
**THE RUSSIAN WAR
CRIMES PROJECT :
GATHERING EVIDENCE**

JANUARY 2023

INTRODUCTION



“Everybody knows that for justice to be achieved, eyewitnesses are key to confronting denial by Putin and his enablers. The voices of the witnesses must be saved to confront crimes committed by Russians.”

Father Patrick DESBOIS

One year ago, after having said that he will never attack Ukraine, Putin sent his army to try and conquer Kyiv under the pretext of “denazification”. Since then, Ukrainian civilians have been tortured and killed, every day. Missiles and artillery have been fired at Ukrainian cities and villages, yet Putin continues to deny civilians are being targeted.

Since March 2022 Yahad – In Unum has been recording evidence – interviews, photographs, and videos – of systematic Russian war crimes and crimes against humanity across Ukraine. We documented proof of the bombing of residential or civilian buildings, killings, violence and torture towards Ukrainian civilians and the forced deportation of civilians to Russia by Russian soldiers.

WHY?

For the first time in a war, the attackers are not denying their attacks, but denying the committing of crimes and denying the identities of their victims.

That's the key challenge that Yahad wants to confront.

The crimes committed by Russian soldiers or units are pervasively denied by Putin, Lavrov, and by the President's spokesperson. Furthermore, the crimes are denied daily by Russian politicians, so-called experts and journalists in Russia and abroad.

Every time a crime is committed, Russia and its supporters follow a pattern of denial that closely resembles traditional genocide denial. First, the existence of the victims or the objects that were hit is denied. If that doesn't work, the propaganda pretends military personnel or objects were present at the scene. Lastly, the Russians pretend that the attack was unintentional, and that the real military target was somewhere nearby.

After the Kramatorsk train station attack in April 2022 during which 60 civilians were killed, the Russian government said that no civilian was present at the train station. We were able to find witnesses who confirmed that the station was full of civilians.

In Kremenchuk in June 2022 when a mall was hit and 21 civilians died, Lavrov said it was empty.

We were able to interview seven employees and customers working that day.

In Dnipro in January 2023, after having killed 46 civilians in their apartments, the Russian representatives explained this was a military base.

This false narrative is repeated after every civilian attack. The more pervasive the lies are, the more deeply embedded they become in public opinion. As people increasingly believe the lies, there is less of a systematic reaction necessary to curtail the propaganda.

But international media interest has slowly faded, with increased focus on the military campaigns in the East and the South. Most of the actual news report about tanks, the front, but nothing about the crimes currently being committed by the Russian troops.

However, the torture and killing of civilians has continued to be investigated and documented in places such as Kherson, Kharkiv, Kupiansk and Lyman, among others.

WHAT WE DO

Civilian victims have begun to appear as little more than numbers on a page. In the news, Yahad - In Unum decided to investigate the indiscriminate killing and torture of civilians, recording witness testimonies, and documenting facts, giving a voice to and fighting for justice for the suffering victims of this terrible ongoing war.

Meeting with tortured victims brings to light why the Russians carry out such violence against civilians and what their real objectives are. Through torture, the Russians have revealed their real intentions: to turn Ukrainian civilians into Russians.

Yahad - In Unum has been documenting these crimes since the very first days of the invasion.

OUR ACTION

Yahad - In Unum has recorded over 500 hours of interviews of Russian crimes from more than 60 locations in 13 different regions, based on the same methodology that has been applied over the past 15 years to investigate the Holocaust by bullets or contemporary genocide like the Yazidi genocide. The testimonies provide valuable details which can corroborate other pieces of evidence or, in certain cases, become the main piece of evidence which will be crucial for the prosecution of perpetrators.

The aim of our investigations is twofold:

1) to collect evidence of the crimes so that the perpetrators are held accountable, which is a key element in providing justice to the victims.

2) to dismantle Putin's propaganda: Russia, which calls its actions a "special military operation", has denied targeting civilians and committing war crimes.

It is crucial to methodically deconstruct the Kremlin's false narrative and provide evidence of the real motives and the extent and impact of their actions.

Yahad is currently investigating cases of torture of Ukrainian civilians in the jails of the occupied territories (Kherson and Crimea) to reveal the involvement of the FSB, which is trying to transform Ukrainian prisoners into Russians.

SUMMARY

According to the most recent UN and HRW reports , since Russia's February invasion, over 7,000 civilians have been killed and 11,000 have been wounded. It is estimated that the actual figures are likely considerably higher.

Approximately 6.5 million Ukrainians are internally displaced, and about 7 million have fled as refugees to European countries. About 2.8 million Ukrainians are in Russia and Belarus, in some cases against their will. Russian forces have killed, arbitrarily detained, tortured and forcibly disappeared civilians. They have also tortured Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war.

Since February, Russian forces have repeatedly carried out massive bombing and shelling operations of civilian areas. These attacks destroyed and severely damaged homes, businesses, schools, healthcare institutions, and other facilities. Many Ukrainians spent the Orthodox holiday season in bomb shelters and mourning the loss of loved ones. At year's end, Russian forces targeted Dnipro, Kherson, Kirovohrad, and Kyiv – with multiple strikes reported in Kharkiv, Odessa, Lviv, Zhytomyr, and the capital. By New Year's Eve all administrative regions were under air raid warnings and the attacks continued in January, threatening all remaining civilians in Kherson, Bakhmut and Soledar.

Russian forces' rockets and drone attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure disrupted access to electricity, heat, and in some cases, water services for millions of civilians throughout the country, ahead of and during the cold winter months.

Russian officials also subjected thousands of civilians fleeing hostilities to abusive "filtration," during which the officials collected extensive sensitive personal information. An unknown number of people were detained during the filtration process and are presumed to be illegally detained in Russian-controlled regions.

Yahad – In Unum has been documenting those crimes since the very first days of the invasion. The aim of our investigations is twofold: 1) to collect evidence of the crimes so that the perpetrators are held accountable, which is a key element in providing justice to the victims, and 2) to dismantle Putin’s propaganda: Russia, which calls its actions a “special military operation,” has denied targeting civilians and committing other war crimes. It is crucial to methodically deconstruct the Kremlin’s false narrative and provide evidence of the real motives, extent and impact of their actions.

In December 2022, Father Desbois and three other members of the investigative team went to newly liberated areas of the south of Ukraine. They had a chance to interview survivors of Russian imprisonment and torture, and to collect information about the exact locations of those crimes, as well as information about the perpetrators, their tactics, and their methods. They also had a chance to meet, for the second time in person, with leadership of the Presidential Office of Ukraine and to discuss further steps of our cooperation which includes gathering evidence of the Russian crimes and providing support to the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine before the European Human Rights Court.



YIU team: Father Patrick Desbois (center), Andrej Umansky (right) and Ruslan Kavatsiuk (second from the left) in front of the building of the Mykolaiv regional administration destroyed by the “Kalibr” rocket, December 17, 2022 @Yahad – In Unum

RESULTS



62 witnesses or victims of
bombing and shelling



14 witnesses or victims of
looting and stealing



45 witnesses or victims of
killing and violence



10 witnesses or victims of
forced deportation and/or
filtration



23 witnesses or survivors of
torture and being hostages



2 witnesses of
sexual violence

INVESTIGATIONS

GATHERING EVIDENCE OF THE CRIMES

Despite major difficulties due to the intensity of war operations in certain regions, power shortages throughout the country, significant displacements of entire populations and the fact that many survivors / eyewitnesses have limited access to the internet, we have been able to interview 170 survivors and eyewitnesses in ten months. This represents over 500 hours of interviews with direct witnesses and victims of Russian crimes, who are able to describe the crimes and the perpetrators.

The interviews conducted by YIU are based on the same methodology that has been applied over the past 15 years to investigate the Holocaust by bullets, contemporary genocides and war crimes, and which has resulted in over 8,000 interviews with eyewitnesses and survivors of those crimes. The interviews are focused on collecting forensic

evidence of the crimes: the exact location, the exact description of the perpetrators and their methods.

Most of the interviews took place online. The survivors and direct eyewitnesses came from nearly 60 locations in 13 regions. Their testimonies are a potent form of evidence of different types of crimes perpetrated by the Russians such as: the bombing of residential areas and the killing of the civilian population, hostage-holding and torture, looting, forced deportation and sexual violence. All of these qualify as crimes against humanity and war crimes according to the Rome Statute. The testimonies provide valuable details which can corroborate other pieces of evidence or, in certain cases, become the main piece of evidence which will be crucial for the prosecution of perpetrators.

INVESTIGATING DEPORTATIONS AND CRIMES OF TORTURE

A number of interviews have helped us identify and further investigate: (1) deportations to Russia: many survivors testified about filtration camps located in Russian territory, in which they had been interrogated and tortured until they had agreed to sign a false declaration of being a spy, and (2) acts of torture (often associated with deportations): their aim is to cut civilians' ties with Ukraine, make them deny their fidelity to their country and make them swear fidelity to Russia instead. After investigating the Russian crimes of torture, it appears that the main goal of the deportations and torture is to destroy the Ukrainian sense of nationhood. This has been

confirmed during our most recent on-the-ground visit to Odessa, Kherson and Mykolaïv, which gave us access to the structures of imprisonment and torture of Ukrainian civilians by the Russians. Four survivors of torture agreed to be filmed and interviewed at length in the cells in which they had been detained. It appears that the Russians established places of imprisonment and torture in every occupied city and village in order to break the Ukrainian identity and to force Ukrainians to collaborate with Russia.

DISMANTLING PUTIN'S PROPAGANDA

Putin's denial of the civilian identity of the victims led us also to investigate those sites where military-driven attacks on civilians were conducted and then denied by Putin's propaganda, claiming that the strikes only hit military targets. A team of three mediators was set up in order to search for witnesses after each attack. The witnesses are able to dismantle the Kremlin's false narrative about the crimes like the ones that were perpetrated at the railway station of Kramatorsk, in the supermarket of

Kremenchuk, in the city center of Vinnytsia, and in the city of Mariupol. While investigating those locations, a lot of effort was put into finding several survivors and eyewitnesses whose testimonies, cross-referenced with each other and with other pieces of evidence, will help us reconstruct the facts and methodically deconstruct and refute Putin's propaganda around the Russian army's operations in those and other locations.

WITNESS 130, KREMENCHUK, POLTAVA REGION



Kremenchuk, Amstor shopping mall after the attack. @Reuters

June 27. I remember everything although some time has passed since then. The day was very calm and quiet. It was a regular Monday, a very typical day as always. Just yesterday, I passed by the mall and I could not stop crying. If it weren't for the people who were in my shop, I would also have gotten out when the air raid siren went on. Sirens would go on every day. Many times during the day. They were on all the time. (...) When Amstor was hit, two customers were by the cashier. They were paying. I was standing behind the cashier, at the desk. I worked at a men's clothes shop called Town, it was next to Comfy which was the epicenter of the explosion. I have a receipt from 3:49pm, the hit was at 3:51pm, and at 3:54pm, I was calling my father, yelling that everything was burning. It was just a moment, a very powerful hit, with a very powerful explosion wave that threw me at the wall. There was a big desk and I crawled under it. It saved my life. There were yells around and I heard those two men. I was sitting under the desk and then, I did not hear them anymore, so I assumed they had left. (...) I did not know what to do. Metal was falling on my head. After some time, I started gradually climbing over the debris, and then I left through that hole. I could not walk out through the main entrance as everything was burning there, and falling apart. The hit was to the right and I was walking out on the left. I was walking through the place that the Russian propaganda claims to be a weapon depot. (...) I knew all the people who were killed there. I had been working there for 2 years, so I knew them. Most of those who died were employees. One woman is still missing. Only after 6 months will she be considered dead.

WITNESS 150, ZAPORIZHIA REGION



Zaporizhia after one of the attacks
@Al Jazeera

On September 24, at night, perhaps at 3 am, the apartment building where I lived was hit by a rocket. Three rockets hit the city, I believe. One of them hit the building directly (...), and another one hit the football stadium nearby, forming a huge crater. I woke up when the first rocket hit, not my building but it was somewhere nearby. I started to collect some belongings. My boyfriend ran to another apartment to get the cats. He was on the 3rd floor and I was on the 2nd floor when the rocket hit the building. (...) The woman from the neighboring apartment was killed. Her adopted child was first taken to the hospital and then, to a psychiatric hospital where he stayed for 3, maybe 4 days. Almost nothing was left from the apartment on the 3rd floor. It was completely destroyed as were so many other apartments.

WITNESS 165, KHARKIV REGION

When we were getting ready to leave the town, it was on June 24, five Russian soldiers in full uniform and bulletproof vests and guns came to our countryside house. They could not fit in the small house, so they took us out, to the yard. (...) I answered their questions just as I liked. They did not like it when I said that we were leaving from occupation and that I had never asked to be liberated. They checked my phone, there was nothing in it as I erased everything. My daughter did not erase everything, she had something about Putin and Ukraine. They said they did not like my family, that I was raising my daughter in the wrong way and that we had to get our stuff and follow them. (...) They gave us 10 minutes (...). My husband was not home (...) but he came back and we had time to get our stuff. They took all our IDs and keys. We were put in a vehicle, and we were taken somewhere. Shortly after, they put sacks on our heads, although we knew where we were being taken. It was a printing house. That's where the police and military administration were located. We were put in a cell with a bench on which we could sit and stand. There was no bathroom, they would not give us water. There were four of us: three of my family and a neighbor.

WITNESS 158, KYIV REGION



Russian posters on the walls of the abandoned base in Balakliia. One says: "We bring peace."
© Reuters

I was arrested on March 13 by two Russian soldiers while walking in the street. (...) I was then taken to a different building where I was asked questions to which I had to give expected answers. The interview was being recorded. They asked me questions about my name, profession, military service, my opinion about the war and the number of Russians I killed. They wanted me to say some absurd things like, for instance, that I was a Nazi or that I hated Russia. They wanted me to tell lies and if I was not answering as expected, they would beat me. The whole thing was filmed because they wanted to broadcast it on the internet as an interview with a Ukrainian prisoner of war. (...) They then transferred me somewhere else. I was in a cell, tied to a chair. My face was covered but I realized that there were three people in this room and that they had two dogs. They told me that they would ask questions and that I would either answer them well or it would hurt. The first questions were just about my name, profession and so on. But then, they started asking about the positions of the Ukrainian army. They threatened to cut off my fingers. They used pliers to pinch them when I was not giving them the answers they wanted. (...) They also said they would cut one of my arteries and that they would either let me die if I didn't give them the right answers or they would call a doctor if I decided to speak. When they started burning my thumbs and when they kicked me in the neck, I lost consciousness. When I woke up, they started everything all over again. I was terrified.

COOPERATION WITH THE UKRAINIAN AUTHORITIES AND LEGAL BODIES

UKRAINE

Since last June, Yahad - In Unum has been working with the Ukrainian authorities in its efforts to bring justice and unveil the truth about the actions of the Russian Federation. During their first meeting with YIU, which took place in June 2022, the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, the Deputy Minister of Justice and the Head of the Presidential Office expressed their confidence in Yahad's ability to help them uncover the true motivations behind the Russian crimes perpetrated against Ukrainian civilians, especially forced disappearances and mass deportations to Russia. It is worth noting that the operations of several NGOs have been invalidated by the Ukrainian state while the interviews conducted by some other NGOs were rejected by judicial and political authorities. Yahad's interviews stand out in their credibility and integrity.

Close to the year's end, Ukraine asked Yahad - In Unum to contribute to and support a claim of Ukraine against the Russian Federation before

the European Human Rights Court. A memorandum providing a legal framework for this cooperation has been prepared and will be signed shortly.

Every two weeks, YIU team has zoom meetings with the Ukrainian Chief of Staff's office regarding our investigative findings. In December, YIU delegation met with deputies to the Heads of regional administrations and with the Head of the humanitarian aid staff in newly liberated Kherson and Mykolaïv. In Kyiv, Father Desbois met with the Deputy Head of the Presidential Office, Andrii Smyrnov, and with the ambassador on special assignments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Anton Korynevych. These meetings were crucial to further our cooperation.



Father Patrick Desbois' and Costel Nastasie's meeting with Andrii Yermak, Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, June 2022 @Yahad - In Unum

GERMANY

The War Crimes Unit of the German Federal Public Prosecutor and the Federal Criminal Police have received and used eight different interviews collected by Yahad. German Justice officials opened a preliminary investigation into all Russian crimes perpetrated in the territory of Ukraine since 2014, and especially since February 2022. They are depending on the help of NGOs like Yahad, because witnesses trust them more

than they trust the police. Also, the German police do not have the authority to conduct investigations outside of Germany. Thanks to Yahad's investigative assistance, they have been able to interview those eight survivors / eyewitnesses who now live in Germany. It has helped them to collect additional evidence which will be used for criminal justice purposes.

MEDIA OUTREACH

Several TV interviews were conducted in Tier-1 Ukrainian media (TSN, 1+1, Ukrainska Pravda) in order to share both the results and the direction of our investigations.

Every two weeks, Father Desbois speaks on French national television, LCI, so that the general public remains informed not only about the military and financial outcomes of this war but also, and most importantly, about the fate of civilian victims murdered every day.

Other mainstream media in France (BFM, le Figaro, La Croix, La Vie, Radio J, France Inter, RFI), Germany (Der SPIEGEL, ntv), and other countries (Al Jazeera, Vatican News, etc.) have shared information collected and provided by YIU.

The intended goals of our work in Ukraine for 2022 have been met. They have been recognized and used by Ukrainian and German legal bodies. French President Emmanuel Macron expressed his personal support for our investigative work in Ukraine in a letter addressed to Marco Gonzalez, the Executive Director of Yahad – In Unum.

As the war continues and the crimes continue to be perpetrated on a daily basis, our project continues with the same aim and goals to be achieved: gather evidence of Russian war crimes through interviews with survivors and eyewitnesses, unmask the real intentions of the Russians behind the crimes they commit, and make those findings available for criminal justice purposes in Ukrainian and European courts.

As the war operations progress, more and more evidence remains to be collected, especially in those parts of the country which are still under Russian occupation, including cities like Melitopol, Mariupol, Simferopol and Donetsk. Our first in-person investigation just took place in Kherson, liberated on November 11. We are committed to continuing this work in 2023 and beyond as necessary.

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