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## Calling a Spade a Spade: How to Unwrap a Genocidal Essence from the Kremlin Anti-Ukrainian Rhetoric

### Abstract:

The sheer number and scale of the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Russian military in Ukraine since the beginning of their all-out invasion, has prompted many experts and politicians to define this brutality as a genocide and seek for the prosecution of perpetrators under international law. The lawyers are cautious in this regard, however, maintaining that crucial element of the criminal case – the clear-cut proof of a genocidal intent on the side of the Russian leadership – might be missing or largely unprovable in the court. This article provides an overview of the ongoing debate on the alleged Russian genocide in Ukraine and argues that the Kremlin's genocidal intent can be proved if the anti-Ukrainian rhetoric of Russian officials, pundits, and propagandists is systemically scrutinized, deconstructed, and contextualized.

### Keywords:

Russian war in Ukraine, war crimes, genocide, international law, discourse analysis

Within ten months of the unprovoked war that Russia launched against a peaceful neighbor,<sup>1</sup> 6,884 Ukrainian civilians were killed (including almost 500 children),<sup>2</sup> and 10,947 injured, according to the official OHCHR data.<sup>3</sup> The exact number of victims might be much higher since numerous mass graves in the Russia-occupied territories are beyond the reach of international watchdogs, and not all of the graves have been found yet on the territories liberated by the Ukrainian army. Since February 24, 2022, about 6 million Ukrainian refugees fled to Europe and about 3 million reportedly moved to Russia<sup>4</sup> (though it is not clear how many of them did it voluntarily and how many were deported forcibly from the occupied regions).<sup>5</sup> Six million more people were recorded as internally displaced in Ukraine, so in total one third of the Ukrainian population was uprooted from their homes.<sup>6</sup>

From the first days of the war, Russian indiscriminate shelling, bombing, and missile strikes inflicted huge damage on the civilian infrastructure: schools and hospitals, roads and bridges, factories and warehouses, shopping malls, and apartment buildings were turned into ruins. After a crushing defeat in Kyiv, and the subsequent expulsion from the northeastern Ukraine, Russian troops shifted toward scorched earth tactics: levelling to the ground entire towns and villages in Ukraine's southeast. In the Fall, expelled from the Kharkiv region and the city of Kherson, Russians began to systemically target Ukrainian energy infrastructure using missiles and drones, openly claiming their intention to bomb Ukrainians "back to the stone age" – to sink them in darkness and freeze them to death.<sup>7</sup>

Reports on war crimes committed by Russian military were abundant in international media as they recurrently published eyewitness stories on the kidnapping and torture of civilians, on mass killings, raping and looting, placing the locals in "filtration camps,"<sup>8</sup> and forcibly sending many of them, including children, into remote regions of Russia.<sup>9</sup> All this raises reasonable concerns of the international community, far beyond human rights watchdogs, and evokes well-grounded accusations of war crimes and crimes against humanity. While the hundreds and even thousands of the alleged war crimes are investigated by Ukrainian prosecutors in cooperation with their international colleagues,<sup>10</sup> politicians and journalists are increasingly engaged in debate on whether this horrible quantity makes up some specific quality: whether the countless atrocities committed by Russian troops and the stated intent of the Kremlin leaders to "de-Ukrainize" Ukraine can be qualified as a genocide.<sup>11</sup>

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1) The research for this publication was supported by the Foundation for Polish Science in the framework of the FOR UKRAINE Program.

2) Офіс генерального прокурора [Prosecutor General Office].

3) OHCHR, "Ukraine: Update."

4) Ibid., "Ukraine Refugee Situation."

5) Amnesty International. "Ukraine: Russia's Unlawful Transfer." Also, Amnesty International, "Ukraine: 'Like a Prison Convoy'."

6) (OCHA). "Ukraine: Situation Report."

7) Nichols, "Russia's Vindictive Rage."

8) U.S. National Intelligence Council, "Russian Forces Conducting Detentions."

9) In mid-May, the estimated figure was 1.3 million, including 223,000 children, see Karbunar, "Russia Kidnapped." See also a detailed report by the Human Rights Watch, "Ukraine: Torture." And the earlier one Human Rights Watch, "Russia: Forcible Disappearances."

10) Gramer and Mackinnon, "Ukraine's 'Nuremberg Moment'"; Bilefsky and Mpoke Bigg, "The Many Parties."

11) See for example Hinton, "War Crimes or Genocide?"; Pager, "Biden calls Russia's War 'Genocide'"; Parker, "What is Genocide in Ukraine?"; Ibrahim, "Russia's War Genocide."; Kim, Specia, Kramer, and Levenson, "Ferocious Russian Attacks"; Kursani, "Beyond Putin's Analogies."

## Legal Ambiguities

Philippe Sands, a renowned British lawyer, insists that the crime of genocide is very difficult, if not virtually impossible, to prove insofar as it requires the evidence of intent which is not, as a rule, explicitly expressed by the perpetrators.<sup>12</sup> In most cases, it is a matter of political will to designate (or not) these or those mass atrocities as genocide. Political bodies like national parliaments are more instrumental in this regard than judiciary. This was the case of ethnic cleansing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, or the man-made famine in Ukraine orchestrated by Stalin and his associates in 1932–1933, condemned by many but not all national assemblies.<sup>13</sup>

The latest developments in the U.S. – a bi-partisan resolution submitted in Congress, that condemns the genocide of Ukrainians and “supports tribunals and international criminal investigations to hold Russian political leaders and military personnel to account for a war of aggression, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide” – will be probably approved, providing a template for other national governments. Though legally not binding, the document “sends a strong message of condemnation of Russia’s actions and indicates ongoing efforts by members of Congress to provide continued support to Ukraine beyond military aid.”<sup>14</sup>

The document refers implicitly to the 1948 United Nations Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (UNCG) that not only obliges the member states to prevent the genocide crimes and punish the perpetrators, but also qualifies those crimes as “international” and mandates the international community to interfere – “to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council ... should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.”<sup>15</sup>

The problem with the UN, however, is that the permanent members of the Security Council can veto any Council’s decision at their whim, making any UN-mandated “collective action” against themselves (and their clients) practically impossible. The document has mostly symbolical meaning, as it delegitimizes genocidal activity and in some cases facilitates investigation and prosecution of war crimes.

Philippe Sands who, with a group of international lawyers, advises the Ukrainian government on the investigation of Russian war crimes, believes they should focus primarily on the crime of aggression since it is very clear and manifestly illegal. It is much easier to prove than the crime of genocide, especially after the International Court of Justice in The Hague has ordered to halt the invasion but Russia ignored it.<sup>16</sup> And, crucially,

The crime of aggression is the only one that can target with certainty those who are most responsible for the horrors being heaped on millions of human beings. Perhaps it can be proved that Putin and those in his inner circle are personally responsible for the war crimes and crimes against humanity that appear to have been committed in Bucha, Mariupol, and across Ukraine, which are

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12) Quoted in Cole, “Russia Committing Genocide, Says Holocaust Expert.”

13) Despite an intense lobbying, the German Bundestag pertinaciously refused to condemn Holodomor as a genocide until recently, when the overwhelming majority of MPs (with the predictable exception of the pro-Russian far-right AfD and far-left Die Linke) passed the long-expected resolution. Remarkably, it was not the new historical facts and evidences that changed parliamentarians’ mind but the ongoing Russian assault on Ukraine and mounting information about the current genocidal atrocities. As one of the MPs put it openly, “the killing by hunger also had as its aim the political repression of Ukrainian national identity, Ukrainian culture and language. ... The parallels with today are unmissable. ... Russia’s current war of aggression against Ukraine stands in this historical tradition.” *Deutsche Welle*, “Germany Declares Holodomor Genocide.”

14) Mackinnon, “Declare Putin’s War Genocide.”

15) OGPRP, “World Summit Outcome Document,” paragraph 139.

16) Maupas, “La Cour internationale de justice appelle.”

being investigated by national prosecutors and the ICC prosecutor. But it is far from certain that the evidence will lead all the way to the top.<sup>17</sup>

In the interview with the major Ukrainian news site he reiterated the latter point even more straightforwardly:

The accent must be on a crime of aggression. In large part because it is the only way with any degree of certainty to reach the top table in Moscow, to reach the president Putin and to reach the foreign minister Lavrov, and to reach the defense minister and the intelligence people and so on and so forth. What I am concerned about is that we will find ourselves in three or four years with criminal proceedings in The Hague in the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity and the defendants will be mid-level military people. But the top brass be effectively let off The Hague. That for me would be a terrible situation.<sup>18</sup>

The only problem, however, with this line of the prosecution is that the crime of aggression – unlike the war crimes, crimes against humanity, and crimes of genocide – is not assigned under the competence of the International Court of Justice, even though, after being introduced in Nuremberg by the Soviets, it was integrated into the Soviet law and still exists in the laws of Ukraine, Belarus, and ironically, Russia. To fill a gap not covered by International Criminal Court’s jurisdiction, the European Parliament overwhelmingly approved, on January 16, a resolution to create a special tribunal to investigate possible war crimes committed by Russia.<sup>19</sup> Parliamentary resolutions, however – either European or American – are not legally binding insofar as their practical implementation depends on further cooperation with the respective governments and judiciaries. As political declarations, they send strong symbolical signals to the Kremlin, but neither preclude nor substitute for activity of the existing institutions of international justice, specifically the ICC, which has already started its own investigation into war crimes against Russia, including genocide claims.

### Plausible Deniability

While the evidences of Russian war crimes and crimes against humanity are abound, their sheer scope and brutality do not make them into a crime of genocide automatically, at least in the legal terms, unless the genocidal intent is persuasively proved. Russian propagandists vehemently dismiss such claims referring to the Russian alleged “inclusiveness”: no occupiers, they say, offer the “occupied” people the passports, citizenship, full civic rights, and all the social benefits of the “occupying” state. They do not treat the Ukrainian population as “occupied,” but rather as “liberated.” Everything that Ukrainians should do is to repudiate their Ukrainian identity deemed “Nazi,” their Ukrainian language deemed “artificial,” their Western orientation deemed “treacherous,” and their liberal-democratic system deemed “alien” for the true Slavs.<sup>20</sup> It does not matter that they never wanted to be “liberated,” never strove for Russian citizenship, never wished to denounce their language (even under a harsh Russifying pressure of the former empire), and never pondered replacement of their imperfect democracy with Putin’s perfect dictatorship. Most of

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17) Sands, “Prosecuting Putin’s Aggression.”

18) Musaeva, “The System is Broken.”

19) Hughes, “European Parliament on Russian Invasion.”

20) A very good analysis of this peculiar ‘dialectics’ is provided by Etkind in “Ukraine, Russia, and Genocide,” 18.

them reject the Russian's "generous" offer and therefore are persuaded now by other available means: they are shelled, bombed, summarily executed, imprisoned, raped, tortured, deported and "re-educated" in the "filtration" camps.

While the developments on the ground make even skeptics recognize the unprecedented scale of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Russian military,<sup>21</sup> the genocidal intent of the top Russian leadership is still wrapped in an Orwellian language of "de-Nazification," "protection of Russian-speakers," "prevention of the NATO advance," "redeeming the territories squandered by Bolsheviks," and "re-establishment of the historical unity of the artificially divided Russian people." Since Ukraine in the Russians' view is not a nation ("not even a country," as Putin infamously put it at the Bucharest 2008 NATO summit – with no opprobrium in response), and since Ukrainians are seen as merely perverse, mentally screwed-up Russians who should be exorcized from the Western-inflicted pathology and restored in their "true" identity, no extermination of them could be qualified as a "genocide." It is just a necessity – to euthanize incurable species who may otherwise cause deadly infection in the healthy body of Russianness. Or, as a chief Russian propagandist put it recently, to rescue that body from the cancerous tumor, called "Ukrainianness."<sup>22</sup>

Back in 1948, Stalin's lawyers wisely excluded "social groups" from the categories subjected to the UN Genocide Convention. Thus, neither large-scale extermination of disobedient peasants nor mass murder of alleged class enemies could fall under the definition of genocide. Ukrainians nowadays are subjects to the same logic: "the Ukrainian nation does not exist, it is a *political orientation*," Moscow City Duma deputy and pro-Kremlin journalist Andrey Medvedev contends.<sup>23</sup> "There is no Ukraine. There is Ukrainian-ness. That is, a *specific disorder of the mind* ... there is no nation;" argued back in 2020 Vladislav Surkov, Putin's assistant at the time and reportedly a major architect of Putin's Ukraine policy.<sup>24</sup> "Ukrainianism is a *fake*. It never was and is not," echoes them Dmitry Medvedev, a former president and prime minister, and the deputy head of the National Security Council.<sup>25</sup>

Alexander Motyl, a Rutgers professor of political science, rightly considers these statements as "clearly expressed ideological and political underpinnings" of the Russian genocidal policy toward Ukrainians. In his view, "it's a small step from the view that Ukrainians don't exist to the view that they shouldn't exist."<sup>26</sup> But in legal terms, the "small step" might appear insurmountable – insofar as dictators rarely leave written orders that prescribe genocidal extermination of a specific group. Putin may still claim in court that he ordered extermination of "Nazis," not of Ukrainians, with a hope that a nonsensical euphemism once again will provide him with plausible deniability. On many occasions, he vehemently denied Ukraine's existence, but was always cautious

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21) Ignatieff, a history professor at the Central European University, admits that he was "always wary when people use the word genocide," but the latest developments changed his mind since Ukraine, indeed, faces a threat "to its existence not only as a state but as a people." Eugene Finkel, a John Hopkins professor and the author of Finkel, "Ordinary Jews," says he also had always resisted applying the term 'genocide.' What changed his view was "more and more evidence" that Bucha [massacre of hundreds of Ukrainian civilians near Kyiv] "was not an exception": it is fully supported now by the explicit official rhetoric from Moscow. He refers to the notorious article by Sergeitsev, "What Russia should do with Ukraine"; published by the state-owned news agency RIA Novosti that openly talks about the "final solution to the Ukrainian question." "As a genocide scholar," Finkel says, "I am an empiricist, and usually dismiss rhetoric. I take genocide claims with a truckload of salt because activists apply it almost everywhere. But not now. Now there are actions, there is intent. It's as genocide as it gets. Pure, simple and for all to see." Quoted from Cole, "Russia Committing Genocide in Ukraine, Says Holocaust Expert."

22) Russian Media Monitor, "Russia is Embroiled in Jihad."

23) Quoted in Ellyatt, "Putin's Supporters Call for Liquidation."

24) Actual Comment, "Сурков: Мне интересно действовать против реальности."

25) My emphasis. Censor.Net, "Ukrainianness is a Fake."

26) Motyl, "Is Putin Committing Genocide in Ukraine?"

enough not to openly call for extermination. The dirty job of inciting the genocide – deriding and vilifying Ukrainians, spreading hate speech, calling for wiping them out from earth, and threatening a nuclear strike at Kyiv – was assigned to political mavericks like a notorious MP Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, neo-fascist philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, TV-propagandist Vladimir Solovyov, and the like. They could have been close to the Kremlin and, probably, to security services, but never too close to tarnish the official “moderate” image with their verbal extravagancies. Plausible deniability was the Kremlin’s favorite method in all of its special operations.

## A Genocide Handbook

The situation had notably changed by the end of March 2022 when Putin’s Kyiv *Blitzkrieg* apparently failed and his “second best army in the world” had to retreat from the region in a rather humiliating manner. Ukrainians did not greet “liberators” as was expected but reached for arms; the propagandistic dichotomy of “good Russia-loving Ukrainians” and “bad nationalistic elite,” was substantially undermined in 2014, and now it completely collapsed. It seems Russians lost their nerves, as they not only engaged in the mass killing and torturing of civilians on the temporarily occupied territories, but also made undisguised genocidal statements, openly calling for the extermination of Ukrainians as alleged “Nazis.”<sup>27</sup>

Timofey Sergeytsev’s article<sup>28</sup> in the Russian official news site RIA Novosti (a Kremlin mouthpiece since 2014) was not exceptional in this regard but quintessential: a Yale historian Timothy Snyder has aptly defined it as a “genocide handbook” – “an explicit program for the complete elimination of the Ukrainian nation as such.”<sup>29</sup> “The Russian handbook,” Snyder contends,

Is one of the most openly genocidal documents I have ever seen. It calls for the liquidation of the Ukrainian state, and for abolition of any organization that has any association with Ukraine. It postulates that the “majority of the population” of Ukraine are “Nazis,” which is to say Ukrainians. ... The genocide handbook explains that the Russian policy of “denazification” is not directed against Nazis in the sense that the word is normally used. ... It operates within the special Russian definition of “Nazi”: a Nazi is a Ukrainian who refuses to admit being a Russian. ... On this absurd definition, where Nazis have to be Ukrainians and Ukrainians have to be Nazis, Russia cannot be fascist, no matter what Russians do. This is very convenient... And so we find Russians implementing fascist policies in the name of “denazification.”<sup>30</sup>

The claim that Ukrainians – who maintain a vibrant democracy, keep the marginal far-right groups in their country behind the electoral threshold, and elect a Jewish president by a large margin in free and fair elections – are “Nazis,” is simply a slur, a “hate speech, designed to justify killing them.”<sup>31</sup>

Sergeytsev’s article, as Snyder rightly remarks, “is clearly a reaction to Ukrainian resistance; at war’s beginning the assumption was that there were only a few Ukrainians and that they would be easily eliminated.” Now, the official war narrative promoted by Kremlin, abandons the notion of the “good” Russia-loving majority enslaved by a Nazi minority, and claims that “a significant part of the people – most likely the majority

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27) Apt, “Russia’s Eliminationist Rhetoric.”

28) Sergeytsev, “What Russia Should Do with Ukraine?”

29) Snyder, “Russia’s Genocide Handbook.”

30) Ibid.

31) Snyder, “Nazis, Nukes, and NATO.”

– have been sucked into the Nazi regime politically.” That is, as Sergeytsev explains, the assumption that the “people are good – the government is bad” no longer works. “Recognition of this fact is the basis of the policy of de-Nazifying, of all its measures.” They include, on the one side, physical extermination of all those who took up arms, as well as top leaders and activists – “active Nazis who should be punished extra harshly and demonstratively” (the idea of public hanging of the alleged “Nazi criminals,” instead of shooting them, is vividly discussed in Russian media).<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the punitive “measures” would require “inflicting the unescapable hardships” on the majority of the population “guilty as accomplices of Nazism.” The program envisions “re-education through an ideological repression (suppression) of Nazi attitudes and strict censorship: not only in the political sphere, but critically, also in culture and education.”<sup>33</sup>

The time frame for de-Nazification, he argues, should last at least for one generation that needs to be born, brought up, and to have reached maturity during the process. The country should be maintained all that time under the occupation, insofar as the process requires unconditional control. Hence, “A de-Nazified country cannot be sovereign. The de-Nazifying country – Russia – cannot practice a liberal approach. The guilty party subjected to de-Nazifying cannot dispute our de-Nazifier’s purpose.” And the last point:

De-Nazifying will inevitably also be de-Ukrainizing, i.e., rejecting the large-scale artificial overblowing of the ethnic component in self-identification of the population of the territories of the historical Little Russia and New Russia (Malorossiya and Novorossiya). ... It appears that we won’t be able to retain the name ‘Ukraine’ as the title of any fully de-Nazified state entity on a territory liberated from the Nazi regime. ... It must be returned to its natural boundaries and deprived of political functionality. ... As history has shown, Ukraine has been impossible as a nation state. ... Attempts to ‘build’ Ukraine naturally has led to Nazism. Ukrainism is an artificial anti-Russian construct that does not have its own civilizational content; it’s a subordinate element of an alien and unnatural civilization. ... Therefore, de-Nazifying cannot be carried out halfway, based on a formula like “NATO – no, EU – yes.” The collective West itself is the designer, source and sponsor of the Ukrainian Nazism. ... Therefore, de-Nazifying Ukraine is also inevitably de-Europeanization.<sup>34</sup>

Eugene Finkel, a renowned expert on the Holocaust, defines the text as “one of the most explicit statements of intent to destroy a national group as such that I’ve ever seen. I have read a lot of Russian nationalist rhetoric in my life,” he adds, but “this is not some wild intellectual fantasy, it is a clear, actionable statement of intent by a state agency. The U.N. definition [of genocide] is problematic, but in this case it fits like a glove.”<sup>35</sup> The best proof that Sergeytsev’s “manual” is not “wild intellectual fantasy” (abound in Russian media, literature and pop-culture), comes actually from the reality on the ground: as for now, all the Russian policies on the occupied Ukrainian territories strictly follow the prescribed recipes.

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32) Nsubuga, “Outrage as Russian Embassy Tweets for ‘Humiliating Death’.” See also Radio Free Europe, “Ukraine Denounces Russian Embassy.”

33) Sergeytsev, “What should Russia do with Ukraine?” See also Center for Civic Liberties, “RIA Novosti has Clarified Russia’s Plans.”

34) Ibid.

35) Quoted in Cole, “Russia Committing Genocide in Ukraine, Says Holocaust Expert.”

## Screening the Context

In May 2022, a team of international experts under the auspices of two reputable think-tanks, prepared an extensive report on the multiple breaches of the UN Genocide Convention committed by Russia in its invasion of Ukraine. They concluded, upon a detailed examination of facts, that the Russian armed forces are fully complicit in mass killings of Ukrainian civilians, rape and sex violence, forcible transfer of people – including children – to Russia, deliberate attacks on shelters, evacuation routes, and humanitarian corridors, indiscriminate bombardment of residential areas, deliberate and systematic infliction of life-threatening conditions in besieged areas – destruction of vital infrastructure, attacks on health care, destruction and seizure of necessities, humanitarian aid, and grain.<sup>36</sup> All these war crimes and crimes against humanity can be qualified, in the experts' view, as a genocide because they are driven by a clear genocidal intent – to eradicate Ukraine and Ukrainians as a distinct national group with their own language, culture, and national identity.

Even though the incitements to genocide are usually wrapped in various euphemisms, so that Russian officials can pretend they exterminate “Nazis” rather than Ukrainians, the absurd equating of Ukrainians with “Nazis” should not be taken seriously. It absolves the genocide masterminds from responsibility from nothing more than the equating of their victims with “cockroaches” or “grunting pigs” (as the former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev elegantly defined his opponents).<sup>37</sup>

International courts [the experts concur] recognize that an inquiry into the mind of perpetrators is a futile, if not impossible, exercise, in the absence of a confession. Instead, courts look to other manifestations of intent, including a “general plan” or a systematic pattern of atrocities directed against a specific group from which to infer specific intent, or “actions which had a logical and coherent sequence.” A general plan can be evidenced by, among other things, official statements, directives, a policy and the invariability of the killing methods applied.<sup>38</sup>

They emphasize, in particular, that “the characterization of the [criminal] acts and their mutual relationship can contribute to an inference of intent” and that to discern the genocidal intent, one should consider those acts “in their totality.”<sup>39</sup>

Hence, the experts reasonably conclude that the groundwork for incitement to genocide in Ukraine was laid by an intensive and highly pernicious denial of the existence of Ukraine as a nation and Ukrainians as a distinct national group. Then, it was upheld by “accusations in a mirror” and construction of a Ukrainian existential threat, solidified by dehumanization of Ukrainians as “Nazis.” And finally, it was facilitated by intensive propagandistic brainwashing that conditioned the Russian audience to commit and condone atrocities. To consider all those developments “in their totality,” one should place them into a deeper historical context. It would clearly indicate that Ukraine and Ukrainians as a distinct national group have been always a problem for Russian elites and population in large,<sup>40</sup> and persistently were targeted by various policies aimed at either their assimilation or elimination (or, in a more diversified way, assimilation of more pliable species and elimination of disobedient). It makes also clear that Putinism is not a political deviation but rather a typical, quint-

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36) Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy and Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, “An Independent Legal Analysis.”

37) Medvedev, “Collapse of the System.”

38) Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy and Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, “An Independent Legal Analysis,” 20–21.

39) Ibid.

40) Garner, “‘We’ve Got to Kill Them.’”



essential approach of Russian elites to the “Ukrainian Question,” though brought, indeed, to the extreme in terms of practical policies.

In political terms, there is little doubt that the genocidal war in Ukraine is intensely legitimated by Putin’s and the Russian elite’s persistent claims to Ukraine’s history, territory, and identity, by their explicit denial of Ukraine’s existence and implicit denial of its right to exist. The neighboring country, internationally recognized in its 1991 borders (including by Russia itself, according to several binding agreements) is dismissed as a fake, a Western conspiracy, a Nazi subversion, a pathology on the body of the all-Russian nation that should be treated (by forcible “re-education”) or eliminated (by a “special operation” surgery). Putin’s belief that Ukraine is a historical aberration and that Ukrainians do not exist and have no right to exist, is not his personal obsession but deeply entrenched in the Russian society’s ideology, that dwells in the core of Russian imperial identity and does not bode well for Ukraine, Ukrainian-Russian relations, and European stability in general.

It would be an overstatement to argue that anti-Semitic views lead inevitably to Holocaust but they undoubtedly facilitate it. By the same token, Russians’ widespread “Ukraine denial” should not have led necessarily to Putin’s ongoing genocidal war; but it definitely facilitated it as much as anti-Semitism facilitated the Holocaust. And this should be recognized if we do not want the same or similar tragedies to happen again.

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