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A comparative analysis of soviet
and russian methods of torture

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AFU – Armed Forces of Ukraine

CC AUCP (b) – Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)

CC RF – Criminal Code of the Russian Federation

CEC – Central Executive Committee

Communist Party – Communist Party of the Soviet Union

CPC USSR – Council of People's Commissars of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

FSIN – the Russian acronym for Federal Penitentiary Service

GULAG – the Russian acronym for the Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps,
Labor Settlements, and Places of Imprisonment

ICC – International Criminal Court

IHL – international humanitarian law

KGB – the Russian acronym for the Committee for State Security

MGB – the Russian acronym for the Ministry of State Security

MIA USSR – Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Narkom – the Russian abbreviation for the People's Commissar

NKVD – the Russian acronym for the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs

RF – Russian Federation

SIZO – the Russian acronym for a pre-trial detention center

SSA SSU – the Sectoral State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine

UNKVD – the Russian acronym for the Directorate of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs

UkrSSR – Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Executive summary

This research delves into the main methods of torture used against Ukrainian military personnel held in Russian captivity at various detention facilities and during different stages of imprisonment after the onset of the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. Numerous instances of ill-treatment including food shortages and lack of medical care have been recorded in pre-trial detention centers and penal colonies across the Russian Federation. Systematic torture has also been recorded. Acts of torture are employed to extract information from prisoners of

war, to coerce false confessions to crimes they did not commit, and to force them to sign criminal charges in accordance with Russian law. Another key objective is to break the physical health and morale of the detainees, thereby preventing their potential return to the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine upon release. This research also provides a comparative analysis linking contemporary events to the repressive practices of the Soviet era. The testimonies presented make it clear: torture in Russia is a continuation of NKVD/KGB traditions.

Methodology

This research is based on the analysis of 40 documented testimonies of Ukrainian prisoners of war detailing the use of torture during interrogations and their detention in facilities across the Russian Federation. These testimonies are part of the database maintained by the Media Initiative for Human Rights. To draw historical parallels, the report also references examples from criminal case files and official documents from the Soviet era that describe torture practices used against political detainees in the Soviet Union. Drawing on this material, the authors

of the report sought to identify the key stages of Russian captivity and to describe the primary methods of torture and instances of inhumane treatment. The report also highlights historical parallels using specific case studies to demonstrate how the instruments of criminal justice were systematically employed to persecute segments of the Ukrainian population, both by the Soviet authorities during the Great Terror of 1937–1938 and by the Russian government between February 2022 and October 2024.

Sources

This research draws on in-depth interviews with Ukrainian prisoners of war who were held in detention facilities within the RF and released through official prisoner exchanges between Ukraine and the RF between October 2022 and October 2024. These facilities include, in particular, Federal Government Institution “Pre-trial Detention Center No. 1 of the Federal Penitentiary Service Directorate for the Kursk Region of the RF”, Federal Government Institution “Pre-Trial Detention Center No. 2 of the Federal Penitentiary Service Directorate for the Voronezh Region of the RF,” Federal Government Institution “Penal Colony No. 7 for the Vladimir Region of the RF, Federal Government

Institution “Penal Colony No. 1 of the Federal Penitentiary Service Directorate for the Tula Region of the RF”, Federal Government Institution “Pre-Trial Detention Center No. 2 of the Federal Penitentiary Service Directorate for the Rostov Region of the RF”, Federal Government Institution “Pre-Trial Detention Center No. 2 of the Federal Penitentiary Service Directorate for the Bryansk Region of the RF.” Documents from criminal case files held by the Sectoral State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine, as well as testimonies of former prisoners of war and members of the Soviet-era resistance movement, were also used in describing the communist period of the USSR.

INTRODUCTION

On 20 February 2014, the RF launched a premeditated armed aggression against Ukraine. It began with the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula, followed by the seizure of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The occupation was carried out using armed groups of the so-called “pro-Russian activists,” who were, in fact, representatives of the Russian intelligence services redeployed into Ukraine, as well as units of the regular Russian army.

In Crimea, the Ukrainian government did not deploy armed forces in contrast to parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions where the Armed Forces of Ukraine actively resisted. During the hostilities in eastern Ukraine, Ukrainian service members began to fall into enemy hands and were taken captive. There is no definitive data on the number of military personnel captured in 2014, as no centralized body was responsible for maintaining statistics at the time. In November 2014, the Prisoner Release Center of the Officer Corps NGO reported that 703 Ukrainians were held in captivity¹. Less than a year later, on 31 August 2015, Iryna Herashchenko, the President’s Commissioner for Conflict Resolution in Donbas, cited the Security Service of Ukraine (SSU) data indicating that 157 people were held captive². In May 2021, the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights Liudmyla Denisova stated that approximately 285 Ukrainian citizens sought to return to Ukrainian-controlled territory through prisoner exchanges³.

Between 2014 and 2021, Ukrainian law enforcement agencies, along with national and international non-governmental organizations, documented the conditions under which Ukrainian citizens were held in Russian captivity. Their numerous reports recorded instances of extrajudicial execution, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, torture, ill-treatment, and conflict-related sexual violence. The vast majority of torture cases took place during unlawful detention of people in detention facilities. The Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court also drew attention to this category of crimes⁴. It was noted

that torture and cruel treatment were routinely used to extract confessions from detainees or to force them into collaboration. Prisoners held in detention facilities on the occupied territories of Ukraine were beaten with fists, boots, rifle butts, hammers, sticks, and metal pipes – essentially with anything at hand. Prisoners were also tortured with electric shocks and air guns; their bodies were stabbed and cut. Another form of abuse involved excessive physical exercises⁵. In June 2018, the SSU reported that it had documented testimonies of torture from nearly 500 Ukrainian citizens – both former prisoners of war and civilian prisoners⁶. War crimes have also been recorded by international organizations, in particular the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Following the onset of the full-scale invasion, the occupation expanded into new areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as into the Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, Kyiv, Sumy, and Chernihiv regions. As a result, thousands of Ukrainian service members were taken into Russian captivity. Due to the classified nature of the issue, Ukraine does not disclose their exact number. However, over the course of three years of work, the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War has facilitated the return of 4,306 Ukrainian soldiers through 62 prisoner exchanges. An additional 469 people were rescued outside the exchange process⁷.

Since the outset of the full-scale war, both governmental and non-governmental entities have continued to document violations of the rights of prisoners of war, including instances of torture and execution⁸. The report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights of 1 October 2024, states that Russian authorities have subjected Ukrainian prisoners of war to widespread and systematic torture and severe ill-treatment at every stage of their captivity⁹. The torture of prisoners of war and civilians detained by the RF is also addressed in Amnesty International’s report¹⁰ dated 3 March 2025.

[1] Prisoner Release Center: militants hold 703 hostages. URL: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2014/11/16/7044412>

[2] Gerashchenko: 157 Ukrainians still remain in captivity of militants. URL: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2015/08/31/7079608>

[3] Maryana Chornievykh. Denisova: Ukraine’s list for the exchange of prisoners held in the occupied districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions includes 285 people, while the militants’ list contains 90.

URL: <https://hromadske.radio/news/2021/05/21/denisova-u-spysku-ukrainy-na-obmin-polonenyh-yak-ykh-utrymuyut-v-ordlo-285-liudey-u-spysku-boyovykh-90>

[4] International Criminal Court. The Office of the Prosecutor. Report on Preliminary Examination Activities (2017).

URL: https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/itemsDocuments/2017-PE-rep/2017-otp-rep-PE-UKRAINE_RUS.pdf

[5] https://www.helsinki.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2016-09-16_Brochure_Plen_ukr_210x297-1.pdf

[6] The SSU: nearly 500 former hostages released from the occupied districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions reported of being subjected to torture.

URL: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2018/06/12/7183122/>

[7] Svitlana Ostapa. How to Avoid Harm When Communicating with People Released from Captivity While Still Telling the Truth.

URL: <https://detector.media/infospace/article/239362/2025-03-25-yak-ne-nashkodyty-u-spilkuvanni-zi-zvilnenymy-z-polonu-ta-pri-tsomu-ne-zamovchuvaty-pravdu>

[8] A video shows men identified as Russian troops holding Ukrainian POWs. Then the killing begins

URL: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-pows-war-crimes-putin-zelenskyy-a2185297338af410fb5122448e62db76>

[9] Treatment of prisoners of war and Update on the human rights situation 1 June to 31 August 2024

URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ukraine/2024/Ukraine-OHCHR-40th-periodic-report.pdf>

[10] Deafening Silence: Enforced Disappearances, Incommunicado Detention, and Torture of Ukrainian Prisoners by Russia.

URL: <https://www.amnesty.org.ua/oglushlyva-tysha-nasylnycki-znyknennya-utrymannya-inkomunikado-ta-katuvannya-ukrayinskyh-polonenyh-rosiyeyu-nove-doslidzhennya-amnesty-international/>

TORTURE AND INHUMAN TREATMENT OF UKRAINIAN SERVICEMEN IN RUSSIAN CAPTIVITY



1.1. TESTIMONIES OF INHUMANITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PREDOMINANT METHODS OF TORTURE BASED ON TESTIMONIES

Between 2022 and 2024, the Media Initiative for Human Rights documented 139 testimonies of Ukrainian servicemen released from captivity.

During interviews, the majority of survivors reported being subjected to routine **physical violence and psychological abuse**. These included severe beatings, electric shocks, sexual violence, suffocation, prolonged stress positions, forced excessive exercise, sleep deprivation, mock executions, threats of violence, and humiliation. Such treatment occurred **throughout all stages of captivity**, including during detention and capture, transfer to detention facilities, and during processing and confinement in penal colonies and pre-trial detention centers.

1.1.1. Admission procedures

“ They lead you down a long corridor. They beat you, but not too hard compared to what would come later. They conduct an initial interrogation, then escort you out of the office and drive you with batons to the bathhouse. There, you are forced to strip completely. They push you into the shower, and then it’s time for ‘vaccination.’ You’re taken into a separate room. Four to six FSIN officers follow you in, carrying electric shock devices. They beat you saying: ‘Welcome to your native land.’”

— says **Witness 4** describing his admission at Kursk SIZO No. 1¹¹.

Admission procedures involve registration of documents, initial inspection, and interrogation of prisoners upon their arrival at a place of detention. All prisoners undergo these procedures. The admission procedures may last from a couple of hours to a full day, depending on the detention facility, the mood of the guards, the number of newly arrived prisoners, and the availability of staff. During registration of documents, initial interrogations, medical examinations, hygiene routines, collection of DNA samples, etc., prisoners of war are subjected to beatings.

“ My admission lasted about seven hours. At first, in the foyer, they forced us into a stress position – with arms and legs spread wide and facing the wall – and began to beat us. The beating went on for a long time – it’s hard to say how long exactly. I ended up doing the splits on the slippery floor. They lifted me up and continued to beat me. From the foyer, we were taken into different rooms, including for interrogations. In one of those rooms, I saw the deputy head of the colony and two staff members. While one of them interrogated, the others kept beating me,”

— recalls **Witness 1**, describing the admission procedures at Kursk SIZO No. 1¹².

The admission of **Witness 2**¹³ at Kursk SIZO No. 1 lasted about six hours:

“ I was beaten the entire time. I could no longer stand on my feet – I was crawling. The Russians continuously shouted at me, and I couldn’t understand what they wanted from me. Eventually, I realized they didn’t like my tattoos. Because of them, they took me to a separate room, where they beat me with an electric shocker in various parts of my body and threatened to cut off my genitals. By the time they brought me to the cell, I had lost consciousness.”

Prisoners of war with patriotic tattoos or markings indicating affiliation with specific military units such as the “Azov” Brigade were beaten more severely.

“ I have tattoos on my chest – a trident and an eagle. The eagle is Roman, on a Roman standard, not the one from the Third Reich with spread wings. But they don’t care: if it’s an eagle, it means ‘Nazi’. So after the beatings that everyone received, they hit my back with a stick about 30 times until it broke against my back,”¹⁴

— says **Witness 3** about his detention in Taganrog SIZO No. 2 in the Rostov region.

Since the early months of the full-scale invasion, Taganrog SIZO No. 2 has become the place of detention for a large number of Mariupol defenders – mainly marines and members of the Azov Regiment, who are known for their manifested capacity to resist Russian military aggression. The Russian Federation views these groups as a particular threat. Numerous testimonies of former prisoners describing admission procedures in Taganrog SIZO are available in the open sources.

[11] Witness 4. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[12] Witness 1. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[13] Witness 2. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[14] Witness 3. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

Member of the Azov Regiment recalls how all shifts of prison guards together with Russian special forces were assembled for the admission procedures. Armed with batons, sticks and electric shockers, they were beating prisoners as they ran down the corridor. Afterwards, the bodies of Ukrainian servicemen were dragged away on bedsheets. The witness himself had his fingers broken during the ordeal. Others, suffering from broken ribs and punctured lungs, died from pneumothorax¹⁵. Further detention conditions had severe consequences for his health: before captivity, he weighed 105 kilograms while upon release he weighed 58 kilograms.

Ukrainian service members have also reported that they had dogs set on them during the admission.

“ There were cases when they unleashed dogs on us, and some people subsequently died from the bites. There was no difference for them whether you were a civilian or a service member,”

— says **Witness 6**¹⁶
about Taganrog SIZO No. 2.

1.1.2. Interrogations

“ I was taken for interrogations quite often. I served in a specialized unit – a chemical defense company – and they were very curious about Ukrainian chemical laboratories, American weapons, and mercenaries. In their opinion, as a medic, I was supposed to know everything about it. When they realized that I would not say anything, the threats began. In a small room where the interrogation took place, there were five men and me, a woman. When I told them I didn’t know anything, one of them – either an operative or shift supervisor – began beating with me his feet and a baton,”

— says **Witness 7**, describing her detention in Taganrog SIZO No. 2¹⁷.

Interrogations refer to actions carried out by relevant Russian authorities initially to collect personal data and intelligence from prisoners of war, and potentially to initiate criminal prosecution. Former prisoners of war interviewed by the MIHR team reported that physical force was used against them not only to extract information, but also for reasons that, in their view, had no logical explanation. During interrogations, beatings were also used as a method of abuse and humiliation.

Interrogations are typically conducted in the presence of several officials, including a representative of Russia’s Investigative Committee or the Federal Security Service (FSB), operatives, prison guards, and members of special rapid response units and the National Guard Troops of the Russian Federation (Rosgvardiya).

Interrogations are conducted in stages, which are alternated in a deliberate pattern. They typically begin with a beating: for several hours, guards and special forces beat the prisoner – male or female – while demanding confessions to crimes they did not commit. Then follows an interview with an investigator. Sometimes the sequence is reversed: an interview precedes the beating. This cycle can last from several weeks to several months, until the investigators obtain the so-called “inculpatory evidence” or lose interest due to prisoner’s inability to provide the information they need. Guards demonstrate particular brutality toward members of the Mariupol garrison, officers, drivers, combat engineers, reconnaissance personnel, signal operators, artillerymen, and medics. Russian investigators are convinced that individuals in these roles possess valuable intelligence or can more easily be scapegoated for alleged crimes.

1.1.3. Daily inspections as a method of systematic coercion

“ While we were standing in the corridor during the daily inspection, they asked us about our military branches. Airborne troopers and marines were targeted the most. Then they realized that such information is insufficient, so they began asking about our military ranks. The higher the rank, the more blows you received. Later, they began inquiring about our positions. In my cell, most were drivers, but there were also a signal operator, a machine gunner, and me – a reconnaissance officer. The three of us got the worst of it,”

— says **Witness 8** about Borisoglebsk SIZO No. 2 in Voronezh region¹⁸.

Daily inspections serve both as searches for prohibited items and as a tool to exert additional pressure on prisoners of war. These inspections take place twice a day: one in the morning and one in the evening. During every inspection, prisoners are forced out of their cells into the corridor where they have to stand in a “swallow” position, i.e. facing the wall with their legs stretched as wide as possible. While some guards search the cells, others abuse prisoners.

[15] “Khokhols, we are tired of beating you up.” Azov fighter “Yuzhnyi” about two years of torture in Taganrog, prison humor, and his personal survival system.

URL: <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/azovec-yuzhnyi-pro-2-roki-tortur-u-taganrozi-feminitivi-gumor-i-vizhivannya-u-poloni-306820>

[16] Witness 6. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[17] Witness 7. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[18] Witness 8. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

“ The guys who were already in the cell warned me that inspections involved physical violence. I had an injured leg, so I thought if I warned the guards, they wouldn’t touch me,”

— says **Witness 6** to MIHR¹⁹
about Taganrog SIZO No. 2.

After doing so, however, he was beaten even more severely than anyone else, including targeted blows to the injured leg, which was ultimately broken.

“ I was prescribed bed rest. At the next inspection, I heard the familiar voice of a guard who had beaten us before. He asked what had happened. I told him that I had fallen and broken my leg. He started laughing. But I couldn’t tell the truth. If I had, they would have broken my other leg. Then the guard said, ‘Listen, if your story changes, you either won’t get out of here at all, or you’ll be carried out feet first.’ After that, during inspections the other guys in the cell were beaten harder because of me lying there,”

— **Witness 6** adds²⁰.

1.1.4. Time in the open air and visits to the shower room

“ The beating were especially brutal in the shower room. One day I was beaten by nine vertukhais [prison officers responsible for searching and escorting prisoners]. They grabbed a wooden board and began beating me across my buttocks. It was very painful. They were having fun. Then they discharged two stun guns on me simultaneously. I felt as if my heart had stopped,”

— says **Witness 1**²¹ about Kursk SIZO No.1²².

In some detention facilities, prisoners of war were taken outdoors, to have their hair cut, and to the shower room on a regular basis. In others, such activities were extremely rare, for instance once a month, or were absent altogether. Every such outing was typically accompanied by beatings. Prisoners were beaten with fists, boots, batons and sticks. They were baited with dogs during their time in the open air. They were tasered in the shower room.

In some detention facilities, visits to the shower room were particularly humiliating for female prisoners of war.

“ We were taken to the shower room completely naked together with men. Men were shaved bald. They wanted to shave us too, but we began crying. They took pity on us,” says **Witness 9** about Donetsk SIZO²³. “In summer they marched us naked with bags over our heads across the courtyard in Donetsk SIZO. We walked for about ten minutes. The guards laughed and filmed us on their phones,” she adds.

Another former female prisoner of war recalls that visits to the shower room were purely performative and looked more like abuse. Describing the conditions in Taganrog SIZO No. 2, she says,

“ We were allowed to wash twice in 35 days, and it could hardly be called washing. They herded us into the shower room and turned on the cold water for three minutes. Men stood around watching us.”²⁴

1.1.5. Deprivation of adequate medical care

“ Going to the medical unit in Borisoglebsk SIZO was just another excuse to be beaten. At first I asked to see a medical officer, but instead they beat me across my back so badly that I could not bend or straighten up: I walked hunched over. After that, I was beaten again by members of the special forces just because I went to see a doctor. I didn’t go to the medical unit for the rest of my time there. People were basically rotting away, but no one wanted to seek medical attention,”

— says **Witness 10**²⁵.

Witnesses interviewed by MIHR reported that prison guards routinely ignored their requests for medical assistance. In some cases, medical personnel refused to attend to prisoners or provided inadequate medical care. There were instances where any attempt to seek help from a medic resulted in violence from jailers. Testimonies also describe situations when medical staff deliberately caused physical harm to prisoners.

[19], [20] Witness 6. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[21] Witness 1. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[22] Witness 1. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[23] Witness 9. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[24] Witness 7. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[25] Witness 10. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.



“ In Kamensk-Shakhtynsky, access to medical care was extremely poor. Only one doctor actually provided assistance. His colleague, however, beat people even more brutally than the guards. He struck me hard in the face during my admission. There was a civilian among us, around 50 years old, who had undergone heart surgery and needed blood-thinning medication. When he asked for help, that doctor came and beat him severely with a baton. We could hear him saying, ‘Well, did I thin your blood for you?’ Another prisoner had broken ribs and an injured leg. In our cell we could hear how that doctor ‘medicated’ him with a baton, and then sarcastically added, ‘Why aren’t you thanking me for that?’ Then he went on beating him,”

— says **Witness11**²⁶.

Witness 12²⁷ describes medical assistance in Novozybkov SIZO No. 2 as follows:

“ They didn’t even have enough medication to help us, and they weren’t ashamed to admit it.”

Witness 3 describes the beatings that accompanied the so-called “medical assistance” at Taganrog SIZO No. 2:

“ My brother-in-arms had his rib broken, and I had my leg badly injured. It took two days before they took him for an X-ray. They claimed nothing was visible, accused him of faking his injury, and then beat him again as punishment.”²⁸

1.1.6. Extraction of confessions and criminal prosecution

“ When you arrive at Taganrog, they electrocute you, beat you like a piece of meat, and stomp on you. It doesn’t matter if you scream that you’ll sign anything or if you stay silent: they just keep beating you. You are forced to do 200 to 500 squats. Even when your muscles are inflamed so much that you can’t squat anymore, you still have to do it,”²⁹,

— the witness recalls his detention at Taganrog SIZO No. 2.

The Russian Federation accuses Ukrainian prisoners of war of committing major criminal offenses, disregarding the norms of international humanitarian law. Their lawful participation in hostilities is instead classified as “terrorist activities” or other common crimes. The RF initiates proceedings against Ukrainian prisoners of war under several Articles of the Russian Criminal Code, including Article 205.1 – assistance to terrorist activities; Article 205.2 – public calls for terrorist activities, public justification of terrorism or propaganda of terrorism; Article 205.3 – undergoing training for the purpose of carrying out terrorist activities; Article 205.4 – organization of a terrorist community and participation in it; Article 205.5 –

organization of a terrorist organization and participation in its activities. These practices are thoroughly detailed in the analytical report “Demolition of Ukrainian Identity as a Government Policy of the USSR and Russia” prepared by the Media Initiative for Human Rights³⁰.

If a prisoner resists and refuses to “confess to a crime”, they are subjected to electric shocks, the use of a tapik (TA-57 – a Soviet-era field telephone), suspension, and sexual violence. Guards at Taganrog SIZO No. 2 employed a particular method of extracting forced confessions known as the “motorcycle.” A former prisoner of war describes it as follows:

“ They handcuff you, pass a stick or a pipe behind your knees, and suspend you in a fetal position. Then they place the pipe across beams and begin spinning you around, asking, ‘Where are you heading – Donetsk or Kyiv?’ I answered ‘Donetsk,’ saying the roads are better there. Then they began shaking me as if we were hitting potholes. I was hanging like that for about an hour. It was very painful”³¹.



[26] Witness 11. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[27] Witness 12. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[28] Witness 3. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[29] “Khokhols, we are tired of beating you up.” Azov fighter “Yuzhnyi” about two years of torture in Taganrog, prison humor, and his personal survival system.

URL: <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/azovets-yuzhnyi-pro-2-roki-tortur-u-taganrozi-feminitivi-gumor-i-vizhivannya-u-poloni-306820/>

[30] V. Havrylov, A. Yakovlev, and M. Klymyk, Demolition of Ukrainian Identity as a Government Policy of the USSR and Russia: An analytical report. Kyiv: Media Initiative for Human Rights, 2025. 32 pages. URL: <http://resource.history.org.ua/item/0018611>

[31] Witness 3. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

Another former prisoner gives the following description of his interrogation at Taganrog SIZO No. 2:

“ My interview with investigator began with a beating. The investigator sat behind a desk while special forces officers kicked, punched, and tasered me without asking a single question. Their immediate goal was to intimidate me. After about 10 minutes, they ordered me to lie on my stomach and stretch my arms out to the sides. They gave approximately 100 electric shocks to my right arm. They burned a 'swastika' – the letters Z and V – on my back. I was left with two scars: one from the handcuffs and the other from the burned-in letters. After four or five such interrogations, I agreed to sign a confession. In total, there were 15 of them.”³²

“ While I was being held at Kamyshin SIZO No. 2, I was forced to confess to crimes committed in Mariupol. I had nothing to confess to. Then they took me to the FSB officers, pulled a bag over my head, threw me onto the floor, connected me to a field telephone, put a chair on top of me, and sent electric shocks through my body. They used this device on me four times. While doing so, the special forces officers said, 'Now we're going to drive the devil out of you!' They seemed to enjoy it,”

— recalls **Witness 14**.³³

According to many witnesses, the most unbearable torture was when electric shocks were applied to the genitals. To intensify the pain, the area where the wires were attached was soaked with water.

1.2. DEATHS IN DETENTION FACILITIES ACROSS THE RF

During the course of the Russian-Ukrainian war, there have been documented cases of deaths and killings of Ukrainian prisoners of war while in Russian captivity.

According to the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, between 24 February 2022 and the end of October 2024 Ukraine saw the return of bodies of **184 Ukrainians who died in captivity – 169 military service members and 15 civilians**³⁴. The actual number of those died may be significantly higher, as not all such cases have been documented.

The most common causes of death in Russian captivity include:



Torture, especially the use of electric shocks, which leads to disruptions of the cardiovascular system. There were instances when guards had to perform resuscitation measures for cardiac arrest in prisoners.



Ill-treatment. Prisoners are systematically subjected to physical violence, forced to perform exhausting exercises, and are deprived of food and sleep. These lead to cachexia, i.e. severe loss of weight, fatigue and weakness.



Lack of medical care. Prisoners are often deprived of necessary medical assistance even in critical situations, which leads to deaths.

[32] Witness 13. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[33] Witness 14. Based on the documentation of the Media Initiative for Human Rights.

[34] Maria Klymyk. The Coordination Headquarters: 184 Ukrainians have died in Russian captivity since the onset of the full-scale war. URL: <https://mipl.org.ua/184-ukrayincziv-pomerly-u-rosijskomu-poloni-vid-pochatku-velykoyi-vijny-koordshtab>

As testified by former prisoners of war, many captives contracted tuberculosis due to inadequate detention conditions in Vyazma SIZO No. 2, Smolensk region. Failure to provide timely medical assistance resulted in the death of at least five of them. Cases of tuberculosis have also been reported in other detention facilities.

The death certificate of Ivan Makarov, a serviceman from the 501st Separate Marine Battalion, listed the causes of death as heart failure and cachexia – a severe inanition. However, his body had clear signs of torture³⁵. “His muscles were torn out, there was an indentation in his skull, and his nose was injured,” recalled his sister Anastasia, who identified his body. What shocked her the most was the branding: a triangle with an eye inside, carved into Ivan’s chest above his heart.

The family of 22-year-old marine Sviatoslav Saltykov, a saxophonist in the military band of the 36th Separate Marine Brigade, learned of his death only six months later, when his body was returned to Ukraine³⁶. All that time, the International Committee of the Red Cross had been assuring parents that their son was alive and well. After his body was repatriated, the cause of Saltykov’s death was never officially determined. His parents are convinced that a healthy young man could not have died without a clear cause. During the identification process, Sviatoslav’s father observed signs of torture on his son’s body,

“The forensic experts said that the bodies of our servicemen are returned in such a condition that it is difficult to determine the cause of death. I saw that he had bleeding from his nose and blood on his body. It was obvious that his jaw was broken and his nose was crooked. I am not a forensic expert, but these were evident during the examination.”

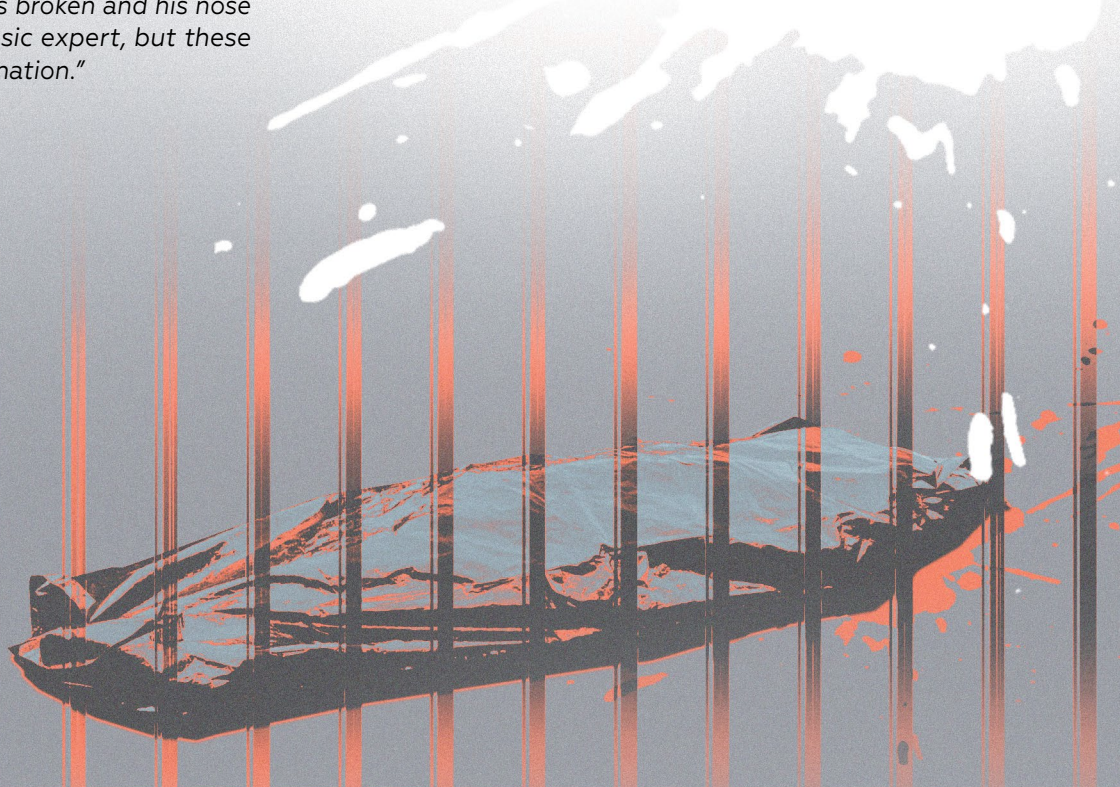
Russia deliberately takes all possible measures to prevent the establishment of the cause of death in captivity. In their forensic examination reports, Ukrainian experts often note:

“The cause of death could not be determined due to advanced decomposition of internal organs and body.”

The death of Oleksandr Ishchenko, a fighter of the 12th Azov Special Forces Brigade, in captivity has also been documented³⁷. He had serious heart problems, yet he was denied proper medical care. Witnesses report that Oleksandr constantly complained of chest pain, and on one occasion, he collapsed during a court hearing. In July 2024, it was confirmed that Ishchenko had died in captivity at Rostov-on-Don SIZO No. 5. A forensic examination conducted in Ukraine after the return of his body found that he had sustained broken ribs and trauma to his chest consistent with blunt force injuries. Additionally, he was severely emaciated having suffered a heart attack³⁸.

According to the Office of the Prosecutor General, since the onset of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and as of early April 2025,

at least 245 Ukrainian prisoners of war have been killed immediately after being captured³⁹.



[35] Maria Klymyk. The body of a marine from the 501st Battalion, tortured to death in captivity, has been returned from Russia.

URL: <https://mipl.org.ua/z-rosiyi-povernuly-tilo-morpiha-z-501-bataljonu-cholovika-zakatuvaly-v-poloni>

[36] Military duty, captivity, death: the tragic story of Sviatoslav Saltykov, a military band saxophonist of the 36th Separate Marine Brigade. Media Initiative for Human Rights.

URL: <https://mipl.org.ua/sluzhba-polon-zagybel-istoriya-svyatoslava-saltykova-saksofonista-vijskovogo-orkestru-36-okremoyi-brygady-morskoyi-pihoty>

[37] Tetiana Katrychenko, Nadiia Chuchvaha No Evidence Needed, Just Four Letters: Azov. Prisoners of War Sentenced in Rostov-on-Don.

URL: <https://mipl.org.ua/dokaziv-zhodnyh-ne-potribno-prosto-chotry-litery-azov-u-rostovi-zasudyly-vijskovopolonenyh>

[38] Maryna Kulnich. Russians Transfer Pavlo Zaporozhets, a Kherson Resident Convicted of the “International Terrorism”, to the Vladimir Central Prison.

URL: <https://mipl.org.ua/rosiyany-etapuvaly-u-vladimirskiy-central-hersoncyya-pavla-zaporozhczya-zasadzhenogo-za-mizhnarodnyj-teroryzm>

[39] A video shows men identified as Russian troops holding Ukrainian POWs. Then the killing begins.

URL: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-pows-war-crimes-putin-zelenskyy-a2185297338af410fb5122448e62db76>

TORTURE OF MEMBERS OF THE RESISTANCE TO THE SOVIET REGIME BY NKVD – MGB – KGB



2.1. OVERVIEW OF THE PREDOMINANT METHODS OF TORTURE BASED ON HISTORICAL DATA

To understand the preconditions for the use of torture by the Russian Federation, it is essential to examine the historical context. This approach helps reveal the continuity of repressive methods, which are deeply rooted in the Soviet system as evidenced by numerous documents.

Torture is not a new phenomenon in contemporary Russia. The similar practices were applied during the Soviet era, particularly in pre-trial detention centers (SIZOs) and forced labor camps. Soviet security service officers subjected detained members of the resistance movement and political opponents of the Soviet regime to torture during lengthy interrogations. These included beatings with crowbars and hammers, dousing with freezing water, simulated drowning, suffocation, confinement in coffins, ovens or punishment cells, forced sleep deprivation, electric shocks, attacks by trained dogs, and denial of medical assistance after torture to name a few.

There are also records of the use of body-stretching torture, where special tables or devices known as the “Saint Andrew’s Cross” were employed. Victims were restrained and stretched until their muscles were torn apart. Sometimes incisions into the muscles were made to speed up the process. Another method employed was breaking on the wheel, where a prisoner was tied to a horizontal wheel and left to die either from blood loss or a broken spine⁴⁰.

“Reder beat me with a chair leg and his fists; Reshetilov beat me with a stick and his fists. Two or three times they beat me so severely that I lost consciousness. Then they poured water on me, so after the interrogation I returned to my cell soaking wet.”

These lines are from the record of interrogation in the criminal case of the imprisoned Platynskyi, who was charged under a political article during the Great Terror of 1937-1938.

The investigators demanded that he confess to being a member of the Bund, a Jewish socialist organization, membership in which was criminalized at the time. When he refused, Mastruk, an investigator of the UNKVD for Vinnytsia region, realizing he would not secure the desired confession, began torturing Platynskyi with a thick rope. Another investigator – Tyshchenko – beat him with his fists, a press, and a ruler. Officers of the Directorate of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs who had been entering the room during the interrogation also took part in the torture. After 9 or 10 days of such treatment, Platynskyi was broken and ready to sign the confession drafted by the investigator⁴¹.

From the literature of the Ukrainian diaspora, we also learn about the methods of torture used by Soviet NKVD – KGB authorities during interrogations. These include:

- | | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| → forcing prisoners to excessively consume food, tobacco, or alcohol; | → crushing fingers and toes by slamming them in doors | → forcing prisoners to stand at rigid attention for several hours; | → locking semi-naked prisoners with bare feet in cold, stone-walled cells; |
| → feeding prisoners salted herring and depriving them of water; | → beating prisoners to the point of unconsciousness and resuming the beating when they regain consciousness; | → subjecting prisoners to hours-long interrogations with continuous bright lighting directed at their faces; | → confinement in a dark cell for several days; |
| → locking prisoners in solitary confinement cells for 2 to 10 days without adequate food: the daily ration consisted of only 200 grams of bread and 300 grams of water; | → beating prisoners with rubber or wooden whips, leather belts, and wire rods; | → confinement in coffin-like boxes, in which prisoners had no support for their feet; | → forcing prisoners to stand with their arms raised; |
| → continuous 48-hour interrogation; | → beating to the genitals, knocking out the teeth, and beating to the head, back, and chest; | → forcing prisoners to repeatedly stand up and sit down for extended periods; | → forcing prisoners to sit on the upturned leg of a chair; |
| | | | → forcing prisoners to stand for 72 hours under surveillance with arms stretched out to the sides ⁴² . |

[40] Oksana Konovets. 24 Methods of Torture That We Have Yet to Eliminate. URL: <https://zn.ua/ukr/SOCIUM/torturi-jak-indikator-rozvitku-suspilstva-.html>
[41] Oleksandr Loshytskyi. (Kyiv). “LABORATORY”. New Documents and Testimonies of the Mass Repressions of 1937-1938 in the Vinnytsia Region. Document No. 11 Extracts from the record of interrogation of D. N. Platynskyi dated 23 October 1939. SSA SSU. File 47806-FP, Vol. 1, pp. 83-85. Typewritten. Certified copy.
[42] Andrii Mykylyn. Concentration Camps in the Soviet Unions. URL: https://zustrich.org/old/lib/soviet_concentration_camps.htm

2.2. DEATHS DUE TO SYSTEMATIC TORTURE

The Soviet repressive system did not provide for the cessation of torture or any possibility of appeal. People who refused to confess to crimes they had not committed, who resisted self-incrimination or who were in poor health often died as a result of torture. Deaths due to torture in the NKVD prisons were a common occurrence during the Great Terror and the Second World War. Political prisoners were scalded with boiling water, had their body parts amputated, and endured other forms of physical violence that ultimately led to death⁴³.

Doctors working in the medical units where prisoners were brought after enduring hours of interrogations and torture described their condition as follows: they had multiple contusions, broken bones, and hemorrhaging across their bodies; most of them arrived unconscious. Some died just a few hours later. These facts are recorded in the documents kept in the Sectoral State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine⁴⁴.

2.3. THE CRIME OF TORTURE: A LEGACY TRACING BACK TO THE SOVIET TIMES

MIHR obtained an extract from the complaint of K.P. Borysov, prisoner of Unit No. 4 of the Svidsky Division of the Kargopol Camp of the NKVD USSR⁴⁵. It describes an interrogation and methods of torture used to coerce a false confession of membership in a persecuted group within the Ukrainian population (the resistance

movement), affiliation with which was criminalized by Soviet authorities on politically motivated grounds. The methods of interrogation employed during both pre-trial investigation and court proceedings closely resemble the practices currently used by Russian investigators against Ukrainian prisoners of war.

Interrogations and the application of criminal justice measures followed a common scenario:

- 1) a detainee was interrogated under torture;
- 2) during interrogation, a detainee was proposed to confess to being a member of a criminalized political group;
- 3) a detainee was proposed to fabricate the existence of accomplices;
- 4) the criminal proceedings were conducted under unequal conditions, with the prosecution enjoying advantages in presenting evidence and summoning the prosecution witnesses, while the defense was denied the opportunity to summon defense witnesses;
- 5) the court rendered a verdict based solely on the evidence presented by the prosecution.

The mass purges and arrests carried out by Soviet security services during the USSR era reached such a scale that security and law enforcement officers used to joke: "Give me a person, and I will find the case for them in my desk." During the mass political purges, the USSR's Ministry of Internal Affairs did not bother to verify whether a person had actually committed a crime. What mattered was solely a detainee's confession to the charges forced upon them⁴⁶.



"Give me a person, and I will find the case for them in my desk."

[43] Volodymyr Honskyi. Yet Another Stage of Genocide: How Prisoners Were Killed in Jails in 1941. URL: <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/articles/501cd9b88474c>

[44] Medical reports documenting signs of physical injuries from various patient records. SSA SSU, F. 5, Case 66927, Vol. 5. URL: <http://avr.org.ua/viewDoc/28862>

[45] Oleksandr Loshytskyi. (Kyiv). "LABORATORY". New Documents and Testimonies on the Mass Repressions of 1937-1938 in the Vinnytsia Region. Document No. 13 Extracts from the complaint of K.P. Borysov, prisoner of Unit No. 4 of the Svidsky Division of the Kargopol Camp of the NKVD USSR addressed to the Prosecutor General of the USSR, A.Y. Vyshinsky. SSA SSU. File 47806-FP, Vol. 1, pp. 87-89. Typewritten. Certified copy.

[46] Bezuglov, A (1957) Notes of a Lawyer. Moscow: Pravda Publishing House.

2.4. USE OF TORTURE AS A MEANS OF OBTAINING EVIDENCE

In 1937, the NKVD officially authorized the use of physical torture to extract evidence in criminal cases, particularly those targeting specific segments of the Ukrainian population. The fact that torture was institutionalized as a source of evidence is confirmed by a telegram from Joseph Stalin dated 10 January 1939. It was addressed to regional and territorial secretaries of the Communist Party, central committees of the national communist parties, people's commissars of internal affairs, and heads of the NKVD branches.

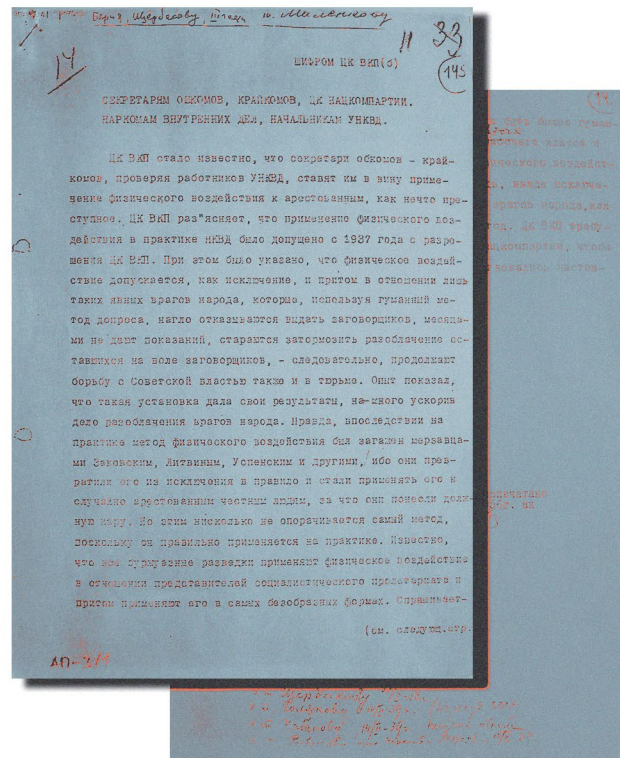
In this telegram, Stalin affirms the legitimacy of such methods (*the text of the telegram is included in the annexes*), and clarifies that the use of physical coercion in the NKVD's administrative practice had been permitted since at least 1937.

2.5. HANDLING OF CRIMINAL CASES

On 1 December 1934, the Secretary of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR Avel Yenukidze⁴⁷ signed the Decree of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR On Amendments to Applicable Criminal Procedure Codes of the Union Republics⁴⁸. It addressed the investigation and adjudication of cases involving terrorist organizations and acts of terrorism against the Soviet regime.

This decree legalized an expedited procedure for imposing punishment in cases involving terrorism, mandating that pre-trial investigations be completed within a maximum of ten days. The accused were handed the indictment just one day before their case was heard in court, which deprived them of the opportunity to prepare any meaningful defense. During the trial itself, no one evaluated the substantiation of the charges, as the proceedings were ordered to take place *ex parte*. The elimination of appellate review by higher courts removed any possibility of oversight or correction, while the denial of the accused's right to petition for clemency underscored the Soviet authorities' intent to swiftly and irreversibly punish those targeted for political persecution. In the majority of cases, the sentence imposed was execution.

Notably, Avel Yenukidze himself fell victim to the repressive machinery he had helped to build so robustly. As early as 1935, the Politburo of the CC AUCP (b) accused him of political shortsightedness and of allowing anti-state and espionage elements into the ranks of the CEC. Ultimately, in 1937, Yenukidze was executed following charges of treason, terrorist activity, and systematic espionage in favor of a foreign power. In effect, he fell prey to the very procedures he institutionalized in December 1934. The political nature and complete orchestration of his criminal prosecution by Soviet authorities is evidenced by the list of individuals to be tried by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR approved by Joseph Stalin. This list included an instruction to delay the sentencing of Avel Yenukidze⁴⁹. This means that his indictment was driven by political directives rather than legal necessity.



Stalin's telegram of 10 January 1939 ([see Annex 3](#)) reveals that interrogations could last for months. These interrogations followed a conveyor-belt system, i.e. continuous and sequential questioning by different investigators, each of whom started everything anew. Even in cases where not all investigators used physical coercion, the very nature of the conveyor-style interrogation constituted ill-treatment, to say the least.

The text of the telegram also indicates that the Soviet repressive machinery had significantly gained momentum since 1937. This led to a rapid increase in the number of its victims.

“The method of physical coercion must continue to be applied, as an exception, against public enemies who have not disarmed,”

— the telegram reads.

This suggests that the primary objective of criminal prosecution was not the collection of evidence for its subsequent impartial evaluation in court, but rather the persecution of those population groups that the Soviet authorities considered hostile.

[47] Avel Yenukidze was a Soviet party and political figure. He was member of the Central Control Commission of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) between 1924 and 1934, and member of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) between 1934 and 1935.

[48] Decree of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR On Amendments to Applicable Criminal Procedure Codes of the Union Republics dated 1 December 1934. URL: https://bessmertnybarak.ru/article/postanovlenie_1_dekabrya_1934

[49] List dated 10 July 1937 [Moscow-Center]. The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, fond 17, inventory 171, file 410, sheet 52. URL: <https://stalin.memo.ru/lists/list41/#image-51>

LEGAL ASSESSMENT OF CRIMES AGAINST PRISONERS OF WAR



3.1. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SOVIET-ERA TORTURE AND CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN PRACTICES

The international humanitarian law stipulates that parties to a conflict must protect the health and lives of prisoners of war and hold them in the specially designated camps with a less stringent regime than that of criminal detention facilities such as prisons, pre-trial detention centers, and penal colonies.

These camps are expected to operate shops for purchasing food and everyday necessities. Prisoners of war must not be confined in solitary cells akin to those in prisons. The detaining power is obligated to offer prisoners of war opportunities for physical exercises, recreational games, and time in the open air. In other words, prisoners of war are deprived of liberty, but not other universally recognized rights.

It is a universally recognized principle that every state must take effective legislative, administrative, judicial and other measures to prevent acts of torture in any territory under its jurisdiction. However, the RF openly and systematically violates its obligations under international conventions, effectively institutionalizing torture as an official administrative practice.

The predominant methods of torture used against prisoners of war can be classified according to their intensity, i.e. those that constitute **inhuman treatment** within the meaning of Article 3 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and those that constitute **torture** in the strict sense of the word. The prohibition of both torture and its less severe form – inhuman treatment – is absolute and permits no exceptions.

The distinction between torture and inhuman or degrading treatment lies primarily in the severity of the inflicted suffering and is largely conceptual. Torture involves the highest degree of intensity. In contrast, inhuman treatment or punishment entails a lower level of suffering than torture. While IHL does not differentiate between torture and inhuman treatment, this distinction is a feature of international human rights law, that is the human rights that apply during peacetime but remain in effect in time of war. The prohibition of tortures is a norm of jus cogens, that is, a peremptory norm of international law. Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁵⁰ stipulates that

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides similar definition⁵¹.

Under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment the term “torture” means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.

Article 2 of the Convention stipulates that each State Party shall take effective legislative, administrative, judicial or other measures to prevent acts of torture in any territory under its jurisdiction. No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture. An order from a superior officer or a public authority may not be invoked as a justification of torture. Article 4 of the Convention stipulates that each State Party shall ensure that all acts of torture are offences under its criminal law.

During armed conflict, acts of torture constitute war crimes, while widespread and systematic measures that compromise a person’s physical and psychological integrity constitute crimes against humanity.

Soviet torture practices, much like those in present-day Russia, concern violations of fundamental human rights. They are manifested by the infliction of severe physical or psychological suffering as part of a deliberate and systematic government policy. Soviet repressions were institutionalized through the NKVD/KGB and aimed at eliminating political opponents. Today, Russian acts of torture in the occupied territories of Ukraine and in detention facilities across the RF are similarly government-supported, as documented in numerous reports by the United Nations and human rights organizations.

[50] The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_015#Text

[51] The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_043#Text

Under the Rome Statute, the crime against humanity (Article 7 (1) (f))⁵² i.e. "torture" means the intentional infliction of severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, upon a person in the custody or under the control of the accused. Under the Elements of Crimes used by the ICC⁵³, a crime against humanity of torture must meet the following elements:

→ the perpetrator inflicted severe physical or mental pain or suffering upon one or more persons;

→ such person or persons were in the custody or under the control of the perpetrator;
→ such pain or suffering did not arise only from, and was not inherent in or incidental to, lawful sanctions;
→ the conduct was committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population
→ the perpetrator knew that the conduct was part of or intended the conduct to be part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population.

According to international practice, in order to be qualified as a crime against humanity, an act should be:

Widespread, i.e. has massive scale and geographic scope (for example, torture in the Soviet GULAGs or in Russian filtration facilities);

Systematic, i.e. follow an organized plan or a consistent pattern of conduct. In the Soviet context, these are substantiated by archival records. In the case of present-day Russia, these are evidenced by the systematic involvement of military and security forces in the torture of civilians.

The government policy may be either explicit (through orders or instructions) or implicit (through deliberate inaction). In the context of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, Russia's government policy can be evidenced by its non-investigation of crimes committed by Russian military personnel. This omission signals the Russian government's approval of such acts. The existence of such a policy can be inferred from consistent patterns of conduct by guards across different detention facilities, the recurrence of torture, the government's omission to act, and the absence of punishment for perpetrators, all of which foster a climate of impunity. Russia's tolerance for the torture of Ukrainian prisoners of war is further demonstrated by its failure to investigate abuses documented in the report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights⁵⁴ and numerous other UN reports. In sum, the RF is knowingly permitting and encouraging the torture of prisoners of war.

In the context of torture as a crime against humanity, it is important to recognize that perpetrators must be aware of the systematic nature of the attack, though they are not required to know every detail of the policy. This means that:

→ in order to prosecute, it is sufficient that the perpetrator be aware of the broader context, such as knowing that torture is part of a repressive policy enforced by the occupation authorities;
→ intent may manifest itself in deliberately aiding the system, even if the immediate motive was to extract information or to intimidate.

Consequently, the acts of torture inflicted by Russia on Ukrainian prisoners of war in the detention facilities meet the criteria of crimes against humanity. These include:

- 1) Repetition and recurrence, which must be interpreted as systematic in nature and linked to an overarching government policy (torture is used as a tool to coerce confessions or agreement with charges in a criminal investigation).
- 2) Violations of the Geneva Conventions (in the context of occupation).
- 3) Physical and intense psychological pressure going beyond physical violence.
- 4) The government implements this policy through its agents (criminal justice and law enforcement agencies) without any intention to put an end to these acts or at least to create the appearance of investigating what are clearly systematic and widespread practices of torture, evident to the entire international community.

Although Article 7 of the Rome Statute stipulates that crimes against humanity are committed against any civilian population, this provision should not be interpreted literally. In our opinion, the term "civilian population" should be understood more broadly to include any protected population, which is not engaged in hostilities, including prisoners of war. Otherwise, crimes against this protected category of people would fail to qualify as crimes against humanity.

[52] The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/995_588#Text

[53] Elements of Crimes URL: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/Publications/Elements-of-Crimes.pdf>

[54] Treatment of prisoners of war and Update on the human rights situation 1 June to 31 August 2024:

URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ukraine/2024/Ukraine-OHCHR-40th-periodic-report.pdf>

3.2. RUSSIA'S PREMEDITATED POLICY

In its report of 24 March 2023, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that torture and other forms of inhuman treatment were systematically inflicted on Ukrainian military personnel immediately after their capture in order to either extract military information or as a form of punishment. Former prisoners of war described being beaten with fists (including tactical gloves reinforced with hard plastic), rifle butts, shovels, batons and sticks; kicked; slashed with knives; electrocuted; suffocated; exposed to freezing temperatures without clothing and threatened with mutilation. They also reported being subjected to mock executions with firearms. As a result, some of the interviewed former prisoners of war lost their teeth or fingers, suffered broken ribs, fingers or noses, and endured long-lasting physical pain⁵⁵.

Authors of the report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights of October 1, 2024, noted that many of the documented instances of torture or ill-treatment involved different state entities, suggesting often significant levels of coordination between them. The routine nature of the abuse, occurring on a daily or weekly basis, also indicated knowledge of facility supervisors. *"Ukrainian POWs recounted that, in a few cases when external officials visited places of interment, the torture and ill-treatment temporarily ceased and conditions improved, showing that officials in charge of the facilities could stop the torture and ill-treatment when necessary,"* says the report⁵⁶.

In the course of fulfilling its mandate, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine has reported that the RF has been holding prisoners of war in inhuman conditions and consistently subjecting them to torture in violation of the international humanitarian law. The Russian authorities employ torture on a widespread and systematic basis^{57, 58}.

Being held incommunicado, prisoners of war are unable to speak out about the facts of torture, which hinders the protection of their rights. *"Russia's systematic incommunicado detention of Ukrainian prisoners of war and civilians is a deliberate policy aimed at dehumanizing them and silencing their voices, while leaving their families in agony, waiting for news of their loved ones,"* emphasized Agnès Callamard, Secretary General of Amnesty International⁵⁹. Torture takes place in complete isolation, where victims are entirely at the mercy of their captors. This is not a series of isolated incidents. It is a systematic policy that violates every principle of international law⁶⁰.

Russia's consistent government policy regarding the use of torture is also documented in an investigation by The Wall Street Journal. *"In the weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine, the head of St. Petersburg's prisons delivered a direct message to an elite unit of guards tasked with overseeing the influx of prisoners from the war: 'Be cruel, don't pity them.' Maj. Gen. Igor Potapenko had gathered his service's special forces at the regional headquarters to tell them about a new system that had been designed for captured Ukrainians⁶¹. Normal rules wouldn't apply, he told them. There would be no restrictions against violence. The body cameras that were mandatory elsewhere in Russia's prison system would be gone⁶².* These explicit instructions marked the beginning of nearly three years of relentless and brutal torture of Ukrainian prisoners of war.

Russia's premeditated policy testifies in favor of qualifying torture as a crime against humanity carried out as part of a broader policy of persecution. To determine the elements of such policy, reference must be made to the ICC Elements of Crimes⁶³, in particular those concerning crimes against humanity (Article 7 (1) (h) of the Rome Statute). They stipulate that the perpetrator severely deprives, contrary to international law, one or more persons of fundamental rights.

The perpetrator targets victims by reason of the identity of a group or collectivity or targets the group or collectivity as such. Such targeting is based on groups protected under international criminal law and shielded from persecution, such as political, national, ethnic or other grounds that are universally recognized as impermissible under international law.

The unlawful conduct is committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population. In order to qualify the perpetrator's acts as a crime against humanity, it must be established that the perpetrator knew that the conduct was part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population or intended the conduct to be part of a widespread or systematic attack targeting people protected under international humanitarian law.

The perpetrator must be aware of the systematic nature of the attack, though they are not required to know every detail of the policy. This means that in order to prosecute, it is sufficient that the perpetrator be aware of the broader context, such as knowing that torture is part of a repressive policy enforced by the occupation authorities. Torture manifests itself in deliberately aiding the system, even if the immediate motive was to extract information or to intimidate.

[55] Report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights of March 24, 2023. URL: <https://surl.li/kfknfw>

[56] Report by OHCHR: Russian authorities have subjected Ukrainian POWs to torture or other forms of ill-treatment throughout all stages of captivity.

URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ukraine/2024/Ukraine-OHCHR-40th-periodic-report.pdf>

[57] Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine dated 4 October 2023. Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, URL: <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/23-10-04%20OHCHR%2036th%20periodic%20report.pdf>

[58] Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine | Ukrainian 15 March 2024. Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine | English 15 March 2024

[59] Deafening Silence: Enforced Disappearances, Incommunicado Detention, and Torture of Ukrainian Prisoners by Russia. New research by Amnesty International. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org.ua/oglushlyva-tysha-naslynyczki-znyknennya-utrymannya-inkomunikado-ta-katuvannya-ukrayinskyh-polonenyh-rosiyeyu-nove-doslidzhennya-amnesty-international/>

[60] Thomas Grove. 'Be Cruel': Inside Russia's Torture System for Ukrainian POWs. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/russia-prisons-ukrainian-pow-torture-52df7908>

[61], [62] Ibid.

[63] Elements of Crimes. URL: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/Publications/Elements-of-Crimes.pdf>

FINDINGS

Based on the analysis of both historical and contemporary uses of torture as an instrument of government policy, a number of key findings can be drawn in support of qualifying these acts as crimes against humanity under Article 7(1)(f) and (h) of the ICC Rome Statute.

Historical experience shows that torture as a tool of coercion or evidence-gathering has been employed in numerous countries, notably in the Soviet Union, where it was officially institutionalized in the 1930s as part of the administrative policy. In the USSR, torture was an integral mechanism for persecuting political opponents. In contrast, the United States undertook efforts to reject the use of torture as a means of obtaining confessions. Notably, in 1936, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling in *Brown v. Mississippi*, declaring that confessions extracted under torture are unconstitutional and inadmissible in court. This decision marked a pivotal moment in the protection of human rights and the legal fight against inhuman treatment. While the U.S. legal system is not a source of evidence in assessing Russia's use of torture, this ruling exemplifies the broader development of human rights law.

Much later, within the framework of universal human rights protection, international mechanisms were introduced, notably the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, adopted on 10 December 1984. This document became

a cornerstone in the global fight against torture. The Russian Federation has assumed commitments under this Convention, but continues to display legal cynicism by failing to uphold its provisions, particularly in relation to Ukrainian prisoners of war.

Russia's use of torture is systemic in nature, evidenced by the impunity and repeated application of torture. Despite heightened attention from the United Nations to the widespread use of torture by Russian authorities, government institutions of the Russian Federation continue to enable and sustain this practice. Both the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation display striking continuity in their use of torture as a tool for extracting evidence favorable to the prosecution and for the physical and psychological destruction of identity. This pattern has been well documented in numerous international reports, including those of the United Nations, which provide detailed accounts of systematic violations of human rights.

Another critical aspect is the use of judicial proceedings to "legitimize" acts of torture. Courts in the Russian Federation consistently fail to respond to credible allegations of torture, thereby undermining the foundations of international human rights law. The analysis of both historical and contemporary practices makes it clear that torture remains an important instrument of the Russian government policy.

AN APPEAL

to the international human rights community for action and proposals for the release of prisoners of war from inhumane captivity

We propose that measures to counter torture be divided into **strategic**, which include the release of prisoners of war from inhumane captivity, and **tactical**, which focus on ending the suffering of prisoners and restoring the rights guaranteed to them under the Geneva Conventions. In our opinion, the following measures should be implemented:

- 1.** Draw the attention of the international community and the International Criminal Court to the crimes committed against Ukrainian prisoners of war, framing these acts within the context of crimes against humanity.
- 2.** Identify those responsible by applying the principles of criminal liability to military commanders and civilian officials, and engaging states that exercise universal jurisdiction and have the legal framework to prosecute *in absentia*.
- 3.** Advocate for the preparation of indictments and activate a broader international investigation infrastructure.
- 4.** Use the sanctions mechanisms.
- 5.** Document acts of torture.
- 6.** Support victims.
- 7.** Advocate for the International Committee of the Red Cross to gain access to all places of detention.
- 8.** Advocate for measures to restore prisoners of war their right to communicate with the outside world and to receive adequate medical care.
- 9.** Prepare and disseminate analytics and other materials, translated into as many languages as possible, across multiple countries as part of initiatives aimed at upholding the right to truth.
- 10.** Foster an understanding at the international level that the silence of the international community makes it complicit in international crimes.

ANNEXES

Annex 1 (a)

Medical records of prisoners from the period of the Great Terror (1937-1938), which testify to the use of torture during interrogations and deaths resulting from beatings and abuse of prisoners. Source: SSA SSU, F. 5, Case 66927, Vol. 5.

URL: <http://avr.org.ua/viewDoc/28862>

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СЛЕДСТВЕННЫЙ А-47

ИСТОРИЯ БОЛЕЗНИ.

ГОНЧАРУК Сафрон Иванович

поступил 24/1У 1938 года
умер 25/1У в 3 часа ночи

диагноз - мозговое кровоизлияние.

прибыл в больницу в безсознательном состоянии

больной высокого роста, правильного телосложения, удовлетворительного питания, больной резко-цианотичный, зрачки расширены, не реагирует на свет, полная прострация дыхания сопорозное, резко клокочущее, в легких разлитые хрипы, тоны сердца - глухие, едва уловимые, пульс аритмичный слабого наполнения, мочевой пузырь переполнен до пупка, рвоты несколько раз.

Сделана веносекция, выпущено 300 кубиков крови, холодно голову, грелки к ногам, кислород, - в 3 часа ночи наступила смерть при явлениях паралича дыхательного центра.

Врач - ГОЛЬДИНА (подпись)

Заверяет - Нач.медсанчасти: (КРИНИС)

Annex 1 (b)

А К Т 175 616

25 Апреля 198г. гор. Винница

Я Нач. Медсанчасти тюрьмы НАВД гор. Винницы МИЛЬШТЕЙН, в присутствии Оперуполномоченного тов. БАКУНЧИКА, Начальника Корпусами тов. ГРИНЧУКА, Ординатора больницы тов. ГОЛЬДИНОЙ, Деж. по тюрьме тов. ГНЕТНЕВА, Деж. Лежбома тов. АПТЕР, составили настоящий акт в том, что сего числа в больнице тюрьмы умер от мозгового кровоизлияния заключенный ГОНЧАРУК Сафрон Иванович, рождения 1936 года, уроженец села Рунькова Старо-Ушицкого р-на, жителя м. Ялтушкова Варского р-на Винницкой области, следственный по ст. ст. 54-4, 54-10 УК УССР

НАЧ МЕДСАНЧАСТИ ТЮРЬМЫ	<i>[Signature]</i>	/МИЛЬШТЕЙН/
ОПЕРУПОЛНОМОЧЕННЫЙ	<i>[Signature]</i>	/БАКУНЧИК/
НАЧАЛЬНИК КОРПУСАМИ	<i>[Signature]</i>	/ГРИНЧУК/
ВРАЧ ОРДИНАТОР	<i>[Signature]</i>	/ГОЛЬДИНА/
ДЕЖ. ПО ТЮРЬМЕ	<i>[Signature]</i>	/ГНЕТНЕВ/
ДЕЖ ЛЕЖБОМ	<i>[Signature]</i>	/АПТЕР/

Annex 2

Extracts from the complaint of K.P. Borysov, prisoner of Unit No. 4 of the Svidsky Division of the Kargopol Camp of the NKVD USSR addressed to the Prosecutor General of the USSR, A.Y. Vyshinsky Source: Oleksandr Loshytskyi. (Kyiv). "LABORATORY". New Documents and Testimonies of the Mass Repressions of 1937-1938 in the Vinnytsia Region. SSA SSU. File 47806-FP, Vol. 1, pp. 87-89. Typewritten. Certified copy.

Citation from the document:

[...] At 1 a.m. on 6 June 1938, I was summoned to Office No. 74 to see investigator Antonov, who held me there until 6 a.m. All that time I stood on my feet against the wall. Investigator Antonov demanded that I answer the three questions he had asked. I told him that the questions were absurd and that I would not answer them. Then Antonov began hitting me all over my body and eventually kicked me out of the office, handing me over to the guard to be taken to Cell No. 6. The cell elder, seeing that I had been beaten, advised me to sign whatever the investigator wrote in order to preserve my health, and added that if I refused, they would subject me to an inquisition.

The first inquisition began on 14 June 1938. It involved the so-called "parachute flight," meaning the chair was kicked out from under me. Each time I fell, I sustained spinal contusions and gastrointestinal distress accompanied by vomiting. I was subjected to such "flights" ten times [...].

Then I was once again summoned to office No. 74 to see Antonov, where I also encountered the head of the 4th Department, Shyrin. From office No. 74, I was taken to Shyrin's office, where another detainee with the Order of Lenin on his chest was brought in at the same time. Having seen the Order of Lenin, Shyrin tore it off the detainee and threw it into the corner where I stood. When I bent down to pick it up, the investigators immediately set upon me and began kicking me [...].

At 2 a.m., the guards, beating me as they went, dragged me once again into Antonov's office. Antonov immediately assaulted me. Shortly after, Shyrin arrived and, threatening me, demanded that I reveal the location of a non-existent weapons cache. I told him outright that this was a fabrication, and that I had no idea whatsoever of any weapons cache. I was then transferred to office No. 51, a poorly lit room with a couch and two chairs. There I was once again urged to speak and falsely incriminate myself. I firmly refused. Shyrin then made a phone call, after which investigators Gunia and Antonov entered the room. They both were drunk. They gagged me with a cap and bent me backward over a chair, with my back facing upward. Gunia twisted my arms behind my back and forced my head between my legs. At that moment, NKVD 4th Department Head Shyrin began beating me with a chair leg. I lost consciousness and awoke later in the corridor, soaked with water. Next to me laid what appeared to be a corpse. I later learned that he was comrade Asauliyak, a disabled commander of a partisan unit and a personal pensioner [...].

My cellmates were horrified when they saw me – my body covered in bruises. They counted 33 dark welts across my back and sides, each one the result of beatings with a chair leg [...].

Three days later, I was summoned again to Office No. 74 to see Antonov, and everything repeated itself: once again I was forced into a chair and tied to its back. Shyrin left the room, while the two investigators, Antonov and Gunia, visibly intoxicated and boasting that they had each consumed 100 grams of alcohol, began abusing me again. I lost consciousness. While Antonov passed out on the couch in that same Office No. 51, Gunia pulled a steel object from his pocket, forced my mouth open, and began breaking and chipping my teeth one by one. In this way, he broke three of my teeth, chipping one and knocking out two. When I lost consciousness, he poured water on me, untied me from the chair, and stood me up against the wall.

At that moment, Antonov woke up. Gunia took his place on the couch, and Antonov began to beat me using boxing techniques [...].

Five days later, I was summoned again to Office No. 74, where I found Antonov and Gunia. It was around 3 a.m. Investigator Gunia said, "It's time to go."

I was taken out into the yard, where a "black raven" (prisoner transport van) was waiting. They forced me inside, laying me face down on the floor with my hands bound up and eyes blindfolded, and drove off. The journey was long. Eventually, we stopped. They pulled me out of the van and led me somewhere, holding me by the arms. When they finally removed the blindfold, I saw that I was standing next to a freshly dug grave at the "Kalyche" cemetery. Right there, Antonov demanded that I answer three questions. I flatly refused. Antonov then told me that he would shoot me down. I said: "You can shoot me, but I will not lie or falsely accuse anyone." Investigator Gunia began clicking the revolver and pulled the trigger three times. After that, they blindfolded me again and led me back. The blindfold slipped off my eyes on the way. When we reached the van, the driver, whose surname was Shkrebot, began beating me with a door handle. They then returned me to the NKVD and demanded that I sign a statement pledging not to tell anyone what had happened [...].

On August 26, the Special Panel of the Vinnytsia Regional Court held a closed-door hearing inside the prison facility to consider the case against us. We were accused – as former Red Guards, partisans, and members of the command staff during the Civil War (1917-1921) – of belonging to a Ukrainian nationalist military insurgent organization. I and all other defendants did not plead guilty to the charges [...].

I and all other defendants stated that we had been tortured and beaten. We immediately requested the court to summon our cellmates as witnesses. However, the court only summoned witnesses from the side of the investigators, including two co-defendants, Kozis and Sukhansky [...]. Kozis blatantly lied. It should be noted that Kozis himself was a former deputy head of the Vinnytsia Regional Executive Committee. While still in custody, around 20 May 1938, he was instructed by the head of the 4th Department of the Vinnytsia Regional NKVD to produce a list for the recruitment of Red Guards and partisans, a task which Kozis was unable to fulfill. Upon returning to cell No. 14, he began seeking advice from fellow prisoners on how to carry out the task assigned to him by the department head. A Bundist named Dykler offered to help and began drafting the list of Red Partisans and Red Guards. The first version of the list included Jewish prisoners only. This list was rejected by the department head, who said Jews were unsuitable for framing as members of a Ukrainian nationalist party. He instructed that the list be composed of Ukrainians instead. The revised list included eight of us, and it was accepted. As a reward, Kozis was given cutlets, sausage, and a bun [...]. As a result, I was sentenced to death by the Special Panel of the Vinnytsia Regional Court. It was only after an appeal to the Supreme Court of the USSR that my death sentence was commuted to ten (10) years in a labor camp. The same fate befell other defendants in this case.

Annex 3

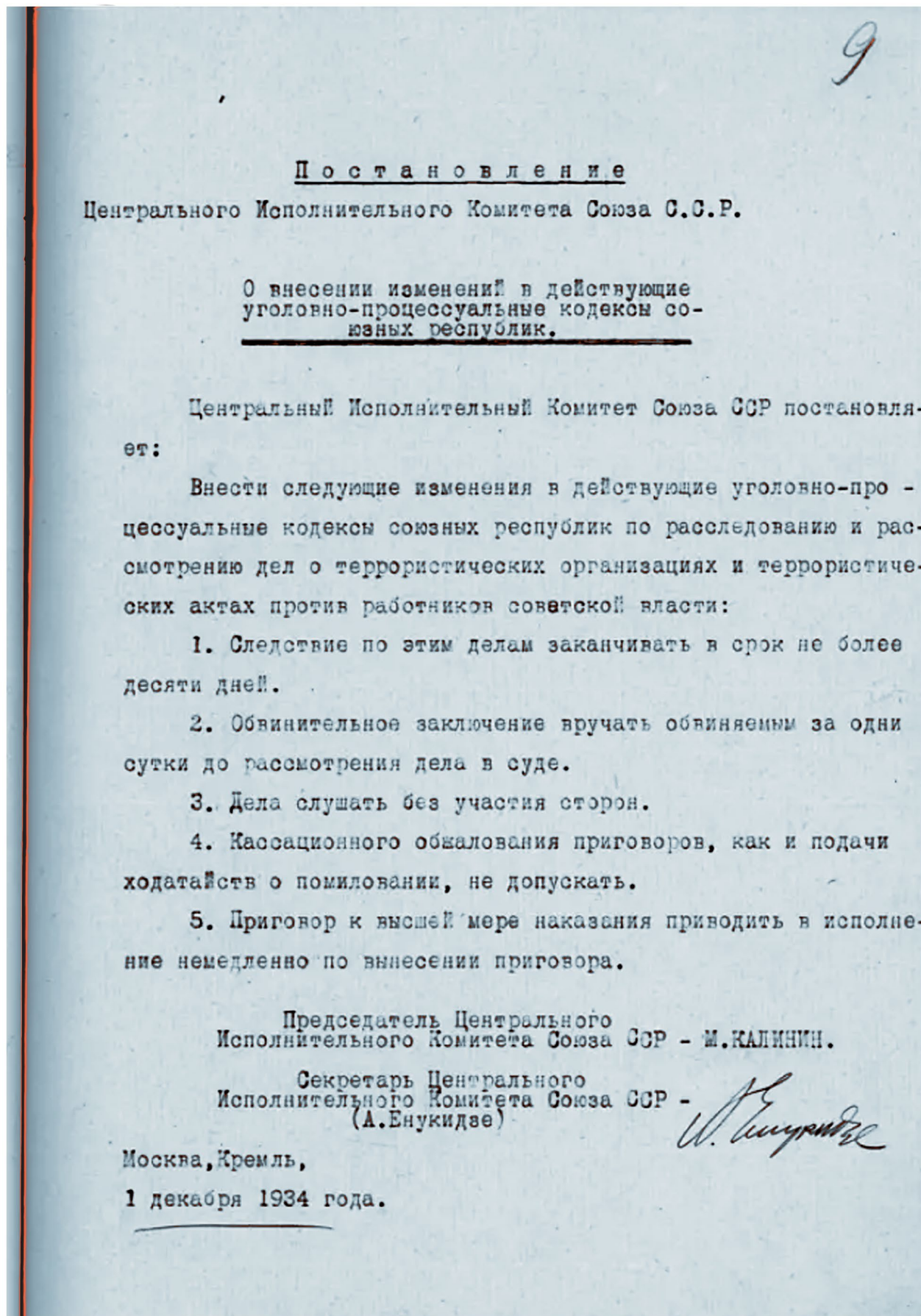
Telegram to secretaries of regional and territorial committees of the communist party, and to the heads of the NKVD directorates legitimizing the use of torture. Signed by Joseph Stalin on 10 January 1939.

BY CODE OF CC AUCP (b)

TO THE SECRETARIES OF REGIONAL COMMITTEES, TERRITORIAL COMMITTEES AND
CENTRAL COMMITTEES OF NATIONAL COMMUNIST PARTIES, PEOPLE'S COMMISSARS
OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS, AND HEADS OF NKVD DIRECTORATES

The Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party has learned that in checking up on employees of NKVD directorates, secretaries of regional and territorial party committees have blamed them for using physical coercion against people who have been arrested, as something criminal. The Central Committee clarifies that the use of physical coercion by the NKVD has been sanctioned since 1937 with the approval of the Central Committee. At the same time, it was stated that physical coercion may be used only as an exception and solely against blatant enemies of the people who, taking advantage of the humane method of interrogation, stubbornly refuse to give up their co-conspirators, refuse to confess for months, obstruct the exposure of conspirators who remain at large, and thereby continue their struggle against the Soviet power even from prison. Experience has shown that this approach has produced results by greatly speeding up the exposure of enemies of the people. It is true that subsequently the method of physical coercion was sullied by scoundrels such as Zakovsky, Litvin, Uspensky and others, because they turned it from an exception into a rule and employed it against honest people who had been accidentally arrested. For these abuses, they have been duly punished. But this does not invalidate the method itself, insofar as it is employed correctly in practice. It is well known that all bourgeois intelligence services use physical coercion against representatives of the socialist proletariat in its most disgraceful forms. The question is why should the socialist intelligence service be more humane toward inveterate agents of the bourgeoisie and implacable enemies of the working class and collective farmers. The Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party believes that the method of physical coercion must continue to be applied, as an exception, against public enemies who have not disarmed, as a completely correct and expedient method. The Central Committee demands that the secretaries of regional committees, territorial committees and central committees of the national communist parties act in accordance with this clarification when checking up on the NKVD employees.

SECRETARY OF THE CC AUCP (b) J. STALIN

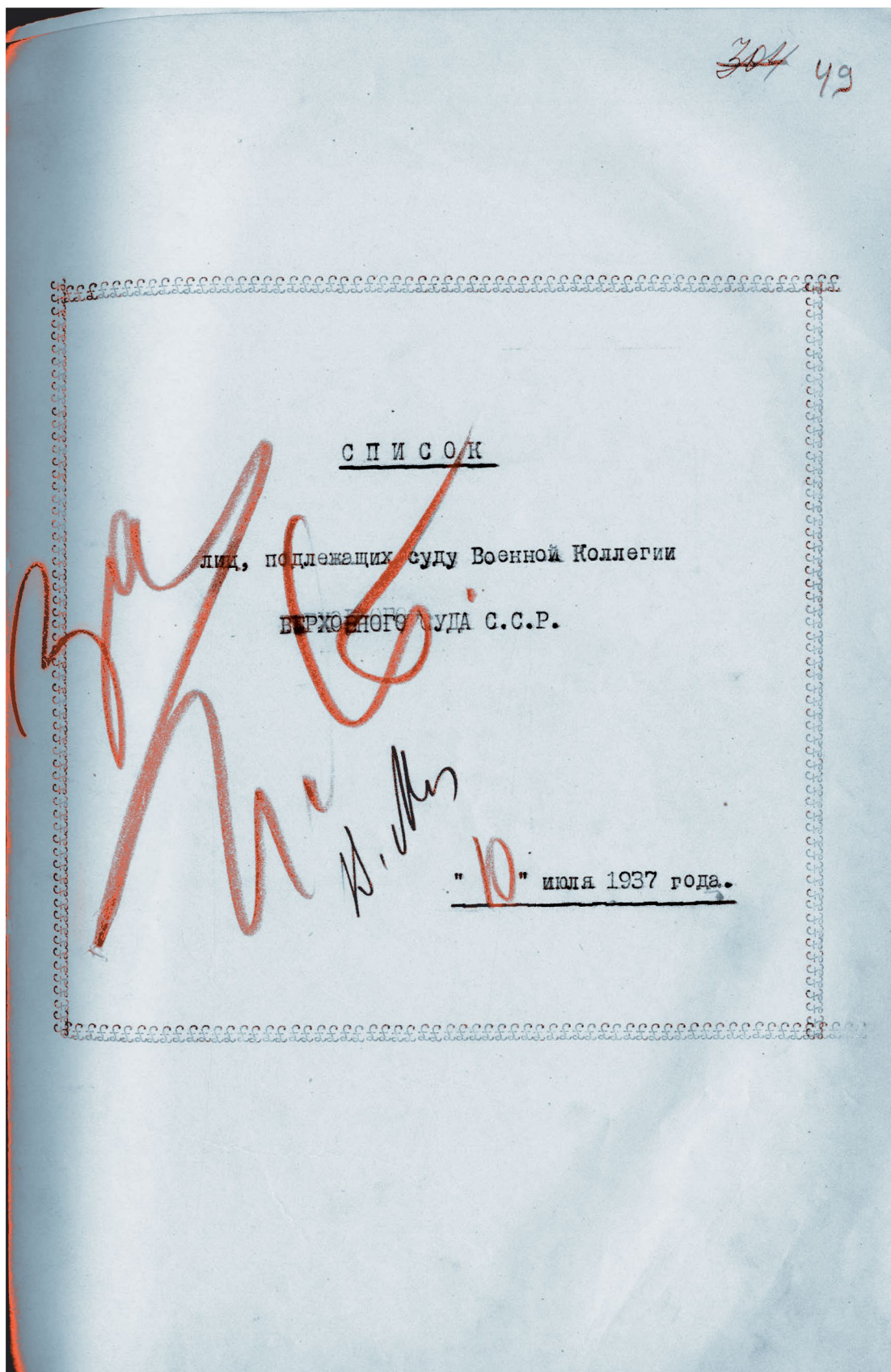


Annex 5

List of individuals to be tried by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR dated 10 July 1937 [Moscow-Center]. The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, fond 17, inventory 171, file 410, sheet 52.

Source: <https://stalin.memo.ru/lists/list41/#image-51>

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26. ГОРОДЕЦКИЙ Михаил Ефимович,
27. ГУДИЕВ Мусса Муссаевич,
28. ДАШЕВСКИЙ Иосиф Самойлович,
29. ДРОЗДОВ Вадим Федорович,
30. ДРОВНИС Николай Яковлевич,
31. ДРУГАНОВ Борис Федорович,
32. ДУБОВ Александр Григорьевич,
~~33. ДУБОВ Александр Григорьевич~~
34. ЖДАНОВ Александр Иванович,
35. ЖДАНОВ Николай Иванович,
36. ЖУКОВ Николай Макеевич,
37. ЖУКОВСКИЙ Иван Петрович,
38. ЗАЙЦИН Петр Михайлович,
39. ЗАЙОНЧИК Давид Моисеевич,
40. ЗАКУПНЕВ Захар Александрович,
41. ЗАКУРДАЕВ Петр Сергеевич,
42. ЗЕРКАЛОВ Василий Иванович,
43. ИЛЬФЕРОВИЧ Марк Борисович,
44. КАЛЬВАРСКИЙ Александр Самсонович,
45. КАСАТКИН Борис Владимирович,
46. КАШИН Иван Прокофьевич,
47. КИВКИЛЛО Павел Емельянович,
48. КОЛОСОВСКИЙ Валентин Викторович,
49. КОНОПЛЕВА Лидия Васильевна,
50. КРИСЬ Василий Яковлевич,
51. КРУМОВИЦ Рудольф Янович,
52. КУДРЕВАТОВ Сергей Кузьмич

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подпись

М. С. С. С. С.



The Media Initiative for Human Rights (MIHR) is a Ukrainian NGO that combines journalism and human rights advocacy to expose Russia's war crimes in Ukraine and respond to human rights violations related to Russian aggression. MIHR investigates war crimes, torture, enforced disappearances, and violations of civilian and military rights in the context of war. The organisation also documents other human rights violations, monitors war-related trials, prepares analyses and recommendations, and engages in national and international advocacy to achieve justice and ensure human rights and freedoms.

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