photographed in their yard on July 6, 2023. Photo: Ira Lupu for The Intercept

Alice Speri

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This article includes descriptions of sexual violence.

BUCHA, UKRAINE — **THE FIRST RUSSIAN** soldiers arrived several days after Bucha had fallen, looking for any men left behind. Anna, a widow, lived alone with her mother and teenage daughter.

"We have no men," Anna told the soldiers, speaking in Russian. She warned her mother not to speak, worried that the soldiers would pick up on her distinct Western Ukrainian speech and mark her as a *banderivka*, a pejorative Russians often use to refer to Ukrainian nationalists or people they think of as such.

Anna showed the Russians her father's death certificate, which noted that he had been born in Russia's far east. "It's what saved us," she later told me.

She tried to appear welcoming, heeding a neighbor's advice. "It's going to be worse if you don't let them in," the elderly woman had warned.

At first, the fact that they were three women alone did not feel uniquely threatening to Anna. Some of her neighbors were hiding male relatives in the basement — a far more dangerous proposition. In the early days of the occupation, Anna and her daughter, Maria, ventured into town, where they collected humanitarian aid from the local hospital and scavenged for

melted ice cream in abandoned stores. They saw the mutilated bodies of men on the streets.

Anna's friendliness seemed to appease the first group of soldiers — the "orcs," as she and many Ukrainians routinely call Russian troops. After searching the home, they gave Anna and her daughter white armbands to wear, a signal that they had been "filtrated" and posed no threat to the occupiers.

It wasn't until the second group of soldiers barged into Anna's yard when she realized that women, alone in the occupied ghost city, faced a different sort of risk. Their leader, a tall man in his early 20s, struck her temple with the back of his weapon and demanded oral sex. He also threatened to rape Maria, who was 13 at the time. Anna acquiesced to his threats to protect her daughter, she says, setting off a chain of events that would lead her own government to investigate her for collaboration with the Russian occupiers even as it eventually came to recognize her as a victim of wartime sexual violence.

I met Anna and Maria this summer at their home in Bucha: the city that first became synonymous with the horrors of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. They spoke for hours, talking excitedly over one another, repeating a story they had told many times but rarely, it seemed, to a willing listener. (Anna and Maria are pseudonyms; I am withholding their full names to protect their privacy.) Well into the conflict's second year, as Ukrainian forces seek to liberate territories that remain under Russian occupation, their story is emblematic of the fissures tearing through Ukrainian society. On the one hand, Anna's ongoing ordeal is a product of enduring stigma around sexual violence. On the other, it reflects deep-seated social divisions that have plagued Ukraine for years and have only escalated amid the current conflict.

As survivors in each liberated town revealed fresh evidence of Russian atrocities, Ukrainians clamored for justice and nursed

a growing vindictiveness against those perceived to have helped the occupiers. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy set the tone, signing a sweeping and unforgiving law targeting collaborators just days after last year's invasion.

In Bucha, neighbors summarily judged Anna's wartime choices and shunned her as a traitor. But her interactions with Russian soldiers also posed a set of challenges for law enforcement officials, who have pledged that no crime stemming from the conflict will go unpunished. Local and international prosecutors have opened hundreds of investigations targeting Russian soldiers over wartime atrocities, including sexual violence. At the same time, local authorities have investigated thousands of Ukrainian citizens for collaboration.

At once a victim and a suspected collaborator, Anna was caught between overlapping quests for justice, facing neighbors — and a law enforcement apparatus — unable to reconcile those contradictions.

"People don't understand exactly what collaboration is, and so they think that any contact with the enemy is collaboration."

"At the beginning no one believed that the Russians were capable of such things. People believed that those under occupation were not exactly collaborators but were quite friendly with the Russians," said Kateryna Ilikchiieva, Anna's attorney, referring to the sexual assault her client described. "People don't understand exactly what collaboration is, and so they think that any contact with the enemy is collaboration."

The legislation passed last year further entrenched that belief. The law does not specifically prohibit relationships with Russians, but it does bar Ukrainians from sharing information

that could have “serious consequences” with enemies of the state. In practice, any contact with Russians is fodder for speculation. “People understand even sex with Russian soldiers as collaboration,” said Alena Lunova, advocacy director at the Ukrainian human rights group ZMINA.

In Anna’s case, the suspicion alone prompted relentless questioning by multiple law enforcement agencies and the dismissal, for months, of her reports that she was abused. She is probably not alone; human rights advocates warn that some victims of Russian sexual violence are not speaking out because they fear being labeled and possibly investigated as collaborators.

In that sense, Anna’s story is a cautionary tale.

Anna walks in her backyard in Bucha, Ukraine, on July 6, 2023. During the occupation, Russian soldiers regularly came to her home and sexually abused her.

Photo: Ira Lupu for The Intercept

Pasha Giraffe

Long before Russian troops invaded Bucha in February 2022, Anna's all-female household generated rumors. Neighbors had gossiped for years about her supposed drinking and promiscuity. They even whispered about Maria, who stopped going to school after the pandemic. The two lived with Anna's 74-year-old mother in a disheveled house surrounded by a large, overgrown yard — on the margins of both the city and society, not caring much about what people said about them. Anna, with her blue hair and extravagant jewelry, looks at once much older than her 41 years and also like a sister to Maria, who dyes her hair bright red and wears artsy makeup.

While most of Bucha's residents fled as the Russians advanced, Anna and her family stayed put. Her mother, who is largely bedridden, didn't want to leave her home. Besides, they had little money and nowhere to go. They followed news of the incursion on TV until the power went out and the sky filled with smoke.

When the first group of soldiers came knocking, Maria noticed many of them seemed barely older than she was. She tried hard to seem friendly, thinking it safer.

The terror began in mid-March, when the leader of the second group of soldiers, called Pasha Giraffe by his compatriots due to his towering height, told Anna that some man would eventually have his way with Maria, so why not now. It had taken them three months to get to Ukraine, another soldier said; they missed women and "needed relaxation." Anna

insisted that Maria was a child and pleaded with the soldiers; she told them she knew they were good men. She agreed to sleep with them so they would not touch Maria. “I took everything on myself,” she told me.

After that, different groups of soldiers started coming by the house several times a day. They would announce themselves by firing shots in the air and hang around a pit fire in the yard, bragging about the people they had killed. Sometimes they would tell jokes and ask Anna and Maria to sing with them. Other times they were more menacing; Pasha Giraffe would cock his weapon when talking as if to remind them that he was in charge. Some of the soldiers were convinced that Anna and her daughter were spies for the Ukrainian army: They once burned Maria’s L.O.L. dolls — plastic figurines that are popular around the globe — because they believed that a laser light in the toys was a recording device. The soldiers were unpredictable and “twisted,” Anna and Maria said. They were always drunk, and most came to the house for sex.

Anna didn’t want her mother to know what was happening, so she never took them inside. Instead, one by one, they filed into a garage in the back of the yard, “like they were waiting in line for the bathroom,” Anna said. There were sometimes up to 10 men a day, she recalled, maybe 30 to 50 different soldiers in a two-week period.

Meanwhile, the other soldiers lingered in the yard with Maria. They put their arms around her waist, sometimes touched her legs, but never more, she said. She credits her mother, but also what she described as her wits. “I learned how to be around them,” she said. “We were playing nice, trying not to be rude. We played their game, said Zelenskyy is a jerk, Putin is great, telling them they were liberators.”

Anna believes most of the soldiers must be dead by now, but she said she would kill Pasha Giraffe herself if she could. She

got to know some others by their nicknames as well: There was Sergeant, Shamil, Puppy, and Monarch, who broke down toward the end of the occupation and apologized to Anna. He didn't know why they came to Bucha, he said, nor why they did what they did.

Her familiarity with the soldiers would come in handy, months later, when Anna was summoned to identify perpetrators of war crimes.

Maria sits in her backyard, where Russian soldiers would often linger during their occupation of Bucha, Ukraine.

Photo: Ira Lupu for The Intercept

Return to Bucha

Throughout the monthlong occupation of Bucha, Russian soldiers killed at least 501 people, according to a newly erected memorial that officials warn is incomplete. When the city was liberated in early April 2022 and residents returned, they found dozens of Ukrainian bodies in mass graves. There was a mound of partially burnt corpses in a shallow patch in Anna's neighborhood. Others were scattered in the streets, some with their hands tied behind their backs, bearing signs of torture.

Not far from Anna's home, on the leafy outskirts of the city, three brothers were found slain, at least one of whom had worked as a police officer. There was also a woman who taught the Ukrainian language, whom neighbors believe was targeted along with her husband and son for refusing to speak Russian to the occupiers. Some people who had fled found their homes looted and burnt; other homes were untouched.

Ira, a neighbor who lives down the street from Anna and asked me to use only her first name, was among those who returned. On April 4, the first day returning residents were allowed into the city, she walked through her yard, cradling her cat, as the executed bodies of her husband and two other male relatives lay on the ground nearby.

Ira remembers seeing Anna and Maria that day. Like other residents, she had heard rumors that the two were among those looting abandoned houses. Blurry photos and videos had circulated on social media, some taken surreptitiously through slits in neighbors' fences. In one, Anna is pushing a wheelbarrow carrying a large piano. In another, she stands next to a resident whom neighbors also accused of looting; after the invasion, he killed himself because of the shame, Ira said. In yet another photo, Anna appears to be smiling.

The smile is what bothers Ira most. The day she returned to Bucha, she photographed Maria and Anna: the daughter flashing a wide grin, the mother a more subdued one. Ira said they had greeted her from down the street waving a victory sign. “We were so happy to see living souls,” Maria told me.

But to Ira and others, the fact that they were still alive, seemingly in good spirits, and that their house was mostly intact, were indisputable signs of their treason. “They are smiling at the same time that there are bodies in my yard,” she said. “Does a victim act like that?”

Throughout the monthlong occupation of Bucha, Russian soldiers killed at least 501 people. Many were found scattered in streets and backyards, some with their hands tied behind their backs, bearing signs of torture, on April 4, 2022.

Photo: Felipe Dana/AP

Rumors about Anna grew worse as more residents trickled back into the city. On social media, people referred to her as a “whore”; some asked for her address and threatened to kill her. Some neighbors said that she had been “in charge” of the

looting, an offense they put on par with the actions of Russian soldiers. They also reported her to the police.

The looting is not all that neighbors blame Anna for. Some municipal workers who had stayed during the occupation and were beaten by soldiers accused her of riding in an armored vehicle with the Russians and guiding the soldiers to them. Neighbors speculated that two elderly residents, whose bodies were found piled among others not far from Anna's home, were targeted by the Russians after yelling at her for looting. Some neighbors wondered how the soldiers had been able to identify the police officers, former members of the military, and community leaders they executed. "Someone told them," said Ira. "Maybe it was Anna."

As I spoke with Ira, an elderly woman stopped to listen, interjecting that the white armband the soldiers gave Anna was a sign "she was in their camp." Another neighbor, who only gave her name as Svitlana, noted with scorn that Anna had taken to wearing earrings with a Ukrainian flag after the city was liberated. "She started working on her new image after the occupation," said Svitlana. When residents hurled insults at her, she added, Anna told them that the Russians would be back. Her father was Russian, Svitlana stressed. "It's in her DNA."

Then there was the sex with soldiers. Her neighbors accused her of enjoying it. They told me about rumors that she drank with the soldiers, danced with them, and even fired their weapons.

Anna doesn't deny taking the piano, which she said she found in the street and took into her home, with the help of some neighbors, after the Russians left the city. Many residents who remained in Bucha looted, she added, thinking that those who fled wouldn't return. But she said she never gave the soldiers information about her neighbors, nor did she fire their

weapons. She laughed when I told her what the neighbor said about her riding in an armored vehicle. And she says she spoke openly to her neighbors of having slept with soldiers, telling them she had done it to protect her daughter.

Ira doesn't believe her. She noted that several other women in Bucha who were raped by soldiers had been killed afterward, while another woman who emerged from a cellar after the invasion looked barely alive and was unable to speak of the abuses she had survived. "That's an example of how a person goes through violence, not smiling," Ira said. Anna, she insisted, "either is a very good actress, or has a mental problem, but it's not sexual violence."

Anna next to the garage where she was sexually abused by Russian soldiers, in Bucha, Ukraine, on July 6, 2023.

Our Orcs

As Anna's neighbors whispered, Ukrainian authorities began to investigate her.

For several weeks, a steady stream of law enforcement officials came to her house. Throughout the visits, Anna took every chance to report the soldier's abuses, repeatedly asking for a lie detector test to prove she was telling the truth. Nobody believed her, she said, because she wasn't beautiful and because her clothes were dirty. "If you survived the occupation, you were a collaborator," she said. "People who were not in the occupation just do not understand what happened here and what it was like."

Ukrainian soldiers were the first to stop by, looking for weapons the Russians might have left behind. After that, most of the officials who came didn't explain what they were looking for, and Anna didn't always know what agency they were with. Photos Maria took on her phone show that several worked for the Department of Strategic Investigations, a special unit of Ukraine's national police.

"If you survived the occupation, you were a collaborator."

Someone from the local prosecutor's office came too. Anna is not sure how the office learned of her ordeal but said the prosecutor, Roman Pshyk, was the only one who appeared to take her account of the sexual violence seriously. Pshyk accompanied her to a gynecological exam shortly after the city was liberated, where she was horrified to see many elderly

women. In the waiting room, she thanked herself for having protected her mother in addition to Maria.

Pshyk, who has since left the office, told The Intercept that Anna's case was one of more than 100 investigations into Russian crimes the prosecutor launched after Bucha's liberation. "Any report of sexual harassment prompts a criminal prosecution investigation," he said. "We can't only take the position of the victim. We need evidence." He added that his office had not yet heard the rumors about Anna and focused only on her testimony. He said the office later referred the case to national police and to Ukraine's intelligence services, the SBU, though Anna didn't hear from them until several months later.

When the local police came to her house, they found cans of spray paint in the garage and claimed that it was used by Russians to mark the homes of allies. Other officers searched every room in the house, rummaging through drawers and asking for receipts to prove that items weren't stolen. Svitlana, the neighbor, told me that police shared photos of items they discovered at Anna's home with other residents, in an effort to identify stolen property. The police did not respond to The Intercept's questions.

Some of the officers were rough. In June last year, they demanded all the phones in the house, with no explanation. When Maria yelled at them and tried to film them, they snatched her phone and shoved and handcuffed her. Vitaliy Pelehatiy, a senior investigator with the Department of Strategic Investigations who was in charge that day, told The Intercept that officers were searching for stolen property and confiscated the phones as part of the investigation.

"They behaved like orcs," said Anna. "Our orcs."

Kateryna Ilikchiieva, the volunteer attorney representing Maria and Anna in a war crimes case against Russian soldiers, visits them at their home in Bucha, Ukraine, on July 6, 2023.

Photo: Ira Lupu for The Intercept

A Slow Reckoning

Sexual violence goes substantially underreported virtually everywhere, but in conflict zones, the stigmatization of victims can be exacerbated. As Ukrainian forces seized back control of occupied territories last year, reports began to emerge of widespread sexual violence by Russian troops. The true toll may never be known, particularly in large swaths of the country that remain under occupation. Even in liberated areas, advocates caution that fear and persistent taboos about sexual violence make the scale of the abuses virtually impossible to assess. Often, they say, law enforcement agencies' own biases and failures only compound the problem.

"Because it is a shame to talk about sexual violence, our society charges these people as if they're not a victim but more of a perpetrator," said Gyunduz Mamedov, a deputy to Ukraine's previous prosecutor general and a rare, outspoken critic of the collaboration law. The suspicion with which sexual violence victims are routinely treated, he said, amounts to "a double victimization."

Seven months into the war, in September 2022, Ukraine's prosecutor general opened an office within the war crimes division to investigate and prosecute conflict-related sexual violence, or CRSV. It was a formal recognition of systemic abuses — and the fact that an array of Ukrainian agencies has failed to adequately support survivors.

It was around this time that Anna's interactions with the authorities took a turn. "After that, they started to work on the

sexual violence case more sensitively, or to work on it at all," said Ilikchiieva, her attorney, a volunteer who was connected to Anna by a legal nonprofit earlier this year.

Late last summer, two SBU officers came to Anna's house and handed her a document recognizing her status as a victim. In the months that followed, they asked more questions about her contacts with soldiers, and last November they finally gave her the polygraph she had been demanding for months.

In a two-hour interview with the SBU officers, she told me, they asked her a wide range of questions: Was she raped? By how many people? What about the looting? Did she work with Russia's security services or kill anyone? It felt just as much an investigation into war crimes by the Russians as a probe into Anna herself. The officers warned her she would go to jail if she lied, and she answered all their questions. Afterward they drove her home, and a few days later an officer called to say she had passed the test.

The officers' questions were the closest Ukrainian officials came to acknowledging that they suspected Anna of collaboration. The SBU did not respond to The Intercept's request for comment. Anna's lawyer said she was never notified of a formal investigation, though Anna's various interactions with law enforcement authorities pointed in that direction. Despite the lack of formal charges against her to this day, Anna's neighbors in Bucha have no doubt about her guilt.

Iryna Didenko, the prosecutor in charge of conflict-related sexual violence at the office of the prosecutor general of Ukraine, acknowledged in an interview that "huge mistakes" were made in the first months after the invasion and that law enforcement officials were unprepared to deal with victims. Investigators often didn't keep information confidential, she noted, at times sharing it widely within the community. When she came in, she took over cases involving sexual violence from

other agencies and overhauled the investigative interview process. Now, there must be a woman on every team, and investigators have been instructed to speak to witnesses and victims more empathetically. Didenko launched pilot programs in Kherson and Kharkiv, territories that Ukrainian forces liberated last year, where multiagency teams were trained by international experts on best practices when dealing with conflict-related sexual violence.

Changing the culture of law enforcement, Didenko said, will take time. She also said there is a need for greater public education about sexual violence. She cited a USAID-led survey, published in May, in which most respondents noted that survivors of sexual violence "constantly face biased attitudes from Ukrainian society," discouraging them from seeking help. "People will sometimes say a victim of rape may not have been against it," she said. "But we are seeing changes; there is stronger support for victims."

Didenko declined to comment on Anna's case specifically, citing confidentiality, but Anna said Didenko visited her earlier this year and was shocked to learn about how investigators had treated her. A week later, the phones Anna had been trying to get back from police for nearly nine months were returned to her.

By the end of last year, Didenko's office had opened more than 220 sexual violence investigations; the office ultimately filed charges against Russian soldiers in 62 cases. Didenko acknowledged that there are likely many more incidents that are not on her office's radar because of the stigma associated with sexual violence and fear, in some liberated areas, that the Russians might return. Earlier this summer, Ukraine's prosecutor general Andriy Kostin introduced a new plan to strengthen protections for victims of wartime sexual violence. Russia often uses such violence, he wrote, "as a form of torture, a way to humiliate and break resistance."

Bodies of civilians lie on Yablunska Street in Bucha, Ukraine, after the Russian army retreated from the city on April 2, 2022. Photo: Ronaldo Schemidt/AFP via Getty Images

Splitting Society

The first calls for legislation to punish Ukrainian collaborators came on the heels of the 2014 Donbas conflict, during which Ukrainian separatists, backed by Russian troops, seized large swaths of land in the country's east, in a precursor to the current war. Russia went on to unilaterally annex those lands following last year's full-scale invasion.

Vitaliy Ovcharenko, a prominent blogger-turned-soldier from the Donbas's Donetsk region, helped draft a law in 2017 that would have imposed civil penalties on officials and administrators who had supported the separatist effort, including banning them from holding public office. In towns that remained under Ukrainian control, he told me, residents who had aided pro-Russian forces, at times leading to the abuse or death of their neighbors, roamed freely. It wasn't uncommon for people who had been tortured to run into their torturers at local shops. "There was a crisis of justice in Ukrainian cities, and no one cared, no one was taking responsibility, and no one knew how to bring these collaborators to justice," Ovcharenko said.

Ovcharenko's proposal stalled after being introduced in Parliament in 2018. He and other local activists believed there was no appetite among Ukraine's political leadership for criminalizing collaboration. He said that human rights advocates in Kyiv, some 500 miles away, accused him of being a traumatized veteran out for vengeance and warned that the proposed law had a violent, "vigilante" connotation to it. "They said, 'We don't need this confrontation in society.' I told them, 'If you left Kyiv and got to the ground, you would see that there are already confrontations,'" he said. "When society feels that there is no regulation from the government, it starts mass

regulation by the people — and that ends with broken tires, broken windows, Molotov cocktails, and violence.”

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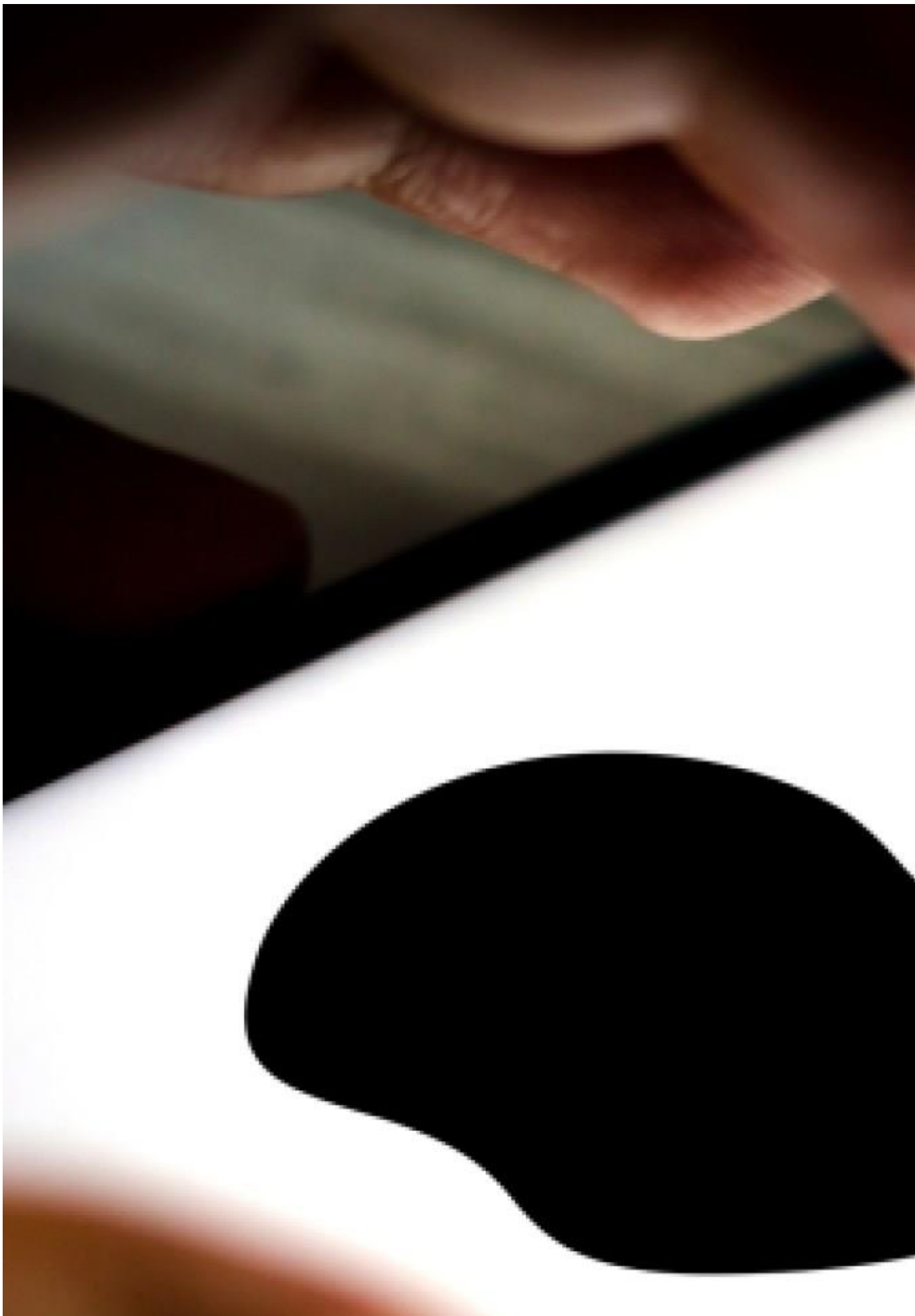

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Several parties, including Zelenskyy's, introduced similar proposals in later years, but they never came up for a vote, partly because of Ukrainian legislators' concerns that they would enflame social divisions. It was also unclear how collaboration would overlap with existing laws, including on treason.

Until last year: After the invasion, legislators voted Zelenskyy's version into law so hastily that the legal advisers who evaluated the bill noted that they had done so under time pressure and "in extraordinary circumstances." The result, many critics charge, was a "bad law" whose overly vague contours effectively criminalize a much broader range of behavior than originally intended. In some parts of the country, it could potentially apply to tens of thousands of people.

The law prohibits participation in political, legal, and law enforcement activities under the occupying authorities and the transfer of resources to them, as well as acts that lead to the "death of people or other serious consequences." It bans Russian propaganda in educational institutions and the "public denial by a citizen of Ukraine of the armed aggression against Ukraine." Penalties range from bans on holding government jobs to confiscation of property and prison sentences of up to 15 years.

The legislation leaves little room for the complexities of war and people's need to survive it.

While its proponents argue that it serves as a deterrent, the legislation leaves little room for the complexities of war and people's need to survive it. The law applies to Ukrainians

providing Russian forces with information about military or civilian targets — as was the case with the agent who helped direct a Russian missile attack on a crowded café earlier this summer that killed 13 people. But it has also been used against local officials who remained in their posts under the new authorities, teachers showing up for work in occupied areas, and private citizens selling hogs or other goods to Russians or expressing opinions, including via social media, that are seen as supportive of the invasion.

So far, prosecutors have investigated more than 6,000 cases of alleged collaboration, according to Ukrainian government records. While many were tried in absentia, scores of people have been convicted already.

Some civil society groups and officials have called on the government to amend the law and apply it more selectively. Iryna Vereshchuk, the Ukrainian minister responsible for reintegration, warned against branding "everybody" who remained in occupied territory a collaborator. "Many people look to the future with fear because they don't know if they fall under those categories," she said last year. Tamila Tasheva, the government's permanent representative for occupied Crimea, also called for a separate approach for Ukrainians who have lived under occupation for years.

But lawmakers have so far refused to budge, with few politicians willing to be seen as soft on those who are considered traitors in the popular imagination.

"The government is pretty understanding of what's going on. It's not a secret for those who are working with the issue, but the problem is that you need to explain to society why we need to change this law," said ZMINA's Lunova. "They can split society with this issue of collaboration."

The phenomenon is hardly unique to Ukraine. "Every war has its collaborators, and every war has an often brutal response to

those collaborators," said Shane Darcy, deputy director of the Irish Centre for Human Rights at the University of Galway, who has researched the issue globally. Still, models for how to address it are scarce. Even international humanitarian law — the body of law that rules conduct in armed conflict — has a "blind spot" when it comes to collaboration, Darcy added.

International law posits that life should continue as normally as possible under occupation and requires occupying authorities to continue providing administrative services to civilians, allowing them to recruit former public servants to keep running them so long as it is not by coercion. "Of course, in a situation of occupation, it's very hard to draw a fine line between what's coercive and what's not," said Darcy. At the same time, international law also allows states to punish collaborators, provided they do so humanely. "Ukraine — to their credit — seem to be subjecting everyone to a legal process," he added. "They're not stringing collaborators from lampposts."

Ukraine's justice system is grappling with how to handle some 80,000 alleged crimes by Russian forces. Critics of the collaboration law argue that, at best, it's impractical because it places more strain on a system that's already overburdened. "We understand the situation, but you can focus on those whose crimes are really critical, against state security, whose actions really have heavy consequences," said Lunova. "You shouldn't prosecute those who put a like on Facebook."

"They are pitting people against each other."

Nadia Volkova, a human rights attorney and director of the Ukrainian Legal Advisory Group, who helped draft a never-implemented transitional justice plan after the 2014 conflict, argued that the mass prosecution of low-level collaborators risks causing long-term harm. Already, last year's invasion deepened divisions that had long split Ukraine. "They

are manipulating these differences that have always existed in Ukraine, because it was never a unified nation in a way," she said. "They are pitting people against each other. One might think that they want to show everybody that if you're not going to be supporting Ukraine, this is what is going to happen to you, you're going to be held responsible. But if they want to unify the nation, it's not really the way to go."

Maria and her mother Anna stand in their backyard in Bucha, Ukraine on July 6, 2023. They have been shunned by neighbors, who view them as traitors.

Photo: Ira Lulu for The Intercept

Neighbors and Traitors

As Ukrainian forces wrestle territory back from Russian control, accusations of collaboration have become ubiquitous across the country. Old conflicts are sometimes recast in light of the ongoing conflict. Victims turn on victims.

“Sometimes it’s real cases, with real records, real evidence,” Leonid Merzlyi, the chief judge in Irpin city court, whose jurisdiction includes Bucha, told me when I visited his courtroom. “In other cases, it is neighbors’ fights.”

Though collaboration cases are usually investigated by national authorities and heard before higher courts, Merzlyi was well aware of their nuances. “If someone didn’t leave an occupied area, we need to know, why? And if someone had Russian soldiers visiting their house, why?” he said. “We need to analyze every case. It’s very crucial for Ukrainian society.”

While some Ukrainians in occupied areas “were supporting the enemy before, and it was clear,” he continued, others may have been “protecting their children, and they were forced by this natural feeling of protection, and it’s hard to judge in that case.”

Anatoliy Fedoruk, the mayor of Bucha for 24 years, noted that there were fewer allegations of collaboration there as compared to other areas that were occupied for longer periods of time, but he acknowledged that long-standing hostilities between neighbors were exacerbated by the conflict. “Often, people on the same street or even in the same family are ready to eat each other,” he said. “We are a civilized society and we do not prove things by conjecture: There should be evidence — whether of collaboration or of rape — not rumors.”

When we met, Fedoruk said that he wasn't familiar with Anna's case and couldn't comment on ongoing investigations. The next day, however, a team of municipal workers came to inspect Anna's rooftop. It had been damaged by shelling, and she had been asking the city to repair it for months. (They still haven't fixed it, she recently told me.)

Anna and Maria's war crimes case is currently in the pretrial phase, Ilikchiieva told me. As part of the prosecutor general's investigation, the two have traveled to Kyiv in recent months to identify soldiers in hundreds of photos authorities pulled from Russian social media. During one visit, Pelehatiy, the senior police investigator who had repeatedly visited Anna at home and who had been in charge when police handcuffed Maria, stood on a side of the room, watching skeptically. Pelehatiy told The Intercept he had heard about Anna's reports of sexual violence by soldiers, but that she had never told him directly about them. "He does not believe her," Ilikchiieva said.

For Anna, it makes little difference whether she will ever face criminal charges for looting or collaboration. Either way, she is now an outcast in Bucha.

Last winter, someone vandalized her fence. On Christmas Eve, while she and Maria were out, two young men from the neighborhood smashed their windows with baseball bats, stole a TV, and beat her mother, she said. After she reported the attack to police, one of the men returned to fix the fence and brought a different TV; he told Anna that he had not touched her mother. In January, the same men attacked Maria as she walked home, threatening her with a knife. Again, Anna reported the incident to police. She said they did nothing.

Anna has come to resent her neighbors and the Ukrainian officials who failed her just as much as she hates the Russian soldiers who abused her. "The worst part," she said, "was not the orcs."