

POLICY REPORT
OCTOBER 2026

Geneva Convention (III) on Prisoners of War: Translating Legal Requirements Into Daily Practice, Lessons from Ukraine

BY EMILY PREY AND HOAR HABRELIAN

NEW LINES
INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

NEW LINES INSTITUTE FOR
STRATEGY AND POLICY

Our mission is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

Our purpose is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.

CONTENTS

Executive Summary _____ 3

Recommendations _____ 3

Introduction _____ 4

Third Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War 1949 _____ 5

Monitoring and Access: Comparing Ukraine and Russia _____ 6

Global Implications of Russia’s War: Foreign Fighters as POWs _____ 8

Zakhid-1: A Case Study _____ 10

Conclusion _____ 11

Policy Recommendations _____ 12

 Ukraine _____ 12

 Europe _____ 13

Authors _____ 13

The content and views expressed in this policy report are those of the authors and should not be taken to reflect an official policy or position of New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy.

COVER: Flying birds in Ukrainian blue and yellow flag colors escaping barbed wire fence. (Illustration by Kseniia Dizdar / Getty Images)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought war to Europe for the first time in the 21st century. On both sides of the conflict, military forces have been capturing and detaining prisoners of war (POWs). However, POWs are treated very differently in Ukraine than they are in Russia, despite international legal obligations under the Third Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War. Ukraine's experience regarding the treatment and maintenance of POWs must be translated beyond general legal principles. Ukraine has unique experience and expertise in the concrete operational realities of POW infrastructure, including intake and classification, medical monitoring, labor, correspondence, religious accommodation, and the handling of third-country nationals that a state must address when developing its own POW detention capacity.

This report will provide a brief overview of the legal framework to which Russia and Ukraine are bound; a comparison between Russian and Ukrainian POW detention centers, including access granted to monitoring bodies, and documented alleged violations against POWs (from primary and open sources); an examination of the global implications of foreign nationals fighting on both sides of the war; a case study and lessons learned from a detention center visit in Ukraine by one of the authors; and recommendations to Ukraine and European states.

Policy Recommendations

Ukraine

- Establish structured intake screening and classification protocols to identify vulnerable POWs, flag individuals who may pose a risk to others, and inform housing and cell assignment decisions accordingly.
- Extend consistent, high-access monitoring to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other independent bodies uniformly across all POW facilities.
- Continue reducing features of the camp environment associated with ordinary penal detention where compatible with security requirements.
- Continue actively managing the risk of informal prison hierarchies and coercive subcultures.
- Continue to investigate reports of crimes like torture, ill-treatment, and sexual violence being perpetrated at Ukrainian transit facilities and POW camps and hold perpetrators accountable under the law.

Europe

- Review domestic legal frameworks, identify suitable facilities, and develop and train personnel in advance of need rather than in response to an active conflict.
- Establish structured mechanisms for lesson-exchange, training, and technical cooperation with Ukrainian authorities and practitioners.
- Direct continued financial and technical assistance toward Ukrainian POW camp infrastructure, medical services, and living conditions, both to support Ukraine's ongoing GC III compliance and to preserve operational expertise that may inform future European detention systems.
- Build institutional capacity for detaining third-country nationals, specifically recognizing that foreign fighters should not be treated as a uniform category warranting a single undifferentiated approach.
- Strengthen cooperation with countries of origin in Africa, South Asia, and Latin America on consular access, repatriation, and disruption of transnational recruitment networks.



Relatives of Ukrainian POWs and military personnel missing in action hold banners urging the return of Ukrainian soldiers from Russian captivity on Sept. 27, 2026, in Kyiv. (hurricanehank / Global Images Ukraine via Getty Images)

Introduction

With global conflict on the rise, more states are confronting the real possibility of having to hold prisoners of war (POWs) and how to do so under the Third Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War 1949 (GC III).¹ Russian aggression in Ukraine, which began in 2014 and escalated in 2022, is the largest full-scale war on European soil since the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. On both sides, the conflict has been marked by increasing infrastructure and planning around POWs. In fact, according to Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of POWs,² approximately 8,050 Ukrainian POWs had been returned from Russian captivity as of March 2026.

As the threat of future conflicts – driven in part by Russian imperial colonialism – seeps across Europe, Ukraine's allies are beginning to test and plan for POW camps of their own. In June 2026, the Netherlands began testing the rapid deployment of a large-scale POW camp³ that could hold 2,000 captured soldiers as it prepares for the possibility of increased Russian aggression across Europe. This is a clear sign of a shift in Europe toward

¹ International Committee of the Red Cross. 2024. "Geneva Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, August 12, 1949." IHL Databases, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciii-1949>.

² Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War. n.d. Homepage. <https://global.koordshtab.gov.ua/>.

³ Litnarovych, Vlad. 2026. "Dutch Army Prepares to Hold 2,000 Russian POWs as Europe Drills for War." UNITED24 Media, June 15, 2026. <https://united24media.com/war-in-ukraine/dutch-army-prepares-to-hold-2000-russian-pows-as-europe-drills-for-war-19826>

understanding and preparing for the realities⁴ of Russian President Vladimir Putin's imperial colonial aims for Russia across the continent. Ukraine has been living in this reality since 2014 and is now the most experienced country in the world in terms of warfare knowledge,⁵ including the building and maintenance of POW camps. Since the establishment of its first dedicated POW camp in May 2022, Ukraine has developed a system of POW detention operating under the GC III and Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 413 (April 5, 2022).⁶ Ukraine's Zakhid-17 camp in Lviv provides an example of its alignment with GC III and demonstrates that compliance with international humanitarian law is achievable even amid an active, large-scale war. This is not theory; it is practice tested under the pressures of modern warfare.

In this context, Ukraine should not be viewed solely as a victim state or a recipient of international assistance. In the fifth year of this war, Ukraine has also become a source⁸ of unique and highly relevant war-related expertise. Ukraine received substantial international support, particularly during the early stages of the full-scale invasion, but what remains is the considerable body of knowledge the country has developed through establishing, operating, and adapting POW camps during an ongoing international armed conflict. Ukraine has had to establish detention infrastructure, develop and adapt procedures, train personnel, accommodate evolving categories of POWs, facilitate independent monitoring, and address legal and operational challenges as they arise. No other state possesses comparable contemporary experience of applying the POW detention regime under GC III at this scale and in the context of an ongoing conflict. For states now reviewing their own preparedness, Ukraine should therefore be a source of operational expertise and institutional knowledge. Systematically identifying, documenting, and transferring the lessons emerging from Ukraine's experience could make an important contribution to strengthening GC III preparedness, implementation, and compliance across Europe and beyond.

Third Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War 1949

GC III Article 4(A)⁹ defines prisoners of war, including members of the armed forces of a party to the conflict, members of other militias or volunteer corps belonging to a party to the conflict (provided they comply with four conditions listed),¹⁰ and those who accompany the armed forces without actually being members, such as journalists. Article 5 provides the temporal scope of GC III protections and clarifies the protections of GC III on persons whose status is in doubt. Due to these regulations, POW status is highly sought after,¹¹ and POWs have rights and protections under international humanitarian law and customary international law that individuals outside the scope of GC III Article 4(A) are not entitled to. According to the ICRC Customary

4 Prey, Emily. 2026. "Russian Imperial Colonialism and Ukraine: Critiquing the North/South Binary." *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 50, no. 1 (Summer): 93-104. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/579fc2ad725e253a86230610/t/6a0b4ddaf692d0412d1c89eb/1779125723717/10_RussianImperialColonialismAndUkraine_Prey%28summer2026%29.pdf.

5 Gongadze, Myroslava. 2026. "Ukraine Is Showing Nato the Future of Warfare." *UkraineAlert* (blog), Atlantic Council, July 4, 2026. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraine-is-showing-nato-the-future-of-warfare/>.

6 Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 2022. Resolution No. 413, "On Approval of the Procedure for the Detention of Prisoners of War," April 5, 2022. Published in *Uryadovyi Kurier* [The Government Courier], April 8, 2022, no. 81. International Committee of the Red Cross, IHL Databases. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/national-practice/resolution-approval-procedure-detention-prisoners-war>.

7 Kushnikov, Vadim. 2023. "New Camp for Prisoners of War to Be Opened in Ukraine." *Militarnyi*, November 7, 2023. <https://militarnyi.com/en/news/new-camp-for-prisoners-of-war-to-be-opened-in-ukraine/>.

8 Zheltukha, Maria, Yaryna Voloshyn, and Kateryna Shunevych. 2026. "Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Lessons Learned from Ukraine." New Lines Institute, June 16, 2026. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/intl-law-peace/implementation-of-the-women-peace-and-security-agenda-lessons-learned-from-ukraine/>.

9 International Committee of the Red Cross. 1949. "Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Geneva, 12 August 1949, Article 4." IHL Databases. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciii-1949/article-4>.

10 GC III Art. 4(A)(2)(a) that of being commanded by a person responsible for his subordinates; (b) that of having a fixed distinctive sign recognizable at a distance; (c) that of carrying arms openly; (d) that of conducting their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war.

11 International Humanitarian Law Centre. "Protected Persons Under IHL." <https://www.diakonia.se/ihl/resources/international-humanitarian-law/protected-persons-under-ihl/>.

“... former Ukrainian POWs have testified that those who are captured by Russia are subjected to torture, sexual violence, deprivation of medical assistance, mock executions, starvation, and other egregious human rights violations.”

International Humanitarian Law Study’s Rule 106 on POW Status,¹² “The implications of being recognized as a combatant in an international armed conflict as significant, as only combatants¹³ have the right to participate directly in hostilities (for a definition of combatants, see Rule 3). Upon capture, combatants entitled to prisoner-of-war status may neither be tried for their participation in the hostilities nor for acts that do not violate international humanitarian law.”

Under GC III,¹⁴ POWs must be treated humanely at all times (Art. 13), are entitled to respect for their persons and their honor (Art. 14), must be provided free medical care required for the maintenance of their health (Art. 15), and are to all be treated equitably, without discrimination based on race, nationality, religious belief, or other similar criteria (Art. 16). Importantly, the Detaining Power may not inflict any physical or mental torture or any other forms of coercion upon POWs (Art. 17). It is required that Detaining Powers evacuate POWs as soon as possible after capture to camps far from the front lines (Art. 19). The purpose in drafting these protections was to foster soldiers’ compliance with the laws and customs of war in order to be rewarded with POW status if captured.

While it has been independently verified by various organizations including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) that Ukraine has broadly been complying with the Geneva Conventions and the laws of armed conflict, it is clear that Russia has not. Despite being a State Party to the Geneva Conventions, Russia regularly violates¹⁵ GC III with regard to treatment of POWs: former Ukrainian POWs have testified that those who are captured by Russia are subjected to torture, sexual violence, deprivation of medical assistance, mock executions, starvation, and other egregious human rights violations.

Monitoring and Access: Comparing Ukraine and Russia

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, both sides have captured and detained POWs – enemy soldiers who must be housed, fed, and cared for while in captivity. However, Ukraine and Russia’s approaches to these responsibilities differ widely. In April 2022, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine passed Resolution No. 413 detailing the procedures for detaining POWs. This resolution explicitly names and follows guidance from GC III and Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (1977).

In addition to diplomatic and consular visits, Ukraine grants the ICRC long-term access to all POW facilities in Ukraine. This authorization allows the ICRC to monitor the camps over extended periods of time rather than ad-hoc monitoring, which could allow POW camp facilitators to threaten detainees or coerce certain kinds of behaviors. Between February 2022 and April 2026, ICRC¹⁶ staff visited more than 8,900 POWs held by both parties to the conflict, although the vast majority of these visits took place in Ukraine as access to POWs held in Russia or Russian-occupied territories is severely limited. In this time, the ICRC has communicated with 17,000 family members across conflict lines with news of their loved ones. ICRC delegations to Zakhid-1 reportedly spend up to three weeks on site and are permitted confidential interviews with

12 International Committee of the Red Cross. n.d. “Rule 106. Conditions for Prisoner-of-War Status.” Customary IHL Database. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule106>.

13 International Committee of the Red Cross. n.d. “Rule 3. Definition of Combatants.” Customary IHL Database. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule3>.

14 International Committee of the Red Cross 1949 (*supra* note 1).

15 Kolomyets, Daryna. 2026. “Red Cross Chief Says Seeking Greater Access to Prisoners of War Held by Russia.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 24, 2026. <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-red-cross-russia-prisoners-of-war/33687095.html>.

16 International Committee of the Red Cross. 2026. “Russia–Ukraine International Armed Conflict: Your Questions Answered About the ICRC’s Work.” ICRC, January 16, 2026. Last updated May 28, 2026. <https://www.icrc.org/en/article/FAQ-icrc-work-russia-ukraine-international-armed-conflict>.



Released Ukrainian prisoners of war pose for a photograph following a prisoner exchange in the Chernihiv region in May 2026. (Roman Pilipey / AFP via Getty Images)

POWs without the presence of camp personnel, consistent with the monitoring framework envisaged under GC III. The OHCHR has separately reported¹⁷ that its monitoring mission continues to receive broadly unfettered access across Ukrainian detainment and POW facilities and generally observes conditions consistent with international norms.

Russia, on the other hand, limits access to detainment and POW facilities and subjects Ukrainian POWs to widespread and systematic breaches of GC III, including sexual violence, torture and ill-treatment, and starvation. Russian authorities systematically restrict¹⁸ ICRC access to POW facilities, only showing captives who are in relatively good health while hiding detainees who have been visibly tortured, abused, or starved in an effort to obscure the worst of their abuses. There have also been documented cases of Russian camp officials impersonating ICRC personnel to test prisoners, punishing those who spoke out with beatings and torture. In August 2025, 41 participating States in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) triggered the Moscow Mechanism¹⁹ to investigate the treatment of Ukrainian prisoners being held by Russia. The subsequent OSCE report found that Russia was very difficult to cooperate with and generally disregarded POW status of detained Ukrainian combatants.²⁰ Most Ukrainian POWs who have since been released reported that they had no contact with ICRC personnel during their captivity. From Feb. 4, 2022, to Nov. 30, 2025, OHCHR documented 664 cases of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) perpetrated by Russian officials against Ukrainian nationals, including POWs, civilian detainees, and civilian

17 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2025b. Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine, 1 June–30 November 2025. December 9, 2025. <https://ukraine.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/2025-12-09%20OHCHR%2043rd%20periodic%20report%20on%20Ukraine%20ENG.pdf>.

18 Diakonov, Ivan. 2025. "Russia Hides Sick and Tortured Ukrainian Prisoners of War from Red Cross – OSCE Report." *Ukrainska Pravda*, September 27, 2025. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/09/27/7532742/>.

19 Ascensio, Hervé, Veronika Bilková, and Mark Klamburg. 2025. "Report on Possible Violations and Abuses of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, Related to the Treatment of Ukrainian POWs by the Russian Federation." OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, September 22, 2025. <https://cdn.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/a/0/598042.pdf>.

20 Human Rights Watch. 2025. "Russia's Systematic Torture of Ukrainian POWs." December 11, 2025. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/11/russias-systematic-torture-of-ukrainian-pows>.

residents and 96 extrajudicial killings of Ukrainian POWs and persons *hors de combat*.²¹ In the last 10 months, Russia has increased its executions of captured Ukrainian servicemembers. Out of 187 recently released Ukrainian POWs whom OHCHR interviewed, 185 reported instances of torture and ill-treatment including dog attacks, suffocation, severe beatings, and electric shocks; 75% of the men reported being subjected to CRSV. POWs are being kept in penal colonies, penitentiary facilities, and detention centers both in Russia and within the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, OHCHR has documented a total of 41 deaths of Ukrainian POWs due to torture and ill-treatment at the hands of Russian servicemembers.

Male POWs and civilian detainees in Russia describe recurring sexual and gender-based violence, including rape, coerced sexual acts, electrocution and mutilation of genitals, prolonged forced nudity, sexualized humiliation, and threats of castration and enforced infertility, in some cases inflicted on entire groups during intake and accompanied by homophobic and xenophobic slurs. In total since February 2022, OHCHR²² has documented 141 cases of CRSV against male detainees. Women POWs and field medics face overlapping but distinct harms, including forced nudity before male guards and denial of reproductive healthcare. Medical care is systematically denied to survivors across both groups, compounding the initial injuries. Returnee testimony consistently identifies a reception procedure upon arrival at Russian facilities, known as *priyomka*, which is associated with severe beatings, humiliation, and torture.

Despite close monitoring from the likes of Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and OHCHR, Ukraine also sometimes falls short of its GC III obligations. Since February 2022, OHCHR has interviewed 137 POWs (all men, including 10 foreign fighters) about their experiences during interrogation, transfer, or detention in unofficial locations of internment in Ukraine. OHCHR documented a total of 79 cases of CRSV perpetrated by Ukrainian officials against 48 Russian and third-country national POWs (men) and 31 conflict-related detainees (19 men, 12 women). The report also documented 30 instances of extrajudicial killing of persons *hors de combat* including Russian POWs, although these mainly occurred in the first year of the war. More than half of the POWs detailed instances of torture or ill-treatment and said that medical staff who examined them did not inquire about their injuries. Ukraine's Office of the Prosecutor General is investigating these reports of torture or ill-treatment in these transit facilities, which sit outside of official POW camps under the authority of the Ministry of Justice.

Global Implications of Russia's War: Foreign Fighters as POWs

Russia's war on Ukraine is not limited to Ukraine's borders. Since the early days of the full-scale invasion, foreign fighters have traveled to Ukraine to join the International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine,²³ a military unit that was composed of volunteer fighters from around the world and was disbanded²⁴ in December 2025. Russia also utilizes foreign fighters, albeit through more coercive measures, often targeting vulnerable populations. The result is that foreign nationals have been, and will continue to be, captured as POWs; this has global implications for the states where these fighters come from.

21 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2025 (*supra* note 17).

22 Ibid.

23 International Legionaries. n.d. "Home." <https://www.ildu.com.ua/>.

24 Zavadzka, Yuliia. 2026. "Ukraine Disbands International Legion, Reassigns Foreign Fighters." Kyiv Post, February 10, 2026. <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/69779>.



Released following a prisoner exchange, Ukrainian prisoners of war react upon arriving at an undisclosed location in the Chernihiv region in May 2026. (Roman Pilipey / AFP via Getty Images)

According to Ukraine's Defense Intelligence,²⁵ Ukraine has identified 28,391 foreign nationals from 135 countries and non-recognized territories who have served under contract with the Russian army in Ukraine. This figure excludes the 14,100 North Korean soldiers who began appearing in 2024. Ukraine has recorded a steady increase in the number of foreigners fighting on behalf of Russia who have been captured on the battlefield; as of April 2026, hundreds of fighters from 48 different countries were being held by Ukraine as POWs. Russia's foreign recruitment plans for 2026 include enlisting nearly 20,000 foreign nationals, specifically targeting vulnerable groups like migrants with expiring visas or minor record violations. Russia uses force, fraud, and coercion to recruit foreign contract soldiers including false promises of salary and legal status.²⁶ Ukraine has attempted to combat this practice through its "Stop Russian Recruitment" initiative,²⁷ which facilitates diplomatic access to POW facilities (observing GC III obligations) and documents and disrupts Russian recruitment practices.

The scale of this recruitment is not incidental. Recent research²⁸ indicates that since 2022, Russia's recruitment of foreign nationals has evolved from reliance on ideologically motivated volunteers into a more globalized system that disproportionately targets socio-economically and legally vulnerable populations, with the number of foreign recruits reportedly increasing approximately fourfold between 2023 and 2025. Within Russia, recruitment has included raids targeting Central Asian migrants, with military contracts reportedly presented in some instances as an alternative to deportation or prosecution. Outside Russia, transnational recruitment networks have operated through platforms such as Telegram, at times using misleading promises of civilian employment or non-combat roles before recruits are deployed, sometimes within weeks, to high-risk frontline operations.

This pattern has been characterized as potentially meeting the elements of state-facilitated trafficking in persons under the Palermo Protocol, rather than constituting simple mercenarism.²⁹ The limitations of existing international legal frameworks further complicate accountability, particularly given that Russia is not a party to the U.N. Mercenary Convention. For Ukraine, this means that foreign POWs protected under GC III should not necessarily be viewed as a uniform population: Some may also have been victims of trafficking or coercive recruitment. This distinction may have important implications for their treatment, screening, and eventual repatriation, as well as for the obligations of states of origin to investigate recruitment networks operating within their own countries or targeting their nationals.

For international fighters who have been captured by Russia fighting on behalf of Ukraine with the (now disbanded) International Legion, misclassification³⁰ of their POW status has life-or-death consequences. Russia treats these captured soldiers as mercenaries and strips them of all international legal protections under GC III, subjecting them to show trials and cruel, degrading, and inhuman treatment. Several foreign nationals, including two British men, have been

25 Mykhailenko, Daria. 2026. "Ukraine Identifies More Than 28,000 Foreign Nationals Fighting for Russia's Army," UNITED24 Media, April 29, 2026. <https://united24media.com/war-in-ukraine/ukraine-identifies-more-than-28000-foreign-nationals-fighting-for-russias-army-18338>.

26 Amnesty International. "Russia: Recruitment of foreign nationals to fight in Ukraine amounts to human trafficking," 10 September 2026. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/09/russia-recruitment-foreign-nationals-human-trafficking/>.

27 Katsimon, Olha. 2026. "Coordination Headquarters: Ukraine Has Halted the Recruitment of Foreigners into the Russian Army in Six Countries." LIGA.net, April 29, 2026. <https://news.liga.net/en/war/news/coordination-headquarters-ukraine-has-halted-the-recruitment-of-foreigners-into-the-russian-army-in-six-countries>.

28 International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Truth Hounds, and Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR). 2026. "Combatants, Mercenaries or Victims of Human Trafficking? Russia's Recruitment and Deployment of Foreign Fighters in Ukraine." April 24, 2026. https://truth-hounds.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/20260424_fidh_rapport-ukraine_en_web.pdf.

29 UN General Assembly resolution 55/25. "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime." 15 November 2000. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>.

30 Bosch, Shannon. 2024. "The Deadly Consequences of Misclassifying Foreign Fighters in Ukraine." The Interpreter (Lowy Institute), July 22, 2024. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/deadly-consequences-misclassifying-foreign-fighters-ukraine>.

tried and sentenced to death³¹ by Russian-backed sham courts that are incompatible with GC III standards. While some fighters have been exchanged in prisoner swaps, Russia continues to disregard its obligations toward foreign national POWs. The states of origin for captured foreign fighters should join Ukraine in pressuring Russia – through all available means – to adhere to its GC III obligations for its nationals.

Zakhid-1: A Case Study

As the threat of war looms over Europe, Ukraine has provided a unique case study³² from which to learn about the organization and maintenance of POW camps. Zakhid-1 was established in May 2022 as Ukraine's first dedicated POW camp. The facility was previously a minimum-security correctional institution that had been abandoned prior to the full-scale invasion. It has since been repurposed for exclusive use for POW detention and is staffed by approximately 200 personnel across security, administration, medical care, logistics, and psychological support functions. The operation of the facility is governed by GC III and Ukraine's domestic implementing framework, Resolution No. 413.³³

Upon arrival, prisoners are processed, undergo hygiene and medical procedures and examinations, and go through a security screening before they are assigned to accommodation units. Consistent with GC III's requirement that officers and enlisted personnel must be housed separately, Zakhid-1 maintains separate accommodation units and further separates POWs by prior criminal history, nationality, and language. The camp also has facilities to separate POWs by sex, but Ukraine generally prioritizes the exchange of captured women combatants due to their extreme vulnerability in captivity. According to the camp administration, they have only briefly held one female POW at the facility before she was subsequently exchanged. Since the early days of the war, Russia has systematically recruited convicted criminals to fight on the front lines. While the exact numbers remain unclear, it is estimated that of the 10,000 captured Russian POWs, 40%³⁴ have a criminal history. Under GC III, all detained Russian soldiers must be treated as POWs regardless of their prior convictions; however, this has practical implications for camp management and can create additional challenges in maintaining order and discipline within the camp.

POWs work an eight-hour day in a variety of roles, including food preparation or furniture manufacturing, and receive compensation for their work. They are allowed to correspond through letters, but telephone calls were discontinued after Ukrainian families with relatives in Russian detention raised concerns of a lack of reciprocity on the Russian side. While GC III is formally non-reciprocal, such concerns can clearly affect and shape the implementation of GC III obligations. The camp maintains a canteen, showers, bakery, workshops, recreational and sports facilities, a grocery store, and five bomb shelters, alongside medical, hygiene, and clothing-inventory recordkeeping. The roof is marked with the letters "PW," the identifying symbol for POW facilities recognized under the Geneva Conventions. Consistent with GC III's requirement to preserve military uniforms, original uniforms are retained in storage while seasonal replacement clothing is issued every six months; items

31 Roth, Andrew. 2022 "Pro-Russia officials open trial against Britons captured fighting in Ukraine." The Guardian, June 7, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/07/pro-russia-officials-open-trial-against-britons-captured-fighting-in-ukraine>.

32 The primary evidentiary basis and analysis for the following case study is formed by a diplomatic monitoring visit to the facility on June 10-11, 2026, attended by one of the authors and subsequent statements from camp administration. Findings specific to Zakhid-1 should not be generalized to Ukraine's full network of POW camps without independent verification.

33 Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 2022. Постанова № 413, "Про затвердження Порядку тримання військовополонених" [Resolution No. 413, "On Approval of the Procedure for the Detention of Prisoners of War"], April 5, 2022. Legislation of Ukraine, Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/413-2022-%D0%BF>.

34 Mazurenko, Alona. 2025. "Over 10,000 Russian Soldiers Captured Since Start of Full-Scale Invasion." Ukrainska Pravda, December 31, 2025. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/12/31/8014147/>.

Ukrainian prisoners of war are welcomed after captivity on March 5, 2026, in Chernihiv oblast, Ukraine. (Artem Gvozdkov / Global Images Ukraine via Getty Images)



supplied by the ICRC remain the property of individual prisoners and may accompany them upon exchange.

Zakhid-1 includes an Orthodox church for Orthodox Christian worship, while the approximately 100 Muslim POWs are permitted to conduct prayers within their living areas. The camp administration reported that the Embassy of Iraq assisted in providing prayer rugs ahead of Ramadan in 2026. The medical infrastructure includes primary healthcare, dental and psychiatric services, radiology, and inpatient capacity. For further specialized healthcare needs, the camp will transfer POWs to civilian hospitals. POWs are regularly monitored for medical needs per GC III requirements, and severely sick or wounded POWs are prioritized for repatriation.

Under GC III, POWs must be held separately from ordinary criminal detainees and are subject to specific international legal regimes, not domestic punitive ones (GC III, Arts. 22, 97, 108). POWs are also entitled to trial only before courts that offer the essential guarantees of independence and impartiality generally recognized under international law (GC III, Art. 84). In comparison, while Zakhid-1 holds only POWs, Russia holds Ukrainian POWs alongside criminal inmates and subjects them to sham trials and judgments that fail to meet these standards. This practice has been repeatedly documented by international monitoring bodies, including OHCHR,³⁵ which has reported on the prosecution of Ukrainian POWs and violations of fair trial guarantees in its periodic human rights reporting on Ukraine.

Conclusion

GC III established a comprehensive international legal regime that governs all elements of captivity, from intake and accommodation to medical care, religious practice, labor, and correspondence. The international community, including international lawyers, media and policymakers, often documents violations of GC III but rarely notes or learns from its implementation. Zakhid-1 camp provides a rare example of GC III in formalized, operational practice amid an active war and stands in direct contrast to the systematic, independently corroborated pattern of torture and sexual violence documented in Russian-held facilities. The effective implementation of GC III requires adequate infrastructure, trained and professional personnel, independent monitoring, diplomatic and humanitarian access, and perhaps most importantly, sustained political will and commitment. Ukraine's hard-earned experience operating dedicated POW facilities under GC III since 2022 demonstrates

35 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2025 (*supra* note 17).

that these requirements are not only possible but achievable during conflict. The diverging treatment outcomes of POW camps in Ukraine versus Russia is a matter of institutional and political choice rather than material constraint. As POW detention may become an operational reality across Europe if Russia is not defeated, Ukraine's accumulated practice offers lessons that extend well beyond its own borders.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 STRUCTURED SCREENING AND CLASSIFICATION

Ukraine

Camp environments modeled on repurposed penal infrastructure risk replicating features of domestic punitive detention that are inconsistent with POW internment's non-punitive character under international humanitarian law. POWs are interned solely to prevent further participation in hostilities, not as punishment. As Ukraine continues to develop its POW detention system, the following measures merit consideration:

Establish structured intake screening and classification protocols to identify vulnerable POWs, flag individuals who may pose a risk to others, and inform housing and cell assignment decisions accordingly. This gives the management of informal hierarchies a concrete operational mechanism rather than relying on administrative separation alone.

2 CONSISTENT MONITORING TO THE ICRC

Extend consistent, high-access monitoring to the ICRC and other independent bodies uniformly across all POW facilities rather than concentrating access at selected sites, to sustain the transparency that underpins confidence in GC III compliance.

3 AGGREGATE POW REPORTING

Publish periodic aggregate reporting on POW population figures, facility conditions, and disciplinary incidents, separate from and in addition to information shared privately with the ICRC. Public-facing transparency of this kind reinforces confidence in GC III.

4 REDUCED FEATURES OF DETENTION ENVIRONMENTS

Continue reducing features of the camp environment associated with ordinary penal detention where compatible with security requirements so that the operational distinction between a POW camp and a prison remains visible in daily practice, not only in formal legal status.

5 CONTINUED MANAGEMENT OF INFORMAL PRISON SUBCULTURES

Continue actively managing the risk of informal prison hierarchies and coercive subcultures, given that a substantial share of the captured population – reportedly approximately 40% at Zakhid-1³⁶ – has a pre-existing criminal record. This requires deliberate separation of prisoner administration from ordinary penal practice in accommodation, discipline, and daily routine.

6 CONTINUED INVESTIGATION OF REPORTED CRIMES

Continue to investigate reports of crimes like torture, ill treatment, and sexual violence being perpetrated at Ukrainian transit facilities and POW camps, and hold perpetrators accountable under the law.

36 Over 10,000 Russian Soldiers Captured Since Start of Full-Scale Invasion (*supra* note 34).

7 IDENTIFY FUTURE LEGAL, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND TRAINING NEEDS

8 MECHANISM FOR TRAINING AND OTHER COOPERATION

9 FINANCIAL /TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO UKRAINE'S POW CAMP INFRASTRUCTURE

10 INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY FOR THIRD-COUNTRY NATIONALS

11 STRENGTHENED COOPERATION WITH COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

in



in



Europe

Ukraine's four years of operating a wartime POW system under GC III constitute a transferable body of practical expertise for European states now treating POW detention as a realistic contingency, illustrated by the Netherlands' 2026 test deployment of a large-scale camp.³⁷ The following measures are recommended:

Review domestic legal frameworks, identify suitable facilities, and develop and train personnel in advance of need, rather than in response to an active conflict.

Establish structured mechanisms for lesson-exchange, training, and technical cooperation with Ukrainian authorities and practitioners, drawing on accumulated Ukrainian experience in registration, accommodation, medical treatment, monitoring, and exchange of POWs.

Direct continued financial and technical assistance toward Ukrainian POW camp infrastructure, medical services, and living conditions, both to support Ukraine's ongoing GC III compliance and to preserve operational expertise that may inform future European detention systems.

Build institutional capacity for detaining third-country nationals, specifically recognizing that foreign fighters should not be treated as a uniform category warranting a single undifferentiated approach. This capacity should include interpretation services, consular-access procedures, and mechanisms for identifying individuals recruited through deception, coercion, or trafficking.

Strengthen cooperation with countries of origin in Africa, South Asia, and Latin America on consular access, repatriation, and disruption of transnational recruitment networks, treating recruitment prevention as an integral component of contemporary security policy rather than a purely humanitarian concern.

AUTHORS

Emily Prey is the director of the Mass Atrocities and International Law Portfolio and of the Gender Policy Portfolio at New Lines Institute, where she leads and produces research on topics including atrocity prevention, the future of international law, and gendered analyses of foreign policy.

Hoar Habrelian is a Ukrainian lawyer holding a Ph.D. in international law who works as a consultant on accountability with Justice Rapid Response, supporting justice initiatives related to international crimes in Ukraine. Previously, she served as a national lawyer with Global Rights Compliance's Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Mobile Justice Team in Ukraine and was a visiting professional at the Office of Public Counsel for Victims at the International Criminal Court.

37 Dutch Army Prepares to Hold 2,000 Russian POWs as Europe Drills for War (*supra* note 3).

Contact

For media inquiries, email
media@newlinesinstitute.org

To learn more about New Lines' publication
process, email
submissions@newlinesinstitute.org

For other inquiries, send an email to
info@newlinesinstitute.org

A: 1660 L St. NW, Ste. 450
Washington, D.C., 20036

P: (202) 800-7302