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Summary

Winterkill follows the struggle of 12-year-old Nyl to survive and protect his family and community during the Holodomor, Stalin's forced collectivization of farms in 1930s Soviet Ukraine. Unfortunately, he cannot stop his family and friends from being killed or deported.

Nyl meets Alice, an idealistic Canadian girl who has come to the Soviet Union with her father, who is initially a true believer of Stalin's collectivization plan. Alice soon recognizes Stalin's motive, which is to eliminate the Ukrainian people and their culture. Alice and Nyl come up with a plan to get themselves out of the country and tell the world about what is happening.

Historical Background

In the early 1930s, Soviet Ukraine was subjected to a genocidal famine that killed millions. This is now known as the Holodomor which means "death inflicted by starvation." For decades the Holodomor was denied and covered up by the Soviet Union, but since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, more information from this time has come to light. The truth is, Stalin used his control of the region to limit access to food and implemented a controlled eradication of the Ukrainian people, their culture, religion, and political leadership. The goal was to eradicate the Ukrainian people and culture and to replace them with ethnic Russians and Belarussians. This time saw the destruction of entire villages, with one third being blockaded and left to die. This book details one family's struggle to survive.

Like Stalin before him, Vladimir Putin also denies the Holodomor. The Russian Federation's current war upon Ukraine has many parallels with the past.

Important Terms/Events

Capitalism - An economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market.

Communism - A classless and stateless socio-political system involving collective ownership of the means of production and consumer goods.

Komsomol (Young Communist League) - The youth division of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The organization was for people aged 14 to 28

Kolkhoz - A collective farm in the former Soviet Union.

Kulak - In pre-Soviet times the term referred to a peasant who was wealthy enough to own a farm and hire labor. During Stalin's "dekulakization" plan in the 1930s, even poor farmers were deemed kulaks if they didn't want to join the kolkhoz. Being labeled a kulak meant deportation or death.

Kolkhoznik - A member of the kolkhoz.

Shock Worker - Officially a title of honor awarded in the Soviet Union to those who displayed exemplary performance in labor discipline. During Stalin's first 5-year plan, these were communist party fanatics who were sent into the countryside to implement forced collectivization.

Tato - Father.

Young Pioneers - A younger sect of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union intended for children aged 9 to 14.

Pre-Reading Questions

1. What inferences or predictions can we make from the cover?
2. What do you think might be the relationship between the characters on the cover?
3. What do you think the meaning is behind the title, *Winterkill*?

Chapter Questions

Chapter 1

1. Why do you think some people referred to the red ties the Young Pioneers wore as “the devil’s noose”? (p. 2)
2. Nyl says he never wears his pin or tie even though he is a “Pioneer on paper.” Why do you think this is? (p. 5)
3. Yulia and Nyl have very different reactions to Alice. What might that tell us about the difference between the siblings?
4. What was Alice doing at the house and why did Nyl call it “alarming?” (p. 6)
5. What did we learn about Stalin and the people who work for him in this chapter? What are some of the things we know communists believe in? How does this impact Nyl and his family and their way of life?

Chapter 2

6. In this chapter, Nyl observes English writing on the tractor. What could that tell us about where the tractors are being made? What does that mean in the big picture? (p. 21)
7. Nyl calls himself a coward for not helping the priest, his wife, or the church. Do you think this is fair?

Chapter 3

8. What is the significance of burning the song book? What does this tell you about what’s going on in Ukraine? (p. 35) Thinking of the Russian Federation’s current war on Ukraine, is there a similar policy?
9. On page 43 it says, “Stalin’s plan counted on getting the envious to prey on the industrious.” What can we learn from this? Are there any parallels between Stalin’s expectations and Putin’s now?

Chapter 4

10. How would you describe Yelena? What do we know about her relationship with her husband? (p. 48)
11. We now know that the students are being made to write about Stalin and communism in school. What other areas of their life are being changed by Stalin’s control on the country? (p. 52) Can you see any parallels between Stalin’s regime and Putin’s Russian Federation?
12. What makes Nyl think Fedir is brave for writing about “how to make kolkhoz function more efficiently”? (p. 53)

Chapter 5

13. In the beginning of the chapter, Nyl describes Tupolev as “nervous,” now that we know what the speech was about, why do you think he was nervous? How else might he have been feeling? (p. 55)
14. If violence and stealing was not part of Stalin’s plan, why do you think the shock workers did what they did? (p. 56) Can you see a parallel between what was happening in the 1930s to what is happening in Putin’s current war?
15. Do you think Stalin was being honest when denouncing the violence?
16. What do you think might have happened if the men had been in the lead of storming the kolkhoz?
17. What did the plan to storm the kolkhoz tell you about Mama and Auntie Pawlina? How would you describe their characters? (p. 59)
18. Ruslana says “The people who are remaining with the kolkhoz are now doing it voluntarily... Hopefully that means we’ll start to work together.” What does that tell us about the start of the kolkhoz before this? Was it working well? Why or why not? (p. 63)
19. In her interaction with Comrade Berkovich, Nyl describes Auntie Pawlina’s reaction as such: “Auntie’s mouth hung open, and her eyes were wide. I could tell that this conversation wasn’t going the way she’d planned.” What do you think was going through her mind at this time? (p. 65)

Chapter 6

20. Think about your parents’ jobs. They probably get paid every two weeks. How do you think your life would change if they were only getting paid once a year? (p. 68)
21. Magda says everyone will get paid the same, even if they do not do the same amount of work. What would be the pros and cons of this system? Does that seem fair? How would that make you feel? (p. 68)
22. Can you think of a time where you could relate to how Magda might feel in this situation? (p. 68)

Chapter 7

23. Nyl says “here was a giant farm being run by people who had never done it before.” Does Nyl think the kolkhozniks will be successful? (p. 73)
24. Who is Nyl referring to when he says “we had stood up to the bullies and we had won”? Who are the bullies and why does he call them that? (p. 75)
25. It seems Mama and Auntie Pawlina have conflicting feelings about how things are going. Mama feels things are getting back to normal but Auntie Pawlina does not. Who would you agree with in this situation? (p. 75)

26. Ruslana tells Nyl that the grain and produce have been collected but they still have not been paid as they were supposed to. Make a prediction about what this means for the kolkhozniks.
27. Based on what we know about Yulia and her feelings towards the kolkhoz and the Young Pioneers, what do you think her future looks like?

Chapter 8

28. How do you think Nyl must have felt upon realizing the intention of Stalin's plan and knowing their food had been stolen? (p. 84)
29. When Comrade Petrovna speaks up, Chort suggests that if they wish to survive they join the kolkhoz. Do you think Nyl and his family will submit to these pressures? (p. 91)
30. How do you think the other members of the kolkhoz who were not aware of the plan, like Fedir's father, felt about the shock workers coming in and stealing the grain?

Chapter 9

31. When Alice and her father were visiting and attempting to recruit workers for the factory, why do you think Mama sent Nyl away? If you were in her position would you want your son to go away and work? If you were in Nyl's position, what would you want to do? (p. 95)
32. Nyl places some of the blame for Uncle Ilya's death on Alice and her father, do you think this is fair? (p. 95)
33. Nyl makes an assumption about the car and camera that Alice and her father have only to learn his initial belief is far from the truth, how can we apply this to our lives? (p. 96)
34. Nyl says "I realized how ironic it was that she and her father had come here in the hopes of a better life, yet my family needed to leave here for the exact same reason," (p. 99). How may this connect to what is happening in Ukraine currently? What do you think the goals were for individual Russian soldiers who were sent to fight in Ukraine? What do we know about the current refugee situation?
35. By the end of the chapter, what plan do you think Nyl and Slavko have? How do you think that's going to work out for them? How will their family react? (p. 100)

Chapter 10

36. When being given food from the woman, Nyl notes that she sits with them but with no food or milk for herself. What inference can we make here? (p. 105)

Chapter 11

37. In this chapter, Nyl talks about how little they have while working at the Tractorstroy but it does not matter since he and Slavko are together and helping their family. What words would you use to describe Nyl's mindset about this challenging situation? (p. 113)
38. How do you think it must have felt for Nyl to see foreigners being treated better in his country than he was? (p. 115)
39. Why are they building a wall all around Tractorgavod? What is the significance of Nyl comparing it to a fortress? (p. 117)
40. After telling Nyl the bad news about Tractorgavod, Comrade Campbell gives Nyl extra money and says to him, "Please take this money. It's the least I can do." What do you think he means by this? Why does he feel the need to give Nyl extra money? (p. 118)

Chapter 12

41. Were you surprised that Mama was not mad at the boys when they returned? How do you think your parents might have reacted in a similar situation? (p. 120)
42. Are you surprised about Yulia choosing to join the kolkhoz? What past actions of Yulia made you think she might make this decision if any? (p. 126)
43. How do you think the family feels about Yulia joining the kolkhoz? (p. 126)

Chapter 13

44. Why would Nyl think Yulia joining the kolkhoz is a betrayal? Do you think Yulia sees it as a betrayal? (p. 129)
45. At the end of the chapter, Nyl takes a moment to recognize how grateful he is for all that he has. From the outside, it may seem like he does not have much at all. What is it that you think Nyl is grateful for? (p. 132)

Chapter 14

46. In this chapter Nyl says they are "huddled together on the floor... staring at the portrait of Stalin in our atheist's corner." Do you think this makes people have greater appreciation for Stalin? Is it having the effect Stalin may have desired? (p. 133) Are there parallels to Putin's current actions in Ukraine?
47. Why would the reminder of Yulia being in the kolkhoz make Nyl "burn with anger" at this time? He had known she was a kolkhoznik for some time now. (p. 137).
48. Why do you think Ukrainian farmers are being labeled "kulaks"? Why are they being depicted as a "cartoonishly fat swarthy man with expensive clothing" when we know this is far from the reality of the people this word is targeting? What is the goal of this poster? (p. 137) Can you think of a modern example of this kind of propaganda?

Chapter 15

49. Nyl was regretful that Yulia was not coming with them when they were making their escape. Based on what we know about Nyl's character, do you think he would accept Yulia back into the family and forgive her for joining the kolkhoz? (p. 144)

Chapter 16

50. Nyl says "All I could do was urge my brother not to think or feel, but to just get ready so we could leave." Do you think you would be able to do what Nyl and Slavko are doing in this situation? (p. 151)
51. Yelena's face "was streaked with tears but she didn't look sad." Why would she be crying about her husband being dead? (p. 152)
52. If Yelena is describing her husband, Commander Chort, as a "devil," do you think she was happy to be in this marriage or agreed with his actions? (p. 152)

Chapter 17

53. How do you think Yulia would feel later to find out her mother had been killed and she did not know? Do you think she would be sad or feel like it was the right thing as her mother had been "stealing"? (p. 154)
54. When looking at the destroyed home, the only things left untouched were the "portrait of Stalin plus the bust of Lenin and the Soviet flag." With this information, who can we assume is responsible for destroying this house? (p. 156)

Chapter 18

55. Why do you think they do not want farmers working at the tractor plant? (p. 173)
56. There are a few times where Nyl references or sees unmarked mass graves. Can you think of other circumstances in history where we know these were used? Are there any similarities between the Holodomor and those? Research what's happened in Bucha, Mariupol and other cities across Ukraine during the current war. Are there parallels?

Chapter 19

57. Nyl continues to blame Alice and her father for the bad things happening to them and the Ukrainian people. In their defense, Alice says that she and her father were just doing what they thought was right. Do you believe her? (p. 178) Are there parallels in the current war? Can you think of other situations where people caused great harm doing what they thought was right?
58. Why would Alice and her father want to leave? (p. 179)

Chapter 20

59. What is the significance of Comrade White and Alice's Canadian passports being put in a safe that they do not have access to? What do you need your passport to do? (p. 185)

Chapter 21

60. Nyl says "I wanted to live in a world where people were equal no matter who their parents were or where they were born. I wanted to live in a place where hard work and kindness were valued." This chapter takes place in 1932. Do you think a place like this exists now? Do we live in a place like this? Has Ukraine become this place? (p. 189)

Chapter 22

61. When Nyl says, "I was desperate to keep [Slavko] safe. Yulia was a different matter," what does he mean by that? How does he feel towards Yulia at this point? (p. 196)

62. The text says, "What would it take for Stalin to realize that it was his policies, not his so-called kulaks, who were the enemy of the people?" Given what we know about the current events in Russia, do you think the Russian leaders learned from these events? (p. 197)

Chapter 23

63. The farmers were selling precious items just to get enough food to survive. Do you think they were being given a fair price for them? (p. 204)

64. Thinking of your own family, what items would be the most difficult to have to sell in order to survive? (p. 204)

65. What do you think the significance of the comic on the inside of the candy is? Nyl thinks that the people who can afford the candies "were living in a fantasy world." Do you think that is true? (p. 206)

66. Alice is sure that it is important to get the photos out. Nyl asks her "But will anyone care?" If Alice gets the photos out, do you think things will change in Ukraine? (p. 207).

Chapter 24

67. Now that they are in Kharkiv, it is clear that people are living very differently there. Is there anything about the way they are living that stood out to you?

Chapter 25

68. After reading the chapter, define what the chapter title *Good Garbage* means?

Chapter 26

69. Roman believes his parents “would rest easy with the thought of us making those murderers a little less comfortable.” What does he mean by calling these people “murderers”? (p. 226)
70. Do you agree that Roman’s parents would be okay with him stealing? Why or why not? (p. 226)
71. This chapter ends by saying “But then one hot summer day it all fell apart.” Make some predictions on what you think might be happening next. (p. 227)

Chapter 27

72. Alice and Nyl were giving any of their spare money to people who needed it to survive even though they needed to be saving it so they could make their trip. What does this tell us about them? (p. 235)

Chapter 28

73. What did we learn about the “famine” in this chapter from Rhea? (p. 241)
74. How does Stalin feel towards Ukrainian people? Does this remind you of anything else you know from history or current events? (p. 241)

Chapter 29

75. Why do you think Nyl refers to Tractorzloy as a place of punishment? (p. 245)
76. Alice and Nyl have clearly experienced an overwhelming amount of death and decimation during their journey and their lives before this point. How can you connect this to the current experience of Ukrainian children?
77. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, make a prediction about what you think may be coming next.

Chapter 30

78. When in the country, Nyl meets many compassionate Russians who do not agree with what is going on in Ukraine. Nyl recognizes that the only Russians he had met before were the “ones sent in from Moscow to punish us and steal from us.” What lesson can be taken from these interactions? How can we connect that to today? (p. 256)

Chapter 31

79. Why do you think Nyl and Alice decided to use ravens and flowers as their symbols? (p. 263)
80. What does Nyl mean when he says Anna’s “words were like a salve to my heart”? (p. 264)
81. What do you think is next for Nyl?

Essay Questions

1. Replacing the horses with tractors is an example of technology advancing and modernization. Support your answer with examples throughout history and demonstrate the pros and cons of technological advancement.
2. Compare and contrast Stalin's actions in 1930s Soviet Ukraine to Putin's actions in present Ukraine. Support your answers with contemporary newspaper and magazine articles.
3. Rhea and Alice are both fictional characters based on real people. Compare and contrast what we know about the real people with the fictional characters. More information about Rhea can be found here: <https://education.holodomor.ca/rhea-clyman/> <https://uamoderna.com/shafka-dok/balan-rhea-clyman-holodomor> (do a search for "Alice" for Rhea's article on Alice)
4. Complete research on a naturally occurring famine anywhere in the world. From what you learn, compare the causes, impact, and aftermath of a naturally occurring famine and Holodomor. What are the differences between a natural act and an intentional genocide?

Culminating Tasks

- Research and create a collection of Canadian political cartoons. Write a short blurb explaining what the comic is depicting and what the impact of the cartoon may have been.
- Write a letter from the perspective of a member of the family to Yulia expressing the feelings and concerns of the family and telling her what has happened as a result of Stalin's actions in Soviet Ukraine.
- With a partner, take on the roles of Nyl and his brother, Slavko and write a collection of letters detailing their time apart from each other when Slavko decides to stay at the tractor factory. You will need to do further research about the conditions of these factories and what happened in Ukraine after the point of Nyl's departure.
- Take on the role of a tractor salesman. Create an advertising poster for the new tractors that are supposedly being built and sold in the Soviet Union. Your imaging on the tractor should be historically accurate.

- Create an in-depth character profile of one of the main characters from the story. The profile should give readers a snapshot of the character, similar to what would be seen on a Facebook profile.
- Research a genocide that has happened in more recent years and complete a Venn Diagram comparing the causes and implications of the Holodomor with the more recent genocide of your choice.
- Choose a key event in the story and create a comic strip, either digitally or by hand, depicting that event, the characters, and the dialogue that may or may not have taken place.
- With a partner, take on the role of interviewer and interviewee. The interviewee will portray Alice or a character similar to her, bringing the news of the atrocities to Canada. As the interviewer, you will want to ask the interviewer about their experiences in Ukraine but will want to be sure to maintain a level of skepticism since Alice and her father were employed by the Soviets.

Resources

The Holodomor Research and Education Consortium has an extremely useful database of information, both for research and education.

For research, this link is a good starting point, containing publications and links to further publications, translated academic articles, documents and sources, videos, maps and memorialization:

<https://holodomor.ca/resources/>

For education, this link is a good starting point, including teaching materials, learning activities, curriculum applications, resources for teachers, news and events, a gallery, plus material in French and English:

<https://education.holodomor.ca/>

Webinar with Marsha Skrypuch about *Winterkill*:

<https://education.holodomor.ca/author-marsha-skrypuch-talks-about-her-latest-novel-winterkill/>

