

Dead Diplomacy and Battlefield Dynamics: Fallen Soldiers' Repatriation in the Russia-Ukraine War in 2022–2026

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Abstract

Purpose: This study analyzes the dynamics of battlefield recovery, transfer, identification, and repatriation of dead soldiers in the Russia-Ukraine war from February 2022 to August 8, 2026. It introduces the concept of "dead diplomacy" to describe the limited humanitarian cooperation on deceased combatants that persists alongside an active war.

Research Methodology: The research employs a qualitative documentary case-study design, drawing on secondary data from international humanitarian organizations, official Ukrainian institutions, major news agencies, and peer-reviewed forensic and conflict scholarship. Content and thematic analysis is applied to interpret a non-graphic pictorial corpus of recovery and transfer operations.

Results: The timing, volume, and asymmetry of repatriations are shaped primarily by territorial control and battlefield turnover, meaning exchange ratios cannot be equated with casualty ratios. High-intensity artillery, mines, drones, fragmentation, decomposition, and inaccessible kill zones render battlefield recovery a forensic problem, creating a second delay between physical repatriation and definitive identification. Large-scale returns nonetheless remain possible through institutionalized humanitarian channels and neutral-intermediary arrangements even without ceasefire diplomacy, as demonstrated by the June 2025 Istanbul process and repatriations continuing through July 2026.

Conclusions: The study proposes a Battlefield-Humanitarian Bargaining Framework linking territorial access, negotiated transfer, and forensic identification.

Limitations: Findings rely on secondary and open-source materials, limiting verification of contested details.

Contributions: Repatriation is reframed as a diplomatic instrument negotiating legal responsibility, family rights, evidence, and the political meaning of loss.

Keywords: *Battlefield Dynamics, Dead Diplomacy, Fallen Soldiers, Humanitarian Diplomacy, Russia-Ukraine War*

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1. Introduction

Death is mostly seen as transition to a place of rest from the world of tribulations. But for soldiers, war is not over at the time of death. Their bodies are caught up in military conflicts, the control of territory, relations between enemy and international humanitarian law, forensic investigation, family expectations and political symbolism. In the case of armed conflict, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) stipulates that "parties to the conflict shall make every effort to search for and collect the wounded and dead, and to take them to safety, if circumstances allow, especially after armed engagements. It also requires parties to try to assist in the return of the remains to the party to which the deceased belonged or their next of kin. These rules provide for an ongoing human and legal dimension to the war dead, beyond the cessation of hostilities surrounding them. Petrig and Wels also argue that the duties of a respectful management, identification, accounting-for and protection of gravesites are substantive obligations and not acts of discretion ([Petric, 2009](#); [Wels, 2016](#)).

Norms are hard to implement in the Russia-Ukraine war, a technologically advanced, geographically dynamic, and politically undecided war. Full-scale invasion of Russia on 24 February 2022 escalated a conflict that had been around since 2014 into one of the largest interstate wars in Europe since the Second World War. Frontlines moved in the course of the battles for Kyiv and Mariupol, Ukrainian counteroffensives in Kharkiv and Kherson, the long drawn-out fight for Bakhmut, Ukraine's counteroffensive in 2023, Russia's seizure of Avdiivka in February 2024, the Ukrainian incursion into Russia's Kursk region in August 2024, and ongoing fighting around Pokrovsk and other fronts ([Gady, & Kofman, 2024](#); [Kofman, 2023](#); [Reuters, 2026](#); [Reuters, 2026](#)). By June 2026, the situation was reported as being an approximate 1200 km front, with continued difficulties in mapping the front, due to the drone warfare causing broad contested or kill zones. As of 8 August 2026, it is still a fighting conflict, as reciprocal missile and drone exchanges continued to be reported and the situation was not that of a post-conflict recovery.

These dynamics are important because bodies of the dead don't tend to be spread evenly over battlefields. Terrain control following an engagement is often in the hands of the force that fought there and this is often the force that searches trenches, ruins, forests, defensive positions, abandoned vehicles and field fortifications. So during the march, a military force might end up with possession of its own dead as well as those of the enemy who were killed during the retreat. A retreating force can be unable to retrieve personnel from exposed positions due to the threat of exposure to artillery fire, mines, drones, and threat of re-attack. Physical custody of remains can then be a by-product of successful or unsuccessful tactics.

The following evidence from the war shows this. In June 2022, returns involved Ukrainian fatalities of the bloody battles at Azovstal/Mariupol, with a single transfer on 8 June involving 37 of the defenders of Azovstal/Mariupol and a subsequent transfer on the same month involving another 46 Ukrainian defenders. Reported returns have grown from dozens to hundreds, to the point that as of late 2024 and 2025, on 29 November 2024, 502 bodies were returned, and on 20 December 2024, the number had jumped to 503, with 909 reported returns in 2025 ([Ukrainska, 2022](#)). The June 2025 Istanbul arrangements resulted in an unprecedented multi-day operation, with Ukrainian authorities reporting that they repatriated 6,057 bodies/remains and the Russian public accounting of repatriations being slightly different, a testament to the need to read war time repatriation figures with source attribution and caution ([International, 2026](#); [Reuters, 2026](#)).

The second issue is after the physical transfer. The repatriated remains can be disarticulated, in a state of disintegration, contaminated or unknown at the time of repatriation. The ICRC highlights that recovery, DNA comparison and corroboration of the forensic work can take a significant amount of time, and in 2026, a forensic audit by the ICRC in the region of Ukraine identified 211 of the 305 cases whose remains were recovered through DNA, with 94 cases remaining unresolved at the study cut-off ([Kozan, Kotsyubynska, Chadiuk, Henyk, Onyshchuk, Makivnychuk, Lampel, Kostyshyn, & Kotyk, 2026](#)). This means that a family may not receive a positive response until a state does.

The review identifies 4 related gaps. The literature on war termination and bargaining theory accounts for how a battle outcome translates into a political demand by [Fearon \(1995\)](#) and [Reiter \(2009\)](#), but does not often take a look at the dead combatants themselves as the subject of limited wartime bargaining. Second, humanitarian diplomacy scholarship suggests that there is an obligation to engage belligerents in a neutral manner by [Slim \(2019\)](#), and literature on the war dead explains legal and moral duties with regard to the bodies of war dead, but neither of these offer a sufficient explanation for how territorial control creates practical considerations for the inventory of remains that can be transferred ([Cordner, & Tidball-Binz, 2017](#); [Parrin, 2023](#); [Petrig, 2009](#); [Wels, 2016](#)). Third, the forensic studies of Ukraine report decomposition, the dependence of DNA, and institutional bottlenecks, but generally start once the remains enter the forensic system, and do not focus on how conditions at the front affect when and in what condition they arrive ([Ashbridge, Randolph-Quinney, Janaway, Forbes, & Ivshina, 2022](#); [Kozan et al., 2026](#); [Shevchuk, Dunaev, Tyshchenko, Biletska, & Nehrebetskyi, 2025](#)). Finally, there is often descriptive reporting of exchange numbers without any attempt to differentiate casualty production from custody production. The transfer of hundreds or thousands of Ukrainians' bodies for significantly fewer Russians' bodies may be interpreted as a casualty ratio, although territorial gains and recovered territory, as well as delayed handovers and control of former enemy territories may be more plausible explanations. The purpose of this research is to fill these gaps by combining battlefield geography, humanitarian negotiation, forensic identification and the political dimension of return in one framework.

The question of whether or not belligerents return their dead is thus not a simple one. It is how the evolving battlefield comes to decide on the presence or not of bodies, when recovery is possible, how many bodies are recovered, what condition they are in and whether or not humanitarian negotiations can operate in the face of political diplomacy failing. The current literature mostly focuses on the termination of the war, adaptation on the battlefield, humanitarian diplomacy, forensic identification or legal obligations separately. The area of intersection is still underdeveloped. The question of this study is: What was the impact of the battlefield dynamics on the timing, scale, asymmetry, forensic processing and diplomatic organisation of repatriations of fallen soldiers during the Russia-Ukraine war from 2022 to 8 August 2026? It takes the notion of “dead diplomacy” one step further to account for the paradox of ongoing diplomacy over the dead in a war for which a political solution has not yet been found.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Dead Diplomacy

In the present study 'dead diplomacy' has been employed as an analytical concept and not a diplomatic category. It is defined more as an agreement between opposing parties to cooperate in the process of searching, recovering, transferring, documenting, identifying and returning human remains, while political issues are settled in substantive negotiations. It is rooted intellectually in part in the concept of "humanitarian diplomacy. According to [Slim \(2019\)](#), the ICRC's approach is: it is neutral, impartial, often confidential, and aims to balance humanitarian law and values with the interests and constraints of belligerents. This kind of diplomacy can bring about limited agreements, but no political solution to the dispute that is at the root of the conflict. It is also based on research into the ongoing political uses of human remains. Both Verdery and Mbembe highlight the link between political power and exposure to death; the latter in his account of necropolitics and the former in the political death of the body ([Verdery, 2000](#); [Mbembe, 2003](#)). The possession, identification and return of war dead thus makes them retain diplomatic relevance because, as such, death can be mourned, commemorated, investigated and politically narrated. As distinct from peace diplomacy, dead diplomacy is not about the end of the conflict, but rather about whether dead bodies can be retrieved across the enemy lines, according to agreed humanitarian protocols.

2.2 War

War is institutionalised violence by political actors who are trying to achieve a goal which they cannot achieve at the time through normal means of political negotiation and bargaining. Bargaining approaches highlight that war and negotiation are not mutually exclusive: war itself provides an indication of capabilities, resolve, anticipated costs, and the viability of commitments. Private

information, incentives to misrepresent, and commitment problems are among the major rationalist explanations for bargaining failure, identified by [Fearon \(1995\)](#) and [Reiter \(2009\)](#), that shape the results of the battlefield. This understanding is relevant to the current study because while negotiating the terms of a ceasefire, territory, sovereignty, and security guarantees, the negotiation of body agreements might also be ongoing. Technical humanitarian transfers can occur between the same actors who could engage in military conflict against each other. Thus, there are multiple arenas for bargaining in war - existential and functional, but the latter is very thin.

2.3 Living War

A living war is defined here as a war in which organised fighting still persists, military control of territory is still up for grabs and the future of territorial control is yet to be determined. It is not the same as “post war” missing-person recovery, which is conducted after a relatively halting end to hostilities. The Russia-Ukraine war is a good example of such a condition, as recovery operations are carried out under the threat of shelling, mines and drones, and frequent attacks. Gady and Kofman portray the nature of the war changing to one of attrition, where force preservation, replacement, ammunition, fortification, and destruction of the enemy's capability are at the heart of the conflict. Kofman also notes significant Russian adaptations, including the increased use of unmanned systems and electronic warfare, alongside changes in assault formations, while Çakıroğlu documents operational adaptations, such as in the course of attritional campaigns like Bakhmut and Avdiivka ([Gady & Kofman, 2024](#); [Kofman, 2024](#)). The repatriation thus takes place not on a historical battlefield that has been settled but next to a battlefield in the process of formation. A site which has been withdrawn may be inaccessible one day but could be considered dangerous if subsequently seen by drones or if it is subject to indirect fire.

2.4 Battlefield Dynamics

Battlefield dynamics are the shift in control of terrain, force posture, the level of combat, use of weapons, mobility, withdrawal, defensive depth and location of casualties. They influence repatriation by a very straightforward, yet significant means: remains can be collected normally only where personnel are physically able to access them. This access is complicated by surveillance and precision-strike systems used today. The many uses of drones, artillery, mines, and routes under remotely observed control in the Russia-Ukraine war have increased the range of where recovery people can be found and attacked. As of June 2026, Reuters reported extensive “grey zones” or “kill zones” along stretches of the roughly 1,200-km battlefield that are hard to map precisely because of drone warfare ([Reuters, 2026a](#)). The dynamics of the battlefield thus impact upon three factors as far as this study is concerned: custody, who gets the remains; access, when retrieval is possible; and condition, the longer the remains are exposed, the more they may decompose, fragment, become contaminated and lose identifying features.

2.5 Fallen Soldiers

Here, the term 'fallen soldiers' applies to individuals who are members of armed forces or affiliated armed military groups who die in circumstances related to the conflict whose remains are subject to recovery and repatriation. After their death, their legal status is different from that of a person still in the conflict, but humanitarian responsibilities still remain. Under customary IHL, search and collection must be done whenever possible, and return of remains and personal effect. Petrig highlights on-going responsibilities relating to the war dead and gravesite ([Petrig, 2009](#)). Collection isn't the end of management. [Cordner and Tidball-Binz \(2017\)](#) think of humanitarian forensic action as the use of forensic science in the service of humanitarian goals after a conflict or disaster and Wels associates integrity, identification, information-sharing and respectful burial with a broader duty of care ([Wels, 2016](#); [Cordner and Tidball-Binz, 2017](#)). [Parrin \(2023\)](#) also states that (where possible) families might not only want to know that the person they are looking for is deceased but that they want to know the circumstances and cause of death ([Parrin, 2023](#)). Repatriation is thus a process of both physical return and restoration of identity and can have humanitarian, evidentiary, legal and commemorative roles.

2.6 Russia-Ukraine War

The all-out phase of the Russia-Ukraine war started on 24 February 2022 and had its roots in conflict that had been raging since 2014. Rapid Russian operations along multiple axes dominated the 2022 campaign, until Ukrainian resistance and counterattacks reshaped the map. The city of Mariupol took a special place in the history of repatriation. Russian troops had control over the area after the siege and final battle around the Azovstal steelworks, where there were numerous Ukrainian casualties. Ukraine received 50 corpses of its citizens, including 37 defenders of Azovstal, on 8 June 2022, according to the Ukrainian authorities, and later in the month, 46 more defenders were returned as a result of a Ukrainian operation ([Ukrainska, 2022](#)). Such events were related directly to the necessity of negotiated return, in terms of territorial loss.

The battle later turned into a battle of attrition. The battles around Bakhmut became a symbol of the 2022-2023 battles of attrition while Ukraine's 2023 counteroffensive faced the echeloned Russian defense. The concepts of adaptation to drones, fortified defence, electronic warfare, and small-unit assault tactics are all explored by analyses of [Gady and Kofman \(2024\)](#) and [Kofman \(2024\)](#), respectively. These changes are important to recovery as roles might continue to be on observation and fire even after major assaults have concluded. Russia's seizure of Avdiivka in February 2024 was a significant gain on the battlefield and led to pressure towards the west ([Reuters, 2024a](#)). The Kursk incursion was another break from the norm, as Ukrainian forces violated Russian territory in an east-west direction, whereas Russian forces usually advance from west-east. Such conflicting movements point to the fact that the care of the dead is not a consistent practice, but one that varies from theatre to theatre.

Even if there was no political settlement, the body transfers increased in size by 2025. In the spring, the remains of 909 people were repeatedly reported to have been transferred, among others, from Kurakhove, Pokrovsk, Bakhmut, Vuhledar, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Sumy, and Kharkiv. Direct negotiations in June 2025 in Istanbul did not result in a comprehensive ceasefire, but did result in humanitarian measures regarding prisoners and dead bodies. The ensuing large-scale repatriation, between 11 and 16 June, was facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as a neutral intermediary and in Ukraine, 6,057 bodies/remains were received during the operation ([International Committee of the Red Cross, 2025a](#); [Reuters, 2025](#)). Throughout 2026 the war was still going on. On 29 January, 1,000 bodies/remains were returned; on 26 February, 1,000 were returned, on 9 April 1,000 were returned, on 16 May, 528 were returned, on 18 June, 522 were returned, and on 16 July, 501 were returned, with the Ukrainian authorities emphasizing that identification would be conducted afterwards and that some descriptions of ownership referred to claims of the Russian side. In the meantime, fighting frontally and mutual air raids lasted till August ([Reuters, 2026a](#); [Reuters, 2026b](#)).

2.7 Empirical Review

Much empirical work on war dead in Ukraine has focussed on forensic rather than diplomatic processes. [Ashbridge, Randolph-Quinney, Janaway, Forbes, and Ivshina \(2022\)](#) conducted an environmental decomposition analysis and used the tools in the early stages of the full-scale invasion to predict battlefield recovery would significantly impact long-term management and identification if not addressed early. They stress the importance of the number of information streams such as DNA, fingerprints, dental features, biological profile, personal information needed for forensic human identification, and how the utility of each of these streams varies with exposure post-mortem. [Gunas \(2024\)](#) studied the forensic characteristics of the Ukrainian Armed Forces soldiers that have died in Russian captivity, which is evidence of relevance to the investigation of treatment and cause of death. Parrin also explores the connection between the expectations of humanitarian identification and criminal-justice goals, demonstrating that humanitarian and evidentiary goals can converge, but need careful management ([Parrin, 2023](#)).

[Shevchuk, Dunaev, Tyshchenko, Biletska, and Nehrebetskyi \(2025\)](#) describe new methods of identification in the Ukrainian context during armed conflict and disaster situations, such as DNA, anthropology, medical records and technological solutions - all of which reiterate that identification is

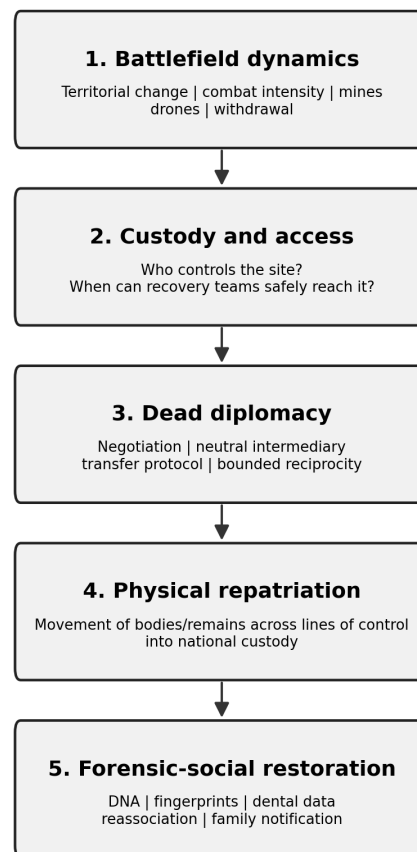
a system. ICRC's integrated forensic guidance also considers identification a multidisciplinary process of reconciling ante-mortem and post mortem information ([International, 2021](#)). The most directly relevant quantitative forensic evidence is from [Kozan, Kotsyubynska, Chadiuk, Henyk, Onyshchuk, Makivnychuk, Lampel, Kostyshyn, and Kotyk \(2026\)](#) which included 305 repatriated military decedents/remains processed at one western Ukrainian forensic bureau from August 2024 to February 2026. Of the 211 cases identified, 94 (31%) were not identified at the study cut-off while 211 (69%) were. The sample also showed significant post mortem alterations such as putrefaction, mummification and adipocere and fingerprint and dental pathways were less operationally integrated than DNA. This is evidence that a big repatriation can result in a downstream identification back log and not an immediate closure.

Having institutional evidence scales. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported that the ICRC had been involved in over 50 human remains repatriations since 2022, and by the end of May 2025 noted 126,000 missing persons cases reported by both sides. As per its 2025 Ukraine report, it hosted 14 repatriations in the presence of ICRC, and provided ongoing support to the forensic infrastructure ([International, 2026](#)). As of the end of June 2026, ICRC Central Tracing Agency Bureau reported about 257,000 missing persons, relating to the international armed conflict ([International, 2026](#)). The figures are drawn from various points in time and not as a straightforward army casualty list, but rather as a reflection of the size of work still to be done in tracing and identifying the figures. The empirical measurement of the link between these burdens of the forensic and territorial control and the humanitarian bargaining structure of wartime is still relatively underdeveloped.

2.8 Theoretical Framework

The study suggests a Battlefield-Humanitarian Bargaining Framework (BHBF) that combines bargaining theory, humanitarian diplomacy, and the politics of dead bodies. Bargaining theory ([Fearon, 1995](#)) and war termination theory ([Reiter, 2009](#)) provide that battlefield outcomes generate information and contribute to a redistribution of bargaining leverage. Slim concept of “humanitarian diplomacy” demonstrates that neutral and confidential engagement can achieve humanitarian outcomes even in the absence of a political settlement ([Slim, 2019](#)). Similarly, Verdery and Mbembe demonstrate that the dead retain political relevance even after biological death ([Mbembe, 2003](#); [Verdery, 2000](#)). BHBF integrates these insights into three interdependent phases: Stage One, battlefield production and custody, concerns where death occurred, which force controlled the location afterward, and whether recovery was tactically possible; Stage Two, humanitarian bargaining, involves communication, agreed localities, sequencing, third-party facilitation, verification, and crossings of lines of control; and Stage Three, forensic-social restoration, encompasses documentation, identification, notification, and the return of remains to families.

Within this framework, dead diplomacy constitutes the second stage but cannot be understood independently of the first and third stages. Humanitarian bargaining depends on the battlefield conditions that determine whether remains can be accessed, secured, and transferred, while forensic-social restoration determines whether the handover ultimately produces meaningful outcomes for affected families. Thus, an effective handover of remains may occur alongside ineffective peace diplomacy without necessarily producing family closure, particularly when the recovered remains cannot be individually identified. The BHBF therefore conceptualizes the transfer of human remains not merely as a humanitarian act, but as a process shaped by battlefield conditions, bargaining dynamics, third-party mediation, and post-recovery forensic and social restoration.



Feedback: renewed combat creates new casualties, new custody problems, and new humanitarian bargaining requirements.

Figure 1. Battlefield-Humanitarian Bargaining Framework (BHBF)

Figure 1 demonstrates the Battlefield-Humanitarian Bargaining Framework (BHBF): humanitarian outcomes are shaped by the interaction between material conditions on the battlefield and the capacity to negotiate across conflict boundaries. The framework therefore views repatriation not as a linear humanitarian process, but as a contingent cycle in which changes in conflict conditions can alter the possibilities for cooperation and humanitarian outcomes.

2.9 Propositions

The repatriation of unrecovered enemy remains is influenced by territorial control, battlefield conditions, technological developments, and humanitarian cooperation. These interconnected factors provide the basis for three propositions concerning custody and access, recovery delays, and the role of humanitarian bargaining in sustaining repatriation.

- P₁*: Disproportional physical custody of unrecovered enemy remains by the force that controls the territory and has access to the battlefields systematically affects the volume, timing and direction of repatriation
- P₂*: As combat intensity and battlefield denial through technological means increases, the time gap between death, recovery, repatriation and identification is expanded due to degradation of remains, difficulty of safe recovery, and the complexity of the forensic process
- P₃*: Repatriation continues sometimes even increasing when political and ceasefire diplomacy does not, because of institutionalised humanitarian bargaining, which leads to a compartmentalised cooperation between otherwise active and fighting adversaries

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative case-study approach was used in this study to analyze how battlefield events and the repatriation of fallen soldiers intertwined in the Russia–Ukraine war. The case-study method is appropriate for examining complex contemporary phenomena involving interconnected military, humanitarian, political, and institutional processes within a specific real-world context ([Yin, 2021](#)). The temporal boundary starts from the date of the first full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022 and ends on 8 August 2026. The repatriation process was defined as a sequence beginning with battlefield death and custody of remains, followed by recovery, negotiation, physical transfer, forensic examination, identification, and return to relatives. This approach recognizes that wartime repatriation involves not only military operations but also humanitarian coordination, forensic procedures, and legal considerations that cannot be adequately represented through numerical indicators alone ([Winaldi & Setiyono, 2022](#); [Mrozek et al., 2023](#)).

Both longitudinal and comparative analyses were conducted by examining major battlefield cases, including Mariupol/Azovstal, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, Pokrovsk, Kursk, and the Istanbul-related arrangements in 2025. These cases were selected because they represent variations in territorial control, combat intensity, negotiation mechanisms, and the scale of remains transportation. The study does not aim to estimate military casualty rates based on repatriation statistics; instead, it examines repatriation as a humanitarian and institutional process shaped by battlefield access, diplomatic agreements, and forensic capacity. Previous research highlights that the recovery and identification of fallen soldiers during armed conflicts depend on operational conditions, documentation systems, and cooperation among military, governmental, and forensic institutions ([Kaźmierczak, 2024](#); [Kozan et al., 2026](#)).

3.2 Method of Data Collection

All data were collected from secondary sources using a documentary research approach. The corpus consisted of publicly available documents from the International Committee of the Red Cross, Ukrainian governmental institutions, official military-related agencies, government announcements, international news organizations, and peer-reviewed scholarship addressing humanitarian diplomacy, international humanitarian law, forensic identification, and the management of the dead in armed conflicts. Documentary research is appropriate for analyzing conflict-related phenomena because it enables researchers to systematically examine institutional records, public communications, and historical evidence to reconstruct events and identify patterns across time ([Bowen, 2009](#); [Morgan, 2022](#)). Sources were purposefully selected when they contained information regarding repatriation dates, numbers of transferred remains, battlefield or morgue locations where available, identification procedures, third-party involvement, and contemporaneous battlefield conditions. Because wartime information is often contested and politically sensitive, statements originating from only one belligerent were coded as attributed claims rather than treated as independently verified facts, following the principle of critical source evaluation in conflict research ([Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2021](#)). Documentary evidence was organized chronologically and contrasted with changes in territorial control and warfare intensity during the same period. The study deliberately avoided converting the number of bodies, body bags, fragments, or unidentified remains into casualty estimates because humanitarian records concerning the dead are shaped by access conditions, identification procedures, reporting practices, and institutional coordination rather than representing complete measurements of battlefield losses ([International Committee of the Red Cross, 2021](#); [Melzer, 2021](#)).

3.3 Pictorial Evidence

There was a separate evidentiary corpus consisting of pictorial materials. Only photographs that had been publicly released, were non-graphic in nature, and were directly related to officially reported recovery, repatriation, forensic, or ceremonial procedures were included. Images depicting mutilation, exposed remains, or recognizable deceased individuals were excluded to respect human dignity and avoid reproducing potentially harmful representations of death. The selection of visual materials

followed ethical principles in visual research, which emphasize that images from conflict environments should be analyzed not only as representations of events but also as products of institutional practices, political communication, and ethical decisions regarding visibility and anonymity ([Murray, 2021](#); [Andén-Papadopoulos, 2022](#)). The photographs analyzed in this study included images of personnel wearing protective equipment during transfer operations, refrigerated transportation facilities, organized storage of closed body bags, transfer locations, and forensic-processing environments. Photographs were not interpreted as indicators of casualty numbers or causes of death; instead, they were examined as visual evidence of logistical capacity, protective procedures, institutional coordination, the involvement of neutral actors, ceremonial practices, and the transformation of battlefield casualties into socially and nationally recognized deaths. Such an approach is consistent with visual methodology research, which highlights that photographs can provide evidence of organizational practices, spatial arrangements, and symbolic meanings beyond their literal content ([Ball & Gilligan, 2023](#)). All photographs reproduced in this manuscript were used under the CC BY 4.0 license as indicated by the original publication source unless otherwise attributed.

3.4 Analytical Procedure: Content and Thematic Analysis

The documentary corpus was analyzed through two sequential qualitative procedures. The first stage applied directed content analysis to systematically code explicit information into six analytical categories: battlefield location, territorial or custodial control, reported number of remains, timing of recovery or transfer, identification status, and diplomatic or institutional mechanisms. Directed content analysis is appropriate when researchers begin with theoretically informed categories while remaining open to additional empirical patterns emerging from the data ([Assarroudi, Armat, Ebadi, & Vaismoradi, 2021](#); [Fereday, & Muir-Cochrane, 2021](#)). A chronological event matrix was subsequently developed to organize repatriation events and compare them with significant changes in battlefield conditions, territorial dynamics, and negotiation contexts. The second stage employed thematic analysis to identify recurring explanatory relationships among the coded materials. Initial codes were grouped into three analytical themes corresponding to the research propositions: battlefield custody, forensic delay, and compartmentalized humanitarian bargaining. Negative cases and variations in transfer patterns were retained to avoid confirmation bias and to examine whether observed mechanisms remained consistent across different episodes. The assessment of propositions was conducted through pattern consistency, triangulation, and mechanism tracing rather than statistical hypothesis testing, following qualitative research principles that emphasize explanation building through systematic comparison of evidence and causal processes ([Braun, & Clarke, 2021](#); [Castleberry, & Nolen, 2021](#)).

3.5 Trustworthiness and Limitations of the Method

Triangulation of sources, chronological cross-checking, and systematic distinction between verified information and claims made by belligerents were employed to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis. Triangulation is an important strategy in qualitative research because it allows researchers to compare multiple sources of evidence and reduce the risk of relying on a single interpretation of complex social phenomena. Institutional reports were cross-checked with international humanitarian organizations, international news agencies, and peer-reviewed research whenever possible to strengthen the reliability of documentary evidence. The study also maintained analytical distinctions between the terms body, human remains, body bag, identified, and reported soldier, because these categories represent different evidentiary statuses and should not be treated as interchangeable. In conflict environments, information released by state actors may be influenced by strategic communication objectives, propaganda, and asymmetric access to information, requiring careful evaluation of source credibility and contextual verification ([Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2021](#); [Bjola & Pamment, 2021](#)).

The greatest limitations of this study arise from the nature of wartime information, including unequal disclosure practices between belligerents, incomplete public records, retrospective modifications of missing-person information, and the inability to independently verify every recovery location and circumstance. Similarly, pictorial materials were treated as selective representations because publicly

available images are shaped by institutional decisions regarding what information is released and how wartime events are visually framed ([Mortensen, 2021](#)). Therefore, the study does not claim that battlefield control is the sole determinant of repatriation outcomes or establish individual causality for each transfer; rather, it identifies recurring patterns and mechanisms that appear across cases through comparative analysis and evidence triangulation.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Proposition 1: Territorial Control Shapes Custody, Volume, and Direction of Repatriation

The first theme supports Proposition 1, with an essential qualification: territorial control affects custody of remains, but repatriation figures do not directly reveal casualty ratios. Combat determines who dies; the post-combat territorial situation often determines who can physically collect those dead. Repatriation statistics therefore reflect at least two processes: fatality production and subsequent custody production. The first case where there is clear evidence comes from Mariupol. After the long siege and the Ukrainian defenders' last consolidation in Azovstal, the battlefield was completely controlled by the troops of the Russian army, from the territory of which it was necessary to pick up many Ukrainian remains. To date, Ukraine has released 50 dead, including 37 of the defenders of Azovstal ([Ukrainska, 2022](#)). Mariupol is an example of the custody mechanism: Ukrainian soldiers had been killed in defence of areas which were later occupied by Russian troops. Their subsequent transportation would thus have required communication and arrangements with the enemy.

This would repeat as attrition grew in this war. During the year, reported transfers took place on 6 October and 22 December, 64 and 66 Ukrainian bodies were transferred, respectively ([Ukrainska, 2022](#); [Ukrainska, 2022](#)). The smaller transfers but repeated in number indicate that the repatriation process had become a routine process and not just a humanitarian act. They provide an explanation for the need to distinguish between event numbers and death numbers. Remains from one exchange can involve multiple individuals that have died over a period of weeks or months, from a number of sectors and in various tactical scenarios. As the tides of the battle turned more towards asymmetry began to show. In February 2024, Russia took control of Avdiivka following several months of conflict, and continued to pressure areas of Donetsk ([Reuters, 2026](#)). The reverse possibility has arisen thanks to Ukraine incursion into Kursk in August 2024, which has brought Ukrainian troops onto Russian soil, at the same time as Russian forces intensify offensive activity elsewhere ([Reuters, 2026](#)). Custody is thus site specific. A state may be expanding and contracting at the same time in different areas and creating both recovery opportunities.

The exchange of 31 May 2024 is an example of numerical asymmetry: 212 bodies were handed over to Ukraine, and 45 to Russia. This can not be turned into a legitimate loss ratio of that relationship. This might be a representation of Russia control of recently captured positions, their stockpiled between exchanges, and their respective recovery times and available supplies at the time of exchange. The transfer was made in conjunction with a prisoner exchange, which further suggests that it was part of an organised bilateral exchange, and not a natural battlefield accounting. The territorial interpretation is enhanced by the late-2024 repatriations. On 29 November, Ukraine stated that it had received 502 bodies, the majority of which were said to be from the Donetsk direction, and on 20 December, it received 503 bodies, again mostly from the eastern directions ([Ukrainska, 2022](#); [Ukrainska, 2022](#)). It was in these areas that the Russians had been pressing and had made advances. In 2025, the bodies were returned in April and in May, including remains from the sectors in which the fighting was ongoing, such as Kurakhove, Pokrovsk, Bakhmut, and Vuhledar ([Ukrainska, 2022](#)). The geographical distribution is related to areas where fighting was heavy, and where the control of trenches and settlements fluctuated.

The asymmetric nature was emphasised in the June 2025 Istanbul operation. Between 11 and 16 June, the ICRC reported a large-scale repatriation had been conducted following the parties' arrangements from 2 June, and Ukraine reported a total of 6,057 bodies/remains received ([Reuters, 2026](#)). This was a multi-day return, rather than a battle return. The scale is analytically relevant as it shows the extent to which battlefield custody can be built up over an extended period of time, before a diplomatic means is used to let it go. A large return can thus provide more information to the researchers regarding

possession, storage, sequencing and negotiation than regarding the relative lethality suffered by each side.

This is confirmed by the visual evidence. Selected documented milestones of return are plotted in Figure 3. It displays a significant growth from dozens of events at the beginning to hundreds, and a very large operation in the Istanbul-arrangement. The chart intentionally refers to the bodies/remains returned to Ukraine and not the Ukrainian soldiers killed. This is important to note because some subsequent official reports indicated that the remains were of “Ukrainian servicemen” or “might be Ukrainian servicemen” and that they had yet to be identified ([Ukrainska, 2022](#)). A January 2026 transfer convoy and protective personnel is also depicted in Figure 5, but what can be seen is neither a battlefield casualty ledger nor a casualty transfer convoy.



Figure 2. Territorial control shifts and their effect on access to fallen soldiers in 2022-2026

Figure 2 traces the shifting territorial borders that had an impact on how fallen soldiers were captured, recovered and returned during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In 2022, Russia took control of the area where Ukrainian remains are located following the capture of the port city of Mariupol, leaving the recovery of remains subject to the negotiated transfer arrangements ([Reuters, 2026](#)). The same pattern has occurred with Bakhmut and Avdiivka, which Russia has taken control of on the battlefield, influencing access to casualties ([Reuters, 2026](#)). In turn, the Kursk incursion in Ukraine in 2024 for a short period of time put Ukrainian forces on the Russian territory, flipping the usual custody pattern ([Reuters, 2026](#)). By 2026, extensive “kill zones” were established using drones, thus minimizing the access for recovery raising the question whether the repatriation trends are driven by territorial custody or battlefield access, rather than casualty rates ([Reuters, 2026](#)).

As of 2026, the Interior Ministry of Ukraine publicly reports the following numbers of bodies/remains: 1,000 on 29 January, 1,000 on 26 February, 1,000 on 9 April, 528 on 16 May, 522 on 18 June, and 501 on 16 July. Forensic examination was also stressed in each of the announcements. This reinforces separation of transferred object of custody and confirmed identity of individual. Thus, mechanism level support is shown for Proposition 1. As a front advances, the side of the front will control the previous enemy's "dead" space. Control over the territories influences the timing of the collection of remains, who collects them and the timing of a transfer of remains if there are adequate stocks. The analytical implication is that the repatriation ratios are not casualty ratios that are frozen at the moment of death, but are custody ratios in time. Interpreting the trends in body exchanges as loss ratios is a possible category error if it is not possible to determine the battlefield possession, the timing of the recovery, and the identification status.

Table 1. Selected repatriation milestones and analytical significance

Period	Reported return volume	Analytical relevance
Jun. 2022	50 then 46	Azovstal/Mariupol-associated returns; early negotiated custody transfer
May 2024	212 to Ukraine; 45 to Russia	Asymmetric handover alongside POW exchange; not a casualty ratio
Nov.-Dec. 2024	502 then 503	Large returns dominated by eastern/Donetsk-linked recoveries
Apr.-May 2025	909 then 909	Repeated high-volume returns from multiple active sectors
11-16 Jun. 2025	6,057 cumulative to Ukraine	Istanbul-arrangement operation with ICRC neutral-intermediary support
Jan.-Jul. 2026	1,000; 1,000; 1,000; 528; 522; 501	Large returns continue while war remains active; identification follows transfer

Table 1 summarises six selected repatriation milestones across the study period, from the Azovstal/Mariupol-associated returns of June 2022 through the large-volume transfers reported in 2026, together with the analytical significance of each milestone. Read alongside the territorial narrative above, the table shows that reported volumes rose from dozens of remains in early negotiated transfers to thousands during the June 2025 Istanbul-arrangement operation, while cautioning that each milestone reflects custody and negotiation conditions rather than a verified casualty ratio.

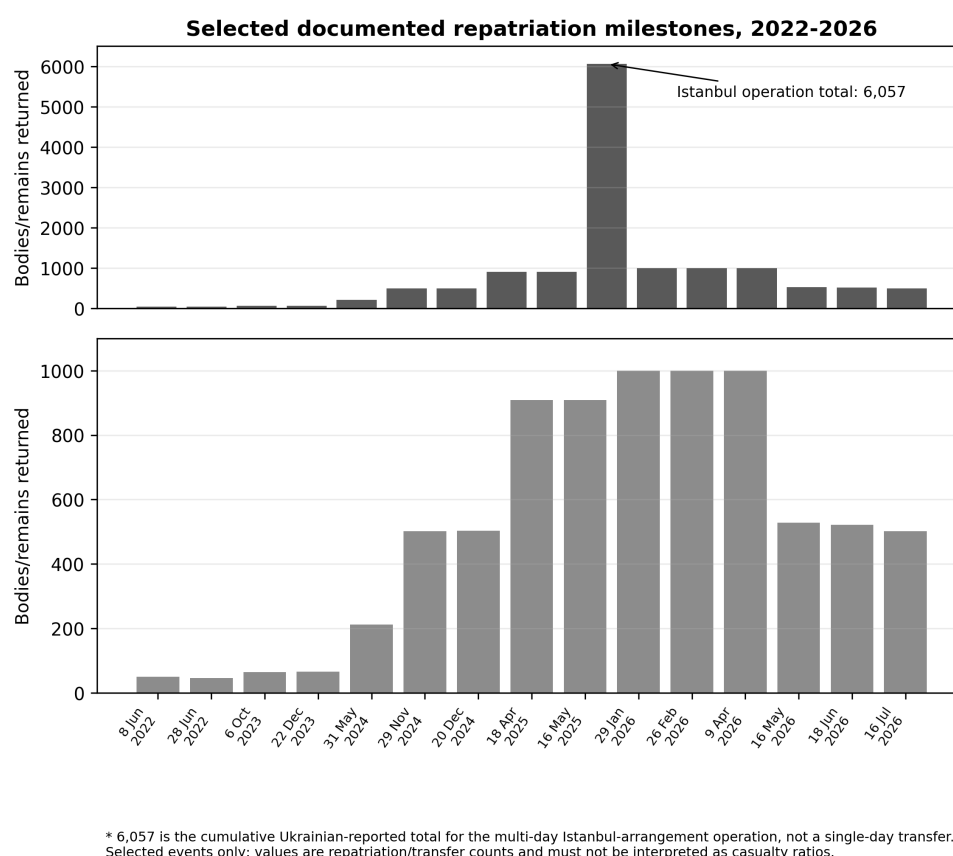


Figure 3. Selected documented repatriation milestones in 2022-2026

Figure 3 shows the reported volume of bodies/remains returned to Ukraine at each documented milestone from June 2022 to July 2026, illustrating the shift from small, dozens-level negotiated

transfers early in the war to the six-day, 6,057-body Istanbul-arrangement operation in June 2025 and the continued four- and five-figure returns reported through mid-2026.

4.2 Proposition 2: Combat Intensity Produces Recovery Delay and a Second Forensic Battlefield

The second theme supports Proposition 2. Repatriation is not a single movement from enemy possession to national territory. It is a sequence of delays. The first occurs between death and safe physical recovery. The second occurs between recovery or repatriation and confirmed identification. Contemporary battlefield technology intensifies both. The first delay is due to the denial of terrain. Customary IHL takes this necessity for operations into account by accepting the requirement for search and collection “where circumstances allow” (International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.-a). Often the situation in Ukraine is such that the immediate recovery is impossible. A recovery team can be a target due to mines, Unexploded Ordnance (UXO), artillery observation, First Person View (FPV) drones, loitering munitions and repeated attacks. In the course of ICRC prior involvement in Ukraine, instances have been encountered in which mines and shelling caused difficulties in accessing the dead, and the conflict on a larger scale in a much more technologically developed front exacerbated this issue.

Until 2026, the relationship was quite obvious due to the use of drones in warfare. According to Reuters, the Line of Control (LoC) was some 1200km long, with extensive contested and kill zones challenging common conceptions of LoC ([Reuters, 2026](#)). Moving personnel, either on foot or in vehicles, can be detected by the same sensors used for detecting combat troops for recovery. A friendly body may then be in close proximity to a body which is physically inaccessible. Battlefield access is not simply a switch on a coloured map, but is a gradient of operation that is determined by the observation, fires, obstacles, weather, terrain and local tactical situation.

Biological effects result from a delay in retrieval. [Ashbridge, Randolph-Quinney, Janaway, Forbes, and Ivshina \(2022\)](#) demonstrate that war dead are exposed to the environment and that decomposition has an impact on the long-term identification of the war dead. Conventional markers can be impacted by various factors, including heat, moisture, blast damage, burning of markers, animal use, and fragmentation, at different rates. If a person survives the incident, they might still have fingerprints, facial parts, clothing, papers and undamaged body parts in tact. The same person could get found again months later and a lot less corroborating information would be needed to reconstruct their DNA. The intensity of combat, therefore, does not only impact whether or not remains will be obtained, but also the quality of the forensic evidence that might be available.

Fragmentation and commingling adds to burden. Artillery, missiles, mines and explosive drones are able to distinguish between the remains or to mix tissues of different people. In July 2026, Ukraine Interior Ministry announced the work of an interagency working group which re-examined 77 bodies/remains, primarily those repatriated in previous operations. Remains from more than one individual were found in five bags and 19 reassociations were carried out. In 66 cases, investigators were able to obtain fingerprints 27 of which matched; in 73 cases dental information was documented; in 19 cases tattoos were documented; 75 DNA-profile matches were processed; 31 identity decisions were made, where the remains of the individuals had been previously handed over to the families. These results demonstrate the need to not assume that a body bag is one identified individual.

The same challenge as viewed by a peer-reviewed perspective can be found in [Kozan, Kotsyubynska, Chadiuk, Henyk, Onyshchuk, Makivnychuk, Lampel, Kostyshyn, and Kotyk \(2026\)](#). In their auditing of the 305 military decedents/remains that were repatriated from Western Ukraine from August 2024 to February 2026, they determined that 211 cases were identified using DNA and that 94 - 31% of the sample - were unresolved at the study cut-off. The distribution of this is visualised in Figure 4. States of preservation also included putrefaction, mummification and adipocere, and fingerprint and dental pathways were not as operationally integrated as DNA. This was not just a matter of laboratory accuracy, but also of architecture and ability of a wartime identification system to be able to receive complex remains at scale.

According to the ICRC, identification is a multidisciplinary process where DNA should be considered in conjunction with other factors such as age, sex, stature, fingerprint information, dental information, presence of tattoos, and personal effects and recovery context ([International, 2021](#); [International, 2026](#)). In its July 2025 statement, it stressed that search and recovery, forensic analysis, and notification to families are a process and time-consuming and that the forensic facilities are under enormous stress. Another key area of support that the organisation reported was to Ukraine DNA and mortuary services ([International, 2026](#); [International, 2026](#)). In February 2026, Ukraine Interior Ministry introduced enhancements to the procedure of DNA identification, which are expected to prioritise ante-mortem DNA samples if they are available, but will also use close-relative samples, and multiple DNA methods. The procedures imply that there are serious implications to the incorrect identification of a body in a system dealing with commingled and fragmented material, which is certainly the case.

The missing-person burden is an indicator of the social impacts of these delays. By the end of May 2025, the ICRC had 126,000 open missing-person cases with families on both sides and by the end of June 2026, a further 257,000 persons remained missing as part of the ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross Central Tracing Agency. These numbers are not the same as those for military casualties, and should not be interpreted as a mortality series. Nevertheless, they do reveal the magnitude of the problems of undecided fate determination and institutional pressures on mechanisms of tracing and identification. This second battlefield is of an administrative nature and is illustrated pictorially. A winter transfer convoy with ICRC marked protective personnel next to closed transport trucks is shown in Figure 5. The lines of the protective-suit personnel next to refrigerated transport are visible in Figure 6, during the last phase of June 2025 Istanbul-arrangement operation. Such pictures do not depict a person in the act of dying; therefore they can be considered ethically. Their importance is the apparatus that is visible: controlled movement, protective equipment, specialised transport, the transition from battlefield custody to forensic custody and the institutions.

This is therefore expressed in the idea of a second forensic battlefield. The first battlefield is to determine whether remains can be reached, the second battlefield is to determine whether remains can be restored to individual identity, the forensic battlefield. A successful operational repatriation may have unintended humanitarian consequences. A state's possession of remains can also bring uncertainty to a family. Proposition 2 can therefore be used and improved: The intensity of a battle translates into delays and degradation in access, which means that the humanitarian cost of a battle is not just immediate, but can be many months or years of access delays, re-association, identification and notification work.

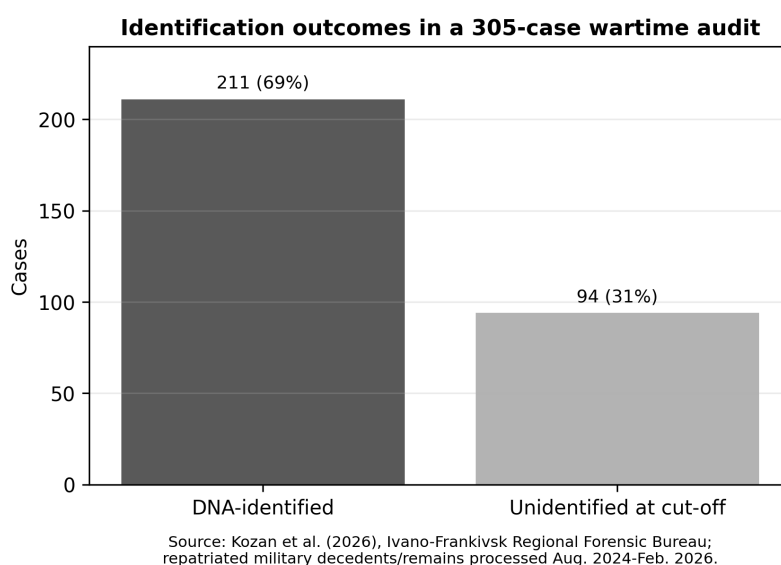


Figure 4. Identification outcomes in a 305-case wartime forensic audit

Figure 4 illustrates the identification outcomes of the 305-case forensic audit reported by [Kozan et al. \(2026\)](#), depicting the proportion of repatriated military decedents/remains that were identified through DNA (69%) against those that remained unresolved at the study cut-off (31%), and thereby demonstrating the scale of the downstream forensic backlog that can follow a large repatriation.



Figure 5. Repatriation convoy and protective personnel on 29 January 2026

Figure 5 depicts a repatriation convoy and protective personnel handling closed transport during the 29 January 2026 operation, describing the logistical apparatus of controlled movement, protective equipment and specialised transport that characterises the transition from battlefield custody to forensic custody.

4.3 Proposition 3: Dead Diplomacy Persists When Peace Diplomacy Fails

The third theme provides the strongest evidence for the concept of dead diplomacy. Russia and Ukraine repeatedly demonstrated that political incompatibility does not eliminate all communication. Instead, cooperation becomes compartmentalised. The parties can conduct lethal operations against each other while simultaneously negotiating technical arrangements concerning prisoners, civilians, missing persons, and human remains. This paradox is explained by the fact of humanitarian diplomacy on death combatant in an ongoing war. [Slim \(2019\)](#) posits that ICRC diplomacy is often practised through neutrality, impartiality, confidentiality and ongoing dialogue with all concerned, instead of political affiliation. It is not intended to provide a political solution, but to allow for space for humanitarian activities. If this is applied to the war dead, this reduces the political hurdle of agreement. The war aims of the belligerents and their territorial claims cannot be accepted as the basis for the return of the deceased by the belligerent. This common ground is supported by the legal framework: parties must make efforts to search for and collect the dead and facilitate the return of the remains.

This channel is manifested in the continuity of exchanges, which is the institutionalisation of this channel. The transfers connected with Azovstal that took place in 2022 had been already dealt with by way of Ukrainian state institutions ([Ukrainska, 2022](#)). Even during the on-going offensive operations, additional returns took place in October and December 2023 ([Ukrainska, 2022](#); [Ukrainska, 2022](#)). Through May 2024, prisoner exchange took place concurrently with body transfers with 75 prisoners exchanged each way so far, with Ukraine receiving 212 bodies and Russia 45. As the case illustrates, humanitarian trades can continue even when the level of trust in the political arena is very low.

The most obvious is the process of Istanbul in June 2025. Direct talks between Russia and Ukraine were held on 2 June but there was a wide gulf between the two over the conditions for ending the war. However, humanitarian measures with prisoners and bodies became a tangible product. On the request of the parties, ICRC served as a neutral intermediary and technical and material assistance was provided during the large scale repatriation process from 11 to 16 June ([International, 2026](#)). Ukraine

then claimed to have been handed 6,057 bodies/remains under the arrangements ([Reuters, 2026](#)). The scene of the logistical operation is shown in Figure 6, but this does not show the dead. This is an analytically important outcome as it shows how humanitarian bargaining can be partially independent of peace bargaining. Field of battle performance will influence the terms that actors will seek in a political settlement, as posited by Reiter war-termination logic ([Reiter, 2009](#)). But as the repatriation case demonstrates, it is possible to disaggregate the bargaining agenda within the governmental sphere. Commitment problems that hinder the ability to reach an agreement on sovereignty, territory, force posture and long-term security should not hinder a short horizon agreement to meet at a transfer point, verify consignment, exchange designated remains and withdraw.

Bounded reciprocity is therefore a key component of dead diplomacy. The parties do not have to have a general trust of each other. They need to have a reasonably convincing process for a particular deal. Operational routines may subsequently develop as a result of repeated interactions; documentation can organize what is transferred; uncertainty may be reduced by the presence of neutral mediators; and the humanitarian nature of the transaction may enable both sides to engage in the transaction without making it appear to be a political concession. In June 2025, the ICRC reported that, since 2022, it has participated in over 50 human remains repatriations ([International, 2026](#)). According to reporting in 2025 separately, it has repatriated 14 people with the presence of the ICRC in Ukraine. These are figures that represent repetition and institutionalisation and not a one-off exception.

The mechanism also continued to operate after the much-heralded Istanbul operation. Ukraine reported large returns throughout 2026 - 1,000 on 29 January, 1,000 on 26 February, 1,000 on 9 April, 528 on 16 May, 522 on 18 June, and 501 on 16 July. The announcements talk of the coordination of the state security, armed forces, the ministry of the interior, missing persons institutions and emergency institutions, while the ICRC is mentioned in the general operation. The repeated transfers demonstrate that a humanitarian channel can last beyond the specific meeting that resulted in its creation. But at the same time, the combat was not in any way meaningfully eliminated. Frontline control continued to be fluid and challenging to determine in June 2026 as a result of drone warfare, and reciprocal air strikes by Russia and Ukraine were continuing to be reported ([Reuters, 2026](#)). Until now, dead diplomacy was in effect, not after war, but in the midst of war. This is because it is not a post-conflict exhumation programme, a truth commission or a peace-agreement implementation mechanism. Diplomacy with the fruits of violence, as violence still yields new dead.

Return has a political connotation that provides an added incentive. The increasing political lives of dead bodies ([Verdery, 2000](#)) is directly relevant. Returning a soldier means a family can bury a named body, a military unit can "account for" a soldier, and a state can insure that a soldier's death is a part of its collective memory. Meanwhile, a handover is marred by forensic uncertainty. Several Ukrainian announcements in 2026 stated that according to the Russian side, the bodies may be or are of Ukrainian servicemen, with expert identification to follow. When someone dies, diplomacy isn't transferred automatically, unless they are dead.

Thus, Proposition 3 is true because the Russia-Ukraine case is an example of a more compartmentalised humanitarian cooperation: governments which do not agree on the political conditions for the end of the war, have a smaller architecture that can transport thousands of bodies/remains across the line of confrontation. Dead diplomacy is not peace nor it is sign of reconciliation. It is a restricted institution to control the dead with verifiable and bounded transactions. Its existence shows that diplomacy in war can't be thought as a continuum from failure to negotiation to successful peace. Different bargaining domains can coexist, and the cooperation might be possible in humanitarian areas because it is less ambitious, with shorter time horizons, and because the results are more easily verifiable than at the level of a comprehensive settlement.



Figure 6. Protective personnel and refrigerated transport during the final Istanbul-arrangement repatriation stage on 16 June 2025

Figure 6 shows protective personnel alongside refrigerated transport during the final stage of the June 2025 Istanbul-arrangement operation. The image illustrates the institutional, logistical, and security dimensions required to facilitate the large-scale humanitarian handover of human remains. Rather than depicting the deceased themselves, the figure emphasizes the organized infrastructure involved in the recovery, transportation, protection, and transfer of remains between the parties. It therefore provides visual evidence of the operational complexity underlying humanitarian arrangements concerning the dead during an ongoing armed conflict.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusion

This research investigated the impact of battlefield dynamics on the processes of repatriating the bodies of fallen soldiers in the Russia-Ukraine war from February 2022 to 8 August 2026. It concludes that repatriation should be viewed not so much as an event that takes place detached from military action, but as a process, in the nature of a battlefield diplomacy. The dead is controlled through territorial gains and losses and thus the possession of the opposing remains depends on the physical access to the dead. As a result, numerical imbalance in body transports should not be considered a direct casualty ratio. The research also reveals that there are two types of delays that result from intense artillery warfare, mines, drones, decomposition and fragmentation. The former distinguishes between death and safe recovery, and the latter distinguishes between being able to return the body to its country and scientifically reliable identification. Thus there can be a repatriation of remains to the state without at the same time repatriating the named person to a family. Lastly, the massive transfer in 2025 to Istanbul and the continued transfers until July 2026 prove the notion of "dead diplomacy," as where-bounded humanitarian cooperation can exist, ceasefire and political settlement do not. The Battlefield-Humanitarian Bargaining Framework brings into focus the importance of the dead in the nexus of law, diplomacy, military geography, evidence and social memory in the context of an ongoing war, as concerns territorial custody, negotiated transfer, and forensic-social restoration.

5.2 Research Limitations

The study is based entirely on secondary sources that were created in the midst of an ongoing war. The belligerents have reasons to minimize, embellish or hide facts, and body counts and battlefields locations are not always independently verifiable. There is an imbalance in the availability and detail of public reporting between Russia and Ukraine. Frustratingly, however, repatriated consignments can consist of partial remains, mixed collections and remains with no associated identity, and so it is difficult to compare the reported bodies with individual remains. Lastly, the qualitative design does not attempt to estimate statistically how much of the effect on repatriation outcomes can be attributed

to territorial control, combat intensity, or third-party mediation. Numerical patterns should thus be viewed as indicative of process rather than as a form of verified casualty accounting.

5.3 Suggestions and Directions for Future Study

Future research efforts should lead to the development of an event-level data set that connects battlefield changes with each individual repatriation, with geocoding of battlefields, with time to recovery, and with identification outcomes. Other interstate or internationalised conflicts could be examined comparatively for the presence or absence of asymmetry in battlefield custody. Experience of the families between repatriation and identification should also be explored, and whether an increase in DNA, fingerprint and odontological facilities decrease the time should be evaluated. Interviews with humanitarian intermediaries, military recovery teams, forensic officials and negotiators would yield evidence that is not found in public documents and would enable more robust process tracing of the agreement of individual repatriations and their implementation.

Acknowledgement

The author recognizes the efforts of humanitarian groups, forensic experts, journalists, researchers, and institutions to document the fate of missing and deceased in the Russia-Ukraine war and this information is readily available publicly. Special mention must go to those who were involved in recovery efforts, transfers, forensic identification and family tracing under the challenging situation of wartime. All documentary material analysed in this study was done without direct involvement of the parties concerned. Pictorial materials are only used as non-graphic and with the source attributed to ensure dignity and minimise unnecessary exposure of affected families and communities.

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