



Contrasting Strategies for Concealing Wartime Atrocities

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by Ted Galen Carpenter

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Just days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, accusations began to surface that the invader was targeting civilian neighborhoods with artillery and missile strikes. Not surprisingly, most of those allegations have come from the Ukrainian government, and it is often difficult for independent observers to verify them. Nevertheless, the Biden administration soon echoed the Zelenskyy government's accusations, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken insisting that there is evidence of "indiscriminate attacks and attacks deliberately targeting civilians, as well as other atrocities."

A fine line exists between casualties inflicted during the course of normal warfare (which is inherently brutal and destructive), and outright war crimes. Some of the incidents in Ukraine appear to fall into the latter category, however. For example, multiple eyewitnesses stated that Russian forces occupying Bucha, a Kyiv suburb, summarily executed civilians and buried their bodies in mass graves. It was apparent from satellite imagery that dozens of people had been killed during the Russian occupation of the town, and their corpses remained in the streets for days.

The Bucha incident has produced widespread international outrage, including calls for war crimes prosecutions. That campaign now extends beyond demands for prosecuting the military units apparently responsible for the killings. More zealous advocates, including President Biden, insist that Russian president Vladimir Putin be put on trial—an utterly impractical goal unless he is first ousted from power.

The Kremlin's response to the episode contributed to the growing international anger. Russian officials issued a series of contradictory accounts. When the news story first broke, they insisted that the accusations of atrocities in Bucha were nothing more than fake news—a propaganda

production staged with actors. When that trial balloon did not fly, the Kremlin insisted that the incident was a false flag operation carried out by the Ukrainian government against its own people. The credibility of that allegation was not much higher than the fake news explanation.

Moscow's media strategy amounted to little more than a transparent attempt at stonewalling, and it has failed miserably in the contest to influence global public opinion. Given the extensive restrictions on news outlets inside Russia, it is uncertain whether most Russians believe their government's denial of a war crime.

The United States has gradually developed a more sophisticated strategy for responding to accusations (and evidence) of its own atrocities. Washington has come a long way from the Pentagon's inept handling of the March 16, 1968, My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War.

The initial cover story regarding that episode was at least as brazenly dishonest as Moscow's current reaction to war crimes allegations. The U.S. military's official statement following the bloodshed on that day portrayed the carnage as an impressive victory over communist fighters, and most accounts in news outlets reflected that view. But the cover story unraveled in November 1969 with the publication of an investigative report by a young freelance journalist named Seymour Hersh. His report uncovered what had really taken place and caused widespread revulsion in the United States. A U.S. Army company under the command of Lt. William Calley had massacred at least 347 unarmed civilians in the South Vietnamese hamlet.

The existence of an independent news media in the West is a key factor in why U.S. leaders have found it more difficult than their Russian counterparts to conceal war crimes. That doesn't mean they haven't continued trying to do so, however. The Navy's official explanation emerging from a supposedly honest investigation about why the USS *Vincennes* shot down an Iranian airliner in July 1988 proved to be false in nearly every respect. *Newsweek* reporters John Barry and Roger Charles eventually debunked the Navy's account, but it took four years for the truth to be established.

It did not take nearly as long for the military's cover story about an August 2021 drone strike on "ISIS terrorists" in Kabul, Afghanistan to unravel. That strike was supposedly a vindication of the Biden administration's "over the horizon" strategy to prevent terrorists from running amok in Afghanistan following the humiliating withdrawal of U.S. forces. Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, went out of his way to describe the drone attack in Afghanistan not only as a successful, necessary military action, but as a "righteous strike." He made that over-the-top description even though other Defense Department officials were already expressing caution about the episode. Three weeks later, following investigations by skeptical journalists, the Pentagon had to admit that U.S. personnel had misidentified an Afghan aid worker and his family as terrorists. The drone strike on their vehicle had killed ten innocent civilians, including seven children.

Again, the work of an independent news media was vital in revealing the truth. However, as in the case of the *Vincennes* incident, there is no evidence that the people responsible for the Afghan drone attack were ever disciplined for their tragic blunder. Worse, there is no evidence that the military's continuing attempts to misrepresent the outcome of the drone strike over the

next three weeks led to disciplinary actions against the offenders. As in the case of the My Lai massacre and the attack on the Iranian airliner, suspicion lingers that military leaders would have continued the cover up indefinitely, if they could have done so.

There is still hope that the Russian troops responsible for the slaughter in Bucha will be brought to justice, although such an outcome is a long shot. It is even more utopian to believe that Putin will ever face a war crimes tribunal. That scenario is no more probable than an American president being prosecuted for a war crime. Exposure of their misdeeds is the most that we can expect, and that is at least a modest achievement.

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