

Putin's Propaganda: **A Path to Genocide**

Marta Baziuk

Marta Baziuk is Executive Director of the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta). She has more than 25 years' experience in the not-for-profit sector, in Ukraine and North America.



Fig 1. Several victims of starvation lay dead or dying on a busy sidewalk in residential Kharkiv.
Photo from the collection of Samara Pearce, great granddaughter of the photographer Alexander Wienerberger. <<https://www.samarapearce.com/>>.

Russia's assault on Ukraine continues, destroying homes, schools, theatres, and hospitals, and even whole towns and cities.

The actions of the Russian Federation in Ukraine by now can be termed genocidal. Perhaps the shocking readiness of the Kremlin to employ brutality is why so many area experts found the chance of a Russian invasion unlikely or inconceivable. Until recently, few people took Russian President Putin at his word, but he has long made his convictions known regarding Ukraine. Driven by nostalgia for both the Russian Empire and the USSR (which conducted its own genocidal assault on Ukraine), Putin has made it clear that he seeks at all costs to destroy independent Ukraine.

Not so long ago, Putin seemed satisfied with the Ukrainian-Russian relationship, when the Kremlin-controllable common criminal Victor Yanukovich was Ukraine's president. Putin never forgave the Ukrainians for driving Yanukovich from office during their Maidan revolution eight years ago. He retaliated by annexing Crimea and launching Russia's war in Ukraine's Donbas region.

Russian media has kept up a drumbeat of hatred for Ukraine and Ukrainianness ever since.

Dehumanizing and demonizing Ukrainians is state policy, intended to prime the Russian public to root for, or at a minimum to accept, Russia's genocidal acts against citizens of a peaceful neighbouring state. The soldiers who are firing missiles at Ukrainian apartment buildings, occupying cities, and torturing POWs are part of the Russian audience that has been fed a steady diet of hate.

Russian media has for eight years told its public that Ukrainians—particularly those who assert Ukraine's right to independence—are evil fascists and enemies of Russia. President Putin has declared that Ukraine is led by drug-addled Nazis: a particularly ugly, cynical smear given that Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's democratically elected president, is Jewish and lost relatives in the Holocaust.

There is a precedent for the demonization of Ukrainians as a prelude to genocide. Propaganda paved the way to the Soviet-induced famine of 1932-33 known as the Holodomor, in which millions



Fig 2. A farm woman, victim of starvation, lies behind a cart near a marketplace in Kharkiv.

Photo from the collection of Samara Pearce, great granddaughter of the photographer Alexander Wienerberger. <<https://www.samarapearce.com/>>.

of Ukrainians were starved to death. Ukrainian peasant farmers were branded kulaks—parasites that needed to be exterminated. A Soviet propaganda campaign primed Bolshevik activists to go house to house in the Ukrainian countryside seizing foodstuffs from a perceived enemy.

Propaganda today prepares Russians to applaud invasion, occupation, war crimes, and genocidal acts. In the places that Russia has occupied, Ukrainian educational institutions are quickly supplanted with Russian replacements. Speaking Ukrainian is hazardous. It isn't the first time. The man who developed the concept of genocide, lawyer Rafael Lemkin, saw the murder of Ukrainians by starvation during the Holodomor to be part of a genocide that included attacks on their language, culture, and leadership.

Kremlin mis- and disinformation was employed to obscure crimes during the Holodomor, and again today. In 1932-33, the Kremlin refused offers of international food aid, maintaining that there was no famine or starvation. Until its collapse, the USSR denied that the Holodomor had taken place. More recently, Russian disinformation asserted that Russian troops were in Ukraine's Donbas region only, with no mention of the vicious assaults on Kyiv, Kharkiv, and other cities. Until it became ridiculous to do so, Russian media claimed that the Russian army was fighting not the Ukrainian army but irregular formations of nationalists. Such lies are impossible to maintain in an age of cell phones and social media, but they manage to sow confusion, which leads to public inaction. In the case of the Holodomor, it took the fall of the USSR, when researchers finally gained access to Soviet archives, to once and for all disprove Soviet disinformation that denied the Kremlin's starvation of the Ukrainian countryside.

The intelligence sources that correctly predicted Russia's onslaught also warned of arrest and kill lists of the Ukrainians most likely to lead resistance to imposition of Kremlin rule. Mayors, journalists, and activists have gone missing. In the 1990s, I worked with civic organisations in Ukraine, and I fear for the people I know who are likely to be targeted for their commitment to the development of a democratic Ukraine. Today, as Executive Director of the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium, I fear for the Ukrainian academics I know. In Ukraine, historians are free to pursue their research interests. In Russia, historians who disagree with the Kremlin face persecution and imprisonment. Scholars engaged in the study of Ukrainian history and culture, including the Holodomor, will be certain targets under Russian occupation.

We are witnessing the Kremlin's atrocities in real time, unlike during the Holodomor, when journalists were forbidden from traveling to Ukraine. The question today is whether the world is willing to do what it takes to stop the Russian President who has headed down the path of genocide.