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# The West's hands in Ukraine are as bloody as Putin's

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There is a discursive nervous tic all over social media at the moment, including from prominent journalists such as *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot. The demand is that everyone not only “condemn” Russian president Vladimir Putin for invading Ukraine, but do so without qualification.

Any reluctance to submit is considered certain proof that the person is a Putin apologist or a Kremlin bot, and that their views on everything under the sun – especially their criticisms of equivalent Western war crimes – can be safely ignored.

How convenient for all those Western leaders who have committed war crimes at least as bad as

Russia's current ones.

I have repeatedly described Russia's invasion as illegal; I have regularly called Putin a war criminal (you may not have noticed but I just did it again in the two preceding paragraphs); and I have consistently compared Putin's deeds to the very worst actions taken by the West over the past two decades. But none of that is enough. More is always needed.

The demand for unequivocal denunciation is a strange, if common, one and suggests that those insisting on it are being dishonest – if only with themselves. The function of the demand is not to clarify whether any particular piece of information or an argument is credible; it is intended purely as a “gotcha” meme.

I don't remember an insistence that anyone condemn Tony Blair or George W. Bush for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 before they could be heard or taken seriously. Or that they denounce the US-backed overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi that plunged that country into murderous chaos. Or that they deplore the West's material

support for Saudi Arabia's slaughter of Yemen's population, including Britain's sale of planes, bombs and training to Riyadh. Or that they criticize the West's backing of head-chopping jihadists in Syria (who coincidentally now appear to be [drifting into Ukraine](#) to become our allies again). Or that they decry decades of Western support for Israel as it has disappeared the Palestinian people.

And those are things for which we – meaning Westerners – are *directly* responsible. We elected the politicians who caused this unquantifiable suffering. Those bombs were ours. We ought to be clamoring for our leaders to be dragged to The Hague to be tried for war crimes.

By contrast, we – meaning Westerners – are not responsible for Putin or his actions. I cannot vote him out of office. Nothing I say will make him alter course. And worse, anything I do say against him or Russia simply amplifies the mindless chorus of self-righteous Western commentary intended to cast stones at Russia's warmongers while leaving our own home-grown warmongers in place.

Westerners denouncing Putin won't make

compromise and peace more likely. It will make it less likely. Russians need to be highlighting Putin's crimes as best they can to drive him to the negotiating table, while we need to be doing the same to our leaders to push them to the same table. As long as our attention is on Putin and his crimes, it is not on our leaders and their crimes.

### **Fog of war**

Those who insist it is quite possible to denounce both Putin and Western leaders at the same time are precisely the people who have been so half-hearted in holding our own leaders to account.

Monbiot, let us note, has not used a single one of his weekly columns at *The Guardian* to highlight the years-long plight of Julian Assange, locked away in a British dungeon for revealing US and UK war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is the gravest attack on a free press in living memory, and yet Monbiot used his most recent column to attack Assange supporters, such as veteran journalist John Pilger, for not being voluble enough in denouncing Putin.

Those who require unequivocal condemnation of

Putin insist that now – in the midst of a war – is not the time to be sowing doubt or undermining morale in the rightness of “our” cause. (A small giveaway that they think of this as a Western, not Ukrainian, war with Russia.)

Again conveniently, that is precisely the message Western leaders want to send too – just ask Britain's prime minister, Boris Johnson, whose “partygate” scandal is now a [distant memory](#) as he seeks to evoke Churchillian gravitas in facing off with Russia. Instead, the parties in the British parliament put aside their very superficial differences this week as the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, rallied them with a “historic address.”

What, really, is the point of demanding Westerners denounce Putin unequivocally when the entire Western media and political class is directing our gaze exclusively at Russia's crimes precisely so Westerners don't look at equivalent Western crimes?

The truth is that, in power politics, unequivocal denunciations are for politicians and diplomats – and virtue-signalers. Condemnations may be emotionally

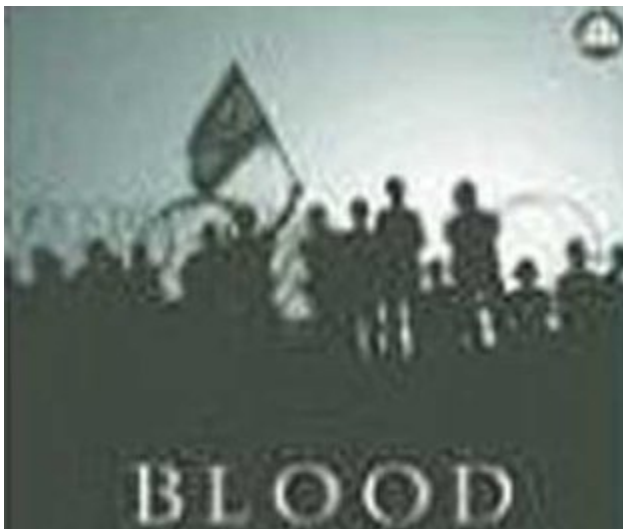
satisfying, but the rest of us can put our energies to far better use.

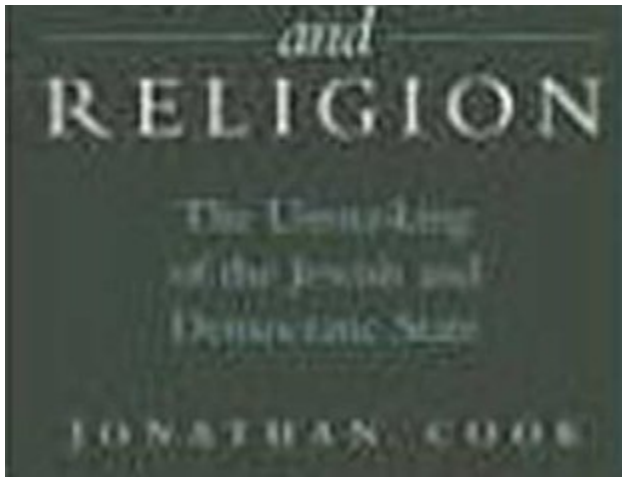
For most of us, the better course would be to blow away the immediate fog of war and instead analyze our – meaning the West's – role in the unfolding events.

### **NATO insurance policy**

Even a cursory glance shows that the West's hands are not clean in Ukraine. Not at all. The meddling – and hypocrisy – have occurred in two stages, first from politicians and then from the media.

It was the choices made by Western politicians that provoked the invasion. (What's coming next is an explanation, not a justification, of those developments, for those who need such things spelled out clearly).





## ORDER IT NOW

Russian troops are in Ukraine not because Putin is “Hitler,” “mad,” or a “megalomaniac” – though, again, the invasion makes him a war criminal in the same mold as Tony Blair and George W. Bush. Russian troops are there because he and his officials judged the West to be acting malevolently and in bad faith in their dealings with Ukraine.

The Putin as “madman” or “Hitler” script deflects attention away from the very obvious fact that Western leaders wilfully played fast and loose with the security of Ukraine and the safety of its population.

The West encouraged Ukrainians to believe that they would soon fall under NATO's security umbrella, when in fact the West had no intention of

protecting them, as is now only too evident. Ukrainians were led to believe that the more Russia's posture turned belligerent towards Ukraine the more likely NATO would be to [come to Ukraine's rescue](#) and act as its savior.

Which, of course, incentivized the Ukrainian government to keep poking the Russian bear in the expectation that Kyiv would have a NATO insurance policy up its sleeve. It didn't. It never did, as current events show.

The reason Boris Johnson lost no time in rebuffing the emotional pressure levied by a Ukrainian journalist at a recent press conference to [impose a no-fly zone](#) over Ukraine is that even he understands that such a policy would be suicidal against a nuclear power like Russia. Shooting down Russian jets would likely plunge us into a rerun of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

But on the back of NATO's deception, recent Ukrainian leaders confidently fomented ethnic nationalism at home and thereby themselves played a dangerous game of chicken with their superpower neighbor.



That included [coddling anti-Russian fascists](#) at home and stoking a related civil war in the Donbas region by its ultra-nationalist allies against the Russian ethnic community living there as a way to drag NATO directly into the conflict.

For those who accuse anyone who points out the long-running influence of ultra-nationalist groups in Ukraine of being Putin trolls, this 2017 video from *The Guardian* – a newspaper now reflexively dismissive of all criticism of Ukraine – showing a neo-Nazi summer camp for Ukrainian children, may make for uncomfortable viewing. The Azov Brigade fascists running it, as well as other like-minded groups, have been effortlessly incorporated into the Ukrainian military the West is arming:

President Zelenskyy hasn't abandoned his pre-invasion intransigence. He has entrenched, calling for Ukraine to be [armed with nuclear missiles](#) and for NATO to either impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine or give Ukraine the planes to enforce such a zone itself.

That Zelenskyy wants NATO to bail him out, especially after NATO was responsible for enticing

him into the current confrontation with Russia, is hardly surprising. But the degree to which the Western media have pushed Zelenskyy's line means a strong majority of the US public now favor Kyiv's course of action, even though it would likely trigger a World War III between nuclear powers.

### **Suicidal narrative**

How in thrall Westerners are to this media-confected, suicidal narrative can be gauged by the number of armchair warriors in the West accusing anyone taking a more cautious approach of not only being Putin apologists but of denying the Ukrainian people their "sovereign right" to join NATO and come under its protection.

But NATO membership isn't a sovereign right. And it shouldn't be viewed as some kind of glorified neighborhood-watch scheme. NATO is a military club. States qualify to join if the other members agree they want to commit to protecting that state.

If NATO members don't have the ability or will to defend another state, as is the case with Ukraine, then it is a crime to pretend they do – for the very reasons the events unfolding now demonstrate. In

fact, it is not just any ordinary crime, it is a crime against humanity.

Every death in the current war – Ukrainian and Russian – could almost certainly have been averted had the US and its NATO allies not led Ukraine up the garden path. Had Ukrainians not believed that with enough pressure they could force NATO's hand in their favor, they would have had to accommodate Russian concerns well before any invasion, such as by committing to neutrality.

Russia would have had no grounds – or pretexts, depending on how you wish to look at it – to invade. The media's "madman" and "Hitler" scripts are needed now to turn reality on its head, suggesting that Putin would have invaded whatever actions NATO and Ukraine took.

But if that is not true – and there is no evidence it is – then the blood of the victims of this war is most certainly on the West's hands, just as it is in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Gaza, Yemen and elsewhere.

### **Media hypocrisy**

The second hypocrisy is the current one being peddled by the Western media. They want to flaunt a bogus moral concern about the suffering of Ukrainians under attack from Russia that they never show towards the victims of Western bombs and missiles.

Terrible as the suffering of Ukrainians is, two weeks into the invasion, it is still a pale shadow of the decades of suffering of Palestinians in Gaza or of Yemenis under Saudi planes and bombs supplied by the West. The prioritization of one over the other needs explaining.

Social media warriors – much less sophisticated than the corporate media – readily rationalize this lack of interest in the West's victims by dismissing them as “terrorists”, or by blaming them for living under “terrorist regimes,” or by simply insisting that they are further removed from us, as though Britons and Americans somehow feel more of a natural affinity with Ukrainians than with Syrians or Palestinians, or with Russians. (We don't unless the corporate media keeps insisting such a bond exists.)



Jonathan Cook

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If that tactic fails, it is on to the next one, arguing that any effort to point out the utter hypocrisy of the Western media and its entirely hollow concern for Ukrainians – rather than for Ukraine, as a pawn on the West's colonial chessboard – is so-called “whataboutery.”

It is bad enough that such reasoning is rooted in a profound racism that counts white Europeans as worthy victims and brown or Black victims as “collateral damage” of supposed Western peace-

making.

But actually the rot runs far deeper. It is not just racism at work in the special treatment of Ukraine's suffering over that of Iraqis or Yemenis or Palestinians. That could be solved through education and awareness-raising.

No, the Western media's identification with Ukraine – and consequently the public's identification with its plight – is based on Ukraine's usefulness to the Western imperial project. Which is exactly what got us into this mess in the first place.

### **Vicious musical chairs**

In truth, a straight line runs between the West's treatment of Iraq and its treatment of Ukraine.

In Iraq, the US and its allies sought to reorder the chessboard by intensifying their grip over oil as Western capitalism began running up against ever-depleting stores of cheap and easily accessible fossil fuels and the climate emergency made capitalism's endless profit-making model ever more precarious.

But though the chess analogy for Western foreign

policymaking dates back to at least the nineteenth century, it may now be inadequate to explain what we have seen taking place over the past couple of decades.

More accurately, Washington's planners see the world largely in terms of a high-stakes version of the children's party game, musical chairs. As the chairs disappear, it is ever more important to make sure you, rather than your enemies, grab the last seats.

The main enemies on the global stage – if you sit in Washington – are Russia and China. The tools you need at your disposal are not just wits, as in chess, but muscle, as in a very adult, survival-of-the-fittest version of musical chairs.

That has required the US and its allies to ever more aggressively isolate Russia and China, trying to sow divisions, and make each feel threatened and isolated. Which, as Moscow and Beijing more clearly understand Washington's strategy, has driven these two unlikely partners into each other's arms.

The rest of us have to decide which of the biggest children we want to ally with as the chairs keep disappearing and the game gets ever more vicious.

## **Proxy war of attrition**

Back in Ukraine, meanwhile, the US and its NATO allies appear to be doing what they can to drag out the war for as long as possible.

Russia appeared initially to want a relatively short war of attrition to pacify Ukraine, forcing its nationalist government to drop aspirations to become a launch-pad for NATO weapons and impose on it instead neutrality. (Now that Russia has committed treasure and lives to the war, it will likely get greedier and want more. Reports suggest it is already demanding independence rather than autonomy for the Donbas region.)

Of course, the conclusion even Westerners would draw, if we weren't so propagandized by the media, is that neutrality for Ukraine is inevitable – unless we are willing to risk the alternative of a World War III. Any delay in achieving neutrality for Ukraine as an outcome simply causes unnecessary death and suffering.

The US, by contrast, wants a long, proxy war of attrition, openly and covertly supplying Ukrainian forces – indifferent as to whether they are “nice



ones” or neo-Nazis – to bog Russia down in years of difficult guerrilla warfare and counter-insurgency.

The bloodshed will feed the [hostility](#) (and unthinking racism) of Western publics towards Russia and Russians, providing the pretext for Washington to sustain the West's parallel economic war on Russia.

Ukrainians will pay the price as the US tries to wear down Russia, just as Syrians, Libyans, Iranians, Yemenis, Venezuelans and Palestinians have paid the price as the US has sought elsewhere to attain the goals of its globe-spanning imperial project.

Washington understands that a weakened Russia might not have been able to save Bashar Assad's government from the takeover of Syria by the West's Islamic State and al-Qaeda allies there. And in the future, it is hoped, Moscow will be in no position to support others who resist Western hegemony, especially the “pariah” states of Venezuela, Iran and China.

It is a huge ambition for a tiny elite headquartered in the US committed to the endless enrichment of itself by enforcing a binary thinking among Western publics that obscures the real reasons for the planet-

wide crises we face.

If it succeeds, the West's war machine will continue trundling over the bodies of the poor and marginalized as it drives us ever faster towards ecological collapse.