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READING “ZHOVTYI KNIAZ” BY VASYL BARKA

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Introduction. The tragedy of the Holodomor Genocide, or the Great Famine of 1932-1933, was concealed from public awareness for decades under the Soviet regime. As a suppressed story, it lingered in the literature and collective memory of Ukrainians across the Atlantic. One of the seminal fictional texts about the trauma of the Holodomor, “Zhovtyi kniaz” (“ЖОВТИЙ КНЯЗЬ”), was written by Vasyl Barka in New York, a quarter-century after the genocide. Only after Ukraine gained its independence in 1991 did “Zhovtyi kniaz” become known to mainland Ukraine and was incorporated into the secondary school curriculum for Ukrainian literature.

Aim. We endeavor to demonstrate that in his seminal novel Vasyl Barka reveals trauma as a rupture of time and language and constructs the Holodomor not as a natural catastrophe but as a systematically engineered necropolitical process, while tracing the transformation of perception, ethical judgment, and bodily experience under extreme hunger and terror.

Materials and methods. We rely on history studies, trauma studies, and close reading of the novel. Numerous literary studies provide valuable insights into Barka’s book reading and reception. Some of them are briefly outlined in the 2025 publication “Holodomor in the Ukrainian Literature” (Gaidash): the theses by Maryna Kulchytska (2002), Natalia Tymoshchuk (2006), Daria Mattingly (2018), and the 2004 study by Rolf Göbner. Drawing on a diachronic perspective, R. Göbner notes the resistance of Ukrainian peasants to the Soviet regime’s imposed and violent collectivization and the unrealistic grain procurement plans devised by Stalin and his supporters, among other factors, as reasons for the Great Famine (2004, p. 184),

thereby appealing to a comprehensive examination of the period. One might infer that the famine per se was not the reason for the mass deaths of millions of Ukrainians, but rather a consequence of the earlier deliberately planned genocidal policy of the soviet regime headed by stalin. It is crucial to mention Guido Hausmann's remark that "A wave of nationalization at the end of World War I had led to the predominantly Russian Bolsheviks in Ukraine being perceived as foreigners for a long time" (2022). There are literary articles tackling Barka's novel authored by Y. Barabash (1992), M. Zhulynsky (2002), O. Zabarny (1996), N. Knyazev (1998), Y. Kovaliv (1992), O. Kovalchuk (1996), M. Kudryavtsev (1999), R. Movchan (1998, 2002), and I. Pasemko (1992), creating a broad poetological and methodological database of "Zhovtyi kniaz", which was formed in the first decade of Ukraine's Independence. One recent book on the subject that includes references to Vasyl Barka is *The Holodomor Reader*, compiled by Canadian scholars Bohdan Bociurkiw and Alexander Motyl in 2012. In trauma studies, Cathy Caruth's concept of traumatic rupture and Dominick LaCapra's distinction between *acting out* and *working through* are applied to the analysis of selected fragments from the novel.

Results and discussion. The first volume of "Zhovtyi kniaz" was published in New York by Vasyl Ocheret under the pen name Vasyl Barka in 1962. It is a grim novel about the Holodomor Genocide of 1932-1933 in Ukraine. We detect the traditions of naturalistic writing in the novelist's intertwining of realistic and symbolic imagery, as seen in Émile Zola's works (for example, "Germinal", 1885). "Zhovtyi kniaz" is a significant text, valuable not only for its remembrance and moral teachings but also for its inherent aesthetic appeal. Barka's book was adapted into the film "Hunger-33" by Oles Yanchuk in 1991 and into a theatrical performance "Lenin LOVE, Stalin LOVE" by Andriy Zholdak in 2008.

From 1991 to 2011, Ukrainian school students studied Vasyl Barka's novel in their literary curriculum. However, during Yanukovych's presidency and Tabachnyk's tenure as Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine, Barka's book was removed from the Ukrainian school curriculum. Regrettably, this canonical text has not returned to school. As for the 2011 removal of "Zhovtyi kniaz" and other

necessary fiction revealing the Great Famine and/or colonialism, such as “Maria” by Ulas Samchuk, “The Great Cellar” by Taras Shevchenko, and “The Nobel Woman” (aka “Boyarinya”) by Lesya Ukrainka, there are ideological factors that prepared the ground for the hybrid war. The primary argument against returning the books in question to schools, raised in response to appeals from teachers and civic activists, centers on their psychological impact. There are current concerns that these books could worsen the traumatic experiences of today’s school students. We will examine three specific excerpts from the novel to illustrate its importance in shaping the nation's understanding of the Holodomor.

The table below showcases the neologisms in the names of the months (Chapter 22), which reflect the tragic experience of the famine (in the absence of the English translation, here is the source text and the German rendition):

Table 1

Poetic anatomy of genocide

The original	The German rendition
– Як по-новому грудень?	«Und wie wird der Dezember jetzt genannt?»
– Зветься: трупень.	«Er heißt jetzt Leichember.»
– Січень – як?	«Und wie der Jänner?»
– Зветься: могилень.	«Der heißt Gräberner.»
– А ті, що попереду?	«Und jene davor?»
– Вересень тепер розбоєнь, бо грабували всіх, жовтень – худень, а листопад – пухлень.	«Der September – Räuberer, denn da haben sie alle beraubt. Der Oktober – Magerer und der November – Anschweller.»
– А після січня?	«Und nach dem Jänner?»
– Лютий – людоїдень, березень – пустирень, квітень – чумень, а далі я забув (Барка, 2023, с. 238).	«Der Februar – Menschenfresser, der März – Einöde, der April – Seucher, weiter habe ich es vergessen» (Barka, 2009, S. 249).

Through the children’s dialogue, Barka’s renaming of the months in “Zhovtyi kniaz” functions as a compressed poetic chronicle of the Holodomor, in which calendar time is reconsidered through the experience of mass death. A close-reading approach reveals how these neologisms operate simultaneously at the morphological, symbolic, and narrative levels to disrupt the neutral flow of historical time and replace it with a sense of catastrophe.

In Ukrainian, the traditional names of months are largely tied to natural cycles:

грудень (etymologically грудка, i.e., замерзла земля береться грудками) – frost, березень (etymologically березовий сік) – birch sap, квітень (etymologically поява перших квітів) – blossoming. Vasyl Barka systematically corrupts the natural vocabulary by grafting morphemes associated with death, violence, and emptiness: грудень – трупень (corpse-month); січень – могилень (grave-month); лютий – людоїдень (cannibal-month). The phonetic closeness of the neologisms to the original month names is crucial. The author, however, does not change the language entirely but instead adapts it to the Red Terror. This demonstrates that normal life is grotesquely transformed under conditions of famine. The calendar survives in form but not in meaning. Time itself becomes a mass grave. This aligns with Cathy Caruth's claim that trauma is not simply remembered but inscribed into perception itself (1996, p. 5). Particularly powerful is the author's rendition of spring months: thus, березень (symbolizing life awakening) turns into пустирень (desolation) and квітень (the time of flowering) becomes чумень (plague). Traditionally, the symbol of rebirth, spring, showcases degradation. This reverses the pastoral myth of cyclical regeneration embedded in Ukrainian rural culture. Nature no longer heals; it witnesses apocalypse.

V. Barka thus presents famine not as a temporary hardship but as an ontological rupture of the natural order. The author's calendar operates primarily in the mode of *acting out* as developed by Dominick LaCapra (2001, pp. 21-22). Instead of movement toward healing or resolution, there is only a cyclical return to horror. From a literary perspective, these months' neologisms serve as chronotopic markers of trauma, the ineffable (what cannot be fully narrated), and evidence of reality's moral inversion.

From the perspective of a grown-up character, the family's father, Katrannyk, describes the steppe and the character's native village as "an empire of death" (Motyl, 2012, p. 330). The detailed description of the dead bodies and the absence of the usual vegetation evoke a post-apocalyptic vision (Chapter 19). This episode stages famine as the annihilation of both landscape and human presence through a radical contrast between remembered pastoral fullness and present desolation. The author

uses contrast: first, Katrannyk recollects the village as an organic space with lush willows, wheat fields bowing to sunlight, a world full of movement, color, and sound; next, he sees practically a cemetery, where was “not one tree, neither in the streets, nor in the yards” (Motyl, 2012, p. 330-331). The imagery of bodily decay transfers from human victims to architecture itself: houses become gnawed bones, gallows, carcasses picked clean by predators, suggesting that famine consumes not only people but the material fabric of the village. Silence replaces the former vitality of the village, marking what trauma theorists would recognize as a space of collective extinction. Through this devastated chronotope, Barka renders the Holodomor as a mass grave inscribed in the landscape itself, rather than as a memory haunted by abundance that confronts a present emptied of life. Ineffable silence surrounds a dystopian landscape devoid of typical plant life found in a Ukrainian village, including trees; only weeds survive. The air is heavy with a pervasive odor; dark holes replace windows. Finally, chapter 20 juxtaposes abundance with death in the town, where Katrannyk observes how grain rots under armed guard while peasants are starved, hunted, and incinerated. The wheat pyramids are just opposite the starving bodies and bureaucratic indifference is staged through officials calmly stepping over a corpse “like a piece of wood blocking state affairs” (*Luczkiw, 2024*). The urban space is depicted as a trap (queues morphing into roundups, freight wagons into death chambers, ravines into furnaces), and famine as an industrialized process of elimination rather than a natural disaster. Getting out of the town, Katrannyk is thrown from the train into a ravine serving as a huge furnace-pit. “The suffocating smoke” turns the landscape into a collective crematorium, collapsing distinctions between human bodies and fuel, victims and debris. Yet the saved loaf of bread functions as a bitter sacrament: life wrested from mass death, morally contaminated yet necessary, forcing the father of the family into an ethical negotiation between survival and reverence for the dead.

Conclusions. Despite the concerns mentioned above, it is crucial to reintroduce “Zhovtyi kniaz” into the Ukrainian school curriculum and to develop the relevant methodology for its use. Barka’s novel has the potential to decolonize modern

Ukraine's relationship to its precolonial past and to the most tragic experiences of its recent history through naturalistic imagery. Through the neologistic renaming of the months in the book, the natural rhythm of the seasons is overwritten by death, turning the calendar into a mass-grave register. Through fire imagery, infernal descent, and the emergence of Katrannyk, Barka frames survival as a passage through hell, in which the regime engineers not only physical annihilation but also a world in which hunger governs perception, ethics, and time. The deliberations above complement international scholarship on the interpretation of "Zhovtyi kniaz" within the literary framework of the Holodomor Genocide and contribute to postcolonial theory.

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