Opinion
Guest Voices
Serhii Lahovskyi, 26, mourns next to the grave of his friend, Ihor Lytvynenko, after he was be

Serhii Lahovskyi, 26, mourns next to the grave of his friend, Ihor Lytvynenko, after he was beside a building's basement in Bucha, Ukraine, April 6, 2022. Residents say the man was killed by Russian soldiers. (CNS/Reuters/Alkis Konstantinidis)



by David Bonior

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Editor's note: *NCR board member David Bonior and contributor Fr. Peter Daly traveled to Ukraine and Poland in March. This is one of several reports from that trip.*

As a child in the early 1950s, I found myself drawn to television war footage of World War II. That is when I first saw a film of the liberation of the concentration death camps in Europe. I was maybe nine when these heinous crimes of mass murder entered my consciousness. Those tragic images are part of my memories of the Holocaust and opened a door that led to my studies of history and government.

I learned that before there was the Holocaust, there was the Armenian Genocide. Adolf Hitler ordered his Reich Marshal Hermann Göring, just before invading Poland in 1939, to "send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women and children of Polish derivation and language." Hitler then added, "who after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

I can imagine Putin thinking along those same lines regarding the "Red Famine," ordered by Stalin, that led to the starvation and death of over 4 million Ukrainians in 1932-33. Today it is known and memorialized as the Holodomor. Now Putin has followed in the same bloodstained shoes and has been recently charged by the International Criminal Court of war crimes in the kidnapping of Ukrainian children. Regrettably, there is so much more.

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On our first day of our trip to Poland in March, Fr. Peter Daly and I met in Warsaw with Olga Kotsiuruba from the movement of civil society called OPORA, which means "It is time." Kotsiuruba runs the War Crimes Center in Warsaw.

Although Kotsiuruba could not share with us specific cases, Fr. Daly and I were familiar with the atrocities from press reports and accounts from refugees from Mariupol, Bucha and Irpin. Kotsiuruba explained that the job of an interviewer of refugees is to gather evidence while it is still fresh in their minds. All interviews are done by lawyers or psychologists. The querists are interviewing independent displaced persons in Poland who have come from Ukraine.

In the first year since the Russian invasion in February 2022, 800 cases have been filed from Mariupol, Bucha and Irpin, Kotsiuruba told us, and filings are increasing by about 150 cases each month. The largest number of cases come from Russian-occupied territories within Ukraine.

Two governmental bodies are engaged in the interview process. There is a joint investigative team made up of five entities: Poland, Lithuania, the International Criminal Court, Ukraine and the European Union. Also, the Ukrainian government is collecting evidence.

Modern communication technology, such as Zoom, helps investigators in the gathering and sharing of evidence. We learned that the iPhone has significantly helped in identifying victims and perpetrators of criminal activities. Satellite imagery also aids investigators. Kotsiuruba and her colleagues are very confident that there will be prosecutions when the war is over.

A woman cries in front of an apartment building destroyed during the Ukraine-Russia conflict

A woman cries in front of an apartment building destroyed during the Ukraine-Russia conflict in the southern port city of Mariupol, Ukraine, April 19, 2022. (OSV News/Reuters/Alexander Ermochenko)

Mariupol, once a city of 500,000, is now a shell of itself with perhaps 100,000 people. Russian attacks on civilians in apartment buildings and a maternity hospital killed thousands of people who were noncombatants. In one of the worst war crimes since World War II, the Russians bombed a theater serving as a shelter resulting in approximately 600 deaths, which included many women and children.

In early April 2022, I opened my New York Times to the horror that took place in Bucha. Before me was a photo of a woman, hand covering her mouth, with a look of anguish and dread as she stared down at her dead family members. Then I read her name, which was similar to that of my grandfather and mother. Although I am not aware of any relatives in Bucha, the similarity of names told me that somewhere in the chain of life we might be connected.

Russia's massacre in Bucha is well documented by many reputable sources, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The mass murders which included torture and executions were in the hundreds. Local authorities maintain that 458 bodies were recovered. Many were executed with their hands tied behind their backs; 419 people were killed by weapons. Rapes were reported, including one of a 14-year-old girl.

On the third day of our trip, we were in Krakow and took the day to visit Auschwitz and Birkenau, a 75-minute ride from Krakow city center. I had been there before. Still, it felt like an appropriate pilgrimage given the war horrors committed by the Russians in Ukraine.

Crosses are attached to the destroyed bridge in Irpin, Ukraine, May 16, 2022, during Russia's

Crosses are attached to the destroyed bridge in Irpin, Ukraine, May 16, 2022, during Russia's invasion of Ukraine. (CNS/Reuters/Jorge Silva)

Auschwitz was the largest Nazi Germany concentration camp. According to a sign we saw there, in the years 1940-45, the Nazis deported at least 1.3 million people to Auschwitz: 1.1 million Jews, 140,000-150,000 Poles, 23,000 Roma/Gypsies, 15,000

Soviet Prisoners of War, 25,000 prisoners from other ethnic groups. At least 1.1 million people died in Auschwitz; approximately 90% of the victims were Jews.

At Auschwitz, we wound through long, crowded lines in darkly lit buildings. There is a foreboding feeling that you are in a herd and that somewhere into the maze there will be the gas chambers where the SS murdered most people. I left feeling desolate, and then angry that these genocidal acts continue today.

Putin and his gang of oligarchs and "yes men" should be made to answer for the bloodbath they have perpetrated on the Ukrainian people. They should be hunted and haunted for their barbarism and should not rest at ease for the rest of their days.

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