs openly condemned Ukraine's classification of the Holodomor as genocide, calling for the topic not to be politicized and emphasizing the shared nature of the tragedy experienced by Ukrainians, Russians, Kazakhs, and other affected ethnic groups. Behind this rhetoric was Moscow's aggressive stance towards the new Ukrainian leadership that emerged after the 2004 Orange Revolution, which Moscow perceived as revisionist (Kupfer & de Waal, 2014). Indeed, recognizing the Holodomor as a genocide served as a political mobilization force for the new "Orange" political elites, who faced resistance from the predominantly pro-Russian opposition. On the other hand, the pro-Russian opposition speculated that the genocide recognition could incite conflict between the 'brotherly' nations of Ukraine and Russia, and jeopardize relations with Ukraine's 'strategic' partner, Russia. In reality, however, Yushchenko

made it clear that no specific nation should be blamed for the Holodomor; rather, the perpetrator of this tragedy was and remains the Soviet regime and its leadership (Zhurzhenko, 2011).

In this context, I argue that Vamik Volkan's concept of 'chosen trauma,' is applicable to Yushchenko's memory politics and the Holodomor-genocide law. Volkan suggests that a 'chosen trauma', the Holodomor in my analysis, represents a collective mental image of a past traumatic event where a large group endured loss or faced helplessness, shame, and humiliation during a conflict with another group, specifically the Bolsheviks in this case. He further argues that over generations, the 'chosen trauma' transcends mere memory—it unifies and becomes a key marker of ethnic identity that political leaders can use to reaffirm such identity.

2014 as a Critical Juncture: Holodomor as a historical analogy

In 2010, when Viktor Yanukovych, the leader of the pro-Russian Party of Regions, became president, the political dynamics surrounding the Holodomor underwent significant changes. Although no legal steps were taken to overturn the law identifying the Holodomor as genocide, the rhetoric about the Holodomor shifted under Yanukovych's administration. Upon assuming office, he addressed the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe using Moscow's framing of the famine: he described it as a consequence of Stalin's totalitarian regime that affected not only Ukraine but also Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. Moreover, he openly criticized the recognition of the Holodomor due to its framing against one nation (Richter, 2020).

Not only did the rhetoric change, but Yanukovych also departed from the established tradition of lighting a candle at 4 pm on the fourth Saturday of November, during Holodomor Remembrance Day. Previously, starting with President Kuchma, political leaders would publicly attend the ceremony to honor the victims of the famine and political repression. Yanukovych, however, broke from this tradition by attending the commemoration privately, early in the morning, accompanied only by his small circle. This disruption of tradition led to

increased opposition against Yanukovych's government, with Holodomor remembrance becoming a unifying platform for Ukrainians nationwide. Lesia Hasydzhak, the Director of the Ukrainian National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide, observed, "The government would commemorate the Holodomor separately in the morning, but the public would gather for the commemoration due to tradition. People united not only in Kyiv but also in other regions of Ukraine. And this was an act of opposition to Yanukovych's government. [...] And in November 2013, the Day of Remembrance marked the 80th anniversary of the Holodomor, and those events also coincided with the Revolution of Dignity in Kyiv, which had already been underway for a few days. The attendance of people either to light the candle or just participate in the protest was enormous, as it represented a peak; every year before, fewer and fewer people would gather, but that day united everyone in opposition to the government" (Hasydzhak, 2024). As evident from the interview, the opposition's efforts culminated when the 80th anniversary of the Holodomor coincided with the 2013 Euromaidan protests, bringing Ukrainians together both to commemorate the victims of the Holodomor and to demonstrate against Yanukovych's regime.

Following the Revolution of Dignity in February 2014, Yanukovych fled to Russia, where he was granted asylum. Simultaneously, Moscow sent military troops to annex Crimea and launched attacks and occupations in Eastern Ukraine. In the subsequent elections in May 2014, Petro Poroshenko was elected president. Amid Russian aggression, Poroshenko started to draw a historical parallel between the Holodomor and the current conflict, portraying it as a logical continuation of Russian imperialist actions and aggression towards the Ukrainian nation (Amiot, 2024). This marked a crucial moment; initially, when the Ukrainian Parliament recognized the Holodomor as genocide, then-president Yushchenko stated that he did not blame Russia in particular but the Soviet regime and its leadership. However, Poroshenko's rhetoric shifted to identify Russia as the perpetrator responsible for the Holodomor, connecting

the Russian aggression and the Holodomor as a continuous genocide against the Ukrainian nation. Prof. Artem Kharchenko claims "When in 2006 Ukrainian parliament recognized the Holodomor as a genocide, President Yushchenko said, 'Russia is not responsible for the famine; it was all the Soviet Union, and now both Ukraine and Russia are democratic countries'—which we know was not correct. Certainly, there was a small group of people who blamed Russia for the famine, but it was on a marginal level. However, starting not from the Revolution of Dignity, but from the conflict that occurred in 2014, the rhetoric about responsibility shifted to modern Russia, marking it responsible for the crimes" (Kharchenko, 2024).

The comparison between the Holodomor and the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 struck a chord within the Ukrainian North American diaspora, sparking another wave of mobilization among them. In essence, the historical memory of the Holodomor served as a lens through which the diaspora began to interpret and understand the conflict in Ukraine as genocidal. This perspective reinforced their connection to Ukraine and motivated a renewed sense of activism and support for their homeland during its time of crisis (Nikolko, 2019).

Full-scale invasion of Ukraine: War, Genocide, and International Recognition:

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the analogy of the Holodomor has been intensified significantly, extending the genocidal narrative to the Russian full-fledged war. The number of Ukrainians who view the connection between the Holodomor as a genocide against the Ukrainian people and nation, and the genocidal nature of the Russian war, has significantly grown—especially after genocidal acts in Bucha, Izium, Mariupol, and other parts of Ukraine were revealed (see Hook, 2023). Starvation, reminiscent of tactics used during the Holodomor, has been employed by the Russian military as a tool of war and occupation. Moreover, echoing Stalin's actions, Putin has engaged in the appropriation of grain and other agricultural products from farmers in regions of Ukraine under Russian control. These stolen resources which are then exported abroad, reflect a continued pattern of exploiting Ukraine's

agricultural assets for external gain, while further terrorizing and starving the local population. Dr. Tatiana Zhurzhenko observes "In public discourse, there is a very strong connection, especially after the full-scale invasion in 2022. There were many other connections and associations when Russia occupied the south of Ukraine, stealing Ukrainian harvests and selling Ukrainian grain. They also used hunger, in a way, to buy loyalty with humanitarian aid coming from Russia. First, you cut people off from the supply from Ukraine, and then they come to you, and you give them food, thereby securing their loyalty. This is what Soviet authorities were doing in the 1930s" (Zhurzhenko, 2024).

The full-scale invasion marked the extension of the Holodomor analogy across the entire European continent. Given the significant increase in the international recognition of the Holodomor as genocide by the majority of European states, it is evident that the Holodomor analogy has resonated with European audiences. In 2022, a significant number of states and political entities, including the Czech Republic, Brazil, Romania, Ireland, Moldova, Germany, Austria, the European Parliament, and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (government in exile), formally recognized the Holodomor as genocide. This trend of recognition continued into 2023, with additional countries such as France, Bulgaria, Belgium, Iceland, the United Kingdom, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Croatia, Slovakia, the Netherlands, Italy, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe also officially acknowledging the event as genocide.

In November 2023, during the 90th anniversary of the Holodomor, President Volodymyr Zelensky thanked the aforementioned states and political entities for recognizing the Holodomor as genocide. He stated that this recognition is not a mere formality and that Russian aggression is a logical continuation of Soviet policy aimed at destroying the Ukrainian nation. Thus, recognizing the Holodomor also means that the recognizing side condemns Russian aggression (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2023).

International Recognition: Holodomor and Diaspora Coalition-Building:

One of the other intriguing developments in the 2022-2023 international recognition of the Holodomor is the range of political entities involved. Before 2022, recognizing the Holodomor as genocide was largely confined to state actors. However, from 2022, various political entities such as the European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the government-in-exile of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (CRI) also started advocating for its recognition. Formed after the Russo-Chechen wars, the CRI represents the Chechen diaspora. In 2022, the Ukrainian Parliament designated the CRI as a state temporarily occupied by Russia and officially acknowledged the genocide against Chechens perpetuated by Russia (Verkhovna Rada, 2022). In a reciprocal move for recognizing the Chechen government of Ichkeria in exile, Alla Dudaeva, the Presidium Chairman of the CRI government, formally recognized the Holodomor as genocide of the Ukrainian people (Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, 2022). For the CRI leaders, acknowledging the Holodomor not only shows solidarity but is also strategically significant in their efforts to gain recognition for the Chechen genocide. This recognition could potentially strengthen their case for secession from Russia following the conflict in Ukraine, using international support to bolster their independence claim.

Kazakhstan, Chosen Amnesia, and how the Holodomor analogy shaped Asharshylyk's recognition:

Emerging commemorative narrative in Independent Kazakhstan:

During the Soviet period, public discussion about the famines in Ukraine and Kazakhstan were heavily silenced. The Ukrainian diaspora played a crucial role in keeping the memory of the famine alive and establishing the genocide narrative. This perspective was eventually introduced into Soviet Ukraine and later, independent Ukraine. In contrast, the Kazakh diaspora did not have a similar movement, but the idea that the Asharshylyk was a genocide surfaced in independent Kazakhstan in 1992. In that year, a commission led by Manash Qozybaev, a Soviet and Kazakh historian, which had been established by the Kazakhstani parliament in 1991, concluded that the Kazakh Famine of 1930-33 could be considered a manifestation of genocidal politics due to the scale of the tragedy (Qozybaev, 1998). However, Qozybaev's report did not specifically label the Asharshylyk as genocide; instead, it focused more on criticizing the Soviet regime and suggested that Stalinism introduced a genocidal policy to Soviet Kazakhstan, leaving the notion of genocide ambiguous.

Despite the conclusions drawn in the report, the government of Kazakhstan, under the leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who served from 1991 to 2019, chose not to address the topic of the Asharshylyk. This silence was maintained to avoid nationalistic rhetoric, considering Kazakhstan's significant Russian minority and the potential for ethnic tensions in the early 1990s. As noted by Prof. Robert Kindler in an interview, "One has to remember the early 1990s, when there were ethnic tensions and fears that they might escalate. Ethnic Russians left Kazakhstan for economic reasons, but they also feared that something might happen there and in other former Soviet republics. And it was a good reason not to highlight the famine in that way" (Kindler, 2024).

On the other hand, considering Russia's self-ascribed role as the successor of the Soviet Union and its position on recognizing the Holodomor as genocide in Ukraine (Zhurzhenko, 2007), the Kazakhstani leadership remained cautious not to risk damaging relations with Russia, upon which the country heavily relies. Therefore, the commemorative narrative that emerged in independent Kazakhstan during the first decades of independence did not entirely externalize from the Soviet past. Instead, it focused on Stalinist political repression, portraying a shared history of tragic experiences and human suffering, where Kazakhs were among the many victims (Kundakbayeva & Kassymova, 2016). Nazarbayev therefore aimed to preserve a broader narrative of political repression. He centered his memory politics on labor camps of the Stalinist era by establishing museums at their sites and designating May 31 as the Day of Remembrance for Victims of Political Repression (Nowicka, 2019; Richter, 2020).

Kazakhstan's Holodomor? Or How the Holodomor analogy shaped Asharshylyk's recognition:

Given the absence of any official stance by the Kazakhstani government on the Kazakh famine, Ukraine's 2006 recognition of the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33, or the Holodomor, as a genocide began to resonate within Kazakhstan's civil society, posing questions about Asharshylyk's recognition in Kazakhstan. In 2008, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Parliamentary Assembly convened in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. The assembly adopted a resolution that honored the victims of the Ukrainian Famine of the 1930s, highlighting the severe impact of the Stalinist regime (OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, 2008). However, the resolution did not label the Holodomor as a genocide. Kremlin propagandists seized this omission as an opportunity to celebrate, mocking it as a defeat, what they called the 'Orange' resolution[7], among other taunts (see Kommersant,

[7] The "Orange" resolution is a wordplay intended to mock Yushchenko's government, which came to power following Ukraine's Orange Revolution and promoted the genocide narrative.

2008; Vzglyad - Delovaya Gazeta, 2008). Delegations from Kazakhstan and Russia opposed the resolution, reinforcing the Kremlin's stance that the famine impacted various regions of the Soviet Union. Although it is true that the famine affected multiple areas, the Kazakh and Russian delegations downplayed the fact that the Ukrainian and Kazakh populations endured some of the most extreme hardships and population losses. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who was then the Speaker of the Parliament and is now the President of Kazakhstan, criticized the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly for condemning the Stalinist regime in an attempt to appease Russia (see Narodetskiy, 2009). The official position of the Kazakhstani government on the Holodomor and its silence on the Asharshylyk, especially its alignment with Russian rhetoric at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, sparked considerable criticism from Kazakhstani civil society. Many criticized the government's stance and expressed their support for Ukraine's recognition of the Holodomor as genocide, calling for similar initiatives in Kazakhstan (see Sadvakasov, 2008).

In 2010, following criticism from civil society, several members of the Kazakhstani parliament proposed that the Kazakh Famine of 1930-33 should be reassessed and properly evaluated through further research. They strongly urged that the subject should not be politicized and explicitly stated that no blame should be assigned, as the Soviet Union and those responsible no longer exist (Kuzhekov, 2010). Members of the parliament brought up an intriguing issue concerning the naming of the Kazakh Famine of 1930-33. Traditionally, it was referred to as the ‘Kazakh Holodomor’ or simply ‘Holodomor,’ which they pointed out was misleading. Nevertheless, the topic of the Kazakh Famine of 1930-33 was still fresh, and initially, there was no consensus in academia. However, it seems now that a consensus has been reached, with both the public and academics referring to the Kazakh famine as Asharshylyk, a term that refers to a human-made famine. According to Botagoz Nurkulova, “there is no significant difference between the terms Zulmat and Asharshylyk because they are

associated with the human-made, artificial famine of 1930-33. In contrast, the term 'ashtyk' (hunger in Kazakh) is associated with a naturally induced famine, like the Uly Ata Zhut [Famine] of the 1920s, which emerged from bad weather conditions resulting in no crops for livestock, or diseases that massively affected livestock, thereby affecting the people" (Nurkulova, 2024). Moreover, the use of the term Holodomor can exclusively be applied to the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33. As noted by Lesia Hasydzhak, "Holodomor is the proper term to refer to the genocide of Ukrainians, the same way the term Holocaust refers to the genocide of Jewish people, or Asharshylyk is the term for the Kazakh famine" (Hasydzhak, 2024).

Another critical development that prompted a government reaction was the emergence of nationalist and anti-government sentiments in Western Kazakhstan, an area primarily inhabited by an ethnically Kazakh population [8]. Ethnic and cultural diversity within Kazakhstan's large population complicated the development of a national identity and the formation of the Kazakhstani nation. Nazarbayev promoted a vision of Kazakhstan that included stories of not only various Kazakh groups but also of other ethnic communities. However, the situation dramatically changed in 2011 with the rise of nationalist and anti-government trends in Western Kazakhstan, culminating in the Zhanaozen crisis. During this crisis, numerous protesters advocating for reforms in the energy sector and political system were either killed in confrontations with the police or subjected to political persecution afterward (Beisembayeva & Kolesova, 2017).

Caught between escalating nationalist trends and the pursuit of multiculturalism in Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev decided to include Asharshylyk in a broader narrative of political repression by beginning to commemorate the famine in 2012, during the Day of Remembrance

[8] Much like in Ukraine, Kazakhstan exhibits a socio-political divide, particularly in Kazakh-speaking regions that historically faced restrictive language policies. These policies limited social mobility based on language, leading to stronger nationalist tendencies after gaining independence.

of Political Repressions[9]. According to Prof. Robert Kindler, "One of those critical junctures was actually 2012, the 80th anniversary of the famine, when the memorial was opened in Astana and huge conferences were held all over the country. [...] 2012 constituted a critical juncture with the decision to mark the anniversary, to erect monuments, and to include the famine in this broader narrative of political repression" (Kindler, 2024). Simultaneously, in order to avoid Kremlin's criticism, as was the case with Ukraine, Nazarbayev approached the issue of victimhood cautiously, avoiding specifying the ethnic identities of either the perpetrators or the victims. Instead, he emphasized that the tragedy was a collective one, highlighting that the reasons for the famine, deportations, and mass casualties were due to the brutal policies of the Soviet regime (Kundakbayeva & Kassymova, 2016).

That same month, Astana hosted a conference titled "Famine in Kazakhstan: Tragedy of the People and Lessons Learned," which brought together numerous local and international historians and scholars. The conference emphasized the importance of addressing the topic of the famine from an academic rather than a political perspective (see Tukusheva, 2012). However, not all historians agreed with the official narrative presented by the government. In 2014, Kazakh historian Kaydar Aldazhumanov criticized the Kazakhstani government's stance, calling for the Kazakh tragedy to be recognized as genocide. He cited Ukraine's recognition of the Holodomor as an example (see Mamashuly, 2014).

Subsequently, the official commemoration of the Asharshylyk began to shift towards a more nationalistic rhetoric regarding the famine. In 2017, on the 85th anniversary of the Asharshylyk, another monument was opened in Almaty at the initiative of President Nazarbayev. The monument featured a quote from Nazarbayev emphasizing that the famine brought an entire nation to the brink of disappearing and should never be forgotten (see

[9] On that day, opposition leaders and members of Kazakh civil society gathered in Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan, to commemorate the victims of Soviet-era political repression and those imprisoned under Nazarbayev's regime. They demanded the release of individuals who were incarcerated following the Zhanaozen crisis, calling them Nazarbayev's political prisoners (See Romashenko, 2012).

Alkhabayev, 2017). The same day, after the official opening of the monument, a group of activists and leaders of the nationalist opposition gathered at the site to commemorate the famine and draw attention to issues of freedom of speech, human rights, and political repression under Nazarbayev's regime (Toguzbayev, 2017). However, they did not advocate for recognizing the Asharshylyk as genocide.

These developments further fueled the genocide narrative concerning the Asharshylyk, yet with caveats. The official state position began to oscillate between two narratives: internationally, the Kazakh government denies any genocidal interpretations of the Asharshylyk, while domestically, the genocide narrative is more or less tolerated (Shoshanova, 2024). A similar dynamic to the Ukrainian recognition of the Holodomor can be observed here. Just as in earlier discussions in Ukraine, the topic of the Asharshylyk in Kazakh academia generally rejects genocidal interpretations [10]. Instead, the genocide narrative is mostly employed by activists and civil society.

In January 2019, Kazakh activist Janbolat Mamai released one of the first documentary movies, "Zulmat: Genocide in Kazakhstan." In this movie, he presented the results of his archival research in Kazakhstan and interviews with historians and activists from Ukraine, calling for the recognition of the Asharshylyk as genocide, similar to the recognition of the Holodomor in Ukraine. When the movie was presented in Almaty, the turnout was so enormous that the movie theater exceeded its capacity and had to organize additional viewing days (Mamashuly, 2019). Various artists critical of the government's position on the official recognition of the Asharshylyk have also expressed support for the genocidal interpretation of the Asharshylyk. While state-supported artists and memorials officially deny the genocide

[10] The genocide narrative in Ukrainian historiography was not prevalent in earlier discussions about the Holodomor until Yushchenko's campaign. Before this campaign, apart from literature from the Ukrainian diaspora, the primary advocates for the genocide narrative were activists and members of Ukrainian civil society. With the availability of more resources during Yushchenko's campaign, scholars began to conclude that the Holodomor may have constituted a genocide.

narrative, it is mentioned implicitly in art, especially in predominantly Kazakh-populated areas (Shoshanova, 2024).

The socio-political division between Kazakh-populated areas and mixed areas is surprising and reminiscent of the situation in Ukraine. For example, the Museum of Victims of Political Repression is the only museum in Kazakhstan with an extensive exhibition and research department dedicated to the Asharshylyk. Surprisingly, it is not located in the capital, but in Shymkent, a city in the south of Kazakhstan predominantly populated by a large Kazakh or Kazakh-speaking population. In Ukraine, Western and Central regions have consistently supported the genocide narrative regarding the Holodomor. In contrast, Eastern Ukraine, particularly Kharkiv, has been hesitant to recognize it due to close geographic and socio-political ties with Russia. As Prof. Artem Kharchenko noted, "In Kharkiv, academic and public circles would perceive messages from Kyiv differently. They were closer to Russia, and since 2014 it has become harder for them, but still, a lot of people used to go to Saint Petersburg and Moscow to attend conferences and archives" (Kharchenko, 2024). Perhaps, the Kazakh government may be trying to avoid a similar situation by leveraging the geographical and socio-political divides within Kazakhstan.

In an interview with Botagoz Nurkulova, Senior Researcher at the Museum of Victims of Political Repression in Shymkent, Nurkulova responded positively to the question of whether the Asharshylyk constituted a genocide, emphasizing the need for Asharshylyk's recognition as a genocide by drawing a comparison to the recognition of the Holodomor in Ukraine. She stated, "Yes, we can [consider the Asharshylyk as genocide]. The Ukrainian famine, the Holodomor, is recognized internationally, but the famine that took place in our Kazakhstan, for some reason, is not recognized as a genocide and is still being discussed. And it is a problem because every Kazakhstani must know about the history of the famine" (Nurkulova, 2024).

Overall, the Holodomor analogy is prevalent in both academic and activist circles, playing a crucial role in shaping the recognition of the Asharshylyk in Kazakhstan. This comparison is frequently used to highlight the similarities between the two famines and to argue for the recognition of the Asharshylyk as a genocide. By drawing parallels to the internationally recognized Holodomor, advocates aim to strengthen their case for official recognition and to emphasize the importance of remembering and understanding this tragic chapter in Kazakh history. As Prof. Robert Kindler noted, “Kazakh historians and activists who advocate the idea of the Kazakh famine as a genocide are following the Ukrainian model, and I think it has an influence. But what is so fundamentally different in the Kazakh case is that it destroyed the nomadic/semi-nomadic lifestyle, ending something that existed for thousands of years. This goes, in a sense, deeper than the famine in present society because Ukrainians who survived the famine remained peasants even after the famine, whereas the Kazakhs, who were victims of the politics of sedentarization, were not [nomads anymore]” (Kindler, 2024).

Asharshylyk as the chosen amnesia:

In previous chapters, I use Vamik Volkan’s concept of *chosen trauma* (2001) to describe how, thanks to the Ukrainian diaspora, the memory of the Holodomor was preserved and passed on to independent Ukraine. Volkan argues that *chosen trauma* establishes a sense of closure and a defined identity, clearly distinguishing between friend and enemy. In this context, the development of the Holodomor from a chosen trauma to a historical analogy helped contribute to the enemy image of Russia, especially in light of Russian aggression and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Buckley-Zistel (2006) introduces the concept of "*chosen amnesia*" to illustrate the reverse process of Volkan's notion of *chosen trauma*. In her study, *chosen amnesia* represents a strategy for local coexistence and the practice of "remembering what to forget' in post-genocide Rwanda. I thus argue that the dynamics of official state engagement with the

Asharshylyk constitute *chosen amnesia*, as the Kazakhstani government has repeatedly emphasized the importance of acknowledging the famine, but also ensured that there is no specific perpetrator to blame, attributing it to the Soviet regime as a whole. Moreover, the dynamics revealing how the Holodomor contributed to shaping the recognition of the Asharshylyk in Kazakhstan show the government's cautious approach: allowing recognition and discussions of the Asharshylyk as genocide domestically, but denying it at the international level. Similar to *chosen amnesia* in Rwanda, while the memory of the Kazakh famine is important, Kazakhstani political elites or the public deliberately omit certain aspects from the discourse.

Chosen amnesia appears to be the dominant strategy employed by the Kazakhstani government to avoid ethnic tensions and evade criticism from Russia. In 2021, during an academic roundtable on the topic of the Asharshylyk, Maulen Ashymbayev, the speaker of the parliament, publicly stated that the public should not speculate and that the famine, when approached academically, cannot be classified as a crime against one nation (Mamashuly, 2021). In the same year, Kazakhstan's president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, underscored the importance of the government to focus instead on the Kazakh Famine of the 1920s. He argued that this famine had such a devastating impact on the Kazak population that, had it not occurred, the Kazakh nation would be significantly larger today (TengriNews, 2021).

To date, the official position on the Asharshylyk remains ambiguous, as state authorities continue to attribute crimes like the Asharshylyk to the Soviet regime, reinforcing the broader commemorative narrative of Stalin-era political repression (see TengriNews, 2023). As Botagoz Nurkulova noted in an interview, "There are many historians among those parliamentarians who could work on this issue. Our scholars have produced sufficient work on this topic, but it should be asked why these works were not brought to the table of our members of parliament and other politicians" (Nurkulova, 2024).

Findings and Discussion:

The role of the Ukrainian diaspora in Soviet Ukraine's acknowledgment of the Holodomor:

The Ukrainian diaspora in North America was vital in preserving and commemorating the Ukrainian famine. However, it was only when the diaspora became highly institutionalized that they managed to establish the genocide interpretation of the Holodomor internationally, taking advantage of the Cold War opportunity structure and successfully lobbying the US Congress. In response, the Communist Party of Ukraine was expected to react to the results of the US Congress's investigation, which declared the Holodomor as a genocide. The Communist Party of Ukraine allowed a group of academics to research the topic of the Holodomor and prepare a response to the US and the Ukrainian diaspora, which the Communist Party considered nationalistic and bourgeois. However, having access to classified documents and records, the Soviet Ukrainian academics sided with the Ukrainian diaspora on the issue of Holodomor recognition. In this context, the recognition of the Holodomor served as a bridge between two previously unconnected groups: the North American Ukrainian diaspora and Soviet Ukrainian scholars. This bridging facilitated their interactions with each other and with other groups. As a result, the Holodomor was acknowledged in Soviet Ukraine, which also enabled local activists and civil society organizations to adopt the genocidal interpretation of the Holodomor and utilize it in their discourse on secessionism.

Changes in the opportunity structure leading to genocide recognition:

Once Ukraine gained independence, political elites adopted a commemorative narrative emphasizing the Holodomor and other famines that occurred in Soviet Ukraine during the 20th century. That narrative, given Ukraine’s intermediary position at the time, maintained a neutral tone regarding the Holodomor victims. Further institutionalization of remembrance, driven by

extensive research, distinguished the Holodomor from other 20th-century famines by highlighting its human-made and artificial nature. However, the 2004 Orange Revolution marked a shift in the opportunity structure towards a more pro-European narrative and an externalization of the Soviet past. I argue that these changes in the opportunity structure facilitated the adoption of the genocide narrative, leading to international and domestic contestation with the Holodomor becoming politicized on both sides. Consequently, a genocide law was adopted, and the Holodomor was instrumentalized by both sides, with Ukraine's officials adopting the genocide narrative and the opposition, backed by Russia, promoting a counter-narrative of shared victimhood.

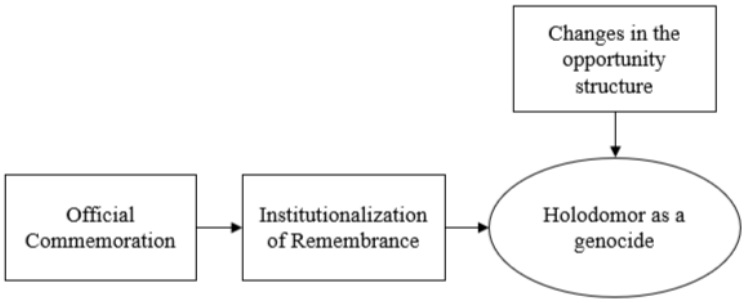

Fig. 1 - Changes in opportunity structure facilitated genocide recognition.

Holodomor as a historical analogy:

When the Holodomor law was passed, then-president Yushchenko, notwithstanding his pro-European position, clearly stated that the perpetrator of the Holodomor had always been the Soviet regime and its leadership, and that there was no particular nation to blame. His successor, Viktor Yanukovych, taking a pro-Russian stance engaged with the Holodomor differently. He negated the genocidal interpretation of the famine and broke established

commemorative traditions. Holodomor's commemoration in 2013 thus served as the platform for protesting against Yanukovych's regime which also coincided with the Euromaidan protests culminating in the Revolution of Dignity and the Russian aggression in 2014. McAdam et. al. (2001) contend that the *attribution of threats* serves as a potent mechanism within collective attributions, which are typically centered on framing the goals of movements according to the classical agenda. Specifically, the 2014 Russian aggression was framed as a continuation of a genocide against the Ukrainian nation, employing the Holodomor analogy. This framing not only connected historical grievances to contemporary geopolitical tensions but also highlighted the persistent use of past narratives to shape present political and public perceptions. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine increased the credibility of the genocide narrative, particularly by incorporating details of the crimes against humanity committed by Russia in Ukraine's occupied territories. As a result, the use of the Holodomor analogy to frame these events resonated strongly with international audiences, ultimately contributing to the global recognition of the Holodomor as a genocide. This narrative framing not only underscored the historical continuity of oppression but also bolstered international understanding and acknowledgment of Ukraine's historical and ongoing struggles.

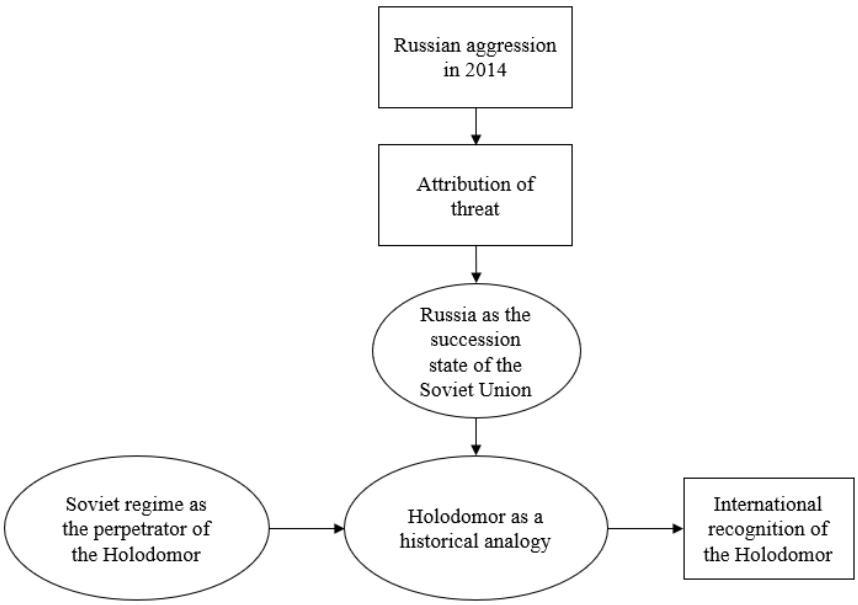

Fig. 2 - Attribution of threat as a causal process for the Holodomor as historical analogy.

Holodomor as a historical analogy in Kazakhstan:

In Kazakhstan, the lack of commemoration for the Asharshylyk during the first two decades of independence can be attributed to two main factors: the potential for ethnic tensions and the adoption of a rhetoric of multicultural victimhood, along with Russia's position on the recognition of the Holodomor. Although the genocide narrative concerning the Asharshylyk was initially introduced in 1991 by a commission established by the Kazakhstani parliament to investigate the tragedy, this narrative did not become part of the broader commemorative narrative, which instead focused on the wider political repression of the Soviet era. It appears that the Holodomor, used as an analogy, has indirectly influenced the Kazakhstani government's decision not to officially commemorate the Asharshylyk.

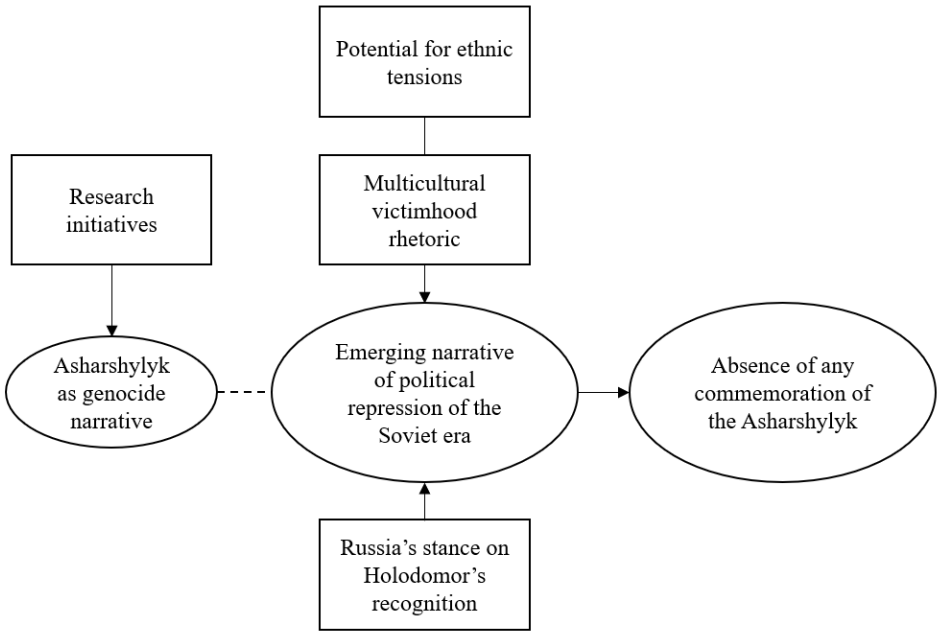

Fig. 3 - The process of commemorative narrative construction in Kazakhstan before 2012.

However, in response to the rising tide of nationalism in Kazakhstan and influenced by Ukraine's recognition of the Holodomor, Kazakhstani state authorities attempted to incorporate the Asharshylyk into the broader narrative of Soviet-era political repression. However, they have also been careful to align with the narrative that Moscow adopted in opposition to Ukraine's recognition efforts. As activism and civil society criticism grew regarding Kazakhstan's alignment with Moscow's narrative, the state authorities adopted a strategy of 'chosen amnesia'. This approach allowed them to balance between geopolitical pressures and local demands for recognition by employing two distinct narratives: a local genocide narrative, and a broader narrative of political repression for the international audience.

Additionally, there is a notable regional variation in how these narratives are expressed, reflecting the socio-political climates of different areas. In regions predominantly populated by ethnic Kazakhs or Kazakh-speaking communities, the genocide narrative is more prominently featured, illustrating how local identities and historical memories shape the public commemoration of past atrocities.

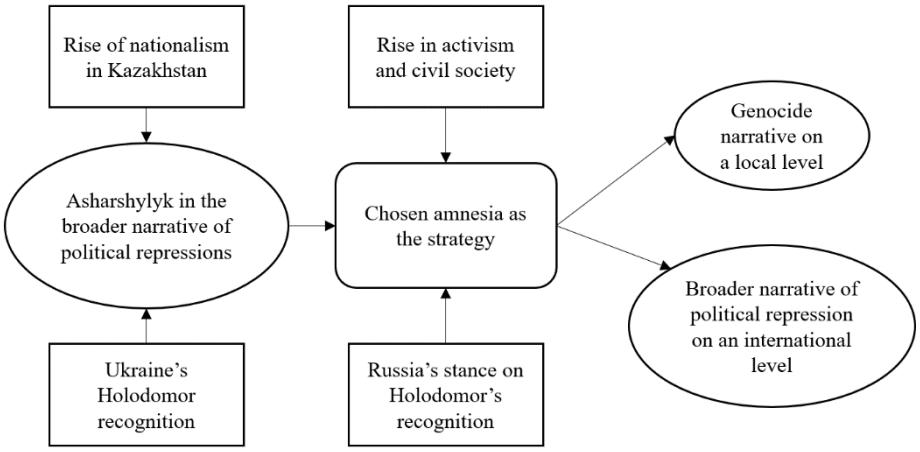

Fig. 4 - Chosen amnesia as a strategy to navigate between geopolitical tensions and local demands for recognition from 2012 onward.

Conclusion:

Several general lessons can be drawn from the politics of genocide recognition in the context of the Ukrainian and Kazakh famines of the 1930s. First, the differing recognition of the Ukrainian and Kazakh famines highlights that the primary reason for such differences lies in the political opportunity structures of the states. Ukraine's example shows how drastic changes in opportunity structures can facilitate genocide recognition. Although Ukraine initially maintained a neutral stance on the famine, gradually shifting towards a stronger externalization of its Soviet past, it was the 2004 Orange Revolution that marked a critical juncture and a change in Ukraine's opportunity structure, enabling political elites to recognize the Holodomor as a genocide. The case of Kazakhstan shows us how closed political opportunity structures constrain domestic genocide recognition. Kazakhstan, due to its limited opportunity structure and reliance on Russia, has avoided recognizing the Kazakh famine as a genocide.

Second, historical analogies can facilitate both domestic and international genocide recognition. However, they need to be cultivated by exogenous factors, such as changes in opportunity structures, and endogenous factors, such as domestic pressures. In the case of Ukraine, the Holodomor analogy originated from the 2014 critical juncture when Russian aggression marked further shifts in Ukraine's opportunity structures. Ukrainian officials and the Ukrainian diaspora promoted the Holodomor analogy, linking the past event with the present to emphasize the Ukrainian nation's struggle against Russia, portrayed as the perpetrator in the genocide against Ukrainian nation. In this sense, the Holodomor analogy fits the 'representing the current situation' category of historical analogy and the 'defining the role of the actors'. The 2022 critical juncture marked by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought the Holodomor analogy to the next level resulting in international recognition of the Holodomor by the majority of European states. This is when the Holodomor analogy started to

encompass the ‘persuading others’ category of historical analogy. In this context, the crimes against humanity and other genocidal acts committed by Russia in the occupied territories of Ukraine strengthened the analogy internationally as a genocide against the Ukrainian nation.

In Kazakhstan, the Holodomor analogy also influenced the recognition of the Kazakh famine. Initially, any commemoration of the famine was absent as the Kazakh government wanted to avoid ethnic tensions and appease Russia regarding the history of the Soviet famine of the 1930s. However, when Kazakhstan publicly negated Ukraine’s interpretation of the Ukrainian famine as a genocide, Kazakhstani civil society and activists began to raise questions about the legacy of the famine in Kazakhstan. Coupled with the rise of nationalistic trends, the silence was broken in 2012, and the Kazakh famine was incorporated into a broader commemorative narrative of political repression. As the Holodomor recognition campaign intensified domestically and internationally, the official stance of the Kazakh government also began to shift. Inspired by the dynamic of regional variation in Ukraine regarding the acceptance of genocide recognition, Kazakh authorities adopted a strategy of chosen amnesia, allowing genocide interpretations on a local level while avoiding it at the international level. I argue that the Holodomor fits all four categories of historical analogy, as it significantly shaped the way authorities dealt with the issue of recognition in Kazakhstan.

Future studies on the politics of domestic and international genocide recognition can significantly benefit from drawing on the concepts of opportunity structures and historical analogies. As demonstrated in my two case studies, the recognition of the Holodomor as a genocide and its use as a historical analogy not only shaped mobilization within Ukraine but also extended its influence beyond the country's borders. This impact resonated within the Ukrainian diaspora and even in Kazakhstan, where historical parallels were drawn. By examining these aspects, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how historical tragic events are framed and recognized as genocides, the factors that facilitate or hinder this

recognition, and the broader implications for national identity, memory politics, and international relations.

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