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Preface

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine that Russia launched on 24 February 2022 was an attack on the European security architecture and peaceful cooperation between nations that the international community had created and consolidated after World War II in order to prevent future armed inter-ethnic conflicts on the Old Continent. The Russian Federation, as the successor of one of the winners of this war – the Soviet Union – acquired United Nations Security Council veto power, which it now cynically uses to block the initiatives of other members to condemn Russian aggression against the sovereignty of a neighbouring country and to try to resolve the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War peacefully. However, when this war began, in addition to the fragile balance of power achieved in post-war Europe being violated and the generally accepted rules of international coexistence being demonstrably broken, the provisions formulated at that time of how war crimes should be assessed in general and who to incriminate as the evil that caused them that were, inter alia, consolidated by pan-European means of history politics, were also attacked. The evidence of mass killings of civilians left in Kyiv's suburbs of Bucha and Irpen, or in Mariupol and other Ukrainian cities, have revealed the widespread genocidal practices of the current Russian army, which, for the first time since the Srebrenica massacre, when the Bosnian Serb Republican Army perpetrated the genocidal killing of local Muslims in 1995, brought the issue of genocide back to the current European political agenda. It is also surprising that in justifying its aggression by the need to "denazify" Ukraine, Russia is interpreting the postulates of the post-war Nuremberg Consensus in a very unique way. These new geopolitical circumstances prompt a rethinking of the historical and legal characteristics and distinctions of concepts and phenomena such as "genocide", "ethnic cleansing", "mass killing", "terrorist tactics" and "war crimes". In addition, the growing insecurity of the post-Soviet region, which threatens its destabilisation, calls into question the effectiveness of the preventive pedagogical and civic programmes and measures that were widely implemented after World War II to perpetuate the memory of war victims and prevent the revival of Nazism. This rapidly changing situation also raises questions of whether the historical experiences of genocides and other crimes against humanity and their academic research can teach the current generations anything at all or guard against their repetition in the future.

The international "Genocides: The Reality of the Past and the Present" scientific conference that the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania (GRRCL) held on 29 September 2023 was designed precisely to address these complex and emotionally difficult issues. It was attended by historians and philosophers from Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Russia, and this thematic issue was prepared on the basis of

the presentations they gave, supplemented by an article by a colleague from Uzbekistan who had planned to give a presentation at the conference, but unfortunately could not attend. It should be noted that even the fates of the foreign authors of the texts published in this issue well illustrate the atmosphere of these turbulent times, as practically all of them have personally experienced the lot of a forced emigrant or displaced person in escaping wars or political persecution by their own governments. When discussing academic conferences that have taken place, the focus is usually on the content of the presentations given at them and the discussions that followed, leaving aside the behind-the-scenes of their organisation. However, this time I think the latter is also worth mentioning, as an eloquent illustration of what a sensitive, delicate and diplomatic subject we were dealing with. One of the guest speakers from Armenia was meant to give a presentation about the Armenian Genocide of 1915. However, when he saw the name of an Azerbaijani presenter on the final conference programme, and that she was going to speak about the Nagorno-Karabakh tragedy, which she was an eyewitness and victim of herself, the Armenian colleague gave the conference organisers an ultimatum: either he changes the topic of his presentation to mirror the presentation of the guest from Azerbaijan, or he refuses to participate at all. After consulting with the GRRCL, we decided not to accept the ultimatum. Our event is an academic one, and we have no desire to turn it into an arena for settling long-standing scores between two nations or an international scandal. Moreover, international law recognises Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, and while preparing for the conference, we could not have foreseen an escalation of the conflict on the very days of this event, when, taking advantage of Russia being weakened due to its position on the Ukrainian front, Azerbaijan finally took back the disputed territories. On the other hand, unlike the Armenian scholar, I know the colleague from Azerbaijan personally, so we were confident that there would be nothing unexpected or unpleasant from her. On the contrary, since I had the chance to visit both countries several times and talk about the Karabakh conflict with representatives of the two nations, I got the impression that this problem is too sensitive, deep and painful there for it to somehow be settled through dialogue or other means acceptable to both sides. However, Dr Parvin Ahanchi was the only person I met in the South Caucasus who was sincerely looking for opportunities for reconciliation between the two nations, no matter how hopeless it seemed, despite the fact that, as a native of Karabakh herself, she had lost both her home and her beloved husband to war and ethnic cleansing, making her a widow with a three-year-old son at the age of 37. She still does not have her own home, because Azerbaijan lost the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, so its veterans and victims do not receive government compensation of any significance to this day (unlike the participants in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which they won). However, when we came up with the idea of replacing the speaker from Armenia with the well-known Russian philosopher and historical memory researcher Dr Aleksey Kamenskikh, the latter also had his conditions –

he would only participate if the Ukrainian colleagues who had already been invited did not object. And even though Kamenskikh was forced to become a political émigré soon after the beginning of the war in 2022 because he is a regional board member for Memorial (a Russian human rights organisation for the study and memory of Stalinist repressions that, after being persecuted and ultimately shut down in Russia by Vladimir Putin's regime in 2021, was one of the three recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize a year later), he feels deep personal guilt and responsibility for the crimes the regime is currently committing in Ukraine. However, neither of the Ukrainian guest speakers – Dr Hanna Bazhenova and Dr Yurii Latysh – objected to his participation, and thus, the experience of organising this conference showed that crimes against humanity are still an open wound, and trying to talk about them in an academically neutral and psychologically detached manner is walking on thin ice...

The events discussed during the conference and the ones that followed showed how closely everything is interconnected and how violence events tend to expand and multiply. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Vladimir Putin's efforts to challenge the US-led global order have emboldened and strengthened other outsiders of the international political system, such as Iran, Serbia and North Korea. After 7 October 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel and Israel retaliated, global media attention shifted from Ukraine to the Middle East. The global protests that ensued against Israel's policies toward Palestinian civilians are likely to raise the uncomfortable question of whether genocide can be committed by people whose parents and grandparents experienced it so recently themselves. Meanwhile, after Azerbaijan's decisive victory in the conflict that had been going on for more than two decades, the residents of the former Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh were forced to flee to Armenia in 2020 for fear of ethnic cleansing. When I visited Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2024 as part of a conference in Baku on the history and culture of Caucasian Albania, the so-called Russian peacekeepers had just begun their withdrawal from its territory, which they completed in June, and the region was still licking the wounds of devastation. Along the way, we saw home-made memorials by each city or town dedicated to the Azerbaijani soldiers who died during the retaking of these territories (while in the centre of Baku, the military equipment that was used in the battles was on display). Access to this area is still tightly controlled and restricted by the government and is only possible through one checkpoint, since only a small portion of the liberated lands have been demined, so Karabakh is still unsafe to this day. My visit to this region that has suffered so much left a conflicting and depressing impression – beautiful natural surroundings filled with ruins and silence – an area that is still practically uninhabited, even though roads and infrastructure are already being built, and the government is encouraging former refugees to return, promising generous grants for settlement. It can be assumed that this excursion was not an end in itself or meant to satisfy the curiosity of foreign scholars. Its participants – prominent researchers of the ancient history of the region – were shown

several completely destroyed towns with intact Christian churches that had relatively unscathed gravestones in their churchyards so that they could authoritatively testify to the camera that Azerbaijan respects its Christian (just not Armenian, but local, Albanian!) heritage. This truly clever and subtle propaganda manipulation leads us to the issue of genocide not only as a crime against people, but also as a crime against culture and heritage, which the participants of the conference in Vilnius also allocated considerable attention to.

Genocide and ethnic cleansing, both in the past and the present, would seem to offer politicians what might appear to be an easy solution to long-standing, complex and multi-layered problems. A solution where you no longer need to look for compromises or persuade and negotiate with your opponents, especially if there is no one left to negotiate with... In a situation of increasingly polarised and intolerant politics and a growing existential threat, which is constantly fuelled by hostile military alliances or ethnic groups with a long history of mutual grievances, this idea of physical elimination starts to look attractive again. And most importantly, the international community, and especially the United States, have proved to be no longer capable of acting in a timely and efficient manner with respect to the aforementioned conflicts. The system of international humanitarian law established after World War II and the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide may have been meant to prevent future mass atrocities, but today they can no longer ensure that these agreements are observed. Meanwhile, calls from the expert community and genocide researchers for countries and armed groups to stop violating international law no longer have much of an impact. Even worse, the results of legal liability and punishment for mass atrocities committed are no less deplorable, so the perpetrators of mass crimes who remain unpunished can continue their evils. Here one can see a direct link between the fact that unlike Nazism, the crimes of communism, like the Marxist ideology itself, with few exceptions, were never universally condemned and their perpetrators were never punished, and the current, already documented, crimes against humanity committed by Russia in Ukraine. This forces us to also reconsider the effectiveness and meaningfulness of the history politics implemented in the post-Soviet region, especially when it tends to be cleverly manipulated with goals that are contrary to peaceful international cooperation. This is precisely what was done at the GRRCL conference and accompanying discussions.

Unfortunately, this issue does not include a piece on the political instrumentalisation of the "genocide of the Belarusian people" in the context of the 2020 protests by Belarusian historian and European Humanities University Professor Dr Iryna Ramanava, who spoke at the conference but was too busy to prepare the article. It also does not include two presentations given by Lithuanian speakers – Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History employees Danutė Selčinskaja and Teresė Birutė Burauskaitė – about people who rescued Jews in Lithuania (during the event, there was also an exhibition of photographs and

documents at the Tuskulėnai Peace Park Conference Centre to highlight the stories of the Righteous Among the Nations), which give hope that even in the direst circumstances, humanity can be saved. Meanwhile, Dr Rasa Čepaitienė (GRRCL) delved into the contexts of the development and change of European history politics and the place of genocides in them. The article based on this presentation provides a more detailed analysis of political exploitation of the Holocaust and its competition with the efforts to politically exploit the victims of communist crimes in post-socialist and post-Soviet countries. The author asserts that the so-called "Nuremberg Consensus" that was reached in post-war Europe tends to regard the totalitarian experience of Central and Eastern European countries as a competitor rather than an equal participant in the dialogue to the prevailing narrative in the EU of "the Holocaust as humanity's greatest tragedy" and "Nazism as absolute evil", which is why there are still so many misunderstandings and conflicts with the national perspective of the history of the middle and second half of the 20th century, as has become more and more noticeable in the Lithuanian public arena in recent years. However, the model of cosmopolitan memory established on a pan-European scale in West Germany after the war, which opposes the doctrine of constitutional patriotism to nationalism, is increasingly challenged today not only by Central and Eastern Europeans, but also by representatives of post-colonial societies and their emigrants, who have already integrated well into the Western academic environment. On the other hand, more and more experts on the subject also assert that the tendency for states to increasingly regulate and sanction interpretations of the past makes the field of history politics manipulative and prone to power games, especially when focusing on elevating their own victims while ignoring or diminishing others. And this is increasingly beginning to conflict not only with the freedom of academic research, but also with the democratic diversity of opinions. Critics are calling more and more loudly to dare to question the prevailing attitude that does not avoid anachronisms and tends to moralise history, and that has supporters who do not hesitate to punish or silence even professional historians for deviations from the established "canon".

The political use (and often – abuse) of victimisation tends to leave aside the question of what really happened to the victims of war and genocide and what long-term consequences this has for the lives of entire generations and societies. This question is examined by Dr Parvin Ahanchi, who attempts to reconcile seemingly incompatible things in her text – a personal testimony of the atrocities she experienced and an unaffected academic study and analysis of them. Meanwhile, Dr Azim Malikov's text, which provides an overview of Uzbekistan's history politics and an analysis of the Museum of Victims of Political Repression in Tashkent, reveals how the crimes of the previous regime are reflected and used in the society where a new authoritarianism has taken hold. If the experience of the Uzbeks in this regard was quite close to the experiences of other post-Soviet countries, then the study conducted by Dr Aleksey Kamenskikh would show that neither during the

Soviet era nor after the collapse of the USSR did Russia manage to unequivocally condemn the crimes of communism, and the memory of Stalinist repressions, after a certain period of fluctuation when it seemed to be recognised even at a more official level, is now again being abruptly pushed out of the public arena while re-Stalinisation is intensifying in the country. Finally, the articles by Dr Hanna Bazhenova from the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin and Dr Yurii Latysh delve into the current human and cultural losses in Ukraine and the possibilities of interpreting them using the concept of genocide. This question, obviously, has caused considerable debate among experts. Some experts tend to view these atrocities through the framework of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, thus concluding that the acts committed are just random and unplanned cases of violence. However, another group of scholars analyses these violent events through the prism of genocide, placing them in a broader historical, political and cultural context of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Bazhenova's article contributes to the latter line of research by examining war crimes committed by the Russian military against the civilian population of Ukraine during the full-scale conflict and identifying signs of genocidal intent through historical and legal prisms. In addition, the article examines the systematic destruction of the country's cultural heritage, which can be seen as evidence of the intention to at least partially destroy Ukrainians as an ethnic group protected by the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Meanwhile, Latysh convincingly connects the crimes committed by the Putin regime in Ukraine with the Holodomor engineered by its ideological predecessor – Stalinism – in 1932-1933, which, like now, was directed against the possibility of forming and consolidating the Ukrainian political nation.

The topics discussed at the conference, some of which were expanded upon in this issue of the magazine presented for the attention of readers, make it possible to draw direct and close connections between the crimes against humanity that have taken place in history and the current genocidal practices. Countries may have different policies towards them, but the political use of history, as evidenced by the cases discussed here in more detail, does not always lead to an honest reflection on these tragic events, repentance of the guilty, or efforts to reconcile both sides – on the contrary. Although there are countries that base their political and civil identity on the genocide they experienced (Armenia, Israel, partly Ukraine as well), as the vicissitudes of international (non)recognition of various genocides would show, this often does not lead to empathy and sensitivity to the pain experienced by others. This sad state of affairs could lead genocide researchers or educators working in places of collective violence to despair and helplessness, but we should not give up, because the crimes committed have no statute of limitations, and neither does our duty as professional historians to recognise and understand them for the sake of peace.

Dr Rasa Čepaitienė