

## *After Rapes by Russian Soldiers, a Painful Quest for Justice*

By [Valerie Hopkins](#)

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Women who were attacked in a village near Kyiv yearn for justice. “I want them to be punished,” said one victim. But Ukrainian officials face daunting challenges in prosecuting such crimes.



Viktoriia and another neighbor were raped by Russian soldiers, who also killed two men, including her neighbor’s husband, and destroyed several homes. Credit...Nicole Tung for The New York Times

KYIV, Ukraine — Every day, Viktoriia has to walk past the house where she was raped by a Russian soldier the same age as her teenage son.

Russian troops arrived in her two-street village, near the Kyiv suburb of Borodianka, in early March. Soon afterward, she said, two of them raped her and a neighbor, killed two men, including her neighbor’s husband, and destroyed several homes.

“If you do not think about it all, you can live,” Viktoriia said in an interview in the village on a recent rainy day. “But it is certainly not forgotten.”

She is cooperating with prosecutors because she said she wants the perpetrators to feel the “lifelong pain” they left her with. “I want them to be punished,” she said.

Whether they ever will be is uncertain and may take years to determine. Rapes were among [the many atrocities Russian troops inflicted](#) on Ukrainian civilians during weeks of occupation in the Kyiv suburbs and elsewhere. But the challenges of prosecuting the assaults are daunting: Evidence is limited, and the victims are traumatized and sometimes reluctant to testify about their assault, if they even report it at all. The accused soldiers have mostly disappeared.

Ukrainian prosecutors say they are investigating thousands of war crimes, including execution-style killings and the indiscriminate bombing of civilians. Among them, “dozens” involve rapes, said Kateryna Duchenko, who oversees rape cases at the office of Ukraine’s general prosecutor — a low percentage that represents only a fraction of the suffering. The oldest victim was 82 years old, she said.



A destroyed military vehicle on the road leading into a small village near Borodianka, Ukraine.Credit...Nicole Tung for The New York Times

Still, the Ukrainian authorities are trying to seek justice for episodes of sexual violence. Last Thursday, in a different case from Viktoriya’s, prosecutors opened the first trial of rape as a war crime. At a closed hearing at a court in Kyiv, they charged a Russian soldier with breaking into a home in Bohdanivka, a village east of the capital, raping a woman in the presence of her child and

murdering her husband. The assault took place the day after Viktoriya and her neighbor say that they were raped in their village on the other side of Kyiv.

The soldier on trial, Mikhail Romanov, 32, was identified by investigators using social media, according to news media reports, and the survivor recognized him. He is being tried in absentia, but [the case will nevertheless send an important signal](#) to victims of wartime sexual violence, said Yulia Gorbunova, a senior researcher on Ukraine at Human Rights Watch.

“It shows that the government is serious about prosecuting rape cases,” she said.

Russian forces retreated from the areas surrounding Kyiv, including Viktoriya’s village, throughout March. In the weeks that followed, Ukrainian authorities were inundated with accounts of atrocities, according to [Lyudmyla Denisova](#), who was serving as the country’s top human rights advocate at the time. From April 1 until May 15, her office’s psychological help hotline received 1,500 calls from people seeking assistance to cope with sexual crimes, torture and abuse, said Oleksandra Kvitko, who manages the hotline.

“A mother called to report that her 9-month-old had been raped with a candle,” Ms. Kvitko said. “They tied the mother up and forced her to watch.” The mother had called saying that she wanted to take her child and jump out of the window. Ms. Kvitko said it was her job to give the mother a reason to live.

The hotline has registered hundreds of calls about rape, but many of the victims were in a state of fragile mental health, Ms. Kvitko said, and were not ready to provide official testimony to the authorities.

Image

A digger used by Russian forces to make trenches, in a small village near Borodianka. A “V” is painted on the back window, a letter that has become a symbol of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Credit...Nicole Tung for The New York Times





To investigate rapes, prosecutors collect whatever physical evidence is available and take testimony from the victim. A medical examination can also serve as evidence, but when rapes occur on occupied territories, an exam is often not possible immediately, and if enough time passes, it may not produce traces of a violent sexual encounter.

In the absence of DNA matches, prosecutors try to rely on other forensic evidence — such as torn clothing, and evidence of cuts and bruises on the victim.

Even when it is possible to determine a perpetrator's identity, most of them are not in Ukrainian custody, as was the case with Mr. Romanov, the Russian soldier who was put on trial last week.

The Russian Ministry of Defense did not respond to requests for comment on Mr. Romanov's case. It has denied allegations that its soldiers commit [war crimes](#).

Viktoriya, 42, and several neighbors provided accounts of the night of the assault to The New York Times on condition that only their first names be used. Viktoriya asked that her village not be named because there are so few people in it that outsiders would be able to identify her, and she feared harassment.

On the night of March 8, Viktoriya said, there was a knock at her door. Three Russian soldiers came in, reeking of alcohol.

Image



Valentyna, 65, in her garden, where her son-in-law Oleksandr, who was 48, was temporarily buried after he was shot in the back of the head by a Russian soldier. Credit...Nicole Tung for The New York Times

They forced Viktoriya to accompany them to a neighboring house, where they had planned to take away another woman, but they decided she was “too chubby,” she said.

The drunken trio took her down the village road to a third house, where a neighbor named Valentyna lived with her daughter, Natasha, 43; Natasha’s husband, Oleksandr; and their 15-year-old son.

When Oleksandr opened the door, the soldiers asked for his wife. “I’m also Russian,” he protested, telling them that he had been born and raised in Crimea. Viktoriya watched as he pleaded with them to take him instead.

One of the soldiers shot him in his doorway, she said.

The soldiers marched Viktoriya and Natasha at gunpoint to the home the Russians were using as their headquarters. A soldier named Oleg took Natasha, Viktoriya said, and one named Danya took her. “When he was leading me there, I asked how old he was,” she said. “He said he was 19 years old.”

“I told him my son was 19,” she said. Oleg, the commander who assaulted Natasha, was 21.

Viktoriya said that she had asked Danya if he had a girlfriend. He replied that he did, that she was 17, and that he had never had sex with her.

“He was so cruel, he treated me not as a woman, as a mother, but as a prostitute,” Viktoriya said. “He raped me, and in front of my eyes, they killed Oleksandr so cruelly. I hated them so much. I wish they would die along with Putin.”

Image



The front room of Valentyna's home, where her son-in-law Oleksandr was shot by Russian soldiers who then took her daughter. Credit...Nicole Tung for The New York Times

In an interview in the entrance to the house where Oleksandr was killed, Valentyna said that her daughter had returned in the early morning hours, looking for her son. She wasn't able to say much.

“She was like a stone, she walled herself off,” Valentyna said.

The family buried Oleksandr in their backyard, near a birch sapling. Valentyna had bought one tree for each family member, expecting them to grow for years before any of them died.

Police investigators came to exhume the body a month later, and the women gave statements about what had happened to them that they hope will lead to a trial. Prosecutors confirmed that they were investigating the assaults as well as Oleksandr's murder. A neighbor, Viktor, confirmed to The Times that Viktoriya had come to his house that night and told him that she had been raped. He said she stayed until the Russians left — fearing the soldiers would search for her in her home.



Natasha's relatives convinced her to leave the village with her son. She is in temporary accommodation now in a small Austrian town where neither of them speak the language. She is in touch with a Ukrainian psychologist, a fellow refugee, with whom she speaks daily.

Her mother, Valentyna, lives alone now, except for her goats, chickens, and cats. The Russians killed her dog on March 19, 10 days before they retreated from the village. Despite the conservatism and stigma in Ukraine over rape, she encouraged Viktoriya and her own daughter to speak to a reporter about what had happened to them.

Image



The word “elderly” is painted on the wall of a house in the village. Credit...Nicole Tung for The New York Times

Viktoriya has remained in the village, living on the same road where she was held at gunpoint. Signs of the occupation are still present. Outside a home near the village entrance, someone had painted a stark white V, [a symbol of Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#). Nearby, another fence bore an ineptly painted “СССР,” the Cyrillic acronym for “USSR.”

But along the rest of the road, the signs are plaintive appeals for mercy from the Russian soldiers: “People live here.” “Children.” “Elderly.”

Viktoriya said that she didn't want to leave Ukraine without her husband, who, as a man of military age, cannot leave the country until the end of the war. It was difficult remaining in the village, she

said, because everyone knew what had happened to her. She believes that those who left during the war and returned have blamed the ones who stayed for the destruction.

“This war was supposed to reconcile the people, and they got worse,” she said. “This war broke everyone’s psyche.”

She has resumed smoking, which she said she had quit before the war. She is also taking sedatives. She hopes her tormentors will be punished. But no trial, she said, will be able to answer the questions she still asks:

“Why do they have such aggression against our people? Why did they come here, burn people out of their homes, and bring grief?”

Evelina Riabenko and Diana Poladova contributed reporting.

### **Russian Atrocities in Ukraine**

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