



Has Russia's Toxic Masculinity Fuelled War Crimes?

Maria Kol'tsova*

Abstract: Human rights defenders and activists report that Russian soldiers are raping large numbers of Ukrainian women and children. Russia's long history of toxic masculinity and culture of violence, championed by current president Vladimir Putin, may help explain these horrific crimes.

Shocking stories are emerging from Ukraine about the extreme violence and cruelty of Russian soldiers, including unprecedented numbers of rapes of Ukrainian women. While the Kremlin has repeatedly denied the accusations, Russian feminists and others are drawing parallels between these alleged war crimes and Russia's long history of extreme, misogynistic and brutal masculinity. Former Ukrainian human rights ombudsman Lyudmila Denisova has [said](#) that there have been more than 400 reports of rape of Ukrainian girls and women to date but admitted it was extremely difficult to give an accurate figure for rapes in wartime. Denisova has [lost](#) her position as she could not verify how she got information about these cases but there is no doubt that a large number of rapes have taken place in Ukraine. Attorney General Iryna Venediktova also [claimed](#) that 'a huge number of rapes' are now under investigation by Ukrainian police

* Maria Koltsova is a Russian journalist and communication specialist in the non-governmental sector. Her main interests include reporting on human rights issues, NGOs and post-Soviet studies. Maria is an alumna of the [Global Campus' CES](#), the Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation in the Caucasus.

and information about these crimes would be brought to the International Criminal Court as a collective case against the Russian Federation. A case in which a Russian soldier stands accused of raping a woman in front of her six-year old child was presented to a Ukrainian court even though the accused has not yet been found and [brought](#) before the court.

Russian historian and teacher Tamara Eidelman vehemently disagrees with those who say they cannot imagine Russian soldiers doing such terrible things. She finds it all too easy to believe the reports:

Firstly, because of the fact that we already have a huge amount of information about [domestic] violence in our country: police officers, guards, husbands beating their wives, parents bullying children, and the like.

Many Russian feminist activists are also unsurprised by the reports of rape by Russian troops in Ukraine—Russian propaganda and President Vladimir Putin's statements represent a far from respectful male attitude towards women. Feminist Anti-War Resistance member and writer Daria Serenko [wrote](#) in a recent Facebook post:

Observing the rhetoric of Russian television, the Russian government and ... of some Russians, I am sometimes startled by a strange recognition: what they say about the war and Ukraine is almost identical to what they often say about women who suffer domestic or sexual violence—'She is to blame, she asked for it, she started it ... I was only defending myself, she wanted to leave me, she cheated on me ... she did not obey me ... she's hysterical, crazy ...'.

History and culture of male violence

Russia has an ultra-masculine, militarised culture and hero-worshipping the army and soldiers, stretches back long before the war with Ukraine. Every year, Victory Day military parades take place in Red Square, children are forced to participate in military games and performances, while state television shows movies emphasising the bravery of Soviet troops in World War Two. Soldiers and war are seen as beyond criticism while pacifist ideals are never publicly supported. Moreover, there is no reflection or even discussion about crimes committed by Soviet soldiers. According to a [book](#) by Antony Beevor, *Berlin: The Downfall 1945*, Soviet soldiers raped 130,000 girls and women of all nationalities. All these years later, we do not know for sure what happened but no one in Russia talks about it for fear of ruining the myth of Soviet soldiers as liberators.

The aforementioned historian Tamara Eidelman agrees that Russia's cult of masculine power has a long history and broad societal implications:

Whoever is strong is seen as a real man. If you ask people on the street to name a Russian tsar they will say Peter the Great or Ivan the Terrible, because of their strength. This was facilitated by Stalinist propaganda but it has gone far beyond Stalin's time.

Violence and physical power supremacy in various forms is a major part of Russian popular culture, official public rhetoric and indeed, legislation. The most telling example is that Russia still does not have a law against domestic violence despite the fact that 65 per cent of women killed in Russia die at the hands of their husband or partner. In 2020, the Anna Center against Violence against Women stated that, in global terms, one in 10 women killed is Russian.

Propaganda simply brushes aside these horrifying statistics. A domestic violence bill has been introduced several times in parliament, but after heated debate it has never been passed. Beatings within the family were only decriminalised five years ago—even now it is not considered a criminal offence if a person beats someone in his household for the first time and does not inflict serious injuries. Women and children are far more likely to be victims of domestic violence than men so the law discriminates particularly harshly against them.

There is a lot of truth in the popular Russian saying which quotes police officers refusing to react to reports of violence until the situation is extremely dangerous or, indeed, until a crime has already taken place: 'We'll come when they kill you'. Another common saying is that domestic violence is 'family business'. Likewise, the state provides little protection for female survivors of domestic violence there are not enough shelters and no support programmes. Furthermore, the state identifies non-governmental organisations which oppose domestic violence as foreign agents and as such, makes it more difficult for them to operate.

Police violence as a norm

Police inaction over domestic violence is predictable, given that beatings and torture at the hands of police themselves are extremely common and it is almost impossible to bring the perpetrators to justice. Independent research says one in every 20 Russian adults has experienced police torture, demonstrating the impunity with which officers act.

There is ample evidence of police and other officials using violence and gender-based humiliation to suppress women. On 6 March 2022, a group of young girls aged 19-23 were arrested at an anti-war protest in Moscow. At the police station, officers beat the girls, calling them 'whores' and threatening, 'Now you will all be deprived of your virginity'. One of the girls managed to record the beatings and the policemen's words but the Investigative Committee which oversees the police in Moscow refused to examine this case and punish the officers involved. Director of the Ivanovo Center for Gender Studies Olga Shnyrova said these police beatings and the cases of rape in Ukraine had a common factor—dehumanisation of the victim. She explains the psychology thus:

This is the behaviour of the occupier in the occupied territory. The occupier convinces himself that in front of him is not just a woman—this is the mother, the wife of the enemy, she gives birth to more enemy soldiers. He says: 'Let her bear a better child from me'. In military conflicts, rape is hugely symbolic of takeover of a foreign land.

The president as the brutal epitome of a 'real man'

Many of these brutal and misogynistic attitudes are reflected and reinforced by the Russian president—Vladimir Putin. For 20 years, Putin's image-makers have created and sold Russia the image of a 'strong leader' and a 'real man' as an example for Russian boys and men. The president has been filmed riding a horse, skiing and discussing his healthy lifestyle.

Misogyny is evident in the president's rhetoric. Talking about Israeli ex-president and convicted rapist Moshe Katsav, Putin [said](#): 'Turned out to be a very powerful man! Ten women raped! I never expected that from him! We all envy him!'

Recently, the president said that those who 'can't live without so-called gender freedoms, oysters and foie gras mentally are not in Russia' demonstrating that respecting other people's choices and accepting difference, are not only not a priority for his government, but in direct conflict with what it promotes as mainstream culture.

Despite the personality cult around Putin, few people have benefited from his example. During his presidency, Russian men have not become healthy and financially secure, and their image as 'protectors', as the situation in Ukraine has shown, is easily combined with looting and violence.

In an interview with Russian media organisation Holod, psychologist Oleksandra Kvitko, who works with Ukrainian women impacted by sexual violence, [called](#) the accused Russian soldiers 'the same age as Putin's rule' and linked their brutality to the fact that they see Ukrainians as 'second-class citizens'. Prejudice is widespread amongst Russians, not only towards Ukrainians, but also towards LGBTI+ people, women and other discriminated-against groups.

Way forward

There is no possibility of real change in Russia unless this toxic masculinity is toppled and ideas of pacifism and non-violence, respect for others, tolerance and support for those in need promoted in its place. This is what we all need to aim for, in tandem with working on anti-war movements and supporting refugees. Russians must be allowed to research and openly discuss their military history as well as current situation. That would be an important step in stopping the war with Ukraine and preventing other such tragedies.