

# Rescue mission

What happens in Russian captivity  
and how to prevent the death  
of Ukrainian POWs



## FOREWORD

The subject of captivity is both intricate and sensitive. For at least five years now, the Media Initiative for Human Rights has been communicating this issue with the relatives of those held captive, individuals who have been released from captivity, officials from state agencies, the international community, and the society of Ukraine. It is of paramount importance to us to highlight that the narratives of captivity transcend mere statistical data within the overall count of individuals detained by Russia; they embody individual human destinies. Our documentation encompasses not only instances of maltreatment in Russian captivity but also the fatalities of Ukrainian soldiers resulting from physical assaults, torture, grave illnesses, and the absence of medical attention in detention facilities within the occupied territories of Ukraine and in the territory of the Russian Federation. Discussing each specific case presents challenges, yet it remains critically

essential. We firmly believe that elucidating the reasons and contexts of deaths in Russian captivity opens avenues for the initiation of preventative measures aimed at safeguarding Ukrainian prisoners of war, thereby enabling each family to anticipate the return of their loved ones from captivity.

In this study, we have intentionally focused on the most flagrant breaches of the rights of Ukrainian prisoners of war to illustrate the repercussions of the conduct of the Russian Federation. Through this approach, we do more than merely record these transgressions and offenses; we also play a role in facilitating the prosecution of those responsible, stimulating both the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the global community to exert pressure on Russia and deter its crimes against Ukrainian prisoners of war.

# 01 Introduction

The demise of Ukrainian soldiers while in Russian captivity within the territory of the Russian Federation (hereinafter referred to as RF) comes to light through the testimonies of those who were released during prisoner of war exchanges, as well as interviews with the relatives of the deceased prisoners. Furthermore, numerous videos and photographic evidence of shootings, including extrajudicial killings of Ukrainian POWs by Russians, are accessible on the Internet. In their reports and public statements, international organizations recall such incidents resulting in deaths of Ukrainian prisoners of war and issue condemnations, declaring these acts as grave breaches of International Humanitarian Law (hereinafter referred to as IHL) and identifying them as war crimes under the Geneva Conventions.

The Media Initiative for Human Rights delves into the treatment of Ukrainian prisoners of war, their detention conditions, diligently monitors rights violations by representatives of the RF, and documents these incidents. Moreover, the Media Initiative for Human Rights keeps track of court proceedings against Ukrainian prisoners of war or Ukrainians who ought to be granted protective status under IHL but are instead denied such by the RF. Concurrently, the Media Initiative for Human Rights has offered a reconstruction of the explosions at Volnovakha Colony No. 120 in Olenivka, which resulted in over 47 Ukrainian prisoners of war perishing and another 120 sustaining injuries. This particular incident concerning the death of Ukrainian prisoners of war is addressed in section 07.

On July 13, 2023, the Ministry for Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine announced<sup>1</sup> that from July 2022 to July 2023, 19 bodies of Ukrainian soldiers who perished in Russian captivity were repatriated to Ukraine. In August 2023, a spokesperson for the POW Treatment Coordination Headquarters reported the return to Ukraine of 12 bodies of Ukrainian prisoners of war<sup>2</sup>, whose detention in Russian captivity had been previously verified by the International Committee of the Red Cross (hereinafter - ICRC). Concurrently, he highlighted that the RF failed to report any health deterioration of these individuals, leading to speculation that their deaths were either sudden or that any decline in health was intentionally concealed.

As of January 2024, the Media Initiative for Human Rights has knowledge of **21 Ukrainian prisoners of war** who succumbed to death directly within the confines of detention facilities during their period of captivity in Russia. Furthermore, we are informed of instances where Ukrainian prisoners of war were executed immediately following their capture, prior to being transported to camps or other detention locales.

In response to a request from the Media Initiative for Human Rights for the tally of Ukrainians who perished in Russian captivity spanning from February 24, 2022, to November 16, 2023, the Ministry for the Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine disclosed a figure of **49 individuals**.

Concurrently, pinpointing the precise count of deceased Ukrainian prisoners of war presents challenges. This complexity arises from the delays in the repatriation or the outright non-repatriation of bodies and the lack of notifications from Russia concerning the demise of prisoners of war. Predominantly, Russia abstains from notifying the Ukrainian authorities regarding the apprehension of Ukrainian servicemen, nor does it permit prisoners of war to maintain contact with their families. These factors obstruct the dispatch of a capture card — an official notice of captivity, the registration by Ukraine of the capture of its servicemen, and eliminates the possibility to oversee the health status of the prisoners.

Based on the testimonies collated by the Media Initiative for Human Rights, it is presumed that the mortality among prisoners of war predominantly stems from torture, inadequate treatment and detention conditions, and the absence of or delay in providing medical care. Moreover, it is recognized that a critical issue resides in the often missing documentation elucidating the causes of death of prisoners of war within detention sites, as the Russian side fails to disclose any pertinent information. Bodies repatriated to Ukraine frequently arrive in an unsuitable state, or merely remains are returned, rendering precise examinations unfeasible.

1. Publication on the website of the Ministry for Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine dated July 13, 2023:

<https://minre.gov.ua/2023/07/13/za-rik-povernuto-tila-19-zahysnykiv-yaki-pomerly-v-poloni>

2. Publication in the Telegram channel of the Military Media Center: <https://t.me/militarymediacenter/2928>



The objective of this analytical endeavor is to cast light on instances of torture and the detention in substandard conditions of Ukrainian prisoners of war within the Russian Federation, leading to their deaths in Russian captivity. The data and testimonies presented in this analysis act as substantiation of the infringement of the rights of Ukrainian prisoners of war by the Russian Federation and underscore the imperative to grant the ICRC

access to these detention venues. It is also vital to underscore the deficiencies at both the international and national levels regarding the safeguarding of the rights of this group of individuals, in addition to the necessity to secure the rights of the families of the deceased Ukrainian prisoners of war. Moreover, the issues delineated in this document impinge upon the capacity to prosecute those accountable.

## 02 Methodology

For purposes of this analytical report, we used documented testimonies from civilians and military personnel who experienced Russian captivity, as well as from the families of deceased prisoners of war. Information from open sources and the official websites of the Ministry for Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine and the POW Treatment Coordination Headquarters was also employed. Journalists from the Media Initiative for Human Rights meticulously prepared and dispatched pertinent information requests to the Ministry for Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine. The insights gleaned from the responses were instrumental in the formulation of this report. Moreover, the Media Initiative for Human Rights incorporated information furnished by the International Commission on Missing Persons.

This document contains sections concerning the demise of Ukrainian servicemen directly within the confines of detention facilities for prisoners. Episodes of extrajudicial executions and the immediate killings of Ukrainian military personnel following their capture are also detailed. A distinct section is dedicated to the death of Ukrainian prisoners of war at Volnovakha Colony No. 120 in Olenivka, Donetsk Region. These breaches of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) by the Russian Federation have been meticulously documented by human rights organizations. Certain cases are presently under investigation by the law enforcement agencies of Ukraine. Nonetheless, it is crucial that not solely individual instances but all such severe infringements of IHL are subjected to thorough investigations at both the national and international levels.

## 03

### International reports confirming deaths and extrajudicial executions

In the fourth interim report on identified violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in Ukraine, dated December 12, 2023 (hereafter referred to as "the Report"), the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) highlights the plight of Ukrainian prisoners of war subjected to torture and cruel treatment in Russian captivity. ODIHR witnesses interviewed shared details on the means and methods employed in torturing prisoners of war, which encompass severe beatings, the use of electric shocks, stress positions, suffocation techniques such as putting bags over heads, extended handcuffing, sexual violence including forced nudity, simulated executions, threats of violence and mutilation, as well as humiliation and verbal abuse. The report also notes the issue of Ukrainian prisoners of war

either not receiving medical care or receiving it belatedly, particularly after severe torture sessions intended to conceal the physical injuries inflicted upon the prisoners.

The Report further contains testimonies indicating that some prisoners of war succumbed to their injuries from severe beatings or complications thereof, while others, still in detention, attempted suicide driven by humiliation and physical violence<sup>3</sup>.

In its October 4, 2023 report, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights documented 21 cases of extrajudicial executions of Ukrainian male prisoners of war from February 24, 2022, to July 31, 2023<sup>4</sup>.



3. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/4/561457.pdf>

4. [https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/23-10\\_04%20OHCHR%2036th%20periodic%20report%20UKR\\_0.pdf](https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/23-10_04%20OHCHR%2036th%20periodic%20report%20UKR_0.pdf)



## Extrajudicial executions

Relying on open sources, including videos posted online by Russian military personnel, the report documents **shootings of Ukrainian soldiers by Russian forces either immediately post-capture or while in captivity.** Such acts of extrajudicial execution by the Russians have been ongoing since 2014 and persist to date.

Specifically, on January 21, 2015, Ihor Branovytsky was murdered in captivity by members of the so-called "Donetsk People's Republic" ("DPR"), under the broad control of the Russian Federation<sup>5</sup>.

In December 2023, near Robotyne in Zaporizhzhia Region, Russian forces, following a combat encounter, captured Ukrainians and executed them within an hour<sup>6</sup>. On December 2, 2023, media outlets circulated a video depicting the execution of unarmed Ukrainian defenders by Russian military personnel, near an observation post in the vicinity of Stepove village in Donetsk Region<sup>7</sup>.

On March 6, 2023, the Internet saw the spread of a video showcasing the execution of a Ukrainian soldier, shot immediately after capture for proclaiming "Glory to Ukraine!"<sup>8</sup> These recordings serve as significant evidence of the crimes committed.

Additionally, **incidents of torture, extrajudicial executions, and detention in inhumane conditions involving Ukrainian prisoners of war captured by representatives of the Wagner Group,** a military unit engaged in the conflict against Ukraine, have been reported. It is unequivocal that these forces are integral to the Russian military<sup>9</sup>. The Media Initiative for Human Rights has elaborated on this in their piece titled "The Wagner Group. Beyond Accountability."<sup>10</sup>

One<sup>11</sup> of the military personnel interviewed by the Media Initiative for Human Rights recounted witnessing a mass shooting of Ukrainian prisoners of war by Wagner fighters near Bakhmut in Donetsk Region:

*"There were 20 of us at the position, no reinforcements were coming, ammunition was running out, we were surrounded. They kept me separately about 5—10 meters from the rest, who were laid down together. At that moment, I heard a burst of automatic fire. I turn around and see four people shooting our guys, from whom blood starts to flow like a river. 'Zeroed out,' as they expressed it." The commission of this crime by Russian soldiers was explained by claiming that the Ukrainian military had supposedly come to a Russian city, although in reality, the execution took place on Ukrainian territory. The released soldier emphasizes: "They have the impression that it's supposedly theirs (the city of Bakhmut — Media Initiative for Human Rights)."*

Another witness, Olena, recounted the incident where a Wagner Group combatant executed her spouse, Oleksandr, who was Ukrainian by birth and an Israeli national. At the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion, he journeyed to Ukraine and enlisted as a volunteer in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Aerial drone footage captured by Ukrainian reconnaissance on November 23, 2022, amidst a battle near Bakhmut, shows Oleksandr wounded in a trench, evidently unarmed. A Wagner Group soldier approached, initiated a conversation with him, and at one point, the Russian soldier was seen shaking his head. Subsequently, the Wagner combatant donned a helmet, grasped an assault rifle, advanced towards Oleksandr, and commenced firing at his back. Oleksandr collapsed instantly, yet the Russian persisted in shooting.

It was only after the liberation of the area where Oleksandr was executed that his body could be retrieved from the battlefield. Classified as missing in action and presumed dead since December 2022, it wasn't until the end of April 2023 that his wife received a morgue photograph, in which she identified her husband's body, primarily through the tattoos bearing his children's names.

**MIHR is also aware of extrajudicial executions from the testimonies of victims who were held captive by Wagner fighters.** In particular, one witness<sup>12</sup> describes the execution of prisoners of war, beheadings, and ear cutting. Moreover, after the killing, Russian soldiers desecrate the bodies of Ukrainian prisoners of war, showcasing them to the living prisoners. Another interviewed witness<sup>13</sup> recalls the beginning of the interrogation at the Wagner Group's headquarters:

*"They showed me the freshly severed heads of our guys, mounted on rebars. One says, 'This is Edik, and this is Valera. They wanted everything to be according to the Geneva Conventions. Do you also want it by the conventions? There's a place for a third'."*

5. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/den-zagybeli-igorya-branovytskogo/31062163.html>

6. <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cm50mj137j1o>

7. [https://t.me/pgov\\_gov\\_ua/19838](https://t.me/pgov_gov_ua/19838)

8. <https://focus.ua/uk/voennye-novosti/553441-rossiyane-rasstrelyali-ukrainskogo-plennoho-za-slova-slava-ukraine-v-op-otreagirovali-foto>

9. <https://mipl.org.ua/grupa-vagnera-chomu-vony-ne-najmanczi-a-rosiyane-za-nyh-taku-zh-vidpovidalnist-yak-i-za-regulyarni-zbrojni-syly/>

10. <https://mipl.org.ua/grupa-vagnera-pozna-vidpovidalnistyu/>

11. Witness No. 1. Hereinafter, a witness refers to a person who was interviewed by the Media Initiative for Human Rights (MIHR) fact finders and whose testimonies are documented.

12. Witness No. 2

13. Witness No. 3





# Testimonies of released soldiers who witnessed the death of Ukrainian prisoners of war in captivity

Ukrainian soldiers, upon their release from Russian captivity through exchanges, narrate their experiences of torture and also recount overhearing the torture of others. Some witnessed fatalities during captivity, indicating that some soldiers are executed immediately post-capture, while others perish in detention facilities.

As of now, the MIHR has identified 43 detention sites for Ukrainian prisoners of war within Russian territory, illustrated on a map<sup>14</sup> we have generated, and approximately 20 detention facilities in occupied territories of Ukraine. Through the accounts of released soldiers, we hear of mortality occurrences across various institutions of the Russian penal system where Ukrainians are detained.

One Ukrainian soldier<sup>15</sup>, having been freed from Russian captivity, testified to witnessing the execution of prisoners of war shortly after his capture while being detained in a village in Chernihiv Region: *“One was shot even before being taken inside the barracks. They parked and shot him in the street.”* The soldier is aware of four killings of prisoners of war that happened during his time in that settlement.

**Former prisoners of war share additional accounts of fatalities during captivity, particularly when discussing their time in colonies and pre-trial detention centers, especially within territories under Russian occupation.**

Such incidents frequently transpire during the reception process — the act of admitting newly arrived prisoners into colonies and pretrial detention centers, wherein guards subject prisoners to beatings prior to their placement in detention. A particular account comes from a former detainee, a doctor who was held in Volnovakha Colony No. 120 in Olenivka (Donetsk Region), who recounted that during such receptions, physical harm was meted out to all prisoners, including those already injured. Notably, during his reception, one wounded prisoner of war was beaten to death.

A military man<sup>16</sup> who was in the Luhansk pre-trial detention center in the occupied territory of Ukraine narrates the death of a prisoner due to the staff's refusal to administer medical care: *“... in the neighboring cell 25, a prisoner died because of the lack of medical assistance. He was bitten by an insect carrying some disease like encephalitis. His cellmates had been asking for medical help for a long time, but the jail staff did not respond until he lost consciousness and started suffocating. Then the medics rushed in, took him away, but it was too late. He died.”*

Another soldier<sup>17</sup> was interviewed by MIHR fact finders after his release from Sukhodilsk Correctional Colony No. 36 in Luhansk Region, which is also under occupation.

He said: *“There was one man from the 36th Brigade. He had shrapnel wounds somewhere in his chest. One day, as we were going to the dining hall, he felt ill and died. There was also a man, I don't remember his surname, about 60 years old — something happened with his heart. He suffered for several days, couldn't eat, had issues with his blood pressure and heart, and died at night. They took his body away, but I don't know where.”*

**Former prisoners often reference cases of death when discussing the detention of Ukrainian captives within the territory of the Russian Federation.**

In the city of Taganrog, prisoners are confined at Pretrial Detention Facility No. 2 of the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service in Rostov Region.

A released soldier<sup>18</sup> who was held there testifies: *“I was told a story that there, during a walk, the guard beat up a guy. He went up to his cell, and his heart stopped. After that, they took away the batons, and they started beating captives with fists and feet.”*

Another witness<sup>19</sup>, who was detained in the same detention center, knows about the death of two prisoners: *“At the beginning of September, the warden of our detention center was replaced after two deaths — we know that for sure. A man from the 74th Brigade died. He was on the third floor. And, as far as I know, an Azov fighter was tortured to death. They were taking him to Taganrog in September, but they beat him so badly that he didn't make it.”*

Another military man<sup>20</sup>, while being held at this detention facility, heard a story about a soldier who was beaten by the police and placed into solitary confinement. The man had a fractured femoral neck: *“He weighed 50 kilograms, and this 120-kilogram dude was beating him. As far as I understand, he experienced multiple organ failure, his kidneys failed, and he also had an ulcer.”*

Another witness<sup>21</sup> was held captive at Pretrial Detention Facility No. 2 of the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service in Voronezh Region. He testifies about torture and death from torture at this detention center: *“It was closer to autumn. We were electrocuted during every check. They started from the fourth floor and went down. Once, the check stopped on the third floor. We were standing, warming up our joints before the beating, but that day they didn't beat anyone — for the first time the check happened without beatings. It turned out that someone's heart stopped from constant electrocution sessions. There were many cases when limbs failed, or prisoners suffered urinary incontinence. Such people were taken out of the cells and transferred somewhere. Later, after two days, we were taken out*

14. [https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?ll=50.951838350236905%2C64.1317373615835&z=4&fbclid=IwAR0oCTOG-869R\\_7ka613QxUq23zvVx0bPKlonYz87F6M3XWlyvO6V4OTmCs&mid=1k23eqj\\_c0ikyUEIE1zFkHna60kDQHQtC](https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?ll=50.951838350236905%2C64.1317373615835&z=4&fbclid=IwAR0oCTOG-869R_7ka613QxUq23zvVx0bPKlonYz87F6M3XWlyvO6V4OTmCs&mid=1k23eqj_c0ikyUEIE1zFkHna60kDQHQtC)

15. Witness No. 4

16. Witness No. 5

17. Witness No. 6

18. Witness No. 7

19. Witness No. 8

20. Witness No. 9

21. Witness No. 10



*(of the cells — MIHR) and the guard tells me: 'Raise your arms higher, you don't want to have a stroke as well, do you?' They also told us about Olenivka, where young marines were simply beaten to death."*

Pretrial Detention Facility No. 2 in the city of Novozybkov, Bryansk Region, is also used as a detention venue for Ukrainian military personnel. A released soldier<sup>22</sup> talks about death in this detention center: *"There were times when they said, again on such-and-such a floor there is a 'stiff' (prison slang for a dead body — MIHR). At least five times this was definitely the case, but that's only what we heard on our floor, maybe there was more elsewhere... One time we were in the yard for walks and the colony staff were talking among themselves: 'Take so-and-so from such-and-such a floor, go pick up the "stiff" and carry it away.' On the floors you could also hear them talk among themselves, saying that there was 'stiff' some place or other."*

Another Ukrainian soldier<sup>23</sup> was held captive at Correctional Colony No. 1 of the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service in Tula Region. He witnessed the death of a prisoner: *"At one point, they took a man out to the exercise yard and beat him for half a day, everyone was beating him there. And in the evening, he felt ill, he asked for a tablet, they gave him a Validol pill. At night, we received a wake-up call, and he felt ill again. Then the ambulance arrived. He was on the second floor. When the guard shift changed in the morning, I heard from them that they couldn't revive him and he died from cardiac arrest. They beat him so badly that he didn't survive."*

This same witness recounts another case at Correctional Colony No. 1 in Tula Region: *"One night, when we were already used to being woken up, a man who suffered a stroke, who was in our cell, couldn't stand up. He just lay there and looked at us. The guard said: 'Why is one lying down?' We explained that something happened to him and he needs a doctor because he's not responding. They came in, looked, said the doctor would only come in the morning, although we knew that there were doctors on call there*

*even at night. But they didn't call anyone. That was the first wake-up call that night. During the second call, they didn't stop at our cell anymore, and instead went to other cells. In the morning, we started to lift that man, but he was no longer responding. A new shift arrived, composed of locals. They called a nurse and she injected him with something. Then the ambulance took the man away, we never saw him again."*

#### **MIHR has knowledge of a death case post-captivity.**

A civilian, returned during an official exchange, passed away a few months following his release. His family reported that he had been incarcerated in Correctional Colony No. 1 in Tula Region and was reticent to discuss his experiences.

A former prisoner of war<sup>24</sup> talks about the man's death: *"I heard how the body was dragged out of the cell by the legs. We all heard it. But we don't know anything about who it could have been. And the cause of death."*

Witnesses say that after this, some higher-up ("official in charge of the prison") came to the cells to learn about the circumstances. *"Then the regime in the cells was relaxed for some time. They even allowed us to sit on the beds for an hour during the day. I remember, this was in December 2022. But it didn't make things any easier for us anymore,"* says the former captive.

He and others recall that some-times after beatings, unconscious people were carried out of the cells: *"He was almost fainting from hunger, he was almost translucent. People in plain clothes entered the cell, called out his surname. From each cell, they picked one person. We asked where they were taking them. They answered: 'To be executed'. Another added, 'If all goes well, you'll be shot in a week too'."*

Per interviews with former prisoners of war conducted by MIHR, in early April 2022, during the so-called reception process at Pretrial Detention Facility No. 1 of the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service in Kursk Region, two Ukrainian prisoners of war perished.

## 06

# Testimonies of the families of deceased prisoners of war

MIHR has interviewed and documented testimonies from relatives of Ukrainian soldiers who died in Russian captivity, revealing several systemic issues. Primarily, relatives point out the inefficacy of the ICRC's operations in Russia, the fact that Russia stores the bodies of deceased Ukrainian prisoners of war without complying with proper body storage protocols, often omitting to document the cause of the prisoner's death, and failing to relay such information to the ICRC, the relatives of the deceased, or the Ukrainian state.

### **NOTIFICATION OF DEATH**

Notifications provided to the families frequently omit the cause of death. None of the families interviewed by MIHR had been informed of any health deterioration of their relative while in Russian captivity. Conversely, released prisoners of war attest that deceased Ukrainian soldiers in captivity were subjected to physical abuse and torture. This leads to the plausible conclusion that such deaths of prisoners may occur abruptly due to beatings, torture, or a lack of medical care.

22. Witness No. 11

23. Witness No. 12

24. Witness No. 13



The widow of the deceased prisoner of war, Serhiy, disclosed that she was notified of her husband's captivity by the military unit on the very day she was informed of his death in captivity. Consequently, confirmation of a soldier's captivity does not ensure their survival.

### ROLE OF THE ICRC

Testimonies from Ukrainian soldiers released during exchanges illuminate the harsh reality that prisoners are maintained in inhumane conditions, often deprived of medical care, particularly following torture.

The bodies of the deceased are not promptly repatriated, leaving families in the dark regarding the fate of their loved ones.

The sister<sup>25</sup> of one of the deceased prisoners shares her experiences regarding the ICRC's work: *"They say we know about everyone, we control everything. But how, if Sviatoslav has been gone for almost half a year? He has been dead for five months. Are they not aware at all? There was information that the Red Cross visited that particular pretrial detention center in the month when he disappeared. Apparently, some emergency happened there, and they went to check something, and after that, the treatment of prisoners there supposedly improved."*

A military musician<sup>26</sup>, who managed to escape from Mariupol and—unlike other members of the military orchestra—did not end up surrounded and captured, shares: *"I spoke with Geneva, and they said that if they confirm a person, it means that they are in good condition, alive, and everything is fine with them."*

From the testimonies received, it can be inferred that **confirmation from the ICRC does not ensure the survival of a prisoner of war. This situation arises from the fact that the ICRC is not granted free and confidential access to detention sites, as per its mandate. Instead, the ICRC is informed about cases of captivity by the Russian military, not through its independent monitoring of detention facilities.**

### CAUSES OF DEATH

Sviatoslav served in the military orchestra of the 36th Brigade, with these musicians still being held by Russia. The 22-year-old was present at the Ilyich Iron and Steel Works. As the 36th Marine Brigade attempted to escape encirclement, some were killed or injured under fire, some managed to return to Azovstal, and others were captured. In the early summer of 2022, Sviatoslav's parents received official confirmation from the ICRC of their son's captivity in Russia. However, Russian authorities restrict prisoners of war from contacting the outside world, leaving Sviatoslav's family unaware of his precise whereabouts for a year. On April 14, 2023, his parents first discovered that Sviatoslav was detained in Pretrial Detention Facility No. 2 of the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service in Ivanovo Region, a piece of information obtained not from Russian authorities but from a released prisoner of war in a chat group for families of the 36th Brigade. On April 20, 2023, they were informed that their son's body had been returned during an exchange and that he had died in captivity.

*"They said there was an exchange of bodies and listed among them were documents of our son. They sent me*

*photos for identification. I recognized my son by some features, but I didn't look closely because it was very difficult to watch,"* says the father.

Prior to this, Sviatoslav's parents had received three letters from him in captivity, two in August and one in September 2022, in which he assured that he was fine: *"I am young, strong, healthy, I will survive. Sooner or later, I will return. Take care of yourselves, say hello to everyone. Love you all, pray for you."* In the last letter, he wrote: *"Say hello to everyone who knows me."*

Such letters, standard in nature, often reach families following the ICRC's inquiry into a specific detention site. Testimonies from witnesses and victims of torture and other inhumane treatments reveal that these letters are censored and frequently dictated. It is impossible for anyone to disclose the realities of what occurs within the walls of these detention facilities.

**One of the released Ukrainian soldiers told MIHR about how letters were written by prisoners** at Correctional Colony No. 1 of the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service in Tula Region. The letters that prisoners were offered to write home were mocked by the guards. **They were forbidden from mentioning their location and condition.** They were allowed to write in general terms that everything was fine. *"Then these letters were collected, they sat and read them, laughed. Meanwhile, we stood in the cells. Heads down, we couldn't move,"* recalls the former prisoner. None of those letters ever reached Ukraine.

*"There was no date on the letters, nothing. It's unknown when he wrote them,"* say the parents of Sviatoslav, who died in captivity.

Sviatoslav's mother learned from one of the released Ukrainian soldiers that **on the 15th of every month, all prisoners were beaten.** This witness also recounts hearing Sviatoslav being interrogated in a nearby room: *"He said where he was from, that he was an artist, a musician. They told him to sing, so he began to sing, he had a beautiful voice."*

Sviatoslav's parents, who are also gathering testimonies about their son, say: *"His guys recognized him by his voice when they went for walks, doing morning exercises, or just like that. He sang very beautifully. The boy who was exchanged recalls that his last song he heard was 'Lost Paradise' by the Russian band 'Aria'. Probably, they forced him to sing those songs because they would have beaten him up for Ukrainian songs."*

A fellow soldier released from captivity mentioned that Sviatoslav suffered from high blood pressure during the summer and was hospitalized. By October, he was reportedly seen during exercises, with indications that he received proper care. Another released prisoner confirmed Sviatoslav's health issues over the summer — high blood pressure. He also disclosed that prisoners were subjected to beatings with electric shockers on their heads. This particular individual was left with only four teeth, having lost the others to severe pain from the beatings and electrical shocks.

Serhiy, another prisoner of war, was captured at the Ilyich Iron and Steel Works in Mariupol. At the end of May 2022, his wife was officially informed by the ICRC of

25. Witness No. 14

26. Witness No. 15



her husband's captivity, stating that he was detained on Russian Federation territory. In August 2022, she received a letter from her husband stating he was well and looking forward to their reunion. However, on April 20, 2023, she received a call from the Kyiv morgue, instructing her to come for identification. She was informed of her husband's death in captivity at Correctional Colony No. 5 of the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service in Ivanovo Region, **within a hospital ward, with the cause of death remaining unspecified.** Before this, on April 10, the mother of a released prisoner informed her that her son had seen Serhiy. Each morning, all prisoners were made to perform squats in the yard. Serhiy fell ill during this exercise, and guards carried him back to his cell, after which he was never seen again.

Dmytro, a Ukrainian soldier detained at Volnovakha Correctional Colony No. 120, also perished in captivity. Dmytro's sister conveyed to MIHR that **the family received not the entire body but merely a few bones. Among these was a fragment of the skull, within which an examination identified a bullet hole and traces of gunpowder.** The findings from the examination provide reasonable grounds to believe that Dmytro might have succumbed to a gunshot wound to the head, or alternatively, that Russian representatives fired at his already deceased body, constituting an act of desecration prohibited by the standards of International Humanitarian Law.

In January 2024, MIHR became aware of another Ukrainian soldier who died while in captivity in the Russian Federation. This individual was confined at Pretrial Detention Facility No. 2 of the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service in Smolensk Region. His captivity lasted for 19 months, culminating in death in November 2023. **The cause of death was**

**ascertained through two autopsies, conducted in Russia and Ukraine, determining tuberculosis as the cause.** At the time of writing, the outcomes of the examination and the inquiry into whether the conditions of captivity and the absence of medical care for the prisoner contributed to the disease have yet to be disclosed. Establishing or disproving the direct link between the conditions of detention and the death is pivotal to determining whether the demise was abrupt or a consequence of infringing International Humanitarian Law concerning the treatment of prisoners of war.

#### IMPROPER STORAGE OF THE BODY

Ukrainian law enforcement suggests that **Russians delay the repatriation of bodies to obscure the cause of death.** For example, prisoner Sviatoslav, previously mentioned, died in Russian captivity on November 14, 2022, but his body was not returned to Ukraine until April 9, 2023. *"Our authorities said that they (Russians — MIHR) keep the bodies in such conditions that make identification difficult. Our son died around November 14, according to the information provided by the Russian side. Some documents were found on him, including the original of his passport, but the cause of death was not recorded — only the date,"* Sviatoslav's parents recount.

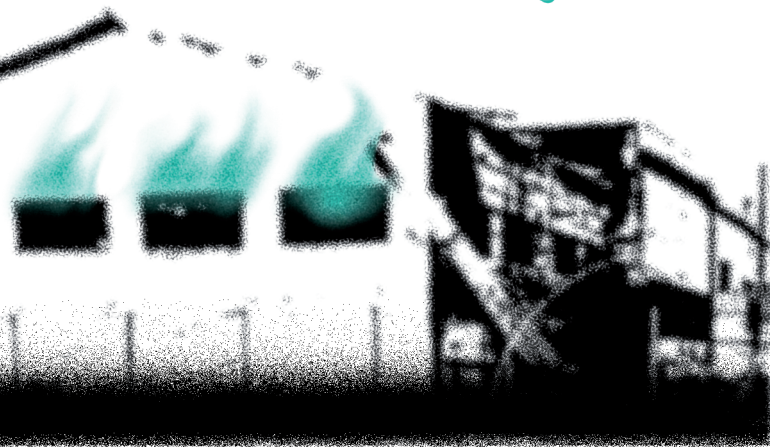
Regarding the cause of death in captivity of another soldier, Serhiy, his wife says: *"The documents state: Serhiy Oleksandrovyich, year of birth, died in the hospital in Ivanovo. That's all. There's no cause. Our authorities couldn't determine anything because the body had been there for seven months, and the certificate stated that it was impossible to determine the cause of death due to the decompositional changes in the corpse."*

## 07

# Olenivka: mass murder of prisoners of war

The explosion at Volnovakha Correctional Colony No. 120 represents another incident in the killing of Ukrainian prisoners of war. Approximately 2,500 Ukrainian soldiers were detained in this colony from May 16 to December 2022, with their numbers fluctuating over time. The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation and the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation maintained control over the colony, as representatives from these entities were consistently present and implicated in numerous breaches of international human rights and humanitarian law.

MIHR fact-finders compiled testimonies from soldiers who survived and were repatriated to Ukraine during prisoner exchanges. Based on these accounts, we documented a variety of rights violations experienced by the soldiers while in captivity in Russia. Witnesses and victims described the so-called reception process, where prisoners are forced through a 'gauntlet' of colony guards who assault them. Moreover, prisoners endure deplorable conditions, lacking access to basic human necessities, and receive insufficient food and water. In barracks intended for 110-120 individuals, occupancy exceeded 300. During interrogations at the colony, nearly all prisoners faced beatings and torture, with subsequent denial of medical care.





From July 26 to July 28, 2022, 193 Ukrainian prisoners of war were transferred from the barracks to a hangar within the colony's industrial zone. On the night of July 28 to July 29, 2022, around 11:00 PM, two significant explosions occurred — preliminary data suggest near the hangar's entrance and on its southern side. **The blasts instantly killed at least 47 prisoners of war, with 30 sustaining minor injuries and over 120 severely wounded.**

**Among the deceased were individuals who died instantly from the explosion and others who succumbed to extensive injuries en route to the hospital or due to inadequate medical care within the colony.** Surviving wounded prisoners experienced complications affecting both their physical and mental health.

One of the witnesses<sup>27</sup>, a medic, recounts what happened immediately after the explosion: *"I see overturned beds. Most were scattered by the blast wave. I feel something like engine oil under my feet, probably a spill resulting from the explosion. Near the hydraulic press, I climbed over the beds up and then down. The oil was mixed with blood. Closer to the entrance, I see torn bodies. Many scattered bodies. The guys died instantly. One of the bodies was still burning like a torch. I saw sparks coming out of a switchboard. And all around a lot of smoke, fire. We attempted to drag the wounded closer to the main entrance of the colony. There was nobody there. We shouted — no response. I ran into the booth (probably the checkpoint — MIHR), started pressing all the buttons. Suddenly, someone with an assault rifle ran out and started shooting. The only prisoner shot at that night was me. He missed."*

**Following the explosion, the injured awaited medical assistance for six hours before being transported to Donetsk hospitals, bleeding throughout. Five individuals died while the colony administration compiled a list of those to be evacuated for hospital treatment.**

The Russian authorities failed to provide immediate medical assistance to the wounded following the attack, exacerbating the casualty toll. In the aftermath of the explosion, the surviving and mobile Ukrainian prisoners of war emerged from the hangar onto the street, attempting to aid the gravely wounded. Lacking medical bandages, first aid supplies, and bandages, they had no means to administer medical assistance. In place of tourniquets, they resorted to using clothing to stem bleeding.

A witness, a military medic present at the colony during the explosion, reported that ambulances arrived at the colony's perimeter 30 minutes post-explosion but were denied entry. The prisoners of war attempted to transfer one of the injured, using a sleeping bag to drag him beneath the fence, only for the ambulance personnel to later return him. The injured prisoner was still alive, yet the ambulance staff declared him beyond saving. When inquired if others needed to be handed over, they responded: "NO." The prisoners requested a needle from the colony guards for decompression procedures on those with chest injuries but were denied.

An interviewee with MIHR recounted that the colony guards neglected to assist the injured prisoners of war, barred medical personnel from attending to them, and did not endeavor to extinguish the hangar fire. Approximately two hours after the explosion, guards tossed several packages

of bandaging materials into the industrial zone. Roughly an hour later, doctors among the Ukrainian prisoners were allowed to attend to the wounded, offering minimal medical aid, yet the absence of medications rendered it impossible to provide the necessary medical care.

A witness observed wounded individuals bleeding out on the asphalt, succumbing due to the lack of essential medical intervention for over six hours. All the wounded were in dire condition, with bodies lacerated by shrapnel, many suffering burns.

As dawn approached, colony guards entered the industrial zone, instructing the prisoners to categorize the wounded by injury severity and compile evacuation lists.

**Another victim interviewed by MIHR described the harrowing task of identifying deceased individuals and marking their surnames on their bodies with a marker, causing profound emotional distress.** The majority of the bodies remained within the colony premises. Burned remains were moved outside, covered, and left exposed to the elements. The Russians stored them not in coolers but in basements. According to the lists, prisoners of war with serious injuries were designated for hospital transfer to Donetsk.

In the early hours, trucks arrived on site. Around 5 a.m., about 80 critically injured prisoners of war were transported to Donetsk hospitals, not in ambulances but in trucks, which were utterly unsuitable for transporting people, especially those severely injured. Some soldiers succumbed to their injuries and the transport conditions en route to the hospital. In total, around a hundred wounded were dispatched to the hospital via trucks.

One of the released soldiers<sup>28</sup> spoke about this journey: *"I know that three of our guys died, maybe more. By the time we arrived, Osyp went silent because Osyp was lying next to me. And Veles as well — he had a very severe head injury, he was in shock, had a concussion, he was tossing and turning, couldn't lie still. He was screaming. And everyone was lying closely packed, like sardines. And it was a KAMAZ truck with metal sides. They threw us all in there. Veles started to thrash around, bumping into others. Osyp was lying next to him. Then he rolled over onto Osyp. Well, Osyp was screaming at first, but halfway there he went silent. As we were driving in, Veles' legs were on Osyp, and both of them were silent by then. Well, Osyp had his abdomen very badly torn open, he said: 'That's it for me.'"*

Days following the explosion, a cleanup detail composed of prisoners was tasked with clearing debris on the colony grounds. The subsequent night, vehicles were heard arriving, with activity in the hangar continuing, as per witness accounts.

MIHR conducted an investigation into the deaths of Ukrainian prisoners of war at Volnovakha Colony No. 120 and made a reconstruction of the Olenivka events<sup>29</sup>.

27. Witness No. 16

28. Witness No. 17

29. <https://mipl.org.ua/voyennyj-zlochyn-v-olenivci-rekonstrukciya-podij-masovogo-vbystvva-polonenyh-azovciv/>



# Forensic examination of bodies and legal assessment of the actions of the Russian Federation

## PROCEDURE FOR RETURNING THE BODY TO UKRAINE

**Upon the repatriation of a Ukrainian soldier's remains from captivity, criminal proceedings under Article 115 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine for intentional homicide are initiated, with the crime's classification later determined based on documented testimonies.**

Representatives of the authorities note that **nearly all returned bodies of prisoners are in a severely compromised** state, indicating non-compliance by Russia with body storage standards like temperature control.

An investigator, a forensic medical expert, and potentially a criminologist examine the body. Subsequently, the investigator requests a forensic examination, secures approval from the prosecutor, and forwards it to the court for examination scheduling. This process's length can be criticized, as maintaining the body in proper conditions until forensic examination approval is essential. It is during the forensic examination that DNA profiling and identification occur, the death cause is determined, the presence and nature of injuries, their severity, and their death relation are identified. The Bureau of Forensic Medical Examination, with the prosecutor's authorization, only releases the body to relatives after establishing the death cause and completing all necessary examinations.

## PROPER EXAMINATION OF THE BODY

A partner of MIHR, **the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), addressed our inquiry regarding the necessary body condition for determining death time and cause.** According to their response, the examination's detail level is contingent on the body's integrity and preservation state. A more intact and undamaged body yields more information about the death cause, whether it was violent, injury types, and their origins.

**Experts also outline scenarios in which determining the cause of death may prove impossible or challenging,** including scenarios such as:

- The absence of thorough internal and external examinations;
- The integrity and preservation state of the body/human remains.

For instance, a forensic expert might face challenges in ascertaining the cause of death if:

- ✗ The body has undergone decomposition;
- ✗ The body is incomplete (missing parts);
- ✗ The body is skeletonized and/or subjected to burning, etc. Under these conditions, while evidence of injuries might exist, it becomes challenging to directly link bodily injuries as the cause of death;
- ✗ In instances where natural causes are suspected (e.g., cardiac arrhythmias or epilepsy) but cannot be conclusively proven due to the absence of pathological signs.

Concurrently, MIHR has encountered instances where relatives have reported the body being in a condition adequate for experts to determine the cause of death, yet, for reasons not disclosed, such examinations were not conducted appropriately. This indicates that at the national level, the execution of body examinations does not uniformly adhere to legal stipulations.

## GRAVE VIOLATIONS OF IHL (WAR CRIMES)

Acts such as murder, torture, inhumane treatment, deliberately inflicting severe suffering, serious bodily harm, or endangering health, and withholding medical care, represent grave breaches of the Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War. According to Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions, severe breaches are deemed war crimes. Any illegal act or omission by the detaining authority leading to the death or posing a significant threat to the health of a prisoner of war under its care is strictly prohibited. This prohibition extends to any form of physical or psychological torture.

Furthermore, coercion of any kind against prisoners of war to extract information is forbidden. Prisoners of war who decline to provide answers must not be threatened, insulted, persecuted, or have their rights otherwise restricted. A breach of International Humanitarian Law also includes impeding the prisoners of war's ability to communicate with the external world.

Upon a prisoner of war's death, the detaining state is obligated to issue a death certificate detailing the deceased's information, along with the date, place, and cause of death.

In every instance of death or serious injury of a prisoner of war caused by guards or others, and in every case of death of unclear causes, the detaining state must promptly initiate an investigation. Russia fails to undertake this action.



# Recommendations



## TO THE STATE OF UKRAINE

- Adequately fulfill its responsibilities to conduct timely and thorough investigations at the national level into each death in captivity, ensuring proper forensic examinations to ascertain the cause of death.
- Maintain continuous communication with the relatives of those who died in captivity, sharing all details concerning the death of their kin.
- Systematically handle criminal cases related to specific detention sites of prisoners on Russian territory and in the temporarily occupied regions of Ukraine, assigning a dedicated team of investigators for each site.
- Aim to acquire lists of deceased Ukrainian military prisoners and all pertinent documents concerning their death causes.
- Guarantee the proper preservation of bodies in Ukraine and engage ICMP representatives in complex cases, especially for collecting post-mortem samples across various morgues for DNA analysis and aiding in body identification.
- Consolidate the insights from investigations to establish standards for probing deaths in captivity, enhancing the effectiveness of investigative techniques. These standards should align with Ukraine's obligations under IHL and International Human Rights Law.
- Continue searching for a protecting power or an alternative entity capable of impartially and effectively assuming the role of a protecting power to safeguard the interests of the conflict parties.



## TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

- Monitor data on potential detention sites and the treatment conditions of Ukrainian military prisoners in the Russian Federation and the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine to identify all locations where Russia detains Ukrainian military prisoners.
- Vigorously pursue access to all detention sites of Ukrainian military prisoners in Russia and arrange confidential meetings with them to impartially evaluate their health and detention conditions.
- Advocate for the return of detained medical staff and prisoners of war with chronic conditions, amputations, or those in critical health to areas controlled by Ukraine or to a third country.
- Probe into the death causes of prisoners of war in detention sites as soon as such cases are brought to the attention of the ICRC.



## TO OTHER STATES

- Persist in urging Russia to respect the rights of Ukrainian military prisoners, cease torture practices against them, and foremost, facilitate the transmission of notification cards regarding the capture of its military personnel to Ukraine. It is imperative to press Russia to allow prisoners of war communication with the outside world, which could not only enhance the psychological well-being of the prisoners but also potentially save more lives.
- Submit requests to the ICRC for visits to sites where Russia detains Ukrainian military prisoners by representatives of this organization.

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Media Initiative for Human Rights is a Ukrainian NGO established in September 2016. The goal of the organization is to combine awareness raising, analytics, and advocacy towards detecting and responding to human rights violations.

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