

To Think of a Nation Is to Think of Its Land: ECOCIDE IN UKRAINE

by **KATERYNA RUDENKO**

On June 29, 2023, Greta Thunberg visited Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. Among senior European political figures and representatives of Ukrainian environmental organisations, she acknowledged that Ukrainian nature is a victim of Russia-induced ecocide. This is a deliberate act committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of mass damage to the environment being caused, according to the definition of the Stop Ecocide Foundation. At that time, the Ukrainian environment had already suffered eight years of negative environmental impact caused by Russian military aggression, starting with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war on Donbas, which began that same year.

Thunberg's visit was a response to the destruction of the Kakhovka dam in the South of Ukraine on June 6, a disaster that killed people and animals, forced thousands to flee and substantially damaged the region's ecosystems. She criticized the international response to the ecocide in Ukraine. Although it might seem that news outlets talk excessively about the current war state in Ukraine, Thunberg is right that there is hardly any action done concerning the negative environmental implications of Russian military advances.

To be honest, it feels slightly strange to discuss the environmental impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine when the human scale is so massive – as if the death toll of this war alone were not enough. But in a time of climate crisis, it is impossible to ignore the fact that global efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change are being undermined by Russian aggression. Ukrainian nature as a victim of the war – and the stress this causes to human systems – is nothing new. The UN World Food Programme (WFP) is highly reliant on Ukrainian grain. According to Reuters, this year the WFP purchased 80 per cent of its wheat from Ukraine and exported it to Afghanistan, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen to combat a global food crisis caused in part by climate change. Not only is Russia making efforts to block this process (known as the Black Sea Grain Initiative), but vast portions of Ukrainian agricultural lands are being burnt to ashes as the war continues, meaning disruptions to global food systems for years to come.

For some people, this line of thought leads to wondering why Ukraine would not cease fighting to save people and the environment. Then, Russia could subjugate the state entirely and trade the stolen grain.

There is so much to say here in response. We could talk about continuous Russian imperialism and threats to Poland and the Baltic countries, about Indigenous people of vast areas of Eurasia who Russia colonised and, in some cases, exterminated, and about hundreds of years of Ukrainian resistance to the Russian colonial regime. In his 1953 article, Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term “genocide,” called Soviet genocidal policies in Ukraine “the longest and broadest experiment in Russification — the destruction of the Ukrainian nation.” A vast body of research connects genocide and the destruction of culture to ecocide, primarily due to the undeniable connection between native cultures and their land. Human civilisation is born out of interaction with nature.

Destruction of the environment by an aggressor, thus, destroys traditional ways of living.

Ukraine has the right to exist as a nation within its own ancestral land. If we treat the environment as merely a commodity, it is easy to ignore the link between the Ukrainian nation and nature. However, for Ukrainians, our nature is our soul. Ukraine's fight will continue regardless of international support. Our land is not a mere possession; our land *is* us.

TAKE ACTION

Sign a petition at stopecocideukraine.org. Share information about the environmental impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its global consequences. In your speech and writing, we ask you to recognize who is an aggressor and a victim explicitly. Condemn the aggressor. Listen to the victim.

Craters from Russian shellings near Marinka in the Donetsk region (East of Ukraine). PHOTO: Kostiantyn Liberov & Vlada Liberova / war.ukraine.ua/photos

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