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Recalling the Hunger Winter: Evoking famine memory beyond the national

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Abstract

This article seeks to demonstrate how hunger legacies function as connecting vectors in later times. By investigating the comparative uses of memory in Dutch newspapers in the period 1945–1995, it reveals how recollections of the Dutch 'Hunger Winter' of 1944–1945 were evoked to make sense of current episodes of hunger, as well as to stimulate political and societal engagement among readers with famines across the world. In so doing, the article shows how memories of the Dutch famine were placed in larger transnational discourses of suffering, experienced by other oppressed and war-stricken communities, ultimately making the Hunger Winter a benchmark for understanding famine, deprivation and humanitarianism. Crucially, this article stresses the need to move beyond national paradigms in the study of famine memory, thereby allowing for a better understanding of the transnational workings of memory.

Keywords

famines, humanitarianism, Hunger Winter, newspapers, the Netherlands, transnational memory

Introduction

> Since the start of the war in Yemen, three-and-a-half years ago, 85,000 children below the age of five have died of hunger. Children who survive the hunger may suffer from the consequences for the rest of their lives. Roos Landman (78) knows from her own experience that starvation is terrible. She was 4 years old during the Hunger Winter in 1944 and she finds the situation in Yemen incomprehensible. 'It is a shame that this still happens in our civilised world', she explains by telephone. Despite her young age at the time, the Hunger Winter has left an indelible impression. (NOS, 2018)[1]

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With these lines, on 21 November 2018, the Dutch Broadcasting Foundation (*Nederlandse Omroep Stichting*) opened a news report on the threat of famine in war-torn Yemen. Focusing on potential health consequences, the report features a professor of Early Development and Health who explains how, based on findings about the Dutch 'Hunger Winter' of 1944–1945, it is expected that the current generation of children in Yemen will be at higher risk of suffering from depression, schizophrenia, diabetes and coronary diseases in later life: 'We found negative effects on almost all aspects of health we have investigated. And during the hunger winter 20,000 people died – now it is almost 85,000 children alone'. Survivor Landman's memories intersect with this scientific commentary: 'My sister would take a whole day to finish that one slice [of rye bread]. That was real hunger'.

The NOS report demonstrates the coexistence of various journalistic uses of memory: first, the Hunger Winter is used by way of analogy, to highlight similarities between the Dutch famine and the current crisis in Yemen. Second, the Hunger Winter provides historical context, to enrich the reporting about Yemen. Third, the interview with a Hunger Winter survivor personalises the experience of famine. Fourth, the comparative use of numbers serves to give meaning to key data on health and mortality ('fact-centered memory'). And, finally, expert knowledge on the long-term effects of the Hunger Winter functions as a reflection of relevance for future consequences of starvation (Edy, 1999; Trümper and Broer, 2021; Zelizer, 2008). This example shows that, through journalistic memory work, recollections of the Dutch famine are written into larger, transhistorical and transnational narratives. As such, in periodical texts references to the Hunger Winter travel through time and space (Erll, 2009, 2014). In the process, Dutch famine memory becomes linked to the experiences of other oppressed and war-stricken communities and is subsumed into larger discourses of suffering.

Until recently, research on recollections of famine focused predominantly on memory processes within national contexts. Previous studies demonstrate how memories of famine have been transformed into central elements in nationalist discourses and processes of identity formation, as has been the case, for example, with the Great Irish Famine of 1845–1850 and the Ukrainian famine ('Holodomor') of 1932–1933 (Ó Gráda, 2001; Kasianov, 2012; Morash, 1995). Studies on the transnational dimensions of famine memory usually centre on the role of diasporic communities in the construction and transmission of hunger legacies, especially across the Atlantic Ocean (e.g. Corporaal et al., 2014; Janssen, 2018; King, 2012; McGowan, 2014; Mark-FitzGerald, 2013). The few studies that touch upon other forms of transnational famine recollections typically focus on (post)colonial memory frameworks, such as Margaret Kelleher's (1997) *The Feminization of Famine*, which identifies recurring motifs in representations of the Great Irish Famine and the Bengal famine of the 1940s, or Laurence Gourievidis' (2010) *The Dynamics of Heritage*, which shows how the Migration Museum in Adelaide represents immigrants from the Scottish Highland Clearances alongside Great Irish Famine immigrants. Arguably, the principal focus on the (imagined) national 'self', whether that be in terms of the nation-state, diasporic nationalism or (post) colonialism, has obscured the dynamics of famine memory beyond the national.

In this light, a reconceptualisation of famine memory beyond national paradigms is due. This article investigates how and why recollections of famine have been evoked transnationally, to make sense of current episodes of hunger elsewhere. Building on theories of mnemonic transfer and exchange, including Michael Rothberg's (2009) distinction between competitive and 'multidirectional' memory uses, and theories relating to processes of narrativisation and premediation (e.g. Beiner, 2014; Erll, 2009; Meretoja, 2021), this is the first study to investigate the comparative uses of famine memory in newspapers.

Our focus is on representations of the Dutch famine of 1944–1945, popularly known as the 'Hunger Winter', which occurred in the urbanised western Netherlands during the final months of

the German occupation. Our corpus consists of all newspaper articles digitised in Delpher (Royal Dutch Library) containing the word '*hongerwinter*' in conjunction with other episodes of hunger. Within this corpus, we qualitatively analysed 180 newspaper publications (e.g. news reports, letters to the editor, opinion pieces) from 1900 to the mid-1990s 'memory boom'. We close-read all pre-World War II (WWII) articles with references to the Hunger Winter (60 articles) and then selected seven post-war episodes of hunger with which Hunger Winter memories most frequently interacted (120 articles). These include both European and (post)colonial hunger crises and cover the entire post-war time frame: Germany (1945–1948), Indonesia (1945–1949), India (1951, 1966–1967), Hungary (1956), Biafra (1967–1970), Ethiopia (1984–1985) and Yugoslavia (1992–1996).

We argue that newspaper items are particularly relevant for examining the transnational uses of memory within a community: the work of journalists 'creates and reshapes cultural memories, thereby influencing our perspectives on the past, present, and future' (Trümper and Broer, 2021: 257). At the same time, engagements such as letters to the editor demonstrate newspapers' high level of audience interaction in the discussion and utilisation of memory. The Dutch famine is an excellent case for studying the comparative uses of memory because it was one of the major European famines of the twentieth century (Wheatcroft and Ó Gráda, 2017) and has been central to the Dutch collective memory of the war since the country's liberation in May 1945 (Barnouw, 1999; De Zwarte, 2020). Moreover, as a substantial repository of digitised newspapers is readily available via Delpher, we could closely examine transnational memory uses in newspapers on a national scale and across a long time span.

After providing a theoretical framework, this article chronologically analyses comparative uses of the term '*hongerwinter*' in Dutch newspapers, divided in the periods before and after 1945. It then considers the memory processes behind these usages, demonstrating how the Dutch famine became a transnational benchmark for understanding hunger. The main aims of this study are twofold. First, this article seeks to demonstrate how hunger legacies can function as connecting vectors in later times. Second, we aim to broaden the agenda of memory studies by exploring the uses and workings of 'shared' famine memory, beyond national borders.

Famine memory

For the purposes of this article, we define 'famine memory' as the repertoire of images and narrative structures distinctly used for the remembrance of episodes of hunger. This repertoire operates at different scales, from individual to international levels, and while it makes use of familiar representations it continuously adapts to accommodate different contexts. We have chosen to use the term 'transnational' to indicate that the recollection of famine in Dutch newspapers transcends national borders (De Cesari and Rigney, 2014; Rothberg, 2014).

The comparative uses of famine memory can be explored by examining how these memories are narrativised, combined, and continuously remediated. The broader existence of analogies in representations of and engagements with hunger is attested by scholarship by, among others, Kelleher (1997), Jan Germen Janmaat (2012) and Andrew Newby (2018). These pioneering studies are comparative, or reflect on comparisons between periods of hunger made in primary sources, but do not engage specifically with the transnational workings of memory. While important work has been done on collective memories of WWII in the Netherlands (De Keizer and Plomp, 2010; Van Vree and Van der Laarse, 2009), studies concerning the Hunger Winter are generally historical in nature (De Zwarte, 2020) or focus on the long-term physiological effects of prenatal exposure to malnutrition (e.g. Lumey and Van Poppel, 2013; Roseboom, 2000). To date, there is no scholarly work on Dutch famine memory, including its comparative or transnational dimensions.

Memory studies research on the reporting of historical events in newspapers often focuses on 'commemorative coverage', paying little attention to the ways in which memory can function 'non-commemoratively' (Trümper and Broer, 2021) to give meaning to present-day periods of hunger, evoke compassion and call for humanitarianism based on shared experiences or legacies of suffering. In its discussion of a substantial number of pieces that engage with the Hunger Winter for purposes other than commemoration, this study reveals the under-examined transnational dimensions of mediatised engagements with famine legacies. For our analysis, we borrow the typology of journalistic 'memory types' from Edy (1999) and Trümper and Broer (2021): analogy, historical context, personalisation, meaning provision to key data and reflection of relevance. We specifically consider the construction of cultural memory in newspapers, a mass medium that is characterised by its great diversity in types of texts, authorial intentions and contributors.

As has been shown for recollections of other periods of hunger, perhaps most extensively in scholarship on the textual and visual legacies of the Great Irish Famine (e.g. Corporaal, 2017; Cusack, 2018; Janssen, 2016; Kelleher, 1997; Morash, 1995), their transfer typically happens in highly formalised ways: a select number of narrative schemata or templates (Straub, 2008; Wertsch, 2002) and common figures or tropes recur repeatedly. These recurring images and motifs include the famished mother and child, the dehumanisation of famine victims and distinct victim-perpetrator roles (Corporaal and De Zwarte, 2022; Janssen, 2016; Kelleher, 1997). Together, these have come to form a cultural repertoire of representations, and it is precisely their formulaic nature which ensures that such images can travel beyond their national contexts. This interaction between different registers moreover demonstrates the 'multi-scalarity' of formations of cultural memory (De Cesari and Rigney, 2014). In our corpus, combinations of the national and international, as well as the general and individual, scales are also present.

This formulaic nature suggests that form precedes representation. Indeed, in her comparative study *Whose Hunger?* Jenny Edkins (2000) argues that existing discourses on famine 'tend not so much to examine an already existing object of study as to produce that object in a particular way' (p. 18). In similar vein, existing representations, rather than 'direct experiences', inform cultural memory, which is 'by definition a matter of vicarious recollection' (Rigney, 2005: 15). In other words, the representation of an event is inherently 'premediated' by a familiar representative repertoire (Beiner, 2014; Erll, 2009).

The range of cultural forms at our disposal for remembering past events, including famines, is limited, and this can be understood as a form of representational 'scarcity' (Rigney, 2005: 16). As active 'working memory' (Assmann, 2008), cultural memory consists of continuous processes of selection, mediatised representation and interpretation. Rigney (2018: 371) calls this 'differential memorability', which 'posits that not all events are equally memorable because they do not equally lend themselves to the scarce number of cultural forms we have for talking about them'. This differentiality can be extended to the elemental level of tropes and images, as some elements of past events lend themselves more readily for retention in cultural memory than others that do not easily fit existing and commonly accepted narrative moulds and imagery.

Representational scarcity does not mean that the discursive space for enunciating memories of past events is similarly limited, as these limitations do not conflict with memory's potential multidirectionality. As Rothberg (2009) explains, mnemonic comparisons often take the form of a 'zero-sum struggle' between competing memories (p. 3). However, analogies between cultural memories can also manifest as 'multidirectional', as 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative'.

While Rothberg largely investigates the uses of Holocaust remembrance by subjects not part of the mnemonic community implicated in the event, and we focus on national border-crossing recollections of the Hunger Winter by members of the Dutch community, we also acknowledge cultural

memory's comparative dynamics and processes of hierarchy formation. Rothberg's (2011) notion of 'differentiated solidarity' is also useful for our purposes: he explains that multidirectional memories can be positioned on two axes, one ranging from equation to differentiation and the other ranging from solidarity to competition (p. 538). Consequently, as this article will show, acts of multidirectional comparison can lead to various forms of social and political affect.

Focusing on memory as a 'sense-making process', Hanna Meretoja (2021: 25) places memory and its narrativisation on a spectrum from 'subsumptive' to 'non-subsumptive narrative practices', which is a relevant observation for our study. While the former results in memories becoming 'reified into a fixed memorial form under which new events and experiences are rigidly subsumed', in the latter form we 'use our earlier experiences as a starting point for understanding something new' without subsuming the new into the existing structures. This does not mean that non-subsumptive memory operates outside of existing representational forms. Rather, it shows a willingness to be flexible in one's understanding of new events in light of the past, and, conversely, in one's understanding of the past in light of new events (Meretoja, 2021: 27). This spectrum can elucidate to what extent a recollection of famine can meet the needs of the present in which it is employed. Our article aims to answer the call expressed by Rigney, Meretoja and others to move beyond national paradigms in the study of cultural memory, thus enabling a better understanding of the transnational workings of memory.

Hunger winter before 'the Hunger Winter'

Before we can examine the transnational workings of Dutch famine memory, it is useful to first establish how the term 'hunger winter' emerged in Dutch newspapers, and which meanings it held prior to its appropriation for the famine of 1944–1945. The term 'hunger winter' became familiar in Dutch newspaper writings around the turn of the twentieth century. The first mention in our corpus was on 8 December 1901, when the social-democratic newspaper *Het Volk* spoke on behalf of the poor and unemployed labourers of the Netherlands and expressed a feeling of powerlessness when confronted with 'another winter of unemployment': 'Multiple times during the cold hunger winter, when we were called upon to speak for them [the poor labourers], we felt guilty for providing words instead of bread'.

Between 1901 and the start of WWII, the term 'hunger winter' featured in about 60 digitised Dutch newspaper pieces. Geographically speaking, pre-WWII usage of 'hunger winter' was broad, as it could refer to hardships in both the Netherlands and in other European countries, where the term similarly became familiar.[2] While the term was adopted by newspapers of different sociopolitical orientations, it was most often employed in socialist and communist outlets. As such, 'hunger winter' received the distinct connotation of the struggles of labouring communities and was often used to solicit solidarity and (financial) relief (*De Tribune*, 1924, 1931, 1935).

In the early 1920s, most mentions of the term occurred in pieces covering unrest and deprivation in Germany and the newly formed Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) (*De Volkskrant*, 1922; *Voorwaarts*, 1922). In times of famine, usage of the term also extended to newspapers on the right side of the political spectrum. On 27 April 1921, liberal newspaper *NRC* reported on concerns in the RSFSR, when the war-torn country was in the middle of a severe famine: 'The people in Russia [. . .] wonder: will we live under the same extreme conditions next winter? How will we survive the shocking distress, which will be much worse than the hunger winter 1920-1921?' As such, although most inclusions of the term 'hunger winter' referred to the plight of the labouring classes, prior to WWII the term did not have a singular association and was not associated exclusively with a specific victim group.

Following rising international tensions, the usage of 'hunger winter' became increasingly politicised. After the economic crash of 1929, the anti-capitalist meaning given to the term became more pronounced. For example, quoting Soviet newspaper *Pravda* on 4 January 1934, communist newspaper *De Tribune* asserted: 'In capitalist countries the labouring masses are in the middle of a fifth hunger winter. – In the Soviet Union all blast ovens are smoking, all machines are purring, all granaries are about to burst'. Inclusion of 'hunger winter' continued to be accompanied by requests for aid (*De Tribune*, 1930, 1934). The term 'hunger winter' also became a central feature in condemnations of governmental (in)action to alleviate the workers' plight. Among other things, these critiques targeted police brutality against labourers, which was considered 'fascistic violence' (*De Tribune*, 1930) in the face of an 'unprecedented hunger winter on our doorstep'. By using 'hunger winter' in this manner, communist newspapers explicitly linked their twin foes: capitalism and fascism. These concerns for Dutch workers were combined with solidarity for their Russian, Austrian, German and Indonesian working-class peers; as attempts to establish 'proletarian solidarity' (*De Tribune*, 1931, 1933), they were based on a supposed pre-existing commonality and should be read as calls for sympathy.

By contrast, in the 1930s, the term hunger winter also became part of anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi discourses. Connotations of the term thus expanded across different and opposing political orientations and were evoked in competitive understandings of war-related sufferings. For example, in 1933, President of the Frankfurt Police Major-General Von Westrem recalled the German 'hunger winter' during World War I (WWI) in anti-Semitic terms. He alleged that while Germans suffered, Jews – described as 'weeds of the German people' and 'war parasites' – actually profited from the situation. As such, Von Westrem sought to unite the country in a collective national sense of adversity by posing Jewish Germans as the enemy (*Het Volk*, 1933).

This broader use of the term hunger winter continued throughout the German occupation of the Netherlands (1940–1945), albeit in a limited number of news reports. Usage of the term became more frequent in the spring of 1945 because of the famine conditions in the urbanised western parts of the Netherlands. The famine, which lasted from November 1944 until May 1945, was the result of various transportation and distribution difficulties following the Allied liberation of the South of the Netherlands in the autumn of 1944 and caused over 20,000 excess deaths (De Zwarte, 2020). In March–April 1945, the term 'hunger winter' appeared in both the illegal Dutch resistance press and pro-German newspapers to describe in a general sense the hardships of previous months (*Algemeen Handelsblad*, 1945; *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer*, 1945; *Trouw*, 1945). In the immediate post-war months, the term became appropriated in Dutch discourses in a narrow sense, referring to the singular event, while eventually becoming a capitalised epithet.[3] The limited references in Dutch historiography to the memory of the Hunger Winter only stress its dominance in the Dutch collective memory of the war (Barnouw, 1999; Klemann, 2010; Trienekens, 1995). By contrast, the following sections demonstrate how comparative uses of Hunger Winter memories enabled the Dutch to make sense of new episodes of hunger elsewhere, and stimulated subsequent responses, while these new famines, in turn, reshaped memories of the Dutch famine itself.

Evoking the Hunger Winter, 1945–1995

Shortly after WWII, Dutch newspapers began to frequently use references to the Hunger Winter to highlight similarities and differences between the Dutch famine and hunger conditions elsewhere. The current section views Dutch famine memory through a transnational analytical lens, demonstrating how Dutch newspapers evoked these memories in continuously changing contexts over a 50-year period. Focusing on oft-employed representational tropes and the most important developments in journalistic uses of memory over time, it shows how border-crossing engagements with the Hunger Winter contributed to processes of sense-making.

Early post-war references to the Hunger Winter in Dutch newspapers mostly functioned as analogies. As Edy (1999) explains, 'historical analogies [. . .] explicitly attempt to make the past relevant to the present by using a past event as a tool to analyse and predict the outcome of a current situation' (p. 77). This applied in particular to the hunger conditions that occurred in Allied-occupied Germany in the years 1945–1949. Dutch newspapers directly compared the two crises, in which the western Netherlands were portrayed as the main victim, with lower rations and worse health conditions (*Het Parool*, 1946; *Het Vrije Volk*, 1948; *Trouw*, 1948; *Twentsch Dagblad*, 1948): 'The famine may not be so severe that people, similar to the hunger winter in Holland, collapse from exhaustion and malnutrition, but in Berlin as well, each month dozens die of hunger' (*Arnhemsche Courant*, 1947).

Because of the short temporal distance between the two events and the central role of Germany as a 'perpetrating country' in the Hunger Winter, victim-perpetrator discourses dominated early analogies. Such simplifying narrative structures, while offering a familiar plot, obscure the inherent complexity of positions inhabited by German and Dutch people. In our corpus, the victim-perpetrator discourse in the immediate post-war period was further strengthened by the fact that most Dutch newspapers had served as illegal newspapers during the German occupation (e.g. *Trouw*, *Het Parool*, *De Waarheid*).

As the German case shows, an important part of the sense-making process was the function Hunger Winter memories had in terms of establishing hierarchies. Famine historian Cormac Ó Gráda (2001) writes that in their collective memories, all famines produce a 'hierarchy of suffering' (p. 123). This can lead to memory competition; indeed, in the comparative discussions of German hunger conditions in the immediate post-WWII period, a competitive perspective dominates, which suggests that Dutch newspaper contributors felt they needed to compete with German suffering for the representation of their own recent communal suffering in the discursive sphere of the periodical.

Using analogies also allowed periodical authors to transition to other, more complex modes of recollection, thereby moving from animosity to evoking pity for German sufferers:

> Many of us need to subdue a wry feeling, before they can give their full pity to the people, whose army attacked, humiliated and extorted us for five years long [. . .] Whoever wanders through Berlin – a city in ruins like most other German cities – and sees how they suffer there, reminding us of our misery in the hunger winter, can only hope for speedy relief. (*Katholieke Illustratie*, 1946)

As such, early comparative uses of the Hunger Winter became part of broader processes of coming to terms with the recent troubled past.

Using key figures to establish levels of suffering was another frequently used memory type which emerged shortly after the war. For example, in 1949, the Dutch Red Cross criticised the Dutch, who 'had known one Hunger Winter', for forgetting the humanitarian situation in Indonesia, where 'four years later, the people [. . .] are still suffering from hunger' (*Nieuwe Apeldoornsche Courant*, 1949). *Het Vrije Volk* (1951) took a similar quantitative approach to famine relief in India in an interview with the Dutch Minister of Agriculture Sicco Mansholt, who recalled that during the Hunger Winter, 'we clearly experienced that even relatively small shipments can be life savers. We are in danger of forgetting that, at this moment, millions of people in India have to suffer serious deprivation'.

'Fact-centred memory' continued in later years, especially with regard to victims:

> The number of victims of that famine during the last winter of war [Hunger Winter] comprised about ten thousand; in Biafra in the month of July, according to conservative estimates, six thousand people died per day, and that number will certainly rise in August if help does not arrive soon. (*Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 1968)

Most transnational engagements with the Hunger Winter thus still constructed hierarchies, but without competitive approaches to suffering, as had been the case with comparisons to the German context. In fact, quantitative comparisons in the other case studies suggest that hierarchies of suffering hunger were reversed early on, with the Hunger Winter serving as a threshold for acknowledging the suffering of other peoples.

Generally speaking, memory uses of the Hunger Winter began to change in the late 1960s, when readers' connections with pre-existing knowledge of the famine based on personal experiences were no longer self-evident. As illustrated above, in newspaper writings on hunger conditions in Indonesia, India and Biafra, close analogies had already been replaced by the broader use of the Hunger Winter as historical context, explaining how famine had also struck the Netherlands and using historical facts and figures to establish orders of magnitude. The increasing temporal distance was accompanied by another key development in memory use: the personalisation of famine memory. From the Biafran famine in the late 1960s onwards, Hunger Winter survivors increasingly shared their experiences in newspapers to draw attention to current suffering (e.g. *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 1968; *NRC*, 1984). The personalisation of famine memory can thus, paradoxically, be considered a result of a declining ability among the readership to connect present to past.

This shift in memory use is also reflected in changing imagery. In the immediate post-war decades, newspaper writings used a broad repertoire of representations to connect the Hunger Winter with current issues elsewhere in Europe. Common tropes in writings on Germany and Hungary, for example, included scavenging for coal, collecting firewood and demolishing houses to battle fuel scarcity, women queuing for foodstuffs, people travelling to the countryside in search of food ('hunger journeys') and the gaunt faces of passers-by (e.g. *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 1946; *Friese Koerier*, 1956; *Heerenveensche Koerier*, 1947; *Het Parool*, 1947, 1956).[4] This broad repertoire of famine representations allowed newspapers to construct compassionate connections between Hunger Winter memories and the experiences of people during their contemporary European hunger crises.

From the late 1960s onwards, this repertoire of shared narratives and imagery narrowed and became connected to a more general repertoire of famine representation, in particular the trope of famishing mother and child victims, which is well known from representations of other famines. While the adoption of a more general register could be an effect of temporal distance, here it apparently stems from geographical distance. Importantly, this 'representational scarcity' seems to be the result of the 'othering' of famine victims in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. As Aschheim (2016: 25) suggests, people are 'less likely to be taken aback by atrocities when removed from the imagined Western core'; therefore, 'when atrocities are perpetrated outside of the putatively enlightened world [. . .] one is (tragically) less likely to be appalled, less able to empathically connect'. This becomes highly evident in the Biafran case. In an interview that appeared in several local newspapers in 1968, a Dutch businessman returning from Biafra stated:

> Everywhere you go, people are dying from hunger. It's comparable with our country during the hunger winter. But there is an important difference. We ventured out to secure food at any cost. The Biafran doesn't. He is very apathetic. If he doesn't have food anymore, he will lie on the street to die. Biafra is a dying country. (*Limburgs Dagblad*, 1968; *Tubantia*, 1968)

The alleged cultural traits of 'apathy' and 'laziness' are also employed in various newspaper writings on hunger in Indonesia in the 1940s and India in the 1950–1960s (*De Locomotief*, 1949; *Nieuwsblad voor de Hoeckse Waard en Ijselmonde*, 1951; *NRC*, 1973). This language is reminiscent of earlier discussions of famine that posit famine sufferers as 'Other', such as contemporary reporting on the Great Irish Famine in the London *Times* (Janssen, 2018). The distinctions in ascribed cultural traits show the 'differential memorability' in recollections of the Hunger Winter: different tropes are adopted for 'western' and 'non-western' episodes of hunger.

As mentioned, the othering of non-European famine victims is accompanied by the increasingly frequent adoption of the image of the suffering mother and child, which often features in newspaper writings on the Indian, Biafran and Ethiopian famines (*De Tijd*, 1970; *Het Vrije Volk*, 1968, 1984; *Trouw*, 1967). On 13 May 1967, *Trouw* included a photograph of a starving 14-year-old mother and her child in India and concluded that the emaciated boy was the 'symbol for hunger in Bihar'. While images of suffering children and mothers can trigger compassion, these representations paradoxically can also dehumanise famine victims. For example, one journalist who had visited Bihar during the 1960s famine writes:

> The deadly lonely child was retarded. We gave him a couple of bananas, which he clearly did not know how to use until he was shown how to peel a banana. Immediately, he began to devour them, growling like a cat who is taken away from its bowl. (*NRC*, 1973)

In a sense, the report can be understood as an attempt to establish differentiated solidarity (Rothberg, 2011) for non-European famine victims. Nevertheless, it is a fraught attempt as its pejorative connotations 'other' the victims, thereby complicating rather than facilitating solidarity.

The use of these tropes grew dominant in conjunction with the visual mediatisation of famine. The role of television as a new medium after the war seems important in 'canonising' these tropes while pushing out others, to the point that the famished child becomes most frequently utilised to link non-European famines with memories of the Hunger Winter. This mediatisation of famine coincided with criticism of the Hunger Winter analogy (*De Volkskrant*, 1966; *Haagse Courant*, 1966). For example, both the communist *De Waarheid* and liberal newspaper *NRC* reported critically on a televised relief action for Ethiopia in 1984, the former observing in exasperation:

> Every half an hour a million [guilders]. Until that woman who has experienced the hunger winter half-cryingly says: 'It is so horrible for a mother to tell a child who is hungry: I don't have it . . .' Then, suddenly, ten million is added. (*De Waarheid*, 1984)

This suggests two conflicting effects: first, it shows the continued power of recollections of WWII to mobilise people; second, it demonstrates that 'famine fatigue', as expressed in Dutch newspapers, was associated with an increasingly limited range of shared cultural representations of famine; in non-western contexts, the image of the famished mother and child turned from trope to cliché.

Invoking the trope of the female and child victims is arguably connected to the 'inexpressible reality' of famine (Kelleher, 1997: 2), as women and children are figures that already occupy an ambiguous boundary between culture and nature. Moreover, these figures 'not only furnish easier objects for compassion and pity but may also seem to secure an a priori distance from the cultivated spectator' (Lloyd, 2005: 163). This helps explain the representational paradox found in Dutch newspapers: while the trope was used to stimulate compassion and to call for aid, it also strengthened racial hierarchies in the post-war Netherlands.

As the examples above suggest, the stimulation of compassion had a problematic dimension. With regard to pre-war episodes of famine and European episodes of hunger after WWII (i.e. in Germany and Hungary), these analogies allowed writers to evoke sympathy or empathy in readers, based on concordances and transferred by a multifaceted repertoire of representations of famine. While sympathy is based on existing similarities, empathy recognises difference; it is a 'cognitive and affective attempt to place oneself in the position of the individual or collective Other' (Aschheim, 2016: 22–23). By contrast, for both geographically and culturally 'more distant' famines in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, comparisons often established distance rather than proximity, as the personalisation of famine memory evoked pity. Pity entails not only compassion but also

condescension, thus creating relationships on the basis of assumed inequality (Assmann and Detmers, 2018). This imbalance was connected to racial hierarchies in Dutch newspapers, as has been demonstrated with regard to the trope of the famished child and attributed cultural traits such as apathy, laziness and nonhuman behaviour.

In this regard, the Yugoslavian case of the years 1992–1996 (i.e. Sarajevo) is interesting, being a 'European' episode of hunger while affecting a predominantly Muslim population. This cultural tension is expressed by the othering of victims, comparable to the representation of their counterparts in (post)colonial contexts:

> Everyone looks apathetically at one another if something needs to be done and Big Brother is supposed to take care of everyone. The awareness that some things have changed, does not register. This often also applies to the stance of the refugees. (*Algemeen Dagblad*, 1994)

The differential narratives of hunger in supposedly 'western' and 'non-western' famines reveal the limits of solidarity and community. By knowingly or unknowingly questioning the shared humanity in representations of famine, this again demonstrates that multidirectional differentiation and solidarity do not mesh; that is, that famine memory can simultaneously be used to stimulate solidarity and to construct difference.

Memory processes: the Hunger Winter as a benchmark

As the previous section has shown, there were important differences in how shared experiences of hunger functioned as connecting vectors in different transnational contexts, which demonstrates that the term Hunger Winter operated on different scales simultaneously, and that its connotations shifted according to its referential context and function. Focusing on overarching memory processes, this section will argue that comparative uses of Hunger Winter recollections also continuously inflected the memory of the Dutch famine itself. In addition, we will show that recalling the Hunger Winter in transnational contexts played an important activating role, ultimately making the Hunger Winter a benchmark for understanding new episodes of hunger.

The previous section has demonstrated how from early on, the Hunger Winter has served as a threshold for acknowledging the suffering of other peoples. Memories of the Hunger Winter premediate interpretations of hunger conditions elsewhere, yet this happens in a 'non-subsumptive' manner: as a flexible reference point, the Hunger Winter lends meaning, but does not impose a particular interpretation on these later periods of hunger. Crucially, this also demonstrates that hierarchies can lead to multidirectionality; the memory of the Hunger Winter is used to point out similarities and to advocate an ethical approach to the suffering of others.

Through transnational analogies, the meaning of the Hunger Winter also shifted, given how it was used in later contexts. Such multidirectional processes of shaping famine memory become clear from several newspaper contributions by eyewitnesses to the Hunger Winter. These examples point to the aforementioned increased temporal distance, the influence of television, and the use of common tropes. Assuming during the 25th anniversary of the Hunger Winter that readers might not be familiar with the event, a letter in *De Tijd* (1969) used contemporary imagery from the Biafra famine to visualise victims of the Hunger Winter: 'It was extremely cold. The children looked the same as the children in Biafra now'. Similarly, during the 40th anniversary of the Hunger Winter, an eyewitness evoked televised images of the famine in Ethiopia to recall the period: 'Big, questioning eyes, that followed you everywhere. And they had these elderly faces, like little old men. They are similar to the children in Ethiopia that you now see on television' (*Het Vrije Volk*, 1984). The uses, functions and connotations of the term 'hunger winter' therefore showed themselves to be fluid, continuously shaping and reshaping representations of new famines and the Hunger

Winter itself at the same time. Consequently, the memory of the period did not become 'ossified' (Huyssen, 1995: 250), but remained adaptable to the needs of shifting presents.

Through this representational power, recollections of the Hunger Winter also receive definitional force, helping to determine what constitutes the condition of hunger. During the Biafra famine, for example, *Nederlands Dagblad* (1968) stressed the need for a 'good definition of hunger', for it could 'refer to anything without directly thinking about hunger winter, famine or deaths from hunger'. Similarly, *De Volkskrant* (1968) critically remarked:

> Everyone knows what hunger is: hunger is what the children in Biafra experience, hunger is what many Dutch persons experienced during the Hunger Winter, but most of us only know from experience what it is to have an appetite. How many children who come home from school declaring that they are hungry, are told off with the remark: 'Hunger is what we had during the war, what you are is peckish'.

Beyond sense-making, the Hunger Winter thus became a benchmark for famine and hunger, strongly linked to post-war definitions of these phenomena.

In addition, recalling the Hunger Winter also had more explicit functions, connected with the politicisation of past hunger conditions as rhetorical tools in the present. This political engagement partly resulted from the earlier mentioned role of newspaper writings in shaping victim-perpetrator discourses. Historical analogies with the Hunger Winter – in which the Dutch people embodied an ostensibly homogeneous victim population and Nazi Germany the perpetrator – 'enabled' readers to choose sides in present-day conflicts. The politicisation and transnational application of this simplified victim-perpetrator motif related to the Hunger Winter was especially pronounced during Cold War conflicts. During the 1956 uprising in Hungary, comparative use of the Hunger Winter allowed journalists to emphasise that the Hungarians were suffering from malnutrition because of enemy occupation by the Soviet Union (*Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 1956; *Trouw*, 1956). In the case of communist-led Ethiopia, in a letter to the editor, the Hunger Winter frame was used to criticise newspaper *Trouw* for using the term 'rebels' to refer to Eritrean independence fighters, who allegedly obstructed food supplies, thereby causing famine conditions in the region:

> According to this terminology, the illegal Trouw would have been established at the time by a 'group of rebels' and the underground resistance (railway strike) caused the misery of the hunger winter. Would Trouw ever write such a thing? Why then do so regarding Eritrea? (*Trouw*, 1985)

The Dutch famine also served to emphasise the political ability and moral duty to relieve famine in the near future. This analogy pertained especially to the possibility of food drops by airplane, which had also taken place in the occupied western Netherlands in the final days before liberation (De Zwarte, 2020). Lessons learned from these Allied food drops appeared in newspaper writings in the 1950s, 1960s and 1990s. For example, during the Hungarian Revolution, *De Tijd* (1956) argued, '[i]t [dropping food] was possible during our occupation and there was an airlift constructed for West Berlin, so it can happen now'. Similarly, during the Biafran famine, an interview with a spokesperson of the Biafran student union posed the question: 'Why can't we organise large-scale food drops, similar to those during the hunger winter and in Korea?' (*De Volkskrant*, 1968). In the case of the Siege of Sarajevo, comparative use of the Allied food drops functioned to criticise imprecise food drops in the region (*Algemeen Dagblad*, 1993). This continuity in transnational memory uses demonstrates that the Hunger Winter frame played a significant and lasting role in engaging with later relief operations. As such, over the span of several decades, the food drops during the Hunger Winter functioned as a benchmark for the discussion of current relief interventions.

In this comparative framework, political and social engagement were often closely linked. Most importantly, throughout the period 1945–1995, Hunger Winter memories were used in newspaper writings to evoke feelings of solidarity and to stimulate altruism. As has been demonstrated, using the term 'hunger winter' to call for (working-class) solidarity and altruism already existed prior to WWII; after the war, newspaper writings show historical continuity in this specific function of the term. Indeed, in all of our seven comparisons, the Hunger Winter is frequently evoked to emphasise shared experiences – whether by using analogies or through personalisation of famine memory, thus functioning as calls for relief intervention, collecting funds or mobilising humanitarian aid. These appeals to the reader for societal engagement and relief giving are illustrated in an interview in *Het Vrije Volk* (1987) with the General Secretary of Oxfam NOVIB Sjef Teunis on a new relief action for Africa:

> I can imagine that people are saying: 'Another action for Africa? Isn't that like carrying water to the sea [i.e. futile]?' But my reaction is simple and blunt: there cannot be a moment in which the appeal to the Dutch people is fulfilled. If a disaster such as this one unfolds, one must help. Period. It would be impossible to imagine the Canadians and Americans reasoning in the same manner during the Hunger Winter at the end of the war.

On an even more fundamental level, the headline of an article on humanitarian aid from the Netherlands during the Bihar famine in 1966 stated, 'A people who starved, helps a people who is starving' (*De Volkskrant*, 1966). Other newspapers also advocated a moral obligation for the Dutch people to move from being an erstwhile recipient of aid to giving aid in the present (*Algemeen Dagblad*, 1966; *De Volkskrant*, 1966). This demonstrates that Hunger Winter memories did not just function as calls for relief interventions; through mnemonic traces of the Dutch famine past in newspapers, the act of relief giving itself became part of Dutch cultural self-identification.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the dynamics of memory beyond national frames, revealing how memories of the Dutch 'Hunger Winter' were evoked in newspapers to make sense of current episodes of hunger, as well as to stimulate political and societal engagement among readers with famines across the world. Our study shows how memories of the Hunger Winter became a benchmark for understanding famine, deprivation and humanitarianism. At the same time, the transnational operationalisation of memory in Dutch newspapers canonised the memory of the Hunger Winter itself. Through transnational comparisons, our study shows that the Hunger Winter became part of a Dutch identity, based on pride for the country's supposed national resilience and subsequent altruism. This points to the complex workings of cultural memory in a national setting while also demonstrating its constructive power in a transnational context. Specifically, it shows how transnational processes of memory comparison can function to transform national recollections of suffering, including those of famine, into incentives for popular and political action beyond national borders.

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Notes

1. In our translations of source materials, we have stayed as close as possible to the original Dutch texts.
2. For example, '*Hungerwinter*' in Germany, '*hungervinter*' in Sweden and '*nälkätalvi*' in Finland.
3. In this article, we also make this distinction: we use 'Hunger Winter' to denote the Dutch famine, and 'hunger winter' when indicating other uses of the term.
4. In later decades, we have only found one reference to these tropes, when *De Telegraaf* (1992) refers to the collection of firewood on a cemetery in Sarajevo.

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