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імені Івана Франка, вул. Івана Франка, 24, м. Дрогобич, обл. Львівська, 82100.
тел.: (0324) 41-04-74, факс: (03244) 3-38-77, e-mail: halivm@yahoo.com

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Ruslan HULA

PhD hab. (History), Full Professor; Professor of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ivan Kozhedub Kharkiv National Air Force University, 77-79 Sumska Street, Kharkiv, Ukraine, postal code 61023 (rslnhula1@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0000-0002-8177-1565
Researcher ID: N-3649-2018
Scopus-Author ID: 57204980116

Iryna PEREDERII

PhD hab. (History), Full Professor; Head of the Department of Ukrainian Studies, Culture and Documentation, National University “Yuri Kondratyuk Poltava Polytechnic”, 24 Vitaliy Hrytsayenko Avenu, Poltava, Ukraine, postal code 36011 (iryna.perederii@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0000-0001-7473-5868
Researcher ID: E-8447-2019
Scopus-Author ID: 57204974725

Руслан ГУЛА

доктор історичних наук, професор, професор кафедри гуманітарних і соціальних дисциплін, Харківський національний університет Повітряних сил імені Івана Кожедуба, вул. Сумська, 77-79, м. Харків, Україна, індекс 61023 (rslnhula1@gmail.com)

Ірина ПЕРЕДЕРІЙ

докторка історичних наук, професорка, завідувачка кафедри українознавства, культури та документознавства, Національний університет “Полтавська політехніка імені Юрія Кондратюка”, пр. Віталія Грицаєнка, 24, м. Полтава, Україна, індекс 36011 (iryna.perederii@gmail.com)

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**HISTORICAL ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE “TERRORIST WAR”:
“SCORCHED EARTH”, ENERGY TERROR AND CRIMINAL RECRUITS
(MODERN TIMES – THE 21st CENTURY)**

Abstract. *The article focuses on the analysis of the essence and key components of the Russian Federation’s “terrorist war” concept based on the analysis of historical military conflicts and their transformation in modern wars. The purpose of the study is to elucidate the nature and structure of terrorist war; in particular terror aimed at the destruction of critical infrastructure, as well as the use of criminal environment in combat operations. Historical parallels between past and modern wars, armed conflicts have been drawn. The methodological basis of the study is the principles of objectivity.*

historicism, systematicity, verification, value orientation and scientificity; problem-search, problem thematic and chronological methods have been applied. **The scientific novelty** consists in the fact that for the first time in the Ukrainian historiography, an attempt has been made to analyze the approbation of the Russian concept components of “terrorist war”, formed by the military leadership of the Russian Federation as a secondary tracing of foreign military theories and practices, with a demonstration of its implementation in the context of world military history. **The conclusions** emphasize that terrorist warfare is a form of warfare involving irregular formations, which mostly include asocial marginality. Its goal is to maintain a permanent state of war, destabilize, destroy and paralyze the political, social and economic institutions of the state and society against which it is waged.

Key words: terrorist war; “scorched earth tactics”, energy terror, criminality, private military companies, Russo-Ukrainian war, international humanitarian law.

ІСТОРИЧНІ ВИТОКИ ТА ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ “ТЕРОРИСТИЧНОЇ ВІЙНИ”: “ВИПАЛЕНА ЗЕМЛЯ”, ЕНЕРГЕТИЧНИЙ ТЕРОР І КРИМІНАЛЬНІ РЕКРУТИ (НОВИЙ ЧАС – XXI ст.)

Анотація. У статті досліджено сутність і ключові складники концепції “терористичної війни” РФ на основі аналізу історичних воєнних конфліктів і їхньої трансформації у війнах сучасності. **Метою роботи** є розкриття природи і структури терористичної війни, зокрема, а терору, спрямованого на знищення об’єктів критичної інфраструктури, а також використання кримінального середовища у бойових діях. Проведено історичні паралелі між минулими та сучасними війнами та збройними конфліктами. **Методологічну основу** дослідження становлять принципи об’єктивності, історизму, системності, верифікації, ціннісної орієнтації та науковості; застосовано проблемно-пошуковий, проблемно-тематичний і хронологічний методи. **Наукова новизна** полягає у тому, що вперше в українській історіографії здійснено спробу аналізу апробації складників російської концепції “терористичної війни”, сформованої військовим керівництвом РФ як вторинне калькування іноземних воєнних теорій і практик, із демонстрацією її реалізації у контексті світової воєнної історії. **У висновках** підкреслюється, що терористична війна є формою бойових дій із залученням іррегулярних формувань, до складу яких здебільшого входить асоціальний маргіналітет. Її метою є підтримання перманентного стану війни, дестабілізація, руйнування та параліч політичних, соціальних і економічних інститутів держави й суспільства, проти яких вона ведеться.

Ключові слова: терористична війна, тактика «випаленої землі», енергетичний терор, криміналітет, приватні військові компанії, російсько-українська війна, міжнародне гуманітарне право.

Problem Statement. The general paradigm of armed confrontation within the Russo-Ukrainian war increasingly corresponds to the content and essence of the concept of “terrorist war”. Its integral components on the part of the Russian Federation are: the organization of large-scale energy terror, the destruction of critical infrastructure facilities, attempts to undermine the logistical foundations of the Defense Forces of Ukraine to destabilize the domestic political situation, and also break the moral and psychological stability of the Ukrainian society and the army through the destruction of the economy.

The relevance of the topic is also due to the fact that the enemy actively involves individuals with distorted legal awareness and criminal pasts in combat operations.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the components of the Russian concept of “terrorist war” in historical retrospect and trace its transformation in the context of modern military conflicts.

Chronologically, the study covers the period from the modern times, when professional armies were formed, to modern wars and conflicts. Within this period, we can trace the growth in the use of tactics to destroy the enemy's economic potential and the combat use

of criminal and paramilitary formations operating outside the boundaries of international humanitarian law.

Review of Recent Research and Publications. After the start of the Russian Federation's full-scale armed aggression, a number of research appeared *in domestic historical science* devoted to the study of the genetic continuity of the terrorist war in the policies of the Soviet and modern Russian authorities. In particular, in historical research by the Institute of History of Ukraine of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine and the Institute for Holodomor Research of the National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide (Smolii, 2023; Movchan, 2022) the Soviet “scorched earth” tactics and its active use by the Russian armed forces during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine have been analyzed.

The issue of involving criminal elements in the hostilities in eastern Ukraine (in the ATO/OOS zone) is thoroughly examined in the study by Mykola Chaplyk “Criminal Involvement in Hybrid Warfare: View through the Prism of Ukrainian Realities” (Chaplyk, 2019). The focus is on the influence of the Russian special services on organized crime, in particular on the institution of “thieves in law”, with the aim of involving them in hybrid warfare.

Various aspects of energy terror by the aggressor state have been studied by such Ukrainian scholars such as Natalia Horlo (Horlo, 2024), Oleksandr Saliuk-Kravchenko (Saliuk-Kravchenko, 2023), and Taras Zhovtenko (Zhovtenko, 2022). These studies deal with the analysis of threats to energy security, particularly in the context of military operations.

The studies of Alexander Schwarz and Maria Grigat (Schwarz, Grigat, 2015), Emmanuel Kreike (Kreike, 2021), and Georgiana Banita (Banita, 2008) focus on the strategy and tactics of “scorched earth”, its impact on political processes, the social sphere, and the environment, using examples from both historical and contemporary events.

The potential of various forms of terrorist warfare as models for explaining and predicting combined manifestations of violence has been revealed in the studies of the British and German scholars: Andre Python, Andreas Bender, Anita Nandi, Penelope Hancock, Rohan Arambepola, Jürgen Brandsch and the others (Python, Bender, Nandi, Hancock, Arambepola, Brandsch et al., 2021).

A separate layer of research focuses on the mechanisms of countering the terrorist war by the political institutions of states. Using the example of neutralizing jihadist attacks, these mechanisms are analyzed by Christof Nägel, Amy Nivette, and Christian Czymara (Nägel, Nivette, & Chimara, 2024).

The study of the British researchers Ivor Sokolić, Denisa Kostovicova and Sanja Vico (Sokolić, Kostovicova, Vico, 2024) highlights the manifestations of war terror by both combatants and non-combatants – representatives of state and non-state military formations – during the conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. The legal decisions of the relevant institutions of Europe and the former Yugoslavia are separately analyzed.

The issue of private military companies participation (PMCs) in the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine is discussed in the studies by Andrew Bowen (Bowen, 2023) and Christopher Spearin (Spearin, 2024). The authors focus on the social composition of these formations, the peculiarities of their combat use, and also compare the Russian and Western models of creation, functioning, and control of PMCs.

Regarding the use of Russian sources, the authors of this article resort to their fragmentary citation exclusively for analytical purposes – for critical understanding of hostile narratives, identifying sources of conceptual borrowings and tracking their impact on the military practice of the Russian Federation. This approach is consistent with the recommendations of

the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine dated October 25, 2024, which provide for careful and verified use of hostile sources in order to counteract information manipulation and ensure the scientific validity of the research.

Research Results. The failure of Putin's "blitzkrieg" in February – March 2022, a partial loss of strategic initiative, and the successful counteroffensive operations of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in Kharkiv and Kherson directions (Kharuk, 2023), which led to large-scale territorial liberations, caused a radical change in the strategy of the Russian Armed Forces. Since then, the dominant vector of the Russian army's actions has been the provisions of the concept of "terrorist war", formulated by Lieutenant General S. I. Skokov, former Chief of the General Staff of the Ground Forces of the Russian Armed Forces in 2010 – 2012. This concept was first tested during the Russian military operation in Syria.

At the present stage, no army, waging an aggressive war against another state, is capable of achieving victory without unacceptable (even under the conditions of conditional admissibility of this criterion) human losses. To circumvent this "problem", the Russian military leadership has created a new type of war model – a terrorist war, based on the use of "cheap" mass force recruited both within the country and in neighbouring states, as well as on the targeted destruction of the critical infrastructure of the enemy state.

At the same time, a modern historical context has created a paradoxical situation: the means of destruction are more expensive than the objects being struck. Under the conditions of such a shift in cost ratios, the essence of "the terrorist war" is not to achieve military victory, but to destroy the country as an independent economic unit. Its main goal is to create chaos: destroyed infrastructure, destabilized economy and broken mechanisms of state governance should undermine the country's ability to resist. In such a model, the seizure of territories is relegated to the background, instead the key tool becomes the systematic terrorization of the civilian population. In this sense terrorist war is the fastest and least expensive way to achieve the strategic collapse of statehood: provoking public dissatisfaction with the government, social unrest, moral and psychological exhaustion of the army and civilians (Hula, & Diatlova, 2021).

The concept of "terrorist war" cannot be considered as a purely Russian "exclusive" product. Similar examples may be found in the history of both Russia and other countries. Moreover, as the Russian military sources and communications show, foreign experience is carefully studied by the enemy with the aim of adapting it. The origins of the implementation of the terrorist war misanthropic logic can be traced back to the pre-revolutionary history of Russia. A striking example of the use of total "scorched earth" tactics was the activities of the commander of the Separate Caucasian Corps, General O. P. Yermolov, in 1816 – 1826. He organized mass terror and an economic blockade of the Caucasian peoples with the aim of their complete subjugation. His combat practice was directed not only against the armed groups that resisted, but also against the civilian population that gave them shelter. If the villagers came to the defense of such families, the entire settlement was subject to physical destruction. Thus, the village of Dady-Yurt was wiped off the face of the earth as well as its inhabitants – only because they refused to betray the resistance fighters and ignored the ultimatum to leave their homes (Buket, 2023).

The application of a similar logic – the targeted destruction of the enemy's economic base – also took place outside of Russia. A prime example is the actions of the US Army General William T. Sherman during the Civil War between the North and the South (1861 – 1865). During the so-called "March to the Sea" (November 15 – December 21, 1864),

W. T. Sherman's troops carried out a large-scale destruction of the military and civilian infrastructure of the states of Georgia and South Carolina. The goal of this campaign was to exhaust the South economically and deprive the Confederacy of the freedom to resist. W. T. Sherman estimated the damage at \$100 million – the equivalent of approximately \$982 million (dollar rate as of 2023) (Hudson).

The practice of destroying material resources in order to deprive the enemy of the ability to use critical infrastructure, industry, and agriculture for military purposes was actively implemented in Ukraine during World War II.

On June 29, 1941, the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR and the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) sent a directive to all party and Soviet bodies demanding "to unconditionally destroy all valuables that cannot be taken out during the withdrawal of troops" (Smolii, 2004). As a result of this order, entire industrial complexes built during the first five-year plans were blown up. In particular, all nine generators of the Dnipro Hydroelectric Power Plant were destroyed, as well as 12 concrete pillars of the dam, which put the entire station out of action. A powerful explosion caused the flooding of a large riverside area up to the town of Nikopol, as a result of which numerous Soviet servicemen who were in the area of the man-made disaster died (Lytus, 2019).

On July 26, 1941, the command of the troops of the Southwestern Front, together with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine (Bolsheviks), called on the population of the occupied regions to completely destroy the crops of grain and industrial crops so that they would not fall into the hands of the enemy. The appeal carried the slogan: "Not a single gram of grain for the enemy! Mow exactly as much as you need for the near future" (Zolotarev, 1999, p. 82).

In October 1941, Deputy People's Commissar of Internal Affairs of the USSR I. O. Sierov personally supervised the evacuation and implementation of special measures in Donbas. At the same time, the local population, in particular the miners of Voroshylovhrad region (nowadays – Luhansk), resolutely resisted the preparations for the destruction of the mines. According to the report of the Deputy People's Commissar of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR S. R. Savchenko to the People's Commissar L. P. Beria, 87 miners were arrested in the region, accused of "anti-Soviet actions", of which 67 (77%) received death sentences. In total, during the evacuation and liquidation of industrial facilities in the region, 123 people were arrested who actively protested against the "special measures" (Demydov, 2009, p. 114). From the memoirs of V. Romanchenko and V. Demenkov, it is known that the miners, preparing to destroy the mines, turned to the special teams with the words: "You will retreat, and the Germans will come – and what will we do? At least we could work in the mine..." (Tytarenko, 2011, pp. 146, 149).

The "scorched earth" tactics was also used during the defense of Moscow in the autumn of 1941. According to the order of the Supreme High Command Headquarters No. 0428 of November 17, 1941, the military command was ordered to destroy all settlements that were in the enemy's rear, to a depth of up to 40 km from the front and up to 30 km from the flanks. For this purpose, it was allowed to use any means of fire and sabotage groups. Although these measures were justified by military necessity – the destruction of the enemy's rear infrastructure – they violated the norms of international humanitarian law. The same order provided for the evacuation of civilians in the event of a forced retreat. Among the military, partisans and underground fighters, this order received an ironic name: "Drive the Germans into the cold!" (Prikaz, 1941).

The idea of destroying critical infrastructure as a means of achieving victory in war can be found in Giulio Due's theory of air warfare. This Italian general formulated the concept of the so-called **strategic bombing** in the 1910s and 1920s – the delivery of massive air strikes on targets deep behind enemy lines. In his opinion, destabilization of life support systems can cause social explosions that will force the enemy government to make concessions or surrender under pressure from its own population. D. Due believed that by establishing dominance in the air, aviation could decide the fate of the war by striking at state and economic centres in the rear (Biryukov, 2023).

It is enough to add modern means of air and space attack to classic aviation, and we will get an updated, technologically enhanced version of this concept under the conditions of the Russo-Ukrainian war. It is according to this logic that the Russian Federation carries out massive missile attacks on critical infrastructure facilities in Ukraine, in particular during the heating season. Such strikes create extreme conditions for the civilian population, and therefore have all the hallmarks of a **war crime**, which can be qualified as **energy terror** within the framework of the implementation of the concept of terrorist warfare.

The social support of terrorist armies is usually a criminalized environment, politically and economically motivated to participate in armed violence. This primarily concerns individuals with a criminal past as part of illegal (“voluntary”) armed groups. At the same time, the involvement of criminals in military affairs is not a new phenomenon – in modern history, military political regimes use asocial elements in armed conflicts actively.

Thus, during the heyday of the British maritime dominance (the 16th – 18th centuries), Queen Elizabeth I officially recruited captains of pirate ships and even entire pirate squadrons into service. The most famous among them were John Hawkins and Francis Drake, who were knighted.

During World War I, the armies of Great Britain and post-Romanov Russia practiced replenishing mobilization resources at the expense of the criminal element (Hula, & Perederii, 2025; Gula, & Perederii, 2018, pp. 56–57). Criminality was used especially actively during the years of the civil war in the territories of the former Russian Empire, primarily in the ranks of the “Red Guard” and the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. The increase in the level of general criminal and “revolutionary” crime in those years became the basis for radical violence, redistribution of property and chaos. Under these conditions, revolutionary ideas attracted broad masses of the marginalized population, which resulted in the formation of a new social base for terror. The destruction of state institutions caused a surge of revolutionary banditry – mass robberies, murders and settling political scores under the guise of ideology. For example, in Katerynoslav (nowadays – Dnipro) on December 28, 1917, after seizing power, the Red Guards shot more than 300 fighters of the Haidamak detachment, who had already laid down their weapons (Tepliakov, 2015, p. 49).

The Bolsheviks tried to use the “mobilization” potential of the criminal world systematically. A textbook example is cooperation with the famous Odesa criminal authority Mykhailo (Moses) Vinnytsky, better known as Mishka Yaponchuk. In his memoirs “Notes of a Chekist” F. T. Fomin wrote: “Mishka Yaponchuk had at least several thousand people at his disposal... He was called the “king” of Odesa thieves and robbers...” (Fomin, 1964, pp. 66–67). In 1919, after the capture of Odesa by the Red Army units, Vinnytsky appealed to the new authorities with a proposal to establish his own combat unit: “We want to fight honestly for the Soviet power. Could you give me a mandate to form the Red Army detachment? I have the people, the weapons too, I have no need for money” (Fomin, 1964, p. 69).

Thus, there was established Soviet Revolutionary Regiment 54 named after Lenin, which became part of Rifle Division 45 under the command of I. Ya. Yakir (Hrynshtein, 1927, p. 89). However, his “combat baptism” ended in defeat: the unit abandoned its positions in panic, and M. Vinnytsky was shot at Voznesensk station for refusing to obey orders.

Another example is Brigadier General H. I. Kotovsky, legendary in the Soviet propaganda. Until 1918, he had the status of a recidivist, but later he effectively fought against the Makhnovtsi and Antonovtsi (Panfilov, 2016).

The participation of former convicts in the hostilities of World War II is widely known. According to the Decrees of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of July 12 and November 24, 1941, tens of thousands of people were released from prison early to recruit the army. In 1942 – 1943, 157 thousand convicts were mobilized by the decision of the State Defense Committee. In total, from the beginning of the war to June 1944, 975 thousand former prisoners joined the ranks of the Red Army (Zemskov, 1991, p. 24).

In recent history, mercenaryism, without regard to criminal pasts, has become the basis for the formation of non-state armed structures, such as the French Foreign Legion.

The active involvement of the criminal element since 2014 in the ranks of the so-called “DPR and LPR corps” enables the British historian and analyst M. Galleoti to assert: “A large number of militants fighting for the DPR and LPR are members of organized criminal groups who simply took advantage of the opportunity to become rebels... It is absolutely obvious that Moscow considers local criminal groups as a useful force in its struggle” (Tlisoa, 2015).

With the beginning of the large-scale invasion of the Russian Federation, the practice of recruiting criminal elements was actively adopted by private military companies. According to open media and communication sources, in the autumn of 2022, when recruiting to the Wagner group, priority was given to prisoners convicted of serious crimes, in particular under the articles: “murder”, “robbery”, “robbery”, “grievous bodily harm”, as well as recidivists (Rofe, 2022). In July 2023, internal sources of the Wagner PMC reported that about 78 thousand people passed through its ranks, of which 49 thousand were former prisoners (Blizkiy, 2023).

With a high degree of probability, modern Russian PMCs (before their inclusion in the structure of the military organization of the Russian Federation from 01.07.2023) may be considered as an analogue of the so-called “terrorist armies” – armed formations created and maintained by terrorist regimes, organized criminal groups or criminal business structures. Their main purpose is to ensure the interests of these actors through systemic armed violence, in particular within the framework of the terrorist war.

Cynically, but objectively evaluating the role of criminality in past and present wars, we may state: this social group is involved not only for the application of cruel and illegal methods of warfare, but is also used as a “disposable resource” – for the **actual disposal** of individuals with deviant legal consciousness. Under the conditions of hostilities, they often serve as “cannon fodder”.

Conclusions and Prospects for Further Research. As a result of the study, it has been found that a terrorist war as a form of armed confrontation is a consciously chosen and purposefully implemented strategy of the aggressor, aimed at a systematic destruction of statehood, moral and psychological state of society and the functioning of basic infrastructures. It combines methods of total terror, hybrid threats, destruction of the rear and the use of criminalized resources for conducting military operations.

The concept of terrorist warfare is not an exclusively modern Russian product – its origins can be traced back to many historical examples, from colonial expansion to world

wars. Russia has adapted classic approaches (including “scorched earth” tactics, strategic rear bombing, and criminal involvement) to the realities of the 21st century, integrating them into its modern military doctrine. The criminal contingent is used not only as a source of “manpower”, but also as an instrument of cruelty, psychological pressure and extreme impersonality of war, which turns it into a mechanism of terror. Massive attacks on critical infrastructure facilities, especially in the energy sector, indicate the conscious use of energy terror elements, which grossly violates the norms of international humanitarian law.

Further scientific study of this issue requires a conceptual understanding of terrorist warfare as an independent phenomenon in the field of modern military history, political science and international law. An important direction is also the formalization of the terminological apparatus and a clear legal definition of the concept of “terrorist warfare” in national and international legislation. No less relevant is a deeper analysis of the sources and mechanisms of involvement of the criminal contingent in hostilities, in particular in the format of private military companies, as well as the study of the long-term consequences of such a policy for the security environment.

Particular focus should be on comparative research of similar conflicts in other regions of the world, where similar destructive strategies were used, which will enable us to identify recurring patterns and regularities. In this context, interdisciplinary approaches that will enable us to study the impact of the terrorist war on the transformation of the humanitarian, energy, information and security architecture of modern states.

A comprehensive interdisciplinary development of terrorist warfare issues will enable not only a deeper understanding of the nature of modern wars, but also the formation of effective models for countering aggression that uses the strategy of targeted terror as the main tool of pressure.

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