

Experiences that should have never happened again: how Ukrainians survive the war

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Russia's invasion has made murder, rape and torture a part of our everyday life. It never ceases to terrify, anger and remind us that we cannot stop fighting. Indeed, those defending us from the invader, those who have lost their loved ones or survived rape and torture, struggle the most. The existence of this suffering, however, does not make all other war experiences less important. Next to the most brutal episodes of the war, we are living our everyday lives, which will not break the internet or become stories for a large Western media, nor will they make one's body tremble with horror. However, no one should ever experience this, nowhere. This text speaks of such 'ordinary' experiences - the experiences that should not have happened.

I am a sociologist. On the first day of the invasion, I sent three letters to the editors of academic journals for which I was writing articles about housing and urban policy in Ukraine. Those letters informed the editors that I was suspending my work on the papers I had been writing for the past year and that, unfortunately, I did not know when I would be back to work. The invasion has changed not just my everyday life but my academic interests as well. Now, I am researching the Ukrainian resistance. Throughout the year, my colleagues and I have conducted in-depth interviews with Ukrainians about what they have been experiencing and how their notions of the world, politics, themselves and others have been changing. Perhaps someday, someone will be able to analyse these experiences and thoughts, identify trends, and even look at what happened from different angles. But for now, every story only adds to the unambiguity of my already black-and-white world, the world in which there is good, and there is evil it must defeat.

Therefore, in this text, there will be no analysis – instead, there will be a direct speech of Ukrainians who have witnessed occupation and hostilities. The interview quotes are unedited so that readers can see not only what people say about their experiences but also how [\[1\]](#) they say it. Vivid emotional reactions, such as laughter or sad sighs, are also indicated in the quotes. The interview transcripts were anonymised to ensure participants' safety, so you will see that names of people or locations are hidden behind asterisks or replaced by a description in square brackets.

All the heroes of this text are very different: they do different jobs and speak different languages; they have faced the full-scale invasion in the territories controlled by Ukraine as well as in the territories controlled by Russia; they have voted for different presidential candidates, explain the invasion differently, and their opinions about the Ukrainian authorities differ, too. What unites them is that they are reinventing their lives, ruined by the war, under new conditions.

Some of the research participants have survived occupation. Considering the hazard people faced under occupation, we did not invite them to an interview until after deoccupation or evacuation took place. Another reason for abandoning fieldwork in the occupied territories was that, in the case of online interviewing, it is harder to support a person when they feel emotionally distressed. No sociological data is worth retraumatising research participants or putting them in danger.

The following stories will appeal to different readers in different ways. If you are reading this text in Ukrainian, you or your loved ones have most likely experienced something similar. Let these stories remind us that our pain as well as our resistance are collective. If you are reading this text in English, this is your opportunity to find out what the everyday reality of war looks like and what Russia has brought us in addition to death and destruction. These stories provide answers to questions about why Ukrainian society does not want to capitulate, why many people do not leave the country (even if they have the opportunity), and why Ukrainians often are not ready to look at current events from different perspectives.

Living in frontline cities and villages

Since 24 February 2022, many cities and villages have become frontline. Even though those places are not occupied, people there live in tremendous danger due to intense shelling, lose access to basic goods and services (such as water, food, medicine and lighting in the streets and at home), live in complete uncertainty regarding tomorrow day... The list is endless. Frontline areas, including such large cities as Kharkiv and Kherson, are attacked the most, and the enemy's artillery can often reach them. The latter increases the risks tenfold.

The hostilities have completely changed the course of everyday life. A woman who had fled a frontline village in Mykolaiv Oblast told us that on the first day of the invasion, she did not expect the war to come to her village as there were no military or industrial facilities there. What concerned her most was that her daughter lived in a big city. But the very next day, the situation changed:

‘Everything was quiet and peaceful, we didn’t hear those rocket launches, but on the twenty... fifth, I guess, of February, we saw the rockets on our territory with our own eyes, they were flying very low. And we realised that the war... had come to our house. In the beginning... the first three or four days, I think, everyone in my village thought that it would pass us over, that we wouldn’t... that the Russian troops wouldn’t come to us, but just in three days, they came... Life drastically changed: we found ourselves without lighting, without [mobile] connection... For the first three and a half weeks, we lived there knowing that they were near us but they weren’t entering our village. It was winter, we didn’t have heating even though we had gas. But almost everyone had double-circuit [electric] boilers which didn’t work. There was no electricity, no lighting, and we could only read news on our phones sometimes when there was an opportunity... We would sleep altogether, getting together in one house ‘cause we were less scared that way.’

In the next weeks, the shelling only intensified:

‘Well, of course, I was scared. It was scary seeing those huge pillars of rockets fly above you, right at the level of your house, and you fall behind a large settee, throwing it, we (smiles) would move it away in a second to hide behind it and wait it out because those were flying. Now, I see the rockets fly kind of higher, but then, they would fly right into buildings. Those pillars.’

Later in the interview, she said that shelling like that had killed some of the women she knew, civilians. Those events made her flee to the west of the country. After Kherson was liberated, this woman and many other residents of her village started coming back, rebuilding their homes, settling matters and restoring trade.

Another research participant is a school teacher who has fled to the west of the country from a big frontline city. At the beginning of the invasion, she decided to stay as relocation seemed a way too

complicated process to her. She also wanted to be closer to her husband, who had decided to join the armed forces. Several weeks later, a rocket hit the yard of her tower block but, fortunately, did not explode. The woman, her daughter and her grandson were unharmed. That night they made a decision to leave. Although right now the family is in relative safety, they continue to watch their hometown being destroyed and people they knew being killed. This is how she described her worst experience:

‘Boys are clearing [the rubble], like, emergency servicemen, and they are crying ‘cause what they’re finding... And what was the worst – we found a notebook from our school... in a different neighbourhood. And the notebook was covered in blood. We realised that had happened to a student, we didn’t figure out who that was. Maybe the notebook had been there for a long time, maybe someone used to be a student, uh-huh. Well, that was a shock.’

Living under occupation

Many Ukrainians found themselves on the other side of the frontline. That meant not only the proximity of hostilities and the lack of basic goods but also the constant violence of the occupiers. A man who stayed in Bucha to look after his parents and domestic animals described to us his life during the occupation. Every day was a separate dreadful day to live through. Some days felt like the last of his life. Poor connection made those feelings worse. Under such conditions, he had to compose a picture of the hostilities from the news his neighbours were retelling as well as from the shelling sounds. All that remained was to believe and wait. Believing and waiting was all that remained.

‘Some days were dreadful. I don’t know, some days were really grim, there were shootings and everything, yeah, there were such days. And there was this feeling, like, this day may be the last day of my life. Yeah, and there were calmer days, like a bit of peace, and it was kind of good, quiet. But quiet days were dreadful, too. ‘Cause after silence, something horrible can happen. [pauses] ‘Cause you know that they might be delivering more weapons or something else. Yeah, that’s how I felt. So every day was, how do I put it, a separate dreadful day in my life. It’s terrifying.’

A daily schedule had to be adjusted to the shellings. Between shellings, one had to manage to prepare food, feed domestic animals (sometimes, also those of the neighbours who had left), turn on a generator to pump water, go find a place where there is mobile connection and try to call relatives or listen to radio news, which was rarely possible. And as soon as the sounds of artillery were heard – run to the basement.

‘Over time, we learnt when it “begins.” We knew when shelling would begin and when we could have breakfast, lunch and dinner. I mean, they would attack in accordance with a schedule. The funniest thing was that it would start at five in the morning, they were shooting and shooting, until about eight or nine o’clock... That’s it, you can go in the street, you can walk in the street, go feed [animals]. I mean, we would feed animals here and there, the ones left. ... At lunchtime – exactly at lunchtime – we would turn a generator on and pump some water. And, while you’re pumping the water, for those ten to twenty minutes, you’re trembling. ‘Cause they were walking around, and if they heard the noise of a generator, that meant what? Petrol. And if there’s petrol... And we had just one tank of petrol, twenty litres. We treasured it like the apple of our eye because no one knew how long we were meant to be like that.’

Everyday issues were not the worst thing during the occupation – it was the life under the

occupation regime itself and communication with the occupiers. People were forced to constantly hide at home, going outside as seldom as possible, risking their lives. The occupiers would constantly question, search, humiliate and abuse them. The man I spoke to in Bucha told me that those things were often done 'for fun':

'Those tower blocks, there were eighteen floors... they were on the roof. We could see them, they were often on that roof. So, they started shooting at us, you know, just for fun. Like, above our heads, not *at* us, but just to scare us. We hear this sound and see the smoke. And suddenly - the whistle, and it blows next to us.'

This is how he described questioning:

'So, they were asking questions, very tricky questions. He [a relative] got it immediately. They ask, "Who is Bandera?" He thinks, "Well, if I say that he's a national hero, I'll be screwed up, they'll just shoot me." So he goes, "Back when I studied at school, that was a nationalist, and now I've got no idea, I'm not interested in that, I do my things." - "How did Ukraine emerge?" He thinks, "If I say it's an independent state, it'll be..." He started answering, in Russian, "There was the Soviet Union. Then, there was the Russian Federative Socialist Republic and Ukrainian Socialist Republic, as well as Georgian and Belarusian, and then the Soviet Union Collapsed, and now we've got Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, Russia. Separated." And it worked, they didn't touch him. Then there were other questions. And he said he'd realised that they were asking loads of provocative questions which, if you answer them straightforward, like, if you say that Ukraine is an independent country, - you're dead.'

On mobilisation, hiding in the occupied territories and escaping from there

Ukrainians living in DPR and LPR mark the beginning of the full-scale invasion as 18th February instead of 24th. Many did not believe that the war could develop into a full-scale one; thus, they did not evacuate when there still was the opportunity. A young man who had been hiding from mobilisation in DPR for five months until he managed to escape explains the circumstances that made him realise the invasion would take place eventually:

'It's the 19th of February, my best friend and I are at work, and we get a call from our deputy director: "Boys, tonight you have to come to the military commissariat with your belongings." I tell her, "What am I supposed to say to this?" She goes, "Well, I can't tell you anything, but you heard me, you got the information." I tell her, "Well, I heard you, that's all I can say." We realise something shitty is coming, and it's the 20th, Saturday. I say, "B***, let's go now, screw it, I don't care if we're fired or not, I don't give a shit, let's go home right now, pack our stuff and look for a way to leave." That was *mobilisation* [2], when they started recruiting those mobics. So, that's what we did. I pulled him, we took off and ran home. That's it - in half an hour, people with guns came to the [institution] where we worked and took all the men away. That half an hour saved us. We come home and start searching - through all the channels, through our acquaintances - how we can leave. We start getting messages, like, we know a woman who works at a military commissariat, she's a boss of some sort: "Guys, it'll be alright, they'll just take some pictures of you and let you go." I was already alert and understood how the stupid system works, so I said, "No, we're not going anywhere."

His partner, who also stayed and looked after him for the five months as she was able to go outside once in a while, describes what it was like for her and how the mobilisation of men was happening:

'I stayed at home with the guys because there was shelling and I was scared, and eventually I came under fire. ... We were really worried that they could take the boys away. And if I met someone I knew, I would normally go to a shop wearing a mask and a hood because I'd told everyone that I left with the boys, like, we'd crossed the border... Of course, the local shopkeepers knew everything: "How are the boys, they weren't taken?" Something like that. Everything I saw and heard was conversations in shops, like, two women are standing and a saleswoman comes up to them, and the woman who came to the shop to buy stuff is telling them about another guy who was taken, and how he was given a summons right in the shop. In the beginning, they would just hand in the summons, and later, they started packing people. They would take people from buses and then, they would go from flat to flat. Later, provocations started, like, they said there would be evacuation of the building, like, something happened, something's burning or there's been an accident, so that all the guys come outside, and they would catch them at the entrance. And we were freaking out, too, we would barricade our front door with a safe and close the peephole, we didn't turn the lights on. That was so much pressure... That was really tough, yeah.'

Five months later, the checkpoints became less strict, so they managed to cross the border and flee through Russia:

'Yeah, the worst checkpoint was when I was lying under the seat, I was hiding, packed like, I don't know, like, I'm not a religious person but then, I almost read a prayer. I was scared as fuck. And finally, the worst thing - that checkpoint, and those from DPR... what are they called... *commendachi*, yeah. Those who stop all the cars at the border and catch everyone... So, this dude who was driving us, he stopped as close to the barrier as possible. He turned with his back, that was funny, too. Like (*laughs*), I'm lying, like this, hiding, he's turning, and I can feel with my body that he's turning or something... And he goes, "When I say run - you run." Like, you get out, grab the suitcases - we had two suitcases - get out, grab the suitcases and run. I get up and he says, "Let's go, now, run." I get out fast, grab the suitcases and run... I run towards them and he shouts, "The other way, you dumbass!" (*laughs*) I turn around and run in the opposite direction. It's like getting into America from Mexico, I think, it's much harder from Mexico. Well, in Mexico, you realise you can get in jail. And here, I mean, one way or another - you'll die and... For fucking what? I mean, I'm completely against this. I don't want to be taken by the DPR. The Territorial Defence [in Ukraine] - okay, in that case, I wouldn't be resisting. But when you're taken by the fucking DPR and sent to die as fucking cannon fodder - that's completely fucked up.'

On mutual aid and resistance

Many Ukrainians, who before the full-scale invasion had never engaged in activism, began to help both civilians and the army. This is the direct speech of a girl who, with the beginning of the invasion, felt that she could not stay out of politics and reorganised her business into a volunteer project:

'In the beginning of the war, I was out of town for a week 'cause I went to visit my mum, and then it wasn't possible to get back. I wanted to go back to [city] on the very first day, no matter what, but the bridge was blown up, and I managed to get home only on the 8th of March. I went to the kitchen right away and started cooking. I was feeding elderly people nearby and processing some requests from Telegram, also from some grandmothers and grandfathers, buying crops and bread in 'Silpo' [3] to give them humanitarian aid. I had some money left, like, a couple of thousands [UAH], and I spent

it from our fund. And I started posting on Instagram, like, you can donate, and you can text me and I'll be cooking for you and your relatives, and we'll be delivering it around [the city]. I found a guy, my former client, who had volunteers with cars, and they were delivering lunches around the whole city until curfew.'

The man from Bucha also shared his experience of solidarity with other people living under occupation. His family had goats that gave milk. They started sharing it with others. Through such a network, he managed to obtain insulin for his mother:

'The goats gave birth, they started milking. And my parents were milking them. So, we had milk, and we would share it with people. We would also share other food and whatever we had that we didn't need. Later, of course... My mum was almost running out of insulin because, well, she has this problem, and... Sister-in-law said that, yeah, back when there was the occupation, that humanitarian help was delivered or something, that it was being delivered somehow and distributed at the hospital. But it was really hard to get there. And once, that man, the one with wood, was passing by. We gave him milk and asked if he knew anything about humanitarian aid being delivered, and medicines. He said, "Yes, I heard about that, which meds do you need?" He asked my mum to give him a list of the meds she needed. She wrote the list, gave it to him. And the next day, they brought insulin and other meds and everything. I mean, well, not all the meds, but most importantly, there was insulin, thank God. We calmed down. 'Cause mum, she was just about... Plus, we had no syringes and only one needle, which was so dull it could barely pierce. That was really harsh - we still had insulin but almost no syringes left. Thank God that man brought the insulin, and it got a bit better. People here were trying to help each other whenever they saw someone in need, to pass each other things, whatever they could. Of course, walking in the street, it was more or less not scary only during the quiet hours.'

During this year, solidarity networks were established both within the civilian population and between civilians and the military. People who found themselves under occupation were trying to pass on information to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. This is obviously very dangerous. Here is what the research participant from Bucha told us about such an experience:

'We swapped Viber for Signal because Signal, people said, has better protection, and it's harder to hack it. There, we didn't add any other people, and we would chat there. Tanks, let's say, tanks or cars are riding there, shootings or something. And then, there were people who would pass on the information to the Territorial defence or to the military. We were trying to help and inform in that way. ... And the military equipment we took pictures of and exchanged with each other - we had to delete those 'cause if they saw that kind of information on your mobile phone, they could, as the saying goes, execution on the spot.'

Every so often, participants would tell us that they hide from their relatives what they really do not to worry them. A volunteer who came to the east of Ukraine from the west to evacuate civilians from the war zone confessed: 'When I come here to volunteer, I don't... Well, I come up with different stories about how I help rebuild houses in central Ukraine or something.'

Almost every participant has a relative or friend who joined the Territorial Defence without any previous experience. Supporting military people - those one personally knows or not - becomes a part of one's life:

'People who'd never seen weapons, and when there are just eight guns in your village,

and they all want to join the Territorial Defence. And what will they do there against heavy machinery? ... When they went at tanks with Molotov cocktails, and three men died at once. Among them was one of the best kids' football coaches, he led them into attack... Well, that was also shocking to me that... I, I didn't think that the Territorial Defence could be of any use to our country. But it turned out that many of them are now fighting and protecting me. V***, a friend of mine, he joined the Territorial Defence in the first days, he defended our village from day three, and now he's at war. Well, I'm proud of him. Because he used to be a truck driver who worked abroad, and he went [to war] 'cause he's got two kids.'

Perhaps, the most incomprehensible thing to an outside observer is that, while supporting and participating in the resistance, Ukrainians remain critical of the government and its decisions. Our research participants were dissatisfied with the way the mobilisation was being carried out, criticised the restrictions on travelling abroad, noted the problems with the provision of the army, spoke about their unwillingness to join the army and the fear that they might be forced to, and complained that the authorities did not ensure evacuation. Expectedly, but symptomatically, the topic of politicians' corruption constantly came up in the interviews, even though the word 'corruption' did not appear in our questions. People also resented the renaming of streets and the demolition of monuments to Russian figures. And it is not only a matter of social conflicts regarding specific policies. In the conversations, a narrative emerged that the president's support is rather conditional and temporary.

Ukrainian internal political processes during the war deserve detailed and, most importantly, long-term research as Ukrainians' political views have drastically changed – and will continue to change. It cannot be otherwise in times of historical upheavals. After the first ten interviews, I was no longer surprised that the father of an 'Azov' soldier defends Pushkin, that a person deliberately switches to Ukrainian language and [listens to Russian-speaking Arestovych](#), and that a Russian-speaking Ukrainian dreams of the 'collapse of Russia.' In regard to our future, not only political contradictions are crucial, but also the readiness and willingness to be involved in discussing them and to defend our interests.

The first interviews were collected in the first two months of the invasion. When our team was working on the interview guide, we had doubts about whether people would be ready to talk about domestic policy and express criticism about Ukrainian authorities. Those doubts have been completely dispelled. Now (just like a year ago), sociologists rarely face unwillingness to openly discuss politics – rather the opposite. Unfortunately, nothing is more politicising than bombs.

This text cannot have conclusions. That is because the experiences collected here have not been fully lived through and reflected on. During this year, something happened that should have never happened again. The wounds will take long to heal and might never heal completely. But they give us a chance that sometimes, the 'never again' does not happen again. What we can do is continue to listen to each other, and the world – to Ukrainian voices.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] The participants of our research spoke different languages (Ukrainian, Russian and Surzhyk), and it was important to us to preserve the features of their speech – a representation of different geographies and backgrounds – in the interview transcripts. However, in the English version of the article, the unique features of speech are lost in translation.

[2] Mogilisation – a word used by Russian and Ukrainian speakers to describe the aggressive mobilisation in Russia, DPR and LPR; the term combines the words ‘mobilisation’ and ‘grave’ (‘mogila’ or ‘mohyla’ in Russian or Ukrainian respectively). – *TN*

[3] A chain of supermarkets in Ukraine.