




The long read

An Altered Reality: The Unseen Impact of War

 Illustration:
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The word war is feminine in every language on the planet. Women, on the other hand, do not initiate them. It appears that the war is only about the military. Any how true is it? What new realities does it bring?

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It is not yet time to write memoirs about “How I Spent February 24th, 2022,” since Victory has not yet been achieved. However, as it marks a year of the ongoing war, everyone has their memories of the first day and this year as a whole. Except for those who died in the first few minutes, not having the chance to write anything on social media, not being able to call anyone, and not knowing that at the same time, some close, familiar, or a friend had died. We remember them. And the living will gradually piece together a mosaic of memories from what they saw, felt, experienced, and did.

Soldiers will remember the first attacks and shelling and how quickly and hastily the army was assembled and created, preventing the capture of Kyiv and not surrendering as Russia had planned in the first three days. Many people talked about how likely and possible a war was, but very few actually thought it would happen.

On the fateful morning, we woke up to the call of my mother’s friend: “Kyiv is being bombed.” My mother calmly made coffee and said we wouldn’t leave anywhere. She put on a jacket over her pyjamas, and I ran out with her. By that time, there were already plenty of cars heading out of the capital. The gas station has a huge line, and we stood in it. It was the first time we heard the alarm, and we looked at each other in fear. Tears streamed down my face. I saw my mother’s eyes trying to remain calm, but the fear was visible. The alarms continued throughout the day. We ran down to the basement several times and spent the night in the car in the garage.

In the morning, after another alarm, my mother opened the suitcase and in twenty minutes gathered the main necessary things. We were on our way out of Kyiv, heading towards western Ukraine, which was our homeland. There, 98% of the population speaks Ukrainian. We have never held negative views towards Russians or any other nationalities. As my grandfather used to say, “There are no parties, religions, or nations. There are only human beings.”

This day is one that everyone will remember. Volunteers will recall the long lines at the conscription offices, where thousands of people stood from morning until night, ready to defend their families, cities, and country. These were people who had never before held a weapon, such as teachers, drivers, lawyers, singers, and doctors. Refugees will remember the endless lines of cars and evacuation trains. They will recall abandoned animals at the train station, scattered toys, and broken strollers on the platforms. They will remember husbands who drove their wives and children to the border, then hitched rides back to the front lines themselves. Others decided to stay with their parents, grandparents, and disabled family members, believing that being together was more important than anything else.

Medical professionals, who believed that COVID-19 had hardened them, rose to the challenge once more. Some went to the front lines to help the wounded, close the eyes of the dead, and, most importantly, refused to abandon the hospitals, performing surgeries and delivering babies in the basements. Which proved once again that being a doctor is more than just a profession.

Utility workers, firefighters, and people who work at power plants kept putting out fires, making sure that cities and vil-

lages had water and electricity, and cleaning up the rubble. Foreigners will recall what they witness in the new Ukraine, which played out in front of them like a scene from a movie and was filled with tales of soldiers fighting for their lives. Every mother will recall telling her children that the war had begun when she woke them up in the morning. To prevent traumatising their children, they made an effort to cover up their worry and fear in their eyes. That morning, all of us had similar awakenings. Every one of us has unique memories, emotions, tales, and frequently even tragedies. Each of us had a different life “before,” which remains in the past.

The first video address by the President of Ukraine was at 6:42 on February 24, 2022. On that day, 27 presidents of different countries called him. The President’s entourage repeatedly urged Volodymyr Zelensky to leave Kyiv. Biden was the first of the presidents to suggest leaving. The Ukrainian President’s response was, “I don’t need a taxi; I need weapons.” Why did he answer like that?

From subsequent interviews: “I understood that if I left, no one would remember who suggested it. There would only be one result. You abandoned your country. And I understood that if the capital fell, the leader would run away, which would mean there was no country...”

At 3:02 a.m. on February 24, 2022, the decision was made to close Ukraine’s airspace. The most difficult thing was happening at the Gostomel airport, where Russian paratroopers were planning to land. There were huge losses. On February 27, 2022, the Russians burned down the “Mriya” plane, one of the largest transport planes in the world with a maximum takeoff weight of 640 t. This plane set 160 world records. For example, it was the “Mriya” that lifted an art exhibition to a height of 1125 meters. From an interview with a flight engineer who was part of the group of developers of the plane: “It wasn’t just a plane that was destroyed. Since only Ukrainians were involved in its development, they shattered the Ukrainian dream, which must be restored.”

The first days were like a dream, a parallel reality. With explosions in Podil (one of the central districts of Kyiv), military planes flying over Obolon, and tanks on Shevchenko Avenue, consciousness couldn’t keep up with reality. The brain was like a marathon of news. Terrible news. Reassessment doesn’t come right away. It’s like crossing the road and almost getting hit by a car. Only later do you realise what could have happened. And the first days of the war are like cars hitting you every day.

The first days were filled with panic, anger, rage, and tears - many tears. However, these feelings slowly gave way to acceptance, perseverance, courage, and even humour. The desire to live intensified as the realisation that life could end in a second became more acute, especially against the backdrop of news about the daily deaths of innocent people, including children, women and elderly individuals.

Every war has its own scale. Military history shows that armies with fewer people, less potential, and less weaponry can defeat the enemy. We have less artillery, fewer shells, and fewer tanks. Ukrainians began to seek answers.

Interestingly, during the attack on Kyiv, the defence line mostly followed the Second World War defence line. Who better than the British can understand the Ukrainians?

Let us recall the bombing of Britain by the Nazi Air Force from September 7, 1940, to May 10, 1941. Five British airports and an aviation factory did not survive. The famous "London Blitz" operation was carried out with 348 bombers and 617 fighters. With air raids, sirens, destroyed homes and infrastructure, and thousands of dead adults and children, a total of 28,556 civilians were killed and 26,578 were injured. Overall, more than 40,000 civilians were killed in Britain due to Luftwaffe bombings; this is history.

But what about now? How are Ukrainians different? How did they live this year, and were they able to adapt to the new reality?

In May, life slowly began to return to Kyiv. People started coming back. There were no more four-hour lines at stores waiting for them to open or empty shelves. There was no shortage of basic necessities like milk and bread. However, life was still far from normal. The streets were mostly empty by 8 p.m., and it was rare to see pedestrians or passing cars but life was returning.

The theatres have started to work. Yes, there were pauses for alerts, and Kyiv citizens joked that they were going to the first act of the play, then an alert came and they were asked to go to the bomb shelter. They waited endlessly for the alert to end. Sometimes, not wanting to wait, they left home without finishing the play. They joked, "We'll buy tickets for the second act so we can come back next time and finish watching the play." Sometimes they went to the play after bomb attacks, when the city was completely dark and without water. They walked through the dark streets of Kyiv to get the emotional experience of joyous, non-military emotions, and it was necessary to hear the gratitude of the artists, who were shining with happiness that people came to watch the play at such a time, under a working generator. Russians were frightening Ukrainians with a cold, hungry, and dark winter. However, 60,000 generators came in Ukraine this year. We are hard to break. Even harder to put on our knees.

This is the story of an academician, a third-generation professor, and the grandson of the rector of the Institute of Virology, who evacuated his 97-year-old parents from Kyiv to Munich in May 2022. "Evacuating parents is a whole epic, given their age, sometimes funny but more often sad, considering that this is their second big war and second evacuation. And by coincidence, they were going to the country with whom they had fought before."

What else distinguishes Ukrainians? Well, at least the fact that if 3 cm of snow falls in Europe everything collapses. In Ukraine, rockets will fly, and Glovo delivery on a bicycle will bring you food home on time, maybe not exactly on time, not to hyperbolise it, but they won't stop driving to deliver. Paradox. They won't let you die of hunger.

What else is the phenomenon of our nation? The desire to learn even during the war. Many people have transitioned to

online learning, and even during alarms, classes continued. When the electricity and internet started being turned off, a university professor rescheduled classes for late evenings or early mornings so that students could stay on track.

Adapting to the curfew was very difficult, and sometimes people simply forgot about it. One story involves a lawyer who stayed too long at a friend's house with her child and couldn't call a taxi at 10 p.m. in the cold winter weather. She had to call the police, and they came with flashing lights to take them home. They arrived just in time, at 22:59, one minute before curfew.

However, funny stories mix with tragedies, such as the case of Bucha, a small town near Kyiv (just 23 km away) where about 400 women and children were raped, with the youngest victim being just 1 year and 8 months old. Children were raped in front of their parents and women in front of their husbands. As one acquaintance put it, "A 30-year-old man went out for bread and was killed. The fastest funeral. Buried in 3 minutes. In a supposedly civilised, educated world." Here is a short interview with a pensioner who survived Bucha: "Send us straight to heaven. We had already seen hell."

Yes, Ukraine is currently regarded as the nation with the highest level of mining. We have learned to live, work, and love despite the shock and panic of earlier times. For themselves, the people they love, and the people they respect, Ukrainian women still aspire to beauty. Ukrainian women continue to give birth, raise their children, work, and volunteer. Girls and women in Ukraine still go to the salon for manicures and pedicures, dye their hair, visit a cosmetologist, get massages, work out, and, ultimately, watch their diet. They still wear red lipstick, which Hitler hated, and buy beautiful clothes.

Yes, there was a time when consumer needs changed and evening dresses were replaced by sneakers and sportswear, but now, asking the chief buyer of TSUM (the main department store in Ukraine), we receive this response: "People are tired of chronic stress and since the summer of 2022, purchases have resumed. And, most notably, for festive evening outfits too. The customer is waiting for the holiday." And so, the Ukrainian buyer is waiting for Victory, and that means Victory will come.

Victory in everyday simple things. An example of a doctor who commutes to work under rockets. A warning siren sounds, and she spends 1.5 hours in a shelter, but the doctor realises that she has an operation scheduled at a precise time. She picks up her assistant and heads out. Meanwhile, 30 rockets are flying towards Kyiv. The assistant suggests stopping under a bridge because an attack could be happening now. Then she asks to turn off the music to listen for approaching rockets, but under the bridge, they only hear the roar of cars and the subway. Two fragile women try to get to work and help the patient. There is no cessation of the alert, but they decide to go ahead anyway. Without interruption and under the threat of rocket attacks, they perform the operation. Fortunately, everything has been successful. And in the evening, happy to be alive and with their patients alive, they return to ordinary life, to the military life of Kyiv, which a year ago was a peaceful and beautiful European city.

From an interview with a reproductive doctor: “The clinic did not close on February 24, 2022. On that day, we had 23 patients whose embryos were being cultured, and we went to freeze the unborn children who would become future Ukrainians and foreigners. We went to transport biomaterial (eggs, embryos) to protected locations from rocket attacks. Because the patients wrote and asked about their children. For them, they are already children.” The irony of life is that somewhere hundreds of kilometres away, there is peace and tranquilly, and people are hugging and walking around. And very close by, people are driving under rockets to fulfil their duty, risking their own lives.

Not just physicians, soldiers, scholars, and attorneys are involved. It focuses on how the ongoing conflict has impacted Ukrainians’ everyday lives. How has the standard of their lives changed? In that case, what has changed?

For instance, during the four hours per day or longer that Kyiv’s power was out, people had to wake up and put on makeup by flashlight before heading to work. The power was still out when they got home after leaving. Some parents even had to carry their children up 22 floors of stairs due to electricity outages. A mother who only weighed 50 kg had to carry her two-year-old up 10 floors of stairs since the elevators were out of service due to the power outage. They turned on the washing machine and had to finish a load of laundry over the course of two days due to power outages. The flower shop was closed as a result of the alarm when they went to buy flowers for someone’s birthday. They went to a restaurant for dinner and ordered, but they had to leave because of the alarm. They had to wait three hours in line even when they went to government buildings to file paperwork, and they were asked to leave because of an alarm just before their turn. Customers had to abandon full carts at gas stations and grocery stores because they were unable to make a payment while an alarm was sounding. This is now the new standard for typical Ukrainians. Children rush to school as a result of the alarm, attend one class, and then spend the remainder of the day in a bomb shelter. They do, however, want to go back to school the next day. As reality has changed, a new normal has emerged. This is modern-day life in the Ukraine in the 21st century.

And finally, one wants to give credit to those who preserve. Preserve and protect the lives of Ukrainians: young and old, strong and weak. Every day. Allowing people to go to the theatres; doctors, teachers, engineers, lawyers, salespeople, drivers, maids, and plumbers to go to work daily; enabling entrepreneurs not to close their businesses; filling the country’s budget; and allowing mothers with little children to walk in the park every day. From the beginning of the war to the present day.

Leaders, presidents, comedians, and clowns are remembered. The same people receive awards and orders. But history is created by ordinary people, and so the last interview in this article is from a simple soldier, a tanker on the frontlines, defending the country: “Every metre of liberated Ukrainian land is washed by the sweat and blood of our warriors.” The war took away ordinary things from us: water, light, communication, warmth. Everything that seemed to be always there.

But I want to talk about the positive things the war has given us. The war showed who was a friend and who was an enemy. It sifted unnecessary people out of our lives. Only those who are truly precious remained close. Those who called and asked, “How are you?”

The war determined priorities and values. It showed that not everything that seems important is important. That simple thing can mean much more. We understood what a country is. We understood that we are Ukrainians, as trivial as it may sound. Yes, most of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine has switched and is switching to the Ukrainian language, and this would not have happened so quickly if there had been no war. We began to listen more to Ukrainian songs, which was not the case before. More Ukrainian films are being made. More Ukrainian brands are being purchased. And we support each other more. We have become stronger as people. The Russians wanted to scare us so that everyone would run away, but they got the reunification of the nation. We learned to live during the war. We understood that many things were superfluous. That we pay attention to the wrong things and the wrong people, and we need to do this for those who love us. And we learned to put into days what other people put into decades...

Glory to Ukraine!

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