

Reflections on World Politics: Ukraine - #22

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Depopulating Ukraine

On July 13, 2022, Anthony Blinken, the U. S. Secretary of State, accused Russia of forcibly deporting up to 1.6 million Ukrainians, in some cases to isolated regions in the Russian Far East. The exact number is not known, but Blinken estimated the total to be between 900,000 and 1.6 million Ukrainian citizens, including 260,000 children. Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, said the number could be as high as 2 million. In response, Russian government officials stated that these people were "evacuated from dangerous areas of Ukraine" and that this was a protective action on their behalf.

As usual, Zelensky was very frank about the plight of these Ukrainian people. He said, "Just imagine this number – two million people. That's how many of our people have already been taken to Russia. Several hundred thousand children. . . No one will name the exact numbers at the moment -- all these deported people are deprived of means of communication, their IDs have been taken from them, they are being intimidated and taken to remote areas of Russia, so that it will be as difficult as possible for them to return to their Motherland."

Russia's Policy of Cultural Genocide: It has become clear that Russia is committed to extending its control over the areas it occupies in Ukraine. An essential part of this plan is to eliminate Ukrainians who are loyal to the Zelensky government and to diminish Ukrainian national identity through depopulation and the destruction of Ukrainian cultural and religious institutions. By mid-July, Ukrainian authorities reported that Russian forces had fully or partially ruined 183 religious sites in Ukraine – churches, mosques, synagogues, and educational buildings owned by religious communities, the vast majority of which are Christian.

The editor-in-chief of Russia's state-owned RT, a global TV news network, recently expressed her pro-Putin opinion: "Ukraine as it was can't continue to exist. There'll be no Ukraine we've known for many years." It is this kind of thinking that explains Russia's goal of dismantling Ukrainian national identity, regardless of the human cost. In the areas of Ukraine where Russian forces are in control, they are issuing local residents Russian passports, circulating Russian currency, opening local branches of Russian banks, and changing school curricula to include Russian language and history courses, while also shutting down Ukrainian telecommunications networks.

Russia's "Filtration Camps": Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians have been forced to go through "filtration camps" in Eastern Ukraine and then been forcibly removed to Russia. Although some Ukrainians voluntarily entered these camps because it was the only way to escape the areas of intense military conflict, many others were picked up against their will when emerging from bomb shelters or being stopped at check points by Russian soldiers. After

spending around three weeks in these camps, in inhuman conditions where they are interviewed and sometimes tortured, some are sent across the border into Russia. Those who are suspected of being loyal to the Ukrainian government have been taken out of the camps and have disappeared without a trace.

If they are allowed to enter Russia, many of these Ukrainians are relocated to distant regions of the country; in some cases, they have been sent to Sakhalin Island on Russia's far east coast in the Pacific Ocean – 10,000 miles from their homeland. Some get housing, a small amount of money, and a SIM card, while others are dropped off with nothing and are expected to make it on their own. Some are able to make their way across the border into Georgia or Estonia, but without a passport or any money this is not possible for most. The majority of these Ukrainians relocated to Russia are women, children and the elderly, although oftentimes the mothers have been forcibly separated from their children.

Russia's Strategy: All of these depopulation plans and harsh resettlement programs have been a part of Russia's brutal war efforts for years, beginning with Soviet policies after the end of World War Two, when millions of Soviet citizens gained their freedom from Nazi prison camps and wanted to return home, only to be forced into holding stations and camps for screening before allowed in after long delays. Fifty years later, during two wars in Chechnya against its people who fought for their independence, Russian forces again used these camps for mass internment. Heavy use of artillery against urban centers in Chechnya and then Syria make it clear that this is a deliberate strategy.

News sources naturally focus on the developments on the battlefield -- who is making gains in conquering new territory and the related important subject of providing necessary military equipment and ammunition so critical for the war effort. But this topic of the deported Ukrainians needs to be addressed and the lives of these members of the "quartet of the vulnerable" (widows, orphans, poor and migrants) protected by the collective attention of American and NATO leaders. We need to remind our leaders not to forget these precious people. Russian atrocities involving indiscriminate shelling of civilians, executions, rape, and looting were not spontaneous actions of rogue soldiers, but are a response to orders from their military leadership and authorized by Putin, who gave medals to those who committed some of the worst crimes. Russia must be held accountable for how it is treating these people.

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