

Tipsheet: Ukraine: Investigating war crimes

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Collecting data while reporting in the field

Introduction:

When Russian forces abandoned the Ukrainian town of Bucha in early April, 2022, reporters Yousur Al-Hlou and I entered the town to canvas witnesses, survivors and officials for evidence. We spent months reporting there on multiple visits. Our goal was to identify the victims on Yablunska Street, how they were killed, and who was responsible.

During our eight-month investigation, together with the New York Times visual investigations team, we collected and analyzed thousands of hours of security camera footage, drone and witness videos, satellite data and military documents the Russian soldiers left behind, as well as exclusive phone logs obtained from the law enforcement agency. Together, the material enabled us to identify the victims and the military unit responsible.

Reporting Tips:

- When you collect witness testimonies, immerse yourself in the community: be sensitive to the traumas people experienced, be patient, commit time, and explain what you are doing.
- Pay attention to details in witness accounts. For example, it was because multiple witnesses told us that Russian soldiers took phones from the locals, that we decided to check the phone numbers of the victims for outgoing calls to Russia after the time of their deaths. This was crucial evidence in our investigation.
- On Google Maps, drop pins for locations you visit to document testimonies or gather data.
- Preserve the metadata for all photo, videos and other documentation you gather, or ask for evidence of the time/date from the source.
- Keep a running log of your reporting days in the field for later reference, with details of who you spoke to and what data you gathered.
- Join local community groups on social media

- Telegram and Viber groups are popular in Ukraine,. If your story is focused on a specific town, or neighborhood, look for those local community groups on Telegram, Viber and Facebook. For example, what helped us identify a number of victims on Yablunska Street is joining a police Telegram group with morgue photos from the Kyiv region. Also, if you are looking for information, ask local officials or sources with a big following in the community to post a question on their social media page.
- Organize the data you gather efficiently.

Examples/Case Studies of investigative stories:

New Images Show How Russian Soldiers Executed Men in Bucha

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/world/europe/russia-bucha-ukraine-executions.html>

Their Final Moments: Victims of a Russian Atrocity in Bucha

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/21/world/europe/bucha-ukraine-massacre-victims.html>

Caught on Camera, Traced by Phone: The Russian Military Unit That Killed Dozens in Bucha

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/22/video/russia-ukraine-bucha-massacre-takeaways.html>

‘Putin is a Fool’: Intercepted Calls Reveal Russian Army in Disarray

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/09/28/world/europe/russian-soldiers-phone-calls-ukraine.html>

Putin’s War: A Times investigation

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/16/world/europe/russia-putin-war-failures-ukraine.html>