

Plus Ça Change: Russian Invasions of Ukraine, Past and Present

Written by Stephen Velychenko

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/05/09/plus-ca-change-russian-invasions-of-ukraine-past-and-present/>

STEPHEN VELYCHENKO, MAY 9 2022

In most wars invading armies commit atrocities against civilians, and Ukrainians have suffered their fair share at the hands of invading Russian troops. Today the horrors at Bucha and Irpen are well known. Less known is that these are the repeat results of tactics Russian rulers used in the past to get and keep control of Ukrainian territories. In February 2022 it was Vladimir Putin's Russia that invaded Ukraine. He and his associates had expected to occupy and annex the country within five days. His invasion was not the first time, but the fourth time in three centuries that Russian rulers invaded Ukrainian territories. In 1709–12, 1918–23 and 1944–50, they were successful. Whether they will succeed again is unknown. What is known is that today, as in centuries past, Russian rulers ordered their troops to arbitrarily kill Ukrainian civilians en masse and destroy the country's infrastructure. Their 2022 campaign of conquest, like the previous three, involves indiscriminate destruction and mass terror against civilians. This article briefly reviews the events of 1709–22 and 1918–23.

Tsarist Russia and Cossack-Ukraine

Cossack-Ukraine (The Hetmanate) emerged as a new political entity in 1649. Its borders after 1667 were coterminous with present-day central and south-eastern Ukraine. The Cossacks were a social group that never constituted more than half of the population in the country. Together with the territory of the Zaporozhian Army the region had a population of approximately two million in 1719 – 14 million in 1897 (60% of the population of tsarist Ukraine). As of 1654, the Hetmanate was a protectorate of the tsar – a ruler whose powers were limited by custom, not written law. His prerogatives, unlike those of European monarchs, allowed him to tax, arbitrarily dispossess, arrest and execute any subject – high-born or common. The Hetmanate was formally abolished in 1781, but prior to that, nine revisions of the 1654 Pereiaslav Treaty had effectively restricted to a minimal level its autonomy.

The tsars did not colonize Cossack lands and try to rule through politically privileged settlers, but did force the pace of integration. The tsar was represented by Russian military governors [*voievoda*] and garrisons stationed in the major Ukrainian towns. In theory these officials, whose number varied according to political circumstance, concerned themselves only with military affairs. In practice, continuous wars intertwined daily life with military affairs and provided opportunities for the governors to extend tsarist authority beyond the limits considered acceptable by cossack leaders.

Cossack-Ukraine posed a serious threat to the tsars for the last time in 1709, when Ivan Mazepa failed in his attempt to secede from Russia in alliance with Charles XII. To ensure that no future Hetman would again risk separating the Hetmanate from Russia, Peter I unleashed a campaign of terror as part of his response to Mazepa's initiative.

Within a week of Mazepa's defection in October 1708, Peter declared the duties and taxes he had imposed while Hetman null and void. More resolute measures to keep Ukrainian loyalty were carried out by Alexandr Menshikov who took the capital of Baturyn. He razed it to the ground, and slaughtered an estimated maximum of 6000 of its inhabitants, another 6-7000 captured cossack soldiers, and approximately 1000 people in surrounding villages. Shortly afterwards, Peter learned that five of the ten cossack regiments remained loyal to him and knew that, according to rumour, Mazepa, after seeing the disastrous condition of the Swedish army, had advised his supporters

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to accept an amnesty. During the next weeks, a portion of his supporters duly left. By 1709 Mazepa had only his mercenary troops – later joined by a few thousand Zaporozhian Cossacks. Perhaps the Hetman thought that the absence from the Swedish camp of his regular Hetmanate troops would save their lands and families from Peter's retaliation.

Perhaps it did, as in 1709 Peter turned south instead of against Hetmanate troops. That spring, a Russian force destroyed the Zaporozhian Cossack stronghold on the lower Dnipro river as punishment for joining Mazepa, executed 300 prisoners, and then massacred as many as another 1 000 people in a nearby settlement. Peter ordered all Zaporozhian Cossacks to be executed on sight. He decreed that anyone suspected of associating with Mazepa and the Swedes in any manner was to have their property confiscated and that informers were to be rewarded with the goods of their victims. Field court martials convicted suspected Mazepa sympathizers on the basis of evidence obtained from denunciations or given under torture. Since there was no legal definition of political crime, presiding officials, or Peter himself, decided what was treason. The most notorious tribunal was at tsarist headquarters in Lebedyn. There are no reliable figures on the total number executed but it is thought to be in the hundreds. Repression continued well after the battle. In 1711, in an attempt to deny a recruiting base to exiled pro-Mazepa Cossacks in territory west of the Dnipro river he had to cede to Turkey by the Treaty of Pruth, Russian troops forcibly resettled approximately 100,000 people from the western to the eastern side of the river. The deportees totaled almost one-half of the population in an area of some 35,000 square kilometers on the western side of the Dnipro.

Thus, even before the battle of Poltava, Peter had created a climate of terror in the Hetmanate by promoting denunciations and witch-hunts and by slaughtering perhaps a maximum of 15 000 non-combatants – almost 1 per cent of the Hetmanate population including the hundreds of prisoners summarily executed. According to one unsubstantiated contemporary Russian estimate, in the eight months between the sack of Baturyn and the Poltava battle, as many as 30 000 Cossacks and non-combatant Ukrainians died at Russian hands. 2700 Cossacks who surrendered after the battle of Poltava were spared, but were reduced in status to peasants, while their officers were exiled.

There is no evidence that Peter personally ordered massive slaughter of non-combatants. Upon learning of Mazepa's defection, what Peter did stipulate in a manifesto to Cossack officers, was that anyone who joined the Hetman would be considered a traitor, dispossessed, and his family exiled. Those captured, as traitors "will be mercilessly punished by death [*kaznny budut smertiu bez poshchady*]. Peter actually ordered Baturyn to be only burned down [*Zzhet ves*] after he heard it had been taken, but before he knew about Menshikov's butchery. In light of Peter's orders to mercilessly punish the Russian rebel Cossack Bulavin's supporters, however, he most probably condoned Menshikov's initiative. In letters he wrote after he had undoubtedly learned of the Baturyn massacres, he warned others that disobedience would bring them the same fate as Baturyn's population. As noted by a Russian historian: "Peter was convinced that in the name of the state's aims many moral norms could be ignored."

After the Great Northern War ended, Peter severely curtailed Hetmanate autonomy and permanently billeted 20 dragoon and garrison regiments on its population. In 1725, almost twenty years after Poltava, and with no apparent foreign threat, Cossack Ukraine still maintained approximately 25,000 troops (1 soldier per 80 people), or 13 percent of the imperial army – all of whom local inhabitants had to feed and lodge. Peter was the first tsar to distribute local land and offices to non-Ukrainians, who thereafter were subject only to him, not the Hetman. Peter's centralist mercantilist economic policies included predatory measures specifically directed against Hetmanate trade and manufacturing. From 1727, Ukrainians no longer participated in the preparation of the legal act that defined their autonomy, and by the end of the century non-Ukrainians controlled most all of the remaining urban commerce and manufacturing.

Bolshevik Russia and the Ukrainian National Republic

Bolshevik leaders as of 1919 considered Ukraine a conquered territory. Red Army commander Mikhail Muraviov, who took Kyiv in January 1918, proclaimed that he had brought Red Power to Ukraine on the points of bayonets from the north. On January 17, 1919, Pravda wrote: "The Red Army paved the road to grain when it conquered Ukraine." In April 1919, Lenin called his takeover of Ukraine a conquest. Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko, who commanded

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Bolshevik troops attacking Ukraine in January 1919, explained his task as follows: “We must occupy Ukraine with our armies. And fast.” Leon Trotsky, in December 1919, thought it expedient to remind his invading Red soldiers: “Firmly remember, your task is not to enslave Ukraine but to liberate it.” In September 1920, he wrote: “Soviet power in Ukraine has held its ground up to now (and not well) chiefly by the authority of Moscow, Great Russian [*ruskii*] communism and the Russian [*ruskaia*] Red army.” In December 1919, one of the key Bolshevik leaders, Dmytro Maniulsky, told delegates at the Eighth RCP Congress: “They [Ukrainians] beat us [Bolsheviks] for a long time and, in the end, we naturally realized that banal truth that, first, without Russian communists, Petrograd and Moscow workers, Soviet Power cannot be established in Ukraine.” UNR reports from the autumn of 1920 related that incoming Russians would tell the locals, “We conquered you honkies [*khakhly*, pejorative for Ukrainians], so shut up and give us what we want.”

In 1922, the leader of the Ukrainian branch of the Russian Communist Party in Ukraine, Khristian Rakovskii said: “Our [Communist Party of Ukraine-CPU] experience showed us that, if we did not have behind us a power like Soviet Russia, the revolution in Ukraine would have died and today we would have had another government here... The establishment of the proletarian dictatorship in Ukraine ... is possible only with the help of Soviet Russia and the Russian Communist Party.” In 1923, one of the other important Bolsheviks in Ukraine stated: “Soviet power did not triumph in Ukraine by virtue of its own strength, but only with the help of a strengthened Soviet Russia and while the German army was collapsing.”

Noteworthy, finally, is how the old Bolshevik and Kyivan Jew I. M. Lapidus who, in early 1920, requested Lenin to rescind his order to reduce the number of Jews in Soviet offices, characterized Bolshevik Russian rule in Ukraine:

The whole course of our revolution clearly showed that in the borderlands it was not conquered [*zavoevaniia*] by the local proletariat but almost always was conquered [sic] by the proletariat from the center, and that Soviet power in the kulak-cossack borderlands is nothing other than military occupation, in particular, in Ukraine... the Khakhol has more faith in his [local-born] Jew than the foreigner Muscovite because most Russians truly behave like conquerors....

Red army tactics targeted civilians. The German-Ukrainian offensive of February 1918 evicted Bolshevik Russian troops from Ukraine. In April 1919, three months after starting their second invasion of Ukraine, Bolshevik troops began destroying entire insurgent villages using heavy artillery. Their leaders, who realized indiscriminate destruction was unwise, as it would kill Bolshevik supporters alongside everybody else, that same month forbade this tactic. Ukrainian resistance continued against a third invasion that same year. In April 1920, the “Short Instructions on the Struggle Against Banditry and Kulak Insurgency,” marked top secret, again formally allowed commanders to destroy and completely eradicate entire villages mounting exceptionally strong resistance. That December, Bolshevik leaders issued an instruction with the same title specifying that only houses and property of partisans were to be destroyed, not entire villages. In July 1920, Lenin commanded the First Cavalry Army (15,000–20,000 troops and even more horses) to sweep through each Ukrainian county twice, seeking to strip them of everything it could, and shoot whoever resisted. Whether troops had actually stopped razing entire villages after it was proscribed, and how many villages were totally destroyed between April 1919 and 1923, historians have yet to determine.

Sergei Zorin, Leningrad’s First Secretary, illustrates to what lengths those Russian Bolsheviks who thought Russia had to control Ukraine and extract resources from it were prepared to go. At an April 1919 CPU Central Committee meeting, he stated that people were starving in Petrograd; he then demanded Ukrainian grain. “We do not recognize any kind of nations.” If anyone opposed grain collections in Ukraine, “then send them to the other world, thousands, tens of thousands, and, if necessary, 100,000 of those idiots fools or villains [*negodaev*], but don’t waste time.” He got a round of applause. Opinion at the meeting was that the Bolsheviks had no need of Ukraine’s population – only its resources for use elsewhere.

In late 1920 a comrade Turkin, who commanded a food requisition unit, told a local Ukrainian communist in the town of Pavoloch: “We will burn down these damned Kyiv, Podillia, and Volyn provinces, not leaving one stone on top of another and let all know just what the Communist party is” – a comment that suggests Zorin’s views circulated down the Bolshevik hierarchy. These recorded statements lend credence to second-hand reports about similar attitudes among other officials. In a report submitted to the Directory, a Ukrainian prisoner of war, who had traveled through

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Bolshevik-controlled Kyiv province during his escape in early 1920, claimed that the head of the Workers and Peasants Inspectorate of the First Cavalry Army, a man named Latipov, had told him that he didn't care if 75 per cent of Ukraine's population died of hunger. If they didn't, they would be shot anyways. That would make the remaining 25 per cent obedient: "We need Ukraine, not its people."

There is no known Bolshevik policy statement calling for the extermination of Ukrainians, as there was in the case of the Russian Don Cossacks, but it is probable that such attitudes were held by some officials in Ukraine – attitudes that did reflect the social Darwinist spirit of the times. For example, London's respectable *Saturday Review* (26 August 1896) stated in reference to Africa: "Permanent peace there cannot be ... until the blacks are either exterminated or driven back into the centre of Africa." Lenin, analogously, in *How to Organize Competition* (1917), dehumanized his opponents and called for their extermination – after 1918 he labeled them insects, vermin, parasites, and bugs.

In 2022, Russian leaders ordered their troops to systematically kill as many Ukrainian civilians as they could and to destroy as much of the country's infrastructure as they could in their attempt to keep Ukraine under Russian control. This was not unprecedented. They were repeating what their predecessors had done in previous centuries.

This work draws on previous publications from this author, as noted below:

The Battle of Poltava and the Decline of Cossack-Ukraine in light of Russian and English methods of rule in their Borderlands (1707 -1914)

Life and Death in Revolutionary Ukraine. Living Conditions Violence and Demographic Catastrophe (1917–1923). (2022)

Life and Death in Revolutionary Ukraine. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Painting Imperialism and Nationalism Red. The Ukrainian Marxist Critique of Russian Communist Rule in Ukraine 1918-1925 (2015).

About the author:

Stephen Velychenko is Sr. Research Fellow at the Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Toronto.