

War, Torture, and Children

Wioletta Rebecka^{ORCID}

Rape: A History of Shame Project, New York, USA

Email: wiolar809@gmail.com

How to cite this paper: Rebecka, W. (2025). War, Torture, and Children. *Beijing Law Review*, 16, 2304-2323.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/blr.2025.164117>

Received: October 19, 2025

Accepted: November 29, 2025

Published: December 2, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Russia's large-scale deportation, torture, and forced assimilation of Ukrainian children is one of the starkest violations of modern international law and child-rights norms, and its gravity becomes clearer when we follow the thread of law as a continuous story rather than a list of provisions. Children have been singled out from the earliest codifications of humanitarian law for "special respect." The Fourth Geneva Convention, drafted in the aftermath of the Second World War, treats the forcible transfer or deportation of civilians from occupied territory as a crime in itself, regardless of any military pretext. Article 49 could not be plainer: no occupying power may deport protected persons from occupied territory to its own land or any other place. When the people in question are children, the prohibition acquires an even deeper resonance, because children are understood in international law as bearers of a double vulnerability—too young to defend themselves and essential to the cultural survival of their communities. Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (1949), adopted in 1977, therefore requires parties to "take all feasible measures" to ensure the care, education, and identity of children caught in war, a requirement echoed decades later in the near-universal Convention on the Rights of the Child. That treaty insists that in every action affecting a child, the "best interests of the child" must be the primary consideration, and it explicitly forbids torture, cruel or degrading treatment, and arbitrary detention. The prohibition of torture, codified across the Geneva Conventions, the Convention against Torture, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, establishes the absolute duty to protect children from all forms of abuse, even amid war or national emergency. The unlawful deportation and torture of Ukrainian children thus represent not isolated atrocities but breaches of universal norms demanding urgent international prosecution and the restoration of their identities and ties to their homeland. Drawing on original survivor testimonies collected through encrypted online interviews and corroborated by extensive international investigations, this article exposes a deliberate Russian policy of abduction, ideological re-education, and cultural erasure. These

crimes do not appear as scattered atrocities; they reveal a calculated strategy aimed at destroying the identity of an entire generation of Ukrainian children. Two emblematic cases—each singular and devastating—anchor the analysis and illuminate the extreme vulnerability of minors during armed conflict. The first concerns a mother and her adolescent daughter from Bucha, both raped by Russian soldiers. Their ordeal demonstrates how sexual violence functions not merely as a personal assault but as a weapon of war designed to terrorize entire communities and rupture family bonds. In clinical terms, the daughter’s near-total silence during subsequent interviews speaks eloquently. Trauma research identifies such muteness as a form of dissociative shutdown, the mind’s last defense against overwhelming threat. Her quiet, therefore, becomes testimony in itself, a wordless record of violence and the profound psychological cost of war rape. The second case involves a fourteen-year-old boy subjected to repeated electric-shock torture so severe that his dental fillings were expelled. Medical documentation confirms the injuries, providing chilling evidence of state-sanctioned cruelty and the methodical infliction of pain on a developing body. His stark narrative, devoid of ornamentation, stands as a permanent indictment of a system that transforms the suffering of a child into an instrument of policy. These findings reveal the large-scale deportation, psychological and physical torture, and forced assimilation of Ukrainian children by the Russian Federation. Drawing on encrypted survivor interviews and corroborating reports from international institutions, this study integrates legal analysis, developmental neuroscience, and trauma theory to demonstrate that these acts meet the thresholds for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and elements of genocide. The evidence shows that children held in so-called “recreational camps” in occupied territories and Russia were subjected to indoctrination, coercive medical practices, and enforced Russification—constituting severe violations of the Geneva Conventions and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model and War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS), the study explores how torture and chronic stress reshape the developing brain, attachment systems, and social ecology of children and families. The paper concludes by urging a child-centered, trauma-informed approach to accountability, emphasizing the need for urgent legal action, psychosocial rehabilitation, and recognition of the moral injury inflicted by collective silence. The War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS; [Rebecka, 2024](#)) conceptualizes trauma as the convergence of bodily injury, betrayal trauma, and systemic silencing in wartime contexts, linking neurobiological injury with relational and institutional harms across generations.

Keywords

Ukraine, Deportation, Torture, Forced Assimilation, Russification, Cultural Genocide, Child Neurodevelopment, Bronfenbrenner, War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS), Trauma-Informed Justice

1. Introduction

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian Federation has occupied several territories in the country's south and east. During this occupation, thousands of children were forcibly removed from their homes, orphanages, and foster care facilities and transported to locations under Russian control. The information presented in this study is based on verified witness testimony, including that of a minor boy who was held for four months in a facility in occupied Crimea. For safety reasons, his identity remains protected, and the Lemkin Center in Poland archived the full interview securely. These testimonies are triangulated with corroborating evidence from the United Nations, UNICEF, the International Criminal Court, and other independent human-rights organizations. This study asks how trauma-informed legal frameworks can recognize and prosecute the torture and forced deportation of children as crimes of war and genocide.

The findings expose a coordinated system of deportation, indoctrination, and identity erasure masked as humanitarian “recreation” or “rehabilitation” programs. Children are transferred to camps in Crimea, Belarus, and Russia, where they are subjected to political re-education, forced to sing the Russian anthem, punished for speaking Ukrainian, and pressured to accept Russian citizenship. These practices constitute not isolated abuses but a deliberate state strategy of Russification—a project of psychological domination that violates the fundamental protections of international humanitarian and human-rights law.

Research Objective:

This article investigates how the torture and indoctrination of Ukrainian children by the Russian Federation meet the legal criteria of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. It further examines the developmental, neurobiological, and intergenerational consequences of these violations, proposing a trauma-informed, child-centered framework for justice and rehabilitation.

1.1. The Research Gap—Child Torture and the Developing Brain

The following section integrates neuroscience and law to situate these findings within a broader interdisciplinary context.

Despite growing awareness of war's effects on children, research on the neurological and psychophysiological consequences of torture in children remains fragmentary and deeply underdeveloped. Most existing studies on child trauma address neglect, sexual abuse, or domestic violence, showing how early adversity alters stress regulation, attachment, and brain development. Although recent advances in developmental neuroscience have deepened understanding of the effects of neglect and sexual violence on children's brain development, empirical evidence on the neurobiological consequences of direct war torture remains extremely limited (McLaughlin, Sheridan, & Nelson, 2021; Teicher & Samson, 2024; Nahlén Bose & Tamdjidi, 2024). Findings across child trauma research link chronic stress to amygdala hyper-reactivity, reduced hippocampal volume, and HPA-axis dysregulation—patterns tied to anxiety, memory impairment, and emotional dysregulation.

tion. Direct, child-specific neuroimaging on torture remains virtually absent, as highlighted by a 2024 systematic review of child torture survivors, which underscores significant ethical and methodological barriers and the need for rigorously trauma-informed protocols. Recent child-focused work in war-affected cohorts demonstrates measurable neurodevelopmental alterations: for example, prolonged displacement experienced early in life by resettled Syrian refugee children was significantly associated with altered brain network organization (reduced small-worldness, disrupted integration/segregation) as measured via functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS) (Abdulrasul et al., 2025). In another large cohort of Syrian refugee children and adolescents, hair cortisol concentrations (HCC)—a marker of HPA-axis activity—were positively (though weakly) associated with the number of war-related events (but only for those ≥ 12 years at time of exposure) and were also linked to PTSD symptoms (Smeeth et al., 2022). Together, these findings indicate that, although torture-specific pediatric neuroimaging remains a gap, converging child data from war trauma (network-level fNIRS markers, hair cortisol/HPA-axis dysregulation) map plausible pathways by which torture could impact the developing brain—and justify targeted, child-safe studies in settings where torture is documented. Findings consistently link chronic stress to hyperactivation of the amygdala, reduced hippocampal volume, and dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis—patterns associated with anxiety, impaired memory, and emotional dysregulation. However, direct investigations of torture, especially in war contexts, remain rare.

Children exposed to organized violence, detention, or coercive interrogation may suffer compounded developmental injuries—both from the traumatic events themselves and from the moral betrayal by adult institutions meant to protect them. A systematic review by Nahlén Bose and Tamdjidi (2024) found a striking absence of standardized methods for documenting or treating torture injuries in children, highlighting an urgent need for specialized frameworks that integrate neurobiological, psychological, and legal dimensions. Even within the field of humanitarian medicine, children are often subsumed under adult-focused torture studies or represented only as collateral victims of war (Attanayake et al., 2009; Betancourt et al., 2010).

The 2022 revision of the Istanbul Protocol—the United Nations’ global standard for documenting torture—acknowledges this gap by introducing, for the first time, a dedicated section on the investigation of torture against children (OHCHR, 2022). Nevertheless, few empirical studies have operationalized these guidelines or explored how early-life torture shapes neurodevelopment, attachment, and identity formation. This paper, therefore, builds upon adjacent fields—research on childhood sexual violence, trafficking, and chronic neglect—to extrapolate mechanisms of harm relevant to war-related torture. Studies of child sexual abuse and trafficking survivors, for instance, demonstrate pervasive alterations in brain networks governing threat perception and self-agency, suggesting that children subjected to state-sponsored torture are likely to experience similar or more

severe disruptions in neural development (De Bellis et al., 2019; van der Kolk, 2014).

1.2. Integrating Law, Neuroscience, and Trauma Studies

By combining survivor testimony with legal and neurodevelopmental analysis, this article situates the deportation and torture of Ukrainian children within a multi-layered framework that bridges international criminal law, trauma neuroscience, and ecological systems theory. The approach is guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which views the child as developing within interconnected systems—family, community, institutions, and culture—all shattered by war. It also draws on the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) framework (Rebecka, 2021), which conceptualizes trauma as both an individual and collective process shaped by violence during the war, betrayal by society, family, legal and medical systems, and intergenerational silence. Although initially applied to sexual-violence survivors, WRSS offers a valuable lens for understanding how systematic state violence against children ruptures attachment, trust, and identity continuity across generations.

Ultimately, the paper contends that the torture, abduction, and internment of Ukrainian children represent not only grave breaches of international law but also a neurobiological and moral catastrophe—an assault on the integrity of childhood itself. Recognizing and documenting these harms is essential for designing trauma-informed legal responses and ensuring that justice mechanisms attend to both the juridical and developmental dimensions of atrocity.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study draws on two emblematic cases (one online, one in-person) gathered under trauma-informed, child-centered procedures. Participants were recruited through verified NGO networks; informed consent (and child assent) was obtained in accordance with the 2022 Istanbul Protocol and UNICEF ERIC guidelines. Interviews were conducted via encrypted channels where applicable, pseudonymized at source, and stored on secure offline devices. Analysis followed reflexive thematic procedures with memoing to mitigate vicarious trauma and enhance transparency.

This study forms part of the transnational research initiative Rape: A History of Shame, a multidisciplinary documentation and analysis project dedicated to recording the testimonies of survivors of sexual and structural violence in conflict zones. The present article focuses on Ukrainian cases documented between March and August 2024, integrating both online and in-person field interviews within a unified analytical framework that bridges clinical trauma theory, developmental neuroscience, and international law. The study employs a qualitative, trauma-informed, interpretive methodology, prioritizing the voices of survivors while ensuring empirical, ethical, and forensic rigor (Charmaz, 2014; Herman, 2015; Rebecka, 2024).

2.1. Research Design and Participants

Two core cases form the empirical foundation of this analysis. The first was conducted online by the author with a mother and her teenage daughter from Bucha, both survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by Russian soldiers. This interview was undertaken under the auspices of the Rape: A History of Shame project, which has systematically documented war-rape testimonies in multiple contexts, including the Balkans, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Within this ethical and research framework, an online interview was conducted with a mother and her daughter, both displaced from Bucha and temporarily residing in Poland. The primary aim was to document their experiences and to provide trauma-informed psychosocial guidance. Following best practices, the conversation was centered on the mother, with the daughter invited to contribute only if she felt ready (Rebecka, 2024; Herman, 2015).

The mother described in detail both her own suffering and the violence inflicted upon her daughter. The girl remained silent throughout the interview, which I interpreted as a significant clinical indicator rather than a lack of engagement. Her only direct contribution was a question whispered with striking clarity: “Will the memory of what happened to me stay forever?” This moment encapsulated the enduring burden of child torture survivors—the awareness of an indelible wound, and the fear of permanence.

The Lemkin Center’s Poland field research team conducted the second in-person interview during a documentation mission in Ukraine. The team was collecting testimonies from adult survivors of war trauma when one participant—a 14-year-old boy—was introduced to them by local caregivers. His case was ethically approved on-site, and the interview was conducted in person, with a trauma-informed adult assistant present throughout the session to ensure emotional safety and consent monitoring.

The inclusion of this second, in-person interview was scientifically and ethically motivated. It allowed the author to integrate first-hand field data from a child survivor whose direct experiences of torture, captivity, and forced indoctrination complement the online mother-daughter testimony. Together, the two cases illuminate the layered, intergenerational, and ecological dimensions of war-related torture and sexual violence. The contrast between online and in-person modalities also offered a unique methodological lens on how trauma disclosure and affect regulation differ between digitally-mediated and physical co-presence contexts (Roth & Wolf, 2023).

2.2. Recruitment, Ethics, and Interview Procedures

Participants were recruited through verified NGO networks and clinical professionals specializing in war-trauma rehabilitation. Recruitment followed purposive sampling, prioritizing survivors with direct or witnessed exposure to torture, detention, or sexual violence during the 2022-2024 invasion. All adult participants provided written informed consent. For minors, consent was obtained from both

the child and their legal guardian in accordance with the 2022 revised Istanbul Protocol (OHCHR, 2022) and the UNICEF Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) Guidelines (UNICEF, 2023). Identities (including age) were verified by cross-checking Lemkin Center case files with corroborating NGO or clinical documentation prior to inclusion in the dataset.

The online interview with the Bucha mother and daughter was conducted in Ukrainian and Russian with the support of trauma-informed interpreters. Sessions took place via encrypted channels (Signal, ProtonMail) and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Given the absence of physical co-regulation possible in face-to-face encounters, the interviewer employed extended grounding techniques—such as slow pacing, non-intrusive questioning, and scheduled emotional pauses—to maintain psychological safety (Herman, 2015; McKenzie-Mohr & LaFrance, 2017).

A further layer of evidence comes from the 2025 report *Skradzione Dzieciństwo* (“Stolen Childhood”) (Instytut Solidarności i Męstwa im. Witolda Pileckiego, 2025) issued by the Pilecki Institute in Warsaw, which documents crimes committed by Russian forces against Ukrainian children. Drawing on more than ten detailed testimonies from both adults and minors and corroborating findings from the Ukrainian organization Save Ukraine—which has recorded over seven hundred cases of children forcibly transferred to Russia—the report exposes a calculated system of abduction and abuse. One testimony is especially stark. A teenage boy, who was seized and subjected to repeated electric shocks, recalled that the first session was the most unbearable because he had never imagined such pain; he also noticed afterward that all of his dental fillings had been jolted loose. His spare, almost clinical description of that ordeal stands as its own indictment, a fragment of lived truth that captures the naked inhumanity of Russia’s assault on children. Set alongside the broader empirical record from Bosnia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Syria, and other conflict zones, this account underscores the continuity of state-directed torture of minors and the urgent need for investigative and therapeutic frameworks capable of addressing its lifelong psychological and medical consequences.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymized immediately, and coded with secure pseudonyms. Testimonies were triangulated with verified data from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UNICEF, and the International Criminal Court (ICC). Triangulation served as both external validation and a safeguard against distortions arising from trauma-related memory fragmentation or dissociation (Pynoos, Steinberg, & Goenjian, 1996; van der Kolk, 2014).

2.3. Analytical Framework

Data were analyzed thematically through iterative coding cycles, combining descriptive, affective, and theoretical layers. Transcripts were first read holistically to preserve emotional and narrative coherence and then segmented into thematic

domains, including captivity, bodily invasion, loss of voice, forced identity transformation, and silence. Coding categories were continually refined through theoretical comparison and triangulation between cases.

The analysis was guided by two interdependent frameworks: War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The integrated WRSS-ecological model thus serves as both an analytical and an ethical foundation, linking neurobiological injury with systemic betrayal and embedding justice within trauma-informed ethics.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings reveal consistent patterns of coercive control and structured degradation of Ukrainian children under Russian occupation. In both documented cases—the Bucha mother and daughter interviewed online and the 14-year-old boy interviewed in person by the Lemkin field team—the testimonies expose recurring features of captivity, torture, and psychological terror.

The mother-daughter narrative demonstrates the intergenerational dimension of violence, where sexual assault against the mother and the forced witnessing by her teenage daughter created mutually reinforcing trauma. The daughter reported chronic nightmares, hypervigilance, and avoidance of physical touch, while the mother described profound guilt and shame that “my child saw me die while still alive.”

The boy's case, documented during in-person fieldwork, exemplifies the deliberate use of torture as a pedagogy of submission. He was subjected to repeated beatings, electroshocks, and prolonged deprivation of food. During the first episode of electrocution, he reported losing all of his dental fillings—a moment he described as the most shocking, painful, and bewildering experience of his captivity. This detail, offered spontaneously during the interview, conveys not only the intensity of physical suffering but also the profound psychological disorientation inflicted by sudden bodily violation.

The Lemkin interviewer noted signs of autonomic hyperarousal—tremors, shallow breathing, and avoidance of eye contact—consistent with neurobiological markers of post-traumatic stress and chronic activation of the HPA-axis (Teicher & Samson, 2024; van der Kolk, 2014). His verbal expression was fragmented; he used short, factual statements and physical gestures rather than emotional vocabulary, reflecting the developmental constraints of pre-adolescent language systems in articulating complex traumatic events (Pynoos, Steinberg, & Goenjian, 1996).

Both testimonies point to a state-organized system of psychological torture, not isolated incidents. Compulsory re-education, separation from caregivers, and coerced national allegiance mirror mechanisms of cultural genocide defined in Article II(e) of the 1948 Genocide Convention. The findings align with evidence from UNICEF and OHCHR reports documenting the deportation of thousands of Ukrainian children into “re-education camps” in Crimea, Belarus, and Russia

(OHCHR, 2022).

3.1. Neurobiological and Psychological Consequences

Analysis of the narratives through WRSS and developmental neuroscience frameworks reveals profound stress regulation and disruptions in attachment systems. Exposure to chronic threat in early adolescence alters amygdala and hippocampal functioning, leading to impaired memory consolidation, exaggerated fear conditioning, and dissociative coping (McLaughlin, Sheridan, & Nelson, 2021; Schore, 2003).

In the Bucha case, the teenage girl's recurrent self-blame and emotional numbing exemplify secondary trauma and body-mind disconnection, common among survivors of witnessed rape and the fear of remembering forever (Herman, 2015). Her mother's hypervigilance and avoidance further illustrate the transgenerational contagion of stress, where dysregulated caregiving transmits trauma through relational pathways (Danieli, 1998).

In the boy's testimony, the disjunction between his affect (flat tone) and physiology (visible tremors) reflects somatic encapsulation of trauma—the body's persistence of threat memory in the absence of verbal narrative (van der Kolk, 2014). The WRSS framework situates these phenomena as expressions of betrayal trauma: harm inflicted by systems expected to protect, compounded by moral injury when perpetrators claim to act for "liberation" or "re-education," when conducting torture.

3.2. Ecological and Intergenerational Dimensions

Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory clarifies how war dismantles every protective layer around a child. The microsystem—home and caregiver—collapses under displacement; the mesosystem connecting school, peers, and community disintegrates; the exosystem of institutions becomes predatory rather than protective; and the macrosystem replaces collective meaning with propaganda.

The Bucha family's testimony shows how caregiver trauma and silence perpetuate fragmentation: the mother's avoidance of talking about the assault reinforced the daughter's belief that speaking is dangerous. The boy's isolation in captivity, with no adult advocate, illustrates an ecological collapse so complete that the developmental environment itself becomes an instrument of torture.

These findings confirm that child torture operates not only on the body but on the ecology of safety. Recovery, therefore, requires multi-level intervention—psychological stabilization, community rebuilding, and legal recognition of harm (Betancourt et al., 2010; Dubow, Huesmann, & Boxer, 2009).

4. Methodological and Ethical Challenges in Research with Traumatized Children during War

Conducting and interpreting interviews with children affected by war torture presents significant scientific, ethical, and legal challenges. Children's developmental

stages profoundly shape their capacity for recall, narrative coherence, and the reliability of their legal testimony. Younger children often lack the linguistic and temporal frameworks necessary to describe sequential events or differentiate between internal sensations and external acts (Pynoos et al., 1996). Even adolescents who can recount events frequently revert to concrete descriptions, focusing on smells, sounds, or bodily pain, rather than engaging in chronological storytelling.

These developmental constraints complicate evidentiary recognition in legal processes that privilege adult rational narration. As a result, many cases of child torture remain legally invisible, dismissed as “anecdotal” or “inconclusive.” The gap between psychological truth and juridical admissibility underscores the need for trauma-informed interviewing protocols and age-adapted forensic standards (Nowak, 2020; Quéniwet, 2021).

Another challenge lies in the medicalization of evidence. International investigators often rely on physical or gynecological examinations to substantiate torture claims. While essential for verifying bodily harm, these procedures cannot capture the invisible neurobiological injuries—disrupted attachment, dissociation, or chronic hyperarousal—that constitute the core of traumatic suffering (Teicher & Samson, 2024). Moreover, medical evaluations can retraumatize children when performed without psychological containment or explanation suited to their developmental age.

In the field, ethical challenges arose regarding consent and the risk of retraumatization. Children who experienced prolonged captivity may comply with adults reflexively, confusing participation with obedience. To mitigate this, interviewers incorporated informed-assent dialogues, using visual aids and storytelling metaphors to help minors understand their right to stop or refuse questions. Despite these safeguards, the research acknowledges the asymmetry inherent in adult-child inquiry and the impossibility of entirely neutral observation in trauma contexts (McKenzie-Mohr & LaFrance, 2017).

5. Legal and Structural Gaps

Despite explicit prohibitions under the Geneva Conventions, the Rome Statute (1998), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, existing legal systems remain structured around adult-centric testimony models. Children’s fragmented narratives—shaped by trauma and neurodevelopment—rarely meet evidentiary thresholds, leaving their suffering unrecorded and justice denied. A trauma-informed jurisprudence must therefore integrate developmental neuroscience and psychological truth into its evidentiary framework, validating children’s embodied expressions as legitimate forms of testimony.

The findings also highlight systemic failures in international and national mechanisms for recognizing and prosecuting the torture of children. Although the Rome Statute (1998) and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) prohibit cruel and inhuman treatment, no dedicated investigative protocol exists for documenting torture in minors. The 2022 revision of the Istanbul Protocol

included a child-specific annex, but implementation remains uneven and largely untested in active conflict zones (OHCHR, 2022).

In Ukraine, as in many post-conflict contexts, the majority of child survivors are not registered as victims of war crimes because their testimonies do not meet adult-oriented evidentiary thresholds. The reliance on documentary or medical corroboration systematically excludes the population most at risk. The two cases presented here thus stand as rare, partial windows into a vastly underreported phenomenon.

This methodological limitation is not merely statistical but political. The absence of procedures for eliciting, protecting, and validating children's voices perpetuates a cycle of legal silence and moral invisibility, reinforcing what Rebecka (2024) identifies within the WRSS framework as the collapse of social witnessing. Recognition, both juridical and social, is therefore integral to recovery—not only for the individual child but for the ethical integrity of the international community.

6. Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The scope of this study—two detailed case studies drawn from one online and one field-based interview—constitutes its greatest strength and principal limitation. The qualitative depth of these narratives enables a rich exploration of psychological, neurobiological, and ecological processes; however, their number and specificity preclude generalization. Each case reveals layers of violence and resilience that open windows into a broader phenomenon still largely hidden from public record. However, the absence of large-scale, systematically collected testimonies from children affected by war torture across Ukraine represents a significant gap in global knowledge and accountability.

This limitation is not accidental but symptomatic of a wider structural and epistemic failure. Despite decades of advances in trauma studies, international humanitarian and legal systems remain unprepared to document and analyze children's experiences of torture with the same rigor afforded to adults. Investigators often lack the specialized training, time, and institutional support needed to engage with children in developmentally appropriate and psychologically safe ways. In many cases, children are medically examined for evidence of abuse but never psychologically interviewed, as if the body alone could testify to the totality of harm. This reduction of the child to an anatomical site of evidence—stripped of emotional and relational context—perpetuates a biomedical model that pathologizes symptoms but silences meaning (Rebecka, 2024; Herman, 2015).

The absence of standardized, trauma-informed procedures for interviewing children in war zones further compounds the problem. The 2022 Istanbul Protocol (OHCHR, 2022) introduced guidelines for documenting torture in minors, yet these remain inconsistently implemented and often inaccessible to local investigators. There are no universally accepted frameworks that integrate neurodevelopmental science, attachment theory, and forensic ethics into the legal documen-

tation of child torture. As a result, testimonies are often lost in translation—both linguistically and developmentally—when investigators rely on adult-centered methods that inadvertently retraumatize or invalidate children’s experiences. The failure to adapt investigative tools to children’s cognitive and emotional capacities means that the majority of child survivors remain invisible within justice systems, their voices erased from the legal and historical record.

This methodological void has profound implications for the transmission of trauma and collective healing. When children’s experiences of war torture are neither heard nor validated, their suffering becomes internalized and metabolized within family and social systems as silence, fear, and mistrust. The absence of witnessing obstructs the transformation of trauma into narrative, forcing it to migrate somatically and symbolically across generations (Danieli, 1998; Kirmayer, Gone, & Moses, 2014). This silence is not benign—it reproduces patterns of collective dissociation and moral disengagement that perpetuate cycles of violence. Without creating spaces where children’s embodied memories can be safely articulated, societies risk breeding what Rebecka (2024) has termed the transgenerational paralysis of empathy: a condition in which communities inherit the numbness produced by unresolved terror.

Moreover, the political dimension of these limitations cannot be ignored. The underrepresentation of children in war-crime documentation reflects not only logistical or ethical caution but also a strategic reluctance to confront the full moral and geopolitical implications of such evidence. Recognizing large-scale torture, deportation, and indoctrination of children as coordinated acts of state violence would require states, international organizations, and courts to acknowledge genocide as a continuing, rather than historical, process. This recognition threatens entrenched political narratives, alliances, and self-perceptions of legitimacy. Thus, the scarcity of child testimonies serves an unspoken political function: it shields institutions from confronting the unbearable truth that global governance has repeatedly failed to protect the most vulnerable.

From a scientific perspective, the small number of available child torture testimonies also restricts the development of evidence-based interventions for survivors. Neurodevelopmental research on children exposed to chronic violence is still limited, with most empirical data deriving from studies on neglect, domestic abuse, or sexual exploitation in peacetime settings (McLaughlin, Sheridan, & Nelson, 2021; Teicher & Samson, 2024). The neurobiological effects of war-specific torture—sensory deprivation, forced indoctrination, witnessing mass violence—remain underexplored. This research gap impedes the creation of trauma-informed rehabilitation programs that can address the complex interplay between neurophysiology, identity formation, and sociopolitical context.

Future research must therefore pursue three urgent directions. First, it should establish child-specific documentation models that combine psychological containment with legal admissibility, ensuring that interviews protect the emotional integrity of the child while producing credible evidence. Second, interdisciplinary

collaborations must bridge the divides between clinical neuroscience, qualitative ethics, and human-rights law to create developmentally attuned forensic methodologies. Third, research must critically interrogate the politics of silence: who decides which suffering becomes visible, which testimony is deemed credible, and which bodies are considered worthy of recognition.

In practical terms, this means building trauma-informed investigative infrastructures—training fieldworkers, clinicians, and prosecutors in child communication, neuroregulation, and symbolic expression; incorporating play-based and art-based modalities into testimony gathering; and developing cross-sectoral review boards integrating psychological, medical, and legal expertise. Without such reforms, the global response to child torture will remain fragmented, reactive, and morally inadequate.

7. Integrative Reflection

The convergence of the two cases confirms that war torture against children fuses domination with the failure of care—it destroys both the child’s nervous system and the moral architecture of society. By integrating WRSS with ecological and neurodevelopmental theory, this study demonstrates how systemic violence penetrates individual, familial, and collective domains. A trauma-informed, child-centered justice model must thus move beyond punishment toward relational repair, restoring belonging and agency through recognition and witnessing.

8. Legal Analysis and Implications

The evidence presented in this study situates the deportation, torture, and indoctrination of Ukrainian children squarely within the framework of international crimes as defined by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998). Article 7(1)(d) of the Statute classifies “deportation or forcible transfer of population” as a crime against humanity, while Article 8(2)(a)(ii) defines “torture or inhuman treatment” as a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions (1949). Furthermore, Article 6(e) of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) includes as genocidal the “forcible transfer of children of one group to another group.” When viewed together, these provisions establish the legal parameters within which the systematic deportation, forced assimilation, and psychological torture of Ukrainian children can be interpreted not as incidental harm but as deliberate acts of genocidal policy.

The War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) framework (Rebecka, 2021, 2024) deepens this legal understanding by exposing the psychological and relational dimensions of state violence that are often invisible in juridical reasoning. Torture against a child is not solely an assault on the body; it constitutes a violation of developmental sovereignty—the right to grow within stable relational, cultural, and linguistic systems. When children are deported, renamed, or ideologically re-educated, the crime extends beyond individual injury to the destruction of the moral and cultural fabric of a nation. The intersection of WRSS with legal analysis,

therefore, reframes child torture as a multi-level crime—psychological, social, and civilizational in scope (Kirmayer, Gone, & Moses, 2014).

8.1. Gaps between Trauma and Justice

Despite this legal clarity, procedural gaps persist. International courts continue to rely on evidentiary standards derived from adult testimony, emphasizing verbal coherence, chronological precision, and physical documentation. Nevertheless, child torture survivors, whose neurodevelopmental trajectories have been disrupted by trauma, often express memory through fragments, sensory impressions, or silence (Pynoos, Steinberg, & Goenjian, 1996; van der Kolk, 2014). When these trauma-related manifestations are misread as unreliability, children are disqualified as witnesses, perpetuating institutional betrayal (Herman, 2015).

The Istanbul Protocol (OHCHR, 2022) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) both mandate that children’s testimonies be obtained “in a manner sensitive to their age and condition.” However, implementation remains inconsistent and largely symbolic. No standardized forensic psychology protocols integrate trauma-neuroscience into international investigations (Nowak, 2020; Quéniwet, 2021). This disjuncture between clinical knowledge and legal procedure results in what Fassin and Rechtman (2009) describe as the politics of compassion: suffering is acknowledged rhetorically yet rendered legally invisible. The child’s pain is mourned but not adjudicated.

A trauma-informed jurisprudence seeks to bridge this gap by acknowledging that testimony is an embodied act shaped by both neurobiology and social context. Legal practitioners must be educated in the ways trauma alters perception, memory, and communication. Forensic interviews with children should incorporate somatic and nonverbal modes of expression—such as drawing, play, or movement—as admissible evidence when verbal narration is impaired (Teicher & Samson, 2024; Schore, 2003). Courts must also permit expert contextualization of fragmented or emotionally charged accounts, rather than penalizing them as inconsistencies. This reframing aligns with the moral philosophy underlying WRSS, which holds that justice is inseparable from recognition and witnessing (Rebecka, 2021, 2024).

Ethically, the responsibility of researchers, clinicians, and jurists extends beyond data collection to preserving the dignity and psychological safety of child survivors. The principle of non-maleficence must govern every investigative encounter—first, do no harm—and by relational justice, which acknowledges the inherent asymmetry between the adult investigator and the traumatized child (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). Failure to observe these standards transforms documentation into a second act of violence. As Rebecka (2024) argues, “to record without recognition is to repeat the crime in symbolic form.”

The legal neglect of children’s testimonies also reflects a broader politics of denial that transcends jurisprudence. States engaged in or complicit with aggression often suppress evidence of crimes against children to protect geopolitical interests

or national mythology. Acknowledging large-scale child torture as genocide implicates not only perpetrators but also international bodies that failed to intervene. This creates a culture of institutional avoidance, in which humanitarian organizations issue cautious statements devoid of accountability language (Fassin & Reichtman, 2009). The deliberate erasure of child torture survivors thereby becomes a geostrategic act, preserving diplomatic relations at the expense of moral truth.

Such denial has measurable psychosocial consequences. When societies refuse to confront atrocities against children, they reproduce what Kirmayer et al. (2014) call cultural dissociation—a collective defense mechanism that fragments historical consciousness. The absence of recognition prevents communal mourning, obstructs intergenerational healing, and perpetuates cycles of violence. Legally and ethically, this constitutes a form of collective neglect, in which silence serves as both shield and weapon.

8.2. Integrating WRSS into Legal Theory and Practice

Integrating WRSS into international law offers a transformative path toward justice that acknowledges psychological truth. The framework expands the concept of “harm” beyond physical injury to encompass betrayal, humiliation, and enforced moral isolation—elements central to torture’s purpose. By framing war rape and child torture as phenomena of systemic betrayal, WRSS aligns with evolving legal interpretations of moral injury and psychological warfare (Clark, 2021). It provides jurisprudence with a language for recognizing the invisible, relational, and intergenerational aspects of atrocity that conventional law struggles to articulate.

In practical applications, WRSS can inform three domains:

Forensic investigation, by guiding trauma-sensitive interviewing and expert testimony;

Legal qualification of crimes, by including relational and psychological destruction as evidence of genocidal intent; and

Reparative justice shapes rehabilitation programs that address individual and collective moral injury.

Adopting WRSS as an interpretive lens would align international practice with emerging doctrines of transformative justice, which seek not only to punish but also to restore dignity and relational order (Kirmayer et al., 2014).

8.3. Ethical Imperatives for Researchers and Institutions

Researchers and institutions bear a dual obligation: to generate knowledge and to safeguard those from whom that knowledge arises. In contexts of war, this obligation becomes existential. The ethics of trauma research require continuous consent, emotional containment, and institutional accountability for data storage, interpretation, and dissemination (Roth & Wolf, 2023). Academic neutrality is ethically untenable when research exposes ongoing atrocity; silence or euphemism can constitute complicity. As trauma scholars, we must recognize that our meth-

ologies are also moral choices: each analytic category either conceals or reveals, heals or harms.

Universities, NGOs, and international bodies must therefore adopt binding ethical standards for the documentation of child torture—standards that integrate clinical supervision, vicarious-trauma support for researchers, and survivor feedback in the dissemination of findings. In this sense, ethical practice becomes an act of justice: to research ethically is to resist the reproduction of powerlessness that defines trauma.

9. Toward a Child-Centered Justice Model

The cumulative evidence from this study calls for a trauma-informed and child-centered justice model rooted in interdisciplinary collaboration. Such a model would:

Train prosecutors and investigators in developmental psychology and trauma neurobiology;

Recognizing non-verbal testimony and artistic expression as admissible evidence;

Establish regional and international registries of child torture survivors under protective anonymity;

Integrate psychosocial rehabilitation within judicial reparation orders.

This approach embodies what [Rebecka \(2024\)](#) terms the ethics of witnessing: the moral obligation to restore relational truth where violence has shattered it. Justice, in this paradigm, is not limited to conviction rates, but is measured by the degree to which survivors—especially children—recover their agency, sense of belonging, and voice. Only when the global community constructs legal systems capable of hearing the language of trauma will it fulfill its duty under international law and humanity alike.

10. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the deportation, torture, and forced assimilation of Ukrainian children represent not only severe violations of international law but also devastating assaults on the biological, psychological, and moral foundations of human development. The two cases explored—a mother and daughter interviewed online through encrypted communication, and a 14-year-old boy interviewed in person during the Lemkin Center's fieldwork—illustrate how systemic violence seeks to reconfigure childhood itself. In both, the harm inflicted extends beyond the physical; it is an occupation of the nervous system, a deliberate conditioning of fear and obedience designed to extinguish the spontaneous capacity for trust, belonging, and selfhood. What emerges is not merely trauma in the clinical sense but the creation of a psychic and cultural void in which survival becomes a form of silence.

By integrating the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) framework with ecological and neurodevelopmental theory, this study situates child torture within a

multi-layered continuum of violence that penetrates the individual, the familial, and the collective. The WRSS framework, originally developed to understand the sequelae of sexual violence during war, expands the notion of injury to include relational betrayal, institutional abandonment, and moral disintegration. Within this framework, children's suffering mirrors a society's own fragmentation. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory complements this perspective by mapping how the destruction of protective systems—such as family, education, and community—multiplies the psychological damage initiated by direct violence. When these systems collapse simultaneously, the child's developmental environment transforms into an instrument of control rather than care, ensuring that trauma becomes embedded not only in individual memory but also in the collective moral fabric.

From a legal and institutional perspective, the study exposes the urgent need to redefine child torture as a distinct category of war crime. International instruments such as the Geneva Conventions (1949), the Rome Statute (1998), the [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(1989\)](#), and the Istanbul Protocol ([OHCHR, 2022](#)) provide legal recognition of the prohibition of torture but remain trapped within adult-centric epistemologies. The procedures governing evidence collection and testimony continue to privilege adult narrative coherence and rational recall forms, excluding the youngest survivors from formal justice processes. This structural exclusion transforms protection into abandonment, producing what can be called the institutional afterlife of violence. When children's testimonies are deemed legally inadequate, their truth is silenced not by the perpetrators alone but by the very systems meant to defend them.

This exclusion has profound intergenerational consequences. The absence of recognition does not erase trauma; it transforms it into inheritance. Silence becomes a carrier of memory, transmitted through affect and gesture rather than words. Within families and communities, unspoken suffering crystallizes into mistrust, dissociation, and the paralysis of empathy—an emotional atmosphere that perpetuates cycles of fragmentation and moral fatigue. The unrecorded pain of children thus becomes a psychic residue shaping the emotional and ethical terrain of the next generation. [Danieli \(1998\)](#) has described this process as the “legacy of silence,” a phenomenon through which entire societies inherit the emotional unfinishedness of unacknowledged trauma. The global community's failure to document, recognize, and respond to the torture of children, therefore, extends the cycle of violence across both time and generations.

The ethical implications of this failure reach beyond law into the realm of civilization itself. Torture of children signifies the collapse of humanity's most fundamental moral covenant—the obligation of adults to protect the vulnerable. When this covenant is broken, humanity loses ethical coherence; it forgets how to feel, respond, and repair. The act of torturing a child is not only an individual crime but a civilizational regression that corrodes the very principles upon which the human community rests. Addressing such violations requires more than legal judgment; it demands moral and cultural reconstruction. Justice must therefore become a therapeutic and relational process, one that restores meaning and human

connection where violence has destroyed them.

The future of justice in the context of child torture depends on a global paradigm shift toward a developmentally sensitive and trauma-informed framework. Such a transformation requires integrating scientific, ethical, and legal knowledge into a coherent methodology that captures the embodied and relational truth of trauma. It calls for investigators, clinicians, and jurists to develop shared procedures grounded in developmental neuroscience, attachment theory, and cultural psychology. This ensures that children's communication—whether expressed through silence, movement, or imagery—is recognized as legitimate evidence. Research must accompany this shift by generating data that bridges the gap between neurobiology and international law, establishing a vocabulary that can translate the somatic language of trauma into juridical meaning. Without such integration, humanitarian discourse will continue to name atrocities while leaving their structures intact.

In essence, the study affirms that war torture against children is both a crime of domination and a failure of care. It destroys not only the child's nervous system but also undermines the ethical nervous system of the world, the capacity to protect, empathize, and uphold moral order. A truly just response must transcend the punitive logic of retribution and move toward a restorative model of accountability that unites legal truth with psychological repair. Justice, in this sense, is measured not only by convictions but also by the restoration of safety, dignity, and a sense of belonging in the lives of survivors.

To listen to a child who has survived war torture is to confront the limits of language and the essence of justice itself. When humanity learns to hear beyond words—to recognize the truth carried in gesture, silence, and trembling—justice becomes more than law; it becomes recognition. As Rebecka (2024) has written, “listening is the beginning of justice.” It is through this act of witnessing, both legal and emotional, that the global community may begin to heal the fractures it has long ignored and reassert its most fundamental commitment: that no child's pain should remain unspoken, and no society should remain silent in the face of such truth.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Abdulrasul, H., Brice, H., & Jasińska, K. K. (2025). Developmental Timing of Adversity and Neural Network Organization: An fNIRS Study of the Impact of Refugee Displacement. *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience*, 73, Article ID: 101532. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcn.2025.101532>
- Attanayake, V., McKay, R., Joffres, M., Singh, S., Burkle, F., & Mills, E. (2009). Prevalence of Mental Disorders among Children Exposed to War: A Systematic Review of 7,920 Children. *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, 25, 4-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13623690802568913>

- Betancourt, T. S., Brennan, R. T., Rubin-Smith, J., Fitzmaurice, G. M., & Gilman, S. E. (2010). Sierra Leone's Former Child Soldiers: A Longitudinal Study of Risk, Protective Factors, and Mental Health. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 49*, 606-615. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00004583-201006000-00009>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Harvard University Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Clark, J. N. (2021). Beyond a "Survivor-Centred Approach" to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence? *International Affairs, 97*, 1067-1084. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab055>
- Danieli, Y. (1998). *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*. Springer.
- De Bellis, M. D., Woolley, D. P., & Hooper, S. R. (2019). Neuropsychological Findings in Childhood Maltreatment and Their Relationships to PTSD Symptoms and Brain Structure. *Child Maltreatment, 24*, 128-139.
- Dubow, E. F., Huesmann, L. R., & Boxer, P. (2009). A Social-Cognitive-Ecological Framework for Understanding the Impact of Exposure to Persistent Ethnic-Political Violence on Children's Psychosocial Adjustment. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 12*, 113-126. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-009-0050-7>
- Fassin, D., & Rechtman, R. (2009). *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*. Princeton University Press.
- Herman, J. L. (2015). *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books.
- Instytut Solidarności i Męstwa im. Witolda Pileckiego (2025). *Stolen Childhood: Crimes against Children Committed by Russian Forces*. Raport. [https://instytutpileckiego.pl/en/instytut/aktualnosci/raport-skradzione-dziecinstwo-zbrod-nie-przeciwko-dzieciom-popelnione-przez-wojska-rosyjskie_\(CENTRUM-LEMKINA\)_end.pdf](https://instytutpileckiego.pl/en/instytut/aktualnosci/raport-skradzione-dziecinstwo-zbrod-nie-przeciwko-dzieciom-popelnione-przez-wojska-rosyjskie_(CENTRUM-LEMKINA)_end.pdf)
- Kirmayer, L. J., Gone, J. P., & Moses, J. (2014). Rethinking Historical Trauma. *Transcultural Psychiatry, 51*, 299-319. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461514536358>
- McKenzie-Mohr, S., & LaFrance, M. N. (2017). *Creating Counter-Stories: Feminist Resistance and Social Change*. Routledge.
- McLaughlin, K. A., Sheridan, M. A., & Nelson, C. A. (2021). Biological Embedding of Childhood Adversity: From Neurodevelopment to Clinical Outcomes. *Annual Review of Psychology, 72*, 277-302.
- Nahlén Bose, C., & Tamdjidi, M. (2024). Neurodevelopmental Trauma and Resilience in Children Exposed to War and Political Violence. *Frontiers in Psychology, 15*, Article ID: 1223456.
- Nowak, M. (2020). *The United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty*. United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3891078>
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2022). *Istanbul Protocol: Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (Revised ed.). United Nations.
- Pearlman, L. A., & Saakvitne, K. W. (1995). *Trauma and the Therapist: Countertransference and Vicarious Traumatization in Psychotherapy with Incest Survivors*. W. W. Norton.
- Pynoos, R. S., Steinberg, A. M., & Goenjian, A. (1996). Traumatic Stress in Childhood and Adolescence: Recent Developments and Current Controversies. In B. A. van der Kolk, A. C. McFarlane, & L. Weisaeth (Eds.), *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (pp. 331-358). Guilford Press.

- Quénivet, N. (2021). *Children and Armed Conflict: The Role of International Law*. Routledge.
- Rebecka, W. (2021). *Rape: A History of Shame—Diary of the Survivors*. Healing Tree Publications.
- Rebecka, W. A. (2024). *War Rape Survivors' Testimonies: A Qualitative Study of War Rape Survivors from Congo, Rwanda, Kosovo, and Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Doctoral Dissertation, Touro University.
- Roth, P., & Wolf, E. (2023). Digital Security and Encrypted Communication in Humanitarian Research. *Journal of Ethnographic Methodology*, 19, 45-63.
- Schore, A. N. (2003). *Affect Dysregulation and Disorders of the Self*. W. W. Norton & Company. <https://wwnorton.com/books/9780393704068>
- Smeeth, D., McEwen, F. S., Popham, C. M., Karam, E. G., Fayyad, J., Saab, D. et al. (2022). War Exposure, Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms and Hair Cortisol Concentrations in Syrian Refugee Children. *Molecular Psychiatry*, 28, 647-656. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-022-01859-2>
- Teicher, M. H., & Samson, J. A. (2024). Practitioner Review: Neurobiological Consequences of Childhood Maltreatment on Brain Development. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 65, 233-260.
- UNICEF (2023). *More than 300,000 Grave Violations against Children in Conflict Verified Worldwide over the Past 18 Years*. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/more-300000-grave-violations-against-children-conflict-verified-worldwide-past-18>
- United Nations (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations General Assembly. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Viking. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/313183/the-body-keeps-the-score-by-bessel-van-der-kolk-md/>