

Tetiana SOPRONIUK, PhD

Department of History of Ukraine, Faculty of History and Law, Nizhyn Mykola Gogol State University, Nizhyn, Ukraine

E-mail: tanyasopron@gmail.com

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**EVERYDAY LIFE REFLECTED IN THE UKRAINIAN SSR
RAILWAY PRESS DURING THE HOLODOMOR
(1932-1933)**

Abstract: *In this article, the author studied how the local printed media of the South-Western Railways (Ukrainian SSR) reacted to the Holodomor – the artificial famine of 1932–1933. While Soviet newspapers were primarily viewed as instruments for disseminating state-approved narratives, this study argues that the local railway press serves as a valuable but often overlooked source for understanding the multifaceted realities of Soviet society during this tumultuous period.*

Examining the editorial mechanisms of the railway press, the article discusses the involvement of workers and farmers as correspondents. The use of „robsilkors” (workers’ and farmers’ correspondents) in reporting everyday issues and problems within the railway system highlights a dynamic interaction between the press, its readership, and the authorities. The press functioned as an information conduit to party units and law enforcement, emphasizing the so-called „self-criticism campaigns” and denunciations.

Under totalitarian censorship and government control, the newspapers did not openly write about starvation and mass mortality. The press, however, inadvertently provided glimpses into the harsh realities of everyday life, especially in local publications where censorship was comparatively weaker. They unveiled details showcasing the impact of food shortages, malnutrition, and unsanitary conditions. While workers had access to canteens and a food supply system, theft and misappropriation were survival strategies. The press documented cases of intentional damage to grain cargoes and corruption in the food stamps system. Despite receiving state-provided goods, workers faced challenges with the quality of provisions and sanitary conditions in canteens.

Moreover, along with covering the famine, the press actively disseminated propaganda aimed at reinforcing the divide between the working class and farmers. This contrast was evident, yet many railway workers experienced life similar to farmers, owning land and resisting state-imposed

agricultural policies. The newspapers called on the railway employees to participate in the so-called „mass campaigns” in the villages, which sometimes appeared to be confiscating food from the farmers' houses. Refusal to join these campaigns could lead to the denunciation on the newspapers pages.

In conclusion, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of the Soviet railway press during the Holodomor years, revealing its dual nature as a propagandistic tool and a subtle source of authentic information. By dissecting the content and contextualizing the narratives within the socio-political landscape, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of Soviet society during a period of historical upheaval.

Key words: Newspapers, Holodomor, press, railway, everyday life, censorship, famine, Soviet Union, Ukrainian SSR, South-Western Railways.

SVAKODNEVNI ŽIVOT IZ PERSPEKTIVE ŽELJEZNIČKE ŠTAMPE UKRAJINSKE SSR TOKOM HOLODOMORA (1932-1933)

Apstrakt: U ovom članku autor proučava kako su lokalni štampani mediji južno-zapadnih željeznica (Ukrajinska SSR) reagovali na Holodomor – umjetnu glad iz 1932. do 1933. godine. Dok su sovjetske novine prvenstveno smatrane instrumentima za širenje državom odobrenih narativa, ova studija tvrdi da lokalna željeznička štampa predstavlja dragocjen, ali često zanemaren izvor za razumijevanje složenih stvarnosti sovjetskog društva tokom ovog turbulentnog perioda.

Istražujući uredničke mehanizme željezničke štampe, članak razmatra ulogu radnika i seljaka kao dopisnika. Korištenje „robsilkora“ (dopisnici radnika i seljaka) u izvještavanju o svakodnevnim pitanjima i problemima unutar željezničkog sistema ističe dinamičnu interakciju između štampe, njenog čitateljstva i vlasti. Štampa je funkcionisala kao informativni kanal prema partijskim jedinicama i organima vlasti, naglašavajući tzv. „kampanje samokritike“ i denuncijacije.

Pod totalitarnom cenzurom i vladinom kontrolom, novine nisu otvoreno pisale o gladi i masovnoj smrtnosti. Ipak, štampa je nenamjerno pružila uvide u teške stvarnosti svakodnevnog života, posebno u lokalnim publikacijama gdje je cenzura bila relativno slabija. Ove publikacije su otkrile detalje koji pokazuju utjecaj nestašice hrane, pothranjenosti i neurednih uslova. Iako su radnici imali pristup kantinama i sistemu snabdijevanja hranom, krađa i nepropisno postupanje su bile strategije preživljavanja. Štampa je dokumentovala slučajeve namjernog oštećenja tereta žita i korupciju u sistemu prehrambenih bonova. Uprkos dobijanju državnih dobara, radnici su se suočavali s problemima u kvaliteti namirnica i sanitarnih uslova u kantinama.

Osim što je pokrivala glad, štampa je aktivno širila propagandu usmjerenu na jačanje razdora između radničke klase i seljaka. Ova kontrastna slika bila je očigledna, ali su mnogi željezničari imali slične životne uslove kao seljaci, posjedujući zemlju i opirući se državnim poljoprivrednim politikama. Novine su pozivale željezničke radnike da učestvuju u tzv. „masovnim kampanjama“ u selima, koje su ponekad izgledale kao oduzimanje hrane iz kuća seljaka. Odbijanje da se pridruže tim kampanjama moglo je dovesti do denuncijacije u novinama.

U zaključku, ova istraživanja pružaju sveobuhvatno razumijevanje sovjetske željezničke štampe tokom godina Holodomora, otkrivajući njenu dvostruku prirodu kao propagandnog alata i suptilnog izvora autentičnih informacija. Analizirajući sadržaj i kontekstualizirajući narative unutar društveno-političkog pejzaža, studija doprinosi dubljem razumijevanju složenosti sovjetskog društva tokom perioda historijskih previranja.

Ključne riječi: *Novine, Holodomor, štampa, željeznica, svakodnevni život, cenzura, glad, Sovjetski Savez, Ukrajinska SSR, Južno-zapadne željeznice.*

Introduction

Soviet press is sometimes perceived as a pure medium of propaganda with little to no informative value¹. The population of the USSR frequently used newspapers not only for reading but also for household needs (for example, making cigars, wrapping food products, or even hanging wallpapers). Such attitude can be explained by the fact that the government and the Communist Party directly stated that the main functions of newspapers were disseminating propaganda among the population, implementing so-called „mass ideological campaigns,“ and informing citizens about the decisions of the authorities². In other words, the press was not putting much effort into becoming interesting for its audience, focusing on the tasks set by the Party and government rather than topics significant to the population.

¹ Olha Vakulchuk. Bahatotyrazhna presa Ukrainy 1917–1941 rokiv: stanovlennia, rozvytok, kontent [Mass-circulation press of Ukraine in 1917–1941: emergence, development, content], NBUV, Kyiv 2021.

² On the Soviet authorities' vision of the role of newspapers, see: Mykhailo Ahuf, *Presa bilshovyzmy [The Press of the Bolshevism]*, Politydav pry TsK KP(b)U, [Kyiv] 1940; Gennadiy Kozhevnikov, *Partiya – organizator rabselkorovskogo dvizheniya v SSSR [Party, the Organizer of the Workers' and Farmers Movement in the USSR]*, Izdatelstvo Saratovskogo universiteta, Saratov 1965; Ivan Portyankin, *Osnovnyie funktsii i printsipy partynoy i sovetskoy pechati [Main Principles of the Party and Soviet Publishing]*, Moscow 1955; Yakov Shafir, *Gazeta i derevnya [Newspaper and Village]*, Krasnaya Nov, Moscow, Leningrad 1924.

Moreover, the Soviet press created the imaginary chronotope, describing the successes of constructing the „new world” and focusing on the utopia of the „bright communist future”. Instead of informing about important current domestic and foreign events or perhaps entertaining the readers, Soviet newspapers mobilized people to work hard³ and were aimed to keep them in a state of constant readiness for possible military aggression⁴. Consequently, the press was not meant to reflect its readers' true sentiments, concerns, or needs.

Another function of the Soviet press was to hide the actual situation and distract readers from everyday problems. In the circumstances of the mass starvation of the Holodomor of 1932 and 1933, the media were, of course, silent about the famine. However, it cannot be stated that there is no trace of the actual situation in the publications. In fact, it is quite the opposite.

Newspapers, especially local ones, contain valuable information about people's households and everyday life, repressions against the workers, and even hidden evidence of starvation. Considering the deliberate destruction of archival documents to cover communist crimes, the Soviet local press can be viewed as a secondary source for the Holodomor studies, especially for the exploration of its events on the lowest level.

This perspective was first proposed by the U.S. Commission on the Ukraine Famine members in 1988. In their report to the Congress, they used newspaper messages to reconstruct the course of the grain procurement campaign⁵. Later, H. Boriak⁶, Sh. Fitzpatrick⁷, O. Koliastruk⁸, R. Liubavskiy⁹, M. Tymoshyk¹⁰ and others studied how people's everyday lives appeared in the Soviet press and examined the printed media of different regions of the Soviet

³ Olha Koliastruk, *Liudyna pratsi v SRSR: vid hloryfikatsii do devalvatsii* [Man of labour in USSR: from glorifying to devaluation], *Aktualni problemy vitchyznanoi ta vsesvitnoi istorii*, 2019, 21, 71-78.

⁴ Artur Mykhailyk, Iryna Zavadska, “Nemynucha viina” yak politychna mifolohema politychnoi propahandy v radianskii Ukraini 1920–1930-kh rokiv [“Inevitable War” as a Political Mythology of Political Propaganda in Soviet Ukraine in the 1920s-1930s], *Hrani*, 2023, 26(5), 83-89.

⁵ *Investigation of the Ukrainian famine, 1932-1933: report to Congress : adopted by the Commission, April 19, 1988, submitted to Congress, April 22, 1988*, United States Government Printing Office, Washington 1988.

⁶ Hennadii Boriak, Holodomor Archives and Sources: The State of the Art. *The Harriman Review*, 2008, Vol. 16, No. 2, 21–35.

⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, Oxford University Press, New York 1999.

⁸ Olha Koliastruk, *Presa USRR v konteksti polityky ukrainizatsiyi (20-30-ti roky XX st)* [The Ukrainians SSR Press in the Context of Ukrainianization Policy (the 1920s – 1930s)], Institute of History of Ukraine, Kyiv 2003.

⁹ Roman Liubavskiy, *Povsiakdenne zhyttia robotnykiv Kharkova v 1920-ti — na pochatku 1930-kh rokiv* [Everyday Life of the Workers of Kharkiv in the 1920s and Early 1930s], Rarytety Ukrainy, Kharkiv 2016.

¹⁰ Mykola Tymoshyk, Raionni hazety yak orhanizatory silkorivskoho rukhu v umovakh stverdzhennia v Ukraini komuno-bilshovytskoi systemy [District Newspapers as the Organizers of the Villages Correspondents Movement under the Conditions of the Establishment of the Communist Bolshevik System in Ukraine]. *Siveryanskyi Litopys*, 2017, No. 4, 215–222.

Union and, in particular, Ukraine. Interestingly, Soviet scholars also analyzed newspapers as historical sources¹¹, but they did not take into account censorship and disinformation.

Railway Newspapers Publishing

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Soviet Union government created a vast network of newspapers directed at different groups of people. P. Kenez called this network „the blood-circulation system of the body politics”¹². Along with geographical targeting, the Bolsheviks organized periodicals for the workers of particular spheres of industry (such as machine building, mining, or textile industry). Similar to the usual press, professional newspapers were divided into central and local. For example, *Gudok* was the newspaper for railway workers of the whole USSR. It was generally considered an exemplary professional periodical. At the same time, the railway workers living, for instance, in the Chernihiv region, had to subscribe to *Chernihivskiy Zaliznychnyk* (*Chernihiv Railway Worker*).

This paper focuses on the press released at the South-Western Railways in the early 1930s. This railway system covered significant parts of the Ukrainian SSR territory and included such big cities as Kyiv, Odesa, Cherkasy, Chernihiv, Vinnytsia, and Zhytomyr. It was also heavily involved in the transportation of grain from Ukraine to Russia and to the Black Sea ports for export and, therefore, was a critical component of the economic system of the Soviet Union.

Two main types of periodicals released at the industrial sites and on transport were so-called „large-circulation newspapers” („bahatotyrazhky”) and „wall newspapers” („stinhazety”). The first were usually printed on professional equipment and issued in more copies, while the latter were typically handmade and existed in only one copy. They also were a part of the hierarchy: the larger regional newspapers were responsible for the smaller ones.

The large-circulation newspapers for the workers of South-Western Railways were issued mainly in Ukrainian (however, occasionally, they contained articles in Russian). Their circulation varied from 1,000 to 10,000 copies. Unlike the majority of average local newspapers, their content did not focus on mass agricultural campaigns, such as collectivization, sowing, or grain procurements, although they were mentioned concerning the work of the transport system. Railway press wrote about the railway transport system's

¹¹ Valentyna Sydorenko, *Presa yak dzherelo z istorii robitnychoho klasu Ukrainy v period sotsialistynoho budivnytstva (1921–1941 rr)* [*Press as a Source for the History of the Working Class of Ukraine during the Socialist Construction Period*]. Naukova dumka, Kyiv 1975.

¹² Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, 224.

problems, perspectives, and ideological movements. These media published the official legislations of state and local authorities regarding railway transport and the reports about their successful (or sometimes unsuccessful) implementation in particular villages and train stations.

The workers had to subscribe to professional newspapers under administrative solid pressure. For example, the *Chernihivskiyi Zaliznychnyk* wrote, *All local committees of the branch Nizhyn – Chernihiv – Homel have to start the work among their workers' collectives to distribute the subscription to the large-circulation newspaper of our junction Chernihivskiyi Zaliznychnyk, make the lists [of subscribers] and send them to the editors' office.*¹³ Such insistence appeared very effective: within about a month, the newspaper printed an article about the Territorial Trade Union Organization of Chernihiv Region staff, all of whom subscribed to *Chernihivskiyi Zaliznychnyk*¹⁴.

Along with the passivity of the workers, who did not want to subscribe to the press, the newspapers faced problems with their distribution caused by the malfunctioning of the mail delivery system. The editors and readers reported receiving newspapers very irregularly: *In the Bobrynska depot, com. Petrushyna is delivering the Udarnyk Transporta newspapers to the subscribers, but she hands them out to anyone and sometimes throws them into the paper waste, and we, the workers of the party brigade, often are left without a newspaper*¹⁵.

Considering all this, it is difficult to state how many people read the press with interest. On the one hand, many workers and even party members did not trust the propaganda and were quite indifferent to the information written on the mass media pages, and we can see this from the reports of the controlling authorities. *Almost all group organizations are politically poorly developed' they irregularly read newspapers' they poorly orient themselves in the political situation.* The results of the audit of the lowest level party work stated¹⁶. On the other hand, newspapers were almost the only source of information about the events in the USSR and abroad for the population. The alternatives to the newspapers were radio, which was still a new phenomenon for many Ukrainians, and rumours.

In addition, the large-circulation transport newspapers were responsible for creating the wall newspapers in the train stations and depots. Despite numerous state and local authorities orders, directives, and attempts to appoint

¹³ *Chernihivskiyi Zaliznychnyk [Chernihiv Railway Worker]*, September 17, 1931.

¹⁴ *Chernihivskiyi Zaliznychnyk [Chernihiv Railway Worker]*, October 11, 1931.

¹⁵ *Udarnyk Transporta [Striking Worker of the Transport] (Konotop)*, April 7, 1933.

¹⁶ *Materiialy obstezhennia part-masovoi roboty v nyzovykh zveniyakh po Koziatynskomu vuzlu Pivd. Zakh. zalizn. vid 10–12 serpnia 1932 r. za pidpysom Instruktora Dorozhnoho partorhanizatora PZZ Kulbachko ta in. [Materials of the audit of the Party and mass work in the low-level units of the Koziatyn junction of the South-Western Railways from August 10–12, 1932, signed by the instructor of the Road Party Organizer Kulbachko et al]*, Central State Archive of Public Associations and Ukrainians, f. 1, inv. 20, case 5717, sheet 44.

the responsible persons, the wall newspapers were often not issued because of the general indifference of those who worked on the „ideological frontline.“

As we can see, all links in this chain (the editors, the mail, and the readers) were apathetic about the newspapers. Nevertheless, due to control and commands from the authorities, the system of mass brainwashing was functioning productively.

Censorship: What Press Was Silence About?

The censorship in the press at the local level was much weaker than in the central editorial offices. The editors in small towns were less qualified, and the Communist Party did not have enough human resources to check the content of every issue carefully.

The general guidance for the editors was the bulletins with the lists of forbidden topics¹⁷, annually released by the so-called „Glavlit,“ or Main Directorate for Literature and Publishing. The editors' offices received these secret documents and were responsible for keeping certain information confidential.

In the context of this paper, we can outline two important forbidden topics. The first is the information about mass starvation, which never directly appeared in the press, and the other is railway accidents. The railway newspapers rarely reported on them, although in the archival documents of the GPU, Soviet security service, one can find dozens of reports about horrible accidents causing many casualties (for example, on May 15, 1932, as a result of the accident between the stations of Yakovlivka and Zelena, 73 people died, and 17 were injured¹⁸).

Moreover, the authorities regularly released decrees and directives on decreasing the number of accidents, especially fatal ones. These documents rarely appeared in the press, although they were not classified. The government probably wanted to create the impression that railway accidents rarely happen in the USSR.

¹⁷ For example, *Perechen (na mirnoe vremya) A) svedeniy, sostavlyayuschih voennuyu taynu i ne podlezhaschih oglasheniyu v tselyah ohraneniya voennyih interesov SSSR. B) svedeniy, sostavlyayuschih taynu i ne podlezhaschih oglasheniyu v tselyah ohraneniya ekonomiko-politichesk. interesov SSSR* [List of (for peacetime) A) information that constitutes a military secret and is not subject to disclosure to protect the USSR's military interests. B) information that constitutes a secret and is not subject to disclosure in order to protect the economic and political interests of the USSR]. State Archives of Chernihiv Region, f. P-3621, inv. 1, case 20, sheets 43–74.

¹⁸ *Lyst Yu. Voitsekhovskoho; Serbichenko do Politbiuro TsK KP(b)U Pro avariuu na perehoni st. Zelena – Yakovlivka Katerynoslavskoi zaliznytsi vid 19.V-1932 r.* [Letter of Yu. Voitsekhivskiy; Serbichenko to the Politbiuro of the CC CP(B)U about the accident on the stretch between Zelena and Yakovlivka stations of the Katerynoslavska railway from May 19, 1932]. Central State Archive of Public Associations and Ukrainians, f. 1, inv. 20, case 5246, sheet 12.

One of the few exceptions is an accident at Myropil station on March 12, 1933, when the train derailed due to a mistake by the driver and switchman. As a result, three people died, and 22 wagons were destroyed. While reporting on this accident, the *Koziatyn Railway Worker* newspaper used it as a reason to increase the propagandistic pressure on the workers. In particular, the editors published a note about the need to strengthen labour discipline and „mass educational work“ next to the news about the disaster. It is also symptomatic that the newspaper called for a higher degree of punishment to be applied to the culprits and, in general, strict treatment of violators of discipline¹⁹.

Occasionally, the researchers consider publishing restricted information in the communist press to be the practice of „silent resistance“ of its journalists and editors²⁰. However, the Ukrainian SSR local railway press is not the case: the articles that violated censorship limitations appeared rather because of accidental mistakes and the editors' lack of proper training than because of their intentional actions.

Correspondents

Along with the censorship, the communist Party wanted to create an impression of the newspapers being close to the people's masses. That is why they developed a network of so-called „robsilkors,“ or „workers and farmers correspondents,“ who were the authors of most local newspaper articles. To become a correspondent, a worker could fill in the form and send it to the editorial office. Another possible way was to start writing and send the report to the newspaper. The idea was that only those working on the transport could write about it well enough, while professional journalists and writers distort the truth and must learn more about the spheres they write about.

However, relying on the unprofessional „workers' correspondents“ who did not have an appropriate education inevitably led to the poor quality of the reports – both on the linguistic and content levels. That is also why these correspondents sometimes wrote about insufficient matters and used the newspapers to solve personal conflicts or even get revenge. Nevertheless, they often reported on their problems, probably believing that these publications could help solve them. In addition, railway newspapers contained much more letters from their readers and correspondents than the general central and local press of that time.

The railway newspaper editorial offices became points for collecting and sorting information from the grounds. A strong incentive for correspondents to report problems was the so-called „self-criticism“ campaigns.

¹⁹ *Koziatynskyy Zaliznychnyk [Koziatyn Railway Worker]*, 22 March 1933.

²⁰ Epp Lauk, Tiiu Kreegipuu, „Was It All Propaganda? Journalistic Practices of 'Silent Resistance' in Soviet Estonian Journalism“, *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*, 2010, 15, 167–190.

Their idea was to look for and reveal, for example, management mistakes or people „of doubtful loyalty“ and make them public without waiting for the authorities to find them.

Also, the newspapers actively cooperated with different law enforcement agencies and controlling authorities. The editors sent there the information they received from the readers and correspondents. Sometimes, the newspapers published comments explaining that the editors checked the information and sent it to the appropriate body, and, if needed, the editors will follow the proceedings in the case (*On August 9, the Poliskyi Zaliznychnyk printed the piece 'Enemy of the Transport—Out of the Party and Transport!'. The bureau of the party unit of the Chernihiv depot informs the editorial office: for his right opportunist practices, the technician Lekhman was expelled from the Party*²¹). Eventually, the very publication in the press itself was enough to resolve the problematic issues without sending the information to the authorities: the railway structures dealt with the rule-breakers on their own²². Moreover, the newspapers even demanded that local party units react to their publications (*The signals of the press should be clearly reflected in the daily work. We are expecting an immediate response from the district [Party] organizations on what is done regarding the following publications...*²³).

The above shows that the press performed the functions typical for the authorities. The network of correspondents guaranteed the constant flow of information to the party units and law enforcement agencies, while the published article about someone's fault could make them resign or even be punished. Encouraging people to denounce each other turned out to be successful. At the same time, the „robkors“ sometimes revealed the real problems, far from propaganda's bright, delusory image, which led to the number of workers' correspondents' publications significantly decreasing since the middle of 1933. Instead, the press replaced them with more and more official documents and statements. In other words, giving the correspondents too much freedom to expose the unpleasant reality was becoming dangerous.

Workers' Everyday Life: Food, Canteens, Supply System

As mentioned above, local newspapers are an essential source of information about the workers' households. Such publications reflect the lack of provision and housing, unsanitary conditions, lack of access to health care, and other issues. During the Holodomor, when millions of people died of starvation, the situation in the transport system was better than in the villages in general.

²¹ *Poliskyi Zaliznychnyk [Polissia Railway Worker]*, December 5, 1933.

²² For examples, see *Udarnyk Transporta [Striking Worker of the Transport] (Konotop)*, February 17, 1933.

²³ *Udarnyk Transporta [Striking Worker of the Transport] (Konotop)*, February 14, 1933.

The workers had much better access to food than the collective farm members, but the state of things was far from ordinary.

Although the press was generally silent about the famine catastrophe, its scale was so massive that hiding it completely was impossible. For example, in one of the publications, the correspondent stated that the amount of bread the workers receive for lunch is 10-15 grams (!) smaller than the norm established by the documents. After the canteen scales were inspected, it appeared that the saleswoman intentionally interfered with their work so that they showed incorrect values²⁴, despite „tiny everyday thefts“ being almost a social norm in the USSR. The fact that people were concerned about under-receiving a few grams of bread on one hand and stealing, on the other hand, reflects the lack of food provision.

Moreover, since the railway workers had access to the grain transported in cargo wagons, they could intentionally damage them to steal the food provision. In one of the press reports, the correspondent wrote about the carrier who deliberately left the hatch open, resulting in 200 kilograms of grain spilling out of the wagon²⁵. The author of this brief piece labelled the man's actions as „wreckage“ and „machinations of the class enemy“ (sabotage), but they can also be explained by the perpetrator's wish to get some food for consumption. In two months, the newspaper correspondent reported about the same person committing the same actions and emphasized that he should not still be working at the station²⁶. Considering the extreme conditions of mass starvation, such thefts can be regarded as a survival practice.

A similar case happened at the Kyiv-Pasazhyrskiyi station, where workers stole food (potatoes and apples) while the trains were manoeuvring at the Kadetskiy bridge. Later, other workers sold these stolen goods at the Halytskiy market²⁷, located next to the station. This market was the starting point of the so-called „beggars' way“, followed by many hungry peasants coming to Kyiv by train²⁸.

At the same time, following the governmental decree „On the Protection of the Property of State Enterprises, Kolkhozes and Cooperatives, and Strengthening of the Public (Socialist) Property“ from August 7, 1932, more commonly known as the „Five Stalks of Grain Law“, the goods carried on water and railway transport were equated to state property; therefore, their theft was severely persecuted and punished by shooting or ten years imprisonment

²⁴ *Koziatynskiyi Zaliznychnyk [Koziatyn Railway Worker]*, 7 January 1933.

²⁵ *Poliskiyi Zaliznychnyk [Polissia Railway Worker]*, October 12. 1933.

²⁶ *Poliskiyi Zaliznychnyk [Polissia Railway Worker]*, December 28. 1933.

²⁷ *Syhnal Udarnyka [Signal of the Striking Worker] (Kyiv)*, January 15. 1933.

²⁸ Mykhailo Kostiv, Ivan Petrenko, „Shans na vyzhyvannia: Kyiv u roky Holodomoru“ [A Chance for Survival: Kyiv During the Holodomor], *Istorychna Pravda*, 1 December 2020. URL: <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/articles/2020/12/1/158581/>.

with confiscation of all property²⁹. The workers from the Kyiv-Pasazhyrskiy station mentioned above were sentenced to 10 years for stealing large amounts of window glass from the central warehouse³⁰, which may indicate that misappropriation of food was quite common and did not always entail severe criminal persecution. The same newspaper report stated that at the moment of the publication of the issue, the transport court was considering 30 cases of thefts committed at the Kyiv railway junction³¹. To decrease the number of thefts, the press proposed to reward the railroad workers who caught the thieves³².

Furthermore, the correspondents often complained about the unsanitary state of canteens and hoped that publication in the press would lead to changes for the better. For example, the newspaper published the story of the train driver who had a conflict with the canteen management at Chernihiv station. He bought the so-called „commercial lunch” (designed for the visitors and not the employees), but there was nowhere to wash his hands. Moreover, he asked for a fork, but, according to the canteen manager, there were only five forks for the entire place³³. An almost identical incident happened in canteen No. 125 at the Kyiv-1 station, where personnel told the correspondent that they had only ten spoons in the dining hall³⁴.

These articles show that the canteens were not adjusted to receive visitors due to their unsanitary state, poor equipment, and weak work organization. Dirty kitchens and dining halls, together with unhygienic conditions of the stations' premises and trains, contributed to the spread of epidemic typhus, which the press also reported about³⁵. However, the authors of such publications usually did not blame the authorities or governmental policies that allowed or even caused these problems. Instead, they denounced particular managers or workers as „wreckers”. The newspapers' editors insisted on personal responsibility—probably because pointing out the system's flaws was too dangerous.

Despite the problems with getting food provisions for the canteens and workers, sometimes products rotted because of improper storage conditions. For instance, 30 wagons of potatoes were loaded out on Holubychi station in

²⁹ Pro okhoronu maina derzhavnykh pidpriemstv, kolhospiv i kooperatsii ta pro zmitsnennia hromadskoi (sotsialistychnoi) vlasnosti. Postanova TsVK ta RNK SRSR [On the Protection of the Property of State Enterprises, Kolkhozes and Cooperatives, and Strengthening of the Public (Socialist) Property. Decree of the CEC and CPC of the USSR]. *Chernihivskiy Zaliznychnyk [Chernihiv Railway Worker]*, 19 August 1932.

³⁰ *Syhnal Udarnyka [Signal of the Striking Worker] (Kyiv)*, January 15, 1933.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Udarnyk Transporta [Striking Worker of the Transport] (Konotop)*, April 25, 1933.

³³ *Chernihivskiy Zaliznychnyk [Chernihiv Railway Worker]*, September 25, 1931.

³⁴ *Syhnal Udarnyka [Signal of the Striking Worker] (Kyiv)*, January 27, 1933.

³⁵ *Syhnal Udarnyka [Signal of the Striking Worker] (Kyiv)*, February 28, 1933.

the fall of 1931. The correspondent, who named himself „Nabat“ („Warning Bell“), highlighted that the potatoes had been lying outside for two weeks³⁶.

Along with eating in the special canteens, the workers received food products directly through the food stamps system, managed by the Transport Consuming Society, where the products and industrial goods were sold (or at least meant to be sold) to the railway workers only. The press, however, printed numerous reports about the „speculations” with ration and bread stamps: the responsible officials either signed these stamps for so-called „dead souls” (in the names of people who did not work in the railway system or who had false certificates) and then either sold this food on the market³⁷, or gave the stamps away to their friends and family members (*There are the cases in our Transport Consuming Society when the workers who sell the products squander the industrial goods to their acquaintances. People who do not have any relation to the transport, such as artists, cinema workers, medical staff, and other close acquaintances of the counterman, receive the industrial goods*³⁸). Such articles reflect the general poverty level and consider food provision and other goods valuable. As a result, they were shared among those „closer” to the distribution points.

Moreover, the provision that the workers were receiving with such difficulties was often of inferior quality, and numerous newspaper publications³⁹ did not help much in solving this problem. In the letters to the editors' offices, the railway workers recognized this fact but complained about the poor quality of bread, which was getting even worse daily⁴⁰.

In the context of food provision for the average „Soviet people“, the articles about awarding the workers and their families with products are of particular interest. In 1931, on the occasion of the „October holidays“, the children of the railway workers received 1.5 kilos of wheat flour, 400 grams of sugar, and some farina each, while the „udarnik“ workers (those who overachieved the targets) have got a kilo of herring, sugar and bullock's fat, and also cigarettes, men's shirts, and shoes⁴¹. The fact that people received food and essential goods from the state as a special gift speaks for itself.

In addition, a particularly cynical campaign, implemented on the South-Western Railways in the autumn of 1933, was the so-called „bread routes” devoted to the 15th anniversary of the Komsomol. The trains loaded with tons of grain and serviced by the outstanding Komsomol brigades were going to Moscow. This is how the *Koziatyn Railway Worker* described this campaign: *Morning. The workers of the Koziatyn station, by the long exclamations*

³⁶ *Chernihivskiy Zaliznychnyk [Chernihiv Railway Worker]*, October 16, 1931.

³⁷ *Syhnal Udarnyka [Signal of the Striking Worker]* (Kyiv), February 28, 1933.

³⁸ *Chernihivskiy Zaliznychnyk [Chernihiv Railway Worker]*, December 19, 1931.

³⁹ *Chernihivskiy Zaliznychnyk [Chernihiv Railway Worker]*, October 22, 1931; *Chernihivskiy Zaliznychnyk [Chernihiv Railway Worker]*, October 30, 1931.

⁴⁰ *Chernihivskiy Zaliznychnyk [Chernihiv Railway Worker]*, November 15, 1931.

⁴¹ *Chernihivskiy Zaliznychnyk [Chernihiv Railway Worker]*, October 30, 1931.

'Hurray!', greet the Komsomol train to Moscow that departs and goes by the bread route. A short meeting begins. The orchestra is playing 'The Internationale'⁴². Similar trains departed from other stations and brought tons of grain from Ukraine, devastated by the famine, to Russia.

City vs Village

One of the Holodomor years' extensive ideological campaigns was aimed at increasing the tension between the workers and the farmers. „Anti-kulak” propaganda blamed the villagers for purposefully hiding their crops from the authorities, which led to „food difficulties” among the working class. Simultaneously, the authorities used the workers as human resources to implement their cruel agricultural policies.

In particular, the railway press organized brigades of railway workers responsible for the different forms of „working with the masses“. Railway workers were sent to the villages to „assist“ the farmers in performing the grain procurement plans or collecting the „sowing funds“. This help included organizing propagandistic gatherings and sometimes direct participation in the searches and food confiscation.

For example, the newspapers called on the party organizations in the transport sphere to „develop the work“ in the „subordinate villages“ to „give the examples of the truly skilful struggle to perform the tasks of the party and the government“⁴³. Moreover, the directorate of the South-Western Railways established several „headquarters“, whose task, among other things, was to „sharpen attention to seed funds and resolve the issue of loans for seed material for collective and individual land cultivation“⁴⁴. This Aesopian language covers a call to participate in confiscations. Railway newspapers joined these campaigns, too: the editors of the *Syhnal Udarnyka* sent its so-called „remote editorial office” from Kyiv to the nearby village (as a response to the letters of the kolkhoz members) to help them organize the regular publication of the wall newspaper⁴⁵.

Nevertheless, some railway workers refused to „work on the bread frontline“ in the villages, and, as a result, they were criticized in the press (*In order to help the subordinate village of Khatsky during the sowing campaign, the Komsomol unit of the steam depot No. 16 chose the Komsomol member Sydorovych and sent him to the village for ten days. /.../ Unfortunately, Sydorovych did not live up to the trust, did not perform the tasks set by the*

⁴² *Koziatynskyy Zaliznychnyk [Koziatyn Railway Worker]*, 30 October 1933.

⁴³ *Koziatynskyy Zaliznychnyk [Koziatyn Railway Worker]*, February 6, 1933.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Syhnal Udarnyka [Signal of the Striking Worker] (Kyiv)*, March 5, 1933.

*Komsomol unit, and deserted from the sowing frontline*⁴⁶). To describe the agricultural campaign, the newspaper used military vocabulary, which reflects the general militarization of the press language in the early 1930s.

At the same time, many workers of the railway system lived in smaller towns and villages, and, therefore, their lifestyle was similar to that of the peasants. They and their family members often worked in the collective farms and experienced food shortages. Moreover, many railway workers owned patches of land and, therefore, like other farmers, were obliged to hand their crops to the state. They often refused to surrender, hoping to leave the crops for themselves – and became the objects of intense criticism on the pages of the newspapers (*... the worker of the Konotop station has to sell 177 kilos of rye to the state. But he stubbornly does not hand it over. The last plenum of the village council, having discussed this, decided to ask the party, professional and economic organizations of the transport to expel him from the industry as a saboteur of the grain procurement process*⁴⁷). In these publications, working in the railway system and accessing its benefits, such as the food supply system, was portrayed as a great privilege that should be available only to „worthy“ people.

Even trying to help others by hiding their grain could lead to public denunciation. For instance, the *Khrystynivka Railway Worker* wrote, *Assistant of the train driver Hrubsky was hiding under his bed 16 poods of grain [approx. 260 kg] belonging to the farmer Hryts Kulyk. For doing so, Kulyk gave him 1,5 poods [approx. 25 kg] of white flour. For such actions, Hrubsky must be excluded from the supply system so that he won't sabotage the grain procurement once more*⁴⁸.

In addition, smaller railway newspapers sometimes denounced particular workers based on their social origin. *Kulak's daughter is working on the post of the timekeeper. /.../ This person will actively help to cover the truants because truancy is the enemy of the socialism building; it disorganizes the work of our transport and plays right into the hands of the class enemy,* reported *Udarnyk Transporta*⁴⁹. Although such articles sometimes appear like personal revenge of their authors, being related to the „class enemies“ („kulaks“, priests, or „Petliura's supporters“) was dangerous for one's career.

Summary

Finally, the local railway press of the Holodomor years distanced itself from reality and produced a delusory image. That is why the editors carefully

⁴⁶ *Udarnyk Transporta [Striking Worker of the Transport] (Konotop)*, April 13, 1933.

⁴⁷ *Udarnyk Transporta [Striking Worker of the Transport] (Konotop)*, January 27, 1933.

⁴⁸ *Khrystynivskiyi Zaliznychnyk [Khrystynivka Railway Worker]*, 1932.

⁴⁹ *Udarnyk Transporta [Striking Worker of the Transport] (Konotop)*, January 3, 1933.

selected the letters of local correspondents and appeals to the readers for publication, choosing the ones most suitable to the general propagandistic narrative, e.g. praising the positive changes that happened during Soviet rule. However, in the publications about the real problems (such reports appeared due to numerous appeals for „self-criticism”), the authors usually blamed specific people who were making mistakes, not the system that led to the problematic state of things.

The press of the South-Western Railways of 1932 and 1933 does not contain any open statements about the hunger catastrophe because the censorship restricted publications on many sensitive topics that could cause social instability. However, some newspaper publications reveal the striking details of everyday life that prove that although the railway workers had access to the system of canteens, food product distribution, and other benefits, they and their families were still severely affected by the famine.

In particular, an effective way of survival during the Holodomor was stealing. Since the railway stations often were the distribution points for provision, the railway newspapers contained numerous reports about people who stole grain, flour, potatoes, corn, or other products, even though they faced the risks of long-term imprisonment or capital punishment. Moreover, the train staff sometimes decided not to react to these cases, showing solidarity with people seeking food. The newspapers actively promoted the idea of guarding the grain stored at the train stations. Another way of stealing was intentionally misusing the bread stamps system; therefore, access to it was considered a privilege.

Moreover, the local railway press's attempts to sharply contrast the peasants and the workers and evoke hatred towards the „class enemies” were not always successful. The complex interplay between the agricultural campaign, the railway system, and workers' lives underscores the Holodomor's multifaceted dynamics, highlighting the manipulation of propaganda and state control, which contributed to the devastating consequences of this historical period.

Zaključak

Na kraju, lokalna željeznička štampa tokom godina Holodomora distancirala se od stvarnosti i proizvodila iluzornu sliku. Zato su urednici pažljivo birali pisma lokalnih dopisnika i obraćanja čitateljima za objavu, birajući ona koja su se najviše uklapala u opštu propagandnu naraciju, npr. hvaleći pozitivne promjene koje su se dogodile za vrijeme sovjetske vlasti. Međutim, u publikacijama o stvarnim problemima (takvi izvještaji su se pojavljivali usljed brojnih apelâ za „samo-kritiku”), autori su obično okrivljavali specifične osobe koje su pravile greške, a ne sistem koji je doveo do problematične situacije.

Štampa južno-zapadnih željeznica iz 1932. i 1933. godine ne sadrži otvorene izjave o gladi jer je cenzura ograničavala objavljivanje na mnoge osjetljive teme koje bi mogle izazvati socijalnu nestabilnost. Ipak, neka novinska izdanja otkrivaju upečatljive detalje svakodnevnog života koji dokazuju da, iako su željezničari imali pristup sistemu menzi, raspodjeli prehrambenih proizvoda i drugim pogodnostima, oni i njihove porodice su i dalje bili teško pogođeni glađu.

Naime, efikasan način preživljavanja tokom Holodomora bila je krađa. Pošto su željezničke stanice često bile tačke raspodjele hrane, željezničke novine su sadržavale brojne izvještaje o ljudima koji su krali žito, brašno, krompir, kukuruz ili druge proizvode, iako su se suočavali s rizikom dugotrajne zatvorske kazne ili smrtnog kaznenog postupka. Štaviše, osoblje vozova ponekad je odlučivalo da ne reaguje na te slučajeve, pokazujući solidarnost sa ljudima koji su tražili hranu. Novine su aktivno promovisale ideju čuvanja žita koje se skladišti na željezničkim stanicama. Još jedan način krađe bio je namjerno zloupotrebavanje sistema za kontrolu hljeba; stoga je pristup tom sistemu bio smatran privilegijom.

Osim toga, pokušaji lokalne željezničke štampe da oštro kontrastiraju seljacima i radnicima i izazovu mržnju prema „klasnim neprijateljima” nisu uvijek bili uspješni. Složen odnos između poljoprivredne kampanje, željezničkog sistema i života radnika naglašava višeslojne dinamike Holodomora, ističući manipulaciju propagandom i državnu kontrolu, koja je doprinijela razornim posljedicama ovog historijskog perioda.

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