

Reflections on World Politics: Ukraine & Russia - #15

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Weaponizing Wheat

There are many aspects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that extend far beyond the war zones described in global news sources. One of the most serious derivates of this conflict is how it is causing a major increase in world hunger.

The Struggle to Control Europe's "Breadbasket": According to agricultural experts, Ukraine has been the "breadbasket" of Europe for centuries because of its enormous wheat production. The country has two-thirds of the richest soil on the European continent and, as a result, dictators have inflicted incredible violence on the Ukrainian people to control this valuable farmland – first Joseph Stalin, and then Adolf Hitler.

Stalin's violence against the Ukrainian people began in 1932, when he decided to replace Ukraine's small farms with state-run collectives and to punish any independence-minded citizens who resisted. Peasants were forced off their land, and Stalin's secret police developed plans to deport 50,000 Ukrainian farm families to Siberia. Stalin also ordered the removal of Ukrainian-language books from schools and libraries – a policy Putin and his national security cronies are implementing as well in areas controlled by their army. An estimated 4 million Ukrainians died in Stalin's man-made famine.

This incredible tragedy was followed by another. Adolf Hitler came to power in Nazi Germany advocating a policy of *Lebensraum* ("living space"), which justified his attack on the Soviet Union. His plan was to permanently remove the indigenous population of Ukrainians, Poles, and Russians and then repopulate these lands with German colonists – a plan that led to mass murder at the hands of the Nazis.

Putin's Decision to Weaponize Wheat: For the Ukrainian people, the repressive policies of these two dictators is now being repeated by Putin, 75 years later. After World War Two, Ukraine once again became an important "breadbasket," especially for the Middle East and North Africa. Ukraine and Russia together provide a third of the world's wheat and barley exports. Ukraine itself is a global food basket – the world's largest exporter of sunflower oil, the fourth largest export of corn, and the fifth largest exporter of wheat.

When Russia attacked Ukraine and the United States and European Union instituted sanctions, Putin responded by banning exports not only of oil and gas, but also of wheat. In addition, Russia has established a naval blockade that has impeded maritime trade at Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea. The Russian navy controls the northern third of the Black Sea, making it dangerous for commercial vessels. As a result, 95% of Ukraine's wheat exports – shipments that were previously sent from Black Sea ports -- are now blocked. In addition, Russian forces

have taken possession of 400,000 tons of Ukrainian wheat, and stolen farm equipment that they shipped back to Russian territory. While European countries have proposed exporting Ukraine's food by rail, river and trucks, Russian forces continue to destroy the infrastructure Ukraine needs for its export trade.

The Autocrat's Handbook: Putin's vicious autocratic rule is being practiced all over the world by other dictators. This is what autocrats do. They care only about remaining in power (because there is no retirement program for dictators) and pursuing their greed, which leads to stealing the wealth of their own people. There is no moral or ethical dimension to their governance, unlike democracies.

A Russian diplomat who finally decided he was ashamed of Putin's aggressive war recently gave testimony that laid bare the evil of Russia's ruling elite. He said, "Those who conceived of this war want only one thing – to remain in power forever, live in pompous tasteless palaces, sail on yachts comparable in tonnage and cost to the entire Russian Navy, enjoying unlimited power and complete impunity. . . To achieve that, they are willing to sacrifice as many lives as it takes. Thousands of Russians and Ukrainians have already died just for this."

The Victims and the Breadmakers: Food experts estimate that Putin's weaponization of wheat and other food products could drive global food prices to an all-time high, leaving 276 million people food insecure, a number twice as high as three years ago. African and Middle Eastern countries are the principal victims of the autocrat's policies. The most vulnerable populations are the vast numbers of orphans and disabled children, some 65 million worldwide.

For Ukraine, bread is more than just food. Ukraine's flag emphasizes the country's agricultural roots – the yellow is its wheat fields, and the blue is the sky that brings the nurturing rain. Because of the famines the country has experienced, bread is sacred. In the middle of this war, a Ukrainian Christian leader said, "The metaphor of Jesus as the bread of life has a lot of meaning for Ukrainians, and the image that the Bible is bread for our souls is very important." Many Christian groups are working hard as volunteers in their churches, seminaries and non-profit organizations making bread and sharing the bread and the Bible with those in need -- a powerful combination and a vibrant testimony indeed!

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