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## **A Ukrainian Soldier's Story of Captivity and Torture**

***Russia is a signatory to the Geneva Conventions. But it treats its prisoners with lawless brutality.***

**Jillian Kay Melchior**

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Only after his release from Russian captivity did Serhii Rotchuk learn his breastbone had been fractured during a beating. He also had lost some 65 pounds after subsisting for almost a year on skimpy rations that often included rotten meat.

Mr. Rotchuk, 34, is among more than 2,500 Ukrainians who have been released in prisoner exchanges since February 2022, when Russia's full-scale invasion began. His story helps explain why Ukrainians are skeptical of any peace agreement. Russia is a signatory of the Geneva Conventions, which prohibit the torture and maltreatment of prisoners of war. Yet in Russian custody Ukrainians have endured "a cruelty that is psychopathic," says Tetiana Sirenko, a psychotherapist who has treated some 400 civilian and military survivors of Russian torture.

Alice Jill Edwards, the U.N. special rapporteur on torture, said this month that Russian violence against Ukrainian captives "is not random, aberrant behavior" but a "part of state policy to intimidate, instill fear or punish to extract information and confessions."

Many former prisoners of war don't speak publicly about what they endured, because of trauma or official constraints on what soldiers can say given the sensitivity of diplomacy around prisoner exchanges. Others "are going back to the front and realize they may be captured again," Ms. Sirenko says. "They understand the potential price of this publicity."

That makes Mr. Rotchuk, a combat medic with the Azov Brigade of the Ukrainian military, unusual. He's amused when friends agonize over what they should or shouldn't broach around him. "If you're interested, just ask," he says. It's not as though avoiding the topic will help him forget more quickly: "I'm not sure the situation will come out of my head for many more years."

In May 2022 Mr. Rotchuk found himself trapped "inside a circle of the enemies and the sea" in the southeastern city of Mariupol. Ukrainian soldiers and civilians took refuge in the Azovstal steel plant. "We had an amazingly high number of injured guys," and medical supplies were running out. After weeks under siege, the Ukrainians worked out a deal for the civilians' evacuation and the soldiers' surrender. We understood "that not all guys will get home, maybe some of the guys will stay in prison, someone will probably die in prison," Mr. Rotchuk said.

The Russians took him to Olenivka, in the occupied part of Donetsk. Two months later, guards came with a list of names of nearly 200 Ukrainians who would be moved to another barrack. The next night, Mr. Rotchuk heard an explosion and screams. Survivors later told him that they had seen "a lot of fire, a lot of guys just burned alive."

More than 50 Ukrainian prisoners died at Olenivka in the early hours of July 29, 2022. The Russians claimed Ukraine had attacked the prison with Himars, a mobile, high-precision rocket system provided by the U.S. But the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights concluded in July 2023 that the explosion "was not caused by a HIMARS rocket." A statement from the Ukrainian military accused Russia of carrying out the bombing "in order to accuse Ukraine of committing 'war crimes,' as well as to cover up the torture and executions of prisoners which they carried out there."

Less than two months later, Mr. Rotchuk and others were transferred to prison in the Russian city of Taganrog, where conditions were so bad "we started joking about 'Olenivka summer camp.'" Mr. Rotchuk says he was beaten, was subjected to electrical shocks, and had needles jammed under his fingernails. He says he witnessed

a lot of “blunt trauma of the legs, blunt trauma on the ribs, chest, and sometimes on the head.” He describes his captors as “professionals” who can inflict painful wounds that don’t leave bruises. “Now I have a big problem with my knees, my joints,” as well as “permanent stress, I think.”

The Ukrainian prisoners became “very tired guys, with very dark eyes” and “a very specific smile,” Mr. Rotchuk says. “I saw a lot of guys just break, and it was really hard for them. And in the opposite: Very young guys, the type which is sensitive—they show themselves like stones, like rocks, and I was very impressed.”

In May 2023, the Russians told Mr. Rotchuk to collect his things. “I understood that it could be something either very good for a change or very bad.” It was good—a prisoner exchange.

Samer Attar, a Chicago physician who has volunteered in Zaporizhzhia region, was present for one prisoner exchange during the summer of 2022. He recalls seeing “scores of young men,” all of them “emaciated” and “sickly looking.” After their release, Ukrainian soldiers are handed off to professionals like Ms. Sirenko, who is deputy director for psychological work at a clinic run by the Health Ministry.

She says nearly all the former prisoners she has treated endured electrical shocks, which can cause long-term cardiovascular damage. “A very common thing done to men is electrodes placed on their genitals and other parts of their body,” she says. “Then there are also things like breaking fingers and bones, tearing out fingernails, and beatings on the heels.”

She has also treated cases involving “a lot of sexual violence—gang rapes, raping with objects.” Russians sometimes brand their victims, and if they discover a patriotic tattoo, they may cut off “the skin and some of the flesh under it,” Ms. Sirenko says. A few of her patients were filmed as they were tortured, and the Russians sent the footage to their families.

Given Russia’s lawless brutality, Ukrainians have no confidence it would abide by any negotiated peace, and they fear domination more than war. Some four months after Mr. Rotchuk’s release, he’s back in the military training new recruits. He intends to return to the front.

***Ms. Melchior is a London-based member of the Journal editorial board.***

# **The Three Roadblocks Keeping Ukraine Mired in War**

## ***Slow gains on the battlefield, a cautious West and Putin's record of breaking deals contribute to a deadlock that Kyiv fears plays in Russia's favor***

**By Marcus Walker**

**Updated September 11, 2023 12:00 am ET**

After 18 months of full-scale war with Russia, Ukraine faces a threefold problem. Ukraine's army is inching forward on the battlefield but is short of firepower, including air power, and well-trained manpower to eject Russia's occupying army from its east and south. The West is sticking to its incremental approach to arming Kyiv, and would like it to negotiate a cease-fire eventually.

But even if Russian President Vladimir Putin were open to a deal, he has a long record of reneging on agreements and renewing his quest to put Ukraine back under Moscow's sway. The current military and political deadlock looks set to continue until one of those three elements changes.

Ukrainians fear the deadlock plays into Russia's hands, especially if political fatigue emerges in the West. "The situation is not sustainable," said Pavlo Klimkin, a former Ukrainian foreign minister.

### **Ukraine's military prospects**

Ukrainian troops have breached Russia's first line of heavy fortifications near Robotyne in the country's southeast, but they are still 55 miles from the sea, the goal of their summer counteroffensive.

The four-month-old counteroffensive has so far disappointed Ukrainian and Western hopes for a major breakthrough. But a significant territorial gain is still possible if Russia's stretched defenses on the southern front reach a breaking point before winter or exhaustion forces a halt to Ukraine's push.

The course of the war has defied the predictions of generals, intelligence services and military pundits, from the failure of Russia's initial attack on Kyiv to Ukraine's surprise victories in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions last year. "We don't know how the war will evolve. There could be black swans," said Klimkin.

Ukrainian troops struggling slowly forward in Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk have been blunt about the difficulties throughout this summer, however.

Dense minefields, a lack of air power and air defenses, shortcomings in new units' training, and more-competent Russian performance in defense have led to heavy casualties for every mile gained.

Ukrainian forces have reduced their losses of troops and armored vehicles by adapting their tactics. But their new, cautious approach also gives Russia's army more time to reset its lines after retreats and makes it harder for Ukraine to build momentum, according to a new study of the counteroffensive by the Royal United Services Institute, a London defense think tank.

Ukraine has the manpower and the collective determination to continue fighting for a long time, provided the U.S. and its European allies continue their military and economic aid. But defeating a fully mobilized Russia would likely require a far more determined effort by the West to deploy its huge industrial resources and facilitate Ukrainian victory.

### **Western caution**

So far, key Western countries led by the U.S. and Germany have followed a measured approach that seeks to prevent Russia from defeating Ukraine while limiting the risk of escalation into a direct clash with Moscow.

President Biden has defined the U.S. goal as helping Ukraine to attain the strongest possible military position for negotiations to end the war, without saying how strong a position that should be. The U.S. has given Ukraine potent weapons systems only after months of debate and lobbying by Kyiv and European allies who want an accelerated effort to defeat Russia.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has consistently said Putin must not win, while avoiding saying that Ukraine should win. The West is showing its interests in Ukraine are limited, said Alexander Gabuev, director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin. "As heartbreaking as the situation is, a lot of voters in the West don't see the war as existential for them. They want money to be spent on other issues too."

The West's priorities are to weaken the Kremlin's military and economic ability to pursue expansionist ambitions, keep NATO countries united and avoid World War III. The current deadlock ticks those boxes. "Putin's already lost the war," Biden said after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, in July. That assessment isn't shared by Putin, however—nor by Ukraine. "So far, Putin thinks time is ticking in his favor," said Klimkin, the former foreign minister. "We need a coordinated strategy with the West so that Putin thinks time is ticking against his personal position and Russia's."

The chips could fall the other way if Donald Trump returns to the White House and the U.S. cuts aid for Kyiv, said Gabuev. "Then Putin's original goal of installing a friendly regime in Kyiv, leaving a rump state in western Ukraine, could be back on the table," he said.

### **Negotiating with Putin**

In Washington and key European capitals, many officials doubt Ukraine can take back all of its territory by force—short of a massive increase in Western military aid that they consider too risky.

Western leaders are reluctant to pressure Kyiv to talk, since that could split NATO while encouraging Russia to bet that the West will abandon Kyiv. But some would prefer negotiations to the costs of a long war.

Some Western commentators have long argued that it would be in Ukraine's own best interests to freeze the conflict and accept a loss of territory, rather than suffer an endless heavy death toll in a war of attrition against a more populous country.

But surveys have consistently shown that Ukrainians overwhelmingly reject giving up territory to Russia. The revelations of killings of civilians, torture chambers, filtration camps and the deportation of children from occupied areas have hardened the country's determination to restore full control over their territory despite the heavy casualties. "So far, the majority of Ukrainians are fundamentally against any negotiation. It is an emotional as well as a political position," said Klimkin.

What's more, many believe Ukraine has no choice, because even if Putin were open to a deal, he wouldn't stick to it. "Putin would just treat a cease-fire as a breathing space to strengthen his military forces," said Andrei Kozyrev, a former Russian foreign minister in the 1990s who has denounced the invasion of Ukraine. "A settlement would open the way to buy weapons from China. In a year or so, Putin would attack again."

When Putin became president, Russia had signed several treaties that guaranteed Ukraine's territorial integrity. In 2003, he personally signed a treaty with Ukraine demarcating the two countries' land border.

In 2008, Putin bristled when asked on German TV whether Russia might lay claim to Crimea, saying: "Russia has long recognized the borders of modern-day Ukraine...I think questions about such goals have provocative undertones."

But in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and covertly invaded the eastern Donbas region. Cease-fire deals known as the Minsk agreements were supposed to restore Ukraine's control over its borders in exchange for autonomy for Russian-backed enclaves, but didn't stop the fighting. Neither side implemented Minsk. Ukraine felt it had signed a bad deal under duress. The Kremlin sought to use its proxy statelets in Donbas to weaken the Ukrainian state, demanding far-reaching powers. "The Minsk agreements produced a staging ground for Russia's full-scale invasion years later," said Alina Polyakova, head of the Center for European Policy Analysis in Washington.

Ukrainians also remember the Russian massacre of retreating soldiers at Ilovaisk in 2014 after Putin had offered them safe passage.

Putin's deal with his former ally Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder of the Wagner paramilitary group, didn't last long either. Despite an agreement that ended Wagner's revolt against Russian authorities in June, Prigozhin and other Wagner leaders were killed when their plane exploded and crashed near Moscow in late August. Few people believed the Kremlin's denial of involvement. "You can negotiate with Putin, but only from a position of strength," said Klimkin. "We need a far better position on the ground, not just in terms of territory, but in our capabilities and weapons supplies, so that Putin understands Russia has a real possibility of losing."