Putin continues the Russian history of war and genocide in Ukraine
Ukraine’s government is fighting back ... in the streets and in the courts.
By Ellen J. Kennedy    Thursday, March 3, 2022

Residents boarding an evacuation train from Kyiv to Lviv at the Kyiv central train station on Thursday.

REUTERS/Gleb Garanich

Ukraine has been a tortured place.
It is located between two previously totalitarian governments – the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Ukraine is called the “bloodlands” because so much loss of life occurred there before, during and after World War II. And now horrific devastation is in these bloodlands yet again.

Beginning in the 18th century, Ukrainian territories were divided between the Austrian and Russian empires. In 1918, after World War I, Ukraine declared independence. However, independence was short-lived; the country was forcibly absorbed into the Soviet Union in 1922.

Stalin’s famine
Under Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, the USSR implemented a system of collectivization of Ukraine’s fertile farmlands. Ukrainian farmers were unwilling to cede their independence and their farms to the government. In brutal retaliation for the farmers’ refusal to cooperate with his mandates, Stalin implemented a famine to break Ukrainian resistance.
To escape starving to death, people in the villages ate anything that was edible; grass, acorns, even cats and dogs ... and each other. Mass graves appeared all across the countryside.

Estimates are that at the height of the Holodomor – murder by hunger – in June 1933, Ukrainians were dying at a rate of 28,000 people a day, 1,167 an hour, 19 people every single minute.

As many as 3.5 million Ukrainians perished from starvation from 1932-1933 in this intentional genocide that not only created physical destruction, but also devastated the culture and traditions of the Ukrainian people.
Raphael Lemkin, Polish and Jewish, who fled from the Holocaust, coined the word genocide and authored the 1948 UN Genocide Convention. He named the Holodomor as genocide, the intentional destruction of a group and of a culture and a nation.

Lemkin identified four integral components in the genocide in Ukraine:

- Executing the Ukrainian political and cultural elites – the brain of Ukraine;
- Liquidating the Ukrainian Orthodox Church clergy and hierarchy – the soul of Ukraine;
- Exterminating the Ukrainian farming population – the spirit and heart of Ukraine and
- Replacing Ukrainians with ethnic non-Ukrainians, a form of colonization – the culture of Ukraine.

The Cover-up

There was total impunity for these millions of deaths. No one was ever held accountable. In fact, the Soviets covered it up, abetted by incomplete and biased reporting by Walter Duranty, then Moscow bureau chief for The New York Times, who falsely wrote that nothing of consequence was happening. Welsh journalist Gareth Jones traveled to the USSR, and, despite grave danger, entered Ukraine illegally and saw the truth – piles of emaciated bodies, dead and dying people everywhere he looked. Jones’ reporting was publicly discredited while Duranty received a Pulitzer Prize in 1932 for his work, which the Times has publicly regretted.

Stalin’s Holodomor crushed Ukraine.

The Nazis

Less than a decade later, the Nazis invaded Ukraine. Mobile killing squads known as the Einsatzgruppen murdered a million and a half Ukrainian Jewish and thousands of non-Jewish Ukrainians. Leaders of the Einsatzgruppen were prosecuted at Nuremberg, but most of the perpetrators of terrible violence in Ukraine, including the killing of 33,000 Jewish Ukrainians at Babi Yar outside of Kyiv, never were held to account. The memorial at Babi Yar was shelled by Russian troops on March 1 – this past Tuesday.

Soviet Repression

The decades after World War II saw increasing Soviet “Russification,” suppression of the Ukrainian language, culture, religion and traditions. Dissidents were imprisoned by the thousands, and fear and persecution were constant.

The Soviets – Independence Again

Ukrainians never lost their longing for autonomy. In January 1990, more than 300,000 Ukrainians formed a human chain to advocate for independence. The line stretched 335 miles, from the capital city Kyiv to Lviv in the west.

Less than a year later, Ukraine declared independence with a vote supported by 90 percent of the people.

War with Russia

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. Vladimir Putin has viewed this as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century,” according to author Kati Marton. He has installed himself as Russia’s leader until 2036 with a goal to re-create the old Soviet sphere of influence.
Putin has already invaded the former Soviet republic of Georgia, supported a *de facto* puppet government in Belarus and Russian troops are now permanently stationed in Azerbaijan, another former Soviet republic.

In 2014 Putin invaded and occupied the Donbas and Crimea regions of eastern Ukraine in full violation of all international laws of war. More than 1.4 million people became displaced, 13,000 people were killed and 30,000 were wounded.

He is emboldened by receiving very little resistance so far.

Now, Putin is trying to finish what he started in 2014 – the re-absorption of Ukraine into Russia. He wants to eliminate the Ukrainians, push back against an eastern expansion of NATO, which he views as Russia’s enemy, and regain Russia’s lost power on the world stage.

**Ending Impunity**

Ukraine's government is fighting back ... in the streets and in the courts.

The International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands is the world’s only permanent court with a mandate to prosecute individuals for these most heinous human rights offenses. The Court has a nearly-global jurisdiction.

In 2014, Ukraine requested that the Court investigate alleged crimes committed in Ukraine during Russia’s 2014 invasion. On Feb. 28, Karim Khan, chief prosecutor of the court, announced that the court will investigate the current situation in Ukraine as well.

On Feb. 27, Ukraine filed a suit against Russia at the UN’s highest court, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), also in The Hague, Netherlands. The ICJ resolves disputes between nations, and Kyiv claims that the two sides have a dispute over the 1948 Genocide Convention, which they have both signed. The suit asks the Court to rule on genocide and Russia’s claim to legal authority for military action in Ukraine. Ukraine also asked judges to order “provisional measures” to protect Ukraine, an extraordinary step to force Russia’s cessation of hostilities.

There must be an end to impunity in the bloodlands. There certainly must be an end to this war.

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World Without Genocide will hold a webinar Thursday, March 10 from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. CST on “Ukraine: Genocide, Repression and War.” Those interested may register at www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/ukraine. The event is open to the public ($10 general public, $5 students and seniors, free to Mitchell Hamline students, $25 for Minnesota lawyers for 1.0 Elimination of Bias credits and clock hours” for teachers, nurses, and social workers).

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