

Relying on Civilian Intelligence in the Russo-Ukrainian War

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in what it called a “special military operation.” Although the Russian government hoped for a quick victory over Ukraine, the war has turned into a brutal back-and-forth slog between the two countries. Caught in the middle of this conflict are millions of Ukrainian civilians, many of them currently living under Russian occupation.

The ubiquity of smartphones and access to telecommunications has given many civilians the ability to fight back against their occupiers in a novel way – by providing intelligence to the Ukrainian military in the form of photos, videos, and texts depicting Russian military activity. Some civilians are actively taking this opportunity. According to the Security Service of Ukraine, the Ukrainian military was able to attack and destroy several Russian vehicles outside Kyiv thanks to a public tip over the Telegram app in early March 2022. In addition, the Ukrainian government has allowed civilians to report intelligence through its Diia app. According to *Business Insider*, users can send information on the number, composition, and time of contact of enemy troops.

On one hand, one could argue that nations are justified in taking more extreme measures if they are fighting an unprovoked invasion. By providing information on Russian soldiers and military equipment, civilians living under occupation can help the Ukrainian military defeat the Russian invasion. In addition, considering the inherent suffering caused by war – including the fact that Russian soldiers have committed war crimes such as rape, summary execution, and looting while occupying Ukrainian territory, and the suffering caused by living under occupation – it could be argued that providing such intelligence could reduce suffering by ending the war with a Ukrainian victory.

On the other hand, the act of civilians providing intelligence on armed forces blurs the lines between soldiers and civilians. If soldiers believe that civilians may be spying on them, which could in turn increase the risk that these soldiers will be attacked, then the soldiers may engage in reprisals against all civilians. For example, Russian soldiers now often search civilians’ cell phones. One could also argue that civilians who provide intelligence in this way are no longer noncombatants, and that they are putting others at risk from enemy forces, who may no longer separate Ukrainian soldiers from noncombatants.

Discussion Questions

1. What ethical concerns separate combatants from noncombatants/civilians?
2. What actions are militaries ethically justified in taking against combatants? Do the reasons for fighting affect which actions it is morally justifiable for them to take? What actions are they justified taking against civilians providing intelligence?
3. Is providing intelligence as a civilian ethical? Why or why not?