# Putin's Brutal War and Ukraine's Dark Heritage

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MARTIN DUFFY, APR 16 2022

The worst of times send international relations buffs into a frenzied search for explanations. Invariably neither cause nor effect in international relations changes much from crisis to crisis. The aggressive war waged from February 2022 by President Putin in Ukraine under the guise of a special military operation (itself a proliferation of his occupation of eastern Ukraine since February 2014) looks like a brutal history repeating itself. Russia and Ukraine share a dark heritage which pre-dates even the last century. Historians and IR scholars often refer back to the theory of historical cycles propounded by inter-war German philosopher-historian, Oswald Spengler. Spengler believed that history regularly repeated itself- one strong leader after another. Although a German nationalist, Spengler fundamentally disagreed with the Nazis. Goethe's vitalism and Nietzsche's cultural criticism inspired him, as did the cyclical vision of world history proposed by the German historian Eduard Meyer. Spengler also morally disagreed with the Aryan racial doctrine and resigned the Nietzsche Archive in opposition to the regime. Spengler, however, regarded dictatorial regimes as inevitable and expressed some sympathy for the Italian Fascist movement. He would not have liked Putin but likely conceded "an unhappy Russia was inevitable". Ironically, Spengler's thinking would surely have identified elements of fascism in Putin's aggression towards Ukraine which rather ridicules Putin's claims of de-nazification.

If Spengler were alive today, he most probably would have interpreted Putin's actions in the Ukraine as a repeat of Hitler's calculated lebensraum which takes us back to our original point that the Russian war is forcing Ukraine to revisit its lengthy and dark heritage with Russia. Let us therefore sketch some timelines for this mutual dark heritage. In explaining why, he launched his special military operation, President Putin falsely claimed that Ukraine was always a part of Russia, while he also made bogus assertions about pro-Russian Ukrainians being under threat (Pieniazek, 11-55). We genuinely need to sift fact from fiction and explain the history of Ukraine and its political independence. President Putin falsely claimed in the years preceding invasion, as he had done in 2014, that there were grave threats to pro-Russian Ukrainians.

**Modern Ukraine**

Back in 1991, in the closing days of the Soviet Union, Ukraine declared independence after nearly seventy years under Moscow's continuous control. And when Vladimir Putin took power a decade later, he began trying to recover territory, claiming Ukraine as part of Russia's family, Russias's "brotherly republic'. Those who are today besieged in cities like Mariupol or Odessa, and effectively even in Kyiv, must be appreciative of that special kind of Russian "brotherly love." At a NATO summit in 2008, Putin reportedly told then-President George W. Bush that Ukraine was not even a country, and certainly, repeated those claims made in several of his speeches, before launching the invasion: "Ukraine never had a tradition of genuine statehood. Modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia". However, this totally ignores the centuries of rich history through which modern Ukraine took shape. It was first home to the Kyivan Rus people, who were Scandinavians traders and Russia's namesake. Over time, it was absorbed by Poland and Lithuania, and then the Russian Empire and Austria-Hungary. Like most of Europe it is a concoction of past empires, but no less integral than Germany, France, or Russia itself, for all of that.

A post-World War I treaty briefly recognized Ukraine's unilateral independence (in the spirit of the times encouraged by US President Woodrow Wilson in his 14-points) but this lasted barely long enough to spark Ukrainian nationalist movements. The Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic was created in 1922. Under Soviet rule, Ukrainian identity was

under constant threat. In 1932, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin showed the ultimate "brotherly love" as his disastrous policies created famine there, killing at least three million Ukrainians in a single year. Indeed, by World War II, some Ukrainians almost welcomed Nazi occupation as an antidote to Soviet control, but relief was short-lived.

The Nazis killed over 1.5 million Ukrainian Jews. Millions more non-Jewish Ukrainians died or deployed as slave labor. By 1954, the country that exists today was part of the USSR. The final piece was Crimea, a peninsula on the Black Sea, which Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred from Russia to Ukraine. Even after Ukraine declared independence in 1991, pro-Russian political elements remained, which Putin subsequently exploited. In Ukraine's 2004 presidential elections- backing pro-Russian Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych. Yanukovych opposed Viktor Yushchenko, a pro-Western opposition politician. Yanukovych won, but international monitors said the election fell short of its standard. Yushchenko supporters then sparked the Orange Revolution, so-called for the campaign's colors, holding protests and storming Parliament.

The Ukrainian Supreme Court deemed the results invalid, and Yushchenko won the next election. During the polling, Yushchenko became ill and suffered horrific facial disfiguration due to dioxin poisoning. This marked the resurrection of clandestine spy-manship by Russia, which has been repeated on numerous occasions since. Yushchenko's supporters immediately blamed the pro-Russian government. The political goal of Ukraine was towards EU and NATO but in Eastern Ukraine, support for Russia remained strong. In 2010, Yanukovych ran again and won. In 2013. Yanukovych stopped trade talks with the E.U., instead pursuing a similar agreement with Russia. Crowds gathered to protest in Kyiv's Maidan Independence, Square. Putin vilified the Ukrainian people.

As 2014 began, authorities grew more violent. In late February, Ukrainian security forces killed dozens of peaceful demonstrators. Then, the opposition and government reached a truce, and Yanukovych fled to Russia. Russia has argued that armed forces are last resort with lawlessness in eastern regions and to protect those citizens. Those so-called requests for help soon followed. On March 6, the Crimean Parliament voted to secede from Ukraine and join Russia. Days later, a public referendum rife with alleged fraud passed with 95.5 percent of the vote. That July, the U.S., EU, Canada, and other allies-imposed sanctions on Russia. Russian troops became an occupying force. As it is today, the Putin regime said it was helping Crimeans defend themselves, with little credible evidence they needed defending. Russia's Channel one has a lot of answer for.

**Putin's Brutal War**

Dmitry Peskov, Spokesman for Vladimir Putin asks: "Will Russia be able to remain indifferent to the situation when, in neighboring Ukraine, Russians are facing a deadly threat? The answer is simple. No, Russia cannot remain indifferent, and it will not remain indifferent ". Two months later, Ukraine elected its next president, pro-European businessman Petro Poroshenko. But the events in Crimea had inspired pro-Russian separatists in two other regions, Donetsk, and Luhansk, collectively known as the Donbass. Their political protests quickly took a military dimension. Russian-backed separatists began an insurgency against the Ukrainian military.

There were diplomatic attempts to reach a cease-fire, but those never held. The fighting continued into 2019, when Poroshenko lost reelection to Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who famously once played an accidentally elected president of Ukraine. He campaigned on domestic issues, but also wanted to restore peace to the Donbass.Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the time said: "Most likely, if I meet Mr. Vladimir Putin, I will tell him the following: Well, you finally gave us back our territories. How much money are you ready to give as compensation for the fact that you took our territories and that you assisted people who participated in escalation in Crimea, Donbass and assisted them on the awful, cruel, and disgusting path? To everyone's surprise, perhaps his own, Zelenskyy proved a robust political leader with a proficiency in his grasp of media and a genuinely popular touch.

Three years later, Putin is forcing the Ukrainian people, while Zelenskyy fights to lead them out. If repression is the inevitable outcome of Russia's relationship with Ukraine, then Ukraine's notorious genocide, the Holodomor, was the precursor to the events of 2014 and 2022. Between 1932–1933 approximately 3.5 million Ukrainians starved in actions by the Soviet state which are formally considered genocide by many countries. It is considered as a criminal act of Stalin's regime by others, and a crime against humanity by five major international organizations. As Ukraine

starved, foreign relief was rejected by the Soviet state. There were periodic famines in Soviet Russia and its empire, such as Kazakhstan famine of 1932–1933. In the case of Ukraine, in 1984 an International Commission determined the Holodomor to have been a genocide.

**Ukraine's Holodomor**

The Holodomor, derived from the Russian phrase, 'to kill by starvation' is also known as the Terror-Famine. It was a ubiquitous famine in Soviet Ukraine from 1932 to 1933 that killed millions of Ukrainians. The term Holodomor emphasizes the famine's fabricated nature and alleged intentional aspects such as rejection of outside aid, confiscation of household foodstuffs and restriction of population movement. As a large part of the wider Soviet famine of 1932–1933 which affected the major grain-producing areas of the vast country, millions of inhabitants of Ukraine, the majority of whom were ethnic Ukrainians, died of starvation in a peacetime catastrophe unprecedented in the history of Ukraine. Since 2006, the Holodomor has been recognized by Ukraine and a growing number of other countries as a genocide of the Ukrainian people carried out by the Soviet government.

Estimates of the death toll by scholars and government officials vary greatly. A joint statement by the United Nations signed by 25 countries in 2003 declared that 7–10 million perished. In the Soviet Union, of which Ukraine was a constituent republic, any references to the famine were dismissed as anti-Soviet propaganda, even after de-Stalinization in 1956, until the declassification and publication of historical documents in the late 1980s made continued denial of the catastrophe unsustainable.

**Glasnost and Perestroika**

Discussion of the Holodomor became possible as part of the glasnost policy of openness. In Ukraine, the first official use of famine was a December 1987 speech by Volodymyr Shcherbytskyi, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, on the occasion of the republic's 70th anniversary. As forensic details leaked out, the true horror of what had been visited on the people of Soviet Ukraine became hard to deny. Evidence of widespread cannibalism was documented during the Holodomor. Only in an atmosphere of perestroika could foreign researchers ever be permitted to learn of this dark heritage.

Day to day survival for Soviet Ukrainians was a moral as well as a physical struggle. A woman doctor wrote to a friend in June 1933 that she had not become a cannibal but was "not sure that I shall not be one by the time my letter reaches you". The good people died first. Those who refused to steal or to prostitute themselves died. Those who gave food to others died. Those who refused to eat corpses died. Those who refused to kill their fellow man died. Parents who resisted cannibalism died. The Soviet regime printed posters declaring: "To eat your own children is a barbarian act. More than 2,500 people were convicted of cannibalism during the Holodomor. Much has yet to be released about this act of genocide in the putrid archives of the Kremlin. It is one of the most formidable examples of dark heritage emanating from Soviet times (Pieniazek, 1-22).

According to Natalya Naumenko, collectivization in the Soviet Union and lack of favored industries were primary contributors to famine mortality (52% of excess deaths), and some evidence shows there was direct discrimination against ethnic Ukrainians and Germans. In Ukraine collectivization policy was brutally enforced, entailing extreme local crisis, and contributing significantly to the famine.

**Explaining Ukraine's Dark Heritage**

It has been proposed that the Soviet leadership used the man-made famine to attack Ukrainian nationalism, and thus it could fall under the legal definition of genocide. For example, special and particularly lethal policies were adopted in and largely limited to Soviet Ukraine at the end of 1932 and 1933. According to Yale historian Timothy Snyder, "each of them may seem like an anodyne administrative measure, and each of them was certainly presented as such at the time, and yet each had to kill." Under the collectivism policy, for example, "farmers were not only deprived of their properties but a large swath of these were also exiled in Siberia with no means of survival. Those who were left behind and attempted to escape the zones of famine were ordered shot".

Despite the crisis, the Soviet government actively denied asking for foreign aid for the famine and instead actively refused to recognize the famine's existence. What aid was given was selectively distributed to bolster the collective farm system. All of this suggests that the genocide was manufactured or at least exploited to weaken Ukraine (Pieniazek, 6-38). Ukrainians in other parts of the Soviet Union also experienced famine and repressive policies and this is sometimes viewed as being connected to the Holodomor in Ukraine. Ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan were also significantly affected by the Kazakh famine of 1931–1933. All of these catastrophes appear too calculated to be meteorically coincidental. The Soviet agricultural collectivization was chaotic, but it required an additional element of calculated brutality to create the perfect nutritional storm.

Then from this famine comes the geo-political problems of modern Ukraine- large Russian communities whose roots are closer to Moscow than to Kharkiev or even Kyiv. Areas depopulated by the famine were resettled by Russians in the Zaporizhzhya, Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, and less so in central Ukraine. In some areas where depopulation was due to migration rather than mortality, Ukrainians returned to their places of residence to find their homes occupied by Russians, leading to widespread fights between Ukrainian farmers and Russian settlers. Such clashes caused around one million Russian settlers to be returned home. Ukraine became an ethnic hotch-pot ripe for internecine conflict and riddled by memories of archaistic conflict.

The Soviet Union long denied that the famine had taken place. The NKVD (and later KGB) controlled the archives for the Holodomor period and made relevant records available only sparingly. In the 2000s, there were debates among historians and in civil society about the number of deaths as Soviet files were released, and tension built between Russia and the Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko. Yushchenko and other Ukrainian politicians described fatalities as in the region of seven to ten million. Historian Timothy D. Snyder writes: "President Viktor Yushchenko does his country a grave disservice by claiming ten million deaths, thus exaggerating the number of Ukrainians killed by a factor of three; but it is true that the famine in Ukraine of 1932–1933 was a result of purposeful political decisions, and killed about three million people". In the last couple of years experts have agreed to a figure of morbidity somewhere in between these controversial upper and lower estimates of fatalities.

**Famine and Disease in Soviet Ukraine**

As a child, Mikhail Gorbachev, from a mixed Russian-Ukrainian family, experienced the famine in Stavropol, Russia. He recalled in a memoir that "In that terrible year [in 1933] nearly half the population of my native village, Privolnoye, starved to death, including two sisters and one brother of my father." Historian R. W. Davies concludes that disease was the cause of many deaths: in 1932–1933, there were 1.2 million cases of typhus and 500,000 cases of typhoid fever (Davies, 22-36). There was also migration into Ukraine as a response to the famine: in response to the demographic collapse, the Soviet authorities ordered large-scale resettlements, with over 117,000 peasants from remote regions of the Soviet Union taking over deserted farms (Ibid).

Scholars continue to debate "whether the man-made Soviet famine was a central act in a campaign of genocide, or whether it was designed to force Ukrainian peasants into submission, drive them into the collectives and ensure a steady supply of grain for Soviet industrialization." Whether the Holodomor is a genocide is a significant issue in modern politics and there is no international consensus on whether Soviet policies would fall under the legal definition of genocide. Several governments, such as the United States and Canada, have recognized the Holodomor as an act of genocide. However, David R. Marples states such decisions are mostly based on emotions, or on pressure by local groups rather than hard evidence. Scholarly positions are diverse, but aside from the eastern areas, Ukrainians do not covet much nostalgia for Soviet days past.

Whether the Holodomor was a genocide or ethnicity-blind, was man-made or natural, and was intentional or unintentional are issues of significant modern debate. The event is considered a genocide by Ukraine, a crime against humanity by the European Parliament, and the lower house of parliament of Russia condemned the Soviet regime, "that has neglected the lives of people for the achievement of economic and political goals". On 10 November 2003 at the UN, 25 countries, including Russia, Ukraine, and United States signed a joint statement on the seventieth anniversary of the Holodomor with the following preamble: "In the former Soviet Union millions of men, women and children fell victims to the cruel actions and policies of the totalitarian regime….."

The Ukrainian parliament first recognized the Holodomor as a genocide in 2003, and criminalized both Holodomor denial and Holocaust denial in 2006. In 2010, the Kyiv Court of Appeal ruled that the Holodomor was an act of genocide and held Joseph Stalin, Vyacheslav Molotov, and other Bolshevik leaders responsible. The Holodomor has since been compared to the Irish Famine of 1845–1849 that took place under British rule, which has been the subject of similar controversy and debate (Duffy, 51-54). To honor those who perished in the Holodomor, monuments have been dedicated and public events held annually in Ukraine and worldwide. Since 1998, Ukraine has officially observed a Holodomor Memorial Day on the fourth Saturday of November established by a presidential decree of Leonid Kuchma.

**The National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide**

The National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide was erected in Kyiv, welcoming its first visitors on 22 November 2008. The ceremony of the memorial's opening was dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor. In a November 2021 poll, 85% agreed that the Holodomor was a genocide of Ukrainians. The first public monument to the Holodomor was erected and dedicated in 1983 outside City Hall in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. On 16 March 2006, the Senate of the Republic of Poland paid tribute to the victims of the Great Famine and declared it an act of genocide, expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian nation and its efforts to commemorate this crime. On 22 January 2015, a Holodomor monument was erected in the city of Lublin.

On 2 December 2008, a ceremony was held in Washington, D.C., for the Holodomor Memorial. On 13 November 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama released a statement on Ukrainian Holodomor Remembrance Day. In this, he said that "remembering the victims of the man-made catastrophe of Holodomor provides us an opportunity to reflect upon the plight of all those who have suffered the consequences of extremism and tyranny around the world" (Ibid). On 7 November 2015, the Holodomor Genocide Memorial was opened in Washington D.C.

**Conclusions**

For someone like Vladimir Putin, "ceremony is everything". It is (therefore) particularly worrying to see the increasing co-operation of Putin and the Russian Orthodox church such as to lead a well-placed analyst like A. Craig Copetas to write that Putin's Holy Man Pushed for the 'Eradication' of Ukraine. The wartime coalition between Putin and his patriarch is called symphonia, an ironclad alliance between church and state that assures reciprocal reverence, with neither institution presuming to dominate the other. Theologians have spent centuries bickering over the fine points, which have now made Ukrainians victims of territorial aggression that Putin and the Patriarch have packaged as a holy campaign to cleanse souls. Once again, Ukrainians are victims of this convenient alliance of Russian church and state.

"A new world order is born before our very eyes," is how Putin described the relationship, later warning those who disagreed with him "will suffer maximum damage." He said: "The Russian people will be able to distinguish true patriots from scum and traitors and spit them out like a midge that accidentally flew into their mouths." To be sure, the only lingering question is how far into repression and hideous cruelty can Putin and his patriarch descend before the means no longer justify the ends. With Russian control in the Donbas and the enormous threat to the Ukraine's independence in its entire east, that nightmare of convergence has already arrived. Spengler's theory appears astonishingly real, and the Russian war and Ukraine's dark heritage are appallingly in the present. For the authorities in Kyiv, war-time shortages and near starvation in cities like Mariupol are like the return of the Holodomor.

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