



How should the world respond to Bucha?

People stand next to a mass grave in Bucha, on the outskirts of Kyiv, Ukraine, Monday.

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We have all heard that war is hell; but the small town of Bucha, ordinarily a quiet Kyiv suburb, has brought this truth home to us in a particularly shocking way. The departure of Russian soldiers who had occupied Bucha and other Kyiv suburbs for over a month before turning away has revealed a grisly picture of barbarism toward the local civilian population. Now the wrenching question is: Where does the world, including the United States, go from here?

The horrors of Bucha and other nearby towns in Ukraine are still unfolding, in searing photos and videos and in residents' accounts. Dead bodies — many with hands tied behind their backs — lie in the streets, in mass graves, in the basements of homes; some reportedly show signs of torture. Some women tell stories of rape corroborated by marks of violence, or of watching their husbands and fathers gunned down. A village mayor abducted by the occupiers is found buried in a shallow pit, murdered execution-style with her husband and grown son.

These are the kinds of atrocities that, for most of us, exist in movies and books about World War II. Now they are unfolding before our eyes.

Should we invoke the anti-genocide motto, “Never again!” — previously betrayed in Rwanda, Bosnia and other places?

Attempts by the Russian government and its spin doctors to explain away the horrifying facts have been pathetic, with discredited arguments quickly replaced by new and contradictory ones. First, there were claims that some corpses could be seen moving and were clearly actors in a false flag operation. When that was debunked, a more sickening lie surfaced: that the victims were killed by Ukrainian forces to frame the Russians. Yet both material evidence — from the likely timing of the deaths to satellite imagery — and survivors' accounts show otherwise.

One can debate whether this tragedy amounts to genocide, i.e., targeted extermination of Ukrainians as part of an effort to destroy Ukrainian nationhood. Recent official statements in Russia suggest such a nation-destroying intent. But so far, it's unclear whether the killings were systematic or mainly driven by wartime brutalization among frustrated, angry and hungry young men. Some accounts suggest the worst cruelty came from irregular fighters from Eastern Ukraine's separatist militias.

But genocide or no, there is little doubt that war crimes have been rampant and that Russia has no intention of stopping them.

For some, this is a clarion call for military intervention. Meanwhile, anti-interventionists left and right cry that the Bucha horrors are being used as war propaganda to unleash World War III.

No sane person clamors for war between two nuclear superpowers, and even the prospect of conventional war between NATO troops and Russia is terrifying. But there is more we can do to help Ukraine's valiant fight without directly joining it: Boost arms deliveries and step up the sanctions. This should include curbing European purchases of Russian oil and gas, which are funding Vladimir Putin's war, as quickly as possible (the latest poll in Germany finds majority support for such measures). Defanging Russia in the United Nations, either by expelling it from the Security Council or by setting up an alternate decision-making body, would also be a welcome move.

Peace negotiations should continue. But after Bucha, Ukraine cannot be expected to make any concessions that affect its capacity for self-defense — and Russia cannot expect to rebound from pariah status unless it ends the war and offers some form of restitution.

Opinions expressed by Cathy Young, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, are her own. She is a contributing editor at Reason magazine.