

THE WAR IN UKRAINE HAS REVEALED A HIERARCHY OF VICTIMS

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Abstract: The invasion of Ukraine is an illegal act of aggression that violates the UN Charter and has targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure. It has resulted in the gravest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War and neighbouring European states have responded to the crisis with generosity and open borders. However, some of the Western media coverage of the war has been infused with stereotypical and racist framing pointing to a hierarchy of victims based on troubling binaries: global North / global South; white / coloured; deserving / undeserving; and civilised / uncivilised that suggests we should value Ukrainian victims of war more because they are white and European (Ryder, 2022). There have similarly been contrasting responses to the war and its victims by some European states, most noticeably Poland, that opened their borders and societies to refugees from Ukraine but pulled up the drawbridge to civilians fleeing wars in the global South. The article suggests that development educators should challenge and rebuff the negative stereotypes, pernicious racism and *à la carte* humanitarianism that has accompanied some of the media and state responses to the war in Ukraine to date.

Key words: Conflict; Refugees; Ukraine; Media; Racism; Stereotypes; Development education; Global citizenship education; Human rights.

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was an act of aggression in violation of the United Nations' Charter and illegal under international law (Amnesty International, 2022a). Russia has been accused of 'indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas and infrastructure' (Ibid) and the mass killing of 410 civilians in Bucha, near the capital Kyiv (Wilson, 2022). More than 4.3 million Ukrainians have been forced to flee their country with most refugees finding humanitarian assistance in neighbouring states (UNHCR, 2022). An additional 6.5 million people are estimated to be displaced internally in what

amounts to the gravest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War (Ibid). This article raises concerns about some of the media reporting of the crisis which has included stereotypical and racist framing that suggests we should value Ukrainian victims of war more because they are white and European (Ryder, 2022). This points to a hierarchy of victims based on troubling binaries: global North / global South; white / coloured; deserving / undeserving; and civilised / uncivilised that seem to cloud the lens of some Western media and government policies.

Irish Aid's global citizenship education (GCE) strategy suggests that GCE's purpose includes 'challenging stereotypes and encouraging independent thinking' (Irish Aid, 2021: 4). This requires that we draw upon the 'critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization' central to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996: 56). The article argues that the international development sector should be applying these skills to challenge and rebuff the stereotypical and racist tropes that have informed some of the reporting on the war in Ukraine. It similarly suggests that the sector should critique contrasting responses to the war and its victims by those European states that responded with great generosity and solidarity to refugees from Ukraine but have been less accommodating to civilians fleeing wars in the global South. Failure to do so risks complicity in the 'othering' of victims of conflicts in the global South, no less worthy of our empathy and support.

Media stereotyping

One of the dominant framings of the war in Ukraine by sections of the Western media has been to contrast displaced white, European refugees with brown or black civilians fleeing war in countries in the Middle-East or Africa. *Aljazeera* anchor Peter Dobbie, for example, was struck by how 'prosperous, middle class people' who 'are not obviously refugees trying to get away from areas in the Middle East that are still in a big state of war... look like any European family that you would live next door to' (*Aljazeera*, 2022). In a similar vein, Philippe Corbé, a French journalist with BFM-TV, said 'We're not talking here about Syrians fleeing the bombing of the Syrian regime backed by Putin. We're talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their

lives' (Bayoumi, 2022). An implication of the comments by Corbé and Dobbie is that residents of some Middle-East countries can expect to be bombed because of their location which somehow reduces their expectation for solidarity and support. This point was underlined on the BBC (2022a) by Ukraine's Deputy Chief Prosecutor, David Sakvarelidze, who said without contradiction: 'It's very emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blonde hair being killed'. And, an ITV reporter, Lucy Watson, commenting on the Ukraine conflict from Poland said 'this is not a developing, third world nation, this is Europe' (White, 2022). In responding to this reporting, the author and academic Moustafa Bayoumi (2022) said:

“These comments point to a pernicious racism that permeates today's war coverage and seeps into its fabric like a stain that won't go away. The implication is clear: war is a natural state for people of color, while white people naturally gravitate toward peace”.

Nadine White (2022), *The Independent's* Race Correspondent, said that while the media 'is often a force for good' it can 'also sanction racial disparities under the guise of 'putting it into context'. The Arab and Middle-Eastern Journalists Association (AMEJA) went further by rejecting 'orientalist and racist implications that any population or country is "uncivilized" or bears economic factors that make it worthy of conflict'. 'This type of commentary', argues AMEJA, 'reflects the pervasive mentality in Western journalism of normalizing tragedy in parts of the world such as the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Latin America' (AMEJA, 2022). By drawing a distinction between what CBS News senior foreign correspondent, Charlie D'Agata, saw on the one hand as 'a relatively civilized, relatively European' country like Ukraine with countries like Iraq or Afghanistan, that have 'seen conflict raging for decades' (Bayoumi, 2022), the media trades in dehumanising stereotypes that Freire described as 'depositing myths indispensable to the preservation of the status quo' (1996: 120).

Unequal treatment

The media's apparent hierarchy of victims seems to be replicated in how Ukrainian refugees are being aided by European states while refugees from the global South struggle for admittance and support. By the end of 2020, the UNHCR (2021) calculated that the European Union's (EU) share of the world's refugees was 0.6 per cent (2.65 million) of its total population, compared to 12.9 per cent in Lebanon, 6.4 per cent in Jordan and 4.4 per cent in Turkey, countries with much less capacity to manage large refugee populations. To date, a total of 4.3 million Ukrainian refugees have found refuge in European states with the majority (2.5 million) hosted by Poland; by any measure a fulsome and generous response (UNHCR, 2022). The Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs announced in response to the crisis that 'anyone from Ukraine is allowed entry, even those who do not hold valid passports' (Pikulicka-Wilczewska, 2022). Yet, in November 2021, Poland deployed 20,000 border police, water cannon and tear gas to repel asylum-seekers and refugees from the Middle-East in a stand-off with Belarus which the UN found to be a breach of humanitarian refugee and human rights law (UNHCR, 2021). Marta Górczyńska, a human rights lawyer based in Warsaw who worked with refugees on the Belarus border said she suffered harassment and intimidation from the same Polish authorities who are now 'welcoming refugees fleeing Ukraine with open arms and providing them with assistance' (Fallon, 2022).

The United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has praised the raft of measures introduced by EU members to provide sanctuary and support to Ukrainian refugees. They include: the lifting of visa requirements and foregoing of the need for passports; the simplification of border controls; 90 days' visa-free throughout EU countries; three years' temporary protection in EU countries; free public transport and phone communication; and rights to a residence permit and access to education, housing, and the labour market (OCHA, 2022). 'This is how the international refugee protection regime should work, especially in times of crisis', suggests the OCHA, but when contrasted with the recent treatment of refugees from the global South in Hungary and Poland, it adds that 'the double standards and racism inherent in Europe's refugee responses are glaring' (Ibid).

Indeed, OCHA raised concerns about accounts of ‘racist treatment, obstruction, and violence’ meted out to students and migrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia also fleeing the war in Ukraine (Ibid).

There is a ‘shocking distinction’, suggests Berlinger (2022), between the treatment of mostly white and Christian refugees from Ukraine in Poland and other parts of Europe, with those escaping violence in the Middle-East and North Africa. Political leaders in Spain, Bulgaria, Greece, and Denmark have similarly pulled up the drawbridge when it comes to refugees from the Middle-East while welcoming Ukrainians ‘who are from us, come from us’ as the Greek MP Dimitris Kairidis put it (Uddin, 2022).

A similar distinction in the response of Western powers to the war in Ukraine can be discerned in the rapid deployment of a range of sanctions on Russia by the EU and United States (US). These include: sanctions on military goods and mercenaries; luxury goods; over 1,000 oligarchs believed to be close to the Kremlin; Russian oil and gas; and, perhaps, most significantly the freezing of financial assets to stop Russia accessing its foreign currency reserves which has already caused a depreciation of the Rouble by 22 per cent (BBC, 2022b). The speed and unity of action by the EU, UK and US stands in stark contrast to their level of inaction and, in some cases, complicity with state human rights abuses elsewhere. For example, Saudi Arabia’s-led war in Yemen has resulted in 377,000 direct and indirect deaths, 70 per cent of whom are children (Haddad, 2022). Nearly 50 per cent of Yemen’s 20 million people experience malnutrition and in 2021, a Yemeni child under the age of five died every nine minutes because of the conflict (Hanna, Bohl and Moyer, 2021: 12). President Biden’s flip-flopping policy on Yemen saw him announce Washington’s withdrawal of support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen declaring ‘this war has to end’ in February 2021 (Borger and Wintour, 2021). But by October 2021, his administration had agreed a \$500 million arms deal with Saudi which included attack helicopters used in Yemen (Kirchgaessner and McKernan, 2021). His foreign policy had previously barred the sale of ‘offensive’ weapons to Saudi (Ibid). In a similar vein, the Court of Appeal in London ruled in June 2019, following a legal challenge by Campaign Against

Arms Trade (CAAT), that British government arms sales to Saudi were ‘unlawful’ as they failed to assess whether airstrikes that killed civilians in Yemen broke humanitarian law (Sabbagh and McKernan, 2019). By September 2019, Liz Truss, the Trade Secretary at the time, admitted that the government had breached the court order three times by issuing export licences for the sale of weapons to Saudi (Sabbagh, 2019).

‘The atrocities committed by Russia in Ukraine’, argues the journalist Patrick Cockburn, ‘should lead to greater condemnation of similar crimes in Aleppo, Gaza, Raqqa, Sanaa, Mosul and a myriad of places in Afghanistan’ (Cockburn, 2022). Indulging in an *à la carte* approach to international humanitarianism and human rights law risks what Cockburn calls a ‘hypocrites’ charter’ which will diminish respect for and adherence to universal human rights.

Palestine and Ukraine

Perhaps the clearest recent parallel between Russia’s illegal and brutal invasion and attack on Ukraine is Israel’s eleven-day bombardment of the Gaza Strip in May 2021 – the fourth since 2008 — which resulted in 256 Palestinian deaths with 2,000 injured and the civilian infrastructure depleted (OCHA, 2021). The civilian targets included 15,000 housing units, 58 educational installations, 19 healthcare centres and 9 hospitals (Ibid). President Biden repeatedly reiterated during the bombardment Israel’s ‘right to defend itself’ (Borger and Chulov, 2021) thus copper-fastening Washington’s diplomatic and economic support of Tel Aviv, which in 2020 included \$3.8 billion in US aid, almost all of which was military assistance (Horton, 2021). For Israel, there have been no sanctions or diplomatic isolation despite recently being designated an apartheid state by Human Rights Watch (2021) and Amnesty International (2022b). Sarah Leah Whitson, the former director of Human Rights Watch’s Middle East division, sees ‘clear parallels between Russian and Israeli violations of international law, including the committing of war crimes’ (McGreal, 2022). ‘It’s very clear that the grounds for resisting sanctions on Israel, or even compliance with international law, is purely political’, argues Whitson (Ibid).

What appears to be emerging from the Western response to the war in Ukraine is what Vijay Prashad calls an ‘international division of humanity’ (Kasonta, 2022). ‘A Yemeni dies, well, Yemenis die’; he argues, ‘but if a European dies, that’s terrible’ (Ibid). In 2021, 31,500 people from across Africa and the Middle-East trying to cross the Mediterranean from Libya to Europe for sanctuary were intercepted and sent back (Hearst, 2022). 2,041 refugees were recorded drowned or missing in 2021 while making the same crossing, up from 1,448 in 2020 (Ibid). Many were fleeing wars in the Middle-East and North Africa fuelled by the United States and its Western allies who supply three-quarters of all arms transfers to the region (Hartung and Draper, 2020). Western powers, therefore, have a responsibility and legal obligation to operate a more humane and equal asylum process for those fleeing war in the global South. ‘We need a more democratic world order’, argues Prashad, ‘one that is premised on the hopes and dreams of all the peoples of the world’ (Kasonta, 2022).

Conclusion

The solidarity, humanity and refuge extended to Ukrainian victims of Russia’s war across Europe is welcome and an example of how civilians suddenly dispossessed and forced to flee their homes and country should be treated. Civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), citizens and communities across Europe have mobilised impressively to extend solidarity, aid and shelter to Ukrainian refugees. But it has drawn an uneasy contrast with how refugees from the global South mostly remain a nuisance to be managed rather than fellow global citizens to be embraced. This contrast has manifested itself in the stereotypical and, in some cases, racist reportage of sections of the global media that have contrasted white, European and ‘civilised’ refugees that ‘look like us’ with people of colour from the global South for whom ‘war is a natural state’ (Bayoumi, 2022). It also has manifested itself in the contrasting way that some European states have opened their borders and arms to refugees from Ukraine and slammed the door closed on refugees from the global South.

On 1 March 2022, Dóchas, the Irish Association of Non-Government Development Organisations, released a public statement on the war in Ukraine. It said: ‘Dóchas is gravely concerned about the conflict in the Ukraine, and denounces Russia’s attacks on Ukrainian territory. We stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine’ (Dóchas, 2022). I’m sure that the clarity and unanimity of the statement was welcomed by all Dóchas members together with the supporting information made available to the public on how to support agencies working on the ground in Ukraine. It raises the question, however, as to whether similar levels of clarity, unanimity, solidarity and public support will be extended in the future to victims of conflict in the global South. If not, the international development sector could be accused of contributing to the hierarchy of victims revealed by the war in Ukraine. As the UN states: ‘Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status’ (UN, 2022). As such they should be implemented with consistency, equality, and respect in all jurisdictions.

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