

UDC 341.322.5:343.541] (477)"2022/..."

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SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS A WEAPON OF WAR: RUSSIAN PERPETRATION AGAINST UKRAINIANS SINCE 2022

Introduction:

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the conflict has been marred by full-scale violence, displacement, and violations of humanitarian law. Among these grievances, include the use of sexual violence against Ukrainian detainees and civilians. The United Nations reports that the use of conflict-related sexual violence has been a recurring and deeply concerning feature of the war (A/HRC/58/67). Acts of this nature include rape, sexual torture, forced nudity, and other forms of abuse. Inflicted on both men and women, the conditions were often under detention or occupation (Noone 2025). While rape and sexual violence has long been considered an “unfortunate side-effect” of war, shift in focus since 2008, when rape as a method of warfare became a warcrime, has made the strategic use of sexual violence against Ukrainians not incidental (Thomas 1994) (Jayaraman 2008). It appears to be systematic and, in many cases, strategically deployed. This piece argues that acts of sexual violence that were perpetrated by Russian forces against Ukrainians function as a crime against humanity as it is systematically deployed to deliberately terrorize populations, extract information, and assert control. Through the analysis of documented cases, patterns of abuse, and the broader strategic context, this paper demonstrates that sexual violence in Ukraine is widespread as well as purposeful, while also addressing the challenges of documentation, accountability, and capacity building.

Defining Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

Conflict related sexual violence refers to “refers to rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict,” as defined in a report written by Secretary General Antonio Guterres (Guterres 2019). Depending on their scale and intent, these acts are recognized as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and in certain cases, even acts of genocide under International Law (Stachow 2019).

In Russia’s use of CRSV, the violence is not limited to just against women, men and children are also frequently victims, particularly in detention settings (Edwards 2025). Furthermore, CRSV has not been confined to a single pattern or location, but instead appears across multiple regions under Russian control. In these occupied territories, sexual violence has been reported to have occurred during house searching, at military checkpoints, and in improvised detention sites. These acts have occurred alongside beatings, lootings, and threats of execution (Straw 2025).

In detention centers, prisoner-of-war facilities, and more formalized settings, the violence takes on a more structured and repetitive role. Survivors have described environments in which guards or interrogators would exercise total control over them, often over extended periods of time.

Since this pattern has been replicated in multiple different regions, this underscores that CRSV is not incidental to a specific battlefield but embedded throughout various layers of strategy over occupation and captivity. In Russian practice, sexual violence often intersects with other forms of abuse, especially torture and coercive interrogation practices. Testimonies from survivors describe sexual violence occurring during questioning sessions, used to extract information or force confessions. Moreover, victims report being beaten, deprived of sleep, electrocuted, then subjected to sexual assault or humiliation (Deutsch 2023).

When sexual violence is used systematically in partnership with interrogation, is divorces from being opportunistic or driven by individual misconduct alone, instead, it reflects consistent patterns with institutional tolerance.

Furthermore, the recurrence of these methods across regions strengthens the assertion that sexual violence serves a functional role within the broader system of control. It is deployed with the purpose to assert dominance over civilian populations, communicate the futility of resistance, and break prisoners psychologically. The combination of abuses magnifies its broader social and political impact, for individuals, long-term trauma extends beyond immediate physical harm, including difficulty reintegrating into communities, isolation, and shame (John Hopkins 2015).

When this kind of violence becomes acknowledged within a community, whether through public rumors or direct testimony, it would create widespread fear, which discourages others from resisting or cooperating with Ukrainian authorities. In this way, the consequences of CRSV have a multiplied effect, contributing to the destabilization of social structures and weakening collective resilience. These patterns reinforce the conclusion that sexual violence in Ukraine is being used not only to harm specific individuals, but also to achieve the long-term goal of military and political oppression perpetrated by Russian forces. Through embedding sexual violence within already created systems of torture and control, perpetrators are maximizing the effectiveness of the tools of domination, making it a central threat rather than peripheral.

Scale and Scope of the Violence

Due to underreporting and the limited capacity of affected areas, quantifying the full extent of sexual violence in Ukraine is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, available data provides a clear indication of the scale of the problem. In the time period of the 24th of February 2022 to the 31st of August 2024, the Human Rights Monitoring Mission had documented 376 cases of CRSV against 262 men, 102 women, 10 girls, and 2 boys (Janowski 2024).

Some UN agencies have documented up to 433 incidents in the same time frame (UN Women 2025). Military personnel, law enforcement officers, and prison authorities perpetrate these cases of sexual violence. Additionally, global monitoring bodies as well as Ukrainian officials emphasize that these numbers likely represent only a fraction of the actual number of incidents due to underreporting caused by lack of forensic capacity, social shame, and distrust of enforcement mechanisms (Wamsley 2022).

In terms of documented cases though, a significant proportion of cases occurred in detention settings (Edwards 2025). In these cases, survivors have reported being subjected to repeated acts of sexual violence, usually in conjunction with physical torture and psychological abuse. These environments are purposely created to be isolated and with complete control in the captor's hands, creating conditions in which abuse can be systematically carried out with impunity. Testimonies from these environments indicate that sexual violence is not rare or isolated but a common experience among detainees (Kottasova and Voitovych 2024).

While most cases occur in areas of detention, sexual violence in Ukraine has also been widely documented in civilian contexts, particularly in areas that were under Russian occupied during the early phases of the invasion. In civilian settings, violence is often perpetrated in highly personal and invasive spaces, such as in the safety and privacy of the victims own home (Fernandez-Powell 2023).

Accounts have been recorded of survivors describing being assaulted during house raids, interrogations, or searches. Armed soldiers who entered without warning and exercised complete control over the environment (McKernan 2022) often perpetrate these.

Many cases included assaults being carried out at gunpoint or under explicit threats of violence against family members, including threats against children or elderly relatives present in the home. This civilian setting further intensifies the psychological impact of the violence. Sexual violence is not transformed from an individual trauma to a collective experience of terror when attacks occur in front of family members or within shared living spaces. Now, witnesses such as spouses and children are often forced to observe helplessly, deepening both immediate fear and long-term psychological harm. Now, the home is a site of violation, stripping the victim from its sense of security and reinforcing the totality of control that can be exercised by Russian forces.

Beyond the immediate victims of these incidents, fear is further generated to create insecurity throughout entire communities. Furthermore, when word of such assaults spread throughout occupied areas, whether through direct testimony, visible signs of violence, or rumors, residents may alter their behavior, from avoiding public spaces to refraining from contact with authorities or resistance networks, creating mass disillusionment in the trust of Ukrainian enforcement mechanisms and solidifying Russian social control (Seelinger 2022).

In the case at hand, civilian-targeted sexual violence operates as a component of a broader strategy of occupation. It reinforces the notion that all forms of resistance or non-compliance would carry severe consequences, and most importantly, teaches civilians that no space is safe.

Patterns and Methods of Abuse

One of the most consistent patterns identified in reports is the use of sexual violence in detention facilities, including rape, forced nudity, and genital torture (Gorbunova 2025). These acts are often carried out during interrogations and are used as tools of coercion and punishment. The systemic nature of these abuses is particularly evident in the repetition and consistency of survivor testimonies (Novytska 2025).

Many victims report being subjected to repeated instances of sexual violence over extended periods, often by different perpetrators. In some cases, the abuse is done to attempt to extract information, with the perpetrators using or threatening sexual violence to force confessions or compel cooperation. This pattern strongly supports the conclusion that CRSV is being systematically deployed as a method of torture.

Furthermore, what is also significant about the use of CRSV is the number of male victims. While in most war contexts, sexual violence disproportionately affects women, evidence from Ukraine demonstrates that men are frequently targeted, especially in detention centers (United Nations Population Fund 2024).

These torture methods against men were specifically designed to humiliate and emasculate victims, such as electric shocks to the genitals or forced sexual acts. The targeting of men in these cases underscores the broader purpose of sexual violence in this context as being driven not by sexual desire but to dominate, degrade, and psychologically destroy victims. This use of CRSV is

done with the purpose of reinforcing power hierarchies and serves as a means of asserting control over individuals and groups.

Conclusion

Overall, the evidence provided demonstrates that the use of CRSV in Ukraine is not an incidental byproduct of war, but part of a broader strategy deployed by Russian forces since the invasion in 2022. The repetition of instances across detention facilities, civilian households, and occupied territories, especially alongside other forms of abuse, suggests a patterned method of control rather than isolated misconduct by individual perpetrators. Furthermore, when sexual violence is systematically integrated into detention centers and interrogation practices, it functions as a tool of domination designed to extract information and punish resistance.

Simultaneously, the documentation of civilian-targeted sexual violence highlights the method of control deployed by Russian forces against Ukrainian people. Through assaulting individuals in their home, at times in front of family members, these traumatic acts extend beyond the immediate victim and into the community. The home is seen as a space of safety and stability, when violated, it turns into a site of fear and vulnerability that is to be replicated in the environment. Sexual violence is now used as a mechanism of population control.

Ultimately, the patterns of violence documented in Ukraine strongly support the conclusion that the methods of sexual violence perpetrated by Russian forces constitute a crime against humanity. Through the recognition of this reality, we can ensure accountability and justice for survivors.

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