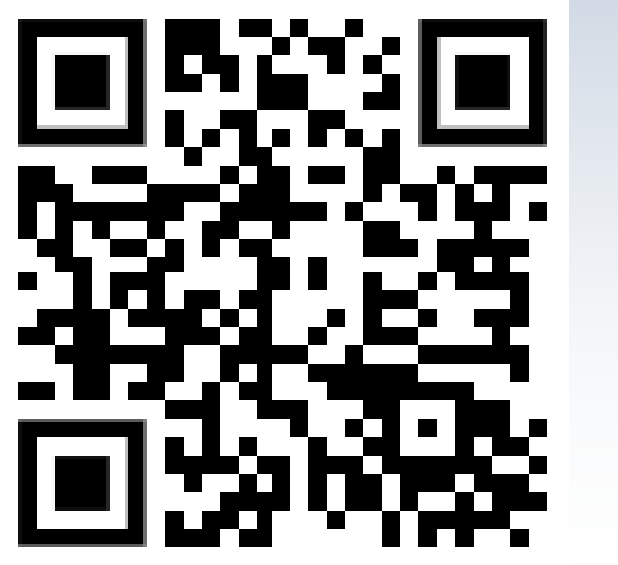


# What Is Categorized as a War Crime Depends On Who Commits It: An Asymmetry In Moral Judgments of Acts of War

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## Abstract

Normative ethical and legal principles state that whether an act is a war crime does not depend on who commits it. Do lay people adhere to these principles, or do they categorize based upon their pre-existing beliefs of who is the victim and who is the aggressor in a conflict?

The principle of combatant equality says that combatants are moral equals, while the principle of discrimination dictates that civilians should never be targets of war. Current literature points to judgments of violations of these principles as dependent on the justness of cause.

In the present research, we find levels of condemnation are asymmetric; people are less condemning of the *same* act by a country that they support versus a country that they oppose.

## Study 1: Real-World Conflicts

**Method:** Four real, ongoing political conflicts were introduced and participants rated which side they supported, and how strongly. Then, they read about a plausible act of aggression by one side:

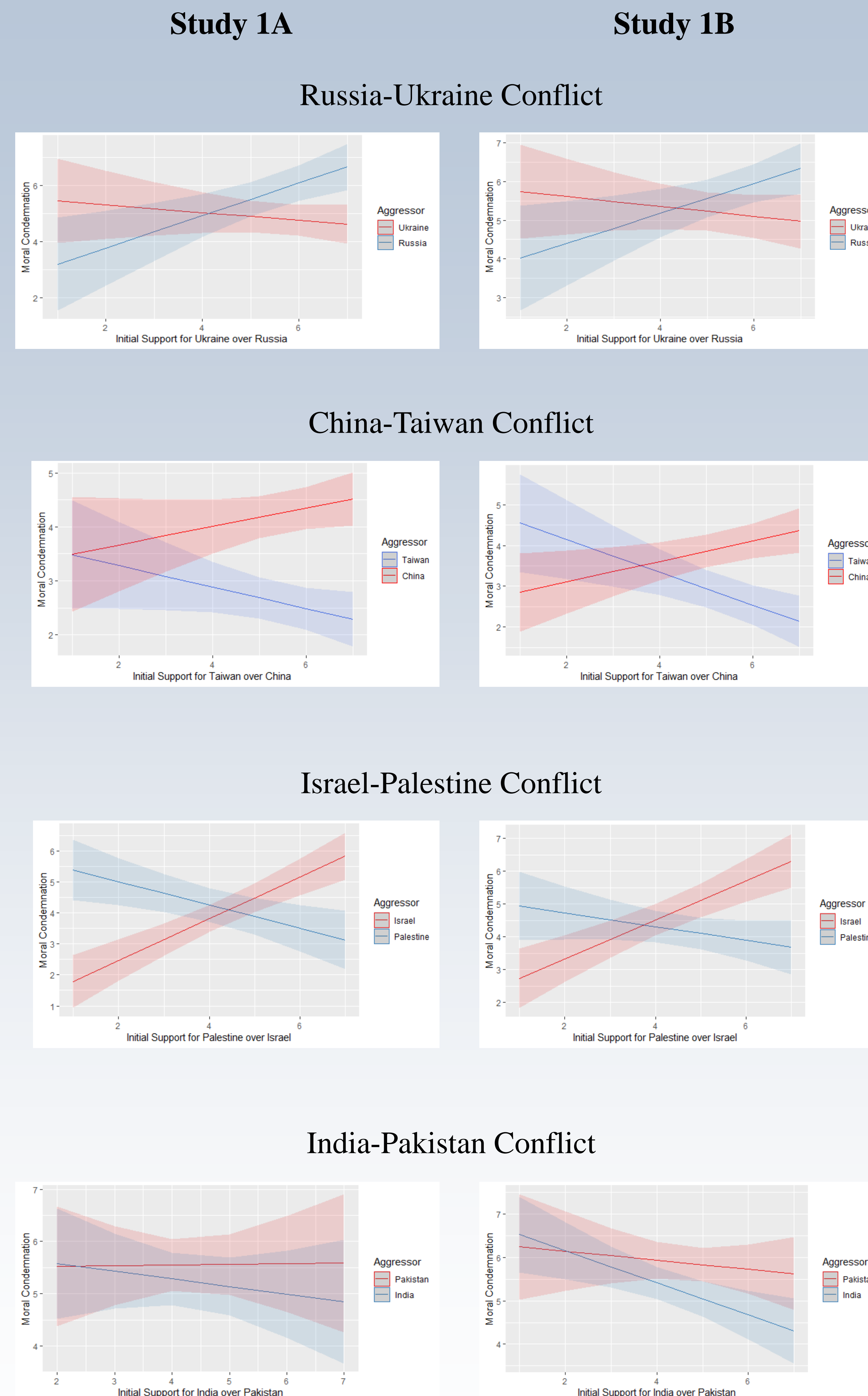
MTurkers ( $N =$  Study 1A: 70, Study 1B: 80) were assigned to one of two conditions for each of the four scenarios:

- China or the United States send naval ships into the Taiwan Strait
- Russia or Ukraine disperse depleted uranium into a small village, releasing radioactive material
- Israel or Palestine start a gun fight that kills multiple civilians
- India or Pakistan fire a missile that blows up a school, but claim that it was accidental

DV: Three-item moral condemnation scale measuring war crime categorization, moral acceptability, and justifiability by self-defense

**Results:** All conflicts except India-Pakistan had a significant two-way interaction ( $ps < 0.05$ ) between initial support and aggressor.

## Relationships between initial support and moral condemnation in individual conflicts, Studies 1A and Study 1B



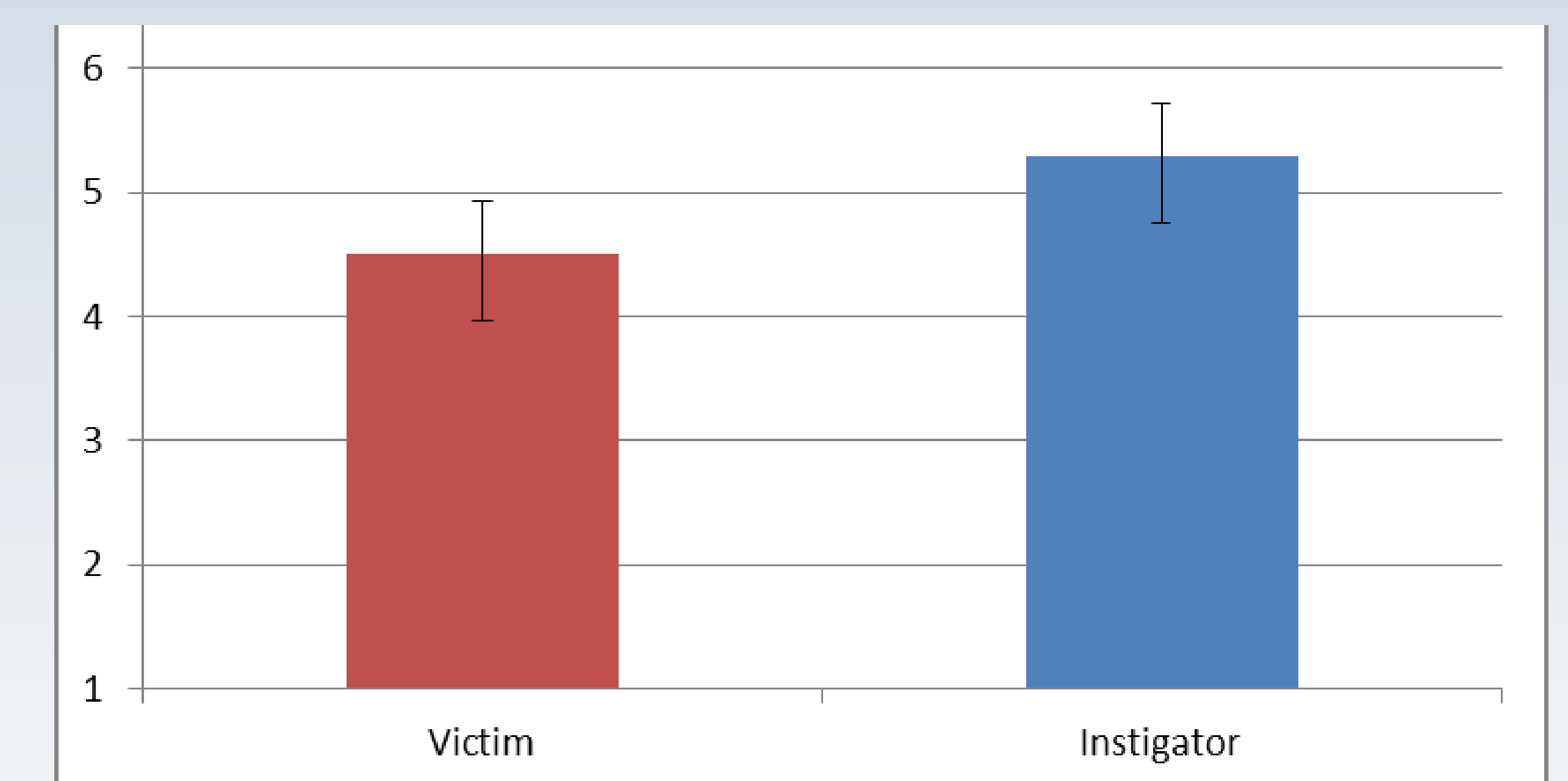
## Study 2: Fictional Conflict

**Method:** A conflict between two fictional nations (“Sofalia” and “Tangova”) was introduced with a brief background that made it clear which nation instigated the conflict. The background was followed with a fictional scenario in which one country utilized Agent Orange.

MTurkers ( $N = 97$ ) were assigned to one of two scenarios, either the victim nation committing the crime or the instigator nation committing the crime.

DV: Same three-item scale as Study 1

**Results:** The same action elicited less moral condemnation when it was committed by the “victim” nation than the “instigator” nation,  $t(95) = 2.33, p = .022, d = 0.47$ .



Moral condemnation ratings of victim versus instigator nations. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

## Conclusion and Discussion

In both studies, participants’ initial support was a predictor of their moral condemnation of an act of aggression, and judgment as a war crime. The country that a participant supported more, or the fictional nation that was described as the victim, received lower ratings of moral condemnation compared to the nations that either had less initial support or the fictional country that was described as the aggressor. In line with prior research in motivated reasoning and morality of war, there appears to be a tendency to excuse aggressive acts by “our side” of a conflict. Lay judgments of what “counts” as a war crime exhibit a motivated asymmetry.

### Contact Information

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