What Makes Armies Commit Atrocities?

The crimes in Ukraine stem from Russian military brutalities.

Bret Devereaux April 6, 2022, 4:14 PM

Bucha resident Tetiana Ustymenko weeps over the grave of her son.

Bucha resident Tetiana Ustymenko weeps over the grave of her son, buried in the garden of her house, in Bucha, Ukraine, on April 6. Ronaldo Schemidt/AFP via Getty Images

As the retreat of Russian forces in northern Ukraine reveals evidence of mass executions of civilians in places like

Bucha, the question of what causes armies to devolve into the brutality of war crimes and massacres has acquired new salience. It's not clear yet which of the atrocities in Ukraine were ordered from the top, as reports of Russian kill lists suggest, and which were ordered by local commanders or carried out by individual soldiers or groups. In war, the latter often occurs because of the tacit permission elites grant. Although all wars involve some degree of brutality, some armies, like the current Russian forces, are much more prone to committing atrocities than others.

All wars, by their very nature, contain some degree of atrocity. As Prussian Gen. Carl von Clausewitz notes, war as an act of force drives each side to extremes of brutality by its very nature. Yet for some militaries, acts of violence against civilians and other war crimes are aberrations, moments when the inherent brutality of war breaks through the institutional and cultural barriers designed to direct and control them. Other militaries seem unable to help themselves, brutalizing civilians wherever they go even when doing so is actively damaging to their overall strategic aims.

Historians of both the recent and ancient past have identified clear patterns in what sort of armies devolve most completely into the brutality of war; atrocities do not just happen, nor are they inherent to any given country. Rather,

they are the product of organizational culture, command decisions, and an institutional structure that shields a military from civilian checks or accountability.

One driver of a military's propensity for atrocity is the brutality of discipline within the military organization. Violence, like proverbial feces, rolls downhill, and soldiers brutalized by internal military hierarchies taking out their frustrations on civilians is a consistent pattern. The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) provides one such case study. Recruit induction and training in the IJA was notably violent and repressive, and as Japanese historian Saburo Ienaga notes, "Individuals whose own dignity and manhood had been so cruelly violated would hardly refrain from doing the same to defenseless persons under their control. After all, they were just applying what they had learned in basic training."

The IJA's organizational culture emphasized a high degree of "power distance" between superiors and subordinates, where recruits and privates found themselves on the receiving end of treatment that was harsh even by the standards of other militaries; when put in a position of power over unarmed civilians, they replicated the pattern to atrocious effect. In a twisted irony, the brutal discipline of a

system that was supposed to encourage obedience made Japanese armies, especially junior officers, more difficult to control, "undermining their effectiveness and professionalism," writes East Asia expert David Hunter-Chester.

Historian Isabel Hull documents a similar dynamic within the Imperial German Army. An emphasis on *kadavergehorsam*, or "corpse-like-obedience," arose from an effort to control the unavoidable chaos of military operations through extreme order imposed by violence. That was extended into a "unrealistic expectation of perfect order" in occupied areas that, when it inevitably failed, was reinforced by brutal reprisals and punishments, justified as military necessity even as violence escalated against occupied civilians, and (proceeding on its own logic) undermined actual military objectives.

The same dynamics can be glimpsed even in ancient Sparta. The Spartan system for raising citizen boys, the *agoge*, was an extended hazing ritual where boys were intentionally underfed, encouraged to steal but severely beaten if caught, and forced to violently discipline younger boys. The result was that abroad, Spartans resorted to violence against both friends and foes, leading Spartan hegemony to collapse almost before it had begun, as brutal and incompetent Spartan leadership, modeled after life in

the agoge, alienated allies and enemies alike.

Although organizational culture among rank-and-file soldiers is clearly an enabling factor, command decisions and thus strategic culture among officers is the decisive point. Armies prone to atrocity are more often not the consequence of undisciplined soldiers escaping the control of their officers but rather of obedient soldiers following the brutal commands of their officers. When bogged down, officers attempt to restore momentum and compel results in the field the same way they would in the barracks: through increasing levels of violence, which rapidly spiral into atrocity.

Hull documents this cycle, for instance, in the brutal German suppression of the Herero people in Southwest Africa (1904 to 1907) in what is today Namibia. The frustration at the German army's failure to achieve a decisive, final victory at Waterberg (August 1904) led to escalating brutality to salvage a clear victory, with the local commander, Lt. Gen. Lothar von Trotha, authorizing a policy of extermination out of frustration once it became clear that achieving a clear "battle of annihilation" was no longer possible. The steady escalation of violence, by that point, had already created a permissions structure for Trotha's soldiers to engage in cruelty, a pattern that continued even against the captured and imprisoned Herero populace.

Finally, armies prone to atrocity tend to lack effective external checks on military culture or behavior. The Imperial Japanese Army and Navy subverted civilian control through a series of assassinations and coup attempts in the 1930s, with the military able to initiate even major wars without effective civilian oversight. Likewise, the German Imperial Army was, as Hull notes, largely shielded from civilian oversight by the political structure of the German Empire, which placed the army largely beyond the influence of the Reichstag. In both cases, the military's position as the ultimate patriotic institution provided an effective rhetorical cudgel to prevent undue civilian oversight, which (in turn) provided the lawless context for atrocity. In Sparta, the Spartans simply disenfranchised and enslaved all but the small hereditary warrior class of the Spartiates, who themselves represented only around 5 to 10 percent of the male population, removing the issue of civilian oversight entirely. Freed from the constraints of civilian oversight, the already poisoned internal military culture of these institutions was free to spiral to its logical extreme with brutal results.

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The organizational culture and institutions that encourage atrocity in armies do not appear all at once; rather, they escalate through a learning process. Hull documents how the lessons of fighting *francs-tireurs* in the Franco-Prussian War conditioned German brutality in Southwest Africa and its occupation in Europe during World War I, culminating in the Wehrmacht's participation in the horrors of Nazi brutality. Likewise, brutal Japanese systems of occupation were developed in occupied Korea and then exported to the

broader "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere."

The elements of this same pattern in the Russian Armed Forces are quite evident. Before the war, the Russian military's problem with hazing, called *dedovshchina*, particularly of first year conscripts, is well documented. Efforts to reduce hazing focused on changing the terms of service rather than altering the conditions of service or changing the military's institutional culture seem largely to have failed. At the same time, Russian command decisions created a clear permission structure for further brutality. Prior to the invasion, U.S. intelligence warned that Russian forces had a "kill list" for Ukrainians to be assassinated or sent to camps, including journalists, activists, and minorities; that Russian forces apparently brought mobile crematoriums to an invasion they expected to be quick and relatively easy may speak to the scale of the intended post-conquest killing they expected to do.

Meanwhile, the internal culture of the Russian military and its pride of place in Putin's ideological agenda render it immune to effective criticism or civilian oversight. The only force monitoring it is the security services, which are concerned with loyalty to Putin, not devotion to the laws of war. As with earlier examples, atrocity has become a learned behavior for the Russian military, from Chechnya to Syria to now Ukraine. The ingredients for atrocity were not

distinctly or uniquely Russian, but Russia, as many other countries before it, had built an atrocity-prone military that it then unleashed on Ukraine.

Much like the Germans in Southwest Africa, as the Russian advance stalled and the prospect of a quick, decisive victory slipped out of their grasp, Russian commanders responded by escalating brutality in an effort to regain momentum, shelling urban centers with cluster bombs and other heavy munitions. In some cases, as with the Russian strike on a theater in Mariupol housing a children's shelter that was clearly marked "children," civilian deaths appear to have been the intent in a failed effort to coerce a Ukrainian surrender.

As can now be seen in places like Bucha, the callousness of Russian leadership toward civilian deaths has created the same kind of permission structure, leading to escalating brutality against civilians by Russian soldiers even in areas under Russian control. These are not isolated acts: Instead, it must be understood that Russian leadership—including Putin, himself—are responsible for first fostering the kind of organizational culture that lends itself to such brutality. Putin's own language and the language used by Russian state media in this "special military operation" have reinforced that very permission structure by declaring all opposition to the Russian invasion is "Nazism."

However, the history of atrocity-prone armies has a caution for the architects of murder too. In a study of mass violence in Roman warfare, historian Gabriel Baker notes that while Roman mass violence against civilians could be strategically effective when the Romans were already clearly winning, in cases where the Romans were facing difficulties—precisely the sort of frustrating circumstances that often lead modern armies to employ mass violence—it was (at best) generally ineffective and often counterproductive, hardening resolve and extending conflicts. Japanese mass violence in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere had the same effect, hardening resistance to Japanese occupation and sapping Japan's anti-Western, imperialist propaganda's effectiveness. It seems likely that Russian atrocities will also be militarily ineffective, hardening Ukrainian resolve to resist and international resolve to sanction Russia and support Ukraine.

For citizens of other countries watching in horror, the scenes from Bucha should serve as a potent reminder of the need to foster a culture of restraint in the military, both among officers and enlisted personnel, as well as maintain effective civilian oversight of the military. But in Ukraine, the only means of stopping the escalating atrocities committed by the Russian military is by defeating it.