

Russia's Way of War

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As Russian forces drawback from Northern Ukraine, they leave behind evidence of their way of war. Prior to the Russian retreat, as reports surfaced of Ukrainian hospitals and theaters serving as shelters being hit by Russian artillery, the West was concerned but accustomed to the idea of collateral damage in wars after 20 years of reports of US collateral damage in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. But the war in Ukraine is in Europe and is closer to the western audience. As shelling ceased in the north, reporters rushed in to document the atrocities that occurred in the war. The images and reports shocked the West, but they should not have been shocked, because the Russian way of war whether in Chechnya, Syria, or Ukraine includes terrorizing the civilian population. Russian military structure and media control enable it.<sup>1</sup>

The Russians are repeating in Ukraine the way of war they used in Chechnya and Syria. Russia killed between 5,000 and 8,000 civilians in their three-month siege of Grozny, Chechnya from December 1999-February 2000. At the time, Grozny was the most destroyed European city since WWII.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 20 years later, the Syrian human rights watch reported that Russia had killed 18,000 people in Syria, 8,000 of which were civilians over three years. Meanwhile, Russia reported internally that Russian forces had killed 85,000 people in Syria, all terrorists.<sup>3</sup> In Ukraine after just 30 days of fighting in February-March 2022, early reports verify that Russian forces killed at least 953 civilians and have destroyed at least 1,500 civilian buildings, including 23 hospitals or healthcare infrastructure and 330 schools.<sup>4</sup> In comparison, in Raqqa, Syria over 136 days in early fall 2017, U.S. and coalition forces killed a verified 774 civilians and damaged 11,000 buildings including 8 hospitals and 40 schools. Raqqa is one of the darkest spots as far as collateral damage on U.S. efforts in the war with ISIS.<sup>5</sup> While comparing different war zones is problematic, this illustrates that while war is hell, Russia's way of executing it is particularly hellish. Several structural aspects of Russia and its military enable this.

In garrison, the Russian military trains violently and when uncontrolled chaos erupts on the battlefields, there is no NCO corps or independent media to counter it. The Russian army notoriously harasses and is violent towards recruits in a practice called *dedovshchina*.<sup>6</sup> If Russian soldiers treat their brothers and sister in arms with excessive violence, how would they treat rivals, especially if their leader designated the enemies Nazis and fascists? Zones are created in the war areas where uncontrolled violence is allowed to flourish. Traditional war and organized crime and terrorism merge and the field commanders, the entrepreneurs of violence, reap both monetary and battlefield rewards, allowing thugs to exploit the chaos rather than try to secure the situation.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the fact that Russia lacks an NCO corps contributes to the lack of meaningful discipline within the force, and therefore a lack of accountability.<sup>8</sup> Young officers rather than older, experienced sergeants are attempting to keep good order in wartime while also trying to lead. Finally, to continue this way of war without prohibitive repercussions, Russia extends its battle to the even more important information space. Proxy forces allow the plausible deniability the information campaign relies upon. The state run information campaign adapts to sustain over multiple years the “patriotic consciousness” of the Russian people who have limited alternative media options, and makes the rest of the world question what is true and fake.<sup>9</sup> Propaganda, hyperbole, and lies spread faster than well-researched truths.

Humanitarian watch groups accuse Russia of war crimes in all Russia’s recent wars endeavors. This way of war is enabled by the information campaign blended with the poorly structured Russian military on the kinetic battlefield. As General Dvoniko takes command of Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine, the Russian way of war shows no signs of changing. Dvornikov is infamous for his brutality in leading the Russian military in Syria and the Donbas.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> “Opinion | The Atrocities in Bucha Are No Aberration. This Is the Russian Way of War.,” *Washington Post*, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/04/03/atrocities-are-the-russian-way-of-war/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Scars Remain amid Chechen Revival,” *BBC*, March 3, 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/6414603.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/6414603.stm).

<sup>3</sup> “On the 3rd Anniversary of Russia’s Intervention in Syria, SNHR Unveils an Incident Database for International Law Violations,” *Syrian Network for Human Rights* (blog), September 30, 2018, <https://snhr.org/blog/2018/09/30/52709/>; “Russia Has Killed at Least 18,000 People since It Intervened Militarily in Syria Three Years Ago,” *The Independent*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-killed-thousands-civilians-syria-civil-war-military-intervention-a8562901.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “Russia’s Attacks on Civilian Targets Have Obliterated Everyday Life in Ukraine” *The New York Times*, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/03/23/world/europe/ukraine-civilian-attacks.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Michael J. McNerney et al., “Understanding Civilian Harm in Raqqa and Its Implications for Future Conflicts” *RAND Corporation*, March 31, 2022, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA753-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA753-1.html).

<sup>6</sup> Sergei Medvedev, *The Return of the Russian Leviathan*, New Russian Thought (Wiley, 2019), 142.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 20-25.

<sup>8</sup> “Russian Armed Forces,” *Army University Press*, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2019/March/Russian-NCOs/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Russian Hybrid Warfare,” *Institute for the Study of War*, accessed April 11, 2022, <http://dev-isw.bivings.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> “Russia Puts General Aleksandr Dvornikov in Charge of Ukraine Invasion,” *The Hill*, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3263345-russia-puts-general-aleksandr-dvornikov-in-charge-of-ukraine-invasion-reports/>.