

Russian army unleashes terror in occupied cities

Friday 25 March 2022, by [PIRANI Simon](#) (Date first published: 24 March 2022).

On Monday 21 March Russian soldiers [fired at](#) demonstrators shouting “go home” in the main square in Kherson, south eastern Ukraine, injuring several people.

Thousands of people have demonstrated with Ukrainian flags every day since the city was occupied on Thursday 3 March.

Monday's violence began after demonstrators found that the town's monument to the “heavenly hundred” – Ukrainians who died in the 2014 uprising against former president Viktor Yanukovich – had been defaced.

Someone, presumably Russian soldiers, had spray painted “the ZSU [Ukrainian armed forces] murder children in Donbass” on the monument. People started cleaning off the spray paint, and were attacked with grenades, teargas and live rounds. (The local newspaper *Vchora* put a film of the incident [on line here](#).)

The resistance to the Russian army in Kherson – a largely Russian-speaking city of 290,000, and the only major city to be [occupied](#) – highlights Russia's deep dilemma in Ukraine. Not only has the population not greeted its army, but mass popular resistance is playing a central part in the military conflict.

Although Russian state TV has broadcast reports of plans to set up a Kherson “people's republic”, similar to those established in Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014, these have been [rejected](#) by the Kherson regional council.

Two weeks ago, on 7 March, Serhiy Kudelia, in an [analysis](#) of the dilemmas facing local authorities in the occupied areas, pointed out that they might opt for “involuntary collaboration” as a “lesser evil”, to ensure vital services did not collapse. There appears to have been very little sign of that so far.

There is another option for the Russian army: to lay waste to cities as they have done to [Mariupol](#), forcing the population to flee and destroying homes and industry (including, in that case, one of the largest steelworks in Europe).

Abductions and executions

Abductions and executions of activists, journalists and local government representatives by Russian forces have been reported throughout the occupied areas. On 15 March an alliance of 85 Ukrainian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) [appealed](#) to the United Nations and international committee of the Red Cross to take up the issue.

They pointed to the execution of Yuri Prylypko, mayor of Hostomel near Kyiv, and two volunteers,

Ruslan Karpenko and Ivan Zorya, who had been distributing humanitarian aid.

That appeal reported mass arrests in Volnovakha. Pavel Lisiansky of the Eastern Human Rights Group, a trade-union-linked NGO based in Donetsk, [reported](#) that 57 activists had been arrested in Luhansk, in areas newly occupied by the authorities of the Russian-supported “people’s republic” there.

Random shootings of civilians by Russian soldiers have also been widely reported, [for example](#) in villages near Kyiv.

A series of local government representatives have been abducted, as occupation forces put pressure on them to collaborate. [One of the latest cases](#), on 19 March, is that of Oleksandr Shapovalov, mayor of Beryslav. He is apparently still in captivity; he has been able to contact his family, who are concerned about his health, since he suffers from heart problems and was badly affected by covid.

The mayor of Melitopol, Ivan Fedorov, who was abducted on 11 March after refusing to cooperate with the occupation forces, was released on 16 March, [reportedly](#) in exchange for nine Russian soldiers who had been taken prisoner.

Fedorov, who was held at a detention centre in Melitopol, said in [an interview](#) that he had not been beaten, but had heard someone being tortured in the next cell. Russian soldiers had detained a range of local people – mostly demonstrators, who the soldiers had warned not to protest in future. They had asked him to sign documents stating that he had resigned as mayor, or had appointed deputies of their choosing, which he refused to do.

Other reported abductions include:

- Mykhailo Kumka, a publisher who controls the Melitopol media holding, was abducted with his family and editorial staff of Melitopol News. They were [released](#) on 21 March. Other [reported](#) abduction victims are Leila Ibragimova, deputy head of the Zaporizhzhya regional council (who was later reported to have been released); and Olha Haisumova, who organised demonstrations in Melitopol.
- Local journalists are prime targets. In Melitopol, Russian troops [broke into](#) the home of Svitlana Zalizetska, director of the Ria-Melitopol website, kidnapped her 75-year old father, and demanded that she report to them to attain his release. In [Berdyansk](#), Russian soldiers seized the building of the local media holding PRO100, held staff hostage, and tried to persuade them to collaborate with Russian propagandists.
- In Kakhovka, journalist Oleg Baturin was [abducted](#) on 12 March, along with Serhiy Tsyhipa, an activist circulating information locally, and four others. Baturin was [released](#) on 20 March; the fate of the others is unclear.
- On 16 March, Dmytro Kuleba, Ukrainian foreign minister, [reported](#) that Oleksandr Yakovlev and Yevhen Matveyev, mayor and deputy mayor of Skadovsk, in Kherson region, had been abducted.
- On 21 March the disappearance in Berdyansk of Aleksandr Ponomarev, whose business group controls much of the town’s industry, was reported. The Opposition Party – For Life of the Ukrainian politician Yury Boiko, who had been close to former president Yanukovich, [announced](#) that Ponomarev, a member of their parliamentary fraction, had gone missing. They gave no information about who was responsible.

For updates, people may find the [Decoding Trolls twitter feed](#) useful.

Areas occupied in 2014

The reign of terror in areas occupied this month is a continuation of Russian policy in Crimea, which it annexed in 2014, and the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics”.

The lawless, arbitrary nature of governance in the republic has been discussed [on this blog](#) and obviously by many others (e.g. [here](#)). A recent review, covering Crimea and the “republics”, is [here](#).

Since last month’s invasion, human rights defenders have reported a renewed series of repressive measures against political dissidence in Crimea, particularly against the Crimean Tatar community.

On 21 March, a Russian court in Rostov-on-Don handed out 14- and 15-year sentences to five Crimean Tatars, all members of the human rights group Crimean Solidarity. They were accused of “planning a violent seizure of power”, without evidence and on the word of anonymous witnesses who did not know them.

The sentences were part of the continuing of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a peaceful transnational Muslim organisation, deemed “terrorist” by a secretive ruling of the Russian Supreme Court in 2003.

Halya Coynash of the Kharkiv Human Rights Group [commented](#) that in Crimea, “Russia has systematically used such charges as a weapon to try to crush the Crimean Tatar human rights movement” that emerged in 2016, to defend the mounting number of political prisoners of the Russian occupation authorities. “Crimean Solidarity activists and journalists play a hugely important role in helping political prisoners and their families, and in ensuring that other Crimeans, and the international community, learn about the human rights violations that Russia is committing.”

On 23 March two more members of Crimea Solidarity were [sentenced](#) to 17 and 13 years, on charges related to a conversation in 2016 about their religious beliefs.

Searches for “prohibited” literature, which play a key part in the preparation of these trials, were [stepped up](#) in Crimea in February, in the days before the invasion.

Some comments

The reign of terror against civilians is not incidental to the war the Russian army is fighting: it is the point. Insofar as the war is an imperialist adventure aimed at dismembering the Ukrainian state, the terror is at least partly a response to the state (specifically, local government) and social institutions (specifically, the media) who have almost everywhere refused to collaborate.

And the war is not only against the state; it is also against the population in a wider sense. Witness the destruction of Mariupol, the arbitrary killings, the bombing of residential areas everywhere, the driving of millions of people from their homes.

Social control – both in Ukraine and in Russia itself – was always part of the Russian state’s war aims, [from 2014](#). In the first month of this expanded war, Russia itself has lurched towards increasingly violent and dictatorial methods to deal with social and political discontent at home.

This tide of authoritarianism has not left Ukraine’s government unaffected. It lashed out this week with [a ban](#) on 11 “pro Russian” political parties. That continue a dangerous trend set in the 2014-22 war in Donbass, and [reported](#) by UN agencies, of persecution of those suspected of links to the Russian side. Sotsialnyi Rukh, the independent Ukrainian socialist group, has [denounced](#) this measure – which in any case is unlikely to be effective, as the parties targeted are mostly in disarray already.

Ukrainian labour organisations have likewise slammed a [government measure](#) suspending a range of

legal rights of labour due to the war.

The one-sided, aggressive character of the Russian war, and the defensive character of the actions by both the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian population, shames those post-Stalinists in the western labour movement who, echoing the Kremlin's ravings, claim that the main cause of the war is NATO expansion, rather than Russian imperialism. But it also makes a nonsense of those in the anti-war movement who think this can be treated as an inter-imperialist conflict in which there is no element of people's war.

We all, in social movements and the labour movement internationally, not only have a responsibility to organise solidarity for those whose lives and communities are being ruined by the war. We must also extend that solidarity to Ukrainian people, who – in whichever form, whether in their workplaces, communities, or territorial defence units – are defending themselves.

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P.S.

People and Nature

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