



House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Erasing Ukrainian Identity and Culture

September 25, 2024
3:00 – 5:00 p.m.
2247 Rayburn House Office Building

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Thank you for inviting me to speak on an atrocity that transcends conventional warfare. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is not simply a land conflict. It is a genocidal campaign aimed at erasing Ukraine as a distinct cultural, political, and national entity.

The genocidal intent of Russia's invasion is evident in the targeted destruction of Ukrainian cultural heritage. These acts are central to Russia's strategy. Over 400 Ukrainian cultural heritage sites have been damaged or destroyed, including historic theaters, museums, and religious sites—symbols at the core of Ukraine's identity.

One of the most egregious examples is the bombing of the Kuindzhi Art Museum in Mariupol, which housed priceless works by the Ukrainian artist Arkhip Kuindzhi. The Ivankiv Historical Museum, containing treasured works by Maria Prymachenko, also fell victim to these attacks. Numerous historic churches have been targeted, showing deliberate efforts to erase Ukraine's historical memory.

A tragic aspect of this cultural erasure is the deliberate destruction of Holodomor memorials in occupied Ukrainian territories. The Holodomor, a man-made famine from 1932-1933 orchestrated by Stalin, claimed millions of Ukrainian lives. In the occupied regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia alone, 14 memorials dedicated to the victims have been dismantled. This is part of Russia's attempt to rewrite history, eradicating memories of past genocides to facilitate the current one.

In the occupied territories, Russia is systematically dismantling the Ukrainian education system. Schools have been forced to adopt Russian curricula that erase any mention of Ukraine's history, independence, and language. Libraries have been purged of Ukrainian books, and more than 20 million Ukrainian books have been either destroyed or removed from circulation. In their place are Russian textbooks, literature, and propaganda materials. Roving gangs of state educators and Russian armed police travel across the territories to search houses for Ukrainian books and replace them with Russian ones.

Particularly alarming is the indoctrination of Ukrainian youth. Patriotic reeducation clubs such as Yunarmiya (Young Army) and Eaglets of Russia have been established in occupied areas to militarize children, glorifying the Russian state while erasing their Ukrainian heritage. These clubs aim to prepare children for military service in Russia, training them to fight against their homeland. Camps like the "Warrior Club" in occupied Zaporizhzhia specialize in military indoctrination for Ukrainian boys nearing conscription age, a clear attempt to reshape Ukraine's future generation into Russian citizens.

A yet more horrifying aspect of Russia's campaign of annihilation against Ukrainian identity is the forced kidnapping and reeducation of Ukrainian children whose parents resist the imposition of Russian identity. Families who refuse to accept Russian passports or who resist enrolling their children in Russian-controlled schools risk and are threatened with having their children taken from them. Such children are sent to reeducation camps in Russia, Crimea, and Donetsk, where they are subjected to intensive indoctrination.

In these camps, children are taught to reject their Ukrainian identity and embrace a Russian identity instead. Some are put up for adoption, given new Russian names, and integrated into Russian society, making it impossible for Ukrainian families to locate their children, as their original identities are literally erased. At least twenty thousand children have been kidnapped. Russia does not hide these crimes—they celebrate them as acts of "protection" and "rescue,"

All these actions align with the broader geopolitical vision of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Putin has repeatedly stated that he does not believe Ukraine is a legitimate nation. In his infamous 2021 essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," Putin outlined his view that Ukrainian identity is an aberration, something created by the West, something sick and extreme. Russia's war against Ukraine is an attempt to absorb Ukraine into a larger Russian empire, engorged by territory and culture that do not belong to it.

International legal precedents confirm that genocide goes beyond mass killings, although Russia has committed plenty of those as well. The Krstić case at the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia recognized cultural destruction as evidence of genocidal intent. What we are witnessing in Ukraine is not only physical destruction but the erasure of a nation's soul. The dismantling of cultural heritage, the suppression of language, the destruction of Holodomor memorials, and the kidnapping of children all indicate Russia's genocidal campaign to annihilate Ukraine as a distinct cultural and national entity.

This war is not simply about territory—it is about existence. Until the genocidal nature of Russia's actions is fully recognized and addressed, peace talks will be hollow. Negotiations that ignore this cultural annihilation will allow Russia to continue its assault on Ukrainian identity. Putin's regime will not rest until Ukraine is absorbed both geographically and culturally.

There is, however, a remarkable resistance in Ukraine. Despite threats of torture, execution, or child abduction, thousands of Ukrainians resist—from refusing Russian passports to remembering the Holodomor through candlelit windows, to providing coordinates of Russian military bases to Ukrainian forces. If we, in the democratic world, see freedom and justice as values, rather than abstract denotations, we have a duty not just to tell the story of Russia's destruction, but to support those who are fighting it. Otherwise, we are not just witnesses to genocide—we are bystanders.