

## **The Tragedy of Famine of 1946-1947 in Bessarabia in the Artistic Project “Hunger” by Yona Tukuser**

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**Abstract:** The article presents an analysis of the art project of the Bulgarian artist Yona Tukuser “The Hunger”, dedicated to the tragic events of 1946-1947 in Bessarabia, connected with an unnaturally organized famine. Yona's paintings make us think not only about the terrible death of innocent people who died, a significant percentage of whom were children, but also about the problem of the spiritual fall of people, who have fallen to cannibalism. The artist makes you think about the question of where the intellectual limit is, after which the mental state changes and the person turns into an animal under the influence of hunger. The work can be useful to both theorists and practitioners in the field of Art and Cultural Studies.

**Keywords:** famine; tragedy; art project; hunger; cannibalism; spiritual death

Among the reasons that triggered the famine of Ukraine in 1946-1947, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory points out the following factors: forced expropriation of grain from the rural population to help fraternal peoples from the newly formed socialist camp to maintain the loyalty of the population of these countries, as well as for sale in order to restore the military-industrial complex of the USSR, destroyed economic facilities of Ukraine and Union republics. The ruined agriculture was finally undermined by the strongest drought of 1946, from which were particularly affected the regions of the south of Ukraine – the region of Izmail, existed at that time, as well as the regions of Odessa, Mykolaiv, Kherson. The famine embraced not only the southern, but also the central territory of Ukraine, reaching its apogee in December 1946 – June 1947. To date, the number of victims of the famine of 1946-1947 has not been accurately established, according to various estimates, it varies from 300,000 to 1 million inhabitants.

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The tragedy of the post-war famine became a black spot in the memory of the inhabitants of Southern Bessarabia. Influenced by her grandmother's stories of the horrors of that time, the young talented artist Yona Tukuser (born in 1986), a Bessarabian Bulgarian, native of the village of Glavani, Artsyz district of the Odessa region, graduate of the art department of the year 2007 of the Izmail State University of Humanities, was carried away by the idea of creating a series of paintings "Hunger", which would reflect the existential trauma that affected her compatriots after the Second World War. After completing the bachelor's degree, she entered the "Fine Arts" department at the National Academy of Art in Sofia. The idea to create the cycle "Hunger" came to the artist at 21, at the first year of studying at the magistracy as a desire to convey to the general public information about the difficulties, faced by the Bulgarian diaspora in Bessarabia in the post-war period, about which, according to the author's impressions, very few people knew, not counting the narrow specialists.

Yona responsibly approached the implementation of this project: for about a year she studied historical materials on the famine in Bessarabia in 1946-1947, using the sources provided by the local Bulgarian community, the monograph of the Artsyz historian Konstantin Pelivan "The Hunger of 1946-1947 in Southern Bessarabia in the Artsyz District of Odessa region (2004), using the publication "Famine in Ukraine: Odessa region (1921-1923; 1932-1933; 1946-1947). Memories, documents, research" (2007), which she examined in the context of general information about the famines under the Soviet rule. Based on the information received, the author created a series of historical paintings, based on the facts described in the documents.

First series of pictures of the cycle "The Hunger" by Yona Tukuser is distinguished by expressive informativeness. In the installation painting entitled "Bessarabia" (2010), the artist reproduces a number of photographs of those years, which are a terrible illustration to the consequences of the artificially created hunger in Budjak with an emotional author's comment placed on a gloomy black background: "There are two large Bulgarian diasporas on the territory of Ukraine: Bessarabia and Tavria. During the famine of 1921-1923, 1932-1933, 30,000 Bulgarians died in Tavria. Before the Second World War, the Bessarabian Bulgarians lived within the borders of Romania. Before the winter of 1946-1947, the Stalinist regime organized a famine, which killed about 70,000 ethnic Bulgarians. As a result of Stalin's

Holodomor, about 100,000 Bessarabian and Taurian Bulgarians died, which is one-third of their total”.

The series of Yona’s paintings is an attempt to convey the horror of group graves that are constantly being carried out during the famine years. The author creates it under the impression of the memories of the inhabitant of the village of Kotlovyna of the Reni district, Afanasiy Kristin, born in 1924, placed on the website “Union of Ukrainian Gagauzians”: “During the hunger, I drove the dead people on a sleigh: who was dead, who was half-dead, I drove them to the cemetery and threw them into the community. My soul was bursting when I heard moans of half-dead <...>. In these years in the village there were several carts, that went and collected the dead. In order not to stop off on the same street, they also took those, who still showed signs of life, but were already hopeless. On the territory of the cemetery at the entrance there were two large pits, where corpses were stacked, barely sprinkled with earth and so on in several layers. Today these graves are also called a community. In 1938 in the Kotlovyna lived more than 5000 people, and in 1948 there were about 2000 left” (*Union of Ukrainian Gagauzians*).



Yona Tukuser. Landscape, 2010

(oil, canvas; 90 x 120 cm)



Yona Tukuser. Pit, 2010

(oil, canvas; 90 x 120 cm)

The first pictures of the cycle “Hunger” by Yona Tukuser, according to the author’s evidence, were created in the process of creative search. They are characterized by narrativity, by an attempt to convey impressions of the famine of 1946-1947 by

means of artistic abstraction, based on the fact of real events. In the pictures “Landscape” and “Pit” the crooked bodies are depicted, thrown at each other, dead in a mixture with hopeless and barely moving of those, who still remained alive. Yona confessed: “I have watched, read and thought about this for over a year every day and night ... To experience this horror and to be able to convey this theme in painting. I painted these pictures the whole night ... lay down at dawn at 5-6 in the morning ... fell from exhaustion, mostly emotional” (from private correspondence).

Symbolic images of the picture “Harvesting” depict people, trying from their last strength, to gather the remains of the harvest from the field. The figures in the foreground are little like people: they are on the border between life and death, they look like spirits, creatures from a different world, their bodies are fragile, characterized by the habits of animals. Yona was shocked by the fact of the existence in the USSR of the infamous “law on the three spikelets”, which implied the physical destruction of people who collected the remains of the crop from the fields. This law did not stop people from trying to hide from the authorities their own – grown grain, in the hope of saving themselves from the pangs of hunger, as the death was the result of refusing any of these options. By confessions of Yona, her maternal grandmother was a wonderful dressmaker, whose goods Yona’s grandfather's drove for sale in Galati, buying grain for the money earned. Every time his delivery was accompanied by difficulties, in particular, an attempt to murder by fellow villagers in order to seize the earnings. In their old house there is still saved a deep cache for storing grain, dug by his grandfather in the basement.



Yona Tukuser. *The Seeker*, 2010  
(oil, canvas; 90 x 130 cm)

Yona Tukuser. *Harvesting*, 2010  
(oil, canvas; 90 x 120 cm)

A few words should be said about the author's technique. The artist intentionally coarsens it, and also uses elements of expression, using poisonous bright tones to enhance the tragic aspect of painting. In one of her publications, Yona ascertains: "Here we cannot help noticing complex colors, large strokes with a broad brush, pasty application of material. These are traces of physical action in the process of creating a painting. Crying desperate cries creep in the canvas, as if the element has captured a man – the element, difficult to explain, invisible, without clear outlines – it's more a color with a sense of pain. This is the face of hunger, when you are completely broken, betrayed yourself to the embrace of death, and you do not have the strength to take a step forward. These are dark, ugly, dragging bodies, here one should not seek the aesthetics of beauty" (Tukuser, 2015, p. 229).

Gradually, the artist departs from the image of abstract figures in bright color spots that correspond and contrast with complex tones in their bodies. In the picture "Eternal Dream" the figure of a dead person lying on the field is written as an abstraction, however it has a distinctly drawn realistic detail: the fingers of the left leg, intentionally enlarged in the context of the proportions of the overall perspective of the image. This detail, creepy in its realism, together with a condensed black brush forms the figure of a dead person:



Yona Tukuser. *Eternal Dream*, 2010 (oil, canvas; 90 x 120 cm)

Infant mortality and high statistics on dystrophy became one of the most tragic consequences of the famine in 1946-1947. These hard facts also became the subjects of a series of paintings of the cycle “Hunger”.



Yona Tukuser. *Corpses of Children, № 2*, 2013

(oil, canvas; 90 x 120 cm)

The overall high mortality rate led to the emergence of new orphanages, one of which is depicted in the picture “Children's shelter”. It presents an attempt to convey the plot of one of the real photos of those years, which in the artistic space of this picture stands on a nightstand in front of the character's bed. The bodies of the girls are exhausted, they are uncombed and untidy, but one of them has the strength to play with a self-made doll, which symbolizes the future of this character. Demonstratively naked skeletal figure of an adult (which is not on a real photo) signals that children are not offended in the shelter, but this person is clearly leaving them, perhaps he is leaving for another world.



Yona Tukuser. Children's Shelter, 2010 (oil, canvas; 90 x 120 cm)

Unfortunately, some children faced a much more terrible disaster: the madness of their parents, who lost their minds from hunger and killed them in order to eat. One of the counterpoints of the cycle “Hunger” is the desire to show the abyss of spiritual degradation of a person, who comprehends it because it is impossible to satisfy the elementary physical need for food. The picture “Mother” depicts a woman eating her child. There are few human features on her face, she rather resembles an animal that quenches its instinct. The artistic concept of this painting has an obvious connection with the famous masterpiece of Francisco de Goya “Saturn Devouring his Sun”.





Yona Tukuser. Mother, 2010 (oil, canvas; 90 x 130 cm)

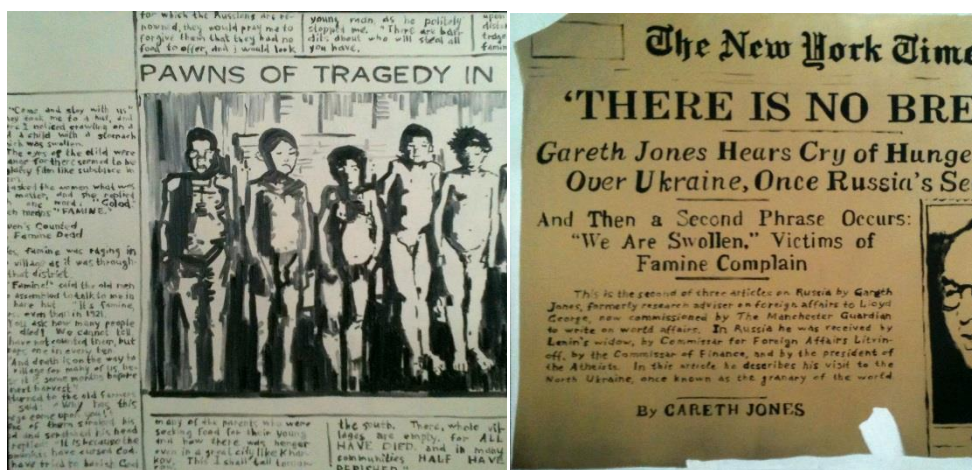
In the cycle of paintings “The Hunger” Yona raises a number of philosophical and psychological questions. When and in which category of people does spiritual death come because of the impossibility of maintaining elementary standards of existence? Where is the intellectual limit, behind which the mental state changes and the person under the influence of hunger turns into an animal? How the physical hunger changes thinking and awakens the lowest instincts, leading to eating not just their own kind, but their very own people (child, wife, father), which even predators do not do (it is known that starving wolves die, but do not bite their fellows from the flock of wolves)? Why does the human DNA program allow such a scenario? Why did once civilized people prefer the hell of falling into cannibalism to hunger death? And, finally, will we pass the test of hunger?

The question of the “bottom”, which can reach a person, who is deprived of the possibility of a civilized existence, is raised in Yona's painting “Seller of Human Flesh”, painted under the influence of several sources. The main one was a real photo, posted in one of the newspaper articles on the Holodomor in Ukraine, which was photocopied by the author. As a document of the epoch, it is represented in the picture itself. It is difficult to say whether the fact of real trade is reflected in the photograph. In the days of the famine, the NKVD organs monitored and prosecuted the facts of cannibalism, most likely, the photo shows the disclosed cannibals. This source was superimposed on the story, read in one of the books, about a certain woman, who sold pies, the filling for which consisted of the human liver and the hearts, which were obtained by her at night in the cemetery. Thus, in the artistic conception of the picture “Seller of human flesh”, the filling for pies has taken the form of fragments of bodies of real people who give signs of life: the helplessly extended hand seems to cry for help. The images of the sellers of human flesh deserve particular attention. The face of a man who maintains his physical state by eating people's corpses is devoid of emotion, it is lifeless, there is no spark of thinking in the eyes. Most likely, thought processes are deliberately suppressed by him as a protective reflex in order to avoid an analysis of the situation, in which he found himself, broken by the psychological factor of hunger. Gray tones emphasize his lifelessness. The face of a woman is in many respects opposed to him. Its completeness testifies to well-fed everyday life, eyes sharply fix what is happening, this is the image of a grumpy, stingy housewife, who considers her incomes.



Yona Tukuser. Seller of Human Flesh, 2010 (oil, canvas; 90 x 130 cm)

The second part of the paintings of the cycle “Hunger” is associated with a bias in documentary. Working with English sources, Yona received a number of new information, which she decided to convey to her audience. According to the author, this approach was born with the need for a logical design of the exhibition, which required more information, historical facts, archives, photographs. The painting “Pawns” depicts an English-language article titled “The Pawns of Tragedy in Ukraine”. The plot of the picture “The New York Times” arose under the impression of the fact that the first English-language article on the famine in Ukraine, written by journalist Gareth Jones, who visited the Ukrainian SSR, was not accepted for publication in the leading American newspaper “The New York Times” and was printed in less authoritative edition. According to the author's intention, the white background under the newspaper clippings, depicted in this picture, should serve as a reminder of this fact, as a remaining empty newspaper column.



Yona Tukuser. *Pawns of Tragedy in Ukraine*, Yona Tukuser. *The New York Times*, 2013  
 2013 (oil, canvas; 90 x 120 cm) (oil, canvas; 90 x 130 cm)

A series of paintings from the cycle “A View from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century on a Document” found an original author's solution: real photos of those years are depicted through the prism of the iPhone screen, as if modern people could capture them, being an occasional witness of terrible events.



Yona Tukuser. *A View from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century on a Document, № 1*, 2013 (oil, canvas; oil, 90 x 120 cm)

Yona Tukuser. *A View from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century on a Document, № 2*, 2013 (oil, canvas; 90 x 120 cm)

The “Hunger” art project was presented by the Ionko Stoyanov-Foundation for image synthesis in 2011 in The Red House Center for Culture and Debate in Sofia. The exhibition received a number of indifferent comments from Bulgarian art critics, which noted the courage to address the topic of the author, who “hammers sharp nails” (Khristova, 2012, p. 32) into the eyes of his public with the tragic problems of an artistic project, the plot of which is based on the real events that shook her. Speaking at the opening of the exhibition art critic Svilen Stefanov marked the creative manner of Yona as a “new historical painting”, based on neo-expressionism. The critic noted the universalism of the problems raised by Yona, the essence of which lies in all possible varieties of human hunger: death, revenge, control over the masses.

The chairman of the Foundation for image synthesis and the curator of the “Hunger” project, Ionko Stoyanov, stressed that the purpose and goal of Yona’s project is to unite people, so that such suffering in the world should not recur. As the chairman of the Foundation, whose goal is to establish a constructive link between art, science and education, he urged scientists to approach with maximum objectivity the coverage of the artificially organized Holodomor in the USSR, because the sufferings of millions of victims “echoed in our minds today, reinforced by the hearts of the younger generation of artists” (Ionko Stoyanov-Foundation for image synthesis).

The exposition of the project "Hunger" was presented at the Izmail State University for Humanities during the international scientific conference “Famine 1946-1947: historical, philosophical, psychological and pedagogical aspects” (18-19 May 2017), dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the tragic events. “Izmail State University for Humanities, – the rector of the University noticed, – is the only state educational institution in Budjak with the wide network of international contacts and stable reputation among internal and foreign scientific and educational establishment, the leading center of education, science and culture life of Ukrainian Danube region” (Kichuk, 2016, p. 452). While greeting the participants of the conference, which was held on the video bridge during the plenary session, Yona stressed that she sees the goal of her project not only in overcoming the taboo topics. The main message of the project “Hunger” was defined by the author as a desire for people’s suffering to serve as a basis for unification, not enmity.

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