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## Melbourne man held prisoner in Ukraine war

Age, Melbourne

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A Melbourne man fighting as part of Ukraine's foreign legion has become the first known Australian soldier captured by Russian forces in the Donbas region and paraded on social media as a Western mercenary.

Russia's ambassador to Australia, Alexey Pavlovsky, was called into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade yesterday after footage of 32-year-old Oscar Jenkins, with his hands tied and being slapped across the face by a man speaking Russian, was widely circulated on social media platform Telegram.

Acting Foreign Affairs Minister Mark Dreyfus said Australia was seeking urgent updates on Jenkins' whereabouts and wellbeing.

"The Australian government is making representations to the Rus-

sian government. We urge the Russian government to fully adhere to its obligations under international humanitarian law, including with respect to prisoners of war," he said.

"Our immediate priority is understanding where Mr Jenkins is and confirming his wellbeing. We are providing consular support to Mr Jenkins' family.

"I reiterate the government's clear advice to all Australians - do not travel to Ukraine."

Army veteran Glenn Kolomeitz, who has advised Ukraine's foreign forces, said several Australians had been killed while fighting with the international legion against Russia's invasion.

"This is the first Australian to be captured," he said. "Russia is clearly exploiting that fact through

its information operations, its propaganda machine. They'll continue to do that, and use this as some kind of leverage with the Australian government because they know Australia has been a big supporter of Ukraine since day one."

*The Age* has independently confirmed Jenkins' identity as a former student at Melbourne Grammar, one of Victoria's most prestigious schools. He graduated in 2010, studied biomedical sciences at Monash University and moved to China in 2015. Since 2017, he has been working as a lecturer at Tianjin college.

In video footage shared widely by pro-Putin accounts, Jenkins, speaking in both English and broken Ukrainian, gave his name and

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age and said he was a biology teacher who had joined the armed forces because he wanted to help Ukraine.

Dressed in military camouflage with dirt on his face, Jenkins underwent rapid-fire questioning from his captor about why he was in Kramatorsk, almost 700 kilometres east of Kyiv, and if he was being paid to fight.

“Where are you from?” his captor asked in the video, a version of which was circulated with English subtitles. A confused Jenkins was then slapped across the face when he did not understand.

When asked his nationality, he replied: “I’m Australian.”

“Who the f--- are you?” his captor asked, before saying “name?” in English.

“My name is Oscar Jenkins ... 32 years old. Live in Australia and Ukraine.”

Speaking in Ukrainian, he then said he was a teacher and a soldier, before being slapped again.

The interrogation footage was first shared by Alexander Sladkov, a Russian propagandist and military correspondent for Russia 1 and Russia 24 TV channels.

Sladkov said the Australian would now face trial and prison,

while adding that Russians were actively hunting for foreign fighters, potentially to secure prisoner swaps. He said Ukrainian units were listed as targets if a foreign language was heard in the radio interception.

Pro-Putin propagandist Simeon Boikov, who has been staying in the Russian consulate in Sydney and is known by his online alias “Aussie Cossack”, yesterday volunteered to be exchanged with Jenkins in a prisoner swap. However, government sources said their immediate priority was Jenkins’ welfare.

Under Russia’s criminal code, “mercenarism” can attract up to 15 years in prison. The Kremlin is reportedly handling almost 600 criminal cases against foreign fighters – mostly citizens of the United States, Georgia, Britain, Canada, Lithuania and Latvia.

Russia has been classifying foreign fighters as mercenaries – people primarily motivated by private gain and not officially affiliated to the state’s armed forces – which denies them protections afforded to combatants and prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention.

However, Donald Rothwell, an international law expert at the

Australian National University, said Jenkins was a combatant and not a mercenary, based on known facts. “Russia is entitled to treat the Australian as a prisoner of war, and they can be detained as such in the short to medium term. [But] Russia has obligations under the Geneva Conventions not to mistreat a prisoner of war and not to publicly humiliate them, such as by posting images on social media.

“Prisoners of war cannot be charged with crimes, and any attempt by Russia to prosecute this individual on the basis they were a mercenary would be challenged. Once Australia verifies the facts, Australia would be able to make representations on behalf of the citizen to ensure they are being treated consistently with their Geneva Convention rights.”

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said the government was seeking more information about Jenkins through Australia’s embassy in Moscow, cautioning that videos released by Russia were often laced with misinformation.

“We know that the Russians often put out information that isn’t right,” Albanese said in Sydney. “So our embassy in Moscow is working [to find out what has happened].”





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Oscar Jenkins, with his hands tied, in an image shared on social media; and (right) in the Prahran Cricket Club team.