
Global Patterns of Torture in Russian Occupied Ukraine: *A comparative microsociological analysis*

I was surprised by the people who tortured me. They were not mature men, but rather youngsters, not older than 25 to 27 years old. Where could they have gotten such brutality?

– *A man heavily tortured by Russian servicemen while detained in Kherson region*

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, reports of human rights abuses and war crimes have been common. Among these, a significant number testify to the widespread use of torture against combatants and civilians alike. In this article, I review the dynamics of torture by Russian forces in Ukraine and seek to answer the question of the man that opens this article: “where could they have gotten such brutality?” This question expresses a sense of puzzlement at the human condition. Importantly, the puzzlement at stake here is a universalized one. The Russian war against Ukraine did not surprise the majority of citizens in Eastern Europe, who have responded not only militarily, societally, and politically with immense courage, but also intellectually by articulating the postcolonial nature of this war (Mälksoo 2022). From that perspective, the militarism and “religious fervour” with which the war has been carried out is unsurprising. But even within that context, those Ukrainians who are direct victims of war crimes find it incomprehensible how “youngsters” can enact extreme brutality. How do we understand such violence?

To reach an answer, this article proceeds in four steps. First, I holistically review patterns of torture in occupied Ukraine, focusing in particular on a) the techniques of torture deployed, b) the sites of torture employed, and c) the forces involved in these acts. This also involves reviewing academic and practitioner interpretations of how the systematic nature of these abuses can be understood. Second, I take a step back and situate the actions of Russian forces in global comparative perspective. As others have noted, patterns of torture are not neatly confined to the borders of nation states and the military or security cultures they contain, nor even to specific regime types, or particular types of security/military intervention. Instead, torture is globalized in the patterns of its emergence. In this regard, Russian war crimes are not exceptional. I unpack this reality, demonstrating sometimes identical homologies between the techniques, spaces, and organizational structure of Russian torture and US-led torture in Iraq and Afghanistan, torture committed by Syrian government forces, and beyond. To understand these patterns, I draw on a mix of theoretical insights from science and technology studies, postcolonial theory, and microsociological studies of violence.

My goal in situating Russian abuses within this context is not to provide any justification, nor is it to normalize or rationalize these violences (Makarychev and Nizhnikau 2023). Instead, understanding these abuses in a global context achieves two main things. First, it situates Russian torture practices within a larger imperial logic of torture, tracing its interconnections back to other colonial contexts, largely those of British and French imperialism, followed by US-led practices. This affirms the degree to which the logic of Russian abuses in Ukraine are situated in a colonial logic. Second, by emphasizing this broader logic, it is possible to understand, to a greater degree, what *is* unusual about Russian abuses. The third move in this paper focuses on that question. It argues that Russia’s own internal brutalization of its security forces and military, as well as society, have generated self-perpetuating dynamics that increase the intensity of the crimes committed in places like Ukraine. Specifically, I conceptualize an unusual set of circumstances that have led to the development of a tacit knowledge of brutality. Finally, the article explores what can be done about this status quo, turning to questions of how to intervene against these patterns in the longer-term.