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## The Nomenclature of War and Genocide: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

### Original article

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** An analysis of the nomenclature of war regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

**Methods:** The research methods include a historical analysis of the naming of wars, specifically the term “World War III,” and documentation of the current political and military situation.

**Results:** The article answers three research questions:

- 1) How and why are wars named?
- 2) What is meant by the phrase “World War III”?
- 3) Is the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022 a global conflict?
- 4) What are the ramifications of the conflict in terms of human rights (genocide) and the international system (political and economic)?

**Conclusions:** The Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022 is not a regional act of aggression by a Russian belligerent state, but the escalation of imperialist aspirations into a global and genocidal conflict. This is a renewed Cold War that ought to be framed as World War III both in regards to collective numeration as well as a recognition of the global nature and potential regarding the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

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## **Introduction**

There is war beyond the bloody conflict in Ukraine and beyond the world divided into camps supporting Ukraine or Russia; it is the war of naming history and genocide.

The nomenclature of history is not created in real-time. The naming of war is a product of history and an interpretation of history. The question is whether the names of conflict be descriptive or politicalized. The American Civil War of 1861-1865 was called an insurrection, a rebellion, a civil war, and the “War Between the States” (Foster, 2018, p.416). World War I was originally known as the Great War. But, in the aftermath of World War II, the Great War was renamed World War I. Russian dictator Vladimir Putin has attempted to represent the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a “limited operation” (Brangham & Nagy, 2022) or a “special military operation” (Al Jazeera, 2022).

### **1. The Naming of History**

“Names are, in one sense, the outward indication of a power negotiation (Croft, 2015, p. 105). Kodosky (2015) discusses the problems in naming conflicts from Vietnam to Iraq. Vladimir Putin’s kleptocratic regime hides between a fantasy of denazifying Ukraine while the world watches Russian attacks on hospitals, schools, apartment complexes, and shopping malls.

There is also a psychological aspect to the description of war. Since the early days of the Cold War, the term “World War III” has become an idiom that is synonymous with a worldwide conflict with a potential nuclear Armageddon between the Western Allies and either the Soviet Union or its heir-state, the Russian Federation. That perception, and the terminology, should change.

Whether we call this conflict a global war, a world war, or World War III, we are closer to the first use of nuclear weapons in combat since 1945 and certainly closer than any moment since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Russia has explicitly threatened to use tactical nuclear weapons in response to NATO’s increased support for Ukraine (Cole, 2022).

Stanton (2022) describes the conflict as a new limited war analogous to the Cold War and the Korean stand-off since the 1950s. He is not wrong. Krepinevich (2020) notes that conflicts between Great Powers are typically protracted. Even a conventional war, given the global context and availability of nuclear weapons, has made the Russo-Ukrainian War into World War III. However, the Russo-Ukraine War of 2022 is not a conflict between proxy states but

directly involves a nuclear power. Given Russia's weakened economy and geopolitical stature, the potential for the use of nuclear weapons, either tactically or strategically, increases with each Russian military loss.

The global conflict orchestrated by Russia against Ukraine has become a global conflict and, therefore, a world war. Using the historically accepted nomenclature and numbering of world conflicts, this is World War III. That is not an inflammatory term, nor a desire to escalate rhetoric, it is descriptive.

## **2. Cui bono? ("Who Benefits?")**

In fact, not using appropriate terminology benefits those who want the war to be seen as a two-state conflict or limited operation.

Regardless of the global scope of support for Ukraine, the distinction between the two definitions of World War III may soon be moot. The protracted conflict has decimated the Russian military capacity. Russia has lost soldiers and conscripts at an astonishing rate and is now releasing criminals from prison to replenish their losses (Walsh, Markina, Shukla, Ochman, & Tarasova, 2022). The situation, combined with the fact that tactical nuclear weapons have a lower yield and area of contamination, may lower the prohibition against their use in international norms.

## **3. World Wars**

While our collective history recognizes two World Wars, academics have noted that there have been more "World Wars" (Hamilton and Herwig (2003). British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called the Seven Years War the first world war. Among the other global wars that do not get the distinction of Roman numerals are the Nine Year's War, the Cold War, and the Global War on Terror. Prunier (2014) has labeled the Second Congo War as "Africa's World War." I suggest that this Russian invasion is a "World War" as well.

Yet the nomenclature of conflict can change. The Great War, World War I, was retroactively called the first World War because of the nature of global participation. However, much of the global participation was a result of European colonial imperialism. Former British colonies like Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa participated in WWI, not out of volition, but as an obligation. Similarly, France built an international army with Indochinese and African soldiers. The German East African campaign in World War I sought to divert Allied resources and brought the European conflict to Africa.

World War II was more global in nature in terms of military conflict. From the European conflict between Germany and its allies versus the French-Anglo-American alliance (later including the Soviet Union), the war was also a conflict that also included the hegemonic rise of the Japanese Empire in the Pacific Rim. While the European colonies in Africa and Asia were involved by requisite, independent nation-states in North and South America were able to choose their degree of participation in World War II.

#### **4. World War III**

Similarly, today, the world must recognize that this is World War III. Non-colonized jurisdictions from around the globe have denounced the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Whatsmore, from positions of independent decision-making and volition, nation-states worldwide have denounced the Russian aggression.

Unfortunately, this Russian provocation of World War III has had a global impact regarding refugees and IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) from Ukraine as well. As of July 2022, BBC (2022) estimates that 12 million people have been internally displaced or become refugees. Achiri and Sandilya (2022) note that among those fleeing the conflict are more than 35,000 Africans and Asians. This war has worldwide ramifications and is a World War.

If it were merely rhetorical reprimands of Russia, then the nomenclature of calling the conflict a World War may be hyperbolic. However, the sovereign nation-states of the world have spoken with not just voices of political posturing. The world has declared this a “World War” through the actions of global and decolonized nation-states.

Non-government organizations, such as the European Union, NATO, the G-7, the World Bank, the IMF, FIFA, and other NGOs have implemented actions to resist and punish Russian aggression. In addition, independent global influencers (Western elites, entertainers, and athletes) have significantly increased the social awareness and pressure on Russian aggression in Ukraine.

From global non-governmental organizations (like the EU, G-7, IMF, and World Bank) who have made aggressive actions against the Putin regime to other regional organizations such as the Arab League who have made attempts to mitigate the global impact of Russia’s invasion, this is -undoubtedly- a global conflict.

From a descriptive and participatory level, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is World War III.

As a result of the globalized economy, the economic effects of Russia’s warmongering have had negative effects on the international economy from grain to oil as well. This global

war has led to worldwide issues of inflation and economic recession (Caldara, D., Conlisk, S., Iacoviello, M., & Penn, M. (2022).

## **5. Rethinking Hyperbolic Cold War Rhetoric**

We need to unlearn the Cold War rhetoric regarding nuclear conflict and recognize that the reality in Ukraine, and the nearly universal division of the global community into pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian camps, make this a global conflict. This is not hyperbolic, but historically descriptive: This is a World War on the Hamilton and Herwig (2003) scale and also might soon include the first use of tactical nuclear weapons in history as well.

## **6. The Second Ukrainian Genocide**

Ukraine is also concurrently suffering its second genocide in Ukraine in less than 100 years. Both genocides were perpetrated by the Kremlin. The Holodomor occurred between 1932 and 1933 and killed millions of Ukrainians through man-made starvation (Holodomor Museum, 2022). Ukrainian Jews were also systematically murdered in the Nazi invasion and occupation during World War II and the Holocaust, meaning some Ukrainians have experienced three genocides in less than 100 years.

Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as:

... any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, as such:

- (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.

The Putin Regime is actively and willfully targeting Ukrainian nationals, including but not limited to ethnic Ukrainians, inflicting conditions of life on civilian populations calculated to bring about its physical destruction, and forcibly transferring Ukrainian children into Russia. In 1996, the international community emphatically recognized rape as a war crime (Facing History & Ourselves, n.d.). The targeting of civilians and the murder of prisoners is also a violation of international law that must be punished as crimes against humanity.

On April 27, 2022, the Canadian Parliament unanimously declared the Russian atrocities in Ukraine a genocide (Singh, 2022). In April, U.S. President Joe Biden used the term “genocide” to describe the Russian war crimes in Ukraine (Liptak, 2022) and has doubled down on the use of the term to describe Russia’s contempt for life and the international rules of war. Former President Donald Trump has also called the attacks on Ukrainian civilians a genocide (Lonas, 2022). Philippe Sand (2022) outlines the legal definition of genocide and the applicableness of the term regarding the crimes against humanity occurring in Ukraine. Contrary to Douthat (2022) who calls the usage of the term “escalatory hypothetical,” it is clear that the actions of Vladimir Putin’s regime meet the international standards of genocide (Sand, 2022).

Terminology matters. It is important to identify and recognize the victims of genocide, not give unnecessary attention to the perpetrators (Keefe, 2018). This is not “Russian acts of genocide in Ukraine” but the Second Ukrainian Genocide. By identifying this genocide by the victims, rather than a singular belligerent, the world can also hold the Belorussian dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko and his Putin-aligned puppet regime accountable as well. Too often secondary belligerents escape justice (Keefe, 2017).

The Second Ukrainian Genocide is not a “hypothetical” statement as Douthat (2022) has said, nor is it hyperbolic; it is the reality of the mass graves, forcibly deported children, the rape and sexual violence against women, and the murder of civilians and prisoners of war. Putin’s self-righteous or delusional propaganda of “de-Nazifying Ukraine” is an attempt at controlling the narrative and the nomenclature of war. His regime argues the need to end a fictitious genocide of ethnic Russians.

## **Conclusion**

While this may be a “limited war” in regards to direct belligerents or a return to a Cold War relationship between the United States and Russia, it is also a global conflict of willing nation-states choosing opposing camps beyond the immediate battlefields of Ukraine.

Trudolyubov (2022) said that “Russia’s war against Ukraine is sometimes presented as a limited operation and sometimes as a world war.” I believe it is the latter.

This is a war between the international system and rogue states, between democracy and autocracy, and between humanity and genocide. Russia is the belligerent and the enemy of internationalism. There is responsibility in the naming of history and, whether Putin cowardly authorizes the use of tactical nuclear weapons or not, this is World War III.

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