

Imperial Famines: America's Response to the Holodomor

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Grade Level: Grades 11 and 12

Time Frame: The approximate time frame for this section of the unit on imperial famines is about 6 days. See daily outline below.

Summary: The purpose of this lesson is for students to develop a heightened sense of global responsibility in the face of injustice. Rather than looking at Holodomor as a distant historic event, students will explore the realities of the time period through the lens of firsthand accounts. These accounts raise profound and disturbing questions about the U.S. response to the Ukrainian genocide and invite students to envision alternative responses. Students will examine a section of the "Investigation of Ukrainian Famine 1932 – 1933, Report to US Congress," and will have several options to choose from when writing a response.

Course: Genocide and Film Studies

Note: This lesson was adapted for distance learning, due to our school's closure in response to the Covid-19 virus. To adapt these lessons for distance learning, teachers may want to make individual QuickTime lectures to post before students view the PowerPoints and films.

Core Curriculum Content Standards (New Jersey):

6.2.12.HistoryUP.4.b: Report on the influence of war, economic depression, and genocide on the arts, cultural values, and social ideas.

6.2.12.HistoryUP.4.c: Compare and contrast the actions of individuals as perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers during events of persecution or genocide, and describe the long-term consequences of genocide for all involved.

Proficiencies: Imperial Famines. Students will be able to:

1. Assess citizens' roles in responding to governmental actions that violate the basic human rights of others, through both personal and group actions.
2. Formulate questions; locate information from different sources; and identify main ideas, supporting evidence, points of view, and biases in these materials.

3. Evaluate how imperial policies of self-interest and indifference, combined with doctrines of inaction and deeply held ethnic prejudices led to various large-scale famines.
4. Assess social, political, economic, and cultural events that interact with one another, resulting in large scale famine and loss of life.
5. Cite specific cases, examples, and time periods in which these famines were used to decimate “undesirable” populations.
6. Differentiate between planned and unplanned events and scrutinize the culpability of governments that take intentional actions to exacerbate unplanned events.

Materials Required: Access to a computer and to the Internet.

Lesson Objectives: After this lesson students should be able to:

- Analyze and evaluate primary and secondary sources and examine multiple perspectives using empathy, a critical thinking skill, in order to gain perspective on a complex issue.
- Evaluate historically difficult questions with context and depth and assess the responsibility of the world community to respond to injustice, even though it may not directly affect one’s own country.

Background for this Lesson:

Students have been studying historic genocides and their relevance to our lives today. This unit deals with imperial famines – the Irish Famine of 1845–1848, which started with an unplanned event, and the Holodomor, The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-1933, which was a planned event. In the days prior to this lesson, students have:

- Viewed and discussed a PowerPoint on Imperial Famines
- Watched the documentary film, *Harvest of Despair* on YouTube. Normally we would watch this together in class, which is what I would recommend, but with distance learning, we all watched it online. I posted several video chats where I discussed the movie and pointed out certain things (such as symbolism) or brought their attention to important points.
- Viewed a narrated PowerPoint on the Holodomor. Usually, I would not narrate the PowerPoint on video, I would do it face-to-face with them in the classroom and open up the conversation for further discussion.
- Viewed a 5-minute segment of Holodomor survivors from *Share the Story* <http://www.sharethestory.ca/index.html>
- Watched an 11 minute clip featuring Valentina Kuryliw speaking of Holodomor on YouTube

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=414&v=Xwf6WEF3dfc&feature=emb_logo

Lesson Plan Activities:

1. Students are asked to go to the link for *Investigation of Ukrainian Famine 1932–1933, Report to US Congress*:

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d00831044s&view=1up&seq=195>

Have students read from pages 161 – 167. Teachers will note that page 165 is mostly all in a footnote. It is an eyewitness account of the famine from Mrs. Marie Zuk of Kalmazivka in Odessa (third most populous city in Ukraine). It was attached to an appeal to President Roosevelt on behalf of the Ukrainian people by the Ukrainian Council in Canada. The Council General in Winnipeg was directed to inform the organization’s leaders that since these conditions “do not appear to directly affect American citizens or interests, the Department is not in a position to take any action.” On pages 166 and 167 students will see similar appeals, also met with inaction, apathy, or outright denial of the genocide. This activity may be done together as a class, individually, or in small groups.

2. After students have read these pages, they will choose one of the following writing prompts and write a double-spaced, two-page, well-considered, well-informed response. Encourage them to use and incorporate the historical foundation materials they have already explored. Here are the prompts:
 - ❖ Write a reflection or journal entry from the point of view of Ivan Chuhan’s sister, remembering what his childhood was like, how he was as a young man, and how unthinkable it is that he was reduced to the horror of the drastic measures he took. You may also write this from the point of view of his wife’s sister or friend. You will have to make up her first name, since it is not mentioned on page 166. You are writing fiction but using details that are compatible with the reality of growing up in Ukraine before and during the genocide.
 - ❖ Write a reflection from the point of view of the *recipient* of Eleanor Roosevelt’s letter mentioned on page 167 look up words you may not know such as *torgsin*). Bear in mind that Eleanor Roosevelt was known to be a champion of the underdog. According to History.com, “She was an early champion of civil rights for African Americans, as well as an advocate for women, American workers, the poor and young people. She also supported government-funded programs for artists and writers. Roosevelt encouraged her husband to appoint more women to federal positions, and she held hundreds of press conferences for female

reporters only at a time when women were typically barred from White House press conferences.”

- ❖ Write a reflection on any aspect that spoke to your “innermost ear” as you read these pages. It might be on the last sentence – how Moscow forbade journalists from traveling to famine-affected areas, and how critical the role of the journalist is in the midst of crisis, catastrophe, and oppression. It might be to address the sentence mentioned above, that *these conditions do not appear to directly affect American citizens or interests*, and what a lack of response says about the US as a country and as a people. It might be on the monstrous nature of absolute power (as in Stalin’s case), and how one can justify, in one’s own mind, the suffering and destruction of human beings in order to achieve a political goal. It can be on anything that comes to mind that moves you intellectually or emotionally.
3. Students will turn in their written work to teachers via Google Classroom, Powerschool, Canvas, Moodle, etc. (whichever platform your school is using).
 4. Follow up: Students will create a 1–2 minute video explaining their response. In their video, they will address what most moved them in their reading of this material. They should include any thoughts they might have on how America (and the world) could have handled its response to the Holodomor differently. Videos will be posted on a class discussion board.
 5. Each student must respond to at least one other student’s video. If you are using Zoom, you can have a class discussion after students have had the opportunity to post their videos. Students should conclude that there are no easy answers to morally complex questions but discussing them may help to clarify what actions (or lack thereof) may or may not be acceptable in times of great injustice.

Suggested Uses for the Lesson Plan:

While this lesson was specifically designed for a Genocide Studies course, it may be used in History, Social Justice, Language Arts, Sociology, Anthropology, and Religion classes. It may also be adapted for in-person learning as opposed to “distance learning.” It is an exercise in both critical thinking and creativity, which beckons students to experience the thoughts and feelings of those who bore witness to the horrors of Holodomor from the inside out. By putting themselves in the shoes of those who suffered, students will develop empathy, insight, and a sense of fair-mindedness – all of which are important critical thinking skills.

Suggested Daily Outline:

Day 1:

Foundation for this unit: Briefly review imperialism and colonialism and discuss how a population can be kept subordinate through the manipulation of economic, physical, and cultural resources.

Overview of various imperial famines including:

- India: Orissa 1866 – 1868
Agra 1837 – 1838
- Ireland: The Great Hunger – 1840s
- Russia: Povolzhye – 1921- 1922
- Ukraine: The Holodomor 1932 – 1933
- North Korea: The March of Suffering - 1994 – 1998
- Congo: Belgian Colonialism 1885 – 1908
- Ethiopia: Dergue Regime 1983 – 1985

Show PowerPoint on Imperial Famines.

Critical thinking in-class exercise:

After watching the PowerPoint, have students consider the following statement:

Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, demonstrated that “there has never been a famine in a functioning multiparty democracy.”

Have students discuss the implications of Sen’s discovery in a pair and share or other small group arrangement. They should conclude that government and organization have much/everything to do with mass death by starvation.

Day 2

Have students watch the documentary, *Harvest of Despair*. This will take the whole class period. Ask students to take notes, making note of salient points and things on which they may need clarification.

Day 3

Based on students' notes from last period, start with a class discussion of *Harvest of Despair* documentary. I have created a PowerPoint to encapsulate the basics.
(10 minutes)

Next, show students the talk by Valentina Kuryliw, Director of Education of the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium in Toronto, Canada. Have each student write one thing that they found important or disturbing (they can use mini white boards, notebooks, computers or black board). Discuss these ideas briefly. (15 - 20 minutes)

Last, go to the link for *Share the Story*, and listen to testimony from 3-5 survivors of the Holodomor. What similarities, if any, do your students see in these stories?

End the class by telling students about the film, *Bitter Harvest* or *Mr. Jones* and show the trailer(s).

Days 4 & 5

(Note: You may need one more day, depending on how involved your class discussions get).

Students will watch the film, *Bitter Harvest*. At various points, stop the video and ask questions to make sure students are understanding the events that are unfolding.

Writing assignment (attached).

The same can also be done with the film *Mr. Jones*.

Day 6

Ask students to go to the link for *Investigation of Ukrainian Famine 1932–1933, Report to US Congress*:

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d00831044s&view=1up&seq=195>

Explain that this report was submitted to the United States Congress in 1988, fifty-five years after the Holodomor had occurred. Have students read from page 161 – 167. The rest of this assignment is explained in detail on pages 3 & 4 of this lesson plan.

Resource List:

1. *Investigation of Ukrainian Famine 1932–1933, Report to US Congress:*
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951d00831044s&view=1up&seq=195>
2. “Holodomor: Memories of Ukraine’s Silent Massacre,” article and brief eyewitness video from the BBC.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25058256>
3. *Harvest of Despair – Great Famine in Ukraine (1932 – 1933)*, 55-minute documentary.
Use UCRDC’s link instead:
http://www.ucrdc.org/Film-Harvest_of_Despair.html
4. “How Joseph Stalin Starved Millions in the Ukrainian Famine,” article from History.com:
<https://www.history.com/news/ukrainian-famine-stalin>
5. “Historic Famines and Episodes of Mass Intentional Starvation,” article from the World Peace Foundation:
<https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2015/10/12/historic-famines-and-episodes-of-mass-intentional-starvation/>
6. “Famine Trends Dataset, Tables and Graphs,” article from the World Peace Foundation: <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/famine/>
7. Valentina Kuryliw, Director of Education, Holodomor Research and Education Consortium, 11-minute YouTube video talk on the Holodomor, “Exposing the Ukrainian Holodomor – “How starvation was used as a political weapon” in Unit 2, Chapter 5 of FAST’s *Voices into Action* program, 2017:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=414&v=Xwf6WEF3dfc&feature=emb_logo
8. *Share the Story* – Brief videos of Holodomor survivors telling their stories:
<http://www.sharethestory.ca/index.html>

9. Holodomor Poems:
<https://www.poetryxhunger.com/historical-poems.html>
10. Holodomor Did Not Break Them – 35-page informational brochure on the Holodomor with photos:
https://old.uinp.gov.ua/sites/default/files/brochure_eng_1000.pdf
11. Ukrainian Genocide – Classroom Resources for Teachers
<http://holodomorct.org/holodomor-information-links/holodomor-classroom-resources-teachers/>
12. Holodomor Teaching Materials from HREC Education: “Denial and Silences” <https://education.holodomor.ca/teaching-materials/holodomor-denial-silences/>
13. *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*, by Adam Jones:
<https://www.mcvts.net/cms/lib07/NJ01911694/Centricity/Domain/155/Textbook.pdf>
Note: I have a hard copy of the third edition, printed in 2017. This link is to an older addition, and pages don’t always match up. It’s an excellent resource, though, and students can access it for free.
14. *Bitter Harvest* trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKLBP3fZ5zA>
15. *Mr. Jones* trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQyRbUGD3Vw>

Appendix / Handouts:

1. Imperial Famines PowerPoint (attached)
2. Holodomor PowerPoint (attached)
3. *Bitter Harvest* film Writing Assignment (attached)