

A person who carries out sabotage.

Sabotage refers to the action taken to destroy or damage material, works or installations which by their nature or purpose add to the efficiency of the enemy's armed forces.

In military terminology, it is preferable to term acts committed against one's own armed forces as "sabotage", and acts committed against the enemy as "**destruction** <sup>[1]</sup>". In the latter sense, sabotage is a **method of warfare** <sup>[2]</sup>.

Whether the use of sabotage against the enemy is legitimate or otherwise depends on

- a. the category of persons committing it;
- b. its target; and
- c. the means and methods used.

As regards the category of persons, in an **international armed conflict** <sup>[3]</sup> only **combatants** <sup>[4]</sup> (i.e. specially trained and equipped units of the regular forces (commandos), members of resistance movements and participants in a *levée en masse* <sup>[5]</sup>) may commit acts of sabotage; no person who does not have **combatant** <sup>[4]</sup> status may lawfully commit sabotage.

Sabotage is generally the work of individuals or small formations operating in enemy-controlled territory and taking advantage of clandestinity, surprise, and ruses of war.

It is generally carried out with great precision and therefore does not usually harm the **civilian population** <sup>[6]</sup>. The targets of sabotage must form part of the enemy's material infrastructure, that is, they must be **military objectives** <sup>[7]</sup>.

To sum up, sabotage against the enemy is a lawful operation provided the legal rules for the

choice of targets and the methods and means employed are respected.

## OUTLINE

Chapter 6, I. 3. b) saboteurs <sup>[8]</sup>

## LEGAL SOURCE

### status

HR, 1 <sup>[9]</sup>, 3 <sup>[10]</sup>

GCI, 13/2 and /6 <sup>[11]</sup> (see ICRC updated Commentary <sup>[12]</sup>)

GCII, 13/2 and /6 <sup>[13]</sup> (see ICRC updated Commentary <sup>[14]</sup>)

GCIII, 4/A2 and 6 <sup>[15]</sup>

PI, 43 <sup>[16]</sup>, 44/3 and /4 <sup>[17]</sup>

### treatment

GCIV, 5 <sup>[18]</sup>, 68/2 <sup>[19]</sup>

PI, 45/3 <sup>[20]</sup> and 75 <sup>[21]</sup>

### definition of a spy

HR, 29 <sup>[22]</sup>

PI, 46 <sup>[23]</sup>

### status and treatment

HR, 29 <sup>[22]</sup>-31 <sup>[24]</sup>

GCIV, 5 <sup>[18]</sup>, 68/2 <sup>[19]</sup>

PI, 45/3 <sup>[20]</sup>, 46 <sup>[23]</sup>

CIHL, 107 <sup>[25]</sup>

## CASES

US, Ex Parte Quirin et al. <sup>[26]</sup>

Malaysia, Osman v. Prosecutor <sup>[27]</sup>

Nigeria, Pius Nwaoga v. the State <sup>[28]</sup>

## BIBLIOGRAPHIC RESOURCES

BAXTER Richard R., “So-Called ‘Unprivileged Belligerency’: Spies, Guerrillas and Saboteurs”, in *BYIL*, Vol. 28, 1951, pp. 323-345.

MEYROWITZ Henri, “Le statut des saboteurs dans le droit de la guerre”, in *RDMDG*

**Source URL:** <https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/saboteur>

**Links**

[1] <https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/destruction>

[2] <https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/methods-warfare>

[3] <https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/international-armed-conflict>

[4] <https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/combatants>

[5] <https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/levee-en-masse>

[6] <https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/civilian-population>

[7] <https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/military-objectives>

[8] [https://casebook.icrc.org/law/combatants-and-pows#i\\_3\\_b](https://casebook.icrc.org/law/combatants-and-pows#i_3_b)

[9]

<https://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=4A21D01103C0DCFBC12563CD0>

[10]

<https://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=C9F199D4A867C874C12563CD0>

[11]

<https://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=CE8A59A191689791C12563CD0>

[12] [https://ihl-](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Comment.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=622AD999736D4F77C1257F7A0)

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[13]

<https://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=6F743996A6E529C2C12563CD0>

[14] [https://ihl-](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Comment.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=52711B8A67F20D11C125811500)

[databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Comment.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=52711B8A67F20D11C125811500](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Comment.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=52711B8A67F20D11C125811500)

[15]

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[16]

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[17]

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[18]

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[19]

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[20]

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[21]

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[22]

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[23]

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[24]

<https://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=9E4891DAB000A725C12563CD>

[25] [https://www.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1\\_rul\\_rule107](https://www.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule107)

[26] <https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/united-states-ex-parte-quirin-et-al>

[27] <https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/malaysia-osman-v-prosecutor>

[28] <https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/nigeria-pius-nwaoga-v-state>