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New War, Same Battle? Conflict-Related Human Trafficking in the Context of the War in Ukraine

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Despite the link between conflict and human trafficking having been globally recognised, academic inquiry investigating how the two interact continues to be limited. Given the recency of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022, this lack of literature is even more pronounced in understanding how the risks of trafficking are developing in the current context. This paper examines extant academic literature to explore what is already known about the relationship between conflict and human trafficking, situating this within the theoretical framework of routine activity theory (RAT). It analyses governmental and non-governmental organisation reports emerging from Ukraine to contextualise the risk that is specific to those affected by the war. The paper identifies four key drivers of risk facing those in, or fleeing, Ukraine, which can heighten their vulnerability to human trafficking, before offering a novel and innovative typology of the ways that human trafficking can manifest as a result of conflict. The typology gives consideration to the direct and indirect links between conflict and trafficking, the geographical spaces in which trafficking can occur, and the specific forms that exploitation can take. By situating the paper within RAT and contextualising it with evidence from the war in Ukraine, the findings of this paper provide both theoretical and empirical insights which help to expand existing knowledge on how conflict situations can increase the risk of THB.

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INTRODUCTION

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation escalated its conflict in the Donbas region to a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The war brought many direct hardships for Ukrainians, including lives lost, livelihoods ruptured, families separated, education disrupted, and the deterioration of mental well-being. Beyond Ukraine itself, the invasion signalled a downturn in international relations, an economic and energy crisis across Europe, and a global food shortage (Esfandabadi, Ranjbari and Scagnelli, 2022; Hutter and Weber, 2023; Lin et al., 2023). However, despite the overwhelming global harm the war has wrought, one group that has seemingly benefited from the chaos of war is human traffickers.

This paper uses the definition of trafficking in human beings (THB) adopted by Article 3 of the Trafficking in Persons Protocol by the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (the Palermo Protocol). This definition constitutes three elements: (a) The Act: the 'recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons'; (b) The Means: 'threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a persons having control over another person' and; (c) for the Purpose of exploitation. Exploitation includes at a minimum 'the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs' (United Nations General Assembly, 2000). All three elements, Act, Means, and Purpose, must be present for a situation to be considered THB, except when the victim[1] is under 18 years old, where it is not necessary for the 'Means' to be present. This definition has been selected following the amendment of Article 149 of Ukraine's Criminal Code on 6 September 2018, which brought its definition of THB in line with the standard of the Palermo Protocol (Verhovna Rada, 2018).

The association between conflict[2] and an increase in THB is one that has been stressed by numerous international bodies over recent years. For instance, the EU Commission (2012) specifically listed 'conflict and post-conflict situations' as one of several key causes of THB. Later, in 2016, UN Security Council Resolution 2331 officially recognised the phenomenon of THB in armed conflict (United Nations, 2016). In 2018, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned again that THB 'is a vile crime that feeds on inequalities, instability and conflict' (UNODC, 2018a). However, despite this international recognition, anti-trafficking policies and documents at the regional level have mainly failed to focus on human trafficking in conflict (Muraszkiewicz et al., 2020a) and there is limited academic research which demonstrates how the two concepts interact at a conceptual level (Heys, 2023).

The academic literature which does engage with the direct nexus between conflict and THB tends to focus on specific forms of trafficking that result from armed conflict: of particular note is the focus on child soldiers (Dunhill and Kidd, 2020; Haer, Faulkner and Whitaker, 2019; Hurtado, Dosdad and Hernández, 2018; Verhey, 2001). There is also attention given to the impact that conflict has in driving sexual exploitation, both in terms of a tactic of war, and in serving a demand for sex (Muraszkiewicz et al., 2020b). The latter is particularly pronounced in the literature in relation to military personnel (Greer and Cates, 2020), and to the introduction of peacekeepers into regions affected by conflict (Heys, 2023; Pehlic, 2020; Smith and Miller-de la Cuesta, 2010; Smith and Smith, 2010).

While discussions of such examples are important in understanding how trafficking can play out in response to conflict, there is little academic scrutiny into the ways in which conflict creates a conducive environment for THB, or where the key vulnerabilities to human trafficking lie within conflict. While the Ukrainian context has brought this correlation between conflict and trafficking to the forefront of conversation (Cockbain and Sidebottom, 2022), it is vital that

1 The authors use the terms 'victim' and 'victimisation' to denote individuals affected by trafficking, recognising debates on agency removal, especially in sexual assault contexts (Heys, 2023). The choice of this term reflects the need to balance acknowledging harm with respecting agency, without implying passivity. This terminology aims to emphasise rights and protections for those impacted, irrespective of their current situation, and acknowledges the term's limitations while prioritising legal and humanitarian perspectives.

2 The words 'conflict' and 'war' are used interchangeably throughout this article, reflecting the wording of extant academic literature. It is however important to note that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine amounts to war, and the word conflict is avoided in reference to the Ukrainian context. The inclusion of the word 'conflict' is however important to delineate that the discussions herein are applicable both to examples of war as well as conflicts that may not fully meet that definition.

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this connection is better understood. Doing so would allow the opportunity to learn from past conflicts how trafficking may transpire as a result of the war in Ukraine, and to recognise how such learnings might be used as lessons for the future. To this end, this paper investigates the key research questions: *How do conflict-driven vulnerabilities facilitate human trafficking in the context of the war in Ukraine?* and *What specific risk factors contribute to the exacerbation of trafficking activities during such crises?*

To drive forward understandings of how conflict can exacerbate risk to THB, this paper situates the relationship between conflict and THB within the theoretical framework of routine activity theory (RAT). This leads to the identification of four key categories of vulnerability[3] which traffickers are able to identify and exploit to their own advantage. The paper then offers an original and innovative typology which portrays the occurrence of conflict-related THB across three levels of specificity. Throughout, insights from the current war in Ukraine are employed to offer real and timely examples which illustrate a practical implementation of the typology.

It is important to note that wars vary dramatically, and Ukraine is an exceptional war in the sense that the European refugee response has overall been relatively positive. Mendel and Sharapov's research for instance demonstrated that 'the risks of large-scale trafficking due to the war in Ukraine were mitigated by granting Ukrainians more extensive rights than typically afforded to refugees' (2024, p. 52). However, it is vital to note that data and research for assessing the scale of trafficking in this crisis are lacking (IOM, 2023). Evidence for an increase in trafficking cases during times of war and crisis is unreliable, for numerous reasons. For one, both governmental and non-governmental anti-trafficking efforts are disrupted in times of crisis while organisations focus on their immediate safety, and in the long term may find themselves under-staffed and lacking the financial and technical capacity to respond to trafficking after the onset of war (IOM, 2023). This has also been the case for anti-trafficking actors in Ukraine, who have found that their ability to proactively identify cases of trafficking was hampered following the full-scale invasion (IOM, 2023). As such, the numbers of trafficking cases during times of crisis are unreliable at best, and can therefore be misleading. As such, while the authors agree with the indications that the refugee response in Ukraine is generally positive, we do not take this as evidence that the risk of trafficking has been overcome. Furthermore, as the war continues into its third year, new trafficking vulnerabilities may begin to emerge. As such, while not all forms of trafficking discussed in this article may currently be applicable to the Ukrainian context, the paper provides a grounding in the broader literature of what is known about trafficking in conflict settings more generally, and thus they must nevertheless be considered both at present as well as in a potential post-conflict era.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a literature review, critically evaluating and synthesising existing research on the nexus between conflict and THB, with a specific focus on the war in Ukraine. The review aimed to identify, assess, and integrate findings from a wide range of sources to understand how the war has influenced human trafficking dynamics. Within this article, RAT (Cohen and Felson, 1979) serves as the foundational lens through which the literature review is conducted. The article organises its analysis around RAT's understanding of crimes as occurring when (a) a motivated offender and (b) suitable target intersect in (c) time and space without the presence of a capable guardian. RAT posits that crime is likely when there is convergence of a motivated offender with a suitable target, in a context where effective guardianship is absent. The theory emphasises the importance of environmental and situational factors in facilitating crime. This framework underpins the article's exploration of human trafficking in conflict, focusing on how the absence of deterrence and opportunity structures contribute to the likelihood of offences taking place.

RAT was selected for its ability to dissect how conflict-induced vulnerabilities increase trafficking risks. Its applicability to various crime types, including those perpetrated in conflict settings, allows for a nuanced examination of trafficking dynamics, highlighting areas for intervention and the crucial role of guardianship in prevention efforts. Furthermore, the formulaic nature

3 The authors acknowledge the potential negative connotations associated with the term 'vulnerability', such as implying passivity or helplessness. It is here employed to specifically denote the increased risk and susceptibility of individuals and groups to human trafficking, as per the Palermo Protocol. Our application of 'vulnerability' therefore aims to highlight systemic factors that elevate the risk of exploitation, without diminishing the agency or resilience of the individuals affected. For further academic discussion around the nuanced consideration of this term, see scholars such as Brown (2013).

of RAT supports the identification of trafficking hotspots and the development of targeted preventive measures. By framing the discussion around the situational conditions conducive to trafficking and the potential for reducing crime, RAT guides this study's focus towards actionable strategies to mitigate human trafficking amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine.

SEARCH STRATEGY

The literature search strategy was divided into two main components to ensure a comprehensive collection of both academic and grey literature relevant to the impact of conflict on THB, particularly in the context of Ukraine post-February 2022. The grey literature search was confined to materials published from April 2014 to September 2023, dating back to the first rise of conflict in the Donbas. The grey literature search focused on reports and documents sourced from authoritative and reliable websites known for their work in conflict and humanitarian zones. Specific platforms searched included ReliefWeb and official United Nations sites such as those of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Other sources included the official government sites of Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE); the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and local Ukrainian NGOs. These sources were selected for their potential to provide up-to-date situation reports, policy documents, and analyses of the situation in Ukraine. The search within these platforms was aimed at identifying the most current insights and responses to the unfolding human trafficking crisis within the context of the war in Ukraine. The search for academic literature was conducted across several databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. This phase used a combination of keywords and phrases such as 'conflict AND trafficking', 'war AND exploitation', and 'Ukraine AND human trafficking' applying Boolean operators.

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Academic and grey literature was included based on the following criteria:

1. focus on human trafficking within the context of armed conflict
2. analysis of the drivers, risks, and manifestations of trafficking related to conflict
3. discussion of the war in Ukrainian since April 2014

Exclusion criteria encompassed studies focusing on general crime without specific relevance to human trafficking, and literature predating the current war in Ukraine. The subsequent analysis involved synthesising findings from the selected studies and reports to identify common themes, trends, and gaps in the literature. The thematic synthesis under the theoretical lens of RAT enabled the development of an integrated understanding of how conflict-related factors contribute to human trafficking, with a particular emphasis on the situation in Ukraine.

This study recognises limitations inherent in literature reviews, including potential publication bias and the challenge of capturing the full scope of unpublished or non-English research. Literature reviews also offer an insight only into a particular snapshot in time of the issue being investigated. The rapidly evolving situation in Ukraine means that findings will need to be updated as new research becomes available.

ROUTINE ACTIVITY THEORY

Given its three cornerstones of motivated perpetrator, suitable target, and absence of a capable guardian, RAT provides a basis from which to understand the shift in balance between potential victim, offender and environment that is affected by the presence of conflict (Muraszkiewicz et al., 2020a), and which may therefore increase the incidence of THB. This article argues that four conditions of conflict skew this balance: economic desperation, disruption in the rule of law, displacement, and discrimination. All four conditions will be contextualised with examples derived from the ongoing war in Ukraine.

DESPERATION (ECONOMIC)

The first way in which conflict affects the balance between victim, offender and environment to favour the commission of THB is by deteriorating the availability of financial resources. In

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the short term, banks and ATMs close, places of work are destroyed, and regular economic activity ceases to exist. In the mid-to-long term, post-conflict economic downturn hampers opportunities to generate income. Indeed, a systematic review of economic literature suggested that mass violent conflicts negatively affect the GDP growth of a country between 1% and 3% for each year of the conflict, with neighbouring countries experiencing around a third of this effect (Bozzoli, Brück and Sottsas, 2010).

This lack of economic opportunity can affect both the suitable target and motivated offender dimensions of RAT. Individuals may have to search for alternative livelihoods, having been forced out of their places of work, making them more vulnerable to offers of employment. Given that one of the most frequently employed devices of THB perpetrators is the recruitment of victims through false job offers (Deb and Sanyal, 2018), the increased number of job seekers in conflict may therefore affect the incidence of THB. On the other hand, having been forced out of legal alternatives, economic desperation could drive individuals to the illicit commerce of THB, where they see their own survival in the exploitation of others (Kidd, 2020). The UNODC (2018b) has labelled economic desperation the most commonly identified vulnerability factor for THB, regardless of the presence of a conflict.

To situate this within the Ukrainian context: UN Women (2022), the IOM (2022a), and the UN's Humanitarian Agency (OCHA, 2022) have all warned of the increasingly dire economic situation that Ukrainians are facing. The country was already one of Europe's poorest, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kitamura, Abbas and Nathwani, 2022). The war further limited access to the job market and many Ukrainians were unable in the initial months of the war to access their social welfare funds (IOM, 2022a). Several cases of THB directly linked to poverty have already been identified in Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale invasion (Tondo, 2022). For instance, prosecutors in Kyiv uncovered a sex trafficking ring in June 2022, having found that traffickers promised young women from Ukraine legitimate employment abroad via social messaging platform Telegram, only to exploit them in Turkey's illicit sex industry (Tondo, 2022). The war in Ukraine thus illustrates the manner in which conflict can create both greater numbers of suitable targets, as well as increasing numbers of motivated offenders through economic desperation.

DISRUPTION (RULE OF LAW)

A second factor linking an increase of THB to the presence of conflict is a weakening rule of law (Cockayne and Walker, 2016; UNODC, 2022a). In peacetime, the law safeguards and protects civilians whilst deterring offenders from committing crimes in fear of likely punishment. However, in conflict, the rule of law is diminished through the incapacitation or breakdown of protective state institutions such as the criminal justice system (Muraszkiewicz, 2020b). This is true not only during conflict, but also following its termination, given that reinstating or rebuilding these institutions can be lengthy, often hampered by post-conflict corruption (Kidd, 2020).

Two components of RAT are affected by a disruption in the rule of law. On the one hand, the likelihood of individuals being motivated to commit an offence rises. RAT assumes the rationality of offenders as they make choices about committing a crime: when offenders perceive they are able to commit a crime without punishment, crime is likely to occur (Cohen and Felson, 1979). With state institutions under attack, focussing on the conflict as opposed to domestic crimes or disempowered by corruption, the chances that an offender will be deterred for fear of apprehension is low. This lack of availability of state institutions also causes an increase in spaces without a capable guardian where THB can occur.

In Ukraine, following the outbreak of the 2014 conflict in the Donbas, the UN Security Council warned that a weak rule of law was a serious risk factor for THB in the country (UNSC, 2017). The full-scale invasion worsened matters, with Ukraine experiencing 'a breakdown of law and order, major disruption to critical systems', which, combined with other factors, meant an environment which 'can create and amplify opportunities for exploitation' (Cockbain and Sidebottom, 2022, p. 7). To illustrate the effect of this, the Ukrainian government on 4 March 2022 communicated to the UN that it would be unable to guarantee the implementation of its obligations under the Palermo Protocol due to Russian aggression and the imposition of martial law (United Nations, 2022). However, it must be noted that in comparison to other wars, some sources suggest that Ukrainian state institutions have remained comparatively intact, allowing counter-trafficking agencies to continue to function (IOM, 2023). Thus while this paper draws on examples of

trafficking that has taken advantage of a weakened rule of law in Ukraine following the full-scale invasion, this is not necessarily to say that this was felt equally across the country as a whole.

The Ukrainian case illustrates that a weak rule of law in neighbouring countries during conflict can also act as a fertile ground for THB. For instance, the mass migration of Ukrainian refugees into Poland at the start of the full-scale invasion meant there was little law and order in place, resulting in the disappearance of a number of children whose whereabouts remain unknown (Oviedo et al., 2022). Additionally, unstable border regions, such as Moldova's Transnistria, have been identified as particularly vulnerable to THB (US Department of State, 2022, p. 465). As such, the weakened rule of law both within and external to Ukraine, exacerbated by the conflict, can heighten the risk of THB.

DISPLACEMENT (IDPs AND REFUGEES)

The displacement of a population represents a third manner in which conflict may increase the incidence of THB. Individuals caught in conflict zones often face a 'choiceless choice' in which every option is risky. Choosing to leave may have decreased the individuals' acute risk of mortality, but likely resulted in a severance of the individual from social support, institutions and locations that may have previously represented a capable guardian from THB (Heys, 2023).

Furthermore, the individual may have left the chaos of war, but is often physically and psychologically weakened by their experiences (Jawaid, Gomolka and Timmer, 2022). Indeed, research has illustrated that trauma is a risk factor for THB in and of itself, regardless of the presence of conflict (Greenbaum, 2017). Decisions are undertaken in 'survival mode', where little scrutiny is given to the validity of offers of shelter, food, water, or employment (Kidd, 2020). To phrase this within RAT: the act of leaving a conflict shifts previously protected individuals to a position of vulnerability.

The more individuals find themselves in the same situation, the higher the risk of victimisation. When large numbers of individuals are displaced, they compete for living space or employment, leading to less scrutiny and thus greater vulnerability to offers of employment and housing (Kidd, 2020). Mass displacement also means individuals' social ties are often severed, signifying a lower availability of capable guardians. Men are often killed in combat, leaving single mothers heading households, or children separated from their parents; while friends and neighbours are scattered. At times, individuals of the same nationality and linguistic background may be separated. This breakdown of social ties hugely restricts individuals' abilities to make choices with full agency (Heys, 2023). Traffickers are cognisant of this and use it to their advantage, visible in particular in their offers of shelter, protection, or employment, playing to these newly formed vulnerabilities (Fenton et al., 2021).

The vulnerability of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees is however not uniform across all geographical contexts. Certain locations are hotspots for THB for people on the move, due to their innate absence of guardians as well as their manifestation of other situational vulnerabilities (a weak rule of law; few economic opportunities; lack of basic necessities). These locations include most notably informal settlements close to the conflict, transit or collective holding points, refugee centres, and communities that host migrants (Cockayne and Walker, 2016).

Certain profiles of IDPs and refugees are more at risk, most notably unaccompanied and separated children. Without social networks in place to keep them safe, children are cut off from caregivers' support and may be manipulated with greater ease (ibid). The vulnerability of children may be compounded when coinciding with a lack of education. These children are likely to have fewer opportunities for legitimate future employment and may be less likely to scrutinise illegitimate offers of support (Heys, 2023).

The Ukrainian case illustrates a convergence of all the vulnerabilities that displacement can create. As of 15 August 2023, there were 6.27 million refugees from Ukraine recorded globally, with over 23 million having crossed the border since 22 February 2022 and an estimated 5.1 million IDPs within Ukraine (UNHCR, 2023), around 40% of whom are estimated to be children (Save the Children, 2022). On 6 May 2022, the EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator estimated that over 13,000 of these children were unaccompanied or separated from their parents. Finally, UNICEF (2023) released a report that estimates the education of 5.3 million children is at risk following the full-scale invasion.

Evidence is mounting of traffickers responding to these newly created vulnerabilities. Organised crime groups have reportedly been positioning themselves at Ukrainian borders, feigning employment in non-governmental and international organisations (Rosenzweig-Ziff et al., 2022). By appearing to be trustworthy points of contact, they lure displaced individuals towards them, offering (illegitimate) assistance with transport, houses and employment (Malangone, 2022, Personal Communication, 27 April 2022). Indeed, this is such a growing concern that Europol (2022) issued a warning stating that the highest risk concerns traffickers targeting Ukrainian victims on the border under the pretence of promises of immediate support.

DISCRIMINATION (ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL)

The final factor binding conflict with an increase in THB relates to discrimination and marginalisation on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or political views. These factors are already considered risk factors for THB victimisation in peacetime, as such communities often suffer from a lack of financial mobility, education, and governmental protection (Box, 2011; Gekht, 2008; Obokata, 2006). Conflict amplifies this existing marginalisation and discrimination, both within the country of conflict, and for those who have fled (Heys, 2023). In conflict, discrimination can also serve as an additional factor motivating potential offenders. A report by the UNODC (2018b) highlighted that some armed groups specifically target discriminated populations for the purpose of THB. However, discrimination may also be a creator of spaces without capable guardians. Discriminated groups may enjoy fewer community support networks and fewer protections from governments, exposing them even further to the risks of THB (İmamoğlu, 2023).

As regards to Ukraine, an example of a population that is particularly at risk as a result of the war is the Roma community. The majority of Roma residing in Ukraine do not have civil status documents (CARE, 2022), and therefore lack access to humanitarian assistance as well as to employment, health services and education abroad. Further, at the onset of the full-scale invasion, the Temporary Protection Directive granting Ukrainians the right to remain in the EU for up to a year did not apply to non-native Ukrainians, who initially were permitted to remain in Poland for a maximum of 15 days (Cockbain and Sidebottom, 2022). Evidence has emerged that Roma communities in general suffer from harsher treatment, marginalisation and discrimination at the borders and face difficulties trying to exit Ukraine (Hoff and de Volder, 2022). These groups are therefore likely to resort, out of desperation, to migrant smuggling routes, which can easily become situations of THB.

The above theoretical extrapolation of RAT illustrates the ways in which conflict may exacerbate the incidence of THB. The number of suitable targets rises due to exhaustion, economic desperation, discrimination and potential traumatisation. The number of motivated offenders rises as barriers to offending are lowered and individuals find themselves in increasingly dire financial straits. Finally, locations without a capable guardian expand, with the diminishing agency of state institutions and social circles.

TYPOLOGY

Having considered the key drivers of risk and the groups of individuals who are most vulnerable, this section evaluates the outcome of the aforementioned circumstances of increased risk, by presenting an innovative typology of conflict-related THB. It furthermore discusses examples from situation reports from Ukraine to illustrate the functioning of the typology as applied to a currently occurring international war. Figure 1 illustrates this new typology, divided into three layers of specificity.

The top level of Figure 1 represents a consideration as to how trafficking can occur both directly and indirectly as a result of conflict. The middle level demonstrates the different locations in which conflict-related THB may occur. The bottom level identifies the specific individual categories of THB that permeate as a result of conflict. The following sections briefly outline the macro and meso segments of this typology. Subsequently, the micro-level forms of exploitation are detailed, illustrated with specific case examples from Ukraine and showing how these relate also to the macro and meso levels of the typology.

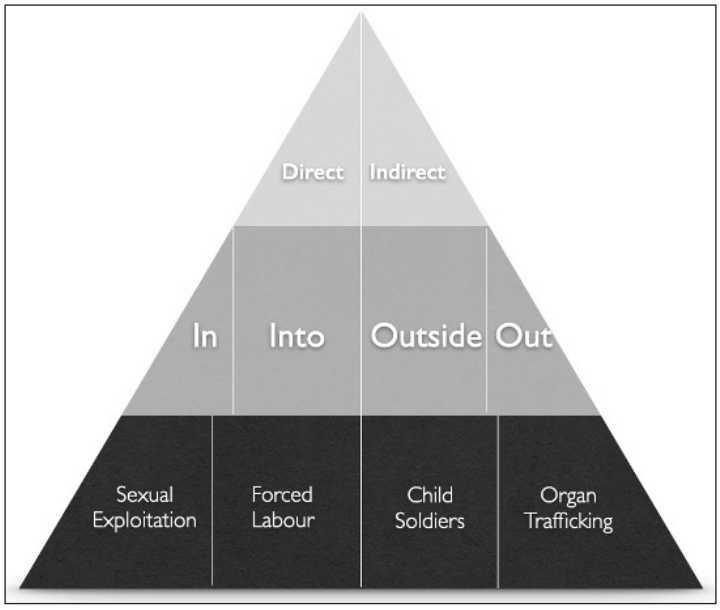

Figure 1 A typology of conflict-related THB.

MACRO

At the top level, conflict-related THB can be distinguished between direct and indirect. 'Direct' relates to situations where THB is part of the violence and hostility perpetrated by parties to the conflict: by armed groups or other actors involved in the hostilities. Indirect THB is where traffickers target victims who have been placed into vulnerable situations as a result of the conflict. Here, THB would not have occurred if not for the conflict but is not an immediate result of it (Muraszkiewicz et al., 2020b).

MESO

At the mid-level, the typology is divided into the four geographical locales where conflict-related THB can take place. Kotecha (2020) outlines three of these in her typology: *in, into* and *out of* the conflict zone. For instance, a child may be recruited into armed groups within their own conflict-affected community or, in the search for safety, an individual may accept an offer of travel and a job abroad which transpires to be a situation of labour exploitation. Alternatively, victims may be brought *into* a conflict zone to be sexually exploited as traffickers respond to an increase in demand for sexual services among armed forces or peacekeeping troops (Pehlic, 2020; Smith and Miller-de la Cuesta, 2010). This present typology offers an additional element: *outside*, whereby trafficking takes place externally to a conflict zone, but which would not have occurred if not for the existence of conflict. By means of an example, a woman may have been forced to flee a conflict zone and, while in a refugee camp, trafficked into sexual exploitation.

MICRO

The most specific level of this typology outlines the individual types of THB that can occur in conflict: sexual exploitation, forced labour, child soldiers and organ trafficking. This section explores each of these in turn, examining the available evidence based on prior literature and analysing their application to the current invasion of Ukraine and the macro and meso levels of the typology. It is of note however that the war in Ukraine is both a chaotic and dynamic one, and therefore the picture of THB as a result of the war in Ukraine may alter over time, and the typology with it.

Sexual exploitation

'The trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation is often part of the systemic sexual violence perpetrated against civilians during and after conflicts' (UNODC, 2022b, p. 54). At the macro level, it can be both direct and indirect. Directly, conflict produces a high demand for sexual services (UNODC, 2018b). This is widely evidenced in relation to the introduction of peacekeepers into conflict or post-conflict zones, who, despite being forbidden from paying for sex under international law, bring with them a great demand, which criminal networks respond to by trafficking women and girls into the area where troops will be working (Amnesty International, 2004; IOM, 2001; Pehlic, 2020; Picarelli, 2002).

In situations of war specifically, sexual exploitation has different definitional parameters. The Rome Statute Article 8 places 'enforced prostitution' as a form of sexual and gender-based violence, meaning that what would be considered sex trafficking if perpetrated by an individual, is a war crime when systemic and in the context of war. This can mean that cases of sex trafficking in war may not be publicised, as they are instead treated as war crimes. Despite this, there are still examples of direct sex trafficking in Ukraine. For instance, the Independent Inquiry of the UN (United Nations General Assembly, 2022) reported one case in which Russian armed forces committed sexual violence against men and women held in their custody, meeting the Palermo Protocol's Act of harbouring, the Means of force and an abuse of a position of vulnerability, and the Purpose of sexual exploitation.

Indirectly, conflict can facilitate THB via the weakened rule of law and reduced economic opportunities (Cockayne and Walker, 2016) by driving individuals to accept risky job offers often used as a means of deception to recruit them into sex trafficking (UNODC, 2018b). For example, there have been reports of women targeted by men in Poland looking for 'beautiful women to sell into the sex trade' (Adler, 2022). The UK has also noted an increase in Ukrainian women arriving in brothels, whom police suspect are being 'compelled into sex work rather than being more consensual sex workers' (Cockbain and Sidebottom, 2022).

Forced labour

The definition most frequently used in reference to forced labour is that of the International Labour Organisation's Forced Labour Convention of 1930: 'all work or services extracted from any person under the threat of penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily' (ILO, 1930). As it relates to THB in conflict specifically, forced labour can be both direct and indirect (Milano, 2020). Directly, armed groups typically use forced labour for one of two purposes: to sustain military operations or to generate illicit income. For the former, there is evidence of victims in conflict being used as porters to carry heavy loads, as workers to build bridges and roadblocks, as well as farm hands, food gatherers, and domestic servants (UNODC, 2018b), or to clear rubble and dispose of corpses (US Department of State, 2023). It should be noted that this does not only happen to victims inside the conflict zone. Cases have been noted of traffickers bringing victims into the conflict zones to provide services to armed forces (Cockayne and Walker, 2016; UNODC, 2022b). In order to generate illicit income for groups partaking in the conflict, forced labour of victims has been reported in extractive industries, particularly in the mines of Russia-occupied Donbas (US Department of State, 2023).

Those fleeing conflict are at high risk of being trafficked out of the conflict zone for forced labour as they look for employment opportunities whilst in competition with huge numbers of others doing the same (Heys, 2023). In Ukraine, IOM (2022b) found that since 2021 there was 'an increase in the percentage of people who would willingly accept work that clearly constituted forced labour, with 13% of respondents willing to accept "work in confinement without a possibility to leave the workplace freely" – up from 8% in 2021'. This is corroborated with a 2022 survey of 8460 Ukrainian refugees across Europe which found that 16% had to work very long hours, 10% were underpaid or unpaid, and 8% were unable to communicate freely with others (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023).

One aspect that significantly heightens this risk in Ukraine is that the conflict has disrupted seasonal and temporary Ukrainian labour to other countries. Ordinarily, March annually sees large-scale recruitment of Ukrainians for summer labour (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021). However, with the regular flow of workers severed, in order to ensure continuity of labour, suppliers may be much less careful about how they screen for new employees, allowing trafficking victims to potentially slip through the cracks more easily. There are also instances in which Ukrainian refugees have been forced into situations of debt bondage, a technique whereby transport is offered for free by traffickers, but payment is demanded upon arrival. When the victims cannot pay, they are forced to 'work off their debt' (Aronowitz, 2001).

Child soldiers

According to UNICEF's Paris Principles (2007), child soldiers are defined as any person under the age of 18 who is part of a regular or irregular armed force in any capacity. This means that both armed fighters as well as those undertaking ancillary roles, for example as cooks, porters, messengers and children recruited by armed forces for sexual exploitation and forced

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marriage meet the definition of being child soldiers. In reference to Ukraine, the 2023 US State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report highlights 'Reports of Russia-led forces using children as soldiers, informants, and human shields persist. Russia-led forces in Russia-occupied areas of the Donbas have reportedly used children to take direct and indirect part in the armed conflict to perform armed duty at checkpoints, as fighters, and to serve as guards, mailpersons, and secretaries'. The report goes on to state that 'the recruitment of children [...] took place in territory occupied by Russia and in areas where the government was unable to enforce national prohibitions against the use of children in armed conflict' (ibid), illustrating again the way in which a reduction in the rule of law can inhibit the government's ability to provide necessary protection from THB in times of war.

Adult victims of forced conflict

Some adults forced to engage in combat could be considered victims of THB. In terms of the war in Ukraine, it could be argued that deception could be read as a 'means' of recruitment for forced combat, where Russian forces may be deceived by their government as to the war's legitimacy, due to propaganda based on manipulation and falsification of facts. Further, there is some limited evidence to indicate that Ukrainian nationals are being forced to fight for Russia, as outlined by a New York Times investigation (2022), which reported forced conscription of Ukrainians to fight for the Russian Federation, with indications of the Russian military disproportionately conscripting Crimean Tatars, an ethnic minority group that has faced persecution by Russian officials. This highlights again the heightened vulnerability previously discriminated ethnic minorities face to situations of exploitation in times of war. Equally, the Ukrainian government could be said to be imposing nationalistic patriotic ideals on their soldiers, thus engaging themselves in a form of deception. However, whether an individual meets that definition outlined by the Palermo Protocol must be considered in a broader context. Article 4 of the European Convention of Human Rights clearly stipulates that 'forced or compulsory labour shall not include [...] any service of a military character or, in case of conscientious objectors in countries where they are recognised, service exacted instead of compulsory military service' (European Court of Human Rights, 1950). As such, the conscription of adults into state forces, legally, does not meet the threshold to be considered THB and therefore is not incorporated within the present typology.

Forced adoption

On 17 March 2023, the International Criminal Court issued an Arrest Warrant to President Vladimir Putin and Commissioner for Children Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova under 'reasonable grounds to believe that each suspect bears responsibility for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population and that of unlawful transfer of population from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation, in prejudice of Ukrainian children'. Since 2014, reports have mounted as to the forced deportation of some 19,500 Ukrainian children to Russia, for the purpose of forced adoption and patriotic Russian education (Government of Ukraine, 2023).[4] While forced adoption alone does not necessarily meet the definitional boundaries of human trafficking, if these children go on to be exploited, or if they become associated with an armed force, then they could quickly meet the definition.

Organ trafficking

The definition of organ trafficking broadly mirrors that of THB: 'the recruitment, transport, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of living or deceased persons or their organs by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion [...] for the purpose of exploitation by the removal of organs for transplantation' (Transplantation Society, 2018). THB for the purpose of organ removal includes the exploitation of an individual for their bodily organs, a form of trafficking made largely possible by a global shortage of ethically removed organs available for transplants (UNODC, 2010).

The most common organs sought for in the illegal 'organ market' are kidneys, followed by livers, for the purpose of transplantation (UNODC, 2010). Since the 1970s, a major source of organs used for transplants has been poor or vulnerable individuals who are lured, via material incentives, to sell an organ (Budiani-Saberi and Columb, 2013). Organ trafficking can take place both directly

4 These statistics were taken from the website and up to date as of 12 September 2023.

and indirectly related to conflict. Directly, armed groups engage in organ trafficking to help their own wounded fighters, or to generate income to support the ongoing conflict (Muraszkiewicz et al., 2020b). Indirectly, displaced migrants fleeing conflict zones have been subjected to organ trafficking, where traffickers who provide food and housing retrospectively demand repayment through organ removal (Cockayne and Walker, 2016). Other times, smugglers work with kidney traffickers and suggest to those being smuggled that selling a kidney could alleviate their debt (Budiani-Saberi and Columb, 2013). However it must be noted that, currently, no evidence exists of the occurrence of organ trafficking in the context of the war in Ukraine.

DISCUSSION

Having outlined the ways in which conflict provides the conditions for the occurrence of THB, as well as a typology as to how this risk manifests itself, the following discussion reviews the principal findings of the paper in the context of the three key elements of RAT.

MOTIVATED OFFENDERS

In terms of the motivated offender dimension, the present article illustrates that within a conflict, the drivers and opportunities for individuals to engage in THB become amplified, and so too in the war in Ukraine. The chaos and rupture of societal structures inherent in such environments create ripe conditions for traffickers to exploit. Offenders, driven by the prospect of financial gain or strategic objectives of armed conflict, find conflict zones a fertile ground for their activities due to the direct and indirect consequences of the war. Directly relating to the conflict, some traffickers are part of the armed forces exploiting human trafficking as a strategy to fund their operations or assert control over territories and populations. These groups may engage in the forced recruitment of child soldiers, employing them not only as combatants but in various support roles that sustain the group's military capabilities. Similarly, the deliberate targeting of civilians for sexual exploitation or forced labour can serve as a tactic of war, intended to terrorise and demoralise enemy populations or to reward combatants (UNODC, 2018b).

Indirectly, the disruption of the rule of law and economic structures provides a conducive environment for offenders not directly involved in the conflict but who are looking to exploit the resulting vulnerabilities. The breakdown of governance and law enforcement removes many of the risks typically associated with trafficking activities, allowing offenders to operate with reduced threats of detection and prosecution. Economic desperation, a pervasive consequence of conflict, creates a pool of individuals desperate for any form of livelihood, making them easy targets for traffickers offering deceptive employment opportunities, both within and outside the conflict zone.

In essence, traffickers operating within and external to conflict zones are motivated by the opportunities presented by the disarray and desperation that conflict engenders. Their activities are underpinned by the strategic exploitation of the direct and indirect effects of conflict, leveraging the breakdown of societal norms, the vacuum of governance, and the vulnerability of displaced populations to perpetrate their crimes with impunity.

SUITABLE TARGETS

To illustrate the second element of RAT, within conflict zones, individuals face heightened vulnerabilities that increase their risk of becoming victims of THB, as evidenced by the war in Ukraine. Economic devastation wrought by conflict propels many into acute desperation, as traditional means of livelihood disappear. This makes them particularly susceptible to false promises of employment and security. Displacement further compounds their vulnerability; with millions forcibly removed from their homes, the loss of community and familial ties deprives individuals of their primary sources of support and protection. Isolated and often struggling to make ends meet, these displaced persons are targeted by traffickers who exploit their need for shelter, sustenance, and safety.

This situation is particularly precarious for certain groups who find themselves at the intersection of multiple risk factors. Women and children, for instance, face increased risks of sexual exploitation and forced labour as they navigate the chaos of conflict and displacement. The severing of social and community ties not only leaves them physically vulnerable but also emotionally and psychologically more susceptible to manipulation and coercion. The overarching theme in the

exploitation of victims in conflict zones is the traffickers' capitalisation on the immediate needs and long-term hopes of individuals, exploiting their vulnerability for profit.

CAPABLE GUARDIANS

Finally, the collapse of societal structures and governance exacerbates the vulnerability of individuals to THB by eroding the presence of capable guardians. The concept of capable guardianship, vital for the protection against exploitation, becomes severely compromised as law enforcement, social services, and community networks disintegrate in conflict. This absence of capable guardianship creates an environment where traffickers operate with minimal risk of detection or intervention. With the breakdown of public order and safety measures, those at risk of trafficking lack the protective intervention that would typically prevent such threats. Community cohesion, often a protective factor against THB, is torn by displacement, leaving individuals isolated and unprotected. Furthermore, the redirection of resources towards immediate survival and military efforts diminishes the capacity and priority of state and non-state actors to act as capable guardians. This void not only emboldens traffickers but also leaves victims with few avenues for escape or recourse, heightening the risk of THB in conflict.

LIMITATIONS

In interpreting the findings of the present literature review, two key considerations must be held in mind. First, while RAT accounts for direct perpetrators of human trafficking in conflict, where it is perhaps less effective is in recognising the role played by global economic systems and supply chains fuelled by human trafficking victims. These indirect perpetrators, through their demand for cheap labour and exploitative practices, represent a key player in fuelling conflict-related trafficking (Leach, 2022).

Second, while RAT specifies that motivated offenders and suitable targets must meet in time and space, this does not account for technological advancements in THB tactics. Traffickers may use technologies to recruit, exploit, and control their victims with greater ease and anonymity (Gezinski and Gonzales-Pons, 2022). The role of the digital landscape is thus another conducive environment for trafficking activities, exploiting the increased digital vulnerability of individuals affected by conflict. It is therefore important to note that while comprehensive, RAT understandings must be nuanced with an appreciation for the broader systemic and technological factors that extend beyond immediate physical interactions.

CONCLUSION

This paper analysed academic literature on the connection between conflict and THB to outline what is currently known about how the two concepts interlink. Utilising the theoretical basis of RAT, the paper discussed the intersecting relationship between the conflict environment and the behaviour of offenders and victims of THB, through conflict's creation of economic desperation, a weakening rule of law, displacement, and heightened levels of discrimination. Contextualising this with grey literature from the current war in Ukraine, it provided empirical evidence to demonstrate that desperation, disruption, displacement and discrimination lead to a rise in suitable targets. Risk is then exacerbated as barriers to offending decrease and financial difficulty increases, thus leading to a rise in motivated offenders. Finally, the result of conflict leading to the reduction in power of state institutions and a breakdown in social networks means locations without a capable guardian expand. It is at the nexus of these three issues that risk for THB was shown to be most heightened.

The outcome of these risks was illustrated in a novel typology which demonstrates how THB plays out in reality in conflict, situating this within the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The typology divided human trafficking into three levels of specificity: at its most broad dividing between THB directly perpetrated by the armed forces engaged in the conflict, and THB resulting from the conflict's existence indirectly. The second level distinguished the physical directionality that trafficking can take: in the conflict zone, out of the conflict zone, into the conflict zone and outside the conflict zone. At its most specific, the typology distinguishes between the purpose of exploitation, specifically THB for the purpose of sexual, labour, and organ trafficking, as well as the phenomenon of child soldiers. Equally, the typology gives consideration to forced combat, as well as forced adoption, as potentially falling under the definition of THB under the Palermo Protocol.

By situating the paper within RAT and contextualising it with evidence from Ukraine, the findings of this paper provide both theoretical and empirical insights to expand existing knowledge on how conflict situations can increase the risk of THB. While the paper has the potential to generate a wealth of practical recommendations, we conclude with just three which, taken from the evidence laid out above, hold significant potential to limit the risk of suitable targets becoming victims of THB:

1. Refugees should be provided with information in their native language when they cross international borders out of a conflict zone to outline their entitlements and signpost to relevant support organisations.
2. Refugees must have legal access to the labour market to reduce their vulnerability to offers of illegitimate employment.
3. Safe hubs should be created at border points where refugees can take shelter in areas that are usually some of the most conducive to exploitation.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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