



## **Prosecute Vladimir Putin for War Crimes? Yes, Alongside MbS, MbZ, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Other Unworthies**

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War is a human horror, the best evidence possible for the existence of evil, the role of Original Sin, and the depravity of man. And so it has ever been.

The mad slaughter, ferocious bloodlust, and brutal violence of ancient combat is difficult to imagine. The killing was up close and personal. Today, in a supposedly more advanced and civilized age, the sophisticated tools that murder and maim are more distant.

Explosives kill on industrial scale, with nuclear weapons able to incinerate entire cities. Aircraft and missiles inflict death from afar, on unseen lands continents and oceans away. Two countries at least, and potentially nine, possess the ability to end most life on the planet. That number is likely to increase in the future.

Yet even in the age of mass carnage, there still is murder most terrible, up close and personal as in the past. Which we saw in the Ukrainian town of Bucha and elsewhere. There was no excuse for the killing of civilians, just as there was no justification for Russia's invasion and bombardment of cities.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is yet another in a long line of loathsome political leaders who set in motion forces that treat millions of human beings as means to selfish, myopic, and brutal ends. The consequences have been terrible for the Ukrainian people. The result also is harming his own people alongside those he targeted with war.

The Russian military's evident brutality further discredits Putin's claimed objectives. Satellite photos reveal the presence of the bodies in Bucha long before Moscow's withdrawal from that area, precluding any elaborate Ukrainian setup. (Contrast that with Washington's reliance on false atrocity claims in the first Gulf War and exaggerated accounts in the conflict with Serbia over Kosovo.) The crime should be investigated and those responsible should be held responsible. Although, realistically, that is unlikely in wartime, especially amid a campaign growing only more bitter. Rarely is justice of any sort achieved in war other than the dubious variant imposed by the victor on the vanquished.

However, Putin's accusers should be careful what they wish for. If Putin is guilty in Bucha, they might be guilty of much more.

Bucha is terrible, a war crime and an atrocity, but not genocide. Ironically, in using a term most identified with the murder of six million Jews by Nazi Germany for political advantage Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky mimicked Putin, who justified his actions against Ukraine by previously claiming that genocide was occurring in the Donbass.

Instead, the Bucha killings look like the sort of war crimes common in conflict, inflicted by angry, undisciplined forces rather than ordered by the political leadership in the distant capital. Including by Western militaries. And even the US armed forces. Indeed, millions of civilians have died in America's wars. Not all killed *by* Americans, of course, but Washington cannot escape often shared, and sometimes primary, responsibility for those deaths.

Consider the terrible crime of My Lai in 1968 in Vietnam, in which US troops slaughtered some 500 civilians. The killing was close up and personal. "I saw them shoot an M79 [grenade launcher] into a group of people who were still alive. But it was mostly done with a machine gun. They were shooting women and children just like anybody else," said Sgt. Michael Bernhardt.

The US Army covered up the crime, which was not publicized until a year later. Nor was My Lai the only such war crime. Observed author Nick Turse: "Far bloodier operations, like one codenamed Speedy Express, should be remembered as well, but thanks to cover-ups at the highest levels of the US military, few are." These murders were terrible war crimes – but neither constituted genocide nor were ordered by President Lyndon Johnson.

He and his successor, Richard Nixon did, however, direct the sustained bombing of Vietnam, which killed some 65,000 civilians by the estimate of political scientist Guenter Lewy. Of course, American leaders did not order the bombing *to* kill civilians. But they bombed knowing that civilians, many civilians, *would* die.

The US also was responsible for the deaths of *South Korean* civilians, the very people Washington claimed to be saving. Scores if not hundreds were killed near the village of No Gun Ri. This story did not emerge until 1999. Of course, this was not official policy nor was it ordered by President Harry S. Truman. However, it happened, and justice was never done.

More recent US military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq and drone campaigns in Pakistan and elsewhere also killed civilians – routinely, steadily, and coldly. And Washington's first reaction always was and is denial, as after the deadly Kabul drone strike last August that killed ten, including seven children. Tragically, none of the US military's assumptions were correct, with murderous consequences.

The impact helps explain why Washington lost its 20-year war in Afghanistan. For America, rural Afghanistan was a battlefield, not a homeland, and civilians paid the ultimate price. A poignant example of the victims of America's war was 40-ish Shakira, whom journalist Anand Gopal interviewed:

*"Entire branches of Shakira's family, from the uncles who used to tell her stories to the cousins who played with her in the caves, vanished. In all, she lost sixteen family members. I wondered if it was the same for other families in Pan Killay. I sampled a dozen households at random in the village, and made similar inquiries in other villages, to insure that Pan Killay was not outlier. For each family, I documented the names of the dead, cross-checking cases with death certificates and eyewitness testimony. On average, I found, each family lost ten to twelve civilians in what locals call the American War.*

*"This scale of suffering was unknown in a bustling metropolis like Kabul, where citizens enjoyed relative security. But in countryside enclaves like Sangin the ceaseless killings of civilians led many Afghans to gravitate toward the Taliban. By 2010, many households in Ishaqzai villages had sons in the Taliban, most of whom had joined simply to protect themselves or to take revenge; the movement was more thoroughly integrated into Sangin life than it had been in the nineties. Now, when Shakira and her friends discussed the Taliban, they were discussing their own friends, neighbors, and loved ones."*

Obviously, none of this excuses Russia's conduct in Ukraine, which is murderous and outrageous, horrible and unjustified. However, President Joe Biden was too quick to charge Putin with war crimes, which requires evidence currently absent. Certainly, the latter has proved willing to kill – when he believed doing so would strengthen his regime. But nothing indicates that he or his high command ordered the Bucha murders, which yielded neither military nor political gain. Indeed, it is widely recognized that one reason for Moscow's initial military disasters was launching an invasion lite, apparently minimizing use of heavy weapons to limit death and destruction in expectation of a quick victory.

These crimes are more likely the result of *minimal command*. Historically the Soviet Union lacked the NCO (non-commissioned officers) corps whose members directly manage and maneuver combat troops. Overstretched and ill-prepared officers lack the numbers and experience to compensate. Russia appears to suffer similar problems.

Troops lied to about their purpose – promised a cakewalk and rapturous reception by "liberated" Ukrainians – may have visited anger most properly directed at Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu and especially Putin on the Ukrainian locals in front of them. Moscow's political and military leadership still should be held responsible, but for the act of criminal aggression, absent discovery of evidence of their culpability in Bucha.

Indeed, the Biden administration might want to think carefully before carelessly charging Putin with war crimes. For by that standard more than a few allied leaders should find themselves in the dock.

Any war crimes trial should start with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and United Arab Emirates Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayad. They initiated a brutal war of aggression against Yemen in which upwards of 400,000 civilians have died. The principal accomplices, always knowledgeable and sometimes enthusiastic, of the royal killers were Presidents Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, whose administrations serviced the US-provided war

planes, supplied munitions used to bomb weddings, funerals, school buses, and other civilian targets, gave intelligence used for targeting, and for a time refueled Saudi and Emirati aircraft.

US officials could not claim to be surprised at their culpability: the State Department warned that they could be held responsible for war crimes. Other governments, too, should be prosecuted. For instance, *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones wrote of the United Kingdom: "Through our staunch military alliance with the Saudi dictatorship, our government is directly complicit with these atrocities."

George W. Bush is another good candidate for a trial on his aggressive, unjustified attack on Iraq, based on manipulated and fabricated "intelligence." His war ended up killing hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians, as well as triggering years more of conflict. Former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, today spending his golden years profiting after acting as Bush's "poodle," would be an appropriate co-conspirator.

And these should be just the start.

Putin is a cruel dictator, and a brutal aggressor. The killings of civilians in Bucha and elsewhere are war crimes. However, before treating Putin as uniquely culpable Western leaders should take a long, hard look in the mirror. American aggression against Iraq and Saudi/Emirati aggression against Yemen both have killed far more civilians than the Russians have yet killed in Ukraine. The West should take war crimes seriously. But that requires starting with its own.

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