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ARTWORK COPERTINA:

Illia Razdelskyi

ISSN 2974-6531

ISBN 978-88-5509-815-1



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Questo numero è stato finanziato dal

Dipartimento di Scienze Umanistiche dell'Università degli Studi di Palermo

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HOW TO THINK ABOUT ATROCITY CRIMES IN UKRAINE

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ABSTRACT

Concepts, such as genocide, ecocide, and domicide, have been proposed to capture different, and often intertwined forms of violence perpetrated *en masse* against a certain group. These discussions are essential not only for ensuring legal responsibility but also for guiding us in understanding war, peace, and human security. They speak to our collective responsibility to stop and prevent barbarity and to the core of what humanity stands for. In today's world of post-truth politics, a difficult but essential balance must be found recognizing the complexity of political realities without losing the moral clarity in our judgement of what is straightforwardly evil.

KEYWORDS

Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian studies, genocide studies, atrocity crimes

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Could a genocide happen, in the modern world, without punishment? But if it does go unpunished, would this not change our deepest intuitions about evil, justice, retribution, and genocide? Do we think about genocide deontologically, as a thing with certain features, or consequentially, as an action that was, or should be, properly punished so that it would occur “never again”? [...] will the very absence of punishment lead to a redefinition of the concept?

(Etkind 2023: 384).

1. Warfare by war crime in Ukraine

«Ukraine is a crime scene» was a horrifying assessment famously provided by the ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan during his address to the UN in 2023. Two years later, the official figures are staggering. As of mid-summer 2025, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) estimated 13,883 civilians killed including 726 children, and 35,548 injured including 2,234 children, bringing the total number of civilian casualties to almost 50 000. As of mid-September 2025, the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine has registered over 211,000 crimes related to Russian aggression, of which over 180,000 are classified as war crimes¹. These figures are a clear illustration of the Russian strategy of «warfare by war crime» (Evangelista 2022) – intentional mass bombing of civilians and of key civilian infrastructure meant to maximise harm (employing a «double tap» tactic, targeting maternity wards and children hospitals), kidnapping, systematic rape, torture and summary executions on the occupied territories as well as the deliberate cultural (UNESCO 2025) and environmental (Ecoaction 2025) damage.

The same crime can be classified differently – a crime against humanity can simultaneously be a war crime. If it is perpetrated with a clear intent to destroy a certain group, as a whole or in part, it can also be understood and thus prosecuted, as genocide. Different legal terms bring with them different legal instruments, responsibilities and ways of ensuring accountability.

In addition to the legal realm, conceptualising atrocity crimes broadens our understanding of violence and its political uses, both at war and in peacetime. Concepts, such as genocide, ecocide, domicide, have been proposed to capture different, and often intertwined, forms of violence perpetrated *en masse* against a certain group. These discussions are essential not only for ensuring legal responsibility but also for guiding us in understanding war, peace, and human security. They speak to our collective responsibility to stop and prevent barbarity and to the core of what humanity stands for. In today's world of post-truth politics, a difficult but essential balance must be found when recognising the complexity of political realities without losing the moral clarity in our judgement of what is straightforwardly evil.

2. Legal tools and their application after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

As is well known, the first international legal document that deals with atrocity crimes is the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the Genocide Convention) that was approved and proposed for signature and ratification or accession by the General Assembly of the United Nations (Resolution 260 A (III) of 9 December 1948) and entered into force on 12 January 1951. It was one of the early and highly symbolic initiatives by the newly established United Nations. The number of State Parties to the Convention is currently 152, including the US and Russia. Such broad adherence gives the document additional legal and moral weight. The document is binding for

¹ According to Oleksandr Ziuz, head of the department for interaction with intergovernmental, state and non-governmental organizations of the organizational, methodological and analytical support department of the Department for Combating Crimes Committed in Armed Conflict, Prosecutor General's Office, see interview here: <https://mediacenter.org.ua/over-180-000-war-crimes-registered-in-ukraine-office-of-the-prosecutor-general/> (ultimo accesso: 27/10/2025)

the parties signatories of the Convention. Not only states have the responsibility to deliver justice in cases of genocide, they are also required to prevent genocide if and when they become aware of genocide as a real possibility.

The Convention defines genocide as any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group. It lists the following acts: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. Crucially, among punishable acts the Convention mentions not only the act of genocide itself but also public incitement to commit genocide, attempts to commit genocide and complicity in genocide.

What distinguishes genocide from other international crimes is the intent to destroy, in whole or in part. This intentionality is subject to much debate, with many legal experts arguing that it makes it exceedingly difficult to prove the act of genocide in court (Sydorenko 2022). To address this difficulty, some experts argue that rather than proving the «intent to destroy» in isolated instances of mass atrocities, one needs to evaluate the overall genocidal intent as evident through consistent patterns of rhetorics and behaviour. In a recent report for the New Lines Institute, the authors argue that

this intent can be attributed to a State through evidence of a general plan (derived from official statements, documents, or policy) or can be inferred from a systematic pattern of atrocities targeting the protected group. The five genocidal acts—killing, causing serious harm, deliberately inflicting physically destructive conditions of life, imposing birth prevention measures, and forcibly transferring children to another group—can also point to genocidal intent when viewed in their totality (2023: 6).

The report proceeds to conclude that «in addition to demonstrating intent to destroy the Ukrainian national group in part, Russia has—in a highly unusual step— committed all five genocidal acts prohibited in the UN Genocide Convention. Durable trends of direct and public incitement to commit genocide—a separate crime— can also be found at various levels of the Russian leadership» (Hook 2024: 1).

After Ukraine liberated parts of the occupied Kyiv region in the spring of 2022, the scale and brutality of the Russian occupation in Ukraine created shockwaves and provoked public outcry. Early parliamentary initiatives to recognise Russia's action in Ukraine as genocide include motions by Ireland, Canada, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, the Czech Republic. Against the background of the brutal siege of Mariupol, one of the first experts to argue that Russian actions in Ukraine constitute a clear case of genocide was historian and genocide expert Eugene Finkel (2022, 2024). He was closely followed by politicians, public figures, and scholars, including an early statement by the US President Joe Biden. Even those who are not convinced that the legal term genocide is applicable to the Russian actions in Ukraine talk about its «genocidal intent» and denounce the scale and brutality of the Russian invasion.

Those who express doubts about the possibility to prove Russian «intent to destroy» in Ukraine, refer to Russian actions in Ukraine as crimes against humanity or war crimes. Indeed, «crimes against humanity» include any of the following acts committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack: murder; extermination; enslavement; deportation or forcible transfer of population; imprisonment; torture; rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity; persecution against an identifiable group on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious or gender grounds; enforced disappearance of persons; the crime of apartheid; other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering or serious bodily or mental injury. These crimes may also be committed in peacetime.

War crimes, on the other hand, although comprising many of the same crimes, are committed during a military conflict. As such, they also include grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions and other serious violations of the laws and customs applicable in international armed conflict and in conflicts «not of an international character» listed in the Rome Statute, when they are committed as

part of a plan or policy or on a large scale. In addition to the above, they include such crimes as taking of hostages; intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population; intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science or charitable purposes, historical monuments or hospitals; pillaging; rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy or any other form of sexual violence; conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 15 years into armed forces or groups or using them to participate actively in hostilities.

Crimes against humanity were codified into the international legal practice under the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 1998. Over 120 states have ratified the Rome statute. Other states may decide to accept the ICC jurisdiction even in the absence of the formal adherence to the Rome Statute. This is the case of Ukraine, which accepted its jurisdiction in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea and extended its jurisdiction indefinitely in 2015. The ICC is a permanent autonomous international court established to investigate, prosecute and try individuals² accused of the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression. It began investigating Russia's crimes in Ukraine on 2 March 2022 after receiving a request to do so from 40 states, a particularly high number that helped launch the investigation at an unprecedented speed.

It issued its first arrest warrant in this case on 17 March 2023 for the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin and The Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova on the charges of unlawful deportation and transfer of children from the occupied Ukrainian territories to Russia. Other crimes, such as attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure (missile strikes, torture, executions, detention conditions), conflict-related sexual violence, the use of indiscriminate weapons, and deportation of civilians beyond children are currently investigated. To facilitate this work, the Prosecutor opened a field office in Kyiv in March 2023. To support evidence collection a special Joint Investigation Team (JIT)³ has been created at the Eurojust.

A «crime of aggression» refers to the planning, preparation, initiation or execution of an act of using armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of another State. The act of aggression includes, among other things, invasion, military occupation, and annexation by the use of force, blockade of the ports or coasts, if it is considered being, by its character, gravity and scale, a manifest violation of the Charter of the United Nations. Crime of aggression has rarely been prosecuted and there is no standard practice for it. For this crime, the ICC jurisdiction is different from other crimes. In 2018 states parties to the Statute recognised the ICC jurisdiction over the crime of aggression. However, the ICC Prosecutor can only decide to open an investigation into a crime of aggression if the United Nations Security Council determines that an act of aggression has been committed. Since the aggressor state in Ukraine holds veto power in the Security Council, the ICC does not have the jurisdiction to open such an investigation.

To address this issue, a unique initiative was launched in 2023 - the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression (ICPA). Based at the Eurojust and funded by the European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments⁴, it works to collect, analyse and preserve evidence relating to the crime of aggression and to prepare potential case files for future prosecutions. The ICPA functions as a coordination and evidence-preservation hub rather than a prosecutorial tribunal itself. For the actual tribunal, several institutional designs are being discussed, such as a hybrid tribunal in Ukraine with international judges and staff (similar to the Special Court for Sierra Leone or Kosovo's hybrid mechanisms), some type of an international tribunal established by a multilateral treaty that could potentially be further legitimised by a UN General Assembly resolution, or a regional tribunal supported by the EU or the Council of Europe. Clearly, different solutions pose different challenges in terms of legitimacy and universality.

² This distinguishes the ICC from the International Court of Justice, which is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations for the settlement of disputes between States.

³ JIT full members are Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, and Romania.

⁴ On 17 March 2025, the U.S. Department of Justice notified Eurojust of its decision to withdraw from the ICPA. Prior to withdrawal, the U.S. contributed financially and via a special prosecutor, and supported evidence-gathering.

3. Ethical-political understandings of mass atrocities

The concept of genocide has an interesting history and lesser-known Ukrainian roots. It was developed by Raphael Lemkin, a Jewish legal scholar educated at the University of Lviv and specializing, among other things, in the Soviet penal code, becoming what was later termed «an expert in Soviet terror» (Irvin-Erickson 2017; Lemkin 2013; Sands 2017). Working in eastern Poland in 1932-33, Lemkin was well-informed about the on-going state-generated famine in Soviet Ukraine, known as the Holodomor⁵. Lemkin saw the Holodomor as a particularly egregious perpetuation of the crimes he had been working on in those years: «acts of barbarity», «acts of vandalism», «intentional interruption of international communications», and «propagation of human, animal or vegetable contagions» (Moses 2021). His proposition to the international community of legal scholars was to outlaw such crimes as international crimes, meaning that they would fall under universal rather than national jurisdiction, much like the crime of piracy already did at the time. In 1933 he formulated this proposal at an international conference in Madrid, focusing specifically on the crimes of barbarity and vandalism. The proposal was not taken up by the broader legal community. Quite tellingly, however, it attracted much attention in the Soviet Union that responded by accusing Lemkin of using these concepts to justify counter-revolutionary interferences in their internal affairs (Irvin-Erickson 2019).

The Holodomor was followed by the prosecution of Jews in Germany that culminated in the Holocaust. Lemkin himself had to flee, first to Sweden and then to the US. Arriving in the US, Lemkin became an inspiration for a movement within the newly formed United Nations to outlaw the crime of genocide, and was nominated several times for the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his contribution.

Over this period of time and until his death in 1959, he continued his scholarly work on mass atrocities and violence against civilians. His 1944 book introduced the concept of genocide, which he defined as the «destruction of nations through cultural, social, and physical violence» and the «destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed» (Lemkin 1944). As the negotiations about the Genocide Convention were unfolding in the UN, he published another influential article that further clarified that

genocide ... signif[ies] a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves... Genocide is directed against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group [...] The crime of genocide involves a wide range of actions ... to cripple permanently a human group (Lemkin 1947).

Importantly, in both works that focused predominantly on the extermination of the Jews, he saw such violence as underpinned by colonial and imperialist logics.

The UN Genocide Convention, inspired by Lemkin's work and adopted thanks to his active involvement, represents the final product of a series of discussions and amendments. Although the African nations were susceptible to the idea precisely because it resonated with their colonial experience, major colonial powers, including the Soviet Union, mounted considerable resistance and made sure that the adopted document could be applied to the Holocaust but not to other colonial crimes. In this sense, the adopted Convention is very much a product of the post-World War II international politics (Applebaum 2017; Weiss-Wendt 2017).

In a bitter account, based on his biographical study of Lemkin's personal correspondences and personal writings, Douglas Irvin-Erickson shows how by 1948 Lemkin grew disillusioned with the UN. Although he never expressed his criticism publicly, he wrote in his memoirs that the law against genocide was in the hands of statesmen «who lived in perpetual sin with history» and «treated human life like currency in a bank». Wary of the Soviet reaction, he did not go back to the case of Holodomor

⁵ Whether the Holodomor constitutes a genocide under the legal UN definition or according to the broader social science scholarship has been widely discussed in the literature, with some replying in the affirmative, e.g. (Serbyn 2008). See also: Markevich et al 2021 and Graziosi and Sysyn 2022.

until after Stalin's death in 1953, when he discussed it publicly in a speech (Serbyn 2009)⁶. Lemkin's biographers say the Holodomor was supposed to be included into a three-volume world history of genocide he was preparing before passing away. Going back to his broad definition of genocide and focusing on the underlying colonial logics of its perpetrators, this work was meant to highlight how genocide had been a recurring historical pattern of premeditated structural violence against nations and peoples.

Lemkin's legacy, therefore, goes much beyond the adaptation of the Genocide Convention. As a scholar, he can be seen as a precursor to many studies of mass atrocities. Rejecting the strict legalistic approach of the Convention that listed specific crimes and specific types of groups, he focused on the broader patterns of violence arguing that specific means of execution could vary across time and space. He also insisted on a victim-centered approach to violence and to history. His biggest contribution was to underscore the premediated and selective nature of violence and civilian harm directed against a particular group.

Building on Lemkin's approach and taking some distance from the legal definition of genocide, Scott Strauss proposes the term of «mass categorical violence» in order to underline the scope and the intentionality of such violence. He defines it as «large-scale, sustained, group-selective violence against civilians» (Straus 2015). When perpetrated by states, such violence amounts to «atrocities by policy» (Browning 1992). In order to reconcile different definitions of mass violence that are based on identifying specific groups, such as the politicide, mass murder and the legal definition of genocide, Rummel famously introduced the concept of democide that includes all of the above and is perpetuated by a government, thus underscoring sustained and coordinated effort against a group (Rummel 1994, Shaw 2015).

Although some grim landmark locations may come to mind when thinking about the better-known cases of genocide, such as Srebrenica, most genocide scholars put great emphasis on the structural features of mass violence, whether they call it genocide or not. For example, Scott Strauss reminds us that

genocide implies a large scale. Genocide is about sustained violence that is repeated across time and space against a substantial part of a target group. The recurring, repetitive, systematic nature distinguishes genocide from a massacre or a riot, which are more one-off events. Genocide is sustained and widespread. The violence will not be restricted to one neighborhood, one town, or one city; it will exhibit a pattern of target selection and civilian destruction that is repeated across those spaces where the group is located (Straus 2015: 31).

Cultural and communicative aspects of genocidal violence are seen as key in the literature. A lot of this research builds on the famous concept of cultural violence by John Galtung in order to unpack the communicative and symbolic acts that are meant not only to justify the violence but also to «make it feel right» (Müge Göçek and Greenland 2020). This communication, as rightly highlighted by Strauss, is not directed at the target group, as would be the case with other forms of political or terrorist violence, because it is not aimed at altering the behaviour of a target group. Rather it would serve to normalise the act of genocide in the eyes of everyone else⁷. The victim's perception of this communication is not taken into account. «The signature of genocide is crushing opponents in the short term and destroying their ability to pose a long-term challenge. Genocide is therefore about extinguishing human interaction, not seeking to shape it» (Straus 2015: 26).

In order to highlight the symbolic value that is attached to the very act of violence by the perpetrators, scholars have focused on crimes against cultural landmarks and on the desecration of religious and cultural sites and places of burial. Some have also documented a particular type of violence that is meant to humiliate the victim, as unfortunately has been the case for many Ukrainian POWs released from the Russian captivity. This type of violence has been famously termed as extra-lethal violence by Lee Ann Fujii (2023).

6 Only to highlight its relevance, this Lemkin essay on the Soviet Genocide in Ukraine was declared «extremist» by a Russian court in 2015, as a bitter repetition of history (Etkind 2023).

7 On Russian narratives to normalise the invasion and the violence, see Dudko 2023, Lewis 2025, Pynnöniemi and Parppe 2024.

In addition, increasing attention is paid by scholars and activists to the crimes against the material environment of the targeted group with the intention of erasing the victims from their social and material landscape (Fujii 2009). Some have written about domicide - the deliberate killing of home – understood as premeditated actions aimed at making uninhabitable certain areas, making their residents not only to relocate but to give up on their previous lives, destroying the material fabric of whole communities (Azzouz 2023).

Looking at the natural environment of those communities, scholars have argued that certain forms of environmental damage amount to ecocide (Zierler 2011). Ecocide can be understood as «the unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts» (Tsymbalyuk 2025: xii-xiii). Stop Ecocide International is a global campaign to amend the Rome Statute making the crime of ecocide an additional crime under the jurisprudence of the ICC. For example, the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in Ukraine is seen as a textbook case of ecocide. In Ukraine, a country with long-standing and vibrant environmental movement, ecocide is codified into its criminal code and an Office of the Specialised Environmental Prosecutor was created in 2021 (Tsymbalyuk 2025).

Although many conceptual and definitional issues pertaining to mass atrocities continue to be debated, these different concepts and approaches are faithful disciples of Lemkin's teachings and are crucial for our understanding of these crimes (Shaw 2007; Scott 2001, Alvarez 2010).

4. Conclusions

Calling mass atrocities by their name is crucial for a number of reasons. In the legal realm, doing so allows to mobilize existing legal instruments, ensure synergies between national and international bodies for evidence collection, and ultimately, ensure the legal responsibility of the perpetrators. Consistent applications of the international law across a range of cases regardless of political expediencies is the only way to strengthen international courts and build their legitimacy.

When committed as part of warfare, war crimes transform irrevocably the aggressor and the victim. They generate new realities on the ground, not only in terms of land gained and lost but also in terms of national identities and societal attitudes about peace and justice. They give new horrific meaning to the occupation and change the discussions about the costs of leaving lost territories as permanently occupied. They change the very meaning of the terms «ceasefire negotiations», «peace talks», and «just peace».

After three and a half years of being subjected to warfare by war crime, Ukrainians are still berated by some Western and non-Western leaders for not being prepared to trade land for peace, as if the aggressor state had set forward clear demands as to which land it wants and which it does not. Such statements denote blissful ignorance of the escalating genocidal rhetoric by Russia about Ukraine. Any durable settlement in Ukraine needs to recognize the consistently stated official position of the Russian state, which can indeed be summarized as the intent to destroy, as a whole or in part. It should also provide for an adequate recognition of the harm inflicted and for meaningful justice to be pursued.

Although some dismiss the war in Ukraine as a «local» war, no different from so many other conflicts around the world, this is not – and should not be – a zero-sum game. A just peace in Ukraine will not come at the expense of just peace elsewhere. To the contrary, it may become one more brick for building better international standards for justice. In the case of Ukraine, the status of the aggressor state – a nuclear power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council – raises the stakes not just for Ukraine but for the whole international system.

Tragically, Ukraine is not the only place in the world today where unthinkable mass atrocities happen in broad daylight. Just as with Raphael Lemkin's work decades ago, there is hope that collective efforts of Ukrainian lawyers, historians, genocide scholars and intellectuals to give the right name to the unfolding Ukrainian tragedy could help strengthen the international norms against mass atrocities. We should also learn the lesson of how selfish political interests by the great powers may work at cross purposes with the universal goals of upholding humanity in the face of barbarity.

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