

**Moral Injury Beyond the Battlefield: Traces of Moral Injury in the  
Leadership Narratives of Non-Military Leaders in Wartime Ukraine  
(2022–2025)**

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## Introduction

The full-scale, unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 provides a critical context for examining lived experiences of moral distress and potential traces of moral injury in both military and civilian settings. The reintegration of military veterans after the war poses an enormous challenge for Ukraine — one shaped by the destruction wrought by Russian attacks on home communities, the internal displacement and emigration of families to Europe, and the physical and mental health needs of returning veterans.<sup>1</sup> In this presentation, however, we explore how non-military leaders who remained in Ukraine during the war—as well as displaced Ukrainians—reflect on moral challenges in their leadership narratives.

Although the concept of moral injury has been primarily developed within psychology and trauma studies, this paper approaches it from the perspective of leadership and lived theology and spirituality. This paper draws on several qualitative studies, but time does not permit a detailed presentation of each of them. We argue that while Ukrainian leadership narratives during wartime reveal significant moral distress, they rarely express moral injury explicitly. Instead, these narratives point to forms of moral anchoring and emerging processes of moral formation under conditions of extreme pressure.

Recent estimates suggest that casualties in the Russo-Ukrainian war are approaching two million soldiers killed, wounded, or missing.<sup>2</sup> Reports from the battlefield also illustrate how prolonged warfare can normalize forms of dehumanization. For example, a drone pilot interviewed by Anthony Loyd described killing enemy soldiers as feeling “like flying a toy into someone.”<sup>3</sup> Such attitudes illustrate how wartime violence can detach lethal action from moral emotion. Scholars describe this phenomenon as **dehumanization**—the perception of another person or group as lacking essential human qualities.<sup>4</sup> Dehumanization plays a significant role in the dynamics of war and is closely connected to discussions of moral injury.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

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<sup>1</sup> Dara Masscot (2026). The lasting wounds of the war in Ukraine: Both sides will struggle to reintegrate millions of veterans. *Foreign Affairs*, March 18.

<sup>2</sup> Helene Cooper, Pentagon correspondent for the *New York Times*, Troop Casualties in Ukraine Near 2 Million, Study finds, *New York Times*, January 27, 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Loyd (2026), ‘I killed the Russian and felt nothing, like a game’, *The Times*, Monday, February 9, pp.24-25.

<sup>4</sup> Nick Haslam and Steve Loughnan (2014), Dehumanization and Infrhumanization. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65, pp.399-423.

Moral injury refers to profound psychological, social, and sometimes spiritual distress that arises when individuals encounter events that violate their moral framework. Shira Maguen argues that such injury may occur when people are exposed to potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs) that challenge deeply held moral beliefs and create internal distress as individuals struggle to process their moral implications.<sup>5</sup> Not everyone exposed to morally troubling situations develops moral injury; however, when these experiences strongly conflict with a person's moral identity and values, they can lead to lasting inner turmoil. PMIEs may involve witnessing morally troubling actions or participating in actions that contradict one's moral beliefs, either through acts of commission — doing something that violates one's moral code — or omission, meaning a failure to act when one believed action was required.

Scholars also note that exposure to morally troubling events does not always lead immediately to moral injury. Instead, such experiences are often understood along a continuum of moral strain, progressing from moral stress to moral distress and, in some cases, to moral injury (Litz et al., 2009).<sup>6</sup> Moral injury emerges when individuals believe they have violated deeply held moral principles or failed to fulfill their ethical responsibilities. In such situations, distress is often expressed through feelings of guilt, shame, and self-condemnation rather than fear, as individuals struggle with their moral identity, sense of worth, and relationship to their communities or beliefs.

Recent scholarship has expanded the concept of moral injury beyond its original focus on military personnel, first responders, and healthcare workers who perpetrate or witness morally troubling actions. VanderWeele and colleagues (2025) argue that moral injury may also arise from experiences of victimization, an understanding particularly relevant for wartime civilian populations. For this presentation we adopt the following definition of moral injury: “*persistent distress that arises from a personal experience that disrupts or threatens: (a) one's sense of the goodness of oneself, of others, of institutions, or of what are understood to be higher powers, or (b) one's beliefs or intuitions about right and wrong, or good and evil*”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Very much based on the lecture of Shira Maguen, Ph.D. is Mental Health Director of the Post-9/11 Integrated Care Clinic and Staff Psychologist on the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Clinical Team (PCT) at the San Francisco VA Health Care System (SFVAHCS), and Professor in the Dept. of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, UCSF School of Medicine. See Maguen, S. (2026, February 10). *Moral injury: Research, measurement, and clinical care* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/lcIkstw1MI0>.

<sup>6</sup> Litz, B. T., Stein, N., Delaney, E., Lebowitz, L., Nash, W. P., Silva, C., & Maguen, S. (2009). Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy. *Clinical Psychology Review, 29*(8), 695–706. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.07.003>

<sup>7</sup> VanderWeele TJ, Wortham JS, Carey LB, Case BW, Cowden RG, Duffee C, Jackson-Meyer K, Lu F, Mattson SA, Padgett RN, Peteet JR, Rutledge J, Symons X and Koenig HG (2025) Moral trauma, moral distress, moral injury, and moral injury disorder: definitions and assessments. *Front. Psychol.* 16:1422441. <https://doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1422441>

This framework allows us to examine whether the leadership narratives emerging from wartime Ukraine reveal evidence of moral injury, moral distress, or other forms of moral transformation.

Moral injury has implications that extend beyond individual psychological distress. Timothy Mallard argues that moral injury can become a strategic issue affecting families, communities, and entire societies, as the moral consequences of war reverberate far beyond the battlefield.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, scholars also note that confronting moral injury can lead to processes of moral and spiritual renewal, as individuals seek to reconstruct meaning, identity, and purpose after traumatic experiences.

### **3. Spiritual leadership in times of war and peace**

As part of a broader research project on spiritual leadership in times of war and peace, Prof. Roger Gill and I conducted fieldwork in Ukraine and interviewed more than sixty leaders from different sectors of society. Drawing on ten research questions, we invited participants to reflect on the meaning of spirituality and organizational leadership during wartime. The interviews were conducted over a nine-month period, from June 2023 to April 2024. I would like to highlight several insights from this research that are particularly relevant to our discussion.

Many interviewees described spirituality as an integration of body, mind, and spirit, expressed through a deep sense of connection to oneself and to others. They emphasized that spiritual qualities—such as integrity, empathy, and a sense of purpose—shape how leaders relate to their teams, make decisions, and uphold ethical commitments. In these narratives, spirituality is closely linked to responsible action, care for others, and the willingness to face the suffering of war selflessly rather than seeking self-preservation or personal recognition.

Several leaders described spirituality as “faith, the search for meaning, and inner balance” (P29). Others noted that the war reshaped their understanding of spirituality, shifting it “from personal self-improvement and self-preservation toward supporting others” (P61). One respondent explained that spirituality during wartime means relying on faith and hope in order to endure constant bad news and emotional trauma without falling into despair (P57).

#### **3.1 “Людяність” (Liudianist) as a Moral Criterion of Leadership**

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy Mallard is Professor of Leadership and Ethics at Birmingham (Alabama) Theological Seminary in the USA and Honorary Fellow in Durham University Department of Theology and Religion.

In our research, many respondents evaluated leadership not only in terms of effectiveness but also in moral terms. In the context of war, one of the most frequently mentioned moral concepts is *liudianist*—a Ukrainian term referring to treating others with respect, dignity, and compassion. For many participants, this concept became a key measure of leadership. When leaders fail to treat others with humanity, respondents often interpret this not simply as poor leadership but as a loss of moral orientation.

*Liudianist* expresses a deep respect for human dignity and the inherent worth of every person. As one respondent explained:

“For us in Ukraine, the concept of *liudianist* is very important. It must remain constant in both peace and war. When difficulties arise, these trials reveal whether our convictions about humanity are genuine.” (P15)

Across many responses, *liudianist* emerges not merely as a cultural virtue but as a moral framework that functions as an anchor in wartime, helping individuals resist the processes of dehumanization that violent conflict can easily produce.

### 3.2 Suppression of Spirituality and Dehumanization (slide 6)

Participants in our study—non-military organizational leaders—described the challenge of supporting and mobilizing their communities while guarding against the loss of humanity that can occur when the enemy is completely dehumanized.

During one interview, a female educational leader (P02) shared a contemporary Ukrainian poem by Marina Ponomarenko. The poem portrays a Ukrainian soldier confessing to a priest that he no longer believes in God after witnessing the brutality of war and the deaths of his comrades. Disillusioned and spiritually exhausted, the soldier concludes that he will no longer take prisoners but will instead kill them.

Reflecting on the poem, the respondent suggested that it captures a broader moral threshold experienced by some Ukrainians during the war. In her words: “*We need to set aside spirituality for later... We must distance ourselves from Russians so much that we stop seeing their humanity.*” (P02)

Although such statements appear relatively rarely in the dataset, they reveal the intense moral pressures created by prolonged war. Most respondents continue to emphasize compassion, solidarity, and the preservation of humanity. At the same time, some narratives suggest that under conditions of extreme suffering and repeated exposure to violence, moral distress is beginning to reshape moral and spiritual frameworks. In a small number of cases,

participants explicitly describe the temporary suspension of spiritual ideals and the dehumanization of the enemy as necessary responses to wartime realities. These reflections therefore point not only to a potential risk but also to emerging signs of moral deformation, in which ethical commitments such as compassion and forgiveness may be set aside in the struggle for survival.

### 3.3. Loss of confidence and loss of personal dignity

Zhdanova et al. (2023)<sup>9</sup> show that at the onset of the full-scale invasion civilians most commonly experienced fear, panic, anxiety, confusion, helplessness, and anger—responses characteristic of acute traumatic stress. However, by 2023 these reactions had noticeably shifted. Fear and panic declined but reduced confidence became the dominant emotional state. The findings of Serdiuk et al. (2025)<sup>10</sup> further illuminate this dynamic. Their research demonstrates that while bombardment and proximity to combat understandably generate intense fear and stress, violence such as rape, assault, or domestic abuse, represents not only a physical threat but also a profound violation of fundamental moral expectations about human relationships. Such experiences directly challenge an individual’s sense of the goodness of others and disrupt basic beliefs about right and wrong. In this sense, interpersonal trauma often carries a stronger moral dimension than impersonal wartime dangers such as artillery or missile attacks.

Recently, as part of our ongoing research, we interviewed Ukrainian trauma therapist Dr. Ruslan Ilchenko, director of the trauma rehabilitation center *The Way Out* in Poltava. He noted that Ukrainian practitioners do not typically use the term *moral injury*, but among people affected by the war they frequently encounter what he described as a “loss of personal dignity” among people affected by the war. According to Ilchenko, war-related trauma often leads Ukrainians to question their own value and identity, sometimes even doubting whether they are loved by God or worthy of care.

Dr. Ilchenko observed that when internally displaced people from the eastern regions of Ukraine resettle in the central or western parts of the country, they often notice that those regions are less damaged by the war and that religious life there appears stronger. In such situations, some displaced individuals begin to interpret their suffering in moral or spiritual

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<sup>9</sup> Zhdanova, I., Shakhova, O., Rodenkova, V. (2023). Dynamics of mental states of civilians during the war in Ukraine. *Visnyk of V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University. Series “Psychology”*, (74), 7-12. <https://doi.org/10.26565/2225-7756-2023-74-01> (in Ukrainian)

<sup>10</sup> Serdiuk, O., Burlaka, V., Markovska, A., Smith, C., Panok, V., Klochkov, V., & Javanbakht, A. (2025). Trauma exposure and risk of post-traumatic stress disorder among youth and young adults during the Russia-Ukraine war. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 391, 119944–119944. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2025.119944>

terms, suggesting that perhaps they are somehow responsible for their own wounds or that they are “not as good” as people living in the western regions of the country.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the psychological consequences of the war in Ukraine cannot be understood solely in terms of fear-based trauma. Feelings of diminished dignity, spiritual questioning, and the reinterpretation of suffering in moral or religious terms suggest that many Ukrainian individuals are grappling with disrupted moral meaning. The shadow of moral injury may be present even when it is not named. Recognizing these subtle dynamics is essential for understanding the long-term moral and spiritual consequences of the war and for shaping forms of psychological, pastoral, and social support that address not only trauma but also the deeper moral wounds carried by many Ukrainians.

#### **4. Moral tension and feeling of defeat in the narratives of organizational leaders**

Recent studies of the war in Ukraine confirm the widespread psychological and moral impact of the conflict on civilian populations. Zasiiekina, Zasiiekin, and Kuperman (2023) report an extremely high prevalence of severe PTSD symptoms and moral injury among Ukrainian citizens during the ongoing war, with greater severity among women, older individuals, displaced populations, and residents of regions under Russian occupation.<sup>11</sup> Additional studies comparing Ukrainian soldiers and civilian students similarly found significantly higher levels of moral injury, PTSD, depression, and anxiety among civilian populations, with particularly strong effects among women (Zasiiekina et al. 2024).<sup>12</sup>

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine prompted a detailed examination of non-military leadership dynamics during wartime. Through surveys and interviews, 145 Ukrainian leaders reflected on their understanding of leadership in wartime, on their leadership roles, their observations of others’ leadership, and the leadership needed for post-war recovery (Negrov and Riggio, 2025).<sup>13</sup> In 2025, we repeated the same four questions with a new sample of 138 organizational and community leaders from multiple sectors.

The 2025 survey also included an additional question, suggested by Jonathan Gosling, asking participants whether they had experienced moments of perceived defeat and how they

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<sup>11</sup> Larysa Zasiiekina, Serhii Zasiiekin and Victor Kuperman (2023), Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Moral Injury Among Ukrainian Civilians During the Ongoing War. *Journal of Community Health*, 29 April, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-023-01225-5>

<sup>12</sup> Larysa Zasiiekina, Tamara Duchymynska, Antonia Bifulco and Giacomo Bignardi (2024), War trauma impacts in Ukrainian combat and civilian populations - Moral injury and associated mental health symptoms. *Military Psychology*, 36:5, pp. 555-566, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2023.2235256>

<sup>13</sup> Negrov, A. I., & Riggio, R. E. (2025). *Leadership in Ukraine*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

exercised leadership in those moments. A majority of respondents (approximately 72%) acknowledged experiencing such moments. These were often accompanied by emotional states such as disappointment and doubt—experiences that correspond closely to what the literature describes as **moral distress**, or ethical strain under prolonged crisis.

Some participants expressed internal doubt and emotional fatigue when their efforts appeared ineffective or when the war seemed endless. One respondent described moments when the pressure felt overwhelming, noting periods of moral and physical exhaustion when ***“my inner voice asked whether all my efforts were in vain.”*** In such moments, he questioned whether it still made sense to continue serving, living, and working under these conditions. Other responses reveal disappointment directed toward institutions and social structures, including political leadership, churches, and society more broadly. One participant described deep frustration when witnessing corruption, injustice, and a lack of societal willingness to sacrifice for veterans, stating that such realities created the feeling that *“we may have already lost another war—the war for respect for human dignity.”* These and other statements suggest distress generated by perceived violations of moral values such as justice, integrity, and solidarity.

### **Conclusion: From Moral Distress to Moral Formation**

Recent studies on moral injury suggest that severe moral stress does not inevitably lead to moral collapse.<sup>14</sup> In some cases, recovery from trauma can produce forms of post-traumatic growth, including renewed resilience, strengthened relationships, spiritual transformation, and a deeper appreciation of life.<sup>15</sup>

Although our data do not reveal extensive direct evidence of moral injury, many responses reflect early signs of such transformative processes. Ukrainian adolescents (Gen Z) frequently describe leadership during wartime in terms of supporting vulnerable people, maintaining compassion, and preserving human dignity despite surrounding violence. Similarly,

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<sup>14</sup> Hoover, Tanzi D., and Gerlinde A. S. Metz. 2024. "What Comes after Moral Injury?—Considerations of Post-Traumatic Growth" *Trauma Care* 4, no. 3: 219-228. <https://doi.org/10.3390/traumacare4030020>

<sup>15</sup> Taku, K., Cann, A., Calhoun, L.G. and Tedeschi, R.G. (2008), The factor structure of the posttraumatic growth inventory: A comparison of five models using confirmatory factor analysis. *J. Traum. Stress*, 21: 158-164. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.20305>; Stasielowicz L (2022), "Adaptive performance in refugees after trauma: how relevant are post-traumatic stress and post-traumatic growth?". *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, Vol. 15 No. 6 pp. 711–727, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJWHM-12-2021-0230>; Kokun, O. (2023), The personal growth resources of the adult population following the first months of the war in Ukraine. *Int J Psychol*, 58: 407-414. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12915>

displaced Ukrainian women often emphasize solidarity, responsibility toward others, and the need for moral and spiritual renewal within society.

I would like to conclude with the words of one Ukrainian organizational leader who reflected on the nature of leadership during the war and in the post-war future:

*“We need people who possess integrity. War exposes everything. It reveals much about a person—whether they have integrity or not: it reveals who is merely a talker, who is a thief, who is corrupt, who occupies a public office without doing anything useful. . . . When I think about the future of Ukraine, I ask: Will we have prosecutors or judges who can pursue cases justly and independently? Will our systems and institutions act with the highest degree of integrity? Will our people genuinely and honestly care for veterans and the traumatized? My concern is not limited to politicians alone—it concerns every person, regardless of their particular station in society. (Res. D25–10; quoted in Negrov, 2026)<sup>16</sup>*

This reflection illustrates how wartime experience stimulates a broader moral evaluation of society. Rather than expressing despair, it articulates a moral expectation that Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction must be grounded in integrity, justice, and care for those who have suffered. Listening to leadership narratives from Ukraine reveals not moral collapse but a process of ethical reaffirmation under extreme pressure. This does not mean that moral injury is absent.

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<sup>16</sup> Negrov, A. (2026). Lived Theology and Leadership in Wartime Ukraine: An Empirical Study of How Lament, Presence, and Hope Reflect and Shape Theological Meaning-Making (2022–2025). *Religions*, 17(2), 169. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel17020169>