Targeting and Public Opinion: An Experimental Analysis in Ukraine

Forthcoming, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*

August 5, 2022

Yonatan Lupu
Department of Political Science, George Washington University
Monroe Hall, Room 417, 2115 G St., NW, Washington, DC 20052
ylupu@gwu.edu

Geoffrey P.R. Wallace
Department of Political Science, University of Washington
139 Gowen Hall, Box 353530, Seattle, WA 98195-3530
gprwall@uw.edu

Abstract

How does targeting in armed conflict affect public opinion in conflict zones? Armed actors choose between targeting militaries and civilians, further choosing whether to target civilians discriminately or indiscriminately. Existing work suggests these choices have important implications for conflict dynamics, in part by influencing public opinion, yet the causal effects of these choices on individual attitudes have not been clearly established. We conduct a survey experiment in the Donbas region of Ukraine, an area that has witnessed years of protracted fighting. We find that reports of civilian targeting robustly reduce approval of both the government and separatist forces. However, we find that the effects of *discriminate* civilian targeting are not statistically distinguishable from those of *indiscriminate* civilian targeting. Finally, we find that our respondents generally preferred a restrained, rather than reciprocal, response from actors in this armed conflict. Our findings have implications for theories of wartime violence.

Word count: 10,982

1. Introduction

How do tactics of violence in armed conflict affect public opinion in conflict zones? Armed actors, including states and non-state groups, face crucial choices of whether to target each other's militaries and/or the surrounding population, as well as how discriminatory that violence should be. The causes and effects of these targeting decisions have generated important findings and debates (e.g., Stanton 2016; Lyall 2009; Downes 2008; Kalyvas 2006). Targeting decisions may affect many aspects of conflict, such as final outcomes (Lyall and Wilson 2009; Tellez 2019); the frequency or lethality of subsequent attacks (Condra & Shapiro 2012; Souleimanov & Siroky 2016); civilian resettlement decisions (Steele 2009); and local reporting on armed groups' activities (Schutte 2017).

Theories about the effects of targeting decisions often rely on mechanisms focused on public opinion toward armed actors and their tactics among individuals living in conflict zones. While researchers have generated valuable insights into the consequences of targeting tactics, we have less evidence directly testing claims about their effects on surrounding populations. We examine the causal relationship between different forms of violent targeting (against the military only, and discriminate versus indiscriminate against civilians) and individual attitudes. Our work seeks to build on existing research demonstrating the importance of analyzing the micro-foundations of theories of the causes and effects of violent conflict (Chaudoin 2016; Grossman et al. 2015; Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014; Arves et al. 2019).

We develop a series of hypotheses about the relationship between targeting choices in armed conflict and public attitudes toward armed groups. We test these hypotheses by conducting a survey experiment in 2018 of individuals residing in the Donbas[1] region of

[1] An alternative spelling sometimes refers to the region as "Donbass" based on its transliteration from Russian.

Ukraine, which since 2014 has been home to an armed conflict between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatist groups in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR respectively), witnessing a range of violent tactics employed by both sides.[2] The conflict became part of a broader war after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022. We contribute the first experimental analysis we are aware of regarding how variation in fighting tactics can affect civilian attitudes in the combat zone of the Donbas War.[3] We randomized the information provided to respondents about the reported targeting choices of competing armed groups – military, discriminate targeting of civilians who support the armed actor's opponents, or indiscriminate targeting of all types of civilians.

The experiment yields three primary results. First, we find that civilian targeting reduces approval of armed actors relative to military targeting. What is particularly surprising is the robustness of this finding to alternative scenarios. The finding holds for both actors, regardless of the order in which their actions were presented, and regardless of what tactic the other actor chose. Thus, even respondents who were first informed about one actor targeting civilians preferred the second actor to target the military. We also find that, while respondents consistently disapproved of civilian targeting even when conducted by the party they generally support, the extent of this disapproval depended in part on their attitudes toward the Ukrainian government (and toward the EU, a proxy for sentiment against the DNR/LNR). Second, we find that we cannot statistically distinguish the effects of discriminate civilian targeting from those of indiscriminate civilian targeting. We encourage caution in avoiding the over-interpretation of a null finding, which does not imply that there is not a difference between the effects of

[2] The groups are sometimes referred to as DPR and LPR.
[3] On general attitudes among Ukrainians toward indiscriminate violence during the war, see Pechenkina et al. (2019).

discriminate and indiscriminate violence. The result is nonetheless striking because it holds even when indiscriminate violence is used in response to indiscriminate violence, and after excluding subjects who could not correctly recall the details of the scenario. We discuss the possibility that this result may be driven by elements of our survey design and/or the features of the Donbas conflict, but we also provide evidence indicating these may not be the only reasons and suggest implications from our analysis that are relevant to other conflicts. Finally, we find that the relationship between the actors' combination of tactics also has important effects on individual attitudes. Specifically, our respondents favored restraint over revenge: that is, they preferred that actors make less harsh targeting decisions even when the other actor used harsher tactics.

2. Tactics of Violence

Armed actors, whether government or opposition forces, use a wide range of violent tactics. These can include particularly abusive practices such as mass killing, genocide, terrorism, sexual violence, forced recruitment of child soldiers, and torture. In addition to variation in the *form* of violence, another important facet of armed conflict is combatants' choice of target. One salient distinction is between military and civilian targeting. According to both just war theory and the laws of war (commonly known as international humanitarian law or IHL), one of the fundamental questions when evaluating wartime conduct concerns *who* is being targeted, with certain individuals or groups viewed as largely acceptable to attack, while others are deemed mostly exempt from violence. The military or combatants (i.e., those who have taken up arms) are generally considered to be legitimate targets during war even if certain restrictions exist on what can be done to them, such as prohibitions on use of certain weapons or rights for prisoners of war. By contrast, non-combatants, or civilians, are usually viewed as possessing the

status of being *hors de combat* ("out of combat"), meaning they should be spared the excesses of war.

Nonetheless, many combatants, whether government or opposition, decide to target civilians rather than limit their attacks to enemy forces (Eck and Hultman 2007). International law and norms often do not inhibit abuse against civilians (Valentino et al. 2006).[4] These constraints may also be overshadowed by leadership ideology (Valentino 2004); regime or rebel group type (Downes 2007); organizational structures (Weinstein 2007); prevailing technologies (Lyall and Wilson 2009); and battlefield dynamics (Downes 2008; Kalyvas 2006; Hultman 2007), among others.

Civilian targeting further varies in terms of its level of *discrimination*. We use the term "indiscriminate" civilian targeting to refer to acts perpetrated against civilians with little or no concern for whether the intended victims support or approve of enemy forces. Similarly, Downes (2007: 421) defines this form of violence as "targeting everyone in a particular village or district with no effort to determine guilt or innocence." Notable examples include collective reprisals by Nazi forces against nearby towns in occupied Belarus (Zhukov 2017) and the widespread bombing of German cities by Allied air forces (Pape 1996) during the Second World War. At an extreme, attacks take on a near random character, such as Russian artillery forces' arbitrary shelling of villages during the Second Chechen War (Lyall 2009).

By contrast, we use the term "discriminate" civilian targeting to refer to acts purposely targeted against civilians based on their individual support for the adversary, where support can take various forms.[5] Some scholars use the term "selective" instead of discriminate violence, and

[4] Some find a more nuanced role for international law, conditioned by reciprocity or other attributes of armed actors (Morrow 2014).
[5] On a typology of varying levels of support, where only a small share become militant, see Lichbach (1998: 17-18).

some define it more narrowly than we do to refer to concerted collaboration.[6] Civilians may not directly take up arms, but can contribute in myriad other ways to an armed group, whether by actively providing supplies, shelter, information, but also through broader political support that can lend legitimacy to the opponent (Downes 2007; Valentino et al. 2004). Individual motives behind this support, whether out of sympathy for the rival or driven by fear and coercion, is less central than the fact that such support exists.[7] Discriminate violence is thus often perpetrated against civilians based on their varying contributions of support for the adversary. Violence conducted discriminately can still be quite brutal, such as many of the massacres that took place during the Spanish Civil Wars toward citizens loyal to either the Nationalist or Republican sides (Balcells 2010).

Why do armed combatants target civilians, and, when they do, how do they choose between indiscriminate and discriminate targeting? Attacks against civilians entail substantial costs, including the opportunity cost of not focusing military resources as much on enemy combatants, and potential condemnation at home or abroad. Armed actors often decide to target civilians, despite the potential downsides, as a second-best alternative to directly defeating the adversary militarily.[8] Armies desperate to improve their chances of victory or to reduce fighting costs may shift to targeting civilians when more conventional approaches fail to yield sufficient results (Downes 2008:29-35). Rebel groups are similarly more likely to turn to attacking civilians after suffering particular heavy battlefield losses that reduce their ability to compete directly with enemy forces (Hultman 2007). Both sides sometimes attack civilians to consolidate

[6] Kalyvas (2006: 104). We return to this distinction in Section 5.2.
[7] Kalyvas (1999).
[8] For instance, Downes (2008: 39) remarks that "Civilian victimization is thus a calculated risk, not an irrational gamble."

newly conquered territories, suppress restive populations, or coerce their opponents (Kalyvas 2006; Downes 2007; Zhukov 2015; Stanton 2016).

Discriminate civilian violence is also often much more difficult to conduct than indiscriminate targeting. Armed actors frequently lack the local knowledge needed to identify partisans (Kalyvas 2006: 171-176). They might overcome this problem by using widespread electronic surveillance (Bhavnani et al. 2011) or engendering co-ethnic defections (Lyall et al. 2015), but such tactics are costly, take time, and ultimately may come to nothing, while armed actors face the immediate and continuing pressures of fighting. Indiscriminate violence may thus offer a less than ideal, but still relatively attractive, "third-best" option for those combatants who have neither the capability nor the desire to engage in more discriminate forms of violence.

The effectiveness of indiscriminate violence on armed combatants' war aims remains heavily debated. In one of the most systematic treatments of the subject, Kalyvas (2006: 190) argues that, to the extent lethal coercion against civilians can be effective, it must be highly discriminate. Violence should target individuals on the basis of their support of a rival group, or at least be perceived as such by the local population. Indiscriminate violence, by contrast, may be counterproductive. Given the risk of being attacked regardless of their actions, civilians are likely to evade, resist, or perhaps even seek protection from rival groups where such options are available (Kalyvas 2006: 144-145). Similarly, scholars have found that indiscriminate violence has detrimental effects in the contexts of aerial bombing (Pape 1996: 10), rebels who turn to terrorism (Abrahms 2006), and collateral damage to surrounding civilians in civil war (Condra and Shapiro 2012).

Others counter that indiscriminate attacks against civilians may not be so harmful to combatants' war aims after all. Drone strikes in Pakistan – widely condemned for frequent

damage to surrounding civilians and their property – may reduce both the frequency and lethality of terrorist attacks (Johnston and Sarbahi 2016). Even the seemingly random shelling of villages by Russian artillery units during the Second Chechen War was associated with a decline in subsequent insurgent attacks (Lyall 2009). Areas in Peru in the 1980s suffering more collective government-led violence against civilians were associated with greater community-based mobilization *against* the revolutionary Shining Path rebel group (Schubiger 2021). Although sometimes coming to very different conclusions about the consequences of targeting choices, existing work acknowledges that targeting tactics have important effects on the attitudes of individuals on the ground.

3. Targeting and Public Opinion

3.1 Civilian Targeting

Violence can affect the beliefs and attitudes of ordinary people living in conflict zones.[9] Existing arguments about the effects of such violence on combatants' war aims often rest on explicit or implicit micro-foundational assumptions about its relationship to civilian attitudes. If the approval of ordinary people is an important determinant of the long-term viability and success of belligerents, then understanding how the violence those groups choose to engage in influences public approval represents a crucial link in the causal chain. Change in preferences and beliefs is often a precursor to any subsequent willingness to take risky or costly actions in support of, or in opposition to, a warring party. In this section, we develop a series of hypotheses examining how violent targeting by combatants affects public attitudes toward those groups.

We begin by examining how civilian targeting in general, as opposed to military targeting, affects public opinion in conflict zones. Civilian targeting may produce two effects on

[9] While other work has sought to measure or trace changes in individuals' behavior in response to violence, we focus on attitudinal consequences.

individuals living in a conflict zone: it causes (or enhances) fear that they might also be victims of the conflict; and it creates a normative outrage against the perpetrators. One of the key purposes of civilian targeting is to instill fear in the population (Crenshaw 1981; Hoffman 2006: 40-41). When civilians see other noncombatants being targeted, they may come to worry more about their own fates or those of their compatriots (Valentino et al. 2004). This fear can lead to a backlash against, or reduction of approval for, groups targeting civilians (Stanton 2016: 6-9).

Civilian targeting also has the potential to generate moral outrage against the perpetrators. Prohibitions against attacking civilians in just war theory and IHL both derive from, and have enhanced, the sense in many societies that civilian targeting is an illegitimate practice. Resorting to brutal methods of warfare directed against civilians is contrary to deeply held societal norms of humanity and restraint (Merom 2003:19-20). While IHL may be difficult to enforce, it can shape individuals' understanding of appropriate conduct during war. Public beliefs concerning appropriate wartime conduct in terms of distinguishing between civilian and military targets can have important consequences for relative support for belligerents. This leads to our first hypothesis:

> *H1: Civilian targeting hypothesis:* Public approval in conflict zones for armed groups will be lower for those groups using tactics primarily targeting civilians compared with tactics primarily targeting enemy military combatants.

We nonetheless acknowledge important counter-arguments suggesting the particular type of wartime tactics employed by an armed group may have little to no impact on public attitudes. With war's own internal logic, any possible distinctions in the conduct of combatants, such as the targeting of enemy troops versus civilians, may be viewed as minor compared to the destructive nature of the organized use of military force. The public may make few distinctions

regarding the conduct of combatants, giving little weight to rules intended to distinguish who is a legitimate or illegitimate target on the battlefield. Indeed, publics have been accepting – sometimes reluctantly, other times enthusiastically – of a wide range of abuses against both combatants and civilians (Merolla and Zechmeister 2009:76-78; Reiter and Stam 2002: 151-152; Valentino 2004: 30-39). This is especially the case to the extent individuals identify with the political, ethnic, or ideological characteristics of the group committing such acts, while seeing the victims as enemies. This sense of group identification may be particularly strong – and preferences toward distinctions in violence against (non)combatants correspondingly weak – in highly polarized environments that often precede or are aggravated by armed conflict.

3.2 Discriminate and Indiscriminate Civilian Targeting

Thus far, we have focused on the distinction between military and civilian targeting. However, once they have decided to target civilians, armed actors then often have a choice of whether to do so discriminately or indiscriminately. The effects of this choice on combatants' war aims are a matter of debate (Valentino 2014), and we analyze one important pathway by which this choice might be crucial: its effects on broader civilian attitudes.

Arguments pointing to the utility of indiscriminate violence in advancing war aims often look at factors other than public approval, such as saving lives on one's own side or conquering territory (Downes 2008: 29-39), demonstrating that the adversary has low prospects for winning the conflict (Stoll 1993: 20), or creating logistical problems and resource limitations for the enemy (Lyall 2009). Yet to the extent indiscriminate violence generates these positive effects for perpetrators, it likely does so *despite* its negative effects on public attitudes. Indiscriminate violence is often argued to be futile, if not counterproductive, at least when it comes to winning the hearts and minds of the targeted population (Kalyvas 2006: 151). Indiscriminate violence

leads individuals to believe they may be targeted regardless of their beliefs or actions, which can lead them to evade or resist, perhaps seeking protection from the rival group. Heightened anger and resentment are common emotional responses, as Tishkov (2004: 142) documents among Chechen civilians following indiscriminate attacks. In some contexts, indiscriminate violence can even drive civilians into the arms of the adversary as their best chance to survive, because siding with the perpetrator offers little relief or guarantee of being spared from attack. In Chechnya, indiscriminate attacks by Russian forces often had an opposite effect than intended, pushing villagers further into the rebels' camp (Souleimanov and Siroky 2016).

The extent to which indiscriminate targeting affects civilians' willingness to collaborate or otherwise provide support to armed groups also has implications for the effects of violence on attitudes. During the conflict in Afghanistan, for example, indiscriminate violence by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) led to increased insurgent support (Lyall et al. 2013).[10] Indiscriminate bombings by Hamas militants made Israeli citizens more likely to support right-wing parties, who adopted a more aggressive stance toward the insurgents (Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014). Such violence can even have long-lasting, inter-generational effects by hardening group boundaries and negative feelings (Rozenas et al. 2017). This leads to our second hypothesis:

> *H2: Indiscriminate civilian targeting hypothesis:* Public approval in conflict zones for armed groups will be lower for those groups using tactics primarily targeting civilians indiscriminately compared to tactics primarily targeting civilian supporters of the enemy discriminately.

[10] Interestingly, Lyall et al. (2013) further find that insurgent violence does not correspondingly translate into increased support for ISAF, suggesting asymmetric reactions by civilians depending on the perpetrator's identity.

This hypothesis thus seeks to make distinctions *between* two main forms of violence against non-combatants. Citizens may disapprove of the brutality of discriminate violence, yet indiscriminate attacks may be expected to have especially deleterious effects on civilian attitudes. While H2 is specified in unconditional terms, there could be circumstances that weaken the public's willingness to distinguish between both forms of violence. In particular, if the targeted population and areas are viewed in mistrustful or generally negative terms, then citizens may be largely indifferent between discriminate and indiscriminate violence.

3.3 Relative Tactics

We have thus far analyzed actors' tactics in isolation from each other. Yet individuals likely also evaluate armed actors' choices of tactics, in part, based on the tactics' relationship to each other. Scholars have long theorized that, in the context of violent armed conflict, the effects of a group's tactics depend on interactions with other actors' tactics (Arreguin-Toft 2001).

In some contexts, showing restraint by not targeting civilians (or at least engaging in less violence) can be used to win both domestic and international approval (Fazal 2018: 63-64; Stanton 2016: 25-30). Perfect humanitarian conduct may be unreachable, but the relative level and type of violence employed by contending belligerents can shape public perceptions. Exerting some moderation can increase local approval and legitimacy for an armed group, especially when contrasted with a particularly abusive adversary. Even factions within the same rebel group can enjoy remarkably different levels of civilian approval based on their treatment of the surrounding population, as was evident across various Shining Path contingents in Peru (Weinstein 2007: 248-258). War is often seen in pure zero-sum terms, but dynamics of

cooperation can be equally, if not more, powerful. As a result, armed actors may gain more approval by being (or appearing to be) less brutal than their adversaries.

Despite incentives to exert a certain amount of restraint, the norm of reciprocity also plays a prominent role in law, military strategy, and public opinion during wartime (Morrow 2014; Chilton 2015). On the one hand, reciprocity can engender mutually moderating conduct on both sides (Axelrod 1984: 73-87). On the other hand, a darker side of reciprocity is that abuse by one party can lead to an escalating cycle of violence. The Eastern Front of the Second World War descended into what has been called the "barbarisation of warfare," as Nazi and Soviet forces adopted increasingly brutal tactics toward enemy soldiers and civilians alike (Bartov 2001: 4). In a study of atrocities during the Spanish Civil War, Balcells (2017) shows that when an armed group took over a locality, it tended to act with similar levels of violence to the opponent previously in control. Some societies and groups have deep-seated norms of revenge or retaliation by which individuals prefer a strong response to harsh violent tactics and disapprove of attempts to de-escalate such confrontations (Stein 2015). This leads to the following three hypotheses about how the public evaluates the interaction of armed groups' tactics; the first is more general, while the latter two suggest more specific, but contrary tendencies:

> *H3: Relative tactic hypothesis:* The effect of an actor's tactics of violence on public approval in conflict zones is conditional on the other actor's tactics.
>
> *H3a: Restraint hypothesis:* The use of less-harsh tactics than the other actor increases public approval in conflict zones for an actor.
>
> *H3b: Revenge hypothesis:* The use of harsher tactics than the other actor increases public approval in conflict zones for an actor.

Although hypotheses H3a and H3b seem mutually exclusive, there may be circumstances under which certain groups of individuals may be more or less predisposed to motives of restraint versus revenge. In a similar manner to the discussion of prior hypotheses, pre-existing societal polarization may lean individuals more towards preferences for revenge. Likewise, personal experience with the hardships of war may shapes attitudes toward wartime tactics (Pechenkina et al. 2019). Although we focus on testing general expectations of the impact of violence on public opinion, it is important to keep in mind the particular local conditions that may influence those opinions both here and in future work.

4. Research Design

To test these hypotheses, we employ a survey experiment that varies information about armed actors' tactics of violence.[11] The advantage of an experiment is that we can randomly assign respondents to differing treatments. In turn, we can compare responses across different experimental groups that are otherwise similar to each other in terms of background variables. This allows us to infer whether the different information we provide about belligerents' tactics has a causal effect on individual attitudes. A downside of experimental designs is external validity. A survey experiment takes a complex reality and distills it to a narrow set of treatments that systematically provide differing pieces of information. Nonetheless, because observational research has yielded competing findings and because inference from observational research can be limited by selection effects, an experiment provides a useful complement to existing work (Druckman et al. 2011).

[11] The experimental design, expectations, and analyses were pre-registered. Section 6 of our pre-registration specified that we did not expect to remove any respondents from the analysis, so the results reported below include all respondents who answered the applicable outcome question. Our pre-registrations is available at https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=y8gr24.

4.1 Sample – Ukraine's Donbas Region

With external validity concerns in mind, we chose an ongoing wartime context in which information about tactics of violence by armed groups would be more meaningful and salient, rather than asking respondents to react to a hypothetical or relatively distant conflict. We fielded our survey in the Donbas region of Ukraine, which provides a number of advantages for evaluating our theoretical expectations. Donbas is the easternmost region of Ukraine, consisting of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, bordering Russia to the east and north. Since the Ukrainian Revolution of February 2014, Donbas has been home to unrest, escalating into violent conflict involving the Ukrainian armed forces and two separatist groups – the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) – both supported by Russia's intervention. Fighting was initially heaviest during the first year of hostilities, but endured at deadly levels with dozens of ceasefires brokered and broken. As of early 2022, according to various estimates approximately 10,000 combatants and over 3,000 civilians had been killed (OHCHR 2022: 5).

In February 2022, the Donbas conflict was subsumed by a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. By summer 2022, fighting had resulted in 10,000s of combat deaths, equal or greater numbers of civilian casualties according to some estimates, and millions of refugees (Habershon et al. 2022). Our study focuses on the pre-full-invasion period.

Armed groups used differing tactics of violence throughout the course of the earlier Donbas conflict. While fighting and casualties took place primarily between the armed forces of the two sides, deliberate attempts to target civilians occurred. Both sides used indiscriminate shelling of residential areas and anti-personnel landmines (OHCHR 2016: 10). Likewise, Ukrainian government and separatist forces deployed violence against civilians in a more discriminate manner, targeting individuals and groups suspected of being affiliated with or

supporting the opposing side (OHCHR 2016: 15; HRW 2014). The War in Donbas experienced important variation in the main tactics of violence forming our core theoretical expectations – military, discriminate civilian, and indiscriminate civilian – although, of course, some targeting choices have been used more frequently than others in the fighting. Importantly from an ethical standpoint, our experimental design did not require any deception of respondents.

In some situations, a nationally representative sample is appropriate. In the case of our hypotheses, which focus on individuals living in conflict zones, the relevant population is the residents of the Donbas region. Living in a conflict zone, residents there either faced more exposure to violence (directly or indirectly), or were at greater risk of future violence in a way that differs from the relatively distant nature of the war for many residents in the rest of the country.

The Donbas conflict can generally be understood as a civil war pitting against each other two forces of political nationalism, one domestic (Ukraine) and one foreign (Russia). The role of identity is complex and contested, both as a legacy of the ethno-territorial policies of the Soviet era, the particular domestic political context (Brubaker 1994), and ongoing cross-border economic ties (Zhukov 2016). The media often portrayed the conflict as setting ethnic Russian separatists against Ukrainians loyal to Kyiv (Thompson 2015), but for several reasons it is not fundamentally an ethnic conflict. First, a majority of the region's residents identify as ethnically Ukrainian but speak Russian. Second, whether or not a given individual is ethnically Russian or Ukrainian is unlikely to be obvious, even to locals, based on their physical appearance or even how they speak, which distinguishes Donbas from other conflicts in which ethnic differences are clearer. Third, as Zhukov (2016) finds, the ethnolinguistic makeup of localities in the Donbas is not a strong predictor of separatist activity. Finally, some ethnic Russians backed the Ukrainian

government side, while support for independence before the conflict was not uncommon amongst ethnic Ukrainians (Giuliano 2018). Even the DNR/LNR forces included a mix of ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians. Rather than ethnically-driven, therefore, the war was largely a nationalist conflict organized around civic and political terms. For the DNR/LNR forces, the notion of Ukrainian political control of the Donbas was illegitimate, whereas Ukrainian ethnic identity was acceptable so long as it is under the umbrella of Russian political authority. Within the context of this civil conflict over political nationalism was an international component in the sense that one side claimed a foreign government, Russia's, as the legitimate political authority and received assistance accordingly.

While having some distinctive characteristics, the Donbas conflict is a useful case in which to test general theories about the relationship between violent targeting and civilian attitudes. The varying use of targeting tactics in the conflict is consistent with many other conflicts, both civil and international. Insights from Donbas therefore offer an opportunity both to understand broader dynamics of violence in the post-Soviet region, as well as to test theories of the relationship between violence and civilian attitudes more generally. The Donbas conflict differs in certain respects from other post-Soviet conflicts, such as in Chechnya, Georgia, and the North Caucasus, in which opposing sides belonged to different ethnic groups, and have been the subject of considerable empirical study into the consequences of violence (e.g., Lyall 2009, 2010; Souleimanov and Siroky 2016). Further below, we discuss how our results may be interpreted in light of the more modest role of ethnicity in the Donbas conflict.

We conducted our survey using phone interviews in conjunction with the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), a private polling firm that administers surveys in

Ukraine.[12] The survey was fielded in September and October of 2018 – several years after some of the worst fighting, but with hostilities still ongoing, especially in the large "frozen zones" between the two sides in the region (though also over three years before the full Russian invasion of 2022).[13] We struck a balance with the timing of the survey, as it was conducted a considerable time after some of the harshest acts of violence, but the treatments given would nonetheless still resonate quite deeply because of continued fighting. Due to logistical limitations caused by the ongoing conflict, we were only able to survey individuals living in the areas of the Donbas controlled by the Ukrainian government. The government- and separatist-held territories differ in several respects, with separatist-held locales generally more urban and populous, but also where the economic and security situation has been more dire compared to government-held areas. We discuss some of the implications of the sample for the inferences we can draw in our presentation of the results further below.

A representative sample of 1,501 respondents, aged 18 and over, were surveyed from government-controlled areas. Respondents were given a choice of taking the survey in Russian or Ukrainian; 1,451 chose Russian and 50 Ukrainian, which is not surprising because most Donbas residents primarily speak Russian. Figure 1 displays a map of the Donbas region. The area shaded in vertical lines was controlled by the DNR/LNR at the time of our survey, so our respondents were located in the areas of Donbas shown in dark gray. Municipalities with five or more respondents surveyed are shown in circles proportional to the number sampled, and those with the most respondents are labeled. Appendix A provides additional information about

[12] Data from KIIS surveys has been used extensively in other research on Ukraine, including specifically in the country's eastern region (e.g., Kulyk 2016; Giuliano 2018).

[13] During the months before and during our survey, daily fighting took place, primarily consisting of infantry, artillery, and tank combat. Victims during this time included combatants and civilians on both sides of the line of demarcation. For example, in the location where a plurality of our respondents resided (Mariupol, 235 respondents; see Table 2 in Appendix A), fighting took place on a daily basis in August, September, and October of 2018.

participants, including demographic data and a list of all the municipalities where our respondents were located.[14] Results of balance tests are provided in Appendix B.

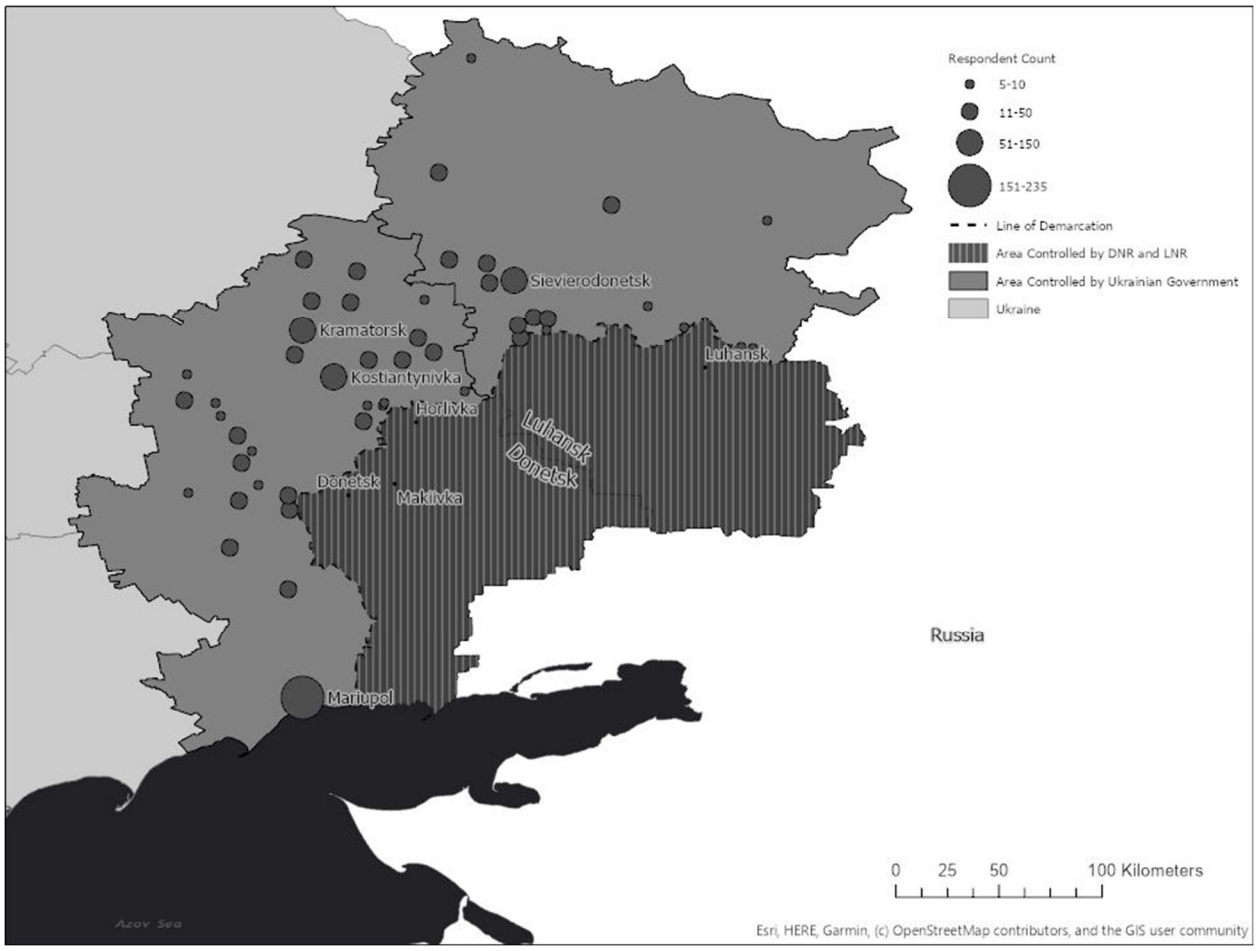

Figure 1: Respondent Locations in the Donbas Region, Eastern Ukraine (2018)

[14] Because both oblasts are divided into government- and separatist-controlled areas, reliable baseline socio-demographic data for only the areas surveyed are difficult to obtain. A further challenge is considerable internal displacement due to the fighting, meaning residents may have lived elsewhere before the conflict. Nevertheless, comparing our sample to benchmarks for the entire Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts from the most recent Ukraine census conducted in 2001 reveals our sample was fairly representative across a range of covariates. See Appendix A for further details.

4.2 Experimental Design

All respondents were presented with an introductory statement providing some background both on contentious politics in general and the conflict in Ukraine:

> "In various countries around the world, some opposition groups decide to take up arms and fight against the government. During the fighting, both sides can use various types of violence. Sometimes they attack soldiers and military targets of the enemy, and sometimes they also attack civilians.
>
> The following questions are about ongoing fighting between the armed forces of the Ukrainian government and separatist forces. There have been several reports about the conduct of both sides during the conflict. Some parts of the description may strike you as important; other parts may seem unimportant."

We randomly assigned respondents to additional information. Each respondent was told about a tactic used by the Armed Forces of Ukraine and a tactic used by the DNR\LNR forces. We also randomized the sequence in which respondents were told the actions to guard against possible order effects. The main treatment involved three possible targets of violence: military forces, civilian discriminate, and civilian indiscriminate. The tactics adopted by the government and separatists were allowed to vary separately; along with randomizing the order in which the actors' tactics were presented, this resulted in a 3 x 3 x 2 factorial design with 18 experimental groups. The language for the three tactics was as follows:

Military target: "There have been reports that in recent fighting [Actor A] have mostly attacked soldiers and military facilities of [Actor B]. Most of the victims of these attacks were troops from the [Actor B] who were involved in the fighting.

Civilian discriminate target: "There have been reports that in recent fighting [Actor A] have mostly attacked civilians and civilian facilities that have supported [Actor B]. Most of the victims of these attacks were supporters of [Actor B], but were not involved in the fighting."

Civilian indiscriminate target: "There have been reports that in recent fighting [Actor A] have attacked civilians and civilian facilities whether or not they have supported [Actor B]. The victims of these attacks included supporters of both forces in the conflict, but were not involved in the fighting."

Word choices for the experimental conditions were informed by several considerations. In the military targeting treatment, we avoided wording such as "limited to military targets" or references to the conduct being consistent with the laws of war in order to avoid explicitly introducing legal and normative elements into the treatment. In the civilian treatments, we did not explicitly use descriptors such as "indiscriminate" or "discriminate", which could likewise bias respondents. Rather, we sought to construct conditions featuring structure and language that were as similar as possible *except* for the type of victims being targeted. We employed the general term "supporters" in the civilian treatments to distinguish from "troops" in the military prompt, though do not provide further details on the nature of their support to maintain a similar

level of detail across all of the vignettes.[15] While trade-offs are inherent in any item construction, this design offers a more internally valid approach that allows for direct comparisons focused on the primary phenomenon of interest concerning tactics of violence.

Respondents were then asked to evaluate each actor's actions: "Do you approve, disapprove, or neither approve nor disapprove of the way [Actor] conducted themselves in the recent fighting described in these reports?" Our aim in these questions was to measure approval of an actor's use of a violent tactic, because attitudes toward conduct can shape overall support for an armed actor and the conflict (Merom 2003: 21-24). Of course, responses are likely to also reflect participants' baseline levels of approval for a given actor. When we compare across experimental groups, however, differences among average responses to these outcome questions should be expected to net out any background approval, allowing us to isolate the effects of information concerning violent tactics on public opinion. For each question, respondents gave an answer on a 5-point scale ranging from "Strongly approve" to "Strongly disapprove." In addition, responses equivalent to "difficult to say" or "refuse to answer" were coded accordingly.[16] Outcome variables were re-scaled to range between 0 and 1 so that effect sizes could be more clearly expressed in percentage point terms.[17] To evaluate respondent recall, we included manipulation checks at the end of the survey. We also asked respondents to tell us the extent to which they considered the information we had provided them as trustworthy.[18]

[15] A potentially fruitful extension would be to examine how variation in different forms of civilian support for a rival affect opinion toward different violent tactics. Though even here, the nature of supporting actions may need to be limited, since after a point certain material contributions risk transforming civilians into de facto or de jure combatants (Walzer 2000: 146). Importantly, the general description of the intensity of the violence perpetrated in the two civilian treatments was kept the same so that the only difference was in the nature of *who* was being targeted and for what reasons.

[16] Appendix G provides an analysis of non-response rates, indicating these do not bias our results.

[17] "Strongly approve" = 1; "Somewhat approve" = .75; "Neither approve nor disapprove" = 0.5; "Somewhat disapprove" = .25; "Strongly disapprove" = 0. These rescaled measures are used to generate all of the main results reported in this paper.

[18] The full instrument, in English, Russian, and Ukrainian, is available from the authors upon request.

5. Results

The left-hand plot in Figure 2 shows average levels of approval of the government's actions conditional on its tactics, while the right-hand plot shows analogous results for the opposition.[19] Across all tactics, absolute levels of approval for the government – with a mean 0.32, or slightly better than "somewhat disapprove" – were higher than for the opposition – with a mean 0.12, between "somewhat disapprove" and "strongly disapprove", likely reflecting the fact that survey respondents were residing in areas under government control. Some respondents, perhaps out of fear, may have been reluctant to express approval for the DNR/LNR, so our sample may not be as useful were we primarily interested in comparing absolute approval levels for the DNR/LNR and Ukrainian government to each other. [20] Our goal, however, is not to gauge baseline approval ratings for the combatants, but instead to assess the extent to which targeting choices cause changes in such approval.

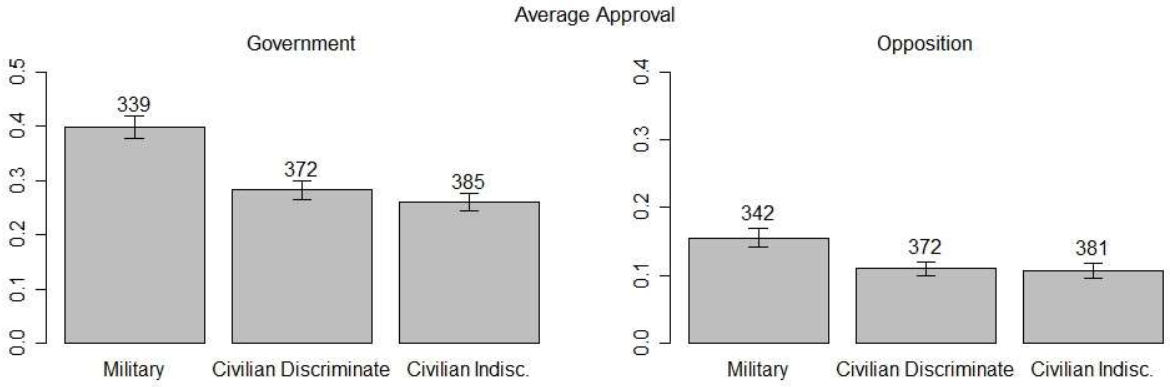

Figure 2: Average approval by combatant and target. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. The numbers of respondents per group are shown above the error bars.

[19] Appendix C provides mean levels of approval broken out across all 18 experimental groups.
[20] This relates to broader concerns of preference falsification, where individuals conceal their true feelings, which may be especially pronounced in armed conflicts. One possibility is that participants in the civilian targeting treatments may have greater incentives to falsify their answers out of fear. However, this would lead to a *harder* test for *H1* and related hypotheses, offering more conservative estimates of treatment effects. Moreover, other observable implications, including similar non-response rates across treatments or the lack of conditional treatment effects based on proximity to the line of demarcation, suggest preference falsification is unlikely to be driving the results.

5.1 Effects of Civilian Targeting

We continue our analysis by testing Hypothesis 1, which predicted that civilian targeting would reduce public approval for armed actors. We compared the military target experimental group to the two civilian target experimental groups aggregated together. The point estimates in Figure 3 show the estimated effect in the (1) full sample; (2) subsample that was informed first about the government action; (3) subsample that was informed first about the government action and second that the opposition targeted civilians; (4) subsample that was informed first about the opposition action; and (5) subsample that was informed first about the opposition action and that the opposition targeted civilians.

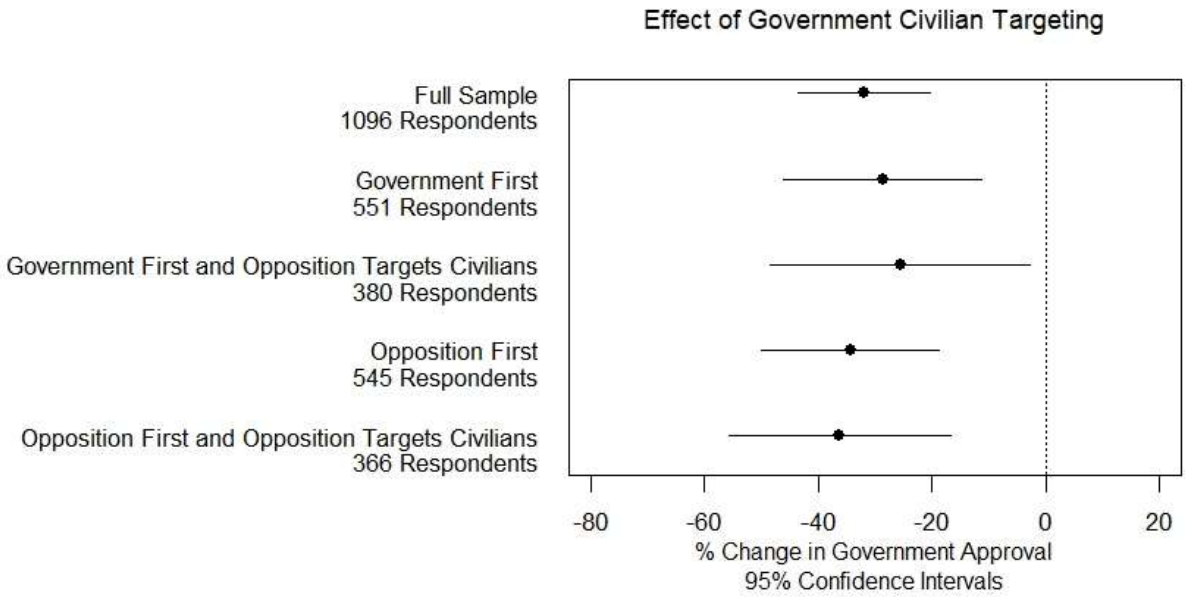

Figure 3: Effects of Government Civilian Targeting on Approval of Government

As Figure 3 shows, civilian targeting robustly decreases approval of the government by about 35% in the full sample. This is the case despite the fact that our respondents all resided in the government-controlled areas, and thus may have had some incentive to express more approval for the government than they personally felt. The effect does not depend on the order in which the actors' actions were presented to the respondents, nor does it depend on whether the opposition targeted civilians. Even if the opposition attacked civilians, government targeting of civilians reduced approval of the government, indicating that our respondents preferred government restraint over reciprocity.

Figure 4 shows the results of analogous tests of the effect of opposition civilian targeting on approval of the opposition. We consistently find that civilian targeting reduces approval of the opposition.[21] In the full sample, the estimated size of this effect is, as above, an approximately 35% reduction in approval of the DNR/LNR. This result holds even if the government attacked civilians, which suggests that our respondents preferred restraint not just on behalf of the government but also on behalf of the opposition. Overall, we find robust support for Hypothesis 1. Results from robustness tests are provided in Appendices D and E. Results provided in Appendix F demonstrate the further robustness of this and other results to restricting our sample based on the manipulation and trustworthiness checks.[22] We find no significant differences in approval based on the ordering of treatments.

[21] In the subsample who were informed first about the government's actions, this effect is not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p \sim 0.07$).

[22] The effect of civilian targeting is much larger among those respondents who correctly answered the manipulation check. With respect to the government, the estimated effect is about 94% larger, and the difference in effect sizes is significant at $p<0.001$. With respect to the opposition, the estimated effect is about 84% larger, but the difference in effect sizes is not statistically significant.

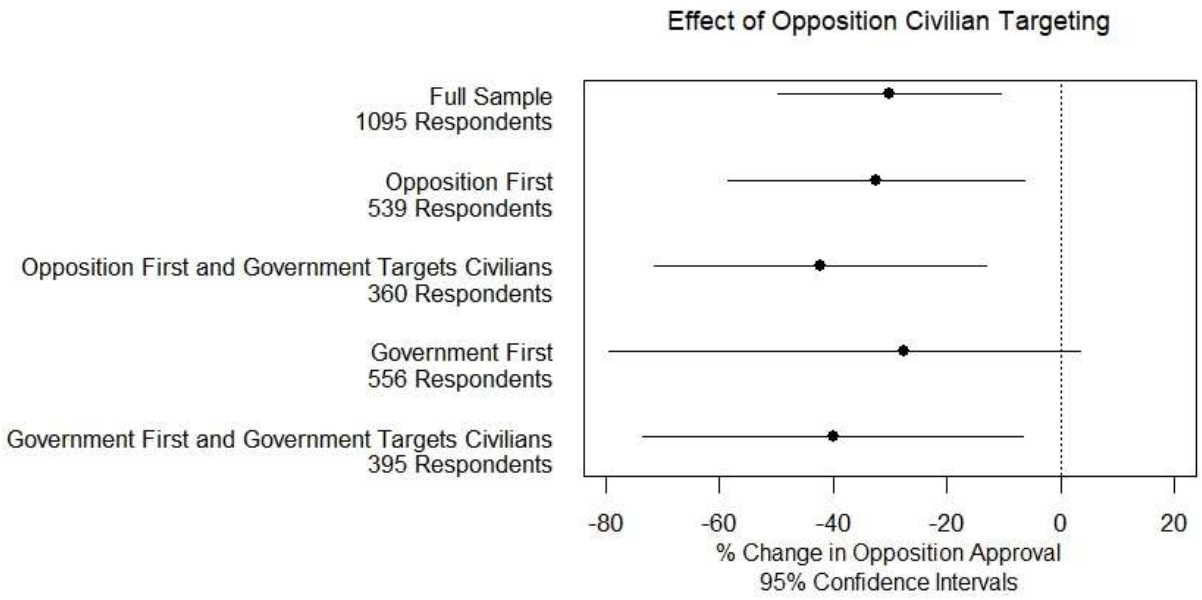

Figure 4: Effects of Opposition Civilian Targeting on Approval of Opposition

5.2 Effects of Indiscriminate Targeting

We now turn to testing Hypothesis 2. We compare approval in the subsample that was told the actor targeted civilians discriminately to the subsample that was told the same actor targeted indiscriminately. This analysis excludes the respondents who were told a given actor targeted the military. As Figures 5 and 6 show, we are generally unable to reject the null hypothesis that civilian indiscriminate targeting does not reduce approval relative to discriminate violence, regardless of whether the actor is the government or the DNR/LNR. The only case in which the effect of civilian indiscriminate targeting on approval for the government is statistically significant is when respondents were first informed about the opposition action and were told opposition forces conducted indiscriminate targeting (Figure 5, row 5). Respondents may have been especially wary of what may have appeared as a vengeful, harsh response by the government (an issue we discuss in greater detail below), but we should not over-interpret the

result as this point estimate is not significantly different from the other estimates in Figure 5. The analogous effect in terms of opposition approval, however, is close to zero and statistically indistinguishable from zero (Figure 6, row 5). Overall, we find little support for Hypothesis 2.[23]

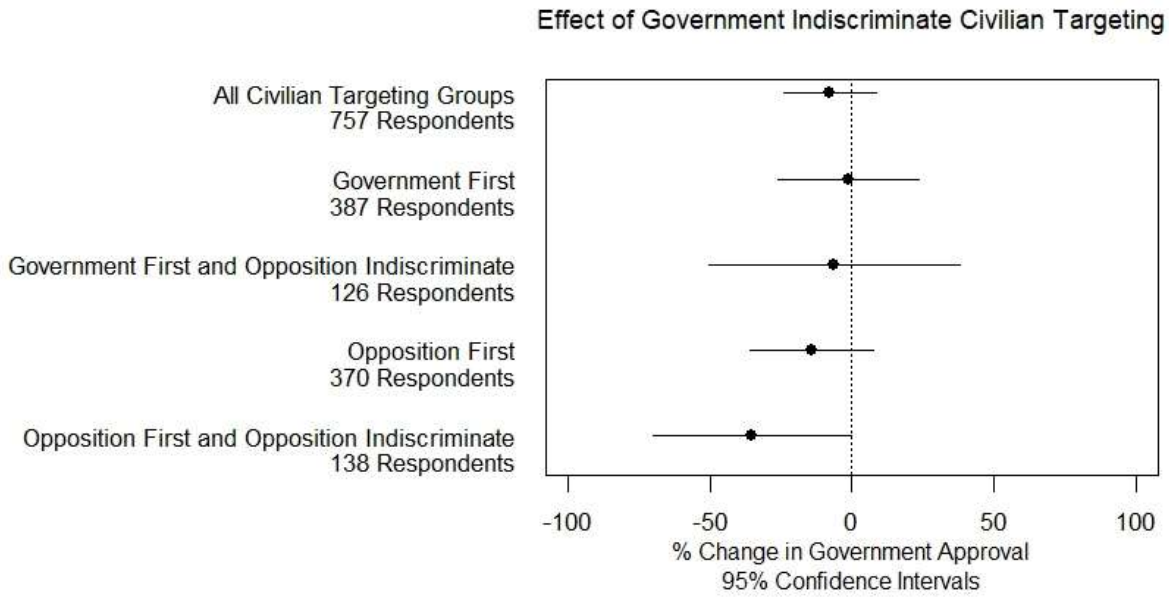

Figure 5: Effects of Government Indiscriminate Civilian Targeting on Approval of Government

[23] As demonstrated in Appendix F, these null findings are unlikely to be the result of respondent inattention, lack of recall, or distrust in the information provided.

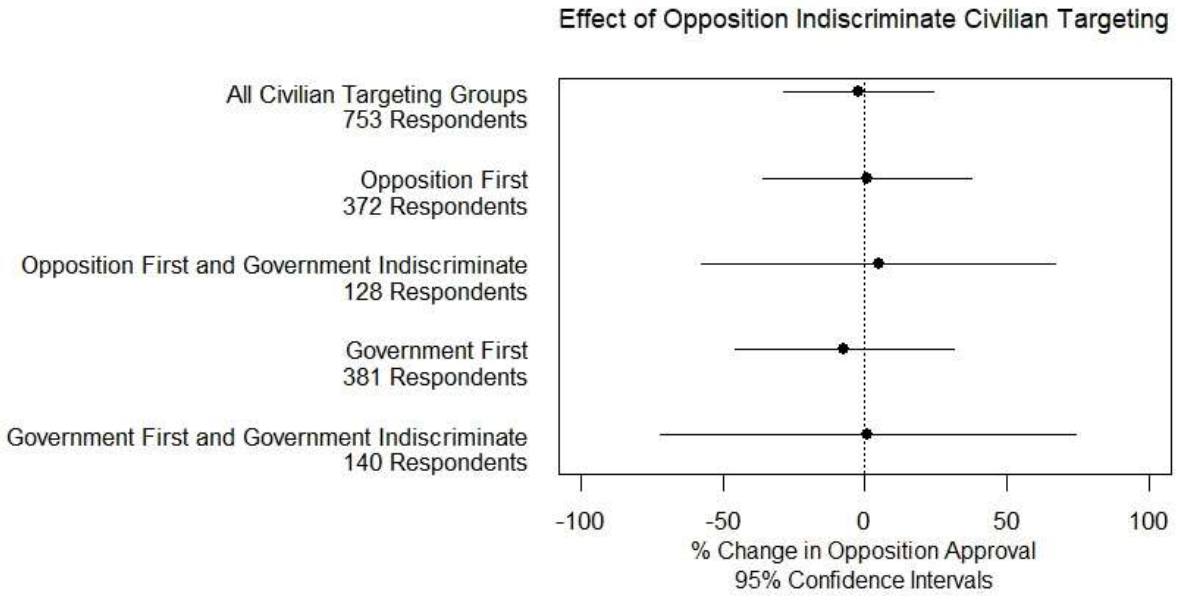

Figure 6: Effects of Opposition Indiscriminate Civilian Targeting on Approval of Opposition

Several factors might be influencing the null results with respect to Hypothesis 2. To guard against over-interpretation, we risk stating the obvious by noting our results *do not* imply that indiscriminate violence fails to reduce approval of perpetrators; instead, our results indicate that we cannot be sufficiently certain whether or not it does so compared to discriminate civilian targeting.[24] In addition, as with any research design, ours is limited by the scope of our data; while we do not have a good reason to suspect the Donbas conflict to be unique in this respect, a circumspect interpretation of our results still leaves open the possibility that indiscriminate violence may reduce public approval in other contexts.

One way in which specifics to the Donbas conflict may be affecting these results is the relative role of ethnicity. The Donbas conflict was not primarily conducted along ethnic terms.

[24] A power analysis indicates these null results are unlikely to be a function of sample sizes. With respect to the estimates shown in the first rows of Figures 5 and 6, Cohen's d is estimated at 0.025 and 0.09, respectively, both well below conventional thresholds.

Locals likely know which of their neighbors identify as Russian or Ukrainian, but outsiders, including many combatants, may find making these distinctions difficult. Some of our respondents who were told that an armed actor attacked civilians who supported the adversary may have implicitly assumed it would be difficult for combatant to identify those victims; if and to the extent this was the case, then the discriminate and indiscriminate civilian targeting conditions may have been interpreted as having similar implications. That said, we should not overstate the relative challenges of identifying supporters and opponents in ethnic versus non-ethnic conflicts. In non-ethnic conflicts ranging from the American Civil War to the Spanish Civil War, support for combatants could be identified through a variety of other ways (Kalyvas 2006:181-182). Conversely, in many ethnic conflicts, individuals break ranks with their co-ethnics to support the other group.

Nevertheless, some respondents may have interpreted the discriminate violence treatment we gave them in a manner similar to the other respondents' interpretation of the indiscriminate violence treatment. If this were the case, however, then they may not have been able to correctly identify whether they had received the discriminate or indiscriminate treatment in subsequent manipulation checks – in other words, they would be unable to distinguish between the two forms of civilian targeting afterward. Our subsequent analysis shows that many respondents were able to correctly classify the type of civilian targeting reports they received, yet their attitudes toward the perpetrator did not differ significantly. This means that individuals could tell the difference between the discriminate and indiscriminate violence treatments, even if they evaluated them in similar terms. The historical record of the Donbas War reinforces the meaningful differentiation between each form of civilian targeting. Numerous instances of both discriminate and indiscriminate targeting have taken place, with reports showing that the

differences between such types of violence have been understood both by armed forces and local residents (HRW 2014; OHCHR 2022: 4-10).

Another possible explanation for these results is that our treatments intentionally minimized emotional language when describing violent tactics. It may be the case that more dramatic descriptions of indiscriminate attacks would have resulted in lower levels of approval compared to discriminate violence. Yet this choice would involve its own trade-offs, since any differences in effects could be due to the vividness of the treatment language rather than the nature of the violence. Along similar lines, we only told our respondents whether or not the victims "supported" the other side, but did not inform them about any specific activities these individuals may have conducted. By contrast, some of the literature makes an important distinction between tacit and active support for combatants (Lichbach 1998: 17). One possibility is that informing respondents about specific support activities (e.g., providing resources or informing on other locals) would generate larger differences between the effects of discriminate versus indiscriminate violence. These conjectures suggest several avenues for future research, which we expand on further in the concluding section.

5.3 Effects of Relative Tactics

The results above also indicate that the effect of one actor's targeting choice depends, in part, on the other actor's actions. We show the results of tests of Hypothesis 3 in Figure 7. We operationalize military targeting as the least harsh tactic and indiscriminate civilian targeting as the harshest tactic. We then estimate the effects on approval of both actors when: (a) the government used a harsher tactic than the opposition; (b) the actors used the same tactic; and (c) the opposition used a harsher tactic than the government. As Figure 7 shows, when the opposition uses a harsher tactic than the government, approval of the government increases. And

when the government uses a harsher tactic than the opposition, approval of the opposition correspondingly increases. Interestingly, when the government used a harsher tactic than the opposition, this significantly reduced approval of the government. The analogous effect with respect to opposition approval was not statistically significant. These results suggest our respondents' approval of the government was quite sensitive to the relative tactics used by the two actors, but that their approval of the opposition might be less consistently sensitive to these relative tactics. This pattern is in line with other research showing an asymmetry in attitudes, with civilians more sensitive to changes in government violence than that committed by opposition forces (Lyall et al. 2013).

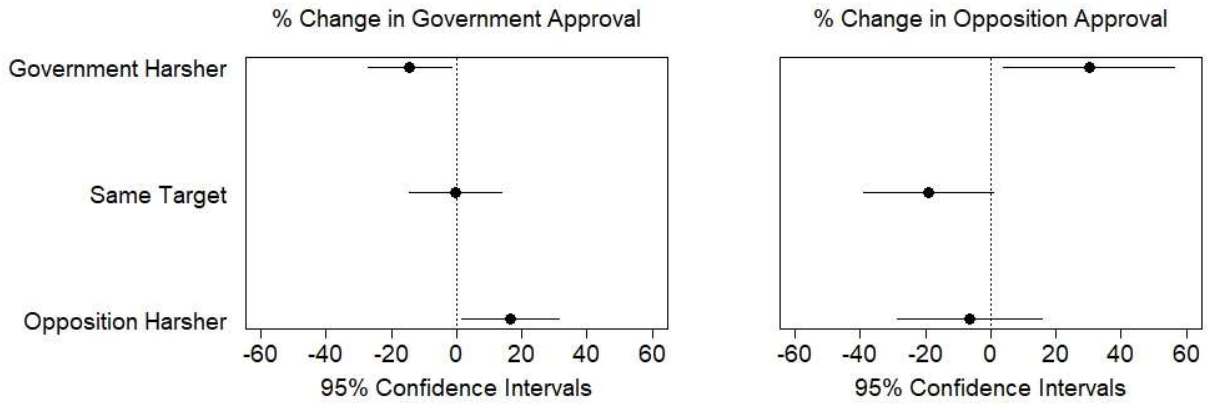

Figure 7: Effects of Relative Tactics

These results support Hypothesis 3 by showing that the effects of one actor's tactics depend, in part, on the other actor's tactics. In conjunction with findings reported above, these results further demonstrate that respondents exhibited a general preference for restraint (Hypothesis 3a) rather than revenge (Hypothesis 3b). Two possible explanations for these apparent preferences may be concerns over morality and security. Our respondents may have

believed that a restrained response was normatively more appropriate. Yet, because our respondents were all located in the relatively small Donbas region, they may have feared that reciprocal responses to harsh tactics targeting civilians could subsequently endanger their own safety or those close to them. Given the length of the conflict, locals are likely also war-weary and thus might prefer an end to the conflict rather than escalation. It is nonetheless important to keep in mind that preferences toward restraint may differ among respondents in opposition-controlled strongholds compared to the government-controlled areas we were able to survey. In particular, ongoing economic hardship and a more precarious security situation in separatist areas may have engendered stronger grievances among residents toward the government in Kyiv, and correspondingly more intense desires for vengeance in response to any attacks.[25] It remains an open question whether desires for restraint versus revenge would prevail after the expansion of the conflict in 2022.

5.4 Heterogenous Treatment Effects

We tested whether our results vary across several demographic and attitudinal characteristics of our respondents. We did not find significant heterogeneous treatment effects based on key demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, income, or educational attainment. Furthermore, treatment effects did not significantly vary based on the respondents' proximity to the line of demarcation (a proxy for personal threat of violence) nor based on their choice to take survey in Ukrainian or Russian (which may stand in for underlying support for the Ukrainian government or opposition).[26]

[25] Though Tellez (2019) shows how exposure to violence can actually raise support for accommodation.
[26] An additional concern is that social desirability biases may be stronger for respondents in areas previously under opposition control. Appendix G demonstrates that our results are robust to the removal of these respondents.

Several significant heterogeneous treatment effects, however, may provide additional insight into our results. First, while civilian targeting decreased approval of both armed actors, the size of these effects depended significantly on our respondents' attitudes toward the European Union (EU). We asked our subjects to respond to the following prompt: "Do you think Ukraine should seek closer economic relations with...", with the options being the EU, Russia, both, or neither. The negative effect of civilian targeting on approval of the Ukrainian government was significantly *larger* for our pro-Russia respondents, meaning this sub-group punished the Ukrainian government to a greater extent for targeting civilians than the pro-EU respondents did (see Appendix H). At the same time, the negative effect of civilian targeting on approval of the DNR/LNR was significantly *smaller* for our pro-Russia respondents, meaning that pro-Russia respondents punished the DNR/LNR for targeting civilians to a lesser extent. This suggests that respondents' reactions to targeting depended in part on their *ex ante* attitudes toward that actor; pro-Russia respondents were relatively forgiving of the pro-Russian separatists but especially unforgiving of the Ukrainian government.

Similarly, we also asked respondents to report the extent to which they trust the Ukrainian government, with four options ranging from "Just about always" to "Never." The greater the level of trust of the government reported by our respondents, the *smaller* the extent to which civilian targeting by the Ukrainian forces decreased approval of the government. At the same time, the greater the level of trust of the government, the *greater* the extent to which civilian targeting by the DNR\LNR decreased approval of those forces (see Appendix H). That is, respondents who expressed greater trust in the Ukrainian government were especially forgiving with respect to the government's actions, but particularly unforgiving of the DNR/LNR. As above, these heterogeneous treatment effects suggest that the magnitude of the

effects for targeting choices depends in part on *ex ante* attitudes toward armed actors. More specifically, this shows that the effects of targeting depend, in part, on respondents' general levels of trust in the armed actors. On the other hand, we did not find any significant heterogenous treatment effects with respect to H2 or H3, suggesting opinions toward discriminate versus indiscriminate civilian are not statistically distinguishable, irrespective of any differences in *ex ante* respondent characteristics or beliefs.

6. Conclusions

The causes and effects of targeting in armed conflict have become some of the key questions in the political violence literature over the last few decades, generating a wealth of theory and empirical insights. Much of what we know is based on claims and assumptions about the underlying effects of these targeting decisions on ordinary individuals on the ground, yet direct tests of the micro-foundations of these claims are generally lacking. What is the relationship between targeting tactics and civilian attitudes in conflict zones? Do these effects depend on the tactics used by the opposing side?

We aim to contribute to answering such questions by systematically investigating these micro-foundations. We do so by using a survey experiment analyzing the public opinion effects of different targeting tactics by government and separatist forces in the Donbas War in the years before the larger Russo-Ukrainian War. Our first key finding is that targeting civilians, instead of limiting attacks to enemy military forces, reduces approval of both armed actors among individuals in the conflict zone across a wide range of scenarios. The result suggests that baseline public preferences are generally in line with a key prohibition against targeting noncombatants found in the laws of war.[27] Indeed, even after being told that one side targeted civilians,

[27] On the resonance of legal logics in public attitudes toward the use of force, see also Dill and Schubiger (2021).

individuals surveyed on average still preferred the other side keep to the principle of distinction and target only combatants. Our findings support other work pointing to a role of ordinary publics in fostering compliance with the laws of war (Wallace 2015: 61-66). Leaders may thus pay non-negligible costs in terms of public approval when they choose to target civilians. Future work could further investigate the extent to which armed actors anticipate, respond to, or seek to counteract possible local reactions to civilian targeting and casualties.

Our second key result is that individuals do not necessarily make clear contrasts between different forms of civilian targeting. In particular, the effect of targeting only civilian supporters of the rival is generally not statistically distinguishable from that for more indiscriminate attacks. Additional research is needed to assess the effects of such varying tactics. Our result could be read a few different ways. It reinforces the first finding by confirming that individuals are disapproving of violence against civilians, however "discriminating" it may be. On the other hand, while armed actors may face public disapproval for targeting civilians, this cost may not increase much further when employing more indiscriminate methods. The stakes of this issue are thus quite profound, suggesting the need for further analysis of the conditions under which ordinary people may be more sensitive to distinctions between discriminate and indiscriminate violence.

Finally, we find that respondents generally preferred restraint over revenge. In most scenarios, when one actor used a harsher tactic than the other, the former was penalized in terms of public approval, and the more restrained actor rewarded. When one actor used a harsh tactic, respondents generally preferred a less harsh, rather than reciprocal, action by the other actor, suggesting they did not hold strong norms of revenge. One implication of this result is that these restraining impulses may serve as a social constraint that armed actors must consider when

deciding how to fight. As above, however, these results should be interpreted carefully; they are not intended to conclusively resolve debates over individual preferences for restraint over revenge, but rather to serve as a basis for further exploration.

Alongside what we have discussed so far, our results suggest several directions for future research. We focused on the Donbas because it is theoretically relevant, but were not able to survey individuals in areas controlled by separatist forces. Furthermore, with the expansion of the war through Russia's full-scale invasion, much more of the Ukrainian population has been subject to violence and a larger share of the population is under Russian control. Future work could analyze similar dynamics in those areas, taking into account changes in overall conflict dynamics.

Second, to create a more parsimonious design, we have conceptualized discriminate and indiscriminate violence as ideal types, yet reality is usually more complex. Armed actors target civilians along a spectrum ranging from fully discriminate to fully indiscriminate violence, with additional variation in terms of intensity, arbitrariness, and other factors. Indiscriminate violence can be almost completely random with any and all civilians liable to be attacked, while in other cases it can be more retributive against particular groups – though such groups may be conceived in the broadest of terms (Souleimanov and Siroky 2016). We hope future work will build on our findings by analyzing the effects of differences along such dimensions of violence.

Third and related, violence against civilians need not be conceived of as only varying along the discriminate/indiscriminate dimension, but may also vary in terms of levels of victimization (Downes 2008), particular numerical thresholds above which it constitutes mass killing (Valentino 2004), the deliberateness of killings through one-sided violence (Eck and Hultman 2007), or the direct versus indirect nature in the application of force against civilians

(Balcells 2017). Future work should incorporate insights from these additional dimensions and conceptualizations of civilian targeting to develop a fuller understanding of the dynamics of violence during war and the role played by ordinary individuals.

References

Abrahms, Max. 2006. “Why Terrorism Does Not Work.” *International Security* 31 (2):42-78.

Arreguin-Toft, Ivan. 2001. “How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict.” *International Security* 26 (1): 93-128.

Arves, Stephen, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, and Caitlin McCulloch. 2019. “Rebel Tactics and External Public Opinion.” *Research & Politics* 6 (3):1-7.

Axelrod, Robert. 1984. *The Evolution of Cooperation*. New York: Basic Books.

Balcells, Laia. 2010. “Rivalry and Revenge: Violence against Civilians in Conventional Civil Wars.” *International Studies Quarterly* 54 (2):291-313.

———. 2017. *Rivalry and Revenge*. Cambridge University Press.

Bartov, Omer. 2001. *The Eastern Front, 1941-1945: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*. Oxford: Palgrave.

Bhavnani, Ravi, Dan Miodownik, and Hyun Jin Choi. 2011. "Violence and Control in Civil Conflict: Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza." *Comparative Politics* 44 (1):61-80.

Brubaker, Rogers. 1994. “Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutionalist Account.” *Theory and Society* 23(1): 47-78.

Chaudoin, Stephen. 2016. “How Contestation Moderates the Effect of International Institutions: The International Criminal Court and Kenya.” *Journal of Politics* 78(2): 557-71.

Chilton, Adam S. 2015. “The Laws of War and Public Opinion: An Experimental Study.” *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* 171 (1): 181-201.

Condra, Luke N., and Jacob N. Shapiro. 2012. "Who Takes the Blame? The Strategic Effects of Collateral Damage." *American Journal of Political Science* 56 (1):167-187.

Crenshaw, Martha. 1981. "The Causes of Terrorism." *Comparative Politics* 13(4): 379-399.

Dill, Janina, and Livia I. Schubiger. 2021. “Attitudes Towards the Use of Force: Instrumental Imperatives, Moral Principles and International Law.” *American Journal of Political Science* 65 (3): 612–633.

Downes, Alexander B. 2007. "Draining the Sea by Filling the Graves: Investigating the Effectiveness of Indiscriminate Violence as a Counterinsurgency Strategy." *Civil Wars* 9 (4):420-444.

———. 2008. *Targeting Civilians in War*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Druckman, James N., Donald P. Green, James H. Kuklinski, and Arthur Lupia. 2011. “Experiments: An Introduction to Core Concepts.” In *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science*, eds. James N. Druckman, Donald P. Green, James H. Kuklinski and Arthur Lupia. New York: Cambridge University Press, 19-41.

Eck, Kristine, and Lisa Hultman. 2007. "One-Sided Violence against Civilians in War: Insights from New Fatality Data." *Journal of Peace Research* 44 (2):233-246.

Fazal, Tanisha M. 2018. *Wars of Law: Unintended Consequences in the Regulation of Armed Conflict*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Getmansky, Anna, and Thomas Zeitzoff. 2014. "Terrorism and Voting: The Effect of Rocket Threat on Voting in Israeli Elections." *American Political Science Review* 108 (3):588-604.

Giuliano, Elise. 2018. “Who Supported Separatism in Donbas? Ethnicity and Popular Opinion at the Start of the Ukraine Crisis.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34(2-3): 158-178.

Grossman, Guy, Devorah Manekin, and Dan Miodownik. 2015. “The Political Legacies of Combat: Attitudes Towards War and Peace among Israeli Ex-Combatants.” *International Organization* 69(4): 981-1009.

Habershon, Sarah, Rob England, Becky Dale & Olga Ivshina. 2022. “War in Ukraine: Can we say how many people have died?” *BBC News* (1 July).

Hultman, Lisa. 2007. "Battle Losses and Rebel Violence: Raising the Costs for Fighting." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (2):205-222.

Human Rights Watch. 2014. “Ukraine: Anti-Kiev Forces Running Amok.” (23 May). https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/23/ukraine-anti-kiev-forces-running-amok#.

Johnston, Patrick, and Anoop K. Sarbahi. 2016. "The Impact of Us Drone Strikes on Terrorism in Pakistan." *International Studies Quarterly* 60 (2):203-219.

Kalyvas, Stathis N. 2006. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Kulyk, Volodymyr. 2016. “National Identity in Ukraine: Impact of Euromaidan and the War.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68(4): 588-608.

Lichbach, Mark I. 1998. *The Rebel’s Dilemma*. Ann Arbor, M.I.: University of Michigan.

Lyall, Jason. 2009. "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks? Evidence from Chechnya " *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63 (3):331-362.

Lyall, Jason, Graeme Blair, and Kosuke Imai. 2013. "Explaining Support for Combatants During Wartime: A Survey Experiment in Afghanistan." *American Political Science Review* 107 (4):679-705.

Lyall, Jason, Yuki Shiraito, and Kosuke Imai. 2015. "Coethnic Bias and Wartime Informing." *Journal of Politics* 77 (3):833-848.

Lyall, Jason, and Isaiah Wilson. 2009. "Rage Against the Machines: Explaining the Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars." *International Organization* 63 (1):67-106.

Merolla, Jennifer L., and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister. 2009. *Democracy at Risk: How Terrorist Threats Affect the Public*. Chicago, I.L.: Chicago University Press.

Merom, Gil. 2003. *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morrow, James D. 2014. *Order Within Anarchy: The Laws of War as an International Institution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2016. *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine 16 November 2015 to 15 February 2016.*

———. 2022. *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine 1 August 2021 - 31 January 2022.*

Pape, Robert A. 1996. *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Pechenkina, Anna O., Andrew W. Bausch, and Kiron K. Skinner. 2019. "How do civilians attribute blame for state indiscriminate violence?" *Journal of Peace Research*, 56 (4): 545-558.

Reiter, Dan, and Allan C. Stam. 2002. *Democracies at War*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Rozenas, Arturas, Sebastian Schutte, and Yuri Zhukov. 2017. "The Political Legacy of Violence: The Long-Term Impact of Stalin's Repression in Ukraine." *Journal of Politics* 79 (4):1147–1161.

Schubiger, Livia. 2021. "State Violence and Wartime Civilian Agency: Evidence From Peru." *Journal of Politics* 83 (4): 1383-1398.

Schutte, Sebastian. 2017. "Violence and Civilian Loyalties: Evidence from Afghanistan." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61 (8):1595-1625.

Souleimanov, Emil Aslan, and David S. Siroky. 2016. "Random or Retributive?: Indiscriminate Violence in the Chechen Wars." *World Politics* 68 (4):677-712.

Stanton, Jessica A., 2016. *Violence and Restraint in Civil War: Civilian Targeting in the Shadow of International Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Steele, Abbey. 2009. "Seeking safety: Avoiding displacement and choosing destinations in civil wars." *Journal of Peace Research* 46 (3):419-429.

Stein, Rachel M. 2015. "War and Revenge: Explaining Conflict Initiation by Democracies." *American Political Science Review* 109 (3):556-573.

Stoll, David. 1993. *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*. New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press.

Tellez, Juan Fernando. 2019. "Worlds apart: Conflict exposure and preferences for peace." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63 (4):1053-1076.

Thompson, Nick. 2015. "Ukraine: Everything You Need to Know About How We Got Here." CNN. (3 February). https://www.cnn.com/2015/02/10/europe/ukraine-war-how-we-got-here/index.html.

Tishkov, Valery. 2004. *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*. Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press.

Valentino, Benjamin A. 2004. *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

———. 2014. "Why We Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence Against Civilians." *Annual Review of Political Science* 17: 89-103.

Valentino, Benjamin A., Paul K. Huth, and Dylan Balch-Lindsay. 2004. "'Draining the Sea': Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare." *International Organization* 58 (2):375-407.

Valentino, Benjamin A., Paul K. Huth, and Sarah E. Croco. 2006. "Covenants without the Sword: International Law and the Protection of Civilians in Times of War." *World Politics* 58 (3):339-377.

Wallace, Geoffrey P.R. 2015. *Life and Death in Captivity: The Abuse of Prisoners During War*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Walzer, Michael. 2000. *Just and Unjust Wars*. New York, N.Y.: Basic Books.

Weinstein, Jeremy M. 2007. *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zhukov, Yuri M. 2015. "Population Resettlement in War: Theory and Evidence from Soviet Archives." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59 (7):1155-1185.

———. 2016. "Trading Hard Hats for Combat Helmets: The Economics of Rebellion in Eastern Ukraine." *Journal of Comparative Economics* 44 (1):1-15.

———. 2017. "External Resources and Indiscriminate Violence: Evidence from German-Occupied Belarus." *World Politics* 69 (1):54-97.