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ECOCIDE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: A HISTORICAL ASPECT

Abstract. *The purpose of the research is to analyze and substantiate that ecocide in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war is not an accidental consequence of hostilities, but a systemic cyclical policy of the aggressor, which has deep historical roots in the imperial and Soviet practice of predatory use of Ukrainian natural resources.* ***The scientific novelty of the research*** *lies in the comprehensive justification and historical-retrospective analysis of the ecocide committed by the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine, which is essentially a direct continuation of the predatory imperial-Soviet policy aimed at using Ukrainian lands exclusively as a resource base without taking into account long-term environmental consequences.* ***The research methodology*** *is based on the use of such methods as historical, problem-chronological, and systemic. An interdisciplinary approach is also applied, involving legal, military-technical and environmental data to analyze the consequences.* ***Conclusions.*** *The authors have proven that the current actions of the Russian Federation are a direct continuation of the political line focused on the systematic destruction of the ecological potential of Ukraine. The aggressor's widespread practice has been the transformation of ecological zones into degraded, unfit for management and habitation territory. The main acts of ecocide recorded during the Russian-Ukrainian war include the deliberate undermining of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power station, the targeted flooding of mines and chemical contamination of soils, water resources and atmospheric air with heavy metals and toxic emissions from hostilities. The consequences of these actions led to irreversible environmental damage, which falls under the legal term of ecocide, which has become an integral part of the military aggression of the Russian Federation and should be recognized as the fifth international crime to hold the perpetrators accountable and prevent similar disasters in the future.*

Keywords:*ecocide, Russian-Ukrainian war, historical retrospective, Kakhovka hydroelectric power station, imperial policy, ecological degradation, man-made aggression.*

ЕКОЦИД В КОНТЕКСТІ РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ВІЙНИ: ІСТОРИЧНИЙ АСПЕКТ

Анотація. Мета дослідження *– проаналізувати й обґрунтувати, що екоцид у контексті російсько-української війни є не випадковим наслідком бойових дій, а системною циклічною політикою агресора, що має глибоке історичне коріння в імперській та радянській практиці хижацького використання українських природних ресурсів.* ***Наукова новизна дослідження*** *полягає у комплексному обґрунтуванні та історико-ретроспективному аналізі екоциду, скоєного Російською Федерацією на*

території України, що, по-суті, є прямим продовженням хижацької імперсько-радянської політики, спрямованої на використання українських земель як тільки ресурсної бази без урахування довгострокових екологічних наслідків. ***Методологія дослідження*** *ґрунтується на використанні таких методів, як історичний, проблемно-хронологічний, системний. Також застосовано міждисциплінарний підхід із залученням юридичних, військово-технічних та екологічних даних для аналізу наслідків.* ***Висновки.*** *Автори довели, що сучасні дії Російської Федерації є прямим продовженням політичної лінії, сфокусованої на системному знищенні екологічного потенціалу України. Поширеною практикою агресора стало перетворення екологічних зон на деградовану, непридатну для господарювання та проживання територію. Основні акти екоциду, що фіксуються протягом російсько-української війни включають: навмисний підрив Каховської ГЕС, цілеспрямоване затоплення шахт і хімічне забруднення важкими металами й токсичними викидами від бойових дій ґрунтів, водних ресурсів та атмосферного повітря. Наслідки цих дій призвели до незворотної екологічної шкоди, яка підпадає під юридичний термін «екоцид», що став невід'ємною складовою військової агресії Російської Федерації та має бути визнаний п'ятим міжнародним злочином для притягнення винних до відповідальності й запобігання подібним катастрофам у майбутньому.*

Ключові слова: *екоцид, російсько-українська війна, історична ретроспектива, Каховська ГЕС, імперська політика, екологічна деградація, техногенна агресія.*

Problem Statement. One of the catastrophic consequences of the war launched by Russia against Ukraine was the largest environmental disaster in Europe, starting from the period of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident. Such events as coalmines flooding, Kakhovka hydroelectric power stationundermining, protected areasdestruction, soil, water resources and atmosphere pollution require a thorough legal and historical qualification as ecocide. The international crime involves the mass destruction of flora or fauna, poisoning of the atmosphere or water resources, as well as the commission of other actions that can cause an environmental disaster.

A historical analysis of the problem indicated by the authors will help to prove the fact that the actions of the Russian Federation are not accidental consequences of hostilities. On the contrary, they remained a purposeful policy aimed at destroying the ecological potential of Ukraine. The policy has its roots in the past and is a vivid testimony to the efforts of the aggressor country aimed at continuing its own imperial directive on the predatory use and destruction of Ukrainian natural resources and ecosystems with military tactics of «scorched earth», as well as the transformation of occupied territories into raw material supplements. In addition, understanding the historical causes and consequences of ecological destruction in Ukraine is the basis for developing effective programs for environmental security and its post-war reconstruction. It is this fact that determined the authors' desire to turn to the study of this topic.

Review of Research and Publications. The proposed topic is at the epicenter of modern Ukrainian history and is closely related to the large-scale tragic consequences of military aggression. Currently, historiographical developments on the environmental situation in Ukraine are actively being formed and accumulated. In particular, the legal and international legal aspects of the problem are covered in the papers by domestic lawyers, for example, in the publication of O. Borshchevska (Borshchevska, 2023), in which the author analyzed the public law and private law aspects of defining the ecocide during military

aggression. This problem is also the subject of scientific research by military scientists. Thus, V. Kuzmenko, N. Tretyak, V. Chornay, I. Yarysh (Kuzmenko et al, 2024) classified the crimes of military ecocide, assessed the damage caused to the environment, and determined the consequences of the enemy's use of missiles and shells on the territory of Ukraine. As for historical research, this topic is partially covered in the study by T. Chubina and Ya. Fedorenko (Chubina, Fedorenko, 2025), where the authors conclude that the Russian-Ukrainian war became the main catalyst for the deterioration of the environmental situation in the Ukrainian countryside in the 21st century. Therefore, despite the availability of valuable publications in the legal and military-technical spheres, a comprehensive historical study of the coverage of ecocide during the Russian-Ukrainian war in the historical perspective requires further systematization and in-depth analysis, which led the authors to address this topic.

The Purpose of the Article. The purpose of the article is to study the historical aspect of ecocide in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war to substantiate the fact of the purposeful policy of the Russian Federation aimed at destroying the ecological potential of Ukraine and to develop effective environmental security programsin the future.

Research Results. The most terrible event in the life of every modern Ukrainian was the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation troops into the territory of Ukraine. The war dealt a triple blow to Ukrainians: it caused thousands of civilian and military deaths, purposefully destroyed infrastructure, and led to significant environmental damage and the destruction of entire ecosystems. According to data announced by the Deputy Minister of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Ukraine for European Integration Olga Yukhymchuk at a meeting with representatives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome, since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the aggressor country has committed more than 7 thousand environmental crimes in Ukraine, the losses from which exceed €72.9 billion (Ukrinform, 2025).

The beginning of large-scale environmental crimes by Russia on the territory of Ukraine dates back to 2014, i.e. the period of the undeclared war in the East of our country. It was then that the invaders began implementing one of their greatest environmental crimes – the gradual flooding of coalmines in the occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Initially, local collaborationist authorities stopped pumping out water from mines that were deemed «unprofitable». Direct disregard for the region's technogenic safety has led to a critical environmental and radiation threat, as the gradually closed and flooded mines will fill with water containing dissolved heavy metal salts, minerals, radioactive elements and other dangerous chemicals. Over time, these toxic mine waters will rise to the surface and enter groundwater, wells and rivers, in particular the Seversky Donets, which is currently a source of drinking water for a significant part of the region and flows into the Sea of Azov, posing a threat to the wider Black Sea region. Another negative consequence of such destructive actions, according to scientists, will be subsidence of the soil. After all, the process of flooding in the near future may lead to the collapse of mine shafts and displacement of the soil, which in turn will cause subsidence and flooding of large areas, making the land unsuitable for construction and agriculture. The third dangerous consequence will be the release of poisonous methane gas, which is contained in mine workings and as a result its accumulation in basements, cellars and sewers, which will create an additional risk of explosions and fires.

One of the most dangerous flooded mines was the Yuny Kommunar mine, where, incidentally, an experimental underground nuclear explosion was carried out in 1979 (Ukrinform, 2023). Since 2014, this mine, located near the settlement of Bunge, has been under Russian occupation, and in 2018, local leaders-collaborators decided to flood it. Their

actions were directly dangerous, since the lifting of mine waters from the Yuny Kommunar posed a threat of radioactive isotopes being brought to the surface and could lead to radioactive contamination of soil and water in the entire Donetsk region.

In 2018, when the consequences of the flooding of mines and the destruction of natural objects in Donbas became obvious and critical (in particular, due to the increase in the radiation and chemical threat), Ukrainian ecologists, human rights activists and public organizations began to actively use the term of ecocide to qualify environmental crimes generated by the war. This term was used to designate all large-scale and targeted actions of the Russian Federation and its occupation administrations, which led, according to the content of Article 441 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine, to an environmental catastrophe in the Eastern region. Human rights activists demanded and still insist on the need to recognize ecocide as the fifth international crime (Borshchevska, 2023, p. 124) to bring the perpetrators to justice. This requirement is justified by the fact that, according to many scientists, the Donetsk region is facing an irreversible ecological catastrophe in the near future, as a result of which large areas will become uninhabitable (Tereshchenko, 2019).

The ecological situation has significantly worsened not only in the East, but throughout Ukraine after February 24, 2022, when during the conduct of hostilities, critical infrastructure facilities, industrial enterprises, water resources, nature reserves, agricultural lands and soils, as well as atmospheric air were mercilessly damaged. Investigating the rapid ecological degradation, environmental scientists, politicians, public figures and historians (Strilets, 2022) began to argue about the inevitable cyclical nature of the consequences of environmental problems, which will become obvious and tangible in the future.

In particular, studying and analyzing the destructive actions of the aggressor country, historians and public activists, have come to the conclusion that the modern ecocide was not just an accidental consequence of the war. It is a cyclical continuation of imperial and Soviet policies aimed at the predatory depletion of Ukrainian natural resources and the transformation of occupied territories into a raw material appendage without taking into account long-term environmental consequences. A vivid example of such destructive actions was the events of June 6, 2023, when the Russian occupiers deliberately blew up the Kakhovka hydroelectric power station, which scientists consider the largest environmental disaster of the 21stcentury in Ukraine. If we look at the event from a historical perspective, it becomes obvious that all large-scale hydro technical projects of the USSR, including the construction of a cascade of hydroelectric power plants on the Dnipro, were carried out without due consideration of environmental consequences. They were based only on short-term economic benefits, and subsequently led to the flooding of fertile agricultural lands, the destruction of unique ecosystems, and contributed to the degradation of the Sea of Azov.

That is why the demolition of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power station in 2023 became one of the most brutal acts of modernized imperial policy of Russia. Since it was not just the destruction of infrastructure, but in fact, a repeated, catastrophic destruction of the ecosystem of the Dnipro and Southern Ukraine. The death of people, the flooding of dozens of settlements, the erosion of cemeteries (in two villages of the Kherson region their contents were simply taken out into the Black Sea) (Santora, 2023), cattle cemeteries, the destruction of tens of thousands of hectares of not only agricultural land, but also protected areas, the loss of the irrigation system of part of the Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhia regions and the entire Kherson region – this is far from a complete list of the negative environmental consequences of the demolition of the Kakhovka HPS.

This disaster was an act of ecocide with unpredictable long-term consequences. The devastating impact on food security and water supply in Southern Ukraine was one of the critical humanitarian disasters caused by the war. After the terrorist attack on the Kakhovka hydroelectric power station, entire sectors of the region's agriculture were on the verge of survival. Not only thousands of hectares that were directly flooded, but also significant areas dependent on irrigation suffered severe damage. In particular, 10 thousand hectares of agricultural land on the right bank, controlled by Ukraine, were rendered inoperable. In addition, the cessation of water supply through irrigation canals that served over 1.2 million acres (about 485 thousand hectares) of agricultural land threatened the cultivation of strategic crops (Kravchenko, 2023). These lands, which previously yielded crops of corn, soybeans, rapeseed, wheat, and vegetables, became potentially unsuitable for agribusiness due to desertification. The volume of lost land in the occupied left-bank territories remained unknown (Chubina & Fedorenko, 2025, p. 80), but most experts agreed with the conclusion that a significant part of the agrarian potential of the Kherson region was practically lost due to the war after this act of ecocide.

The consequences of the destruction of the reservoir went far beyond agriculture. The loss of the Kakhovka reservoir as the main source of water created a drinking water crisis for hundreds of thousands of people in the region, including cities and industrial centers. The massive flow of water carried into the Black Sea not only garbage and infrastructure remnants, but also tons of soil, chemicals, heavy metals, and pathogenic organisms. This caused catastrophic pollution of the marine area and directly threatened fish resources and biodiversity, as well as water security of the entire Black Sea region. Given these facts, we can argue that the environmental damage from the destruction of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power station was the largest act of ecocide recorded by Ukraine in the entire history of independence.

In the context of our research, it is necessary to pay attention to the aspect that the entire political line, first of the Russian Empire, and later of the Soviet Union, was based on considering Ukrainian lands as an exclusively resource base. This led to excessive, irrational and environmentally dangerous industrialization on the territory of Ukraine.

That is why from a historical perspective, the modern actions of the Russian Federation have become a direct continuation of this imperial-Soviet political line, focused on the systematic destruction of the economic and environmental potential of the territory of Ukraine. A common practice for the aggressor has been to transform territories that could not be incorporated into a degraded zone unsuitable for farming and living.

A direct and tangible manifestation of this destructive policy is the catastrophic impact of hostilities on the quality and condition of soils, which have already lost about 30% of the accumulated humus over the previous 100 years (Kuzmenko et al, 2024, p. 64). The explosions of mines, enemy missiles, guided aircraft bombs and artillery shells have already contaminated and continue to contaminate the land with heavy metals, such as nickel, lead, titanium, strontium, cadmium, etc., turning it into a degraded, unusable territory. It is worth noting that during the explosion, all substances undergo complete oxidation, and the products of the chemical reaction are released into the atmosphere. The main ones, carbon dioxide and water vapor, are not directly toxic but are harmful in the context of climate change, since both are powerful greenhouse gases. In addition, in the atmosphere, sulfur and nitrogen oxides can cause acid rain, which changes the structure of the soil and causes burns to plants, to which conifers are particularly sensitive. Acid rain also has a negative effect on the human body, other mammals and birds, affecting the condition of mucous tissues and respiratory organs. In addition to gaseous products, metal fragments of shells that fall into the environment pose a

significant danger. They are not completely inert. Cast iron with steel impurities, which is the most common material for the production of ammunition casings, contains not only standard iron and carbon, but also sulfur and copper. These dangerous substances enter the soil, can migrate to groundwater and, as a result, enter the food chain, affecting the health of animals and people in the long term. According to scientists, these processes may in the near future provoke the creation of an ecological bomb with a long-term toxic effect.

In addition, soil contamination with fuels and lubricants and other petroleum products also occurs as a result of intensive movement and damage to land military equipment in the combat zone. In soils soaked with petroleum products during the war water permeability has sharply decreased, oxygen has been displaced. Moreover, consequently, biochemical and microbiological processes have been disrupted, which leads to disruption of plant root nutrition, inhibition of their growth and development and, ultimately, to death. In addition to soils, water resources, air and protected forest areas also suffer. Thus, it has become common practice for Russian troops to carry out attacks aimed at destroying port infrastructure along the coast of the Black and Azov Seas and ships at anchor. Such actions inevitably lead to water pollution and the spread of toxic substances into the sea. Oil products negatively affect marine biocenosis, forming films on the water surface, which disrupts the exchange of energy, heat, moisture and gases between the sea and the atmosphere. In addition, they directly affect the physicochemical and hydrological conditions, causing the death of fish, seabirds and microorganisms. All components of oil are toxic to marine organisms. That is why ecologists from Bulgaria and Turkey have noticed cases of mass fish kills and dolphin deaths in the Black Sea (Shinkarenko, 2023).

During the massive missile and artillery shelling of Ukraine, especially its industrial facilities, all toxic substances that are released undergo a process of chemical oxidation and pollute the atmosphere, significantly worsening air quality and, therefore, negatively affecting human health (Lubinets, 2023).

The shelling of industrial facilities and critical infrastructure, which has been ongoing since the first days of the full-scale invasion and continues to this day, has constantly caused large-scale fires, which have become a source of additional, complex pollution of soil, water and air. The combustion products released into the air consist of highly toxic gases, soot and dioxins.

The risks associated with damage to communications, enterprises and other objects that pose an increased environmental hazard, starting with the full-scale invasion in 2022, have acquired a special, critical importance. In conditions of prolonged hostilities, limited control and opportunities to promptly eliminate negative consequences, these phenomena have significantly increased the scale of the negative impact, which creates all the prerequisites for a technogenic and environmental disaster. We can take as an example the events that took place in the first two weeks after the large-scale invasion of the Russian Federation into the territory of Ukraine. Thus, on February 27, 2022, the Russian military hit an oil depot in the Vasylkiv district of the Kyiv region with a ballistic missile. As a result of the missile strike, a fire broke out on the territory of the oil depot near the village of Kryachky. As a result, 10 tanks of 2,000 m^3 of gasoline and diesel fuel caught fire, causing significant damage not only to infrastructure but also to environmental safety. The enemy used the same tactics in the cities of Okhtyrka, Chernihiv, Zhytomyr, and the village of Chernyakhiv (Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Ukraine, 2022). Similar enemy attacks also covered other industrial facilities with a high risk of chemical contamination. In particular, on March 3, 2022, in the village of Chaiky near Kyiv, a shell hit a warehouse with

polyurethane foam, which caused a fire in the warehouse and in an adjacent office building (Roshchina, 2022). The tactics of destroying potentially important industrial facilities for environmental safety (destruction of energy infrastructure facilities, attacks on oil depots and chemical warehouses) by the aggressor country continue to this day.

That is why incidents related to the burning of polymers and chemicals, which are a direct source of toxic gases and carcinogenic particulate matter, further worsen the state of atmospheric air, cause poisoning of animals and people, and contribute to the appearance of acid rain. In turn, the danger of acid rain lies in the fact that they cause plant burns. This leads to a decrease in biomass in agricultural crops, as well as to the weakening of wild plants and forest crops. Weakened forests can quickly be affected by pests, which in turn contributes to an increase in the amount of dead wood in the forest and the spread of fires in ecosystems (Omelchuk & Sadohurska, 2022). In general, according to the Accounting Chamber of Ukraine, as of the end of 2022, 3 million hectares of forests in the country had already been affected by occupation and hostilities, which amounted to about 30 percent of the total forest area of Ukraine. As of 2024, the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the process of de-occupying the territory had liberated 2.2 million hectares of forest massifs. However, at the same time, it is worth noting that a large number of these territories are mined (about 700 thousand hectares) and require restoration, and some consist of trees damaged by debris and broken by explosions (Nalyotov, 2024). More than 850 thousand hectares of forests remain occupied.

Conclusions. Thus, we can conclude that ecocide in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war has a deep historical basis and is not an accidental consequence of hostilities, but a systemic cyclical policy of the aggressor.

Firstly, modern acts of ecocide are a direct continuation of imperial and Soviet policies, which considered Ukrainian lands exclusively as a resource base. This led to excessive, irrational industrialization without due consideration of long-term environmental consequences.

Secondly, during the course of the Russian-Ukrainian war, a strategy of systematic destruction by the aggressor of not only the economic, but also the ecological potential of the territories that could not be incorporated was followed. The transformation of these zones into degraded, unsuitable for management and habitation territory became a common practice.

Thirdly, man-made aggression (the targeted destruction of potentially environmentally hazardous infrastructure), the deliberate undermining of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power station, the pollution of soil, atmospheric air, water resources, and the destruction of forests have led to irreversible environmental damage. This damage falls under the legal term of ecocide, which has become an integral part of the Russian Federation's military aggression and should be recognized as the fifth international crime to hold those responsible accountable and prevent similar disasters in the future.

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