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### Ukraine: Experience of War

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## OP-ED

### UKRAINE: EXPERIENCE OF WAR

The May issue of OPREE is being published during the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian people to the massive invasion of Putin's Russian army. The unjust war of aggression launched by Russia in 2014 has been going on for more than eight years. But three months ago, the destructive leader of our neighboring state to the east wished a great victory over Ukraine. This prompted a major slaughter between the two nations.

Why did Russia attack Ukraine? The official version of the Russian government was to restore the integrity of the divided "*Russkiy Mir*" (Russian World), which, in their opinion, in addition to Russia should include Ukraine and Belarus. The real motives of Russia are completely different. Zbigniew Brzezinski rightly formulated them at one time, noting that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, and with Ukraine, bribed and then conquered, Russia automatically becomes an empire. Another, more secret motive is the struggle to take away our birthright, which we have rightly inherited from Kievan Rus. Because of this, as well as because of its geopolitical ambitions and efforts to absorb human, economic, and cultural potential, Russia has been trying for at least 350 years to make the Ukrainian people its vassal by all available means. However, the homeland of Ukrainians is not an empire, but a home, a common home for all who live here, regardless of ethnicity, race, and religion. We do not want other people's lands and shrines. And the main criterion of Ukrainianness is the readiness to love Ukraine and create certain things for its benefit.

Throughout its history, Russia has repeatedly tried to make Ukraine a victim, but each time it arose due to the tears and blood of Ukrainian martyrs and heroes. Our love of freedom and the struggle for independence have cost us the lives of millions of our sons and daughters. Here is just one example. In the early 1930s, the Soviet government organized the forcible collectivization of the Ukrainian peasantry, which was in fact an attempt to destroy the national identity of Ukrainians. This provoked strong resistance from the peasants—almost five thousand uprisings involving about a million people. To suppress this resistance, the Stalinist regime staged an artificial mass famine—the *Holodomor*<sup>1</sup> (1932-1933), a genocide of the Ukrainian people, which took the lives of at least 3,900,000 Ukrainians. Tens of thousands of people were deported to remote parts of the USSR or died in

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<sup>1</sup> Death by hunger.

concentration/punitive camps. Almost every Ukrainian family grieved for a relative who was the victim of these crimes against humanity. Despite all the threats throughout the history of the USSR, Ukrainians have resisted in various ways the hated Soviet regime until its collapse.

The life philosophy of the Ukrainian people was aptly described by Albert Schweitzer's phrase: "I am a life that wants to live in the midst of a life that wants to live." Could we have imagined that in the 21st century someone would invade our state to kill and die for some illusory idea? What sane person could believe in such absurdity? In that now seemingly distant pre-war February, on the eve of the Russian invasion, we were living in anticipation of spring, making plans for the future. This free-spirited European country with a population of almost 40 million is inhabited by talented and hard-working people. It is blessed by God fertile and blossoming land and cheerful people full of bounties and virtues living on it.

In the morning of February 24, 2022, the "*Russkiy Mir*" killed its future in Ukraine with the first missile and bomb strikes on large, mostly Russian-speaking cities. Russia has destroyed the Kyiv font in its heart; the dignity, honor and reputation of its own state. The ghostly brotherhood of our peoples died much earlier, in 2014, when that failed empire occupied the Ukrainian Crimea and parts of Donbas. So far, Russia has lost the quintessence of everything Russian and even Slavic. And after the cruelties of the Russian soldiers in Bucha, Borodianska, Irpin, Hostomel, and other towns, we started being doubtful in their humanity. After those horrible events, we call Russia the Horde or Mordor<sup>2</sup>, and we write the words "russia" and "putin" with small letters. Widely used in public, the politically correct expression "*Russkiy Mir*" has acquired other meanings in its military form. This phenomenon has received a new, adequate name—"rashism." Yes, it is russian fascism, an ugly eclectic hybrid of imperialism, Stalinism, and Putinism.

As the Canadian historian of Ukrainian origin Orest Subtelny rightly noted, the Ukrainian people survived under any conditions. This is happening again now. On the morning of February 24, all of our plans were destroyed. They were narrowed to two life strategies: to fight in order to survive or/and to survive in order to fight. After the shock of the war, the mobilization of Ukrainian civil society started. And how else could that society react? Ukraine survived the collapse of the USSR for over three decades, and then witnessed *Perestroika*, fought three revolutions, and has now been at war for more than eight years. All this time we have been fighting, surviving, and sacrificing ourselves, not relying on anyone,

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<sup>2</sup> This is a reference to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Mordor was the land from which the evil Sauron launched his attacks against the rest of the world.

including even our own powerful officials. We have lived and created for our children to have a better future. The universal formula we learned was this: if you want everything to be good in your family, city, and country—do it yourself.

Ukrainians are often compared to bees. In peacetime, they are calm and hard-working, busy arranging their own hive. In times of threat, they turn into a cohesive swarm.

What did our swarm look like at the beginning of the war? The first call-up papers brought queues of mobilized troops and volunteers near the military enlistment offices. Many wanted to enlist in the territorial defense units, but when they took first only those who had military experience, others made up the reserve. There was a long traffic flow. We could observe many men taking women and children to the border with the European countries to flee the danger, and then returning home. Other men were returning from abroad, where they had worked to defend their homeland. There were also people moving between regions, evacuation trains that were transporting people from particularly dangerous combat zones to quieter parts of the country. The migrants in these trains were anxious, but full of hope, taking with them only what was most valuable: their relatives, pets, and a few suitcases.

Our special pride—the volunteer movement—the ubiquitous mobile communities, cannot even be counted. Ukrainian volunteers work miracles: they rescue people from shelling, pull victims out of bombed houses, take them out, feed them, dress them, and treat their wounds. Almost all of us are volunteers now. We donate blood for the wounded, weave camouflage nets and weld anti-tank obstacles (hedgehogs), buy bullet-proof vests and drones, donate food and sew clothes, etc. for our cats/*Nashi Kotyky* (that is how we call the Ukrainian soldiers).

For three months now, the Russian army has been at war with the people of Ukraine. From the sky, land, and sea, they fire at the Ukrainian cities and villages, turning them into grey ghosts unfit for life. These months are perceived by us, peaceful Ukrainians, as one long day, divided not into minutes, hours, or even days of the week, but into a relatively safer and light part of the day, and then later—into a sinister and dark part of the day, during which the rashists burn everything alive. That is the time from one sound of a siren to another, between siren sounds and explosions.

Observing the ruins and ashes of our cities, we have gained the experience of an *existential place*. This is the place where we were born, took our first steps, grew up, fell in love, and got a profession. This is the place where we came to our aging parents. We would feel great happiness if they survived this horror! This is the place we chose to get a better life.

Here we gave birth to children and raised them, we created good living conditions, planted trees and flowers for them.

During the bombings and missile strikes of the rashists, we gained the experience of *existential time*. It manifested itself when an air raid was declared across the country, and suddenly came the realization that there were no safe places left. So we fall asleep wearily to the annoying howls of sirens. And our first thought when we wake up is this: “waking up means being alive.” When we called our close and distant neighbors to ask only one question: “How are you?” that actually meant: “Are you alive?” We tried to call our friends who were under occupation, but they did not answer for some time. And then these people showed up somewhere else in another part of the country, or even on another continent, with stories of how they got out of hell. Unfortunately, there are those who will never get in touch with us...

The Ukrainian intellectuals are going through these difficult tests together with their country. Among the native authors who have been published in OPREE in different years are those who are now defending their motherland with weapons in their hands, volunteering, and prayerfully serving the suffering people of Ukraine or waiting for their relatives to return with the victory. There are those who have survived the horrors of the russian occupation or the blockade of their cities and escaped. Some of them have suffered great mental and physical torments that will not be healed any time soon.

None of us wanted to experience this war, and we hope that will never happen again. At present we listen to the voice of our conscience, being aware of our mission and firmly believing in the victory of Ukraine. This OPREE issue comes out to show our nonviolent resistance to the darkness of the war, which is being dispelled by the rays of truth.

**Nataliia Ishchuk, Advisory Editor of OPREE**