

The Cost of Atrocity: Strategic Implications of Russian Battlefield Misconduct in Ukraine

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Since commencing its illegal invasion in 2022, the Russian military and authorities have committed numerous war crimes against the people of Ukraine. These include the mutilation and execution of combatants; the torture, kidnapping, forced expulsion, rape, and massacre of civilians; and indiscriminate attacks on densely populated areas. This misconduct has been primarily framed, quite understandably, in moral terms—Ukraine, along with much of the world, has condemned the perpetrators, and the Russian state itself, for their abject behavior throughout the conflict. Less focus has been given to the *strategic* implications of Russian battlefield misconduct. In this essay, I evaluate these implications, focusing exclusively on the Western responses.

Analysis of battlefield misconduct in Ukraine can help us better understand not only the strategic cost of Russian crimes but also the status of the rules themselves. For as long as the just war tradition and the laws of war have operated, they have been criticized by some as excessively burdensome obstacles to victory.¹ According to this criticism, normativity and instrumentality are in permanent tension, with the former typically receding in favor of the latter. Too often missing from this criticism is recognition of the degree to which battlefield misconduct complicates, and sometimes makes impossible, the fulfillment of strategic-political goals in armed conflict. On the opposite end of the spectrum are those who view war crime abstinence and civilian harm avoidance as *necessarily* supportive of strategic

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Ethics & International Affairs, 38, no. 1 (2024), pp. 6–16.

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doi:10.1017/S0892679424000054

imperatives in war.² Missing here is recognition of the multitude of rule violations that fail to generate any negative strategic consequences for the offending party.

In reality, war crimes can and often do negatively impact the strategic goals of the perpetrator, but whether and how this occurs is rarely governed exclusively by the offending action. Western perceptions of battlefield atrocity, shaped as they are by identity, race, and politics, may radically shift from one context to another. In the case of the Russia-Ukraine war, the status of both the participants and the conflict itself has helped inculcate a *particular* sensitivity among Western actors to the battlefield criminality of Russia. I do not argue that Western opposition to Russia's invasion is motivated exclusively or even primarily by *in bello* factors. International efforts to aid Ukraine have been driven predominantly by moral outrage over the *ad bellum* misconduct of Russia (that is, the initial invasion), as well as the more instrumental goal of degrading (militarily, financially, and politically) a geopolitical rival. But Russia's systematic violation of battlefield rules *has* likely exacted a strategic cost, helping to consolidate Western support for the Ukrainian military effort, politically, diplomatically, and materially.

In the first section of this essay, I evaluate why Russia's campaign of wartime atrocity has outraged Western audiences and galvanized Western action, while failing to catalyze a similar response in much of the non-West. In the second section, I consider Western reactions to Russian battlefield misconduct, focusing specifically on the strategic implications of the 2022 Bucha massacre and the ongoing bombing by Russia of Ukrainian civilians.

THE SHOCK (AND NON-SHOCK) OF WAR CRIMES

There are more than one hundred armed conflicts currently being fought globally.³ None of these—whether in Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sahel, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or elsewhere—receive a fraction of the media attention of Ukraine.⁴ Nor do the victims. War crimes and atrocities abound, from the ethnic cleansing perpetrated by Azerbaijan against the Armenians⁵ to the systematic human rights violations of Yemenis by the Saudi and United Arab Emirates-led coalition.⁶ In contrast to Russian misdeeds, the West has remained largely silent in the face of this criminality.⁷ What factors explain this normative inconsistency?

For war crimes to shock, they must be seen as an intolerable deviation from the expected. Armed conflict, cruel and destructive enterprise that it is, will always

produce a high degree of unjust harm. Warfare waged in and around urban centers is especially and unavoidably ruinous. Part of what makes the conduct of the Russian military in this conflict so shocking to so many is the amount of harm it has inflicted upon Ukrainians beyond the (high) level that we might expect from a conflict of this scale.⁸ The volume and gratuitousness of Russian war crimes have rightly appalled observers.

The impact of battlefield misconduct is also, however, a matter of interpretation. For war crimes to shock, they must be observed by a shockable audience. Shockability will be influenced by a number of factors, including the identity, race, and political status of the perpetrators and victims of the war crimes in question.

The evidence suggests that policymakers and the public typically view war crimes as less condemnable when committed by their own side.⁹ Another contributor to shock is the status of the conflict itself. Audiences are generally more forgiving of battlefield indiscretion by “just” parties, and vice versa¹⁰—a view in stark contrast to the explicit rules of war, which hold *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* as independent regulatory frameworks. Russia’s cause and aims in its war against Ukraine are seen as categorically unjust by much of the West. This conflict also represents the culmination of a steady toxification in relations between the West and Russia. These factors, coupled with the systematic and grave nature of Russian misconduct, render Western audiences especially susceptible to normative shock.

Race and geography also matter. International humanitarian law emerged from a colonial and racially hierarchical context. While the equal application principle holds today (meaning that the rules of war apply equally to all belligerent parties to a conflict, regardless of race, nationality, or culture), civilizational stereotypes have been slower to update. There endures a widespread and problematic assumption in much of the West that the warfare of and between countries and peoples in the non-West is inherently more cruel, purposeless, and unrestrained. Such a belief is more likely to inspire sad resignation than moral outrage among those who witness the commission of war crimes. A key element in the shockability of Western audiences in relation to Russian atrocities in Ukraine has been the inclusion of the latter in the European zone of identity:

They seem so like us. That is what makes it so shocking. Ukraine is a European country. Its people watch Netflix and have Instagram accounts, vote in free elections and read uncensored newspapers. War is no longer something visited upon impoverished and remote populations. It can happen to anyone.¹¹

This feeling of sameness extended to Ukrainians is a relatively recent development.¹² Long excluded from the concept of “European,” Ukrainians are now “dying for European values.”¹³ The civilizational gulf has closed; “Ukraine is us and we are Ukraine.”¹⁴ It should be noted that Ukraine has been an active and effective participant in this reconceptualization. Ukrainian officials and supporters, chief among them President Zelenskyy, have worked to frame the Ukrainian struggle as the front line in the military and ideational defense of Europe and the liberal international order.¹⁵ Non-Western audiences have, perhaps unsurprisingly, been less persuaded by this framing.

In order to understand the lower level of normative shock among non-Western states to Russian war crimes in Ukraine, it is necessary to consider the historical context of the conflict. For many, Russia’s imperial war against Ukraine is more continuation than rupture—merely the latest episode in a long history of immorality, illegality, and impunity among the Great Powers. U.S. and European efforts to condemn Russian war crimes in Ukraine, while resisting a full account of their own in Iraq and Afghanistan, have led to accusations of “rank hypocrisy.”¹⁶ This charge has only grown in strength in the wake of Western support for Israel’s military campaign in Gaza, which has included documented war crimes.¹⁷

Compounding this has been Russia’s deliberate effort to frame the invasion of Ukraine as moral resistance to Western imperialism. Moscow’s “memory diplomacy,”¹⁸ which instrumentalizes the history of Soviet support for African struggles against Western colonialism to promote the view of Russia as an anti-imperial force, has contributed to the relatively low levels of shockability we have seen among these populations to Russian misconduct and atrocity in Ukraine.

Though it ought to be otherwise, war crimes have never automatically shocked the conscience of onlookers. Like any other crime, their status is shaped by a range of factors, explicit and implicit, legitimate and illegitimate. This is not to downplay the severity of Russian war crimes—the abuses systematically and creatively inflicted by the Russian military against the people of Ukraine have rightly shocked Western audiences. But identity, race, culture, and politics have also mattered in distinguishing these crimes from others. In the next section, I consider the strategic effects of Western shock, focusing on the 2022 Bucha massacre and the ongoing Russian bombing of Ukrainian civilians.

THE STRATEGIC COST OF RUSSIAN MISCONDUCT

Just as with earlier conflicts in Chechnya¹⁹ and Syria,²⁰ Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been marked by a doctrinal commitment to battlefield war crimes and atrocity. This includes consistent indiscriminate attacks;²¹ the direct targeting of ambulances²² and hospitals;²³ and the torture and murder of Ukrainian civilians and soldiers.²⁴ Forced deportations by Russia have also been a feature of this campaign,²⁵ as has the mass abduction of Ukrainian children.²⁶

We cannot know with any certainty how this war, and Western reactions to it, might have evolved differently had Russia followed, rather than systematically violated, the rules of war. It is likely, though, that such a course would have benefited Russia strategically, particularly in relation to the West. Russian war crimes are not the cause of Western aid, but they have, I argue, helped consolidate Western political, diplomatic, and material support for the Ukrainian war effort. For evidence of this, we can first turn to the Bucha massacre.

The Bucha Massacre

The March 2022 Bucha massacre was an important moral and strategic juncture in the early stages of the Russia-Ukraine war. The mass murder of Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war by Russian forces took place during the battle for and subsequent occupation of the town. Between March 5 and 30, the UN documents the killing of seventy-three civilians by Russia,²⁷ including the summary execution of at least fifty.²⁸ The “unspeakable cruelty and shocking brutality”²⁹ of the extrajudicial executions outraged international onlookers and galvanized Western supporters of Ukraine into further action.

U.S. national security advisor Jake Sullivan characterized the events as a “tragic” and “shocking” act of “brutality.” He went on to promise additional military assistance “in the coming days,” arguing that “as the images from Bucha so powerfully reinforce, now is not the time for complacency.”³⁰ This was echoed by then-British prime minister Boris Johnson, who claimed that Putin's actions in “places like Bucha” had “permanently polluted his reputation and the reputation of his government.”³¹ Western media amplified this outrage, framing the massacre as a “turning point” in the invasion that demanded a committed European response to the defense of Ukraine.³² Bucha shifted the international politics around the war, helping to combat apathy from those already committed to the support of Ukraine, while also triggering stronger opposition to Russia from states such as Israel, which had until that point been mostly silent.³³

Beyond the rhetorical denouncements, the Bucha massacre also intensified the diplomatic isolation of Russia. In response to the incident, numerous European Union members ordered the expulsion of, collectively, over two hundred Russian diplomats.³⁴ Japan replicated this move in the days after the Bucha revelations, citing Russia's actions in Ukraine, including the killing of civilians.³⁵

Russian battlefield misconduct in Ukraine also had a significant material cost, intensifying Western efforts to sanction the former and militarily aid the latter. The EU's fifth round of sanctions against Russia included a prohibition on the purchase, import, or transfer of Russian coal and other fossil fuels; a denial of Russian vessels at EU ports; a ban on Russian and Belarusian goods entering the EU over land; and a multitude of other economic sanctions. According to High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell:

These latest sanctions were adopted following the atrocities committed by Russian armed forces in Bucha and other places under Russian occupation. The aim of our sanctions is to stop the reckless, inhuman and aggressive behavior of the Russian troops.³⁶

In the days following the Bucha revelations, the British committed a further \$130 million in military support, including Starstreak anti-aircraft missiles, short-range air-defense systems, anti-tank missiles, and other precision-guided munitions.³⁷ A month after the massacre, German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock promised to supply twelve howitzers while on a trip to Ukraine with her Dutch counterpart, the first stop of which was the town of Bucha.³⁸

Just as strategically important as what the Bucha massacre created or intensified in the West is what it foreclosed. The systematic mass murder of defenseless Ukrainians disempowered those in the West who were calling for a negotiated settlement or ceasefire. As Polish president Andrzej Duda clarified, "Pictures from Bucha disprove the belief that we have to seek compromise at any cost. In fact, the defenders of Ukraine need three things above all: weapons, weapons, and more weapons."³⁹

Russia's Bombing Campaign

Alongside the distinct episodes of Russian misconduct, such as Bucha, the protracted bombing of Ukrainian cities has further consolidated Western support for the imperiled state. From the beginning of the conflict, Russia has embraced a campaign of civilian targeting, launching missiles and Iranian-sourced Shahed drones at Ukrainian government and residential buildings, energy grids,

humanitarian aid depots, and hospitals.⁴⁰ The purpose of these strikes is twofold: First, they force Ukraine to commit finite military resources to safeguarding its population and infrastructure. Second, the strikes constitute a form of “terror bombing,” violence imposed strategically to degrade the morale of Ukraine. “The ultimate intention,” argues Jade McGlynn, “is to break the will of the population so that they will at some point give in and accept Russia.”⁴¹

Though highly destructive, these strikes have not produced the strategic effects Russia intended. They have failed, polling suggests, to undermine Ukrainian resistance,⁴² with one Ukrainian journalist claiming the opposite effect: “Russia wants to scare Ukraine with missiles . . . But each such massive attack on Ukraine, on the contrary, unites people against Russia and puts all internal disputes on the back burner.”⁴³ They have also had a galvanizing effect on the West. The military aid committed by Western countries to Ukraine has included anti-drone capabilities and air defense, for the explicit purpose of assisting Ukraine to “defend itself against Russia’s indiscriminate strikes against its civilian infrastructure.”⁴⁴

We should be careful here not to overstate the commitment of the West to Ukraine. Western actors have been criticized throughout the conflict for failing to substantiate their supportive rhetoric with supportive action.⁴⁵ As the war passes its six-hundredth day, concerns over “Ukraine fatigue” are intensifying, particularly in relation to a likely reduction in military support from the United States.⁴⁶ Russian battlefield misconduct is unlikely to be the primary determinant of whether international support for Ukraine holds steady or declines. What Russian war crimes *do* provide, however, are a form of “shock renewal”—they are a resource that can be drawn upon by campaigners to press for greater aid to Ukraine.

This can be witnessed in relation to the recent and, at the time of writing, largest air attack by Russia of the war. On December 29, 2023, the invading state launched a combination of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones, striking civilian infrastructure and military facilities across Ukraine. In response, the United Kingdom committed to sending approximately two hundred air defense missiles to Ukraine, a package that, according to U.K. defense secretary Grant Shapps, “sends an undeniable message” that Britain “is absolutely committed” in its support.⁴⁷ As other European leaders have argued, Russia’s “latest act of terror”⁴⁸ reinforces the need “to provide additional military equipment to support Ukraine.”⁴⁹ U.S. president Joe Biden has joined these calls, referencing the recent attack to push Congress to pass the latest funding package for Ukraine.⁵⁰

We should not exaggerate the strategic implications of Bucha, civilian targeting from the air, or any other of the multitude of war crimes committed by Russia during this war. But this misconduct, in all likelihood, *has* negatively impacted the strategic prospects of Russia, helping to consolidate and sustain Western efforts to support Ukrainian resistance.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have detailed the strategic cost of Russian atrocity in Ukraine. However, it is worth remembering that the best and truest arguments against battlefield misconduct will, and always should, remain moral. Targeting the innocent and defenseless with violence—something Russia has done throughout this conflict as a matter of policy—is an inherent wrong. Russian war crimes have likely undermined the state’s military and political goals in this conflict, a good reason not to embark on such a wretched course in the first place. But even if it were otherwise, and Russian crimes facilitated rather than impeded the attainment of victory, they would remain inexcusable.

This lesson also applies to war crime opposition. An atrocity is an atrocity, worthy of condemnation no matter the political status of the perpetrator, or the race of the victim. Beginning with the Global South, charges of hypocrisy can only get you so far before you have to assert your own moral principles. Ukraine is engaged in an anti-imperial, anti-colonial struggle, and the refusal of portions of the non-West to recognize this and extend support warrants significant criticism. So, too, do the moral inconsistencies of the West. The Russian state has deserved every form of censure it has received throughout this war. The force of this opposition, however, has been weakened by a consistent failure in the West to extend the same judgment to other perpetrators and the same regard for safety and dignity to other victims.

NOTES

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Abstract: Since commencing its illegal invasion in 2022, the Russian military and authorities have committed numerous war crimes against the people of Ukraine. These include the mutilation and execution of combatants; the torture, kidnapping, forced expulsion, rape, and massacre of civilians; and indiscriminate attacks on densely populated areas. In this essay, I evaluate the strategic implications of this misconduct, focusing exclusively on Western responses. I argue that war crimes can and often do negatively impact the strategic goals of the perpetrator, but whether and how this occurs is rarely governed exclusively by the offending action. Western perceptions of battlefield atrocity, shaped as they are by identity, race, and politics, may radically shift from one context to another. In the case of the Russia-Ukraine war, the status of both the participants and the conflict itself has helped inculcate a *particular* sensitivity among Western actors to the battlefield criminality of Russia. Drawing on evidence from the 2022 Bucha massacre and the ongoing bombing of Ukrainian civilians, I argue that Russian misconduct has consolidated Western support for the Ukrainian military effort, politically, diplomatically, and materially.

Keywords: war, armed conflict, Russia, Ukraine, war crimes, laws of war, international humanitarian law, Bucha, atrocities