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14 November 2022

The Battle of Humanity on the Civilian Front

On February 24th, 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted not only a military battle but also a battle over the human rights of innocent civilians. Under the threat of nuclear war, Ukrainian officials instructed civilians who could not join their military to evacuate. This resulted in a large-scale exodus, with millions of Ukrainians fleeing the country and flooding neighboring European countries. The Russian government simultaneously began taking custody of Ukrainian civilians, forcing them to migrate to Russia, where they have been placed in filtration camps. The filtration system relies on illegally screening refugees, manipulating their national identity, and physically abusing and torturing them. This system is a Russian attempt to suppress Ukrainian resistance and seize control over any civilian opposition or protest. Russia's inhumane treatment of innocent Ukrainian civilians is a direct violation of their right to privacy and protection, during the evacuation of war territory.

Historically, in times of war and national conflict, refugees have flooded into surrounding countries and occupied regions where they are welcomed and offered assistance. With a rise in military technology and militias employing specialized weapons in combat, a greater emphasis has been placed on civilians evacuating or migrating from regions of military discord. When Russia initially invaded Ukraine, the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine advised women and children to leave the country. The border was closed to all men between the ages of 18 and 60, who were ordered to remain in Ukraine and fight on behalf of their country. Currently, around

eight months into the war, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) has reported 7.8 million Ukrainian refugees in countries in Europe, Asia, and North America.

The majority of Ukrainian refugees fled to surrounding European countries that were accessible and offered immediate protection. The European Union (EU) Temporary Protection Directive was enacted in March 2022 to provide displaced civilians of Ukraine access to housing accommodation, employment, and medical care in any EU state. Currently, 4.6 million refugees are registered for protection, according to the UNHCR. Many Ukrainian refugees have relied heavily on the EU provision and humanitarian relief services for their economic and physical needs. The global church and humanitarian organizations have also supported refugees by meeting their physical needs for housing, food, medical care, and other emergency services.

While neighboring countries and humanitarian groups have supported Ukrainian refugees, many face insurmountable challenges. Countless refugees have experienced a lack of proper documentation and visas or learned that their identification has been manipulated or stolen. There have been mass reports of Ukrainian refugees experiencing ethnic and racial discrimination, as diverse religions and cultures clash. Many refugees attempting to leave Ukraine have become victims of sexual abuse and human trafficking.

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) said, “Ukrainian orphans and unaccompanied minors are particularly susceptible to such predators, and they need not only to be safely evacuated from Ukraine but also securely tracked and transferred into national child protection systems so they do not fall prey to human traffickers or otherwise disappear.” As the CSCE seeks to protect these individuals, concern remains for refugees’ safety and accounting for them, especially children. Ukrainian evacuees also face employment and educational challenges amid language and cultural barriers. Despite the support from

neighboring countries, Ukrainian refugees have encountered much adversity as they attempt to find homes in foreign countries.

Russia's forced migration system and its filtration camps have presented a far worse danger to Ukrainians displaced by war. The Human Rights Watch, a non-governmental organization that studies human rights violations, purports that the Russian government has been forcibly transferring refugees to Russian territory, taking custody of these civilians, and endangering them. In June 2022, the Russian military attacked the city of Mariupol in Ukraine, killing approximately 21,000 people and demanding the evacuation of thousands of refugees. Under Russian custody, these refugees have been placed in filtration camps, places of illegal detainment, where the Human Rights Watch reports that Russian forces are abusing, beating, manipulating, starving, and holding refugees captive.

This kind of treatment has roots in past conflicts between Russia and surrounding territories. In 1994, Russia invaded Chechnya in an attempt to take back land that belonged to the federal republic of Russia. During this invasion, they enacted Directive No. 247 which states, "establish filtration points for the identification of persons who had been arrested in the zones of combat operations and their involvement in the combat activities." This directive was proposed as a simple measure of protocol and military responsibility. Later, it was exposed as Russian torture and abuse of Chechen civilians. During the 2nd Chechen War in 1999, civilians experienced filtration again. Many testified that they were stripped of identification documents and prohibited from leaving Russia. The Russian government used filtration to target those with enemy ties; this led to the mass disappearance of registered Chechen citizens. In 2014, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea, a region torn between Ukrainian and Russian control. The Ukrainian Parliament revealed that during the invasion Russian forces ran 79 detention centers

and camps holding innocent civilians. In testimonials gathered by Ukrainian human rights organizations, “The survivors presented detailed accounts of beatings, sleep deprivation, forced labor, compulsory exercise, mock executions, unprovoked shooting at detainees’ extremities, and threats to bring harm to the detainees’ families,” (The New Yorker). Now, as the war in Ukraine continues, an estimated 2.8 million Ukrainian refugees have been forcibly relocated to Russia (UNHCR).

In the wake of World War II, international treaties sought to establish protections for civilians caught in a war conflict. In 1949, the Geneva Convention outlined protections for civilians, medical workers, and wounded personnel from war conflict. Article 45, in the Fourth paragraph of the Geneva Convention, states, “In no circumstances shall a protected person be transferred to a country where he or she may have reason to fear persecution for his or her political opinions or religious beliefs.” The document was written and signed after World War II in response to Nazi-run concentration camps and the German mass murder of Jews.

Today, Russia’s filtration camps constitute war crimes and violate civilians’ rights to protection during armed conflicts (International Humanitarian Law). In addition to Russian forces physically harming refugees, many are being stripped of their privacy and security. Within the filtration system, Russian forces are screening and leaking refugees’ personal data, including body measurements and calculations (biometrics). The United Nations reported that Russian forces were responsible for the raping of refugees during these screening processes. Meanwhile, legal documents belonging to these Ukrainian citizens have been stolen or “misplaced,” with the intent of preventing them from exiting Russia.

Russia’s filtration process has targeted vulnerable refugees, including those with ties to the Ukrainian military and a staggering number of children. The Ukrainian government has

reported that 240,000 children are under Russian control. These children have been estranged from their families and transported to Russian territory, where they are being held in filtration camps. In the hands of Russian forces, these children have little hope of returning to their families. Their identification has been reportedly changed, and they are marked as misplaced. It is believed that Ukrainian children have little access to humanitarian aid.

Winston Churchill, Britain's prime minister during World War II, said, "Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it." The Holocaust was one of the largest mass genocides in history and serves as an example of the most inhumane treatment of citizens to date. Nazi concentration camps, led by Adolf Hitler were responsible for the extermination and genocide of 6 million Jews. The consequences of a murderous dictator on humanity are evident. Much is still unknown about Russia's plans and treatment of Ukrainians and the lengths its leader, Vladimir Putin, will go to seize control. But the Russian government's inhumane treatment of Ukrainians still serves as a reminder of the horrors of the Holocaust and the human toll of oppressive political regimes.

At the heart of the Russo-Ukrainian war is a military and political fight for power, control, and defeat. The military battle in Ukraine has garnered widespread attention. But a battle remains over the human dignity of Ukrainian citizens. When countries engage in conflict, there is always a civilian front—primarily women, children, the elderly and disabled, and wounded soldiers, all of whom endure oppression, manipulation, and torture by the enemy. In today's technological age, it is easy to believe the public is informed about the damages of the Russian invasion on humanity. But the presence of forced migration and filtration camps underscores the many unknowns that remain as the invasion continues. As Ukrainian refugees have become

victims of Russian oppression, the disregard for their human dignity, freedoms, and God-given right to life unveils.

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