

## THE NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST VS. GENOCIDE PROBLEM: A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

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*The study considers the thought experiment “The Nuclear Holocaust vs. Genocide Problem,” invented under the influence of considerations about the Russia-Ukraine war. In the thought experiment, there are three participants: the Aggressor (the nuclear weapons possessor, the genocide initiator, the threatener of nuclear weapons), the Victim (the state under attack), and the Bystander. The rest is up to the Victim’s, the Bystander’s, and the Aggressor’s choice of moves. The Victim may just surrender and be eliminated by the Aggressor. The Victim can resist since her existence is at stake. The Bystander may stand aside, or he may intervene in one way or another: to help the Victim with resources, to fight back against the Aggressor, etc. The Aggressor’s moves will depend on the success of the Victim’s moves and the moves of the Bystander: he may or may not use nuclear weapons. The use of nuclear weapons may or may not lead to a nuclear holocaust. In any case, for each of the participants, any move may turn out to be a zugzwang, that is, a move that worsens her/his position. In this case, at different moves, each participant may face the threat of death (the Victim faces this threat at the first move of the Aggressor). At a certain move, the Bystander may find himself faced with the need to test the strength of his ethical principles and choose between his ethical principles and self-preservation.*

*Key words: genocide, nuclear holocaust, thought experiment, Trolley Problem.*

The world is faced with a dilemma (in a non-strict, non-logical meaning): a choice must be made between a nuclear holocaust (apocalypse) and genocide. The world is facing this dilemma because of the Russian Federation, led by Vladimir Putin. It was the Russian Federation that unleashed a war with Ukraine on February 20, 2014, and a full-scale invasion into Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The military resistance of the Ukrainians and assistance to Ukraine from other countries made it impossible for the Russians to win quickly in Ukraine. Moreover, Russian troops are suffering defeats in the Russia-Ukraine war.

The inability to win quickly in Ukraine has led the Russians to use or threaten to use the entire arsenal of conventional and unconventional means of warfare: mass murder, torture, rape, looting, and destruction of civilian infrastructure to suppress the local population’s will to resist (banal looting, sadism, sexual violence, and various forms of discrimination are not excluded; the Russian military enjoys impunity); the use of unconventional weapons (the alleged use of prohibited munitions, including chemical and biological weapons). Not the least of these arsenals are nuclear weapons, from probable accidents at the Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia atomic power plants and “dirty bombs” to possible strikes with tactical and strategic nuclear weapons, both against Ukraine and against Western countries.

It is essential to be aware that the rhetoric of using nuclear weapons is not something that Russia started using in 2022. Since the start of the war with Ukraine in 2014, Russian federal TV channels such as Rossiya-1 have spread the threat of the West turning into “nuclear ash” if the West militarily intervened in the Russia-Ukraine war [Сулейманов

2014]. The West itself hardly paid attention to this threat at first, due to the inherently hybrid nature of the Russia-Ukraine war, even though it was probably necessary due to the polonium poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in the year 2006 [Faulconbridge 2021]. There were exceptions, such as the BBC documentary “World War Three: Inside the War Room” (2016, directed by G. Range), which showed a hypothetical “hot war” in the East of Europe, including nuclear confrontation.

But the events of February 24, 2022, changed the West’s attitude to the threat of nuclear war and forced Western politicians to take this threat seriously. In addition, Western intellectuals, including philosophers and philosophizing thinkers, are primarily focused on the threat of nuclear war. Their reactions are manifold: attempts to understand the causes of the Russia-Ukraine war (as a rule, the culprits of the war here are Russia, the capitalist West led by the United States, and Ukraine; the latter is identified as one of the culprits of the war due to the dominance among leftist intellectuals of Russian propaganda narratives and lack of proper fact-checking, especially of a historical nature, see e.g. [Vighi 2022; Watkins 2022]; and separately see: [Peterson 2022]); the simple capturing of the intractability of the current situation (“zugzwang” primarily for European powers such as Germany and France, see: [Habermas 2022]); calls to negotiate with Russia, even to the detriment of Ukraine’s interests [Polychroniou 2022]; calls to fight Russia [Hamza 2022; Roger 2022; Žižek 2022]. The dominant narratives here are the following two: the first is Russia started the war, scared by NATO expansion to the East, which allegedly poses a possible threat to the existence of Russia, and the second is Russian Revanchism (an attempt to revive the Russian Empire / USSR).

Remarkably, few Western intellectuals pay attention to the Russian desire to extinguish Ukrainians as bearers of Ukrainian identity and culture, both physically and symbolically. Vladimir Putin has been relentlessly claiming that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are one ethnic group [Путин 2021]. Russian propaganda echoes his claims, adding that the West invented Ukrainians and implanted in the minds of Russians who lived in Ukraine the idea that they were Ukrainians [Україна на переломі епох 2022]. This is even supported by a particular philosophy in the manner of Danilevsky and Spengler, see [Смирнов 2022]. In fact, Russia not only wants to take over Ukraine and “enslave” Ukrainians; the Russians want to wipe out the Ukrainian identity and culture and redesign Ukrainians as Russians. One of Russia’s key objectives in the Russia-Ukraine war is to commit genocide against Ukrainians, both physically and symbolically.

In effect, that is why one could argue that the world was faced with a choice between a nuclear holocaust, that is, the annihilation of all humanity and, possibly, all living things on Earth, and genocide, that is, the annihilation of all Ukrainians and all Ukrainian belongings.

As I write this paper, the choice between nuclear holocaust and genocide has not been made. So, I suggest that we consider this dilemma as a thought experiment: imagine that a nuclear-armed state invades a neighboring state in order to take it over and annex it. In such a scenario, the authorities and inhabitants of the invading state deny the national identity and national culture, including the national language, of the inhabitants of the neighboring state and seek to exterminate them physically and symbolically. Invasion and genocide are accompanied by threats of nuclear weapons both against states willing to defend or at least provide some assistance to the invaded state and against the invaded state in case of need. The current situation places the world community faced with a

choice: either nuclear holocaust or genocide. What to choose? Possible solutions are the *subject* of this study, and their analysis is the *purpose* of the study.

At the outset, I would like to point out that I see the presented thought experiment as a “Trolley Problem” type of experiment. The “Trolley Problem” is a type of ethical (and psychological) thought experiment that suggests a choice between sacrificing one person or several. The choice itself is a choice between knowingly unacceptable alternatives, for the value of any human life is accepted.

The first version of the “Trolley Problem” is believed to have been proposed by philosopher Philippa Foot in 1967, although similar versions of the problem can be found earlier, such as those by Karl Engisch in 1930 [Engisch 1930] or by Hans Weizel in 1951 [Weizel 1951]. Ph. Foot's variant is now known as the “Trolley Driver” and looks like this: “[S]uppose that a judge or magistrate is faced with rioters demanding that a culprit be found for a certain crime and threatening otherwise to take their own bloody revenge on a particular section of the community. The real culprit being unknown, the judge sees himself as able to prevent the bloodshed only by framing some innocent person and having him executed. Beside this example is placed another in which a pilot whose airplane is about to crash is deciding whether to steer from a more to a less inhabited area. To make the parallel as close as possible, it may rather be supposed that he is the driver of a runaway tram, which he can only steer from one narrow track on to another; five men are working on one track and one man on the other; anyone on the track he enters is bound to be killed. In the case of the riots, the mob have five hostages, so that in both examples, the exchange is supposed to be one man's life for the lives of five” [Foot 1981, 23].

Subsequently, similar thought experiments were developed on the basis of the “Trolley Problem” in which new terms were added to the problem, such as variations by Judith Jarvis Thomson (“Bystander at the Switch,” “The Fat Man,” “Transplant,” “Hospital,” “The Loop Variant”) [Thomson 1985], Jason Millar (“Tunnel problem”) [Millar 2014; Lin 2014], Michael Huemer (“Innocent Conviction”) [Leske 2015].

I will repeat the content of the thought experiment: Picture a nuclear-armed state invading a neighboring state in order to invade and annex it. In such a scenario, the authorities and inhabitants of the invading state deny the national identity and national culture, including the national language, of the inhabitants of the neighboring state and seek to eliminate them physically and symbolically. Invasion and genocide are accompanied by threats to use nuclear weapons both against states that are willing to defend or at least provide some assistance to the invaded state and against the invaded state in case of need. The current situation places the world community in a choice between a nuclear holocaust and genocide. Which to choose?

For the sake of brevity, I will refer to the invading state as the Aggressor, the invaded state as the Victim, and other states willing to provide any assistance to the invaded state as the Bystander.

It is necessary to stipulate the following further: J.J. Thomson, in her study of the various variants of the “Trolley Problem,” has shown that the particular variants of the solution of particular variants of the “Trolley Problem” are not dependent on the pure abstraction of the thought experiment, as is the case with the variant of Ph. Foot, but on the interpretation of the point of view of each participant in the thought experiment, and on the particular circumstances in which the events of the thought experiment unfold: the choice facing a possible hand switch and the choice facing a transplant surgeon are not

equivalent precisely due to the circumstances [Thomson 1985]. In what follows, I suggest that the participants' points of view and circumstances should be taken into account.

In short, there are three participants: the Aggressor, the Victim, and the Bystander. First, let's look at the Aggressor. The Aggressor attacks the Victim. The Aggressor's reasons for attacking may be different: the conquest of territory, the change of the state (political) regime, coercion to peace, the war against terrorism, etc. According to the suggested terms of the problem, the Aggressor's position is unambiguous - the seizure of the Victim and its liquidation (that is, the forcible annexation of the territories of another state and the physical and symbolic extermination of the inhabitants in the annexed territories). At the same time, the Aggressor can shield himself with words about protecting the local population from the authorities of the state the Aggressor invaded, as well as protecting that population from other states, which allegedly conduct an aggressive policy both against the Aggressor and against the Victim.

The Aggressor's actions are generally dependent on the Victim and the Bystander. The Aggressor attacks the Victim in the eyes of the Bystander. At the same time, the Aggressor is aware that the bystander may be just as strong as the Aggressor, if not stronger. Therefore, the Aggressor threatens to use (nuclear) weapons against the Bystander. The bystander is now faced with alternatives. The first alternative is that the Bystander can do nothing and let the Aggressor do his thing, and here one can even appeal not to the fear of starting a nuclear war, but rather simply declare that this is a matter between the Aggressor and the Victim alone. The Bystander here can act as either a Passer-by or an Observer. Essentially, under the given circumstances, the Bystander must turn a blind eye to genocide.

This only works, however, if the Bystander did not commit to helping the Victim preceding the Aggressor's attack. If commitments were taken, the Bystander is obliged to do something about the attack; otherwise, his reputation will be damaged. Here, then, the Bystander can choose to act as the Victim's Helper or the Victim's Defender. The Defender must intrude and fight back. However, the Bystander must consider the option of nuclear war. In this situation, the Bystander can choose the role of Helper, i.e., helping the Victim financially, with weapons, etc.

In fact, under the circumstances, the Bystander is confronted with an ethical problem: “Should we turn a blind eye to genocide?” and an existential problem: “If we do not turn a blind eye to genocide and try to prevent it, will it lead to a nuclear war and a nuclear holocaust, that is, the annihilation of both the Bystander and all living things on Earth? The Bystander must choose between his ethical principles and self-preservation.

Meanwhile, there is also the Victim, who is aware that the Aggressor aims to liquidate her. Here the Victim, oddly enough, has two alternatives: either to let the Aggressor liquidate herself or to fight back against the Aggressor, especially if she has nothing to lose anyway. If Victim were to choose the first alternative, it would be easier for both the Aggressor and the Bystander: the Aggressor would simply accomplish his aim of eliminating the Victim, and the Bystander would not have to choose between his ethical principles and self-preservation and to interfere. However, the Victim, unlike the Bystander, does not choose between the ethical and the existential; the Victim fights for her existence. The Victim's resistance to the Aggressor makes the Bystander balance between the ethical and the existential and solve the unsolvable problem of how to help the Victim in her resistance against the Aggressor so as not to provoke a nuclear

holocaust. And the more successful the Victim's resistance is, the more delicate the balance of the Bystander is.

Also, the successful resistance of the Victim places the Aggressor faced with a choice: to implement his threat to nuke or not. If the threat is not implemented, the Aggressor's aim may not be achieved and the Aggressor's reputation will be damaged. The Aggressor's threat will turn out to be just a Bluff and then the Bystander may turn into a Defender. If the threat to the Aggressor is implemented, then how to implement it in such a way as to achieve your goal and not be destroyed by the Bystander? Here the Aggressor can check the reaction of the Bystander only with action. For example, to strike the territory of an invaded state with a tactical nuclear weapon. If the Bystander does not retaliate and if the Victim does not surrender, then the Aggressor can continue to strike nuclear bombs up to the total annihilation of the Victim. It would be better for the Aggressor if, after a tactical nuclear strike, the Bystander did not retaliate and the Victim surrendered.

Failure to retaliate against the use of nuclear weapons is not a solution for the Bystander, since it creates opportunities for the Aggressor to use nuclear weapons as a threat, and not only against other non-nuclear-weapon states. When nuclear weapons have been used, and this has proven to be an effective tool in achieving the goals set by the nuclear-weapon user, the threat to other states is quite real, and the resistance of those states is suicidal. Other states will now know that the threat of a nuclear weapon is not a bluff. The failure of the Bystander to retaliate sets the stage for more victims of the Aggressor. It may also encourage some states to acquire nuclear weapons for self-defense, and other states to use the Aggressor's strategy of threatening with nuclear weapons.

If the Bystander chooses to retaliate with tactical nuclear weapons, he must be able to figure out how to prevent a nuclear holocaust from occurring. Here, also, the test must be done in practice. It is possible to strike first with non-nuclear weapons. If the Aggressor does not retaliate with nuclear weapons, then you can continue with non-nuclear strikes. If the Aggressor retaliates with nuclear weapons, then nuclear war is inevitable, because the Bystander will have to defend himself with nuclear weapons. Of course, the Bystander might not retaliate with nuclear weapons, but that could mean either the death of the Bystander or a nuclear war of all against all.

To conclude, there is the thought experiment "The Nuclear Holocaust vs. Genocide Problem," in which there are three participants: the Aggressor (the nuclear weapons possessor, the genocide initiator, the threatener of nuclear weapons), the Victim, and the Bystander. The rest is up to the Victim's, the Bystander's, and the Aggressor's choice of moves. The Victim may just surrender and be eliminated by the Aggressor. The Victim can resist since her existence is at stake. The Bystander may stand aside, or he may intervene in one way or another: to help the Victim with resources, to fight back against the Aggressor, etc. The Aggressor's moves will depend on the success of the Victim's moves and the moves of the Bystander: he may or may not use nuclear weapons. The use of nuclear weapons may or may not lead to a nuclear holocaust. In any case, for each of the participants, any move may turn out to be a zugzwang, that is, a move that worsens her/his position. In this case, at different moves, each participant may face the threat of death (the Victim faces this threat at the first move of the Aggressor). At a certain move, the Bystander may find himself faced with the need to test the strength of his ethical principles and choose between his ethical principles and self-preservation.

I have suggested for consideration the thought experiment as the Problem of Choosing between Nuclear Holocaust and Genocide and the possible consequences depending on the choices that the participants involved in the thought experiment can make. Other scholars might be interested in this thought experiment and propose their possible solutions to the problem of this experiment or their variants of this experiment.

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#### **ПРОБЛЕМА «ЯДЕРНИЙ ГОЛОКОСТ VS. ГЕНОЦИД»: РОЗУМОВИЙ ЕКСПЕРИМЕНТ**

*У дослідженні розглядається розумовий експеримент «Проблема “Ядерний голокост vs. Геноцид”», винайдений під впливом міркувань щодо російсько-української війни. В розумовому експерименті є три учасники: Агресор (володар ядерної зброї, ініціатор геноциду, погрожує ядерною зброєю), Жертва (держава, на яку нападають) і Сторонній спостерігач. Решта залежить від вибору ходів Жертви, Стороннього спостерігача й Агресора. Жертва може просто здатися та бути знищеною Агресором. Жертва може чинити опір, адже на карту поставлено її існування. Сторонній спостерігач може стояти осторонь, а може втрутитися в той чи інший спосіб: допомогти Жертві ресурсами, дати відсіч Агресору тощо. Від успішності дії Жертви і дії Стороннього залежатимуть дії Агресора: він може застосувати ядерну зброю, а може і не застосувати. Застосування ядерної зброї може спричинити, а може і не спричинити ядерний голокост. У будь-якому випадку, для кожного з учасників будь-який хід може виявитися цугцвангом, тобто ходом, що погіршує його становище. При цьому на різних ходах перед кожним учасником може постати загроза загибелі (перед Жертвою ця загроза постає на першому ж ході Агресора). На певному ході Сторонній спостерігач може опинитися перед необхідністю перевірити на силу свої етичні принципи і зробити вибір між своїми етичними принципами і самозбереженням.*  
*Ключові слова: геноцид, ядерний голокост, Проблема вагонетки, розумовий експеримент.*

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