Morality at War: A Comparative Study of Military Restraint of Russian and Ukrainian Combatants

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Abstract

Military violence remains a critical concern in the study of armed conflict and international security. Despite the proliferation of international humanitarian norms and sustained efforts to prevent wartime atrocities, acts of brutality persist – both as unintended outcomes of military operations and as manifestations of deliberate violence. This thesis examines the case of the Russo-Ukrainian war, where a marked asymmetry in the treatment of non-combatants has been observed: Russian forces have demonstrated significantly higher levels of violence than their Ukrainian counterparts. This divergence presents a theoretical puzzle, particularly in light of Ukraine's rational incentives for violence, shared institutional and cultural legacies of both armies, and mutually dehumanizing wartime rhetoric found on both sides. Focusing specifically on opportunistic violence, the study explores the restraining function of morality in warfare. It draws on the rational choice theory, evolutionary psychology, and contractarian ethics to conceptualize morality against military violence as a social contract and describe the role of combatants' motivations in producing moral restraint. Using empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews with Russian and Ukrainian combatants, the study argues that those motivated by a common cause – such as collective defense – are more likely to internalize and uphold moral norms against military violence. In contrast, when motivations are rooted in private gains, moral restraint tends to erode and eventually collapse. Thus, the thesis offers a rationalist account of moral behavior in war, reasserts the relevance of normative factors in shaping combatant conduct, and contributes to policy-oriented debates on atrocity prevention.

Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, Leonardo Aurelio Ingannamorte, candidate for the MA degree in International Relations declare herewith that the present thesis titled "Morality at War: A Comparative Study of Military Restraint of Russian and Ukrainian Combatants" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegal use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, May 20, 2025

Leonardo Aurelio Ingannamorte

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I would, of course, also like to thank my family, friends, and colleagues who have been with me throughout my studies at CEU and the process of writing of this thesis. Without your support, all of this would not have been possible at all.

Last – but certainly not least. In fact, quite the opposite. Here, I would like to express not only gratitude, but sorrow – toward Ukraine and the Ukrainian people – for the pain, death, and suffering inflicted by my country. As a Russian citizen, I ask for your forgiveness for what the Russian state and its soldiers have done and continue to do, including in my name. I sincerely wish peace to the living and eternal remembrance for the fallen. Peace as you envision it – not as Putin craves it. Слава Україні!

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Introduction

Despite the widespread introduction of international humanitarian norms and consistent efforts to mitigate wartime atrocities, military violence remains a defining feature of contemporary armed conflict. Recent hostilities in Gaza, Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, and other countries and territories continue to be marked by extensive harm to civilians and prisoners of war (POWs) (Human Rights Watch 2024, 2025; Jamaluddine et al. 2025; OHCHR 2022a). Among these conflicts, the war in Ukraine emerges as particularly salient – it is the largest military conflict of the 21st century accompanied by brutal atrocities against non-combatants.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine, initiated on February 24, 2022, presents a compelling analytical case for the study of military violence. Reports by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) underscore a stark disparity in the treatment of POWs by opposing forces. According to OHCHR (2023c), 92% of POWs held by Russia reported experiencing ill-treatment, compared to 49% of those held by Ukraine.

While both figures may seem troubling, the asymmetry in prevalence, context, and forms of violence presents a puzzling divergence in the conduct of the two sides. The OHCHR report suggests that Ukrainian abuse typically occurred during capture – emotionally charged and quite stressful moments – and often took the form of beatings, threats, or mock executions. In contrast, Russian military violence appears more systematic and more brutal, frequently manifesting during detention and including violent practices such as electrocution and sexual abuse. Notably, the Russian military exhibits markedly higher levels of violence towards women: while only one case of ill-treatment of female POWs by Ukrainian forces was reported, twenty female prisoners of war in Russian custody reported various forms of abuse (Figures 1, 2).

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TORTURE AND ILL-TREATMENT OF POWs IN THE HANDS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION
cases documented by OHCHR through individual interviews

Number of cases documented*

- 92% — Men: 170 Women: 20
- 84% — Men: 153 Women: 20
- 27% — Men: 52 Women: 3

■ Overall at any stage of captivity
■ During internment
■ Upon capture

Widespread forms**

Beatings
Welcoming beatings
Electrocution
Stress position
Sexual violence***
Threats of mutilation
Mock execution
Asphyxiation/waterboarding
Stabbing/shooting at leg

Creation Date: 21 March 2023
Source: OHCHR HRMMU

* Out of all POWs interviewed by OHCHR
** Represents POWs subjected to a particular form of torture or ill-treatment
*** Including threats of sexual violence and inappropriate strip searches

Figure 1. Torture and ill-treatment of POWs in the hands of Russia
(OHCHR 2023c, 18)

TORTURE AND ILL-TREATMENT OF POWs IN THE HANDS OF UKRAINE
cases documented by OHCHR through individual interviews

Number of cases documented*

- 49% — Men: 112 Women: 1
- 44% — Men: 100 Women: 1
- 15% — Men: 34

■ Overall at any stage of captivity
■ Upon capture
■ During internment

Widespread forms**

Beatings
Severe beatings***
Threats of violence or execution
Forced to sing
Mock execution
Electrocution
Stabbing/shooting at leg
Exhaustive physical exercises

Creation Date: 21 March 2023
Source: OHCHR HRMMU

* Out of all POWs interviewed by OHCHR
** Represents POWs subjected to a particular form of torture or ill-treatment
***Prolonged beatings causing severe pain and/or resulting in loss of teeth or broken bones

Figure 2. Torture and ill-treatment of POWs in the hands of Ukraine
(OHCHR 2023c, 28)

This divergence in POW treatment, alongside other indicators of disproportionate violence by Russian forces against non-combatants (Human Rights Watch 2022a, 2022b; OHCHR 2022b, 2022c, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c), prompts a central research question: why are some armies and individual combatants more violent than others? This question is particularly provocative in the case of the war in Ukraine, which constitutes a theoretical puzzle. Both armies descend from a shared historical and cultural heritage rooted in the Soviet military tradition (Ellmanns, Melnyk, and Paes 2025). Moreover, the peoples of Russia and Ukraine were, until recently, connected by dense networks of social ties (Davlikanova et al. 2024). In terms of wartime narratives, both sides rely on intense enemy

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dehumanization – referring to each other as "Nazis" or "Orcs" (Rooney 2023; Zakharchenko 2022). According to existing research, such rhetoric typically escalates violence (Dower 1986; Maynard 2015). At the same time, Russian authorities continue to portray Ukrainians as a "brotherly people," which, by the logic of social proximity, should reduce violence. Furthermore, given the existential threat faced by Ukraine, one might expect stronger incentives to relax normative constraints and resort to any available measures of self-defense (Downes 2012; Mitchell 2004). Yet, despite these expectations grounded in both normative and material theories, it is the Russian military that has consistently demonstrated greater brutality – a finding that challenges conventional wisdom and warrants deeper investigation.

This apparent contradiction does not necessarily undermine existing theories; instead, it may suggest that the category of "military violence" itself requires further conceptual clarification. In the context of the war in Ukraine, military violence may refer to disparate phenomena: the atrocities in Bucha or Irpin, the torture of POWs, the disregard for civilian life during artillery strikes and city assault, or deliberate targetings of civilian infrastructure. Accordingly, the literature tends to focus on different aspects of the concept. For instance, Downes' ideas about "desperation to win" (2012) address centrally planned, strategic military violence, whereas Bell's research on military culture (2016) explores primarily opportunistic violence – actions by individuals or groups of combatants driven by personal motives.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a unifying thread across these various manifestations of military violence: morality. Despite differences in perpetrators, circumstances, and motivations, both indiscriminate bombings and isolated cases of looting or sexual assault are perceived as morally reprehensible. Consider two scenarios: in the first, a combatant kills another combatant pointing a gun at them; in the second, the same combatant kills a civilian suspected of sharing information with an enemy. In both cases, the actor, action, motivation –

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self-defense, fatal outcome, and war context are identical. What distinguishes them is the moral judgment we intuitively attach to the act. This approach to defining military violence may be profoundly insightful, as it directs attention to the core source of judgment – morality – rather than to customs derived from morality or law that has evolved from customs.

Morality may play a significant role not only in the matter of understanding military violence but also in matters of a practical nature. It is difficult to argue against theories that emphasize organizational and legal constraints on military violence (Bell 2016) – any individual, when faced with the threat of meaningful punishment, is likely to alter their behavior accordingly. However, such constraints may carry limited weight in the absence of oversight and control, conditions that are characteristic of virtually all armed conflicts. When control and the likelihood of consequences for violent conduct are absent or severely diminished, morality may remain the only meaningful internal restraint on violent behavior.

Although morality seems to be central to how we understand military violence, it remains marginal in much of the existing literature. Liberal theories tend to emphasize institutional and regime norms (Rummel 1995; Engelhardt 1992). Realist approaches, when they address morality at all, often frame it as a strategic concern related to external perception rather than internal conviction (Kasher 2010; Stanton 2009). While constructivist theories engage productively with the normative dimension, they do not clearly distinguish between morality as an internalized value and culture as a product of institutional socialization or training, also paying little attention to the difference between genuine moral commitment and coerced compliance (Bell 2016; Shor 2008). Moreover, normative theories often neglect the rational dimension of moral decision-making: moral and broader social norms are not behavioral imperatives. In this study's interviews, all combatants, when directly asked, initially rejected the acceptability of military violence. However, further conversations

revealed variations: some expressed moral reservations only declaratively and agreed to engage in immoral acts in hypothetical scenarios for personal gains; others were willing to violate norms for only a greater good, such as saving lives; still others abstained, not necessarily due to moral conviction, but due to fear of legal or informal repercussions.

Another underexamined dimension in the literature is opportunistic military violence. As noted earlier, when scholars invoke the term "military violence," they often conflate distinct phenomena. For instance, violence can occur unintentionally, out of neglect – e.g. civilian casualties from shelling or city assault – or intentionally, with the deliberate targeting of non-combatants. Within the Ukrainian war, two illustrative cases of this distinction are the Russian bombing campaign against civilian infrastructure – presumably aimed at undermining civilian resistance (Polishchuk and Gurcov 2025) – and the April 13, 2025, strike on Sumy, which killed 35 and injured 129 (Evans et al. 2025). In the former, civilians were the intended audience and target; in the latter, they were likely collateral damage from a strike on a military award ceremony.

Even among deliberate acts of violence, intention may vary further. Violence may be instrumentalized for strategic military and political goals – such as genocide or terrorizing civilians into submission – or it may be opportunistic, carried out by individual combatants or small groups for immediate personal benefits (Figure 3). In such cases, the victims are not targeted as members of a group or nation but as individuals possessing benefits – e.g. material properties or information – that combatants may seek. Notably, this form of opportunistic violence has received little attention in security studies. While strategic violence is extensively and productively studied (Downes 2012; Kalyvas 1999; Mitchell 2004; Ron 2003), opportunistic military violence remains under-theorized and underexplored – and has received no systematic attention through the lens of morality. This thesis, therefore,

centers on opportunistic violence and the role of morality in restraining it, within the empirical context of the war in Ukraine.
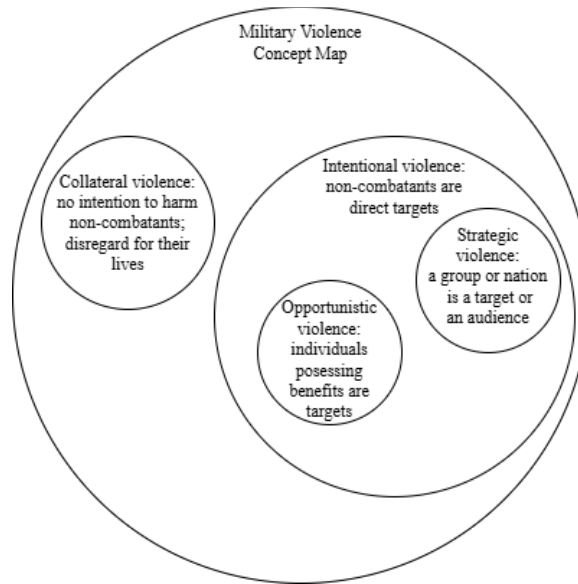
Figure 3. Military violence concept map

To address these gaps, this thesis draws on three theoretical traditions: the rational choice theory (Satz and Ferejohn 1994), contractarian ethics (Hobbes 2008; Rawls 1971; Rousseau 2017), and evolutionary psychology (Tooby and Cosmides 2010). While the rational choice theory emphasizes self-interest and cost-benefit calculation, and contractarianism views moral norms as social contracts among rational agents, evolutionary psychology adds a further dimension by exploring how such norms may have evolved, been negotiated, and internalized over time. This study builds on that insight, treating moral behavior as a context-dependent value that influences combatants' rational decision-making and is shaped by societies to which individuals feel attached.

From this set of ideas, the thesis derives its main argument that moral restraint in war is influenced by combatants' motivation. Those who fight for a common cause – such as the collective defense – are more likely to internalize moral norms that prohibit violence against

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civilians. By contrast, those motivated by private benefits are less likely to adopt such norms and more prone to abandoning them when opportunities arise. This hypothesis is tested through a series of semi-structured interviews with acting Russian and Ukrainian combatants. These interviews yield qualitative data on combatants' motivations and their adherence to moral norms in hypothetical scenarios modeled by the researcher. The findings corroborate the hypothesis: combatants driven by collective motivations consistently exhibit stronger types of moral restraint, whereas those pursuing individual rewards display significantly diminished restraint. These insights call for a reevaluation of current approaches to mitigating wartime violence, emphasizing the need to consider motivation as a critical variable.

This thesis thus offers an original perspective on the concept of military violence through the lens of morality, introduces a systematic classification of violent acts based on the perpetrator's motivations, presents a rational account of how combatants' personal motivations to participate in armed conflicts influence their propensity to engage in immoral behavior, and provides specific practical recommendations for preventing military violence by addressing the motivational dynamics of combatants. Ultimately, this thesis contributes to broader debates on the nature of morality in political and social life. Conceptualizing morality as a social contract, for instance, may offer valuable insights into how moral content acquires meaning and how moral boundaries are constructed and manifested within societies.

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, the potential risk of persecution faced by Russian combatants who participated in this study due to the designation of Central European University as an "undesirable organization" within the Russian Federation, and the content of confidentiality commitment made to the participants of the study, the dataset collected for this research is not publicly available, even in anonymized form. Only the most general

demographic information, which does not allow for the identification of participants, is presented in Appendix A.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. The first section reviews the literature on military violence and restraint, identifying key debates and conceptual gaps. It proposes a conceptualization of military violence through the lens of morality, classifies it based on perpetrators' motivations, and argues that while existing explanations in the literature are valuable, they often neglect the role of individual agency and moral reasoning. The second section outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on the rational choice theory, evolutionary psychology, and contractarian ethics to develop a rational model of moral restraint in warfare. The third section describes the research methodology, namely qualitative analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with acting combatants under the quasi-experimental static-group comparison research design. The fourth section presents the findings, highlighting patterns of combatants' motivation and their correlation with different types of moral restraint. The final section discusses the implications of these findings for both theory and policy, proposing avenues for further research and reducing military violence through a deeper engagement with combatants' motivation.

1. Literature Review: Military Violence and Morality

1.1. Concept of Military Violence and the Role of Morality in Shaping It

The purpose of this literature review is to demonstrate existing approaches to military violence and restraint in security studies and to justify the necessity of examining military violence through the lens of morality. This review engages with the full spectrum of theories on military violence in order to show that without engaging with the moral dimension – or, at least, a systematic approach that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of military violence – some empirical cases remain inexplicable.

This study proceeds from the assumption that military violence constitutes morally transgressive behavior. Although the formal criteria for identifying military violence – such as the principles of distinction, proportionality, necessity, and humanity embedded in international humanitarian law (Kubiak 2023) – are intuitively appealing, they provoke substantial debate in practical application, especially in the context of contemporary conflicts (Heffes, Kotlik, and Ventura 2020; Schmitt and Watts 2015). For instance, whether targeting civilians using mobile apps to transmit enemy movement data constitutes military violence, or whether a strike on a power station supplying both military and civilian infrastructure is proportional, remains contentious. Such debates, however, may seem less about understanding military violence and more about positioning oneself within group conflicts – justifying one's own side and delegitimizing the opponent. This is how such debates may appear when viewed analytically through a non-aligned, external lens.

This study proposes focusing not on law derived from custom, nor on custom derived from morality, but directly on morality itself as the foundational basis of our judgments on acceptable and unacceptable conduct. This perspective enables a deeper understanding of both the variability in recognizing certain acts as military violence and the dynamics of public

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debates surrounding it. If one views these seemingly legal debates as narrative confrontations – where each side promotes a preferred moral narrative, accuses the other of violating "universal" norms, invokes hypocrisy, and frequently references past actions of adversaries or third parties – then these dynamics closely mirror the account of moral conflict offered by Tooby and Cosmides in their theory of coalitional psychology (2010). Accordingly, legal interpretations in the context of military violence may function primarily as acts of coalitional alignment: efforts to gain support, legitimize one's own actions, and delegitimize the opponent by undermining their moral standing. From this angle, the study's focus on morality as the foundation of our judgments about military violence gains coherence.

This study thus defines military violence as morally transgressive violence occurring within the context of armed conflict. While this definition may appear vague – and such criticism is understandable – its vagueness is deliberate. It reflects the possible variability of moral contexts and does not attempt to establish strict formal criteria for what constitutes military violence. Rather, it underscores the impossibility of doing so, given that no single moral assessment can be universally accepted for every phenomenon, event, or action. This definition thus emphasizes the inevitability of moral disagreement while identifying moral transgression as the key characteristic of military violence.

As stated in the introduction, military violence encompasses multiple types of actions: collateral, strategic, and opportunistic violence. It may be analytically useful to use these categories and distinguish military violence types based on perpetrator's motivation – military violence can be either unintentional or intentional. Unintentional violence occurs due to neglect, when non-combatants die as a result of military operations but are not the intended targets. Intentional violence, in turn, can be strategic – directed against specific groups or nations to achieve military or political goals – or opportunistic, where targets are chosen not

based on group affiliation but due to the advantages combatants can get from them. Examples of the latter include sexual violence, looting, humiliations aimed at acquiring status or material gain, or civilian killings motivated by fear, where security is the benefit sought.

Scholars tend to focus selectively on those aspects of military violence that align with their philosophical perspectives or research interests. For instance, Alexander Downes (2012) discusses military violence in terms of leadership strategies that either deliberately target or knowingly endanger civilians. In the proposed classification, this corresponds to collateral and strategic violence. Downes argues, challenging liberal theories emphasizing democratic restraint (Rummel 1995; Engelhardt 1992), that democracies may be more prone to military violence. Democratic leaders, being accountable to voters and wary of military casualties that could damage their political standing, may adopt strategies that minimize risks to soldiers but increase risks to civilians. However, Downes does not explore opportunistic violence, nor does he suggest that combatants from democratic countries are more likely to engage in opportunistic military violence, such as sexual violence or looting. As such, his theory captures only certain aspects of military violence while omitting others.

At the same time, opportunistic military violence remains a critical issue in contemporary armed conflicts. Numerous examples from the war in Ukraine illustrate this type of violence: the massacres in Bucha and Irpin (OHCHR 2022c), abductions and torture in Kherson (American Bar Association. Center for Human Rights 2022), mistreatment of prisoners of war (OHCHR 2023c), and even looting and robberies by Russian soldiers within their own territory during fighting in the Kursk region. Interestingly, violence among Russian combatants themselves even long before the outbreak of the war was not uncommon (Human Rights Watch 2004). It is not surprising that this continues today, given the possibilities presented by the fog of war – as Russian combatants reported in interviews, this reportedly

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includes violence up to and including executions for disobedience. Were it not for the conventional conceptual limitation that confines military violence to acts against non-combatants, such intra-military violence might also fall under this category. On the other hand, such violence, although intra-military, could be considered a form of opportunistic military violence, especially when directed against unarmed individuals to secure obedience, discipline, or material benefit.

Despite its significance, opportunistic military violence receives little attention in the security studies literature. Some authors acknowledge its existence but deliberately narrow their analytical frameworks to exclude it (Downes 2012). Others attempt to explain such type of violence without clearly defining what precisely they are trying to explain (Bell 2016) or focusing on a certain aspect of opportunistic violence, such as sexual violence (Bastick, Grimm, and Kunz 2007) or looting (Azam and Hoeffler 2002; Mac Ginty 2004). More often, however, opportunistic violence is simply ignored in favor of other forms of military violence (Engelhardt 1992; Kalyvas 1999; Rummel 1995; Stanton 2008). This gap represents an under-explored dimension of military violence that calls for deeper theoretical engagement.

In conclusion, the conceptual boundaries of military violence remain contested, and the term is frequently instrumentalized in coalitional conflicts. In the literature, its treatment often reflects the authors' philosophical commitments and what they are interested, prepared, or able to explain. This study emphasizes moral reasoning – understood as an internal, context-sensitive process of judgment – as a key mechanism in distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable violence. Despite their variability, moral assessments shape perceptions and evaluations of military violence. Among other things, this research argues for recognizing multiple forms of military violence and focuses on opportunistic violence, as it remains a pressing yet under-explored issue in the existing body of scholarship.

1.2. Causes of Military Violence in the Literature of Security Studies

This section examines theories of military violence that establish causal relationships between various independent variables and the levels of military violence. The primary objective is to present how different theoretical frameworks account for the phenomenon of military violence and to assess their potential for explaining the case of military violence in Ukraine. Given that most of these theories focus not on opportunistic violence but rather on strategic or collateral ones (or do not clarify the object of the study), the war in Ukraine is analyzed holistically – encompassing both acts of violence committed by individual combatants and centralized campaigns of violence. Nonetheless, the overarching aim remains unchanged: to underscore the necessity of incorporating morality as an independent category.

Existing theories of military violence may be divided into three major traditions: realist, constructivist, and liberal. Realist theories predominantly focus on the rational incentives to, or constraints of, military violence. Constructivist approaches explore how norms and identities shape combatant behavior. Liberal theories emphasize regime type and institutions as independent variables of military violence. These theories may be further classified into those that focus on incentives and those examining constraints (Figure 4).
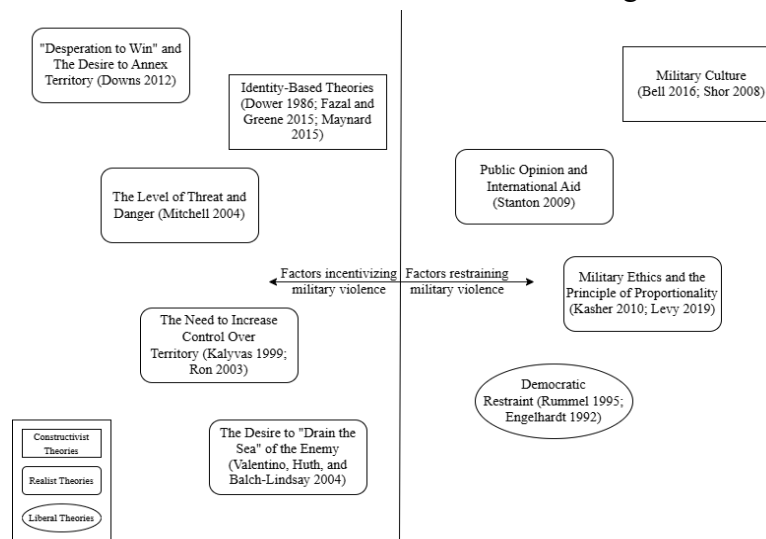

Figure 4. Theories of military violence and restraint

Most realist theories of military violence are primarily focused on the incentives for violence. This study does not challenge their heuristic power but argues that these theories are insufficient to explain cases fully. For instance, considering factors such as Downes' "desperation to win" (2012) or the need to control territory (Kalyvas 1999; Ron 2003), it may be asserted that Ukraine has been under significant influence from these incentives. In the early weeks of the war, the Russian army was within the administrative borders of Ukraine's capital, indicating that the Ukrainian leadership was likely experiencing a high perception of existential threat. Throughout the conflict, Ukraine has also faced resistance from civilians sympathetic to Russia. Nevertheless, it is Russia, not Ukraine, that has committed and continues to commit extensive acts of military violence (Human Rights Watch 2022a, 2022b; the OHCHR 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). This suggests that, in addition to incentives, factors of restraint should also be considered.

Theories of military restraint span the three primary philosophical traditions in the literature of international relations and security studies. Liberal theories argue that democracies are less likely to target civilians due to regime constraints (Rummel 1995; Engelhardt 1992). However, the literature highlights a lack of causal clarity in these theories and their limited validation (Downes 2007; Mueller 2002; Rosato 2003; Valentino, Huth, and Croco 2006). As noted earlier, Downes even contends that democracies may be more prone to violence, as democratic leaders are accountable for deaths of their soldiers. This pressure may compel them to adopt military strategies that ensure swift outcomes and safe conditions for their forces, frequently at the expense of civilian populations (2012). Liberal theories also struggle to explain the case. Both Russia and Ukraine are classified as "electoral autocracies" according to the V-Dem Institute (2024), indicating no difference in the independent variable, despite significant variation in the dependent variable – military violence.

Realism offers two theories of military restraint. According to Stanton (2009), international aid and public opinion can influence the cost-benefit calculations of engaging in military violence. Both factors act as quasi-variables of morality, accounting for the perspectives of international and domestic audiences. However, these factors reflect the morality of the observer, not the actor, which can lead to analytical inconsistencies. For example, Bell (2006) describes a case of civil war where the side supported by Western countries committed a large number of acts of violence, while the side backed by China, the USSR, Saudi Arabia, and Cuba showed significant restraint (CIA 1984).

Regarding public opinion, it can be assumed that public sentiment in both Russia and Ukraine disapproves of military violence. Indirect evidence of disapproval in Russia includes, for instance, the extensive and consistent efforts by Russian authorities to restrict the dissemination of information about Russian war crimes domestically (Ingannamorte 2024) – likely in an effort to avoid potential public backlash.

Kasher (2010) discusses the principle of proportionality in the context of military ethics. She asserts that "no army in the world would endanger its soldiers," emphasizing that military and political leaders are obligated to assess existing threats and measures through the principle of proportionality, defined as "justifiability of the collateral damage on grounds of the military advantage gaine." This may be considered an attempt to explore morality within a rational framework. Levi's ideas (2019) may be seen as an expansion of her ideas, exploring hierarchies of the value of life and how various factors shape our perception of the relative importance of lives belonging to different social groups. While these theories implicitly engage with morality, they still do not address the nature of morality and its origins. Instead, they focus on the conditions under which the benefits of military violence can outweigh moral convictions.

Finally, constructivist theories most thoroughly examine the role of norms and their socialization within the military communities (Bell 2016; Shor 2008). However, one may note issues with conceptualization and causal links in these theories. For instance, Bell defines military culture as "beliefs, customs, and institutions that socialize combatants into organizational norms" (2016, 489) and as "a set of evaluative standards, such as norms or values, and a set of cognitive standards, such as rules and models, that define social behavior" (2016, 494). These definitions, however, conflate multiple phenomena – institutionalized rules, peer influence, and personal values – under a single umbrella, thereby blurring the boundary between structural conditioning and internalized belief. He also discusses the influence of training, leadership, norm enforcement structures, and peer-to-peer socialization on military restraint (2016). However, it remains unclear how institutional factors, such as laws and organizations, can be equated with interpersonal interactions and moral convictions within a single conceptual framework. In other words, Bell conflates phenomena that appear fundamentally distinct into a unified concept. Consider the following statements:

1.   "I act this way because I was trained to act this way in similar situations."

2.   "I act this way because I will be punished if I do otherwise."

3.   "I act this way because I am part of my society, and this is how we behave."

In the first case, the focus is on training. In the second, it is on punishment, whether through legal measures or social condemnation. In the last, it is about a demonstrative affirmation of one's belonging to a particular society. This study interviewed Russian and Ukrainian combatants. When presented with a hypothetical scenario involving an immoral act and declining to commit it, they were asked why. Here are their responses:

1.   "We were trained to simply report such cases to our command."

2.   "They zero us out even for drugs and alcohol. No one wants to take the risk."

3.   "I don't want to stoop to the level of the Russians."

The first combatant cites training. The second avoids the act out of fear of execution. The third explicitly rejects the act of violence to emphasize their "otherness" from the Russians. While such responses arguably do not constitute genuine moral reasoning and formally fall under Bell's definition of military culture, they clearly represent distinct phenomena. Unlike Kasher, Bell does not discuss how norms influence combatants' behavior; he merely highlights a correlation between what he defines as military culture and reduced levels of violence. However, it seems that in certain cases, individuals are willing to override moral norms that are not strict imperatives.

In interviews with combatants, they were presented with hypothetical scenarios involving the torture of POWs to extract information. When the information pertained, for example, to an upcoming battle and could provide a tactical advantage, a few combatants agreed to use torture. When told that a nuclear power plant had been mined and the POWs knew the location of the bomb, a significantly larger number of combatants were willing to resort to torture. A Ukrainian combatant recounted their training, which involved discussions of proportionality during every seminar. They deliberated the permissibility or impermissibility of certain actions in specific scenarios. He provided an example involving a special operations group sent into enemy territory. If the mission's goal was simple reconnaissance, a civilian who might reveal the group's presence would not be harmed. However, if the mission was to eliminate a key military or political leader whose removal could significantly weaken the enemy's position, the civilian would be eliminated to prevent jeopardizing the mission. This element – the rationality of morality – is also overlooked by constructivist theories. This suggests that norms operate not as imperatives but as contextually contingent guidelines, subject to recalibration based on perceived trade-offs

In 2022, Bell, Gift, and Monten published a study showing that military cultures of combatants aligned with the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States differ (2022). This study further challenges Bell's theory of military culture. If political preferences can influence military culture – differentiating a seemingly unified ideational domain within the closed and hierarchical military community – then Bell's earlier ideas hold true only if preferences vary not among individual soldiers but across entire units, which would then act as cultural bubbles. However, this is not what they observe.

Finally, if culture alone determines the behavior of combatants, how can one, considering the high level of military culture within the US armed forces (Dorn et al. 2000; Halvorson, Whitter, and Taitt 2010; Redmond et al. 2015), explain the acts of wartime violence committed by US soldiers in Iraq (Amnesty International 2023), Afghanistan (Ning 2021), or Vietnam (Man 2018)? This suggests that culture and norms are not the sole factors influencing violence but rather ones of the components in the decision-making process.

Despite the considerable diversity of explanatory models, the existing literature on military violence tends to overlook the moral dimension as an independent category of analysis. The existing approaches either treat morality as an external constraint (through norms, laws, or public opinion) or reduce it to cultural patterns, without revealing the internal mechanisms of moral choice. Yet it is precisely moral reasoning that helps explain why certain forms of violence are deemed acceptable or rationally justified, while others are categorically rejected – even in the face of external pressure or potential benefit.

Particular attention should be paid to the phenomenon of opportunistic violence – arguably the most unstructured yet widespread form of violence in armed conflict. Unlike strategic or collateral violence, opportunistic violence is often committed spontaneously, without orders or specific objectives, and is aimed at private gain. This form of violence is

particularly exposed to moral judgment – both by participants and external observers – as it directly reflects individual agency and personal responsibility. Despite engaging with moral constraints, most theories fall short of treating morality as an independent variable – an internalized mode of reasoning, part of the cognitive framework

To address this gap, the present study advances a conception of morality not as an external system of norms, but as an intrinsic component of rational decision-making, grounded in the idea of a social contract. This approach, informed by the rational choice theory (Satz and Ferejohn 1994) and supported by both contractarian ethics (Hobbes 2008; Rawls 1971; Rousseau 2017) and evolutionary psychology (Tooby and Cosmides 2010), treats moral norms as endogenous constraints that emerge from strategic interaction within groups. By framing morality in this way, it becomes possible to analyze both material incentives and moral considerations within a unified framework of rational agency.

In the literature, there are several other major moral theories. Among the most notable are deontological ethics, which emphasize duties and rules as the foundation of moral behavior (Kant 2018); utilitarianism, which assesses the morality of actions based on their consequences and the maximization of happiness (Bentham 2000; Mill 2016); and virtue ethics, which focus on the moral character of the individual (Küçükuysal and Beyhan 2011). This review does not aim to evaluate each of these theories, as the aim of this research is to test a framework that uniquely integrates material and normative factors into a unified explanatory framework, offering insight into why some combatants refrain from violence.

2. Theoretical Framework: Morality as a Social Contract

This section develops a rationalist explanation for moral restraint among combatants, grounded in contractarian ethics and evolutionary psychology. This framework conceptualizes morality – particularly the condemnation of violence against non-combatants – as a form of social contract. It explains the origin and purpose of this contract, its benefits and beneficiaries, and how this understanding leads to the main thesis of the study about the causal relationship between combatants' motivation and their moral restraint. To clarify, the argument unfolds as follows: (1) moral decision-making is treated as rational; (2) morality is framed as a social contract between rational actors; (3) evolutionary psychology explains the coalitionary context in which social contracts emerge; (4) moral condemnation of military violence benefits non-combatants while imposing costs on combatants; (5) rational actors may follow costly norms due to coercion or motivation, with the latter increasing the value of coalitions and, consequently, that of their social contracts; (6) wartime conditions weaken coercion; (7) motivation, however, can sustain compliance when the group holds value for the actor; (8) this leads to a hypothesis linking combatants' motivation to their moral restraint; (9) coalitional psychology provides a mechanism for verifying sincerity of combatants' responses; (10) the final hypothesis is presented (Figure 5).
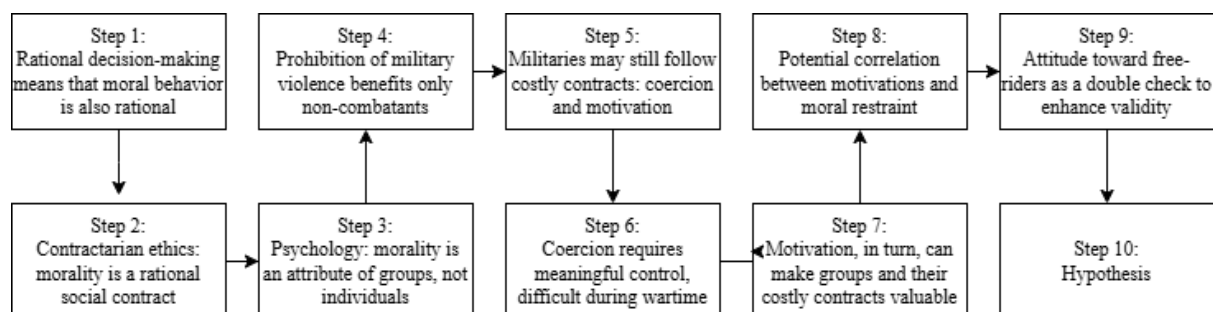
Figure 5. Thread of argumentation and hypothesis building

Since this section draws on the insights from evolutionary psychology to explain moral behavior, it is necessary to begin by acknowledging a critical theoretical caveat. Within this framework, it is impossible to construct a unified theory of morality. This is due to the fact that moral cognition, as demonstrated by research in cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, is not governed by a single psychological mechanism. Instead, it is an aggregate of multiple domain-specific systems shaped by disparate adaptive problems. These include, for instance, mechanisms for regulating incest avoidance to create moral disgust at incest, which rely on early co-residence cues to suppress sexual attraction between individuals raised together; psychological systems for punishing free-riders to provoke anger and moral condemnation towards those who do not contribute to a common cause; or systems for mutual regulation of behavior within groups, which facilitate coordinated cooperation and mutual benefits (Cosmides, Guzmán, and Tooby 2018). These systems – each with separate origins – highlight the fragmented, domain-specific nature of moral cognition and underscore why a unified theory of morality is untenable within the evolutionary psychology framework. Thus, what is being explained here is a specific moral belief, not morality in general. This clarification is essential both for recognizing the limits of the framework and for informing future research on morality.

The explanation begins with a foundational assumption: human decision-making – including moral decision-making – is fundamentally rational (Satz and Ferejohn 1994). Individuals are understood as agents who act on the basis of cost-benefit analysis. This is a basic foundation of the rational choice theory and the rational perspective, which ideas are supported by natural sciences. As argued by Lisa Barrett (2020), the core function of the brain is to efficiently manage energy through prediction and modeling. If the brain evolved to make rational decisions for the sake of survival and reproduction, then moral behavior –

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which is a result of the brain's work too – may be comprehensible as a rational act. This suggests that moral behavior is not a matter of sentiment or idealism, but a rational response to external incentives.

One of the most famous theoretical frameworks presenting morality as an act of rational nature, the contractarian tradition (Hobbes 2008; Rawls 1971; Rousseau 2017), offers an account of moral norms as social contracts. Rather than reflecting lofty ideals or abstract dogmas, moral rules here are pragmatic tools designed to coordinate behavior, reduce mutual harm, and maximize shared benefit within a group. In this view, norms are followed not because they are inherently good or universally accepted, but because they facilitate stable cooperation – particularly when agents expect others to follow them as well. However, while this approach offers valuable insight into the nature of moral rules, it leaves unanswered the question of how such rules emerge, become internalized, and are maintained across different social environments. To address these gaps, this analysis turns to evolutionary psychology.

Specifically, it draws on the theory of coalitional psychology – the cognitive architecture evolved to form, navigate, and manage coalitions (Tooby and Cosmides 2010). Coalitions were evolutionarily indispensable for performing complex tasks such as group defense, large-scale hunting, and communal child-rearing (Boyer 2018). They also introduced a series of coordination problems, including the need to manage free-riding and ensure alignment among members. To solve these problems, humans evolved specialized mechanisms for detecting allies, tracking commitments, and punishing defectors. Moral psychology evolved as an extension of these psychological mechanisms and largely relies on them. Put simply, morality involves evaluating situations to identify the most fitness-enhancing actions for oneself and one's peers, negotiating accepted and unaccepted ways of behavior within coalitions, and monitoring and punishing others for its violations (Tooby and

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Cosmides 2010). As it may be inferred, morality in most cases is impossible outside the group context – if it is about mutual regulation, then in the absence of "mutuality," there is no sense in following moral norms.

Thus, from this perspective, morality is not separate from group dynamics. It is, in fact, a regulatory mechanism for intra-coalitional behavior. Norms serve to enhance cooperation, clarify expectations, and increase mutual benefits. Consequently, moral condemnation is rarely universal – it is typically bounded by group membership. A person living in Europe, for example, is unlikely to experience moral distress or consequences of their behavior over failing to participate in the Malagasy funerary ritual of turning the bones of ancestors. This has moral salience within its originating coalition but carries no such weight outside it. The example demonstrates that moral commitments are context-dependent.

Viewed through these lenses altogether, moral condemnation of military violence emerges as a social contract operating within a particular group of people. The contract offers specific benefits – the protection of non-combatants – and thus is most strongly supported in coalitions dominated by non-combatants' interests. They are the primary beneficiaries of such norms. However, for combatants, these moral constraints often impose only costs: they may reduce tactical and strategic flexibility or even increase operational risks. By prohibiting certain actions – such as targeting non-combatants, employing indiscriminate weaponry, or using civilian infrastructure for military advantage – these norms create additional limitations and risks. Thus, while civilians gain protection, combatants may perceive these moral rules as burdensome constraints that undermine combat effectiveness and put them at risk.

Despite these costs, adherence to the moral contract can still be rational – for instance, if credible enforcement mechanisms are in place. Combatants may comply with these norms when the risk of punishment outweighs the benefit of violation. Legal and institutional

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penalties, such as courts-martial or prosecution under international humanitarian law, provide deterrents. This perspective aligns with organizational theories of military culture and discipline, where deterrence mechanisms are key to norm compliance (Bell 2016).

However, the effectiveness of deterrence depends on the credibility of norm enforcement. In wartime, the "fog of war" undermines surveillance and accountability. Unpredictability, battlefield chaos, breakdowns in command, and the difficulty of gathering evidence all conspire to reduce the likelihood of punishment. Even professionalized armies like those of the US or UK have experienced failures in enforcing laws protecting civilians, highlighting how deterrence breaks down in the chaos of war (Amnesty International 2023; Man 2018; Ning 2021).

A second, non-coercive mechanism that can sustain moral restraint is the intrinsic value a combatant assigns to a coalition itself. When individuals pursue goals that cannot be achieved alone – such as defense – they become invested in coalitions that offer access to those goals. The coalition thus acquires intrinsic value. In such contexts, adherence to the moral norms upheld by the coalition serves as a signal of loyalty to the coalition's mission. Even if those norms are personally costly, individuals may follow them because doing so maintains their place within the group and advances collective aims they regard as essential.

This line of reasoning leads to the central argument of this thesis: moral restraint is sustained when a combatant's motivation is represented by a common cause uniting them with non-combatants that hold and promote the moral conviction against military violence. When motivation is collective – focused on shared objectives – the moral norms of the coalition are internalized regardless of their disadvantage. In contrast, when a combatant's motivation lies in private benefits – such as money – moral norms are intuitively seen as expendable, especially in the absence of credible enforcement. This distinction generates

observable predictions. For example, combatants who are motivated by collective goals should refrain from immoral actions, while those motivated by private gain are expected to disregard morality and show little moral restraint.

At the same time, the observation of combatants' motivation may be complicated for a number of reasons – at the very least, by social desirability bias, which may prompt them to distort their responses. The presented theoretical framework offers a means of additionally verifying the presence or absence of an individual's connection to a coalition. It was previously stated that human psychology possesses mechanisms for detecting and punishing defectors within coalitionary interaction – an essential condition for overcoming the rational tendency of any individual to avoid contribution while still reaping coalitionary benefits. If combatants are indeed motivated by a common cause, they are expected to demonstrate a negative attitude toward defectors – draft dodgers, deserters, those who have left the country, and even those who speak out against the hostilities. Motivation by private benefits, in turn, should not lead to a negative attitude toward free riders – the absence of motivation by a common cause implies the absence of a coalition itself and the absence of investments by the combatant that would otherwise require protection.

Thus, this study hypothesizes that a combatant's participation in a coalition with the broader society, oriented toward achieving a certain collective goal, driven by motivation through a common cause and confirmed by the presence of a negative attitude toward defectors, should correlate with stronger internalized moral restraint – norms that, absent shared purpose, would likely be dismissed as irrational constraints.

3. Methodology: A Quasi-Experimental Static-Group Comparison Design

This study employs a quasi-experimental comparative group design using a mixed-method approach to examine how Russian and Ukrainian combatants' motivations for participating in the war correlate with their propensity to engage in immoral behavior in researcher-modeled hypothetical scenarios. Empirical data are collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview questions focus, among other things, on motivations and hypothetical actions in modeled situations (Appendix B). The data are analyzed using content analysis to identify key patterns in responses. In addition to qualitative analysis, quantitative descriptive methods are applied to present and interpret the data, including frequency counts and the use of visual tools to demonstrate differences between groups of combatants.

The comparative group design serves as the primary research methodology, aimed at demonstrating the influence of the variable of interest – motivation by a common cause – by contrasting two groups of participants, where one group exhibits the variable and the other does not. Both groups undergo the same research intervention – an interview with situational questions – and the data from both groups are then compared and contrasted (Figure 6). This design features elements of a quasi-experimental study, as participants are assigned to groups based on a pre-existing variable that is naturally distributed without the researcher's control (Mauldin 2020). While there are certain limitations and potential biases in the results, which will be addressed later, this design is deemed optimal given the ethical and logistical constraints of studying military violence and interviewing acting combatants, involved in an ongoing military conflict.

Not motivated by a collective goal (i.e. motivated by private benefits)

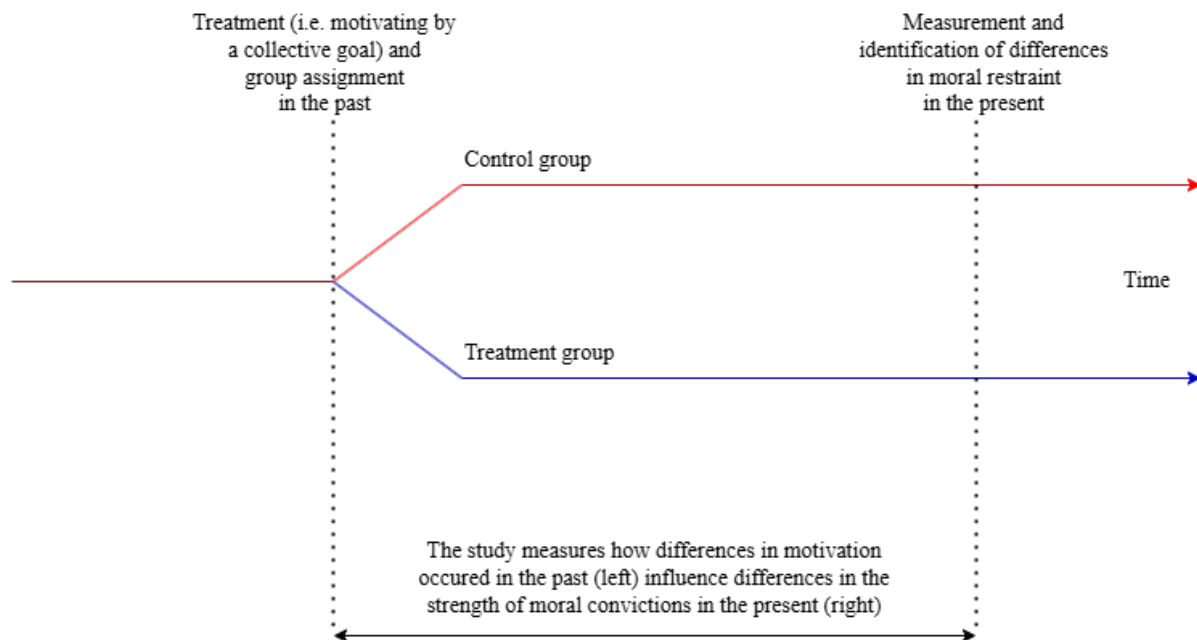Motivated by a collective goal (e.g. the need for defence)

Treatment (i.e. motivating by a collective goal) and group assignment in the past

Measurement and identification of differences in moral restraint in the present

Control group

Time

Treatment group

The study measures how differences in motivation occured in the past (left) influence differences in the strength of moral convictions in the present (right)

Figure 6. A quasi-experimental static-group comparison design

Participant recruitment is conducted randomly through social media. To avoid the dominance of socially active participants, a snowball sampling method is also employed. The combination of these two sampling methods helps reduce potential selection bias. Additionally, to ensure representativeness, the study limits participation to no more than three individuals from the same military unit, as the social and environmental factors associated with particular units may influence the responses. To enhance the validity of the results, the study interviews not only generally more violent Russian combatants, where one could argue for the influence of intervening variables, such as prior exposure to brutality, but also Ukrainian combatants. This is to demonstrate that combatants of both armies – one brutal and one generally restrained – behave in accordance with the predicted behavior patterns depending on their motivations. At the same time, the study does not aim to answer the

question of the exact proportions of combatants with different motivations, thereby simplifying the methodological task of selecting participants.

To explore combatants' motivations, the question "What do you believe is the main motivation for your comrades to participate in the war?" is asked. By focusing on others, this question helps mitigate social desirability bias – the tendency of participants to provide answers that reflect positively on themselves – and at the same time, highlights the actual motivations of participants, as they answer through the lens of subjective experience and attribution processes. Given the indirect nature of the question, a double-check question is also posed: "How do you feel about those who do not contribute to the war effort or even oppose it?" This question aims to reveal negativity toward free-riders that should emerge when coalition psychology mechanisms discussed above are triggered. It is expected that participants who cite a common cause will demonstrate negativity toward free riders, and vice versa. This serves as a double-check on the variable of interest.

Given the rational nature of human behavior, including moral action, this study treats moral restraint as the outcome of cost-benefit reasoning. In this framework, moral norms and are understood not as categorical imperatives, but as variables affecting the perceived utility of particular courses of action. Accordingly, this study measures and identifies different types of moral restraint by gradually manipulating the incentives associated with norm violations. Participants are presented with hypothetical wartime scenarios involving the opportunity to engage in behavior widely considered immoral. For example: "During a combat mission, you are positioned in a civilian building where you find a box full of jewelry. Will you take it? Why?" "You have captured several enemy soldiers. One of your comrades, in a fit of rage over fallen comrades, begins to beat the prisoners. Will you intervene or join in? Why?" "You have learned that enemy civilians in your area are collaborating with enemy armed forces and

special services, passing information about your unit. What will you do?" and others. If participants reject immoral behavior, the situation is modified to increase the personal gains from immoral actions. For example, the study may offer the opportunity to send the jewelry box home, influence comrades to share the jewelry, or ensure that the act is not witnessed, depending on the response to "Why?" If participants continue to refuse to engage, the study escalates the stakes to extreme levels, where personal gain is replaced by existential or large-scale collective outcomes. For instance, the study might present the option to torture POWs who have mined a nuclear power plant to extract information about the bomb's location.

Based on participants' responses across escalating scenarios, four behavioral types of moral restraint are identified. Moral disengagement characterizes those who are immediately willing to engage in immoral acts without requiring further justification or incentive. Egoistic compliance includes those who initially refrain but are willing to transgress when offered substantial personal gain. Cooperative compliance refers to cases where participants resist immoral conduct unless it serves a vital collective interest. Finally, refusal to engage denotes rejection of immoral behavior even when both types of stakes are high – whether due to moral convictions, fear of sanctions, or other factors not examined in this study (Figure 7).
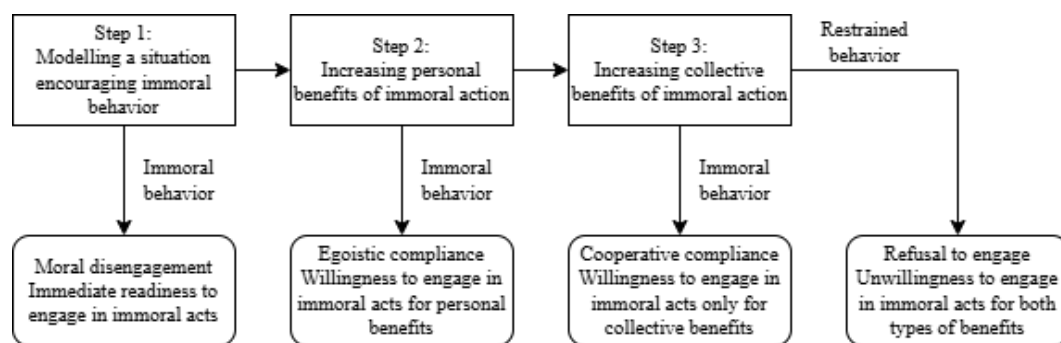
*Figure 7. Algorithm for identifying types of moral restraint of combatants*

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4. Results: Morality and Motivations of Russian and Ukrainian Soldiers

Under this study, 12 Russian and 7 Ukrainian combatants were interviewed. They actively participate in combat operations and serve in various military units, ranging from internal troops to special forces and volunteer corps.

The combatants' responses regarding their motivations were categorized into two groups: private benefits and a common cause. The first group captures motivations tied to obtaining personal gains from participating in the war, such as money, freedom (release in exchange for participation), and coercion. The latter is classified as a private benefit because the individual's presence on the battlefield results from a desire to avoid the negative consequences of defiance. It is important to note that this does not reflect the actual status of the combatants – some mobilized individuals on both sides cited a common cause as their motivation. Thus, this question reveals not the factual circumstances that led to participation in the war but rather personal motivation – what the combatant aims to achieve or avoid.

The common cause category includes responses indicating a desire for collective self-defense and group survival. For example, responses from Russian combatants included "protecting the people of Donbas," "defending Russia from NATO," and "helping the guys." The factual alignment of these motivations with reality is irrelevant – what matters is the goal perceived by the combatants. On the Ukrainian side, all responses in this category were variations of defending the country against Russia.

Preliminary findings indicate that 5 out of 7 Ukrainian combatants and 3 out of 12 Russian combatants cited a common cause as their motivation for participating in the war. Below is a bar chart showing the distribution of responses from Russian and Ukrainian combatants regarding their motivations (Figure 8).
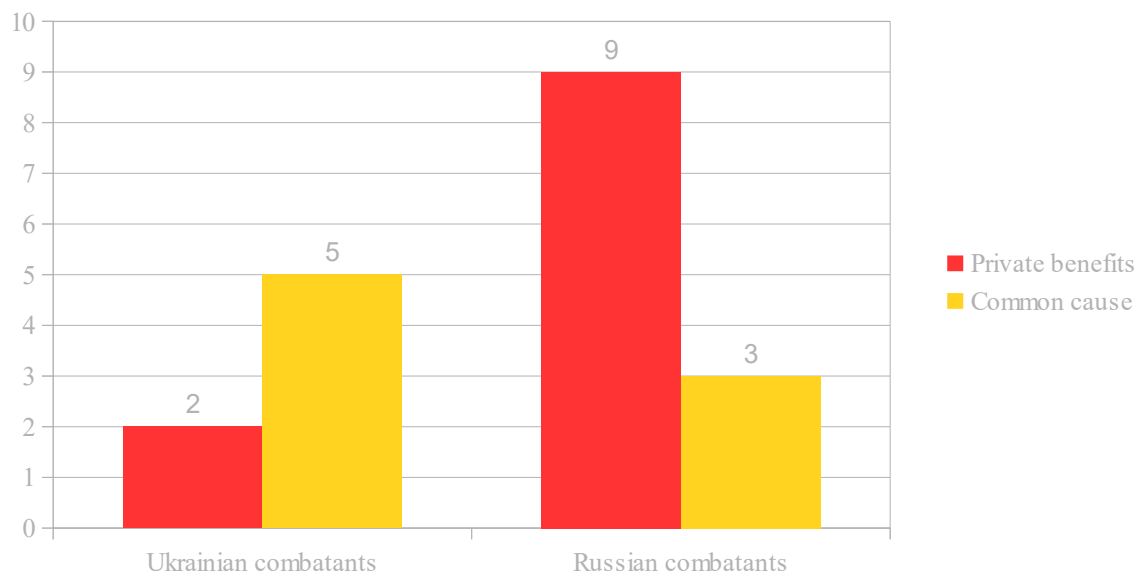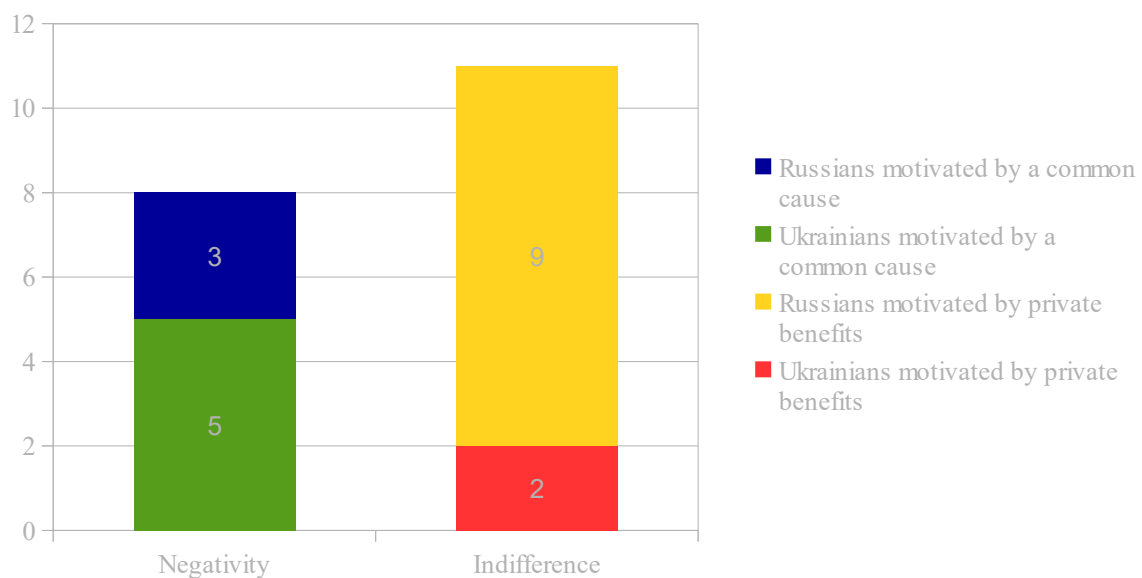
Figure 8. Responses from combatants about their motivations

According to the proposed theory, this suggests that those 5 Ukrainian and 3 Russian combatants are participants in the social contract of moral conviction about the inadmissibility of military violence. However, acknowledging potential distortions due to biases or deliberately false responses, this study also examines the combatants' attitudes toward free riders, where a negative perception should correlate with a common cause motivation, as both variables reflect interconnected psychological mechanisms.

Posing a question to active-duty soldiers about how they feel toward individuals who evade contributing to the war effort, hide from conscription, etc., might appear paradoxical – how can individuals risking their lives daily claim indifference to the apathy of the others? Yet, as predicted by the theory, responses to this question mirror the earlier self-reported motivations, thus reinforcing the internal coherence of the presented explanation.

Combatants citing private benefits as their motivation expressed indifference toward free riders, stating, "It's their choice," "I don't care," "Why should it matter to me?" and other marks indicating a lack of concern. Combatants motivated by a common cause expressed

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anger, condemnation, and a desire to punish free riders in various ways. For example, one Ukrainian combatant argued that free riders should be stripped of voting rights – the right to participate in governing the state "they refuse to defend." A Russian combatant stated that such individuals should be caught and forcibly sent to the front lines to make their contribution to the common cause. Below is a bar chart illustrating the distribution of responses from Russian and Ukrainian combatants regarding their attitudes toward free riders based on their motivation (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Responses from combatants regarding their attitudes toward free-riders

Thus, 5 out of 7 Ukrainian combatants and 3 out of 12 Russian combatants exhibit a psychological connection to society and are expected to demonstrate stronger types moral restraint in the following section. At the same time, this distribution does not imply the actual distribution of motivations among all Russian and Ukrainian combatants – one cannot claim that 70% of all Ukrainian combatants are motivated by a common cause, while approximately the same proportion of Russian combatants joined the war solely for financial reasons or other forms of personal gains. The limited empirical data collected and potential selective

biases prevent generalizing this distribution to the entire combatant population. This study does not seek to answer the question of how many Russian / Ukrainian combatants are motivated in one way or another, but rather aims to investigate how specific motivations influence the moral restraint, which is the next step of the study.

During the same interviews, participating combatants were asked a series of questions in which they were presented with hypothetical situations where the circumstances might incline them toward immoral behavior. Some of the answers were particularly interesting as they confirm the nature of morality as a component of cost-benefit calculations rather than strict behavioral imperatives. Here is one such example:

R.[2]   While carrying out a combat mission, you take a position in a residential building and find a box of jewelry. Will you take it for yourself? Why?

I.[3]   No, why would I need it there? Carry it around with me?

R.   Imagine you have the opportunity to send it home, to give it to your family.

I.   In that case, I would take it.

R.   Now imagine that one of your comrades enters the room and disapproves of your actions. How would you respond?

I.   I would suggest sharing it with him. Why the f*ck is he lecturing me on morals <...>?

R.   He refuses. Then a couple more of your comrades enter and also disapprove <...>.

I.   In that case, I would not take anything.

Here, in the span of two minutes, the combatant shifts from rejecting a violation of moral norms to agreeing when the possibility of sending the jewelry home is introduced – a

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2   "Researcher"
3   "Interviewee"

situational opportunity to utilize the private gains, and then back to rejecting it when pressure from peers, who condemn such behavior, is introduced.

Another example challenges the established practice of reducing wartime violence through military training and explaining to soldiers the limits of what is permissible and impermissible. Below, the combatant demonstrates a full understanding of the existence of wartime norms and rules, as well as imperatives prohibiting inhumane treatment of non-combatants. However, he immediately abandons these norms and imperatives when the prospect of significant gain through immoral action – revenge – is introduced.

R.   You have captured several enemy soldiers. One of your comrades, taking out his anger for fallen comrades, begins to beat one of them. Will you stop him or join in?

I.   I would stop him, of course. As you said earlier, there is a code of honor. Norms, rules, laws. We are not savages.

R.   You then learn that the captured soldiers had previously beaten and tortured your comrades whom they had taken prisoners.

I.   I would shoot them without hesitation.

Knowing about norms is not the same as having an incentive to follow them. The motivation to adhere, which in the proposed theory is seen as the need to avoid exclusion from the valuable society, which is necessary for an individual to achieve a common goal, can be overcome by greater benefits.

This is revealed in several examples where combatants discussed the possibility of immoral behavior if the goal of such behavior provided greater benefits for participants of the contracts than adhering to moral norms. For example, combatants motivated by a common

cause and rejecting immoral behavior for selfish reasons are willing to torture prisoners who know the location of a bomb at a mined nuclear power station or kill civilians encountered during a special mission to assassinate a high-ranking enemy military or political leader in order to destabilize the enemy's command structure and gain a significant advantage on the battlefield. According to the proposed theory, this is explained by the fact that such behavior provides members of their respective societies with much greater benefits than the contracts themselves, which, on a subconscious level and from the intuitive perspective of individuals, may allow for deviations from the norms dictated by the contract.

According to the methodology of the study, combatants are initially asked to engage in acts of immoral behavior. If they agree, they are placed in the "moral disengagement" group. In the case of avoidance of immoral behavior in the hypothetical situation, the researcher increases the personal benefits of immoral actions. Those who agree to this are placed in the "egoistic compliance" group. Upon a second refusal, the researcher increases the group benefits – benefits for a larger or unlimited group of people. Combatants who agree to such acts are placed in the "collective" group. Those who refuse immoral behavior in all cases are placed in the "refusal to engage" group. Below is the distribution of Russian and Ukrainian combatants indicating their motivation in these groups (Figure 10). It should be noted that the charts below present not individual combatants as units of analysis, but individual hypothetical situations in which a particular type of restraint was exhibited.
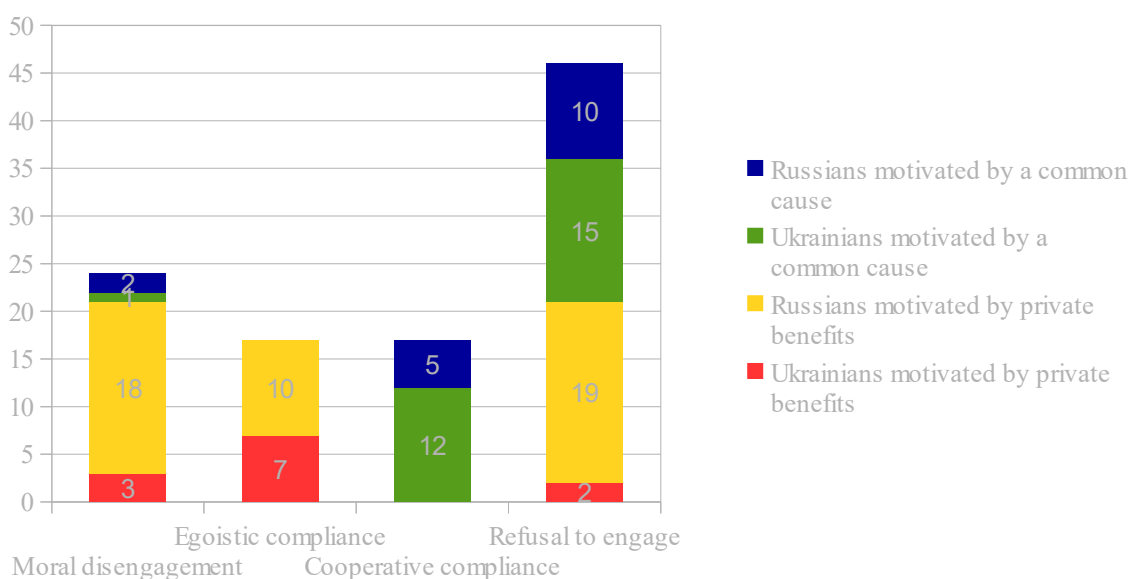
Figure 10. Types of moral restraint of combatants, indicating their motivation

The idea behind the distinction between these categories is as follows. "Moral disengagement" includes combatants who show no signs of moral restraint. They are ready to commit immoral acts without hesitation at the slightest indication of potential benefit. The "egoistic compliance" group initially demonstrates moral restraint – these combatants refrain from acts of military violence when first presented with a hypothetical situation. However, an increase in personal benefits leads to a change in their course of action – moral norms are abandoned in favor of selfish motives. "Cooperative compliance" represents a qualitatively different model of behavior – no personal gain can compel these combatants to engage in immoral actions. However, the introduction of coalitional benefits – advantages for a broad or unlimited group of individuals belonging to the same society as the combatant – may influence their assessment of the situation and trigger a shift in behavior. In other words, combatants are willing to violate the social contract that prohibits military violence and provides benefits to coalition members if their immoral behavior can bring even greater

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advantages, sufficient to justify the transgression. The final group of combatants, who reject engagement in immoral actions altogether, will be discussed further.

One can observe that the groups "moral disengagement" and "egoistic compliance" mainly consist of combatants motivated by personal gains for participating in the war. One exception is a Ukrainian combatant who, during the interview, jokingly suggested looting the homes of Russian officials and officers of the Federal Security Service. The humorous tone of the response introduces ambiguity regarding its sincerity. However, the researcher did not have the opportunity to ask for clarification, as such a question would have been leading, which is not allowed within the framework of the study.

Another exception is particularly illustrative – it demonstrates that what matters is not only the presence of a collective goal, but also the composition of the coalition through which individuals pursue that goal. In two cases, a Russian combatant who reported being motivated by a collective purpose immediately agreed to engage in immoral behavior when presented with a scenario. When asked about his motivation, he described it as "helping the guys," which, while a form of collective reasoning, positioned him within a coalition composed exclusively of fellow combatants fighting in Ukraine. In this instance, the coalition does not include non-combatants – who, as argued earlier, are the primary source of the moral belief against military violence. As a result, despite acting within a coalition, the combatant belongs to the coalition in which the internalization of norms prohibiting violence against civilians is not incentivized, due to the absence of beneficiaries of such restraint within that coalition.

In the "cooperative compliance" group, there are combatants motivated solely by a common cause. They are not willing to engage in immoral acts for personal gains but are ready to violate moral norms dictated by society if society itself stands to gain from their immoral actions.

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In the final group, "refusal to engage," there are combatants with different motivations, including those motivated by personal gains. To understand the reasons for their restraint, the researcher asked them a relevant question. In 17 cases, responses were related to consequences. These answers were provided by combatants motivated by personal gains, indicating adherence to norms not due to their genuine internalization but because of the potential punishment for violating them, including through institutional mechanisms. It also includes the combatant who is "helping the guys" on the battlefield and was discussed earlier.

In the remaining cases, combatants, including those motivated by personal gains and collective causes, cited morality as the reason for their restraint. The presence of combatants motivated by personal gains in this group can be explained by the social desirability bias; or the limited time since deployment, which may have prevented the erosion of civilian moral norms due to disconnection from society. Another possibility is that these combatants participate in other coalitions oriented around collective goals not examined in this study.

The next bar chart shows the distribution of answers regarding the reasons for the refusal to engage of combatants in accordance with their motivation (Figure 11).
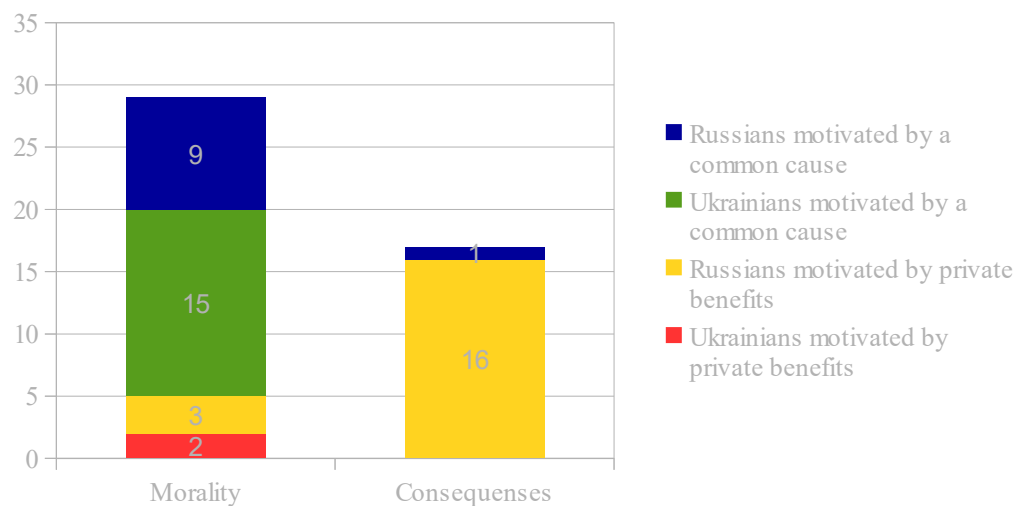
Figure 11. Reasons for refusal to engage in immoral actions

5. Discussion

The empirical results provide preliminary support for the proposed model linking combatant motivation with patterns of moral restraint. The ideas are further supported by the similarity of responses from Russian and Ukrainian combatants motivated in the same way, despite potential differences in their respective backgrounds.

These ideas suggests that the reason the Russian military is more violent towards civilians and POWs is due to the lack of proper motivation among soldiers, caused by failures in Russian leadership regarding propaganda within the military and recruitment strategies that prioritize coercion and personal gains from participation in the armed conflict (Klein 2024). However, this study does not highlight the exact distribution of motivations among Ukrainian and Russian military personnel – the data is insufficient, and difficulties in recruiting participants for the study may have led to selection bias. The observed asymmetry in motivation between Russian and Ukrainian combatants may also be partially explained by contextual factors not measured in this study. Notably, Ukrainian soldiers are defending their own territory from foreign invasion, which likely reinforces their identification with the civilian population and their perception of the war as an existential struggle. This context may foster stronger coalitional bonds and thus moral commitment. Conversely, for Russian soldiers, the narrative of defending Russian-speaking compatriots in Donbas may be less compelling or less uniformly accepted, particularly in the absence of direct threats to their homeland. Nationalism and external invasion of one's homeland may therefore function as key intervening variables in shaping the motivational structures underpinning moral restraint.

At the same time, the theory offers an explanation for the significant, though not absolute, disparity in reported abuse rates mentioned in the introduction: 92% in Russian custody versus 49% in Ukrainian custody (OHCHR 2023c). The question of motivation is an

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individual matter, and each combatant has their own motivation, driven by their experience, intellect, and personal goals. However, the theory demonstrates the importance of organizational factors related to recruitment and informing combatants about the goals and objectives of the armed conflict. In the context of military violence, they must know, understand, and share the collective goals of participating in such conflicts. This underscores the need for programs aimed at properly motivating combatants to reduce the level of military violence, although the development of such programs fall outside the scope of this study.

Importantly, the findings of this study do not undermine theories that emphasize the relevance of institutional and organizational mechanisms of restraint – such as punishment systems, leadership influence, and so on. These factors can indeed ensure compliance with norms when there is a credible threat of consequences for violations. Although monitoring and norm enforcement are notoriously difficult under combat conditions, 17 times combatants cited potential consequences – from legal prosecution to more extreme forms of informal punishment, such as execution for disobedience – as reasons for restrained behavior. Some combatants in the "egoistic compliance" group may also have been initially deterred by such consequences, with their restraint later overridden by the promise of substantial private gains. While acknowledging the relevance of these mechanisms, this study demonstrates how morality can function as an additional – and arguably more effective in the absence of meaningful external oversight and control – source of norm compliance through motivation.

Another potential way to reduce military violence may be to exploit the very nature of moral convictions. If they represent a social contract – a situation in which the actions of one individual affect the distribution of benefits and costs for all members of society – one can propose a somewhat unconventional approach to solving the problem of military violence. The Roman army had a high level of discipline and adherence to orders and established

behavioral norms. Violations of such discipline were severely punished, up to decimation – the execution of a randomly chosen tenth soldier (Taylor 2022). While obviously not a call to revive such punitive practices, this historical example illustrates how perceptions of shared consequences can activate norm-enforcing psychological mechanisms.

This refers to artificial "moralization" – creating conditions in which restrained behavior by soldiers leads to the reward for the entire unit, and/or the engaging in acts of military violence by one combatant results in the punishment of all soldiers in the unit. Setting aside the controversial issues related to collective responsibility and its acceptability, I can suggest that such conditions would trigger psychological mechanisms that govern adherence to moral norms and monitoring their observance by others, which lie at the foundation of moral behavior.

In addition to explaining the case and providing policy recommendations, this study raises questions for the literature and outlines pathways for further research, advancing the literature on military violence and international relations in general. Firstly, it further confirms the possibility of exploring the ideational as behavior of rational and self-interested actors within the framework of the rational perspective. This confirms opportunities for integrating material and ideational theories to enhance the heuristic strength of theories.

Secondly, borrowing from evolutionary psychology helps define the boundaries of morality in human communities. Rather than vague assertions about the morality of a given social group (Bell 2016), it allows for the precise identification of which individuals promote and follow moral norms by investigating the benefits of the social contract itself and the societies in which they are situated. In this study, moral conviction emanates from civilians. It is disadvantageous for soldiers, but they follow it if united with civilians in a single community pursuing a collective goal.

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Thirdly, the study shows, that morality is context-dependent. It is not only about participation in coalitions – being motivated by a common cause, it is about participating in specific coalitions, where certain moral beliefs exist and are promoted. The example of a Russian combatant motivated by a private cause, but still engaging in immoral acts, reveals this finding – he is a part of the coalition composed of only militaries, where, according to the theory, moral belief against military violence is unlikely to appear and be internalized due to absence of benefited by the belief actors.

Fourthly, this study reveals morality as a factor in opportunistic military violence and restraint, which has been underdeveloped in the literature. Further research could examine the questions of collective violence, while also considering the hierarchy of human communities and the dynamics of leadership morality. This would provide answers not only to the causes of individual atrocities but also to the causes of mass violence – such as the ongoing shelling of civilian infrastructure in Ukraine today. The rational tradition upon which this theory is based may allow for the examination of morality while integrating strategic considerations, which are typically the focus of the realist literature on military violence.

Finally, it raises questions for existing approaches and theories within the broader literature of international relations. For instance, Tannewald's "nuclear taboo" (1999) could be examined through the lens of the presented theory as a social contract within the international community. One could consider the nuclear taboo through the presented lens, analyze the dynamics of its spread, and draw generalized conclusions about the genesis of norms in the international community.

One limitation of the present design is the absence of variation in collective benefits across hypothetical scenarios. While the study successfully manipulates egoistic incentives to measure the elasticity of moral restraint under self-interested conditions, it does not similarly

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test whether combatants motivated by collective goals demonstrate different levels of norm adherence when collective stakes vary. Future research could incorporate such manipulations to assess whether communitarian motivations are also subject to instrumental recalibration when the perceived value of group outcomes fluctuates.

Last but not least, there is a need for research on opportunistisc military violence in other contexts. Despite measures taken to increase the validity of the findings – such as interviewing combatants from both sides (one violent and the other relatively restrained) and preventing mass interviews with members of the same military unit – one may still question the generalizability of the results due to the focus on a single context of the war in Ukraine. To achieve convincing and definitive confirmation of the theory, it must be examined in other contexts, particularly cultural ones. Only then can one speak of a full validation of the proposed theory. The following highlights this call. In addition to the example of the properly motivated but still violent combatant – where the explanation lies in the composition of their coalition – it is reasonable to assume that the absence of moral restraint may also occur for other reasons. For instance, in some societies, individuals who advocate for the prohibition of military violence may lack agency or the ability to impact due to political or social inequalities. In such societies, the mechanisms outlined in this theory may fail to activate. Further investigation may help explain why, in certain cases where collective motivation is apparent – for example, the actions of Soviet soldiers during the Second World War – we still observe widespread military violence.

Future research could also explore how individuals infer the presence of a moral contract within a society and assess its legitimacy. What signals or cues guide their perception of societal norms – and what mechanisms drive norm recognition or misrecognition in volatile social contexts?

Conclusion

This study proposes a rational account for morality as a factor of military restraint. According to this model, combatants motivated to participate in armed conflict by private benefits are more prone to military violence, and vice versa. This relationship stems from how moral beliefs function as social contracts. These convictions may be viewed as a social contract – described as such in the literature on social and political sciences – or as an n-party exchange in evolutionary psychology. This specific belief is primarily promoted by individuals who stand to benefit from it – namely, civilians.

Non-combatants are the primary beneficiaries of such moral convictions, as these ensure their safety, health, and well-being. For militaries, however, restrictions on military violence come with direct costs and lost benefits – for instance, the inability to obtain intelligence that could confer an advantage in future battles or the need to employ tactics and strategies that increase personal risks. Nevertheless, individuals frequently adhere to moral norms that are disadvantageous – either through coercion, highlighted by organizational theories, or by intrinsic value of societies themselves. The former is limited under the conditions of war – it is difficult to monitor compliance on the battlefield.

Among other things, individuals may also comply with disadvantageous moral norms when participation in the society enforcing these norms offers them sufficient benefits. In simple terms, this adherence is caused by a shared goal. When combatants and broader society jointly pursue a collective goal, adherence to the norms of that society becomes a crucial condition for achieving this goal. Conversely, failure to adhere may lead to exclusion from the society – a prospect undesirable to any individual, especially in the presence of the goal. Here, this motivation adds value to otherwise costly social contracts.

In reality, decision-making among combatants is far more complex. Combatants motivated by private benefits may still adhere to norms if violating them leads to punishment and if they believe such punishment is inevitable. Second, morality is not static; it evolves based on social context, and these changes do not occur instantaneously. This observation explains findings such as those of Manekin (2013), whose analysis shows that the longer the deployment, the higher the risk of military violence. Separated from the societal context and motivated by personal gain, combatants adjust their internal value systems according to calculated costs and benefits within a certain societal framework – the longer the deployment, the greater the likelihood of abandoning convictions that entail only costs.

All of this depends on the personal experiences, knowledge, intelligence, hierarchical structures, their dynamics, leadership, and other factors, creating variance in the proposed theoretical model. However, as collected data demonstrate, combatants motivated by collective causes – such as the necessity of defense – consistently exhibit stronger types of restraint, at least in simulated scenarios where they were asked to choose a hypothetical course of action.

Considering the findings of this study, it may be asserted that the atrocities committed by the Russian army could, in part, stem from a lack of proper motivation among its combatants. Within the sample, approximately 70% of Russian respondents cited private benefits as their primary motivation, suggesting a limited attachment to the broader societal value underlying the restrictive social contract. While this proportion cannot be taken as representative due to potential selection bias, it nonetheless provides a basis for assuming that a significant number of Russian combatants may indeed lack adequate moral motivation. Another possible explanation lies in the nature of the conflict itself: Ukrainian soldiers are defending their homeland against an external aggressor, a context that likely fosters stronger

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national sentiments and coalitional bonds and, consequently, reinforces moral restraint. For Russian combatants, by contrast, the narrative of protecting "compatriots" in Donbas may carry less weight – particularly in the absence of observable threats to their own country.

These findings allow for a reevaluation of policies aimed at reducing military violence. First, they reject approaches based solely on training and teaching – moral norms are not internalized simply through knowledge of their existence. Notably, 100% of the combatants interviewed stated that they considered military violence unacceptable. However, this did not stop some of them from stating that they "would shoot them without hesitation" or expressing readiness to engage in other forms of immoral behavior.

Second, the model prioritizes the motivation of combatants. If one seeks to reduce the level of military violence, one should ensure that combatants believe they are pursuing a collective goal. Financial incentives and coercion, often used in recruitment strategies, result only in the absence of connection to society and, consequently, weak moral convictions.

Third, alternative policies focused on artificially moralizing military violence may be considered. Given that social contracts inherently involve the impact of one individual's actions on the benefits and costs of all the others, conditions could be artificially re-created to prompt the activation of psychological mechanisms responsible for morality. This could involve penalizing an entire unit for acts of military violence committed by one member or rewarding all for the absence of violence by any member. Setting aside debates on the acceptability of collective responsibility and based on the proposed model, I may argue for the potential effectiveness of such an approach.

This study represents an attempt to integrate principles of evolutionary psychology into security studies to explain the ideational – morality – within a rational framework. Evolutionary psychology, supported by ideas from other natural sciences, asserts principles of

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human nature, such as rationality and selfishness aligning closely with the rational choice theory. At the same time, it successfully explains the ideational, which is often neglected by this philosophical tradition.

The findings suggest that this integrative approach holds promise for explaining opportunistic violence and moral restraint of combatants. Nevertheless, to fully validate the proposed theory of military violence, attention must be paid to other contexts, especially cultural ones. Limitations in this study, such as potential influence from intervening variables and selection bias, prevent the generalization of its findings without additional research.

Other promising areas of inquiry include leader-directed violence, which is complicated by hierarchical structures that alter the dynamics of morality, and further exploration of the ideational as rational actors' behavior. For instance, one could explain the "nuclear taboo" not as an abstract normative prohibition but as a social contract within the international community.

Military violence remains a complex phenomenon. This theoretical model, while explaining when and under what circumstances combatants may be restrained by morality, does not address equally important questions about how specific personal experiences, environmental circumstances, gender, leadership influence, and other factors can affect outcomes. This underscores the need for further research to develop comprehensive policies aimed at reducing military violence and ensuring that moral restraint in warfare becomes a matter not of chance, but of deliberate institutional and social design.

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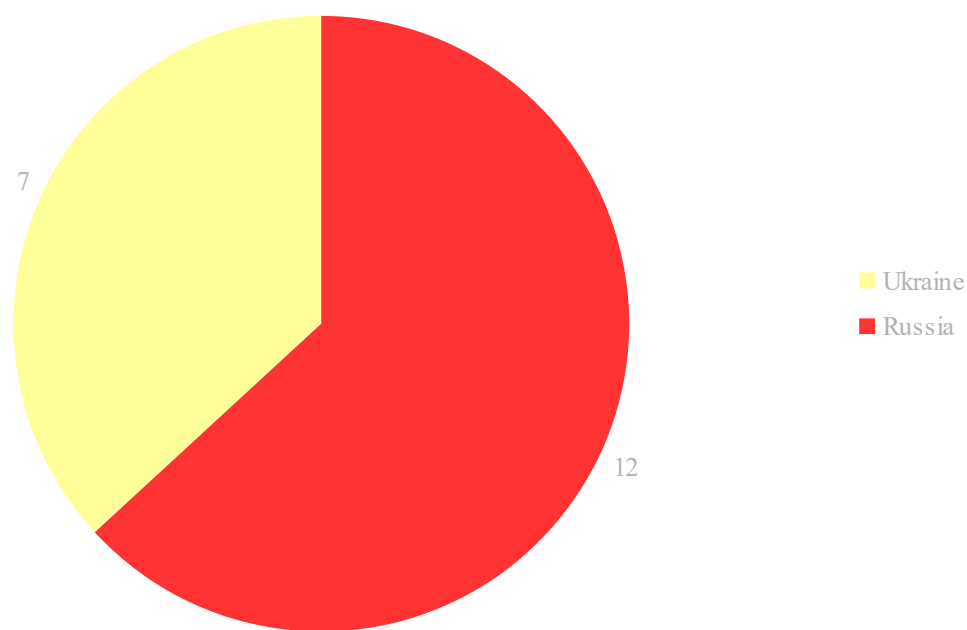# Appendix A. General demographic data of study participants

Figure A.1. Affiliation of study participants with parties to the conflict
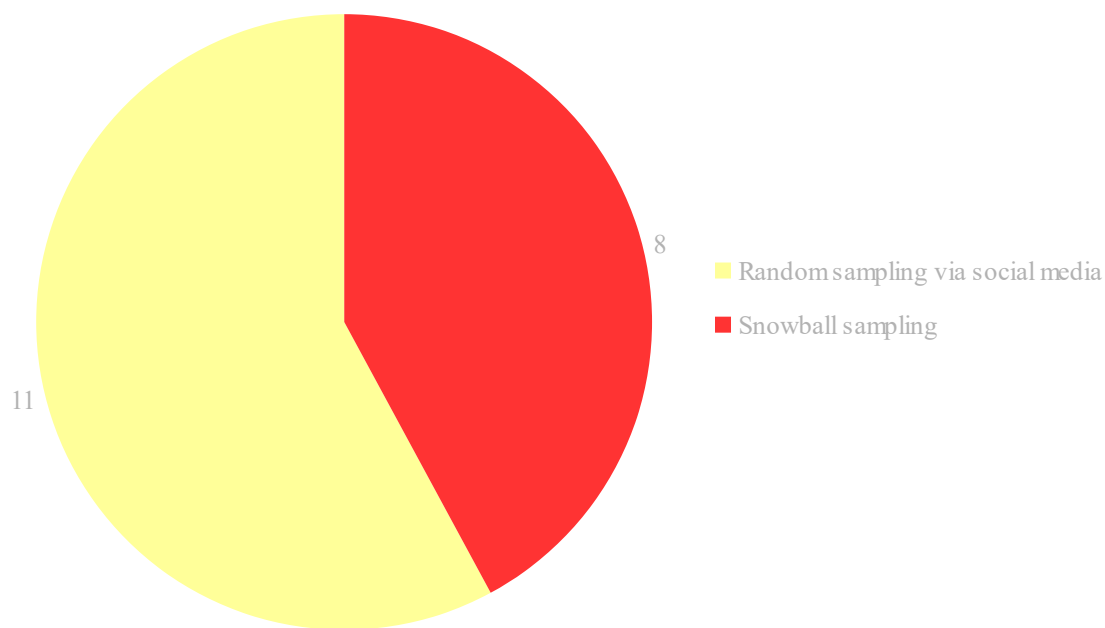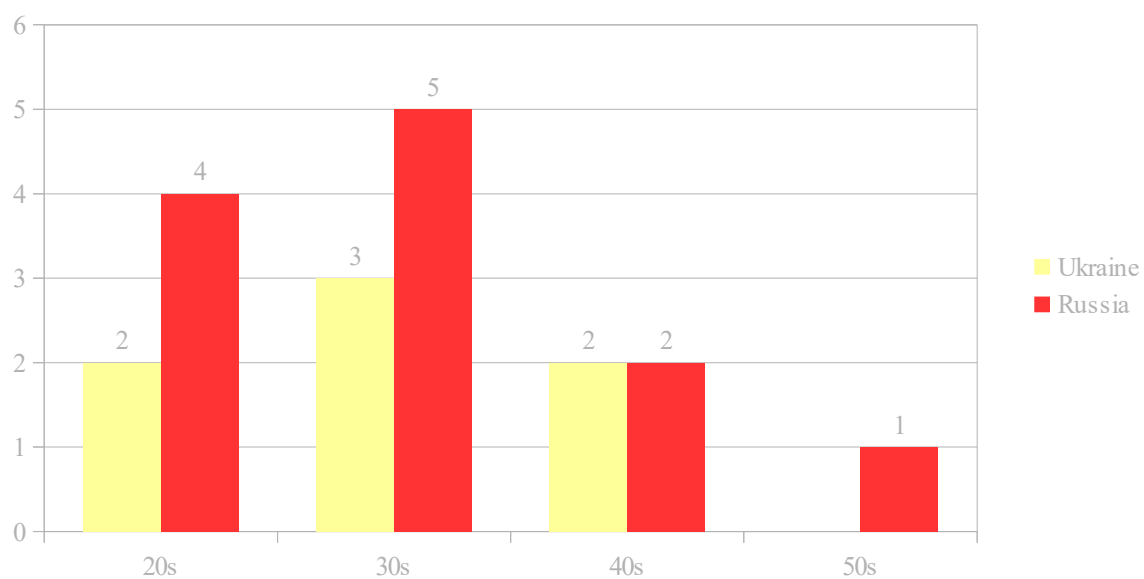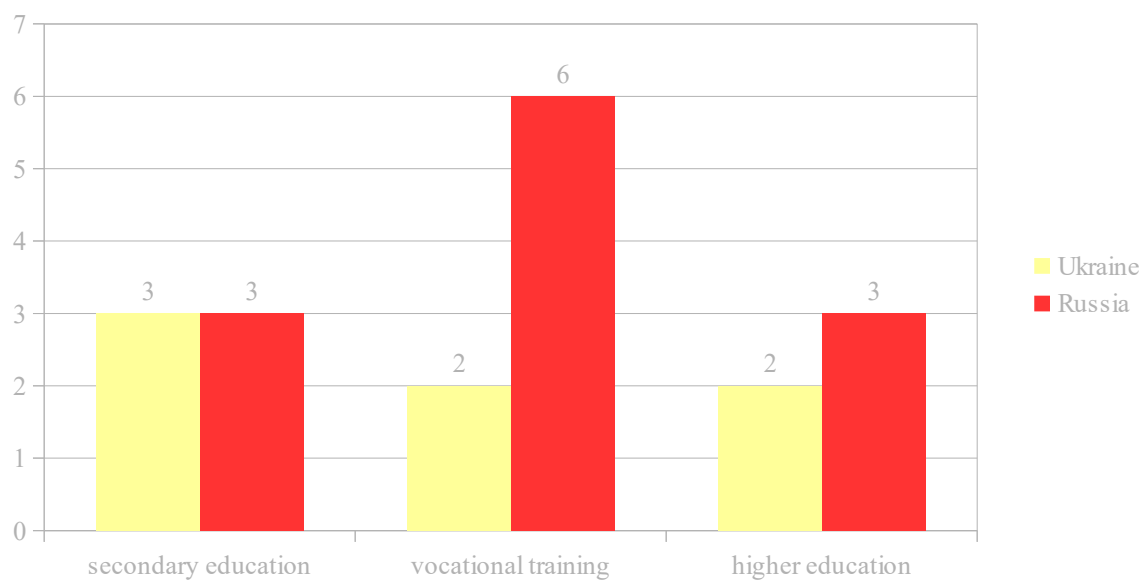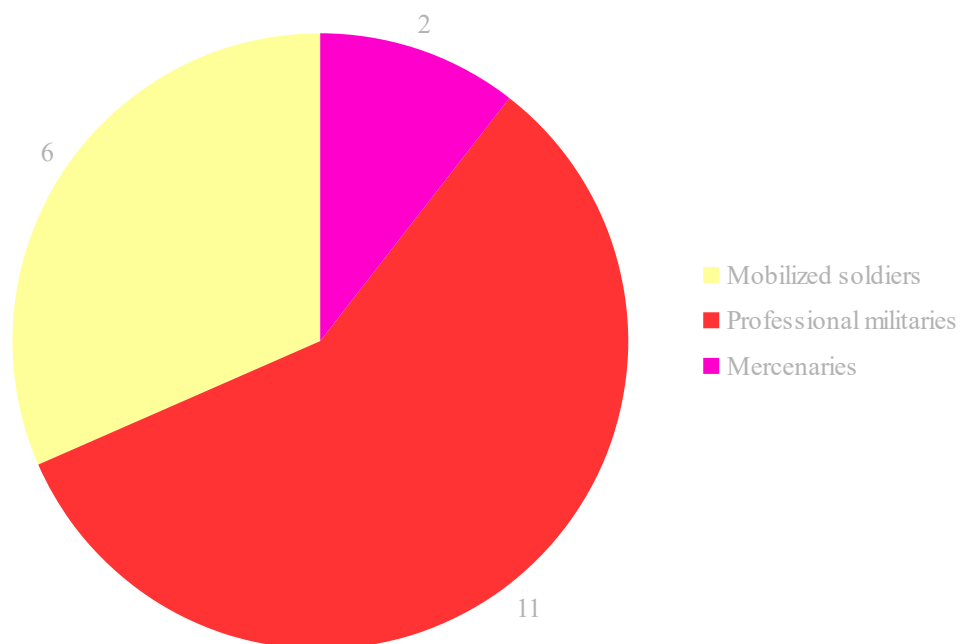

Figure A.2. The sampling method used to recruit study participants

Figure A.3. Age of study participants by country

Figure A.4. Education level of study participants by country

Figure A.5. Military status of study participants

Appendix B. Interview topics with sample wording of questions

Section 1. Self-identification and perceptions of society

1.1. Each person is a part of something bigger, a group of people to which they belong and with which they feel unity. What are you a part of?

1.2. Speaking globally, at the world, civilizational level, what civilization do you feel you are part of?

1.3. When you think about your country, what images and feelings come to mind first?

1.4. What does it mean to you to be part of /*society, nation, social group*/?

1.5. How do you demonstrate your belonging to /*society, nation, social group*/ in everyday life and in service? How is it expressed, in what actions?

1.6. What are the differences between /*interviewee's society, nation, social group*/ and /*rival society, nation, social group*/?

1.7. If you were offered the chance to move to another country, which country would it be and why?

1.8. What values are important in raising children?

1.9. What is your attitude towards the idea of patriotism? How do you understand it?

Section 2. Perception of conflict dynamics*[4]

The questions in this section were preceded by an introductory description of the situation by the researcher, framing the conflict and the prospects for the interviewees' respective sides in positive, negative and neutral terms.

2.1. How do you assess the unity of the Russian / Ukrainian people and their contribution to the common cause?

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4   Not all questions and topics from the list presented were used in the final dataset. The questions and topics that were included in the data analysis for this thesis are marked with an asterisk (*).

2.2.   How do you assess the unity and strength of the Russian / Ukrainian army?

2.3.   How do you assess the enemy's unity and strength?

2.4.   What do you think is the main incentive for your colleagues to fight in the war?*

Section 3. Combatants' decision-making process*

3.1.   What guides you when making decisions during combat missions?

3.2.   List your three most important priorities in descending order of importance.

3.3.   Let's imagine a hypothetical situation. During a combat mission, you and your unit took up a position in a residential area. There you found a box filled with gold jewelry and diamonds. Will you take the jewelry for yourself? Why no / yes?*

3.4.   *Several questions that increase / decrease calculation of the subjective value of plundering (absence / presence of a colleague, refusal / consent of a colleague to steal and share stolen property, living quarters of the enemy's / one's own civilians…).*

Section 4. Military violence: perception, acceptability, and inclination to engage*

The questions in this section were preceded by an introductory description of the military violence phenomenon by the researcher, framing the phenomenon in positive (understanding), negative (condemning) and neutral (descriptive) terms.

4.1.   How do you personally assess the acceptability of attacks on civilians?*

4.2.   The death of civilians during artillery, missile and drone strikes, even if these strikes are aimed at a legitimate military target – a tragedy and "collateral damage" or a crime by those who carried out the strike? Why?*

4.3.   Let's imagine hypothetical situations. Here is the first one. While performing a combat mission, you received information that civilians on enemy territory are collaborating

with their intelligence services and army, providing them with information about your unit, its movements and actions. What actions will you take and why?*

4.4. Second. You have received orders from your commander to neutralize a civilian. Your actions? Why?*

4.5. Third. You have captured enemy soldiers. Your colleague, throwing out their emotions, began beating one of the prisoners. Will you join or stop and why?*

4.6. *Several questions that increase / decrease calculation of the subjective value of torture (condemnation of inaction / torture on the part of fellow soldiers, the presence / absence of fellow soldiers and other prisoners, the presence / absence of information valuable to the unit from the prisoner…).*

Section 5. Demographic data and patterns of media consumption*

5.1. Give your approximate age (20-29, 30-39...).*

5.2. What is your level of education?*

5.3. What did you do before you started serving?

5.4. What is your main information source about events in the country and the world?

5.5. Do you trust /*media type*/? Why?

5.6. What information do you get from /*media type*/?

5.7. *Free discussion of individual media reports for capturing the peculiarities of perception and processing of information by combatants.*