

Vakhtang Kipiani (ed.)

World War II, Uncontrived and Unredacted

Testimonies from Ukraine

Translated by Zenia Tompkins and Daisy Gibbons

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Collected by Andreas Umland

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The Truth About War

When I was a child of about seven, I would find myself feeling rather awkward on May 9 and June 22. Over thirty years had passed since the end of “the most terrible war in human history,” as we were taught at the time. All of my classmates had grandmothers and grandfathers that had fought on the front. Some of these veterans were still coming to school for the ceremonial assemblies in honor of the war, while others were already long dead and buried. But they had once existed, these heroes of the Great Patriotic War; yet my grandmothers and grandfathers had not fought. Three of them were too young to be sent to the front, and one of my grandfathers was exempted from service as an energy specialist and head of a strategic state facility. I was very jealous that everyone had someone in their family who had fought, whereas I did not.

Only many years later did I come to appreciate what a blessing it is when an all-encompassing catastrophe bypasses your family; when your loved ones are all still alive and your grandparents can share with you their own version of what transpired and what they witnessed and lived through. This very human truth about the war that was void of lofty epithets often didn’t match up with what they said on TV, what was being shown in movies, and the stories we were spun at school as the only possible version of events.

Naturally, there were films and books that contradicted the fabrications of the Soviet General Staff’s propagandists and their “parrots” among the Soviet General Staff—but these ideas were merely a drop in the ocean. It felt as if most people born in the USSR only knew what the party allowed them to know and remember. Fortunately, this was indeed not the case. At home, parents and elders would share stories with their children that didn’t make it into the official canon—often accompanied by the proviso, “But don’t tell anyone outside of this house or at school!” Later, these uncontrived and unredacted stories would act as the yeast that gave rise to freedom of thought, speech, and action.

Obviously, in order to fully comprehend World War II, one must read a multitude of academic monographs, as well as the memoirs of Winston Churchill, Erich von Manstein, Gregory Zhukov, and so on. But not everyone has time for that. Sometimes a brief paragraph will suffice to entice someone into reflection and research. A photo story by the renowned journalist and photographer Yuri Rost, which appeared in the pages of the then very popular Russian *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (“Literary Newspaper”), once made an incredible impression on me. In the Cherkasy region of

Ukraine, he had met a certain Lysenko family: the mother Yevdokiia and her ten sons Andrii, Pavlo, Mykhailo, Todos, Mykola, Petro, Oleksandr, Ivan, Stepan, and Vasyl. When the war began, all ten – Andrii, Pavlo, Mykhailo, Todos, Mykola, Petro, Oleksandr, Ivan, Stepan, and Vasyl – went off to fight. And when the war ended, all ten – Andrii, Pavlo, Mykhailo, Todos, Mykola, Petro, Oleksandr, Ivan, Stepan, and Vasyl – returned home, to the house they had grown up in, where their mother was waiting for them. Some time after the war, a memorial to the mother was constructed in the village of Brovakhyy in the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi District. Ten poplars were also planted there in honor of her ten sons, and five willows in honor of the daughters she raised (this woman gave birth to seventeen children in total). Unfortunately, I haven't had the opportunity to travel to those places and bow my head before this symbolic memorial to all the mothers who bore children for love and happiness and, as it turned out, for war as well. We are not the ones to choose the times we live in.

The Ukrainian edition of this book went to print in April 2018. Yet back in the spring of 2010, an announcement appeared on the pages of several popular websites and newspapers about the start of the project "1939 - 1949: Unwritten Stories: Share Your Family's Story of World War II." It was a short and very simple text:

World War II left its mark on every Ukrainian family. As a general rule, those who participated in these events, regardless of which side they fought on, do not want to share the details till this day. Only on occasion would they entrust their truth of the war to their closest relatives.

On the eve of the national celebration of Victory Day, we encourage Ukrainian journalists to publish their family stories and lore about what their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents lived through during the war.

We also encourage our readers to participate in this project.

The idea resulted in over one hundred publications. The voices of both the living and of those who are now long gone were heard. Eyewitnesses to the war's events – soldiers of the various armies (the Red Army, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, the German Army's "Galician Division"); residents of the territories occupied by the Nazis, their allies, and the Bolsheviks; *Ostarbeiters*; children; women – all spoke up. And, very importantly, people's children and grandchildren finally found the time to sit down and listen to their loved ones, and to write down the testimonies of a time that seemed so far away, yet one that is somehow still close at hand. Because Ukrainians argue till this day about whether it should be called World War II or the Great Patriotic War; Ukrainians are still divided, as a quarter of Ukraine's citizens still consider Stalin to have been an effective leader and inspirer of "the victory of the peo-

ple.” At the same time, many people recall the other dimensions of this tragedy – from the heroism of some to the baseness of others. Yet others continue to remain silent about what they saw – about the death and the fear and the tears. Such things are not forgotten, even if they are not spoken of out loud.

The stories published in this collection are just a portion of the texts published on the popular-history websites *Ukrainska Pravda* (“Ukrainian Truth”), *Teksty* (“Texts”), and *Istorychna Pravda* (“Historical Truth”). In reality, there are many more such texts that can, if the opportunity presents itself, be published in a second and third volume. If you haven’t yet shared your loved ones’ stories of World War II in Ukraine, you can always do so by emailing istpravda@gmail.com.

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