

# Putin's Annexation of More Ukrainian Territory is Part of Pattern of Ethnocide and Genocide. Stand with Ukraine.

October 1, 2022



Bodies exhumed in Ukraine show signs of torture before execution.

Russian dictator Vladimir Putin in a formal ceremony in St. George's Hall in the Kremlin yesterday signed papers to formally annex and incorporate into Russia large portions of Ukraine amounting to 20 percent of that country's territory. That territory and those people thus officially cease to be Ukrainian.

At Putin's orders, Russia conducted hastily organized sham referendums in these provinces where hundreds of thousands had fled and where tens of thousands of others lived under occupation, some in ruins. Still other Ukrainians in this region—some reports say as many as a million, including thousands of children—have been rounded up by Russian soldiers and FSB police agents and sent to Russia. Clearly, as the world could see, under these extreme conditions the people of those regions could not freely decide their own fate.

Yet Putin stood in the hall and made a preposterous speech claiming these territories for Russia "forever."

“The people made their choice,” he said. “And that choice won’t be betrayed. I want the authorities in Kyiv and their real overlords in the West to hear me: the residents of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson are becoming our citizens. Forever.”

As United Nations Secretary General António Guterres said, however, “Any annexation of a state’s territory by another state resulting from the threat or use of force is a violation of the Principles of the U.N. Charter and international law. Any decision to proceed with the annexation of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine would have no legal value and deserves to be condemned.”

These phony referendums and Putin’s theatrical performance in the Kremlin surrounded by Russian officials and the puppets he had put in power in the conquered territories constitute the latest episode in an on-going war of ethnocide and genocide against the Ukrainian people. They form part of a hundreds-of-years-long, off and on process of attempts to Russify Ukraine and to erase the Ukrainian people’s identity. Ironically it takes place as the Ukrainian people have come together as one people as never before and have succeeded in frustrating Putin’s military objectives. Putin speech, taking place as he ordered the conscription of hundreds of thousands to fight in Ukraine, was accompanied by the flight abroad of 200,000 Russian men and protests in the streets throughout the country with thousands arrested.

Russia’s war on Ukraine has, I argue here, had from the beginning a genocidal character, as defined by the United Nations, which I cite in full so that readers can see that all of these elements are present, as I will show.

*In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:*

- 1. Killing members of the group;*
- 2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;*
- 3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;*
- 4. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;*
- 5. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.*

All but the fourth of these practices have occurred in Ukraine.

The U.N.’s definition, does not align with our popular conception of genocide most indelibly imprinted in our minds by the Jewish holocaust. Yet the official definition does grasp that genocide has an intention and a trajectory and that through a process these elements fuse into a horrifying reality.

How do we on the left, we socialists, look at this worst of all imaginable crimes, the attempt to culturally erase or physically annihilate an entire people? And where do we stand?

## **Imperialism and Genocide**

The current campaign of ethnocide, of cultural erasure, is driven by Russian imperialism. Imperialism is one of the frequent causes of ethnocide or genocide. The expansion of a state with the goal of conquering and subjugating another people or nation—whether the state was ancient, medieval, or modern, that is, pre-capitalist, capitalist, bureaucratic collectivist (i.e. Stalinist)—has

often come to involve genocide.

We might take the case of Spain beginning at the end of the fifteenth century as the paradigm. With its ideology of *pureza de sangre* (pure blood) and its role as defender and propagator of the Catholic faith, Hapsburg Spain began to expand. In pursuit of empire, the Spanish fought the Muslims and the Protestants in Europe and the pagans of the Americas with the intent of extirpating their religious beliefs.

In 1492, the same year Columbus sailed for Spain and stumbled across the Americas, the Spanish either drove the infidels—Jews and Muslims—out of the Iberian Peninsula or in ethnocidal campaigns forced their conversion at the point of a sword. Arriving in the New World, the Spanish conquistadores vanquished the indigenous empires, the Aztecs and Incas, and many less powerful states and tribes, and imposed their racial dominance, their religion, and their language, as well, of course, as seizing the indigenous peoples' wealth and lands. In the course of the conquest, in some cases, they practically exterminated entire ethnic groups, such as early on the Tainos of the Caribbean among many others. Under Spanish rule other groups lost their distinctive ethnic character, their religion and language, and were transformed culturally.

The Spanish, of course, were not alone. At the time, the English, Dutch, French and other European ruling classes held similar notions of their ethnic, religious, and cultural superiority, as did the rulers of the great territorial empires of the Ottoman Empire and Russia. Though, of course, in each case it was *their* blood that was pure, *their* religion—Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, or Muslim—that was the true faith, and *their* civilization that should rule. Long before the arrival of modern capitalism, for example, the Tsarist Russian empire absorbed Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland and Poland in the West and Siberia and nearly all of Central Asia in the South and East—in the name of Russian superiority embodied in the Orthodox faith and proven by conquest. While the British North American colonies and then the United States annihilated some indigenous people and forced others off their traditional lands and onto reservations.

In the late nineteenth century, the concept of civilizational superiority became justified by the pseudo-scientific racism of social Darwinism, the notion that the Europeans were the most evolved, had the highest intelligence, and superior morality. The French, for example, told the world and the tens of millions of Africans, Asians, and Pacific island peoples in their colonies that their empire had a *mission civilisatrice*, a civilizing mission, just as the British, with the largest empire “on which the sun never set” took up, in Rudyard Kipling's words, “the white man's burden” of bringing peace and plenty to “the silent sullen peoples.” In Eastern Europe at that time, Tsarist Russia imposed its language and culture on Ukraine, but against a rising Ukrainian national sentiment that became a revolutionary force by World War I.

In reality, by the end of the nineteenth century not ideals but interests had become predominant; the territorial empires (Ottoman and Russian), the older capitalist, commercial and industrial empires (England, Holland, and France), and the newer ones (the United States, Germany, and Japan) all contended for control of the world's land masses and seas, for natural resources and labor, leading to two world wars. Throughout this evolution of imperialism, the ideology of ethnic and cultural superiority continued to justify mass murder and genocidal campaigns either in the colonies or in the wars in Europe itself. Under King Leopold of Belgium, who postured as a great humanitarian, some ten million Congolese were killed in the pursuit of land and rubber. The Dutch and the British carried out genocidal wars against the San people (called the Bushmen) in the Cape of Good Hope colony. In Europe, Stalin's Soviet Union, neither capitalist or socialist, collaborating with Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany, also engaged in genocide in Ukraine. Hitler ordered the “final solution” that through starvation, firing squads, and gas chambers killed six million European Jews.

In the post-World War II period, as the anti-colonial movement grew among the subject peoples of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, the United States and Europe continued to engage in imperialist interventions in the name of their superior civilizations based on capitalism, democracy, and human rights, while the Soviet Union did so in the name of Communism, progress, and international solidarity. The French fought wars to keep their colonies in Vietnam and Algeria. The U.S. took up the war in Vietnam that killed two million Southeast Asians and precipitated the greatest contemporary genocide in neighboring Cambodia, killing between 1.5 and 2 million people. The Soviet Union invaded and occupied Afghanistan. China took Tibet. The United States' "war on terror," including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan also killed hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children, one estimate is 890,000.

### **Putin's Arguments for Imperialism, Ethnocide and Genocide**

So, aware of this history, when today we hear Vladimir Putin's atavistic notions about the role of Russia among the Slavic people and more generally in Europe and Asia, we recognize at once that we are dealing with an imperialist ideology, though his arguments resemble those of sixteenth century Spain more than modern imperialist concepts. Putin laments the collapse of the Soviet Union and the breakup of its empire in Eastern Europe. "As for the Russian people, [the fall of the Soviet Union] became a genuine tragedy. Tens of millions of our fellow citizens and countrymen found themselves beyond the fringes of Russian territory. The epidemic of collapse has spilled over to Russia itself," he said.

In reality, Putin's imperial ideology is a throwback to Tsarist Russia. Putin—influenced by rightwing intellectuals like Lev Gumilev and Alexander Dugin—believes (or claims he believes) in the thousand-year-old Russia. He sees the Russia of the old Tsarist empire, infused by a cosmic force of "passionate power" (Gumilev), inspired by the Russian Orthodox Church, the archetypal Slavic nation, speaking Russian, and leading the other Slavic peoples and the neighboring Asians in the creation of a Eurasian power than can stop and challenge and defeat the West. Such an ethno-nationalist, civilizational ideology has been used by Putin to justify conquest, mass murder, and ethnocide.

Putin believes then, that the Russian empire must be recreated and those "fellow citizens and countrymen [who] found themselves beyond the fringes of Russian territory," must be rescued and reincorporated into Russia. Most important of those are the Ukrainians, a nation as large as France with a population of more than forty million people with its own history, language, and culture whose very existence Putin has denied. In 2019, Putin told filmmaker Oliver Stone, "I believe that Russians and Ukrainians are one people ... one nation, in fact," Putin said. "When these lands that are now the core of Ukraine joined Russia ... nobody thought of themselves as anything but Russians."

Putin rejects the idea of a Ukrainian people and nation, arguing that Ukraine is an artificial creation. "Modern Ukraine was entirely and fully created by Russia, more specifically the Bolshevik, Communist Russia," Putin said in 2021. "This process began practically immediately after the 1917 revolution, and moreover Lenin and his associates did it in the sloppiest way in relation to Russia — by dividing, tearing from her pieces of her own historical territory." He has also written an article arguing this position. His position thus denies the Ukrainian people any agency, any ability to decide their own identity. Clearly this position becomes a justification for war against the Ukrainians to force them to become part of Russia. It is an argument for ethnocide and even genocide.

If one is to commit mass murder or genocide, the aggressors also find it necessary to deny the humanity of those they plan to kill or eliminate altogether. To motivate their people and their soldiers, they must argue that those who will be killed are less than human, either because of their

race, their religion, or their political views. As he launched his war against Ukraine in February 2022, Putin declared, "To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine and put to justice those that committed numerous bloody crimes against peaceful people, including Russian nationals," Putin said. Calling the Ukrainians Nazis dehumanizes them, especially given the history of Adolf Hitler's war on the Soviet Union, launched in 1941, that killed 27 million, not only Russians but many other Soviet ethnic groups and particularly Ukrainians. Ironically, while there are some Nazis in Ukraine—as there are today nearly everywhere—Putin's military forces include not only the neo-Nazi mercenaries of the notorious Wagner militia but also a regular Russian Army battalion under the self-proclaimed neo-Nazi commander Alexei Milchakov.

### **The War as Evidence of Ethnocide and Genocide**

The Russian war on Ukraine has from the beginning—even if it has not happened everywhere—exemplified what is sometimes called "total war," that is, it is a war on both the military and civilians involving artillery fire or aerial bombing of cities, destruction of offices and industrial plants and mines as well as agricultural fields and facilities, mass murder of both soldiers and civilians (adults and children), in the course of which thousands of soldiers and civilians have been killed, torture and rape, all of which is intended to create terror among the population. As a result, 7.4 million Ukrainians fled to other nations in Europe, though perhaps as many as three million have now returned. Another seven million Ukrainians have been displaced from their homes to some other place in their country. Among the displaced who have left and those who remain are about 3 million children. Total war in Ukraine has also destroyed the economy and left millions unemployed. While all of these atrocities have been common in modern wars and do not in themselves constitute either ethnocide or genocide, they may lay the basis for it.

The concerns about ethnocide and genocide are increased by the finding of hundreds of bodies in mass graves. An Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine established by the United Nations' Human Rights Council found that Russian soldiers had committed war crimes, including many cases of torture, executions, rape (including of children), bombing of civilian areas sometimes leading to separation of families from their children. The commission is also looking into the adoption of Ukrainian children by Russian families.

How does one prove genocide, since as the U.N. convention reads, "*intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.*" I think it is a question of examining, as we have here, all of the elements surrounding the case in question.

While war always leads to atrocities, in this case the combination of Putin's ideology, his claims of the non-existence of Ukraine or Ukrainians, his total war on the Ukrainian people, and the record of war crimes makes it clear that we are witnessing both ethnocide and genocide. All of this call us as socialists, and should call others, to stand with Ukraine, to support its war for self-determination and its right to acquire arms, and at the same time lead us to support the anti-war movement and war resisters in Russia.

