

INTRODUCTION

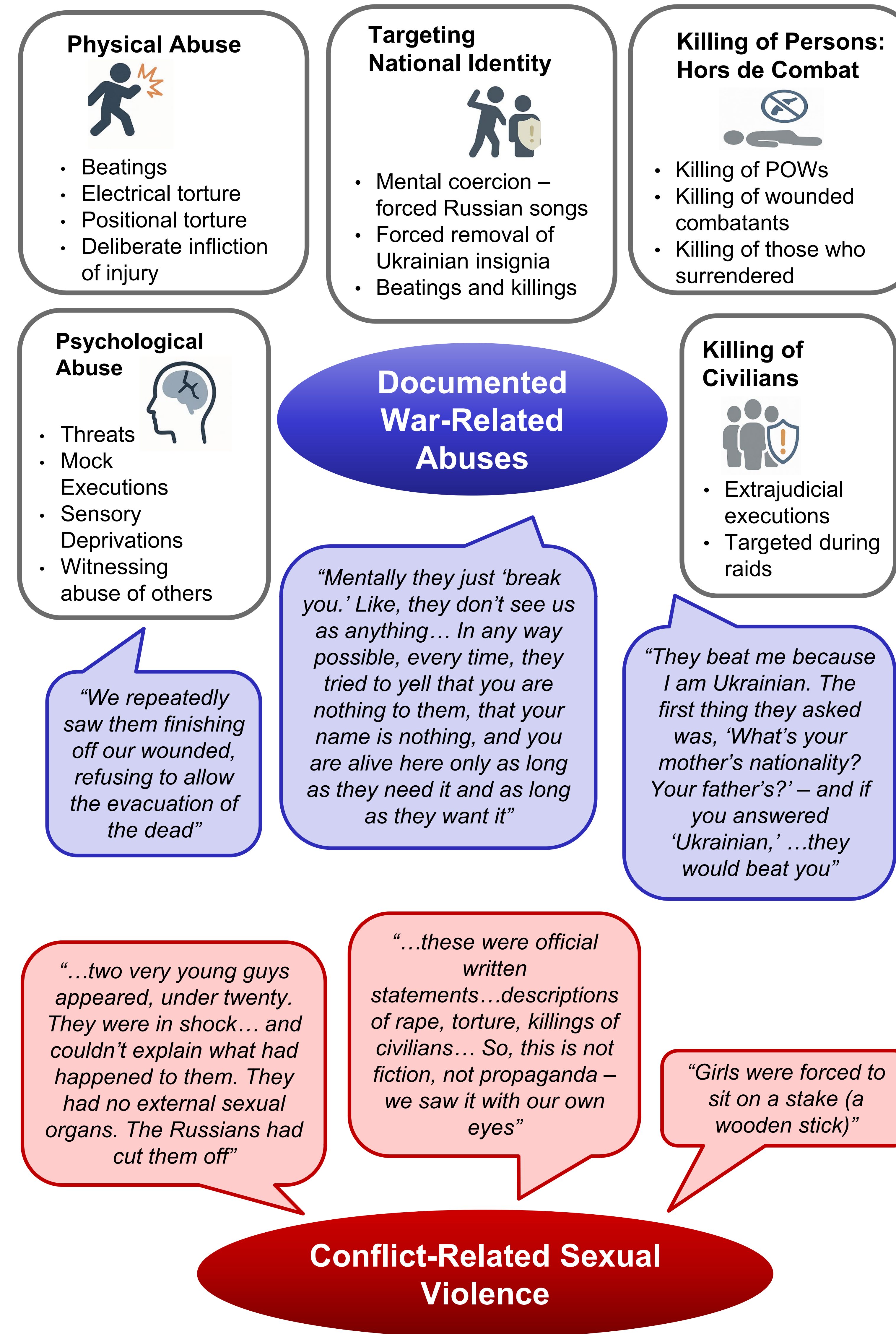
- The February 2022 Russian Federation invasion of Ukraine, following the conflict in 2014, resulted in massive casualties, widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, and a humanitarian crisis
- Russian forces do not adhere to Geneva Conventions, International Humanitarian Law, or International Criminal Law
 - Documented war crimes in Chechnya and Georgia
- Numerous violations of international humanitarian law have occurred in Ukraine, suggesting possible war crimes and crimes against humanity (WCCA), including:
 - Indiscriminate shelling
 - Systematic torture
 - Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV)
- This study: explored lived experiences of Ukrainian veterans and former Prisoners of War (POWs) since 2014 to document reported abuses and inform accountability and future justice processes.

METHODS

- Mixed-methods studied design, combining thematic analysis of semi-structured key informant interviews with quantitative descriptors.
- Participants: 40 Ukrainian veterans and former POWs from the 2014 and 2022 invasions
 - 20 males, 20 females
- Interviews August and November 2025.
- Qualitative instrument
 - 32 open-ended questions covering demographics, abuses, psychological impact, and justice
 - Written in English and translated to Ukrainian, with culturally sensitive wording
- Qualitative analysis
 - Deductive thematic content analysis using NVivo 15
 - Interview transcripts were independently coded by four researchers and then discussed to reach consensus
- Quantitative data were independently coded directly from transcripts
- Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview
 - Verbal rather than written consent
 - Ethical approval was obtained from regulatory boards of US and Ukrainian institutions

DISCLAIMER

The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views, assertions, opinions or policies of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS), the Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine, Inc. (HJF), the Department of War (DoW), or the Departments of the Army, Navy, or Air Force. Mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations does not imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. The authors declare no conflict of interest.



RESULTS

- Participants reported numerous instances of abuse consistent with WCCA, including:
 - Attacks on civilian infrastructure and unlawful killing of civilians
 - Systemic torture, electrocution, starvation
 - CRSV targeting both male and female captives and civilians
- Internally, female veterans reported facing discrimination, restrictive roles, and military sexual assault
- Trauma symptoms, including PTSD, anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances, were cited as major consequences of their experiences
- Participants further reported strong feelings of guilt and symptoms consistent with moral injury, stemming from psychological and emotional turmoil of witnessing atrocities against comrades and civilians

DISCUSSION

- Abuses appear deliberate, widespread, and consistent with WCCA.
- Stigma, particularly for male CRSV survivors, and other psychosocial barriers may obstruct evidence-gathering and truth-telling, undermining efforts for justice and accountability
- Severe trauma symptomatology necessitates an immediate humanitarian response prioritizing the recovery of veterans and former POWs through structured, accessible, long-term psychological and psychiatric services
- Restrictive roles, discrimination, and military sexual assault reveal a need to establish mechanisms that combat internal sexual violence and reinforce professional military hierarchy
- Limitations
 - Respondent perspectives are limited to location and timeframe of military service
 - Not generalizable to all veterans or active-duty military
 - This study does not constitute a legal determination regarding violations of international law and is not meant to serve as an evidentiary record

CONCLUSIONS

- This study contributes to understanding widespread abuses perpetrated against Ukrainian military members and civilians
- Findings indicate an urgent needs for long-term psychological and psychiatric services for veterans and former POWs, and protection and prevention mechanisms to promote efforts for justice and accountability for these abuses

REFERENCES

