Putin’s war is an effort to rewrite history

He distorts memory of Holocaust in attempt to erase Soviet Russia’s failures

By NILS ROEMER

One of the many recent Russian missile strikes in Ukraine hit near the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center where in 1941, under orders from Adolf Hitler, the Nazi army shot more than 30,000 Jews in two days in the Babyn Yar ravine.

The strike was one of hundreds to rain down on the Kyiv region, and it is not clear whether the memorial center was targeted by the Russians. However, this particular attack, along with other attacks on museums and cultural sites, demonstrates not only violence and cruelty, but a desire to erase the past. One can see that desire in the bombings as well as in Russian President Vladimir Putin’s speeches, where he completely rewrites history.

This disdain for the past should cause the rest of society to use the past to prepare for a better future.

The current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, like much of contemporary politics, follows in the fault lines of the past. In this instance, it is the disintegration of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires in the First World War. Just as Germany attacked Poland at the outset of the World War II in an attempt to overturn World War I, Putin is now attacking Ukraine to change political boundaries that have come about through wars and uprisings.

In doing so, Putin is attempting to erase the failures of Soviet Russia by restoring borders that more closely resemble that of 18th- and 19th-century imperial Russia.

Putin has portrayed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a Nazi, and the Ukrainian government as fascist, despite Zelenskyy identifying as Jewish as well as being the grandson of a WWII Red Army veteran. By using the words “Nazi” and “fascist,” Putin is trying to capture the anguish of WWII for his own warped political purposes. Instead, however, he is spewing hatred and lies and casting a blind eye to the truth of the past.

In 2014, when Russia previously invaded, Ukrainian troops assumed positions outside their country’s newly occupied eastern territories. They fought in the dugouts and trenches carved out during WWII. Because of Putin’s large-scale, unprovoked military attack on a sovereign Ukraine, today’s Ukrainian soldiers are fighting in some of those same trenches, in both the figurative and literal ruins of the previous conflict, adding yet another layer of devastation and suffering.

As Putin seeks the elusive promise of a greater Russia in the future, his rhetoric and the Ukrainian war provide clear examples of brutality, an attempt to erase Ukrainian history, and to distort the memory of the Holocaust.

The Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas — along with similar centers around the world — exists to ensure that the lessons of the past are not lost. It is far too easy for individuals or countries to lose their way and end up engaging in genocidal, racist or violent behavior.

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