

# RUSSIA'S IMPERIAL IDENTITY

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## HEARING BEFORE THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS SECOND SESSION

SEPTEMBER 18, 2024

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COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND  
COOPERATION IN EUROPE,  
U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION,  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
*Wednesday, September 18, 2024.*

The hearing was held from 2:34 p.m. to 3:40 p.m., Room 2358-C, Rayburn House Office Building, Representative Steve Cohen [D-TN], Ranking Member, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

**Committee Members Present:** Representative Steve Cohen [D-TN], Ranking Member; Senator Sheldon Whitehouse [D-RI]; Representative Victoria Spartz [R-IN].

**Other Members Present:** Representative Mike Quigley [D-IL]; Representative Jimmy Panetta [D-CA].

**Witnesses:** Botakoz Kassymbekova, Assistant Professor in Modern History, University of Basel; Philip Obaji Jr., Correspondent, The Daily Beast; Timothy Snyder, Richard C. Levin Professor of History, Yale University; Maria Vyushkova, Buryat Activist and Scientist.

### OPENING STATEMENT OF STEVE COHEN, RANKING MEMBER, U.S. HOUSE, FROM TENNESSEE

Co-Chair COHEN: [Sounds gavel.] The Helsinki Commission is called to order. I thank each of you for being here.

I want to recognize myself for five minutes for opening remarks and then we will go into—do you want to make an opening statement? No? We will just go on.

Russia has—we have got some people here from Helsinki I would like to recognize first, some Ukrainian parliamentarians. Where are you all? If you all would stand up, please.

I appreciate you coming. Maybe we will meet later but I wanted you to be here for this hearing.

I understand the Cultural Forces of the military from Ukraine are also here in Washington. Thank you for attending and for your contributions to preserving Ukrainian culture. Thank you.

Russia has been an empire for most of its history. The empire of the czars created the Soviet Union and it made way for it, but it was only a temporary thing. They were not liberators but they were empire builders. Moscow's interests dominated the Soviet Union and the republics were valuable for what resources the government could extract from them.

It was Russian culture and the Russian language that counted. That was it. It was celebrated, respected, and necessary to advance one's career in society. Entire ethnic groups in the Soviet Union

like the Crimean Tatars in 1944 and North Caucasus people, the Chechens, and others, were deported to Siberia or other regions far from their native lands, many of them not surviving the journey.

No one was ever really held to account for the crimes under Stalin and throughout the Soviet history. Stalin's policy of forced collectivization resulted in the Holodomor famine in Ukraine from 1932 to 1933 and I believe, if I am correct, this manmade famine also touched southern Russia and Kazakhstan, and they suffered as well. Five million people totally died of starvation during that time across the USSR. The majority were in Ukraine.

This was also a time when Soviet power was going after intellectuals, writers, artists, and others. In fact, Stalin's reputation in Russia these days has received a boost from Putin's patriotic version of history, which he twists to justify his regime's crimes.

Though Russia's political ideologies have changed over centuries of empire, the fundamentals are the same—internal repression of minority groups and external aggression toward countries that refuse to bow to the Kremlin.

Ukraine has borne the brunt of Russia's imperial rage. However, Putin's need for domination persists in its military and psychological operations against Russian neighbors and discrimination toward any and many colonized nationalities and ethnic groups.

We will also hear today how Russia is operating in Africa to spread anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda while committing atrocities against the local populations. The United States has its own troubled past of colonization, of course, and oppression but, thankfully, we live in a country where we can openly acknowledge that, discuss our history, and get better, and we get closer to being a more perfect union. We still have a ways to go.

In Russia, there is no attempt to have a more perfect union, only a more perfect Putin, and there is no such thing as a perfect Putin. He is perfectly reprehensible and disgusting.

In Russia so many who have suffered go unheard because truth is silenced and because the voices of Moscow have usually been the loudest of the entire region. That is why it is so important to listen to the stories of historically marginalized and colonized people. We will hear some of these stories today from witnesses.

We will hear from Dr. Botakoz Kassymbekova, an assistant professor of modern history at the University of Basel, south Switzerland. Next is Philip Obaji, a correspondent for The Daily Beast, followed by Dr. Timothy Snyder, whom I know from television. He is a TV star and I always hear him. [LAUGHTER.] He also goes to Yale and—or, he teaches at Yale. I do not know if he went there or not. Where would you go?

Mr. SNYDER: I went to Brown.

Co-Chair COHEN: Brown. Okay. Well, that is—the same league. [LAUGHTER.] Different pew. Same church, different pew. Finally, Dr. Maria Vyushkova. Yes, thank you. Buryat indigenous rights and anti-war activist and researcher.

I am here today because Mr. Wilson, who is the chair, is not up to—is under the weather a bit so I am taking his stead, and we will recognize whoever wants to go first.

Dr. —thank you.

**TESTIMONY OF BOTAKOZ KASSYMBEKOVA, ASSISTANT  
PROFESSOR IN MODERN HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF BASEL**

Mr. KASSYMBEKOVA: Botakoz Kassymbekova.

Co-Chair COHEN: Yes, I have done it once.

Mr. KASSYMBEKOVA: Thank you. Thank you for the invitation, dear ladies and gentlemen, and—

Co-Chair COHEN: Let me say that you are recognized for five minutes and there will be—

Mr. KASSYMBEKOVA: Yes.

Co-Chair COHEN: —a red light—the yellow light will say you have got one minute to go and a red light says you are supposed to finish.

Mr. KASSYMBEKOVA: Right. Until recently, colonialism seemed to be a thing of the past. We thought that the idea that one nation is entitled to dominate and exterminate other nations, robbing the ability to decide on their future, was gone. Who would have thought that it would be the Russian nation, which proclaimed itself the global leader of communism and anti-colonialism in the 20th century, would lead one of the most brutal colonial conquests in the 21st century?

If it was once possible to argue that it was missionary communism against capitalism that led the Russian nation to expansionism, this explanation is no longer sufficient. The truth is that Russian colonialism has a long history that dates five centuries back.

The Russian nation had 500 years to craft a story of exceptionalism, to grab and rob lands, suppress nations, and create the largest land empire in the world. The difference between Russian colonialism from other European empires, however, is that its metropole never democratized or engaged in self-critical enlightenment. This means that its colonize knew no mercy.

Communism itself thrived on Russian colonialism. When the Russian tsarist empire collapsed after World War I in 1917 and its numerous colonized nations like Ukraine, Finland, Latvia, Georgia, Estonia, Armenia, Poland, Bessarabia, Belarus, Kazakhs, and Buryats, and many others proclaimed independence or autonomy, communist Moscow brutally reconquered most of them, killing at least 10 million people.

In the new communist empire, Bolsheviks proclaimed the Russian nation to be the superior one. Consider this fact. In their national anthems, non-Russian colonized nations had to praise and thank the Russian people for the supposedly bright life under the communist dictatorship.

I was one of the children in Soviet Kazakhstan who had to sing an anthem with the words "To the great Russian people we say big thank you." I sang it without knowing that 40 percent of Kazakhs died in the 1930s because of the salvation inflicted on the Kazakh people by Moscow. Moscow stole the cattle of Kazakh nomads, knowingly leaving millions to starvation. My grandmother's family perished in that hunger and she was forcibly taken to a Russian orphanage where 60 percent of Kazakh children died.

There, she was taught to forget her language, and her parents, and to praise the Russian nation for communism. As you know, in the Ukrainian case 4 million people died and today Ukrainian chil-

dren are taken to Russia. Russian colonialism was historically based on the strategy of killing, deporting, and terrorizing the local population, Russifying them, and settling the territories with the Russian people.

Consider this quote from a Russian colonial officer about the strategies of conquest in the northern Caucasus in the 1860s. "The expulsion of half of the mountain people and the settlement with Russians, these were the war plan. The Russian population was not only to be the crowning glory of the conquest of the region; it was to become one of the main means of conquest."

This strategy continued into the communist period. The Chechens, Crimeans, Tatars, and many others were killed and deported from their lands in the 1940s. Terrorized and forbidden to learn their languages, they were taught to praise the Russian nation instead.

The Russian people when settling, accepting privileges, and listening to Soviet anthems, learned to think that the colonized land was theirs. As a result, in 1989 the last communist ruler, Mikhail Gorbachev, argued against lending independence to non-Russian nations which demanded independence because he said, and "The Russian people are that way."

Although in 1991 communism collapsed, the Russian imperial identity did not. For many of us who experienced Russian colonialism firsthand, there were four lessons from the 20th century.

First, the collapse of the Soviet Russian empire was a victory for humanity. Millions of people received the possibility to live in dignity, freedom, and the ability to decide their own futures. This would not have been possible under the Russian occupation.

Secondly, although communism failed Russian colonialism did not. It was never questioned by Russian intellectuals, liberal or illiberal, its leaders, and by the world at large. However, we now know that it was not just communism that was incompatible with democracy, equality, and peace. In fact, it is Russian colonialism that is not.

Thirdly, in 1991 Moscow argued that without this control the colonized nations would present a danger to the world. This was a colonial lie and today we know that it is a colonial lie. Out of all former Soviet republics, it is the Russian one that presents the most danger to the world.

Finally, Russian colonialism, just as communism, is not reformable because it is a system based on ideology. Just like communism, it has no future. Unlike communism, it can collapse only if actively defeated.

Thank you.

Representative PANETTA: Thank you, Doctor.

Professor Snyder, please. Five minutes.

**TESTIMONY OF TIMOTHY SNYDER, RICHARD C. LEVIN  
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, YALE UNIVERSITY**

Mr. SNYDER: Okay. [Off mic, technical difficulties]—we are talking about a particular historical structure. For the last 500 years of world history, the empire has been the dominant structure. The last hundred years or so have seen a contestation of that, of which the Russo-Ukrainian war is probably the latest continuation.



[Off mic, technical difficulties]—a dominant center and exploited periphery. This very often corresponds to a dominant nation or a dominant group and exploited national minorities. [Off mic, technical difficulties]—empires do is to negate. They carry out policies, statements, and ideologies of negation. They deny—and this is true of history as well as of the present war—they deny the reality of other states. Other states are not real. An empire is real; other states are not. Other nations are not real. The dominant power or the dominant center of an empire is real but not other nations.

According to this very brief summary, the Russian Federation of 2024 is very clearly an empire and its ideology is very clearly imperial. Russian elites say so themselves including in official foreign policy documents.

Their idea is that empire has not been consigned to the past but that empire should continue, that the imperial moment goes on. The structure of the Russian Federation as well as the structure of how they fought this war is also imperial. The center in Moscow and Petersburg exploits a periphery—an Asian periphery—for its resources.

[Off mic, technical difficulties]—minorities, first of all, including Buryats and poor people. The occupation has treated Ukrainians as an inferior people with no right to exist. Therefore, the structure.

The theory of time is very present in this war. In this war, Mr. Putin says that Russia has the right to destroy Ukraine because something happened a thousand years ago. I will spare you the details but it does not get better if I give you the details. It just gets worse and stupider.

The idea is that Russia is innocent because of something that might have happened to a Viking a thousand years ago and, therefore, can invade Ukraine. I have now given it more dignity than it deserves.

That is the theory of time, right, because of that Russia has history laws that make it illegal to question the official version of history, and because of this theory of time anything that looks like Ukrainian culture, such as the representation we just had, is claimed not to have exist and thus we have imperial negation in practice.

Inside occupied Ukraine the murder of local elites, the deportation of children for their Russification on the logic that there is no Ukraine anyway, the deliberate destruction of publishing houses, archives, and libraries, and I would note that historically the bandura playing which you just saw was treated as part of Ukrainian culture that did not exist in the Soviet Union and bandura players were executed.

Which leads me to a very specific form of negation. Russia in this war is repeating very specific imperial practices of the Soviet Union and, indeed, of Nazi Germany while denying that those things ever happened, which is part of this larger notion of time.

All right. Therefore, what does that mean for policy? I will make five very quick recommendations.

Number one, myths of empire can only grow when nobody knows anything about history which, unfortunately, as a first approximation describes us.

Number two, if we are going to be anti-imperial we also have to be reflective.

As Representative Cohen suggested, if Americans are going to talk about anti-imperialism, they better be ready to talk about their own imperial past, or else no one in the Global South will take us seriously, and people from the Global South have to be brought into this conversation or it makes no sense.

The third thing we need to say is that imperialism directly contradicts the basic foundations of the international legal order. It is not just some funny idea. It is counter to everything we take for granted and that brings us stability.

Fourth, Americans who are against empire should be in favor of the European Union. The European Union is the way that European states have found another kind of political organization, a way to interact that is post-imperial and anti-imperial.

Fifth and, perhaps most important it is important to note that empires usually lose their wars. Empires usually lose their wars. Since 1945 the bigger country, the empire, has usually lost its wars.

That means that we can expect or it would not be strange if Russia would lose its war, and then underneath that it should lose its war even if all you care about is Russia because the only way that empires in Europe have transitioned into becoming rule of law states is by losing their last imperial war.

Therefore, an analysis of the history of the empire would lead you to the conclusion that doing what one can to help Russia lose this imperial war would be good not only for the people that Russia is oppressing and whose existence they are denying but also good for Russia itself.

Thank you.

Representative PANETTA: Thank you.

Mr. Obaji, please. Five minutes.

**TESTIMONY OF PHILIP OBAJI JR., CORRESPONDENT, THE DAILY BEAST**

Mr. OBAJI: Thank you so much, members of the Commission. It is a huge privilege to be with you today and it is also a great honor for me to appear with Dr. Kassymbekova, Professor Snyder, and Dr. Vyushkova.

Last year I wrote one of the most powerful stories published anywhere, an in-depth investigation on the operations of Russian paramilitaries in the Central African Republic following the death of Wagner boss Yevgeny Prigozhin who, by the way, never said anything good about me.

The account revealed how so-called Russian military instructors operating under the command of the Russian Ministry of Defense slaughtered dozens of people to secure access to a gold mine in the north of the CAR. That is short for the Central African Republic.

Traveling from my home in Nigeria to Central Africa last December was not my first. I had spent years highlighting the plight of people maltreated and abused by Russian paramilitaries and that has not gone unnoticed by the Russians.

In 2022 I became a target of the Wagner Group after exposing the wrongdoing of their mercenaries operating across Africa. Con-

tacts told me that my photo had been circulating on chat groups used by locals recruited by Wagner, who have apparently denounced me as an obstacle to fighting extremism in the CAR and claimed that I am an agent of the West who should be arrested or killed.

I traveled to the regions of the CAR where militias had previously attacked outsiders with slingshots, machetes, and guns. I was held for hours by rebels who initially accused me of attempting to spy on them.

Days later on the border with Cameroon I was arrested, tortured, and detained overnight by Central African forces acting on the orders of Russian paramilitaries after soldiers saw me interviewing artisanal miners who were attempting to flee the country following attacks on their community by Russian paramilitaries. Soldiers beat me and confiscated my phone and camera.

No amount of intimidation was going to stop me from continuing my investigation. After the soldiers released me I crossed into Cameroon, bought new equipment, and returned to the CAR to finish the work I had started.

The attack by Russian paramilitaries on locals in the northwestern central African town of Koki in which at least 50 villagers were killed became an obsession for me, all the more because the victims were ordinary people who had done nothing wrong.

I managed to interview 16 witnesses to the attack. They all told me the same thing. Russian paramilitaries slaughtered their friends, colleagues, family members, and neighbors simply because the Russians wanted to secure access to Koki's gold mine.

That was not all. In the middle of December 2023, I traveled to Bouar in the northwest of the CAR where I interviewed a dozen girls who told me Russian paramilitaries led them into a military base on the outskirts of town and then drugged and raped them before administering contraceptive shots and pills to them. A couple of other girls described to me how Russian paramilitaries held them at gunpoint on their farmlands and then took turns raping them right in front of their family members.

In Mali, where I recently interviewed women raped and abused by Russian paramilitaries, the Wagner Group continues to operate in the country on behalf of Vladimir Putin's regime, helping government forces in central and northern Mali carry out raids and drone strikes that have killed scores of civilians including many children.

Like in the CAR, Russian activities in Mali have exacerbated long-running lawlessness, corruption, violence, and human rights abuses with total impunity. Russia continues to be a primary purveyor of disinformation in Africa, sponsoring over 80 documented campaigns targeting more than 22 countries.

The United States has also been targeted. I recently found dozens of sponsored articles by pro-Russian media outlets in western Central Africa making claims like the largest—saying the largest park in the CAR has been mismanaged by Americans who have deployed rebels from Joseph Kony's Lord Resistance Army in the DRC to the Central African Republic.

Finally, Russia has promulgated disinformation to undermine democracy in at least 19 African countries, contributing to the con-

continent's backsliding on this front. From Africa, Russia is also targeting American democracy.

I look forward to your questions and thank you for the privilege of testimony today.

Representative PANETTA: Thank you, Mr. Obaji.

Dr. Vyushkova, please. Five minutes.

**TESTIMONY OF MARIA VYUSHKOVA, BURYAT ACTIVIST AND SCIENTIST**

Ms. VYUSHKOVA: Thank you. It is a great honor to be testifying here at this hearing on behalf of Russia's indigenous activists.

My research focuses on the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the indigenous people of Russia's north, far east, and Siberia. From the very first days of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, it has been reported that Russia's ethnic minorities are overrepresented both in the invasion forces and among the Russian side casualties.

If we look at the top 10 Russia's regions by per capita death toll we will see that seven out of 10 are ethnic republics, or Okrugs, with the Asian republics of Tuva, Buryatia, and Altai at the very top of the list. The indigenous ethnic groups living in those regions are very significantly overrepresented among the Russian side war casualties with Telengits living in Altai showing 11.5 times greater per capita death toll compared to Russia's average.

The small numbered indigenous peoples of the north, Siberia, and far east such as Telengits, Udege, Nganasan, and Chukchi are hit the hardest, the per capita death toll for those ethnic groups being much higher than even for Buryats or Tuvans.

For instance, Nenets living in Nenets Autonomous Okrug, one of the most economically prosperous regions of Russia, do not benefit at all from the booming extractive industry there. Instead, it destroys the environment, threatening their traditional way of living. Nenets are very significantly overrepresented among the region's war casualties as well as among those who were specifically recruited from prisons.

In September 2002, Vladimir Putin announced partial mobilization in Russia. The indigenous rights activist organizations such as Free Buryatia Foundation, Free Yakutia Foundation, and Batani Indigenous Foundation, received multiple reports of disproportional draft of indigenous men.

Official documents show that Buryatia, my home region, was hit disproportionately hard by the mobilization. In Khabarovsk Krai and the Republic of Sakha Yakutia, the small-numbered indigenous peoples of the north were drafted more often than the rest of each region's population.

In Khabarovsk Krai, the indigenous men were drafted almost three times more often than the nonindigenous population. According to the Batani Foundation, in one Nanai settlement, the authorities attempted to draft 100 percent of the adult male population. In the Udege settlement of Gvasiugi, they drafted 30 percent of adult men. Thus, whole indigenous cultures are at risk of disappearing within the next several decades.

Russian legislation, ostensibly meant to exempt small-numbered indigenous peoples from mandatory military service, totally fails to

protect them. The fact that indigenous people of Russia's north, far east, and Siberia are overrepresented in the Russian invasion army has led to the formation of the warlike, bloodthirsty savage stereotype against the indigenous people, most notably against the Buryats, Tuvans, and the Nenets.

Apparently, not just the death toll but also the moral burden of Russia's aggression against Ukraine was put disproportionately on the indigenous people. Unfortunately, such prominent public figures as Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church, started spreading this narrative making the indigenous people a potential target for hate crimes, especially given that some of us live in Ukraine or in other countries abroad.

There were a number of war crime allegations against the Indigenous troops that turned out to be false, most notably about the Bucha massacre, which was falsely blamed on the ethnic Buryat troops. However, it has been established beyond any reasonable doubt that it was the paratroopers from the Russian city of Pskov, almost exclusively ethnic Russians, who were responsible for the Bucha massacre.

However, the Buryats in Bucha myth still persists among the anti-war Russian public as well as in Ukraine and in the West. I think that for the Russian anti-war influencers, their motivation is obviously the desire to shift the responsibility away from the Russians.

According to a recent study by Dr. Adam Lenton of Wake Forest University, the Russian public opposed to Putin's regime and sympathetic to liberal views tends to be significantly more xenophobic towards Russia's ethnic minorities than the society in general.

This is a very alarming result, posing a question of whether the possible regime change would bring a better future for Russia's indigenous peoples.

In conclusion, let us not forget that there are more than 240 indigenous political prisoners in Russia. Please spread the message that in any future prisoner exchanges with Russia, they should not be overlooked. Thank you for your attention.

Representative PANETTA: Thank you, Doctor, and thanks to all of the witnesses for that very powerful testimony.

There is a speaking order. I know the chairman normally asks questions. However, I am filling in for the chairman so I do not think it is appropriate that I go. Instead, I am going to turn it over to Senator Whitehouse for his five minutes of questioning based on a timing issue that he has and having to leave.

Therefore, Senator, please. Five minutes.

#### **STATEMENT OF SHELDON WHITEHOUSE, U.S. SENATE, FROM RHODE ISLAND**

Senator WHITEHOUSE: That is very kind of you. Thank you. My questions will be for Professor Snyder.

Thank you for being here, Professor. Good to see you. I would like to hear your comments on—something just vibrated over here that was not me—how the international dark money network supports corrupt oligarchies that produced Putin.

He is now sort of the oligarch in chief. He either has them all in tow or he is had them killed or sent off or intimidated, and it

looks to me like a colleague of yours, a historian, wrote about a clash of civilizations—that our clash of civilizations is between this kleptocratic oligarchy and representative democracy.

Is that a context that is worth looking at what led to Putin's rise to power? That is the question. More a topic than a question.

Mr. SNYDER: No, that is excellent. There is, of course, an obvious connection between extractive empires and oligarchs or very wealthy people. Control of hydrocarbon resources as in the Russian Far East is quite a simple way for a few people, an individual, or a clan to become very wealthy.

It is a simple extractive process. It can be—the territory can be controlled by force, and then, as in Russia and other hydrocarbon states, you see that one clan or one group—one family, as the Russians say—end up controlling all the wealth.

Therefore, there is in this case a very direct connection between the processes described here and the power of Putin or whoever might succeed Putin so long as Russia is an extractive hydrocarbon regime.

Of course, you are right that this is an international phenomenon and when so ever the wealth might arise if one is American or British or responsible for policy in a number of other states, one should be very concerned about the fact that there are not just loopholes but giant inviting windows through which international oligarchs can hold and launder their money.

This is a subject beyond the borders of my own expertise but I think it is very important to note that international dark money networks exist because of us and not just because of the people that we are calling the bad guys.

You are right, of course, as well that Putin's succession and rise to power involved a kind of parade of oligarchs with whom at first he was in some kind of agreement and then he showed by example, most prominently in the case of Khodorkovsky, who controlled precisely hydrocarbon resources, that anyone who was not with him was against him and would be treated as a criminal.

Then there is a final connection, which is maybe the most interesting. Putin, as one of the richest men in the world, joins the other rich men in the world in having lots of very strange ideas about the future, and the very strange ideas that oligarchs have, Russian or otherwise, tend to bend us into conflicts which we might otherwise avoid.

It is not healthy to think we are all going to go to Mars. It is not healthy to think we are all going to live forever. It is not healthy to think there is no Ukraine, which is Putin's particular oligarchical fantasy.

Senator WHITEHOUSE: It is not healthy to think that Russia is an imperium awaiting to manifest itself well.

Well, thank you very much. One of the folks I traveled with a lot and learned a good deal from was my colleague in the Senate and quite a dear friend, John McCain, I guess I will summarize with his famous quote about Russia, which is that it is a gas station that is run by a mafia that happens to have an army, and I think you have summarized that very well, Professor Snyder.

Therefore, thank you and thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Co-Chair COHEN: Thank you, Senator.

I think Mr. Quigley has to go somewhere and since I have been somewhere I am going to let you go somewhere. [LAUGHTER.]

**STATEMENT OF MIKE QUIGLEY, U.S. HOUSE, FROM ILLINOIS**

Representative QUIGLEY: We are all going somewhere.

Doctor, help me. Maybe I missed it but your facts, while compelling, lead to conclusions that I was waiting for you to state, right? At least one of them has to be that this war has many advantages for Putin.

One is he can, as you described, use it as an assault on indigenous people but also fight a war of attrition seemingly much longer than Ukraine might be able to because he can treat people he does not care for like cannon fodder.

However, would you extrapolate on those and anything else that I might be missing about how Putin's choice and how he is conducting this war reflects your facts?

Ms. VYUSHKOVA: Yes. All right. I strongly believe that Putin's regime just—Putin is trying to reduce the political risks for himself by conducting this war at the expense of the vulnerable discriminated groups no one cares about including—

Representative QUIGLEY: [Off mic]—a lot more pushback if there were other groups he was drawing into—

Ms. VYUSHKOVA: Exactly. Exactly. For instance, such groups include migrants, prisoners, convicts recruited from prison, homeless people even, and, unfortunately, ethnic minorities are one of those discriminated and disadvantaged groups. Therefore, it is just politically safer to conduct this war at the expense of—disproportionately at the expense of ethnic minorities.

However, I do not think that it is a deliberate ethnic cleansing policy, so to speak. Therefore, it is just the result of the indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities being a discriminated group so it is just politically safer for the local authorities, for instance, to draft the indigenous men three times more often in Khabarovsk Krai, for instance, and actually 80 percent of the indigenous men from Khabarovsk Krai who ended up fighting in this war 80 percent of them were drafted against their will actually and only 20 percent went there voluntarily.

However, unfortunately, ethnic minorities especially the small numbered Indigenous nations of the north and far east are so discriminated against, and their social status is so significantly lower than their Russian counterparts that it is totally politically safe to do whatever they want like draft 100 percent of adult men from a Nanai settlement.

Representative QUIGLEY: If anyone else would like to comment on that.

Mr. SNYDER: If I could just come in briefly on the premise.

Of course, it is right that Putin's ability to treat much of his population or the population of occupied Ukraine as he wishes is an advantage in some sense. It does not, though, mean that his troops are motivated the way that troops on the other side are. It is also a disadvantage to be coercive.

Zelensky and the other side have the advantage that many of the people in the army are there because they have some notion of why they are there and they are defending their homeland. Then just

as a factual matter, I would point out that—and perhaps you would want to comment on this—but as a factual matter, you do eventually start having to draft people from the big cities and start having to draft the Russians, which means that the longer the war goes on the harder it might become to just continue to carry out what you are calling the war of attrition because the longer it goes on the more Russians—the more middle-class people, the more city people—you do have to bring into the army and they are getting to that point now.

Mr. KASSYMBEKOVA: Yes. I would like to add that there is a huge national awakening among the non-Russian nations within the Russian Federation. They are nations—21 nations. They have their own parliament. They have their own constitutions. They are not ethnic minorities.

There is a huge awakening also because many of them have left Russia. They went to places like Kazakhstan where they say, oh, we did not know that one can actually live in one's own republic with dignity and the ability to exercise one's culture and learn one's language.

Therefore, the political geography is changing now. There are very strong voices for the independence of these nations and we need to look at them, and they are not only ethnic minorities. There are real nations within the Russian current empire.

Representative QUIGLEY: Thank you.

Co-Chair COHEN: Do you yield? Mr. Quigley yields.

Ms. Spartz, you are recognized for five minutes.

#### **STATEMENT OF VICTORIA SPARTZ, U.S. HOUSE, FROM INDIANA**

As we know, ethnic cleansing, oppression, and racist policies of superiority have been in Russia for centuries, you know. However, my question for Dr. Vyushkova, do you think the ethnic people, like, realize that—you know, that they have been oppressed?

I mean, do you see on the ground they have an understanding that they have been screwed in resources and money which oligarchs have taken from them? They live pretty miserably poor. Is there that understanding on the ground?

Ms. VYUSHKOVA: Yes, I think there is and actually the revival of ethnic activism and indigenous rights, activism in Russia is a very important sign, I believe, and there are a lot of decolonial activists and indigenous rights activists and ethnic anti-war activists from Russia but most of them, obviously, were forced to leave Russia.

However, this war, of course, changed our understanding of our identity. Probably not the majority of our nations but many people just realized that this type of imperial aggression against Ukraine has very similar roots as how—to how we are treated inside Russia, especially the fact that ethnic minorities were so much over-represented among the war casualties. Like, they had to—the war death toll was put disproportionately hard on their shoulders. This also made people realize that, yes, they are actually exploited subjects, as Professor Snyder put it.

I think there are very significant changes but probably they are not as fast as we would want them to be.



Representative SPARTZ: Right. Right. Well, that ethnic cleansing happening right now in Russia it is very racist, and policies that they are doing it.

Ms. VYUSHKOVA: Right. Yes.

Representative SPARTZ: They think that they are superior. They teach their kids they are superior to everyone—[LAUGHS]—including Ukrainians. You know, that is been taught, unfortunately, for generations, sadly, you know, even though they—a lot of them live a pretty bad life.

Just my question is to Mr. Obaji. [LAUGHS.] You know, I can say other names better than yours but I will do my best. I think what is happening in Africa is disgraceful. It is awful what China and Russia are doing right now. I mean, it is just really, I mean, destroying the continent, taking advantage of resources, and really enslaving people. I mean, it is sad to see for me that the international community is not standing up more to see that and, unfortunately, a lot of American companies are afraid even now to go to Russia.

Therefore, you know, China takes resources. Russia, you know, is the force there that, you know, with their military force now. What they are doing is awful, but have you seen any positive moves happening? I think what Afrika Korps are doing right now it is brutal, it is awful, and they have been doing it for a while.

However, have you seen any positive things that people actually start realizing or some governments, or it is so corrupt and so bought and people afraid that it is just really in terrible shape? It is awful. Can you share any positive things happening in Africa right now that some of those governments are waking up?

Mr. OBAJI: Well, positive, if you say in terms of—if your question is positive in terms of, you know, Russia being present in Africa and whether or not some governments are seeing their presence as being positive the answer is yes if that is what you mean. Some countries, not all countries.

Therefore, let me be clear. The Russians are mostly active in the Central African Republic, in Mali, in Burkina Faso, and in Niger but they have troops on the ground in the Central African Republic, in Mali, and recently we had—we saw about 300 members of the Bear Brigade make it to Burkina Faso.

The reason why they are able to have a field day in these countries is that to start with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger own the military dictatorship and much of the rest of the world really has cut ties with these countries, even the sanctions by the African Union, sanctions by ECOWAS as the west African regional body, and also with the EU, and that has created an opening for the Russians to get there.

In the Central African Republic for some reason, I do not even know why the West have completely looked away from that country and because that happened the Russians saw an opening to get involved.

However, yes, corruption in these countries, in these administrations, have made it a lot easier for the Russians to act with impunity, for the Russians to carry out massacres, you know, in numbers that no one has ever seen before.

Representative SPARTZ: Right. Hopefully, we will have better policies.

As we are talking, Professor Snyder, I know that my time is up but, you know, unfortunately, the Soviet Union lost the war but did not win the peace because we did not have Jeffersons and Washington there to write democratic, you know, constitution and write the republics and, unfortunately, most of those republics fell back into dictatorship and corruption, including—I did not get a chance but maybe some other time. I do actually see what has happened in Central Asia but it is very important because people have been oppressed there for a while, too.

However, I think my time is—I am running out of time, so I have to yield back. However, thank you for being here.

Co-Chair COHEN: Mr. Panetta?

**STATEMENT OF JIMMY PANETTA, U.S. HOUSE, FROM  
CALIFORNIA**

Representative PANETTA: Thank you, Chair Cohen. I appreciate this opportunity to be a part of this hearing at the Helsinki Commission—with the Helsinki Commission, so thank you very much. Thanks to—[off mic, technical difficulties]—recently, past couple months. I have been to Ukraine twice, including this last weekend. Therefore if I cannot form complete sentences, it is because I am exhausted. That is the reason.

However, I have also been to the Sahel, as well, numerous times, every August. Austin Scott and I, I go on a bipartisan trip to the Sahel every year. Obviously, what we have seen in that area and what I saw is that those are countries and areas that are clearly being affected by much of what you talked about, the desire of Putin to create and maintain an empire.

Now, when I was in Kyiv in early August I came in through Moldova. We drove into—it was unlike the regular congressional trips in that we actually got to stay on the ground for five nights. Moldova to Odessa, Odessa for a night, and then up to Kyiv and then around the surrounding areas.

Had a fruitful meeting with President Zelensky, and other military leaders, and basically allowed to speak to civilians and one of my takeaways from that trip was the appreciation of the United States' support for Ukraine but in particular the F-16s, not just from military leaders but the morale boost that it provided civilians on the ground how much basically they appreciated that. Even though they may not know the extent of what it can do, the fact that we were supporting them with that particular piece of equipment was very important to the civilians.

Then last weekend I attended the Yalta European Strategy Conference. However, beyond that, we actually took a train out to Kharkiv and saw the destruction that the Russians imposed upon the people of Kharkiv and actually stood on a burnt-out gutted, you know, Soviet-style apartment building about 12 floors. Took the stairs to the top and actually looked into Russia and you could see basically where the Russians were coming from.

In two of those trips, obviously, the desires that we heard from most people were that they need air defenses and they need permissions. Now, when I went to Africa in Sahel, obviously, you saw

the influence in Wagner and in fact we went to Niger and were able to get in and meet with the leadership of Niger, and what you are seeing is, obviously, not just in Niger but as you said, Mr. Obaji, in Mali, in BF, in CAR, in Libya, is the influence of Russia's and the fact that the Russians, obviously, starting with Wagner and Prigozhin and then turning into Afrika Korps now and literally becoming an offshoot of Russia.

Yet, they are taking advantage of these coups. They are taking advantage of the corruption. They are taking advantage of the dysfunction, unfortunately, of these governments at this point and that is where I believe that we, the United States, must still continue to engage with these countries and, as you said, not just pull our stakes but actually try to engage because I do believe that it is our standards and our ways, I think, that are everlasting, not the standards of Russia.

However, Mr. Snyder—Professor Snyder, if I could, as you know next week we are going to see President Zelensky come to the United States and present a victory plan. Obviously, what we are seeing right now is a war of attrition where it is basically kind of a war of butchery, to be honest with you, and that Putin is just throwing humans at the problem, throwing these Russians that they are going in and taken advantage of by paying them an exorbitant amount of money, at least for them, to be on these front lines.

When you look at this so-called plan, Professor, if you were to advise Zelensky in dealing with Putin what would your victory plan entail?

Mr. SNYDER: Well, I am an American talking to Americans and I am going to keep it in those terms.

First, if I could just note there is a very important connection between the Russian empire and the way the United States has thought about the Russo-Ukrainian war. From the very beginning, we have tended to treat Russia as a real country because we are aware of its big history, big literature, and big past.

Many of us learned about it in school and many of us imbibed the Russian imperial narrative according to which the peoples that we have been speaking about today were secondary, irrelevant, troublemakers, and nationalists to somehow be dismissed, and I think that was deep under our skin and had a lot to do with the misjudgments that Americans made in general in February 2022 when we took for granted as a society and as a polity that Ukraine would break within a few days when Russia invaded.

I think we are still in the process of de-imperializing or decolonizing our own minds vis-à-vis Ukraine. I think we have seriously underestimated the potential of the Ukrainian armed forces and the potential of Ukrainian society, partly because we have taken in imperial assumptions ourselves and it seems to me that that should be a part of what we are talking about today.

Therefore, part of being an empire is controlling the discourse and to a large degree, the Russians have been able to control the strategic discourse, setting up for us new rules in a war that have never existed before like, for example, that when you invade another country the entire war should take place on the territory of the country you have invaded.

No one has ever said that before because it is completely absurd and, yet, somehow it has been accepted in the United States as normal that this war should be fought on Ukrainian territory. There is no precedence for that kind of idea.

Another idea that the Russians have that we have accepted is that it is normal, for example, when you and I were in Kyiv, for ballistic missiles to rain down on the city where we were trying to do normal business but it is somehow not normal for ballistic missiles from Ukraine to go into Russia.

Why is that? Why is it normal for one country and not for another? It has a great deal to do with imperial thinking, which we have accepted. There is something precious, special, et cetera, about Russia and somehow it is okay for Ukrainians to be victims because they always have been victims.

We need to investigate, I think, that understructure of thinking, which I believe has guided our policy in the wrong way.

As far as empires are concerned, I will return to my—to what I said at the end, trying to respond now to your question about a victory plan. I believe the Ukrainians are right about something that they have been—that they are hard-pressed to convince us of and I think what I am saying now is consistent with the history of empire.

The Russians are going to negotiate peace when they believe they are losing, and so if anyone is serious about negotiation that person should be trying to get the Russians into a position where they think they might be losing.

The Ukrainians get that but they are having a really hard time making us understand that pairing. Therefore, when they talk about a victory plan or a peace plan what they mean is together the West and Ukraine do enough to get Russia to a point where it might negotiate sincerely. They are not there now.

Representative PANETTA: Outstanding. Thank you. [APPLAUSE.]

If I may just briefly, Doctor—with your indulgence, Mr. Chair—Dr. Kassymbekova, I have been to Kazakhstan. I believe that Kazakhstan should be granted permanent normal trade relations and we should get rid of Jackson-Vanik for Kazakhstan. I will say that and I will yield back.

Co-Chair COHEN: Thank you. I am going to do something that I do not think is—it is not normal. I do not think has ever done. I am going to ask our guests from Ukraine, our four members of parliament from Ukraine, and our cultural folk from the military, who I know are here to perform and not to—but do you have any questions you would like to ask of any of the panelists or statements you would like to make concerning any of these issues?

Stand up if you would like to speak and identify yourself. Yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Off mic.]

Co-Chair COHEN: Sure, you can—yes, sir. Would you stand up? Tell me your name.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Alexei Stanka, and we are from—[off mic]—Ukraine.

Co-Chair COHEN: Welcome.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you very much. Thank you for your support and for everything that the United States does to Ukraine because, of course, we need to win, and it is—the only chance for

us to live and be alive is to win this war because evil will never stop. Putin will never stop. Any, you know, thinking about frozen conflict or something like this, the war will start in two years, three years, and five years.

You know, I am representative of the Poltava region, and two weeks ago—it was a horrible thing—Russia bombed the university in Poltava and more than 60 people died. They were students. They were 17, 18, and 19, so kids.

Co-Chair COHEN: Was that the military school?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes, but they were students.

Co-Chair COHEN: I got you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: However, they were students and they were not yet soldiers.

Co-Chair COHEN: I got you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: About 200 people were injured and 20 people we could not even find where they are. However, we understand that when rockets and bombs are, there is nothing left, especially nothing left from people.

The thing that we really, really need is permission for us to hit those military objects on Russian territory, because in the Poltava region, we are 100 kilometers to the border with Russia and a hundred twenty kilometers to the active war in Kharkiv. They put those systems that send ballistic rockets near the border, and it is only 100 kilometers. It is one minute until the ballistic bomb falls in the Poltava region. In Sumy region, it is 20, 30 seconds. Therefore, there is no possibility for the people to run in the shelter.

It was the same situation in Poltava's university. People just did not have the ability to run in the shelter because it is not enough time. It was only one-and-a-half minutes starting from the alarm until the university was already attacked by the rockets.

Therefore, we really need this permission, and we want to win. We are doing everything to win, and our best people are doing everything for us—to fight and to stand—you know, stand with us, help us. Of course, we want to do everything to win.

Thank you very much and thank you for what your country does to us. Thank you. [APPLAUSE.]

Co-Chair COHEN: You are very welcome.

I was trying to find a report that I saw yesterday, and I hope you all have seen it, about the drone attacks on the Russian missile security area. They apparently knocked out 300 or 400 ballistic missiles, and they said it was like an earthquake and 2.6 on the Richter scale. Take that, Vladimir. [LAUGHS.]

You know, I wish I could tell you that we are allowing the weapons to be used to go outside of Ukraine and to penetrate Russia. I have signed a letter with about 20 or 30 other members, most of them Helsinki members and Foreign Relations. However, we signed that and I support it, and I hope that it is allowed. I certainly understand it.

Do you have a question, sir?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes.

Co-Chair COHEN: Sure.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You know, during—over history Russia tried to destroy Ukrainian culture.

Co-Chair COHEN: Tell me who you are.

Mikolai Sierga [founder, Cultural Forces]: My name is Mikolai. I am the founder of Cultural Forces.

Cultural Forces will be in Ukraine, which supports the morale/psychological state of the soldiers on the front line. Before the war, we—[off mic]—artists.

Co-Chair COHEN: Dr.—Professor Snyder had to go, so—it is not because of you. [LAUGHTER.]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes. On the first day of the war, we become soldiers. Then after some period of time, we accumulate our main weapons: Our poems, our songs, our instruments, and right now, in Cultural Forces, we have eight artists, and every day we are working on the front line. We have eight groups, each group making three, or four concerts per day. Therefore, every day we are doing about 25 concerts on the front line. Therefore, during the war, we held more than 4,500 concerts in front of the troops in the common zones. Right now, we are here in the United States to say thanks to the American people for your support in sharing our culture, our emotions, our—reflecting our experience through our culture.

Russia tried to destroy Ukrainian culture during all of its history. In the beginning of the 20th century, they collected all—invited all the bandura players—kobza players—to, like, festival and killed everybody and burned their instruments. In the beginning of this event, we made a little performance before you came in and it was bandura player—[inaudible]. Therefore, all the bandura players in Ukraine at that time were killed because the bandura was an instrument of freedom, an instrument of soul. It shows what is—what is Ukrainian soul to Ukrainian people, and they want to break the—[speaks in Ukrainian as an aside]—

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Chains.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Break the chains, yes, when they have this music. Therefore, Russia killed them.

Russia killed a lot of young Ukrainian poets and writers. How did they do that? They invited everybody of them and said, we will give free flats, and free rooms in a big building, which is called the Building of S, like S the first word in the Ukrainian word "word." [LAUGHS.] Like—

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Budenikslava.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes, budenikslava. They killed half of all the citizens in this building. Another half they put in the jails. Therefore, they killed. It called—

Co-Chair COHEN: Was this the beginning of the 20th century, too? Same time?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes, yes, yes. Therefore, all the time they are trying to destroy Ukrainian culture and Ukrainian artists. Right now, we are Ukrainian artists. We are here. Yurii Ivaskevych, opera singer who lost his leg on the front line. Sasha Boole, a very famous Ukrainian country singer. Two more, like Olga Rukavishnikova, violinist. She lost her eye on the front line. We come here to the United States, and we will have tour here on the south part of United States.

MY QUESTIONS: What we can do to help you to convince American people to support Ukraine more, to do not let Russia make the

new circle of killing Ukrainian artists, Ukrainian brains, Ukrainian hearts?

Co-Chair COHEN: Thank you for what you are doing. Thank you for your service and supporting your country in the war. I am sorry about the injuries that happens and—but committing yourself to continue to support the troops on the front lines, and that is admirable. I did not really know about all that so I appreciate it.

I have had a resolution, which I have tried to pass, and having declared that Russia is committing genocide now and what they have done they have destroyed a lot of artifacts—cultural artifacts in Ukraine and I think they have—you know, that is part of genocide.

What you can do to help, I think your touring around is important for Americans to see and to hear your stories, and I do not know where you are going in the South but that is a good place to go because there are a lot of people there that are more likely to be affected by the information put out by Trump and that world that say that we should be spending our money at home on domestic.

However, that is an excuse. What they really want to do is they want to be buddies with Putin. Trump and Putin have got a relationship, and it is unfortunate.

Therefore, we have got an election coming up, and I think if they see you I think it is important and good, and explain—and to understand that if Ukraine goes the Baltics, Poland, Europe's next, and then Putin's not going to stop and they need to know that and see that, and eventually if it goes to NATO it is going to mean American troops on the ground and those folks are not going to want to see that either because it is going to be some of their sons and daughters.

Therefore, where are you going in the South? Where is your tour?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a tour list.

Co-Chair COHEN: Do you go to Memphis?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Let me say, could you help us? You know, your song schedule?

Co-Chair COHEN: Are you scheduled to go to Memphis?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes, I think they are—yes, they are planning to go—

Co-Chair COHEN: Good. Do you know when?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: —to Texas, then go to Alabama, to South Carolina, North Carolina, Florida—

Co-Chair COHEN: When do they go to Memphis?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Texas. Memphis, one second.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We will find out for you.

Co-Chair COHEN: That is my home.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We will find out.

Co-Chair COHEN: It is a great music city. Yes. Hopefully, I will be there.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: If we do not have it in the schedule, we will put it. [LAUGHTER.]

Co-Chair COHEN: However, I appreciate what you are doing, and it is admirable. You know, it is hard for me to fathom. I mean, Putin's—it is all about his ego, and it is—and I do not know how you change that. Maybe you kidnap his ballerina girlfriend.

[LAUGHTER.] Otherwise, he is not going to stop. He may let her go.

[LAUGHTER.]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you.

Co-Chair COHEN: Do you have—would you like to ask a question, sir, or make a statement?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We can sing the question. [LAUGHTER.]

Co-Chair COHEN: [Sings: "Old Man River."] Can you do that? [LAUGHTER.]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Sings: "America the Beautiful."]

Co-Chair COHEN: Amber grains.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We do not remember the ending.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Sorry. [LAUGHTER.]

Co-Chair COHEN: You are doing good.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Sings: "America the Beautiful."] [APPLAUSE.]

Co-Chair COHEN: Bravo. Bravo.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you.

Co-Chair COHEN: Thank you very much. I do not think anybody can top that, so I want to—[LAUGHTER]—I want to thank our panelists for being here, our witnesses and for your testimony, and everybody, and to the members of parliament, I think you have some time to come to my office and we can talk some more, and if you all would like to come you are more than welcome, too.

With that, this meeting of the Helsinki Commission is concluded. [Sounds gavel.]

[Whereupon, at 3:40 p.m., the hearing ended.]



## Additional Submission for the Record

### OPENING STATEMENT OF BENJAMIN L. CARDIN

Thank you to Mr. Cohen for leading this Helsinki Commission hearing on Russian imperialism. Whether it is Vladimir Putin's repressive internal governance efforts or his brutal aggression abroad, Russia's imperial identity has become increasingly relevant to understanding Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Unlike other European empires, Russia has never reckoned with its violent colonial past. The invasion of Ukraine and other acts of aggression and sabotage on the global stage are stark reminders that this imperial mindset remains a driving force in Moscow's foreign policy. Russia will not be able to transition to a modern European State as long as it continues to base its identity on expansionism and oppression of minority populations.

The Russian State boasts incredible diversity, with over a hundred indigenous groups. However, Putin's centralization of power has stripped away much of the autonomy that Russia's regions and ethnic republics are guaranteed under the Russian constitution. It is no surprise then, and statistics show this to be true, that Putin is disproportionately sending these ethnic minorities to fight and die in Russia's war against Ukraine.

Behind Russia's aggression abroad is a drive to expand Russian language, culture, and political domination—much of which is rooted in Putin's imagined past of historical Russian greatness.

The consequences of this Russian colonial mindset are especially stark in Ukraine. Russians' patronizing view of Ukrainians as inferior "little brothers" justifies denying Ukrainians their right to exist independent of Russia. This rhetoric, coupled with Russia's intentional attacks on civilians, has led to the savage war we are now witnessing.

As Secretary Blinken said in Kyiv last week, "The bottom line is this: We want Ukraine to win." I would add not only for Ukraine's benefit, but also for the democratic future of Russia and the good of the whole region.

Ukrainian victory will restore peace to a country that has suffered from Russia's war for a decade. However, Ukraine's victory over Russia is also essential if Russia is ever going to confront its own imperialist identity. It would challenge Russia's self-conception as a great power entitled to control over its neighbors.

Only with the hard reality of Russian defeat, will autocratic regimes in Moscow and all around the world, see that building empires by force will not work.

I look forward to hearing our witnesses' insights on this subject.

**TESTIMONY OF BOTAKOZ KASSYMBEKOVA, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN  
MODERN HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF BASEL**

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Until recently, colonialism seemed to be a thing of the past. The idea that one nation can and is entitled to dominate and exterminate other nations, robbing their people of life, humanity, and the ability to decide their own future, we thought, was obsolete.

Who would have thought that the Russian nation, which proclaimed itself the global leader of communism and anti-colonialism in the 20th century, would lead one of the most brutal wars of colonial conquest in the 21st century?

If it was once possible to argue that it was missionary Communism that led the Russians to expansionism, this explanation is no longer sufficient. Russian expansionism has outlived communism. It is the imperial framework of Russian national identity—its self-understanding as endowed with a supreme role in world history—that allowed Russian imperial identity and practices to outlive communism.

However, communism also thrived on Russian colonialism. Consider this fact: In their national anthems, non-Russian Soviet republics had to praise and thank the Russian people for the supposedly bright life the Russian people had given them through communist dictatorship.

I was one of the children in Soviet Kazakhstan who had to sing an anthem with the words “To the Great Russian People we say, big thank you” I sang it without knowing that 40 percent of Kazakhs died in the 1930’s because of starvation inflicted on the Kazakh people by Moscow. Moscow stole the cattle of Kazakh nomads, knowingly leaving millions to starve. Similar genocidal violence was inflicted on Ukrainians and other non-Russian nations. All in the name of communism and Russia’s special role in building it. My grandmother’s family perished in that hunger, and she was forcibly taken to a Russian orphanage where 60 percent of Kazakh children died. There she was taught to forget her language and history and to praise the Russian people for communism.

To understand what is happening in Ukraine today, it is crucial to understand the relationship between colonialism and the historical idea of the Russian World. Russian colonialism was based on the strategy of russifying the land by forcibly russifying the local population. If the local people resisted, they were eliminated and brutally repressed. Consider this quote from a Russian colonial officer about the strategies of conquest in the Caucasus in the 1860’s:

“The expulsion of the [indigenous mountain people] and the settlement of the Western Caucasus with Russians—this was the war plan of the last 4 years. The Russian population was not only to be the crowning glory of the conquest of the region, but it was also to become one of the main means of conquest . . . To achieve this, it was necessary to wipe out half the indigenous population in order to force the other half to lay down their arms”. At that time, in the 19th century, Russian colonial officers marked on maps those areas of the Russian Empire where more than fifty percent of the Russian population were settled as safe, and those with less than fifty percent as unsafe. This policy continued under Russian Communist rule. In 1989, a hundred years later, Mikhail Gorbachev told George Bush that Moscow could not agree to the independence of non-Russian republics because, and I quote, “Fifty percent of Estonia is Russian, over 50 percent of Latvians are now Russian, Lithuanians are the majority in Lithuania”. He also spoke of Ukraine and my homeland, Kazakhstan, using the same old Russian colonial mathematics while ignoring the violence of these numbers. Today, Putin is using the same rhetoric and strategies. For example, since 2014, 800,000 Russians have been settled in Crimea in order to claim that it is Russian. The same is happening in other occupied territories in Ukraine. Russian conquest has always been based on violence. When the Russian people carry it out, they propagate that they are doing it in the name of the great Russian culture.

Although in 1991 Soviet Communism weakened the empire, leading to the partial collapse of the empire, what did not collapse was the Russian imperial identity that was rooted in the idea of a special mission and special right to dominate other nations, while demanding gratitude and praise.

For many of us, who experienced Russian colonialism firsthand, there are two big lessons from the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. First, the collapse of the Soviet Russian empire was the victory of humanity in the 21st century. Millions of people received the possibility to live in dignity, freedom, and democracy. This would not have been possible under Russian occupation. Second, although communism failed, Russian colonialism did not. Russian colonialism outlived communism because the idea of Russian supremacy was never questioned, either by the Russians themselves or by the world at large. However, we now know that it was

not just communism that was incompatible with democracy, equality, and peace. In fact, it is Russian colonialism that is not.

#### TESTIMONY BY PROFESSOR TIMOTHY SNYDER, YALE UNIVERSITY

A main trend in world history these last five hundred years has been imperialism, and a main trend these last hundred years has been anti-imperialism.

An empire tends to have a privileged center and an exploited periphery, and often a correspondingly dominant national group and oppressed minorities or neighbors.

Empires deny that they share a contemporaneity—time—with other states. For imperialists, an imagined glorious past justifies territorial expansion, and legal borders are meaningless.

Imperialism [generally] meant European powers acting beyond Europe. For a special period, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union applied imperial practices within Europe. This included denying the existence of neighboring European nations and states, creating zones of colonial domination, and genocide of peoples.

The contemporary Russian Federation is an imperialist State in all of these senses.

Russia denies that the imperial moment has passed. Its foreign policy, and in particular its war of aggression in Ukraine, is meant to re-establish the empire as the normal regime type.

Russia fights its war with a State that is imperially structured. Wealthy cities in western Russia prosper thanks to the exploitation of hydrocarbon resources in Russian Asia. In the first instance, Russia fought the war with Ukrainian citizens forced into combat and with Asian and other national minorities from within the Russian Federation. In its occupation of Ukraine, Russian policy is to destroy institutions of Ukrainian culture, murder cultural and political elites, and deport children to Russia for re-education and assimilation.

The ideological logic of the war is of a legendary past. Vladimir Putin has repeatedly cited fables of the ancient origin of Russia and of an enduring Russian Ukrainian unity as the justification for the Russian invasion. These fables are historically more than dubious. Even were they accurate depictions of history, the implicit logic—that events of a thousand years ago justify changing borders now by force—would destroy the international legal order.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine recalls the special period of European colonization—Nazi and Soviet empires—of the 1930's and 1940's. Like both Stalin and Hitler with respect to Poland in 1939, and like Hitler with respect to Czechoslovakia in 1938, Putin claims that a neighboring State has no legal justification, because it is ruled by the wrong people, or because it is multicultural.

At that time, as today, Ukraine was the center of European colonization. Both the Stalinist and the Hitlerian projects depended upon the conquest of Ukraine, for its fertile black earth, and for its other resources. The Stalinist industrialization project of the 1930's required the domination of Ukraine, which led to a starvation campaign that killed some four million people. Hitler wished to imitate Stalin and exploit Ukrainian agriculture, with the difference that Ukraine was to feed Germany and Europe. Hitler's aim to colonize Ukraine was the single major cause of the Second World War in Europe.

Putin's revival of these recent European imperial traditions overlaps with his portrayal of the Russian past as eternal and innocent. Putin denies the centrality of Ukraine to the Second World War, seeking to persuade the Western public that the war was fought and won by Russians alone. He denies that Soviet policy exploited Ukraine and that Ukrainians were starved by the million. The whitewashing of both Nazi and Soviet imperial practices is an intrinsic element of their repetition by Russia now.

It follows that American policy should involve the promotion of the history of Eastern Europe, especially the recent history of Nazi and Soviet colonial exploitation of Ukraine [the subjects of my books *Bloodlands* and *Black Earth*]. A particular problem is the tendency in Germany to ignore the centrality of Ukraine to Hitler's war and to incorrectly identify Russia with the Soviet Union.

Critique of empire, of course, requires a certain amount of self-reflection and openness to dialog. Americans who raise these subjects will have to be able to set an example by referring critically to their own history. It should be American policy to help Ukrainians undertake a larger international dialog with the "Global South," especially with thought leaders from Mexico, Brazil, India, and South Africa.

Americans should stress, in public pronouncements, that Russian [and any] imperialism is antithetical to the existing international legal order, which is based upon self-determination and upon the general recognition of the legal borders of states.

Imperialism is not just an idea or a way of talking; it is an active plan to destroy that order.

For the same reason, Americans should understand that the European Union is the indirect target of Russian imperialism since the EU represents a peaceful route to cooperation among former imperial powers. Americans should support the European Union as an alternative to imperialism because that is what it is.

Most importantly, Americans should take heart and draw lessons from the arc of imperial history. The collapse of the empire began about a hundred years ago, after the First World War. It was accelerated by the defeat of the Nazi colonial project in 1945. Since the third quarter of the twentieth century, the technological and immunological advantages that enabled empire have ceased to obtain. In general, empires have lost their wars since 1945. It would therefore be historically normal, and unsurprising, for Russia to lose its war in Ukraine.

Empires *should* lose their wars. Ukraine should be allowed to win this war because of the wrongs done to Ukraine, because of the right to self-defense, and because of the global chaos that would follow a Russian victory. However, defeat in war is also necessary for empires to become other sorts of regimes. The European states now lauded as democracies are former empires that lost wars. Losing imperial wars was a step in their transition to becoming stable regimes of a very different type. Russia's best chance for a better future, historically speaking, is defeat in its imperial war.

#### **TESTIMONY OF PHILIP OBAJI JR., CORRESPONDENT, THE DAILY BEAST**

Last year, I wrote one of the year's most powerful stories published anywhere, an in-depth investigation on the operations of Russian paramilitaries in the Central African Republic [CAR] following the death of Wagner boss, Yevgeny Prigozhin. The account revealed how so-called Russian military instructors—operating under the command of the Russian Ministry of Defense—slaughtered dozens of people to secure access to a gold mine in the north of the CAR.

Traveling from my home in Nigeria to the CAR last December was not my first. I had spent years highlighting the plight of people maltreated and abused by Russian paramilitaries and that has not gone unnoticed by the Russians. In 2022, I became a target of the Wagner Group after exposing the wrongdoing of their mercenaries operating across Africa. Contacts told me that my photo had been circulating on chat groups used by locals recruited by Wagner, who have apparently denounced me as an obstacle “to fighting extremism” in CAR and claimed I am an agent of the West who should be arrested or killed.

I traveled to regions of CAR where militias had previously attacked outsiders with slingshots, machetes, and guns. I was held for hours by rebels who initially accused me of attempting to spy on them. Days later, on the border with Cameroon, I was arrested, tortured, and detained overnight by CAR forces, acting on the orders of Russian paramilitaries, after soldiers saw me interviewing artisanal miners who were attempting to flee the country following attacks on their community by Russian paramilitaries. Soldiers beat me and confiscated my phone and camera.

No amount of intimidation was going to stop me from continuing my investigation. After the soldiers released me, I crossed into Cameroon, bought new equipment, and returned to the CAR to finish the work I had started.

The attack by Russian paramilitaries on locals in the northwestern CAR town of Koki in which at least 50 villagers were killed became an obsession for me, all the more because the victims were ordinary people who had done nothing wrong. I managed to interview 16 witnesses to the attack. They all told me the same thing: Russian paramilitaries slaughtered their friends, colleagues, family members, and neighbors simply because the Russians wanted to secure access to Koki's gold mine.

That was not all. In the middle of December 2023, I traveled to Bouar in the northwest of the CAR, where I interviewed a dozen girls who told me Russian paramilitaries lured them into a military base on the outskirts of town and then drugged and raped them before administering contraceptive shots and pills to them. A couple of other girls described to me how Russian paramilitaries held them at gunpoint on their farmlands and took turns raping them right in front of their family members.

In Mali, where I recently interviewed women raped and abused by Russian paramilitaries, the Wagner Group continues to operate in the country on behalf of Vladimir Putin's regime, helping government forces in central and northern Mali carry out raids and drone strikes that have killed scores of civilians, including many children.

Like in the CAR, Russian activities in Mali have exacerbated long-running lawlessness, corruption, violence, and human rights abuses with total impunity. The same could happen in Burkina Faso, where soldiers from the Bear Brigade, a Russian private military company, arrived in May to support the country's military junta, and could also occur in Niger, where dozens of Russian military instructors arrived in April to work for the junta, which has cut links with the West.

Russia continues to be the primary purveyor of disinformation in Africa, sponsoring over 80 documented campaigns, targeting more than 22 countries. The United States is also being targeted.

I recently found dozens of sponsored articles published by pro-Russia media outlets in West and Central Africa falsely claiming that the Chinko National Park, the largest nature reserve in the CAR, had been mismanaged by Americans, who have deployed rebels from Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army in the Democratic Republic of Congo to the CAR with the aim of disturbing the peace in parts of the country. These articles also claim that American cargo planes land in the CAR every week to evacuate stolen wild animals and mammals to the U.S., and that the airfield in Chinko is also "used by private American military companies to carry out reconnaissance and surveillance activities of the national territory and certain neighboring areas of the park, including the border areas of the CAR."

Russia has promulgated disinformation to undermine democracy in at least 19 African countries, contributing to the continent's backsliding on this front. From Africa, Russia is also targeting American democracy.

I look forward to your questions and thank you for the privilege of testimony today.

#### **TESTIMONY OF MARIA VYUSHKOVA, BURYAT ACTIVIST AND SCIENTIST**

Russian Imperialism: How the Russian War in Ukraine Destroys the Indigenous Nations of Russia's North, Siberia and Russia's Far East.

##### **1. DISPROPORTIONATE DEATH TOLL.**

From the very first days of the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine, it has been reported that Russia's ethnic minorities are overrepresented both in the invasion forces and among the Russian-side casualties.

Generally speaking, the Kremlin tries to minimize the political risks by putting the burden of the war on the most vulnerable and discriminated groups such as convicts, migrants, remote rural populations, orphans, homeless people, etc. And, apparently, ethnic minorities and Indigenous people are one of those vulnerable groups no one cares about.

If we look at the top ten Russia regions by per capita death toll, we will see that seven out of ten are the ethnic republics and okrugs, with the Asian republics of Tuva, Buryatia, and Altai at the top of the list.

The Indigenous ethnic groups living in those regions are very significantly overrepresented among the Russian-side war casualties, with the Telengits living in Altai showing 11.5 times higher per capita death toll compared to Russia's average.

Generally speaking, the Small-Numbered Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East such as Telengits, Udege, Nganasan, Chukchi are hit the hardest, the per capita death toll for these ethnic groups being much higher than for Buryats or Tuvans.

In some cases, the Indigenous are also overrepresented among the convict casualties drafted from the prisons which might be indicative of over-incarceration of the Indigenous population.

##### **2. DISPROPORTIONATE DRAFT.**

On September 21, 2022, Vladimir Putin announced the so-called "partial mobilization" in Russia. The Indigenous rights activist organizations such as Free Buryatia Foundation, Free Yakutia Foundation, Batani Indigenous Foundation received multiple reports of disproportionate draft of the Indigenous people from their contacts in Russia. However, the statistics on the "partial mobilization" are much harder to access compared to the confirmed casualties [as the obituaries are published more often than any information on someone being drafted].

However, in some cases, the mobilization numbers can be derived from the official financial reports. For instance, those numbers confirm that Buryatia, my home region, was hit disproportionately hard by the mobilization.

For the Khabarovsk Krai and the Republic of Sakha-Yakutia, the local officials have released the numbers showing that the Small-Numbered Indigenous Peoples of the North were drafted more often than the rest of each region's population. For instance, in the Khabarovsk Krai, the Indigenous men were drafted almost 3 times

more often than the non-Indigenous. According to the Batani Foundation, in one Nanai settlement, the authorities attempted to draft 100 percent of the adult male population; in the Udege settlement of Gvasyugi they drafted 30 percent of adult men. Thus, the whole Indigenous culture is at risk of disappearing within the next several decades due to the disproportionate mobilization of the Indigenous men to Russia's war in Ukraine.

### 3. SHIFTING THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WAR CRIMES; XENOPHOBIA AMONG THE ANTI-PUTIN PUBLIC.

The fact that Indigenous people of Russia's North, Far East, and Siberia are over-represented in the Russian invasion army has led to the formation of the "warlike, bloodthirsty savage" stereotype against the Indigenous people, most notably against the Buryats, Tuvans, and the Nenets.

Apparently, not just the death toll, but also the moral burden of Russia's aggression against Ukraine was put disproportionately on the Indigenous people. Unfortunately, such prominent public figures as Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church, fell for this narrative.

There were a number of war crime allegations against the Indigenous troops which turned out to be false, most notably about the Bucha massacre which was falsely blamed on the ethnic Buryat troops.

However, it has been established beyond any reasonable doubt that it was the paratroopers from the Russian city of Pskov, almost exclusively ethnic Russians, who were responsible for the mass murder of civilians in the Ukrainian city of Bucha.

However, the "Buryats in Bucha" myth still persists among the anti-war Russian public, as well as in Ukraine and in the West. I think that for the Russian anti-war influencers, the motivation is obviously the desire to shift the responsibility away from the Russians.

According to a recent study by Dr. Aam Lenton of Wake Forest University, the Russian public opposed to Putin's regime and sympathetic to liberal views tends to be significantly more xenophobic toward Russia's ethnic minorities. This is a very alarming result posing a question of whether the regime change would bring a better future to Russia's Indigenous Peoples.







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