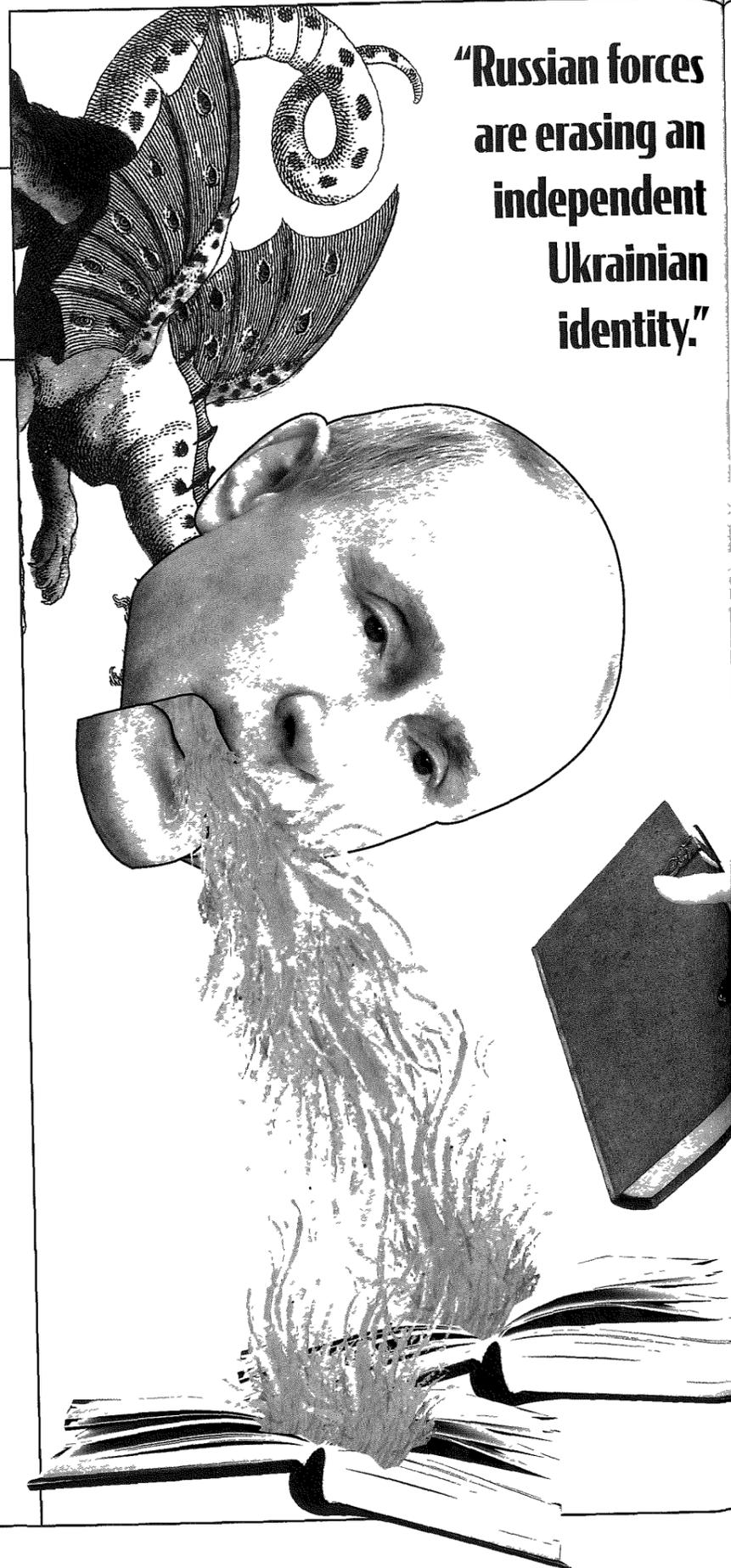


by Antoon De Baets
& Ruben Zeeman

Historians Respond to Putin's Rewriting of the Past



**“Russian forces
are erasing an
independent
Ukrainian
identity.”**

Russian President Vladimir Putin's essay "On the Historical Unity of Ukrainians and Russians," published in July 2021, set out his belief that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, and questioned the legitimacy of Ukraine's borders. In retrospect, it may have been a harbinger of his plans to invade Ukraine. Since 24 February 2022, it has been as if Putin and his inner circle have been trying to make their distorted view on history come true.

In Ukraine, Russian forces damaged the Dormition Cathedral in Kharkiv, destroyed part of the building that houses the provincial KGB archive in Chernihiv, and looted and demolished the Ivankiv Museum of Ukrainian folk art. These, and other examples, led Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to call the destruction an attempt to erase an independent Ukrainian identity—a claim especially noteworthy in light of Putin's essay.

In Russia, the State Duma passed a law on 4 March 2022 that criminalised the spreading of "false information" about the invasion, prohibiting calling the war a "war" or an "invasion." This law fits within a broad pattern of "memory laws," which have prescribed or prohibited specific historical views in Russia since 2014. Not only does it force media outlets to retroactively edit articles in which references to the war are made, it also hinders future Russian historical writing about the invasion. Additionally, on 1 March the education ministry provided schoolteachers with guidance on how to teach about the invasion and answer questions that would likely come up from their students. Valery Falkov, minister of science and higher education, called on people to report professors who violate the norms of "historical facts" set by the regime.

Historians are fighting back. On the day of the invasion, International Memorial, a Russian human rights organisation focused on researching crimes committed in the Soviet Union, called the invasion a "crime against peace." This accusation is not made lightly: it was used during the Nuremberg trials to refer to what is now known in international law as a "crime of aggression." Perhaps not surprisingly, the Russian supreme court confirmed the liquidation of the Russian human rights organisation four days later. On 3 March 2022, 1194 Russian historians published an open letter, bravely condemning the manipulation of history involved in the justification

of the war. The letter was taken down after the 4 March law was decreed.

Other historical organisations have responded. The International Council of Archives called on the Russian government not to destroy any documentation and cultural heritage, or harm any archivists remaining in Ukraine. On 27 February, the European Association of History Educators (EuroClio) harshly condemned Putin's bogus claims to justify the invasion on the grounds that it was an effort to "denazify" a country which "had no tradition of statehood." On the same day, an academic collective called Scholars of Genocide, Nazism and World War II, rejected the Russian government's abuse of the term genocide—referring to the baseless claim that Ukrainian forces were committing a "genocide" in the Donbas region—and of the memory of World War II, and its equation of the Ukrainian state with the Nazi regime. Since then, the list of historical institutions that have condemned Putin's "abuse," or "falsification," of history has kept growing. Another remarkable fact has been that five Chinese historians published an open letter in their country to condemn the invasion, here, as in Russia, the letter was almost instantly censored.

As things currently stand, it is unclear what future actions Putin envisions in Ukraine. However, in destroying part of the distinct cultural heritage of that country, in falsely claiming that Ukraine has no tradition of statehood and is committing genocidal crimes against its own population in the Donbas region, and in obstructing Russian coverage of the war, the distortion of Ukraine's past and of the future historiography of the invasion are at the centre of his imperial and bellicose strategy. Today, more than ever, it is important that all those concerned with the integrity of historical writing speak out against all falsifications. ■

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49°59'23.6"N
36°13'48.7"E



51°29'32.4"N
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50°26'04.1"N
30°33'24.2"E