

Morale and Moral Injury among Russian and Ukrainian Combatants

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Abstract

This chapter explores morale and moral injury in the Russia-Ukraine War, emphasising the role of narratives. Ukrainians have been engaged in a fierce struggle for their very existence, while the morale-boosting narratives among Russian forces have faced serious challenges. Yet, the involvement of NATO countries possibly reinforced an ‘us against the rest’ mentality in Russian troops. Also, on the battlefield, unique dynamics shape morale, with the willingness to sacrifice for comrades being paramount for combat readiness. Previous conflicts’ insights suggest that both sides face a substantial risk of moral injury. Russian soldiers, in particular, may be susceptible to moral injury, not as deep remorse but as feelings of betrayal by their leadership and society post-deployment. This chapter contemplates how ‘us/them’ narratives in Western societies shape our understanding of the crisis. A tragic narrative, rather than a superheroes versus villains tale, might better capture the human aspect of war.

Keywords: Morale, Combat motivation, Moral injury, Narratives, Resilience

1. Introduction

Amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, this chapter emphasises the often-overlooked human dimension. While international relations and military strategy are critical, the suffering inflicted on civilians and soldiers warrants attention. This chapter focuses on soldiers’ experiences, providing insights into the challenges faced by those directly engaged in the fighting. In the short term, morale’s role in combat readiness is striking, while a longer-term concern is the risk of moral injury.

Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, iconic moments emerged that captured the resilience of Ukrainians.¹ For instance, the famous ‘Russian warship,

¹ Dickinson, “Will morale prove the decisive factor in the Russian invasion of Ukraine?”; Khurshudyan and Hrabchuk, “As morale suffers, Russia and Ukraine fight a war of mental attrition”; France 24, “Short on Equipment, High on Morale”; Johannesson, “The critical role of morale in Ukraine’s fight against the Russian invasion.”

go **** yourself' quote from a Ukrainian guard on Snake Island quickly became a symbol of their early resistance.² Additionally, a video showed an unarmed Ukrainian POW, Oleksandr Matsievsky, calmly saying 'Glory to Ukraine' moments before being gunned down by his captors. Western journalists and military analysts openly admired the seemingly unbreakable Ukrainian morale, undoubtedly intensified by their wish for Ukrainian victory.³ In stark contrast, Russian forces exhibited notably low morale from the outset, followed by further demoralisation in the ensuing months.⁴ The Russian soldiers faced several issues, including inadequate preparation, insufficient supplies and personnel, logistical failures, leadership issues and poor service coordination.⁵ News articles began reporting on instances where soldiers were heard telling each other over the radio they 'were all fooled.'⁶ Also, reports emerged of soldiers who refused to redeploy for a second time after a period of leave,⁷ and of soldiers in Ukraine who refused 'to carry out orders, sabotaging their own equipment.'⁸

At the same time, the first signs of psychological problems have been observed among both Ukrainian and Russian combatants.⁹ This is not surprising given the well-documented effects of war on mental health. Previous conflicts have shown that soldiers' moral beliefs and expectations can be shattered when faced with the harsh realities of war, leading to severe long-term mental health problems.¹⁰ However, it is not just demoralisation that can be problematic, but high morale as well. High morale often leads to prolonged exposure to combat, increasing the risk of moral

² The Guardian, "'Go fuck yourself,' Ukrainian soldiers on Snake Island tell Russian ship."

³ Dickinson, "Will morale prove the decisive factor in the Russian invasion of Ukraine?"; Khurshudyan and Hrabchuk, "As morale suffers, Russia and Ukraine fight a war of mental attrition"; France 24, "Short on equipment, high on morale"; Johannesson, "The critical role of morale in Ukraine's fight against the Russian invasion."

⁴ Johnson, "Dysfunctional warfare"; Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg, "A brutal examination"; Lymar, "Lessons for the West"; Massicot, "What Russia got wrong."

⁵ Johnson, "Dysfunctional warfare"; Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg, "A brutal examination"; Lymar, "Lessons for the West"; Massicot, "What Russia got wrong."

⁶ Khurshudyan and Hrabchuk, "As morale suffers, Russia and Ukraine fight a war of mental attrition."

⁷ Sauer, "'They were furious.'"

⁸ Churchman, "UK spy chief."

⁹ Bryant, Schnurr, and Pedlar, "Addressing the mental health needs of civilian combatants in Ukraine"; Zasiakina et al., "A concept analysis of moral injury in Ukrainian National Guard service members' narratives"; Hamama-Raz et al., "Can patriotism be a protective factor for symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?"; Tenisheva and Beardsworth, "Scarred by war, returning Russian soldiers struggle to adapt to civilian life"; Ilyushina, "Russia sends soldiers to war but ignores mental trauma they bring home"; Kinetz, "Never saw such hell."

¹⁰ Bica, "A therapeutic application of philosophy. The moral casualties of war: Understanding the experience"; Lifton, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans*; Litz et al., "Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans."

dilemmas. Also, hatred towards the opponent and overconfidence can lead soldiers to disregard moral boundaries and engage in actions that may later haunt them.¹¹

This chapter considers the potential roles of morale and moral injury in the Russian-Ukrainian war, drawing on insights from past conflicts. However, several factors warrant caution in this tentative reflection. Firstly, the limited availability of systematic and in-depth information on the ongoing war, relying on secondary sources. Secondly with so much at stake, disinformation and propaganda have become a weapon of war, primarily by Russia but also by Ukraine, complicating the assessment of information reliability. Also, the emotional investment of Western Europe and the US in the conflict has inevitably influenced news reporting. Thirdly, at the time of writing the conflict is still ongoing, and in any case, the full extent of its human impact may only become apparent years or decades later, as mental health problems develop with time. These considerations make this reflection highly tentative.

This said, contemplating the possible influence of morale and moral injury through findings from past wars still provides valuable insights. A lens of narratives will be used to organise the analysis of morale and moral injury, to bring further focus and to offer insight into the impact of macro level rhetoric on the micro level of military experience. In the final section, the lens of narrative will be brought home, by exploring the role of (sometimes wishful) narratives in western societies in shaping understandings of the conflict.

2. Morale

2.1 *Morale and narratives*

Morale is a broad term that refers to motivation, confidence and discipline, not in a generic sense, but in relation to achieving goals. It is related but not to be confused with morality, which refers to personal and collective values and norms in a specific sociohistorical context. Morale is critical to military effectiveness and combat readiness, which makes it a vital topic for military leaders: high morale is positively associated with performance, and negatively related to psychological casualties.¹² As Napoleon allegedly said, ‘three-quarters of victory is down to morale, only one quarter to the balance of military forces.’¹³ To offer a definition of morale

¹¹ Molendijk, “Toward an interdisciplinary conceptualization of moral injury: From unequivocal guilt and anger to moral conflict and disorientation”; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*.

¹² NATO HFM-329RTG, “The military leaders guide to psychological support across the deployment cycle.”

¹³ Thorl, “Troop morale and military unity.”

in a military context, morale is the enthusiasm and persistence with which an individual unit member or entire unit engages in accomplishing mission objectives.¹⁴

Morale is often mentioned as an ideational factor influencing combat performance, alongside material factors such as the quality of equipment and logistics. However, morale and material issues are interdependent. Ostensibly trivial factors such as food, sleep and dry clothes play an important role in maintaining morale.¹⁵ The same goes for other organisational and performance issues, which moreover influence one another. For instance, unprofessional conduct by leaders and colleagues, failing equipment and the absence of expected victories can cause demoralisation, while the reverse is also true.¹⁶ As such, the co-dependence of morale and performance on the battlefield can result in either a positive spiral or a negative one.

At the same time, good material circumstances are not sufficient conditions for morale, and may even not always be necessary. Trained soldiers understand the rigours of combat and are generally willing to face deprivation and push themselves to their limits, even putting their lives on the line.¹⁷ The ability to persevere amidst material and physical adversity, however, does demand conducive ideational circumstances, such as a convincing shared narrative. Narratives offer assumptions and meanings through which to understand events and experiences, including a *moral* of the story. By constructing a why-what-and-how, narratives enable people to make sense of what happens to them, make judgments about what is justified and unacceptable conduct, and create a compass that guides their actions. The creation of guiding life stories can be a highly personal effort of constructing a coherent understanding of one's experiences and forming a sense of self-identity.¹⁸ But narrative creation also occurs at collective levels, including as a conscious, strategic enterprise of governments to garner support from the wider public for a military operation, and foster a sense of purpose and unity among the soldiers fighting the mission.¹⁹ In any case, personal narratives are always situated in relation to broader narratives, whether they reflect or actively resist these wider narratives.

¹⁴ cf. Manning, "Morale and cohesion in military psychiatry"; Peterson, Park, and Sweeney, "Group well-being"; NATO HFM-329RTG, "The military leaders guide to psychological support across the deployment cycle."

¹⁵ Manning, "Morale and cohesion in military psychiatry."

¹⁶ Manning; Thoral, "Troop morale and military unity."

¹⁷ Strachan, "Training, morale and modern war."

¹⁸ Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives*; Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Molendijk, "Moral injury in relation to public debates."

¹⁹ Graaf, Dimitriu, and Ringsmose, *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War*; Molendijk, "Moral injury in relation to public debates"; Molendijk, "The role of political practices in moral injury"; Kalkman and Molendijk, "The role of strategic ambiguity in moral injury."

In turn, narratives are shaped within the context of broader discourses. For instance, in Russia, a particular political discourse of Russian-Ukrainian ‘brotherhood’ has been propagated for decades. While emphasising both literal and symbolic familial ties, this discourse portrays Russia as the dominant ‘big brother,’ relegating Ukraine to the position of ‘little Russia’ (see also Baudet’s contribution in this volume). This includes a rhetoric of ‘the Great Patriotic War’ and the idea of Ukrainian ‘denazification’ to eliminate ‘anti-Russia’ elements in Ukraine allegedly fostered by Ukrainian nationalists and the West.²⁰ At the same time, since 2014, when Crimea was annexed by Russia, Ukrainians have been engaged in a fierce struggle for their very existence. While the Russian regime may perceive its war with Ukraine as existential, driven by its claim of Ukraine as part of historical Russia, Ukraine’s battle is literally about its survival.²¹ This sentiment voiced as: ‘If Russia stops fighting, there will be no war. If Ukraine stops fighting, there will be no Ukraine’ encapsulates the high stakes involved.²² It is within this wider context that more specific narratives emerge (see Figure 6.1).

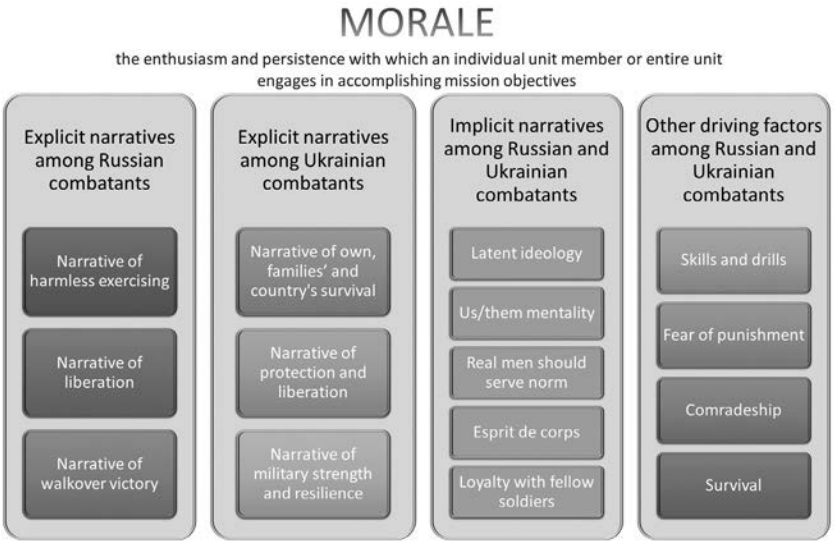


Figure 6.1: The role of narratives in morale among Russian and Ukrainian combatants

²⁰ Kuzio, “Imperial nationalism as the driver behind Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.”

²¹ Hamama-Raz et al., “Can patriotism be a protective factor for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder?”; Knott, ‘Existential nationalism.’

²² Hamama-Raz et al., “Can patriotism be a protective factor for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder?”; Knott, ‘Existential nationalism.’

2.2 *Morale in Russian combatants in the presence of explicit narratives*

At the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, several strategic narratives seem to have been available to Russian troops, including a narrative of harmless exercising, a narrative of liberation, and a narrative of walkover victory. The first narrative is the story that the Russian troops that were sent to the borders of Ukraine in the weeks leading up to the invasion were only participating in large-scale military exercises. The Kremlin had kept its intentions secret even from a significant part of its military, and it appears that initially the narrative of exercising was told to part of the invading troops as well.²³ Intercepted phone calls from Russian soldiers and interviews with captured Russian officers and enlisted personnel, although the credibility of these sources is never clear, indicate that the operation's scope was not communicated at the tactical level.²⁴ As a military expert wrote: 'the soldiers themselves were likely shocked by suddenly finding themselves first, at war, and second, against a capable opponent.'²⁵ Russian lower-rank soldiers maybe only really became aware of what they were actually doing shortly before they were doing it, which possibly affected their morale. Tentative assessments 'give an emerging picture of a rank-and-file taken by surprise and *demoralized by its own attack*.'²⁶

However, two other narratives were then still available to them. The first is a narrative of a walkover victory, similar to the bloodless annexation of Crimea in 2014, which seemed to be Kremlin's initial optimistic view of the invasion. In fact, the majority of Western military analysts also believed that Russia's powerful military would easily defeat Ukraine's armed forces.²⁷ The second narrative is a story of liberation. As mentioned, the idea of Ukrainian 'denazification' had been formulated in Russia.²⁸ As part of this, the Ukrainian leadership was portrayed as nothing more than 'a band of drug addicts and neo-Nazis,' as famously stated by Putin at the onset of the invasion.²⁹

In the mentioned phone calls by Russian soldiers in Ukraine, many stated they initially believed that they were there to liberate or conquer Ukraine and protect

²³ Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg, "A brutal examination"; Edmonds, "Start with the political."

²⁴ Edmonds, "Start with the political"; Jankowicz, "Captured Russians said their leaders lied about the plan to invade Ukraine, leaving them unprepared for fierce resistance"; Al-Hlou et al., "Putin is a fool"; Boffey and Sauer, "We were allowed to be slaughtered."

²⁵ Edmonds, "Start with the political."

²⁶ Jankowicz, "Captured Russians said their leaders lied about the plan to invade Ukraine, leaving them unprepared for fierce resistance," emphasis added.

²⁷ Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg, "A brutal examination."

²⁸ Kuzio, "Imperial nationalism as the driver behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine."

²⁹ Edmonds, "Start with the political."

Russia.³⁰ While, again, it is difficult to judge the credibility of these statements, such beliefs and subsequent disillusion are not uncommon among soldiers, even in less propagandised contexts. Many soldiers in recent UN and NATO missions have related that they expected a warm welcome as liberators, only to encounter suspicion and hostility and to achieve anything but great success.³¹ In Ukraine, too, grateful civilians and triumph turned out to be far from the truth as well, while the fierce Ukrainian resistance quickly led to substantial Russian losses.

2.3 *Morale in Russian combatants in the absence of explicit narratives*

There is a general consensus that ‘political or patriotic instruction is important in getting the soldier to the front, in inculcating the sense of duty which causes him to volunteer or to report on mobilization.’³² However, many researchers have been surprised by a *lack* of such explicit political ideology on the battlefield, without it necessarily resulting in a lack of morale.³³ For instance, in his research on American soldiers in Vietnam, Moskos found that soldiers ‘had a general aversion to overt patriotic appeals,’ while also signaling other ‘preconditions in supporting the soldier to exert himself under dangerous conditions.’³⁴

One of these preconditions is what Moskos called ‘latent ideology,’ which refers to underlying, implicit beliefs and values that individuals hold without being consciously aware of them. As several studies found,³⁵ soldiers often hold latent beliefs in the legitimacy and superiority of their own way of life, even while maintaining ‘a profound skepticism of political and ideological appeals.’³⁶ For years, Russian propaganda has disseminated the narrative of Ukrainians as anti-Russia.³⁷ Also, many Russians have internalised the belief that ‘every real man should serve,’³⁸ consistently bolstered by Russian state media portraying soldiering as ‘unquestionably the

³⁰ Edmonds; Jankowicz, “Captured Russians said their leaders lied about the plan to invade Ukraine, leaving them unprepared for fierce resistance”; Boffey and Sauer, “We were allowed to be slaughtered”; Al-Hlou et al., “‘Putin is a fool’”; Kinetz, “‘Never saw such hell.’”

³¹ Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Lifton, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans*; Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*.

³² Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 182.

³³ Moskos, “The military”; Slim, *Defeat into Victory*; Strachan, “Training, morale and modern war.”

³⁴ Moskos, “The military,” 62.

³⁵ Moskos, “The military”; Slim, *Defeat into Victory*; Strachan, “Training, morale and modern war.”

³⁶ Moskos, “The sociology of combat,” 15.

³⁷ Edmonds, “Start with the political”; Kuzio, “Imperial nationalism as the driver behind Russia’s invasion of Ukraine”; Johnson, “Dysfunctional warfare”; Knott, “Existential nationalism.”

³⁸ Mathers, “Russia is depending on its soldiers for victory in Ukraine but they have to bring their own first aid kits—and 200,000 are probably already dead.”

manliest job.’³⁹ So even as expectations of swift victory and liberation have proven illusory, the ‘us against anti-Russians’ narrative seems to have been able to live on,⁴⁰ while the belief that real men should serve may persist regardless of whether Russians support the political goals of a war.⁴¹ In fact, the invasion may have even reinforced an us/them mentality, serving as a self-fulfilling prophecy of Russian power against anti-Russian sentiments. The Western support for Ukraine may have intensified this mentality further, leading Russian troops to view themselves as defending Russia against Western aggression and creating an ‘us against the world’ narrative.

Of course, even with this mentality, soldiers’ survival instinct still kicks in when they are confronted with danger. Yet, while civilians will flee war zones because that is what they have learned to do, soldiers tend to fight. This brings us to one of the most significant drivers of morale: the fellow soldier.⁴² It has become almost dogma in modern military theory that soldiers fight for their comrades more than for their country. Yet, contrary to popular belief, this loyalty is not always the result of intensive training, or of an *esprit de corps* of devotion. In some cases, it stems from the immediate life-and-death necessities of combat, where soldiers depend on their primary group for survival.⁴³ This can explain why even untrained, non-patriotic Russian soldiers would continue to fight.

Then again, as small-group loyalty becomes increasingly important as the fighting intensifies, it also creates a paradox. Intensive combat can erode small-group loyalty when significant casualties result in the influx of replacements who struggle to bond with their colleagues.⁴⁴ Moreover, small group solidarity can also foster dissent from military leaders and the organisation, negatively affecting combat performance.⁴⁵

Dissent by Russian soldiers has resulted in disciplinary actions, echoing past conflicts where ‘tough punishments curbed manifest cowardice.’⁴⁶ Protesting

³⁹ Troianovski et al., “Aren’t you a man?”.

⁴⁰ cf. Kinetz, “‘Never saw such hell.’”

⁴¹ Mathers, “Russia is depending on its soldiers for victory in Ukraine but they have to bring their own first aid kits—and 200,000 are probably already dead.”

⁴² Strachan, “Training, morale and modern war”; Gray, *The Warriors*; Manning, “Morale and cohesion in military psychiatry”; Peterson, Park, and Sweeney, “Group well-being”; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; Moskos, “The military”; Shils and Janowitz, “Cohesion and disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II.”

⁴³ Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; Moskos, “The military”; Shils and Janowitz, “Cohesion and disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II”; Strachan, “Training, morale and modern war”; Newsome, “The myth of intrinsic combat motivation.”

⁴⁴ Strachan, “Training, morale and modern war,” 212.

⁴⁵ Strachan, “Training, morale and modern war”; Newsome, “The myth of intrinsic combat motivation.”

⁴⁶ Strachan, “Training, morale and modern war,” 215.

the war or discrediting the military is illegal in Russia, and soldiers refusing to fight face severe penalties, including forced conscription.⁴⁷ However, it is unclear whether these methods enhance or undermine morale. Financial motives and cultural norms, further, serve as informal disciplinary measures, associating dissent with impotence, dishonour and weakness.⁴⁸

2.4 *Morale in Ukrainian combatants*

On the Ukrainian side, soldiers have displayed notable morale throughout their ongoing battle.⁴⁹ While this surprised friend and foe, it can be explained in the context of the abovementioned factors influencing morale (see also Brinkel and Sellmeijer in this volume on the relationship between resilience and democracy). The Ukrainians are engaged in a battle for their own, their families' and their country's survival.⁵⁰ Also, the narratives that were available to them, revolving for instance around survival, protection, liberation, military strength, resilience and *esprit de corps*, have remained intact. They may have even gained strength over time, bolstered by victories and international support, including access to equipment and combat training.

That said, Ukrainian combatants have suffered significant losses too. As the war dragged on, exhaustion and mental fatigue were reported among Ukrainian soldiers. They struggled with losing comrades they had come to rely on and who relied on them, as well as an influx of new and inexperienced recruits, both of which are major challenges to morale.⁵¹ Reports have emerged of Ukrainian soldiers

⁴⁷ Mathers, "Russia is depending on its soldiers for victory in Ukraine but they have to bring their own first aid kits—and 200,000 are probably already dead"; Knott, "Existential nationalism."

⁴⁸ It is likely that newly mobilised conscripts, who frequently come from economically disadvantaged regions, ethnic minorities, and marginalised backgrounds, were deployed with low levels of morale. As inexperienced soldiers being deployed with a lack of food, warm clothes and medicine, many may have felt like they were being sent to Ukraine to become cannon fodder. The Wagner Group's strategy of recruiting from Russian prisons initially proved successful, but 'the flow of volunteers dried up as reports of the high casualty rates made their way back to prisons.' Yet, formal and informal discipline can motivate a substantial number of soldiers to continue their involvement in the war even when explicit morale is absent.

⁴⁹ Dickinson, "Will morale prove the decisive factor in the Russian invasion of Ukraine?"; Khurshudyan and Hrabchuk, "As morale suffers, Russia and Ukraine fight a war of mental attrition"; France 24, "Short on equipment, high on morale"; Johannesson, "The critical role of morale in Ukraine's fight against the Russian invasion."

⁵⁰ Dickinson, "Will morale prove the decisive factor in the Russian invasion of Ukraine?"; Khurshudyan and Hrabchuk, "As morale suffers, Russia and Ukraine fight a war of mental attrition."

⁵¹ Melkozerova, "Ukraine army discipline crackdown sparks fear and fury on the front"; Ordoñez, "Exhausted Ukrainian soldiers fight mental fatigue as the war drags on"; Khurshudyan and Hrabchuk, "As morale suffers, Russia and Ukraine fight a war of mental attrition."

panicking, rebelling against orders, getting drunk, misbehaving and deserting their positions.⁵² Moreover, panic attacks, defections and desertions in fellow soldiers appeared to be ‘contagious,’ further challenging the morale of Ukrainian soldiers.⁵³ A new law was signed in January 2023, introducing harsher punishment for disobedient soldiers while stripping them of their right to appeal, which confirms that morale problems are emerging.⁵⁴ Indeed, no human being is immune to the physical and mental exhaustion of war. Still, even a year after Russia launched its war against Ukraine, Ukrainians persist in their fight, demonstrating remarkable resilience.

3. Morally injurious experiences: moral transgressions, dilemmas, senselessness and betrayal

3.1 *What is moral injury?*

The discussion of morale challenges raises the question of how it could impact soldiers in the long run. This leads us to the issue of moral injury, which has been observed in various conflicts throughout history, albeit not always under this term.⁵⁵ Moral injury refers to the psychological and social problems caused by participating in, witnessing, or being a victim of an act that violates one’s moral beliefs and expectations.⁵⁶ It is typically classified into perpetration-based moral injury, which involves guilt and shame for actions taken or not taken, and betrayal-based moral injury, which entails anger and distrust, for example towards military or political leaders.⁵⁷ In reality, morally injured individuals often experience a combination of perpetration-based and betrayal-based symptoms, as no act occurs in a social vacuum: ‘even war crimes can’t be owned exclusively by the perpetrators’.⁵⁸

Moreover, only a small portion of morally injurious experiences are straightforward war crimes. More frequently than clear-cut moral transgressions, they

⁵² Melkozerova, “Ukraine army discipline crackdown sparks fear and fury on the front”; Johannesson, “The critical role of morale in Ukraine’s fight against the Russian invasion.”

⁵³ Ordoñez, “Exhausted Ukrainian soldiers fight mental fatigue as the war drags on.”

⁵⁴ Melkozerova, “Ukraine army discipline crackdown sparks fear and fury on the front”; Johannesson, “The critical role of morale in Ukraine’s fight against the Russian invasion.”

⁵⁵ Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*; Bica, “A therapeutic application of philosophy. The moral casualties of war: understanding the experience”; Jones, “Moral injury in time of war.”

⁵⁶ Litz et al., “Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans.”

⁵⁷ Griffin et al., “Moral injury.”

⁵⁸ Boudreau, “The morally injured,” 749.

involve moral conflict.⁵⁹ For instance, morally injurious situations often entail moral dilemmas, where adhering to one value requires violating another, engendering tragic remorse. Additionally, soldiers may experience moral detachment, resulting from being so morally overwhelmed that they act in ways they later come to regret. Lastly, soldiers may develop profound feelings of senselessness.⁶⁰

The following section considers risk factors associated with moral injury in Russian and Ukrainian combatants (see Figure 6.2).



Figure 6.2: Risk factors of moral injury in war

3.2 Moral injury in Russian combatants

The crux of moral injury, like other trauma-related conditions, lies not so much in the physical facts of an event but rather in the *meaning* that people ascribe to it.⁶¹ Therefore, here again, narratives are pertinent, as they hold a pivotal role in shaping these meanings. People use rationalising and justifying frameworks as defense mechanisms.⁶² When these justifying frameworks crumble, moral injury

⁵⁹ Molendijk, "Toward an interdisciplinary conceptualization of moral injury: From unequivocal guilt and anger to moral conflict and disorientation."

⁶⁰ Molendijk.

⁶¹ Molendijk, "Moral coping or simply uncomplicated soldiering?"

⁶² Bandura, "Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities"; Janoff-Bulman and Timko, "Coping with traumatic life events."

can ensue.⁶³ The conflict's course and outcome are crucial factors in this process. Losing the war instills a sense that all the efforts were in vain, while winning can reinforce a narrative of triumph, national pride and the fulfilment of a greater mission. Also, the outcome influences whether existing narratives persist or new ones emerge, reflecting the adage, 'History is written by the victors.' The saying 'History is written by the victors' reflects how outcomes impact narratives. Both Russian and Ukrainian combatants are prone to developing moral injuries, albeit in distinct ways.

As discussed, while Ukrainian narratives have persisted, Russian narratives have been extensively challenged, rendering Russian troops susceptible to moral injuries in this regard. Notably, this does not mean that many Russian soldiers would completely turn against their own war and embrace an opposing vision of Ukraine. Evidence from soldiers' moral conflicts in previous wars suggests that this is improbable. If veterans struggle with moral conflicts, these struggles often entail guilt and shame stemming from experiences such as witnessing women and children dying, or making mistakes that led to the death of their colleagues.⁶⁴ Also, many soldiers experience disillusionment and feelings of betrayal by their military organisation and political leaders for the situations they have been placed in and their treatment afterwards.⁶⁵ Some soldiers furthermore develop profound confusion about wider narratives concerning their deployment, including disorientation about how 'dirty but necessary' the suffering was that they witnessed and caused.⁶⁶ However, this all still does not necessarily lead to the development of remorse for fighting in the first place and opposition to the war in general.⁶⁷ Historical examples, such as German Nazi soldiers, Dutch Indonesia veterans and American Vietnam veterans, indicate that even drastic shifts in societal narratives of military

⁶³ Molendijk, "Toward an interdisciplinary conceptualization of moral injury: From unequivocal guilt and anger to moral conflict and disorientation"; Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions*; Molendijk, "Moral coping or simply uncomplicated soldiering?"; Lifton, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans*; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*.

⁶⁴ Schorr et al., "Sources of moral injury among war veterans"; Currier, McCormick, and Drescher, "How do morally injurious events occur?"; Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Gray, *The Warriors*; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*; Ein et al., "The potentially morally injurious nature of encountering children during military deployments."

⁶⁵ Schorr et al., "Sources of moral injury among war veterans"; Currier, McCormick, and Drescher, "How do morally injurious events occur?"; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*; Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*.

⁶⁶ Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*; Lifton, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans*.

⁶⁷ Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Drescher, Nieuwsma, and Swales, "Morality and moral injury: Insights from theology and health science"; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*.

operations typically result in only a minority of soldiers making 180-degree turns in their perceptions.⁶⁸

As discussed, while Ukrainian narratives have persisted, Russian narratives have been extensively challenged, making Russian troops particularly susceptible to developing moral injuries in this regard. Notably, this does not mean that many Russian soldiers would completely turn against their own war and embrace an opposing vision of Ukraine. Evidence from soldiers' moral conflicts in previous wars suggests that this is improbable. If veterans struggle with moral conflicts, these struggles often entail guilt and shame stemming from experiences such as witnessing women and children dying, or making mistakes that led to the death of their colleagues.⁶⁹ Also, many soldiers experience disillusionment and feelings of betrayal by their military organisation and political leaders for the situations they have been placed in and their treatment afterwards.⁷⁰ Some soldiers furthermore develop profound confusion about wider narratives concerning their deployment, including disorientation about how 'dirty but necessary' the suffering was that they witnessed and caused.⁷¹ However, this all still does not necessarily lead to the development of remorse for fighting in the first place and opposition to the war in general.⁷² Historical examples, such as German Nazi soldiers, Dutch Indonesia veterans and American Vietnam veterans, indicate that even with drastic shifts in societal narratives of a military operation, 180-degree turns in soldiers' perceptions occur only among a minority.⁷³

Yet, Russian soldiers do appear susceptible to other symptoms, such as moral distress stemming from having killed human beings up close and being a 'flesh-witness' to the sight and smell of their suffering.⁷⁴ In Ukraine, furthermore, there is

⁶⁸ Kellenbach, *The Mark of Cain*; Scagliola, "Cleo's 'unfinished business'"; Shay, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*.

⁶⁹ Schorr et al., "Sources of moral injury among war veterans"; Currier, McCormick, and Drescher, "How do morally injurious events occur?"; Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Gray, *The Warriors*; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*; Ein et al., "The potentially morally injurious nature of encountering children during military deployments."

⁷⁰ Schorr et al., "Sources of moral injury among war veterans"; Currier, McCormick, and Drescher, "How do morally injurious events occur?"; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*; Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*.

⁷¹ Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*; Lifton, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans*.

⁷² Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Drescher, Nieuwsma, and Swales, "Morality and moral injury: Insights from theology and health science"; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*.

⁷³ Kellenbach, *The Mark of Cain*; Scagliola, "Cleo's 'unfinished business'"; Shay, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*.

⁷⁴ Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*; Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*; Maguen and Burkman, "Combat-related killing."

mounting evidence of Russian soldiers committing ‘a pattern of widespread’ war crimes, including willful killings, attacks on civilians, torture, rape, and more.⁷⁵ While many war criminals display a callous indifference to their actions, there are also many instances where atrocities have evoked profound remorse in the perpetrators.⁷⁶ Again, this statement requires nuance. On the one hand, the Russian military seems to instill specific moral standards that diverge from international humanitarian law, as well as distinct viewpoints on Ukraine.⁷⁷ The atrocities perpetrated by Russian troops are not incidental occurrences and mere by-products of corruption, but rather reflect a longstanding, structural aspect of Russian military doctrine, extending beyond Putin’s reign.⁷⁸ Thus, Russian soldiers may view civilian targeting as necessary for their strategy. Even when they recognise it as wrong, their narrative of protecting Russia may enable rationalisation. On the other hand, despite the adage *inter arma enim silent leges* – in times of war, the laws are silent – no soldier is devoid of judicial and moral standards. Albeit to varying degrees, universal moral intuitions, like valuing human life, guide moral reasoning worldwide.⁷⁹ Accordingly, soldiers worldwide distinguish between murder and legitimate killing, innocent civilians and armed enemies, and illegitimate and legitimate targets.⁸⁰

Regarding the specific attitude toward taking Ukrainian lives, Russians have grown up not only with stories about anti-Russian elements in Ukraine, but also with the idea that Ukraine is a ‘brotherly nation.’⁸¹ Although, as mentioned, Ukraine is generally perceived as the ‘little brother’ that should obey ‘big brother Russia,’ there exists this familial notion. Furthermore, a significant number of Russians have relatives living in Ukraine.⁸² Ultimately, whether or not they are able to

⁷⁵ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, A/HRC/52/62”; OHCHR, “The situation of human rights in Ukraine in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation, 24 February to 15 May 2022.”

⁷⁶ Maguen and Burkman, “Combat-related killing”; Kellenbach, *The Mark of Cain*; Giesen, “The trauma of perpetrators”; Mohamed, “Of monsters and men.”

⁷⁷ Provoost and Kitzen, “Don’t underestimate the bear—Russia is one of the world’s most effective modern counterinsurgents”; Zhukov, “Counterinsurgency in a non-democratic state”; Kinetz, “Kill everyone.”

⁷⁸ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, A/HRC/52/62”; Provoost and Kitzen, “Don’t underestimate the bear—Russia is one of the world’s most effective modern counterinsurgents”; Kinetz, “Kill everyone”; Zhukov, “Counterinsurgency in a non-democratic state.”

⁷⁹ There appear to be universal moral foundations such as care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, and liberty/oppression. See e.g. Graham et al., “Moral foundations theory”; Haidt and Joseph, “Intuitive ethics”; Graham et al., “Moral foundations theory.”

⁸⁰ Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*.

⁸¹ Khaldarova, “Brother or ‘Other’?”

⁸² Petrova, “For many Ukrainians, everyday Russians are as guilty as Putin.”

justify Ukrainian killing, veterans' accounts of numerous wars reveal that the existential reality of the battlefield may still crush some fundamental beliefs about humankind.⁸³ To use the words of Vietnam veteran Bica,⁸⁴ 'as the screams of dying comrades replace the sounds of inspiring anthems, and the chaos, insanity, and horror of the battlefield become apparent,' the realisation may dawn that war is 'destruction and nothing else.'

3.3 Moral injury in Ukrainian combatants

Ukrainian soldiers may face war as 'destruction and nothing else' as well. Yet, it is also a fight for family, home and country, possibly shielding them from moral injury in one sense while making them susceptible in another. Unlike Russian soldiers, they confront the literal destruction of their families, homes, and country, giving the suffering they encounter a significantly different meaning than it does for Russian soldiers. Furthermore, as with any war, Ukrainian soldiers may have unintentionally been involved in actions that caused harm to their fellow Ukrainians due to errors and misjudgments.⁸⁵ Moreover, the intense individual and collective survival instincts that are essential for navigating the immediate challenges of combat may have resulted in behaviour that will haunt some in the long term.⁸⁶ The combination of the harsh reality of war, instinctual survival responses, and an environment of impunity can create a volatile mixture that leads to moral transgressions and even war crimes.⁸⁷ The United Nations have reported a small number of possible violations of international humanitarian law by Ukrainian soldiers, including positioning near civilian areas without protecting civilians and incidents of summary execution and torture of Russian POWs.⁸⁸

⁸³ cf. Gray, *The Warriors*; Bica, "A therapeutic application of philosophy. The moral casualties of war: Understanding the experience"; Lifton, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans*; Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions*; Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*.

⁸⁴ "A therapeutic application of philosophy. The moral casualties of war: Understanding the experience," 87.

⁸⁵ Schorr et al., "Sources of moral injury among war veterans"; Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Gray, *The Warriors*; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*.

⁸⁶ Schorr et al., "Sources of moral injury among war veterans"; Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Gray, *The Warriors*; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*.

⁸⁷ Gupta, *Path to Collective Madness: A Study in Social Order and Political Pathology*; Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*; Zur, "The psychological impact of impunity."

⁸⁸ OHCHR, "The situation of human rights in Ukraine in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation, 24 February to 15 May 2022"; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, A/HRC/52/62."

It is important to reiterate that the Ukrainian soldiers' crimes are incidental and incomparable to the widespread atrocities by Russian troops, which appear deliberate and structural in their military strategy. Also, not all incidents reported are necessarily illegitimate, for instance certain fighting tactics. However, it would be unwise to assume that no transgressions at all are perpetrated by Ukrainian forces. No documented war has been completely free of legal and moral breaches. Discussing such issues may provoke strong emotions and criticism, but it is vital to remain realistic about war's devastating impact on human behaviour. These incidents may have caused moral conflicts for the soldiers involved, or they may do so in the long term.

Furthermore, moral injury may also affect soldiers who have not committed any potentially illegitimate act. Increasingly, reports are emerging of Ukrainian soldiers experiencing moral turmoil.⁸⁹ In a rehabilitation centre where Ukrainian soldiers are sent for a week before being redeployed to the frontlines, a local psychologist relates: 'Many can't sleep. They have nightmares. [...] There is also this enormous sense of guilt. They feel guilty about their friends who died on the front line. And – because many of them have never killed a living being – they sometimes even feel guilty about killing enemy soldiers. They use the word "murder."' ⁹⁰

Besides survivor's guilt and distress about having killed, Ukrainian soldiers have reported feeling a moral betrayal by the Russians. For instance, Ukrainian soldiers of the Donbas war have been cited stating 'Brother nation Russia, they kill us, betray us, and it hurts because we are brothers,' referring to how Russian declarations of being brother nations and their 'subsequent betrayal was seen as particularly hurtful.'⁹¹

The experiences of Allied forces in World War II, as veterans of another 'good war,' offer insight into how these moral struggles can unfold. Reflecting on what war brought out in him and his fellow soldiers, WWII veteran Jesse Glenn Gray writes: 'Faced with this presumptuousness of the human creature, his closedness and dearth of love, the awakened soldier will be driven to say in his heart: "I, too, belong to this species. I am ashamed not only of my own deeds, not only of my nation's deeds, but of human deeds as well. I am ashamed to be a man." [...]. How many soldiers have experienced in battle a profound distaste for the human creature!' ⁹²

⁸⁹ e.g. Kakissis, Harbage, and Lytvynova, "A rehab center revives traumatized Ukrainian Troops before their return to battle"; Cancio, Kuptsevykh-Timmer, and Omori, "Perpetual war with the brother nation."

⁹⁰ Kakissis, Harbage, and Lytvynova, "A rehab center revives traumatized Ukrainian troops before their return to battle."

⁹¹ Cancio, Kuptsevykh-Timmer, and Omori, "Perpetual war with the brother nation," 12.

⁹² Gray, *The Warriors*, 205–7.

In his wartime diary, he wrote about the deaths for which he bore responsibility, concluding: 'I hope it will not rest too hard on my conscience, and yet if it does not I shall be disturbed also.'⁹³

4. Concluding reflections: Us/them fairy tale narratives in the west

The issues of morale and moral injury among Russian and Ukrainian soldiers are clearly situated within interrelated processes at the micro, meso, and macro levels. They underscore the relevance of broad ethical questions about war in the real-world context of the battlefield, while at the same time calling discussions about the ethics of war out of abstract arguments toward closer consideration of the concrete psychological costs of war.

Take, for instance, the Just War tradition, a tradition of theory that attempts to provide ethical guidelines for war. The preceding discussion showed that the grounds on which political leaders resort to war inevitably affect soldiers' conduct during the war and their retrospective appraisal of their own conduct. This confirms both the relevance of Just War tradition and an interconnection among its three categories: *jus ad bellum* (the justification for going to war), *jus in bello* (the ethical conduct of war), and *just post bellum* (justice after war).⁹⁴

The core criteria of the Just War tradition have been incorporated into the formal frameworks of the United Nations. As solidified ethical principles, these international laws and regulations protect not only civilians but also combatants, both physically from other combatants and mentally from themselves. Clearly, Just War criteria and human rights can also be misused by political leaders, such as Putin, as a narrative to justify war crimes. At the same time, it became clear that reality cannot be entirely reduced to a social construct of narratives. The cruel experience of war on the battlefield, where civilians do not necessarily welcome invading soldiers with open arms, reveals the existential reality of invasion, possibly damaging narratives of justification. Previous conflicts have demonstrated that while soldiers may cling even tighter to these narratives, the visceral experience of war and the darker side of humankind can haunt them indefinitely.⁹⁵

⁹³ Gray, 176.

⁹⁴ see also Molendijk, "Just war theory for morale and moral injury: Beyond individual resilience"; Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*.

⁹⁵ cf. Gray, *The Warriors*; Bica, "A therapeutic application of philosophy. The moral casualties of war: Understanding the experience"; Lifton, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans*; Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions*; Molendijk, *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict*; Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*.



Figure 6.3: Societal narratives of war

As a final point, it is important for Western audiences to recognise that, just as Russian and Ukrainian individuals and collectives, we also construct narratives of the conflict that can have tangible impacts. Engaging in critical self-reflection allows us to uncover how our own narratives shape our understanding of the invasion, potential solutions, and ultimately influence our actions and interference in the conflict (see Figure 6.3). In the face of crisis and threat, it is common to fall into us/them narratives, where we tend to believe that our own violence is justified and perhaps even virtuous while that of the other side is barbaric.⁹⁶ A 'war narrative' emphasizes a bipolar divide of some kind: a dichotomous representation of the international scene, a global clash between two antagonistic forces that invariably carry with them a moral identity.⁹⁷ But this can be dangerous.

To be sure, it is indeed essential to take a clear stance during wartime, as passive neutrality in asymmetric conflicts inevitably means choosing the side of the aggressor. Also, Schadenfreude about enemy casualties and aversion to criticism of Ukraine are understandable. However, care must be taken when crafting a narrative that oversimplifies by categorising all Russians as evil and all Ukrainians as superheroes. Such a 'fairy tale' division fails to provide a nuanced understanding

⁹⁶ Lambert, Schott, and Scherer, "Threat, politics, and attitudes"; Leudar, Marsland, and Nekvapil, "On membership categorization"; Skitka et al., "Confrontational and preventative policy responses to terrorism."

⁹⁷ Vinson and McDonnell, "War narratives," 5.

and ends up dehumanising not only Russian soldiers but Ukrainians as well. It demands that they be superhuman.

An alternative perspective on war views it as a tragic human endeavour, where all soldiers can cross moral boundaries and, thus, should be safeguarded from their own actions. The historical lesson that humans can commit inhumane acts is precisely what led to the establishment of international laws and regulations for war. Ethical baselines, developed over centuries, are not naïve, but a tradition of minimalist ethics. When these standards are deemed irrelevant in the challenging circumstances for which they are designed, they lose their meaning.

Hence, while expecting clean wars is unrealistic, it is equally unrealistic to dismiss transgressions committed by the ‘heroes’ as ethically irrelevant. As the ‘fairy tale’ narrative not only fails to protect Ukrainian soldiers from their own actions but also exposes them to the risk of being vilified in the post-war aftermath, as seen in past military operations like Vietnam, Srebrenica, and the Dutch East Indies. Acknowledging war as a tragic human endeavour, instead, allows for genuine empathy for soldiers who cross moral boundaries in the fog of war and must live with the consequences.

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