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Excusing the Massacre: Russian Officials and State-Run Media on Bucha

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Abstract

On April 2 a series of immensely graphic images from Bucha, a suburb of the Ukrainian capital, were distributed by the leading international mass media. As details emerged, it became clear that Russian forces had massacred civilians in Bucha. Russian officials and state-run media have, however, been expressing an alternative view, using a “firehose of falsehood” to mislead domestic audiences and sow doubt about the cause of the massacre. Russian propaganda techniques employed in relation to Bucha include blaming the Ukrainian side, demonizing the Ukrainian government as “Nazis,” alluding to conspiracies that “the West makes up against Russia,” and pretending that “we were not there.”

Introduction

On April 2 a series of immensely graphic images from Bucha, a suburb of the Ukrainian capital, were distributed by the leading international mass media. The images showed local civilians, some of them with their hands tied behind their backs, shot or mutilated. Adviser to the Office of the President of Ukraine Mykhailo Podolyak, who was one of the first witnesses, claimed that these atrocities were committed by Russian troops. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Bucha, like other Kyiv suburbs, had fallen under the control of the Russian forces, which subsequently retreated in early April due to high losses, the prevalence of Ukrainian troops in the Kyiv region, and a change in Russian military strategy.

As the story developed and more journalists, officials, observers, and international organizations arrived at the site, it became quite clear that Russian forces had massacred civilians in Bucha. The mayor of Bucha has estimated the number of victims at approximately 300 civilians, although the investigation is still ongoing. Human Rights Watch has characterized the events in Bucha—as well as in a range of other Russian-occupied Ukrainian areas, such as Chernihiv, Kharkiv, and Kyiv regions—as war crimes against civilians.

Although the precise number of victims is not yet clear, the world is quite unanimous in its interpretation of the events in Bucha. Unsurprisingly, Russian officials and state-run media have been expressing an alternative view.

“The Provocation in Bucha Was Orchestrated”

Shortly after the shocking images of the Bucha massacre were published around the world, Russian officials and propaganda turned on “denial mode.” Commenting on the massacre, Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov alluded to the event in Bucha as a “show.” “Any accusations against the Russian side, against the Russian mil-

itary, are not just groundless, but this is a well-directed show. Nothing else. Tragic show,” he stated in a briefing with journalists on April 5.

Russian media front man Vladimir Solovyov expressed the view that the events in Bucha had been orchestrated by British intelligence. In his popular YouTube show, “Solovyov-Live,” he stated that “Bucha was ‘chosen’ because in English it sounds like Butcher—that is, a good consonance. So it is clear who is behind this: British specialists.”

Other state-run media came up with “proof” that the events were orchestrated. Russian state-run Channel One, Russia 24, and 360-TV ran stories that questioned the videos of the corpses from Bucha and sought to paint them in a different light. “Those who were indicated as the corpses are alive. Here is a man lying on the road moving his hand, and in another frame in the side mirror you can see that the deceased came to life and sat down,” stated the latter’s news release.

In fact, the state-run media have been spreading the only video about which there is any question at all (since a raindrop on the camera operator’s lens could be interpreted as a “movement”). Other, higher-quality videos disproving this alleged “movement” have been published, but Russian propaganda has declined to cover them.

“Ukrainian Soldiers Are to Blame”

Another narrative spread by a range of Russian political officials and pro-state media is that the massacre in Bucha took place after the retreat of the Russian soldiers. This statement, initially made by the Russian Defense Ministry, was quickly spread by the state-run media. According to the ministry, “during the time that this settlement was under the control of the Russian Armed Forces, not a single local resident suffered from any violent actions.” The ministry indicated that all Russian units completely left Bucha on March 30 and northward exits from the city were not blocked.

Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov made the same claim. “What happened there is an outright provocation aimed at presenting Russia as guilty of crimes committed after the withdrawal of the Russian Armed Forces,” he stated in a conversation with UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths.

The state-run media unanimously propounded the same narrative: a long time passed between the Russian troops’ departure and news of the massacre, which proves that they had nothing to do with it. In its news coverage on April 6, Russian federal Channel One expressed precisely this view: “The West and Ukraine indiscriminately accuse our military, suppressing the fact that the footage appeared 4 days after the withdrawal of our troops.”

State-run TV channel Russia-24 came to the same conclusion. “The monstrous provocation in Bucha was done clumsily—Ukrainian propaganda revealed itself. It is enough to trace the chronology: according to their own sources, the Ukrainian army entered Bucha several days after the Russian retreat. No one discovered any corpses until then,” the news outlet claimed.

The chronology of Russian propaganda is also quite confusing, as it relies on Russian official sources, which announced that Russian troops would leave Bucha on March 30. However, it is clear from other public statements and news coverage that Ukrainian forces did not control Bucha until April 2.

Blaming Ukrainian soldiers for a diverse range of damage likely caused by Russian troops in Ukraine has been a key strategy of Russian propaganda. The latter, for instance, accused the Ukrainian army of shelling the maternity hospital in Mariupol, an act that is widely believed to have been carried out by Russian forces.

The Bucha massacre is no exception to this strategy. State-run Ren-TV claimed that Ukrainian soldiers had killed the citizens of Bucha. “Atrocities and crimes indeed happen in Ukraine, but these crimes are the work of Ukrainian Nazis. No one but Kiev needed a provocation in Bucha, because NATO countries have so far been very reluctant to talk about military assistance,” its news release of April 5 stated.

State-run 360-TV sought to further substantiate this narrative. “The corpses in Bucha have white bandages on their hands. This was a certain identification sign meaning ‘I am loyal—do not shoot’ during the presence of Russian troops. For the Ukrainian military, for its part, this sign means ‘the enemy.’ So it is possible that in this way the Ukrainian military cleansed the city of unwanted people,” news coverage from April 4 argued.

State-run Channel One not only included the term “Ukrainian Nazis” in its coverage, but also saw an American hand in the Bucha massacre. “It is quite obvious

that the situation in Bucha was inspired and organized by the United States, and the representatives of Ukraine were only playing the role of actors. The United States and Brussels seized authority in Ukraine and brought the Nazis to power, so there will be more ‘Buchas’ coming,” the channel’s April 5 coverage stated.

These narratives have been disproved by clear evidence that the massacre occurred while Russian troops were in Bucha. For instance, satellite pictures show that multiple corpses had been lying on the streets of Bucha since March 11—when the city was under Russian occupation.

Western Conspiracy against Russia

Another approach prevalent among Russian officials and state-run media was to accuse the West of making up the Bucha massacre in order to discredit the Russian side.

At a press conference in Moscow, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova openly criticized Western media for spreading “fakes” about Bucha. “By spreading fakes and blocking the truth, an alternative point of view, the materials of investigators and direct reports, they are accomplices in this terrible tragedy, which was the result of the Kiev regime. Yes, I accuse the Western media—and, above all, the American media—not just of spreading fakes and disinformation, but of complicity in a crime in Bucha. Your newspapers, your television, your columnists are complicit in this punitive action,” she stated on April 6. Zakharova also claimed that Bucha is full of Western intelligence and called for this to be investigated.

At a UN Security Council meeting on April 7, Russian Permanent Representative to the UN Vasily Nebenzya claimed that “Ukraine was and is just a pawn for the West in a geopolitical game against Russia, which they will easily sacrifice.”

Russian state-run television echoed these accusations in their coverage. “The staged video from Bucha was used by the West to blame our military for the deaths of civilians,” alleged Channel One.

Russian federal channel Zvezda, which belongs to the Ministry of Defense, conducted an investigation that came to the conclusion that the Bucha Massacre had been “staged” for the Western audience. “Those who know English clearly appreciated the strategy of Zelensky’s bloody PR people. In English, Bucha is consonant with Butcher. The staging in Bucha was played out specifically for the Western audience. Russia, on the other hand, is accustomed to false accusations, and the world knows that such disinformation won’t break us and we won’t shed a tear. Therefore, the bloody misen-scene was originally intended for the European layman, intimidated by the increased gasoline and food prices,” the reportage claimed.

Conclusion

The general narrative of Russian propaganda remains unchanged: blaming the Ukrainian side, demonizing the Ukrainian government as “Nazis,” alluding to conspiracies that “the West makes up against Russia,” and attempting to prove that “we were not there.” The latter is a classic maneuver Russia makes to deny involvement in the most heinous crimes it is believed to have committed. The MH17 airplane catastrophe, the poisonings of Sergey Skripal and Alexey Navalny, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and many other serious international crimes have been met with “we were not there” rhetoric on the part of Russian officials and propaganda.

That being said, Russian propaganda has commented a lot more on the Bucha massacre than on other aspects

of the war in Ukraine (for instance, rapes and lootings allegedly committed by Russian soldiers), domestic discussion of which has mostly been silenced. Its coverage of Bucha can best be characterized as a “firehose of falsehood.” This approach includes the creation of multiple narratives spread rapidly and massively in order to mislead the audience. At the same time, this kind of propaganda creates an illusion for the Russian audience that there is “another side of the coin” and a proliferation of alternative views of the Bucha massacre. Although between 74 and 81% of Russian citizens support the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is obvious that their vision of these events—as well as of the Bucha massacre—is different from the reality.

About the Author

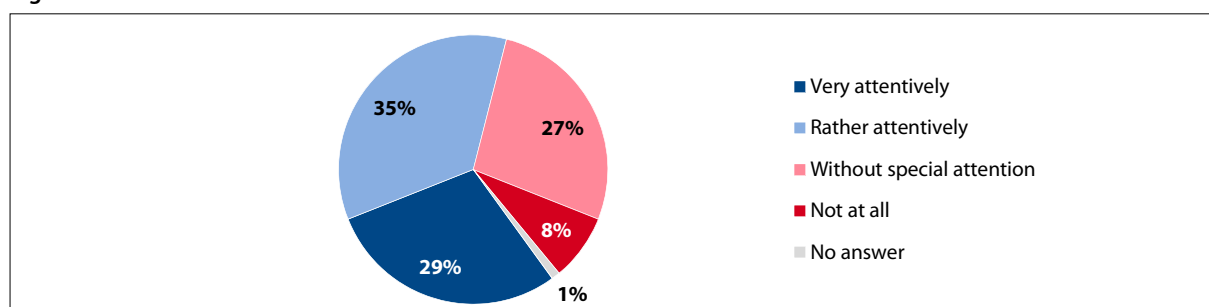
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OPINION POLL

Russian Public Opinion on the Ukraine War, Sanctions and Support for the Political Leadership

The opinion poll documented below was conducted by the Levada-Center as a representative survey of the Russian population from 24 to 30 March 2022 (N=1632). The Levada-Center is an independent polling institute which falls under the “foreign agent”-law in Russia and is considered to be a reliable pollster. However, in a poll by the Center itself, conducted already in 2016, only a third of respondents stated that they would answer honestly to questions about politics in public opinion surveys. Even a reliable pollster can, thus, only report the answers given, i.e. the polls indicate what people are willing to say in public and not necessarily what they really believe. Moreover, the participation rate (minimum response rate) on the poll documented below amounted to just 30%. For a critical discussion of these issues see the contribution by Kseniya Kizilova and Pippa Norris in the *Russian Analytical Digest* No. 281.

Figure 1: Do You Follow Events in Ukraine?



Source: Levada-Center, representative poll of the Russian population (N=1632) from 24 to 30 March 2022, available online at <https://www.levada.ru/2022/03/31/konflikt-s-ukrainoj/>