

Orysia Hrudka, Bohdan Ben

Dark Days, Determined People

Stories from Ukraine under Siege

With a foreword by Myroslav Marynovych

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“Watching the pain of Ukrainians almost continuously for the past few years has been excruciatingly difficult. This book unfolds the daily sacrifices Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers make, in their own words.”

– Michael Bociurkiw, Sr. Fellow – Atlantic Council (Washington DC), global affairs analyst (CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera), and former OSCE spokesperson.

“Dark Days, Determined People vividly chronicles the Russia-Ukraine war by providing a clear and intimate account of the motivations, hopes, anxieties, and worries of Ukrainian defenders and civilians. In the process, it reveals the profound depth and extent to which Ukraine and its survival matter.”

– Bohdan Kordan, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Political Studies, University of Saskatchewan.

“This book tells the stories of ordinary Ukrainians who became heroes by fighting on the frontline and supporting their country’s defense against Russia’s aggression. Anyone who wants to understand the reality of war should read this book.”

– Winfried Schneider-Deters, Director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation’s Kyiv Office, 1996-2000, author of books and essays about contemporary Ukraine.

Foreword

The Power of the Unnoticed

The Ukrainian defense against Russian military aggression has been unfortunate in that it does not have a single unified narrative in the world. It is described differently depending on political and ideological preferences. However, there is one radar on which the chronicle of this war is being reflected most accurately: the radar of the human spirit. It is on this screen that courage to stand against obliteration shines brightest, and only on this screen does the suffering of the innocent gain a higher meaning.

The collection of stories presented here is literally transcribed from these radars of the spirit. For only the human spirit can convince ordinary young men to rush to evacuate the wounded and desperate civilians, ignoring the constant bombardment. It is the spirit that encourages a warrior to remain on the battlefield and cover his brothers-in-arms, realizing that he may be seeing daylight for the last time. It is the human spirit that prompts farmers to sow bread amidst hidden mines, not knowing if they will be able to harvest it. When you stand on the side of Light, the possibilities of your inner strength become virtually limitless.

In each of these stories, we see the blatant and triumphant evil of the occupier who has been given the command: "Attack!" I want to believe that all these documents will one day be laid on the table of the International Tribunal, which Ukrainians now confidently call "Nuremberg 2," although this name is probably unfair to the current residents of this peaceful German city. For Ukrainians, however, this name is important because it reminds the whole world that the actions of the communist regime in the USSR were not qualified as crimes, the perpetrators were not held accountable, and those who supported this regime did not repent. And the seeds of these unatoned crimes have today borne terrible fruit in the regime of Putin's "Rashism." Thus, it is not surprising that Putin acts according to Stalinist textbooks. And until the world finds the strength to condemn the latest crimes, punish the criminals, and

incline Russian society to repentance, the 21st century will not advance beyond the streak of “dark times.”

This was and is quite obvious to me, a human rights activist and political prisoner of the Brezhnev era, as well as to all my companions in the infamous Gulag, who shared with me the title of “especially dangerous criminals against the state.” And those of us who are still alive today warn the world in one voice against the temptation to quickly reconcile the Ukrainian and Russian peoples in the style of Realpolitik, allegedly for the sake of saving people, by exempting aggressors and war criminals from responsibility. It is not for nothing that the saying goes, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

I write these words in the days when the master of the Kremlin has come out with new and cunning “peacemaking” initiatives, which are an undisguised ultimatum to Ukraine. And once again, there are so many politicians and just good people who have forgotten Clausewitz’s warning that “the aggressor is always peace-loving;” he seeks to conquer only “peacefully.” May God guide the minds and hearts of those who will make crucial decisions in the world today.

The world has sufficiently researched how Nazism originated and has placed clear warning red flags along this path. Today, humanity must decode how Rashism originated and what it does. After all, it again combines the satanic triad of drivers: deception, hatred, and violence. And behind the “Russian world” doctrine, the ambitions to reincarnate the Russian Empire, which is impossible to imagine without Ukraine, are already openly manifesting. That is why the national identity of Ukrainians, which Russians have been distorting or simply uprooting for centuries, is a recurring theme in many of the stories in this book. However, the world saw only the effects of this trauma: at best, the identity of Ukrainians was undefined for it.

That is why even in 2020, one of the documents of the Munich Security Forum proposed something unprecedented: to “launch a new national dialogue about identity.” “This dialogue should include opinion-makers, top scholars, and internationally recognized experts. Efforts should be made to engage with perspectives from

Ukraine’s neighbors, especially Poland, Hungary, and Russia.”¹ And the sad irony is that Russia took it upon itself to fulfill this wish of Western experts in its own way, by sending troops to reinforce its claim that “Russians and Ukrainians are one people.”

Thus, Ukrainians had to make a sacrifice to prove that they indeed have a national agency. And the manifestation of it amazed even themselves. After 24 February 2022, in an instant and without any command from above, society turned into one huge hive of people who managed to protect the state itself.

This book invites readers to rethink many long-standing stereotypes, as it will give them the opportunity to see how significant Havel’s “power of the powerless” (in contemporary Ukraine, power of individuals’ contribution to the cause) is—and how shameful a people becomes when it seeks its “greatness” in “forcing love”. Russia’s war against Ukraine will make world democracies wonder whether they retain, in an age of post-truth and new weapons of mass destruction—fakes—their ability to distinguish truth from deception, and therefore good from evil.

However, the eye of a former Gulag prisoner sees not only the crimes of the occupiers, who are responsible for numerous graves of the murdered, cars with the inscription “Children” shot at, entire cities leveled to the ground, people expelled from their homes, widespread torture, the numbness of orphaned children and helplessness of mothers locked with their infants in the basement. And this list is far from exhaustive. In the introduction to my camp memoirs, I wrote: “Far more important to me than any condemnatory testimony, however, is the love of those dear to me, the camaraderie of my friends, the nobility of sacrifice, and the spark of humanity in criminals. For surely the chronicle of Satan’s deeds is not as majestic as the shining traces of God’s light, which warmed my soul in bondage. His light can brighten the darkness of any prison.”²

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- 1 The statement was published in February 2020 (https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/03_Materialien/EASLG_Statement_Ukraine_FINAL.pdf).
 - 2 Myroslav Marynovych. *The Universe behind Barbed Wire. Memoirs of a Ukrainian Soviet Dissident* / Translated by Zoya Hayuk. Edited by Katherine Younger. With a foreword by Timothy Snyder - University of Rochester Press, 2021, p. 2.

So I invite all readers to feel the truth of this conclusion, which is also reflected in these stories. I can only admiringly note that both of its authors—Orysia Hrudka and Bohdan Ben—managed to capture and highlight new “shining traces of God’s light” in the grim days of war. It is thanks to these manifestations of love and mutual support, resilience and self-sacrifice that the book—despite its undoubted tragedy—is not pessimistic. This book accurately conveys the truth of the famous quote by Erich Maria Remarque: “In dark times, bright people are clearly visible.” Through their self-sacrifice, these bright people are defining the history of Ukraine today. And the light they radiate is capable of overcoming the greatest darkness of dark times.

Myroslav Marynovych

Preface

For more than two years since 2022, every day an average of over 50 Ukrainian soldiers have given their lives defending the country from Russian military aggression. More than 10,500 civilians have been killed according to most moderate estimates.³ Each of these people had their dreams and plans for the future, families and friends for whom they were beloved and dear. Overshadowed by top politicians and major events, “little individuals” frequently go unnoticed, while the country becomes an abstract territory where front lines are drawn and bombings occur.

The heroes of these stories were caught in extraordinary conditions and had to put their lives on hold to protect what is valuable to them. If it were not for the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians ready to defend their country and the millions willing to help them, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s rumored response to the foreign leaders’ evacuation offer, “I need ammunition, not a ride,” would never have been possible. And if it were not for hundreds of thousands of Russians ready to die in a war of aggression, there would be no war at all.

This book describes Ukraine at war, where fighting and the killing of civilians happen every day. But it also depicts life in the country under siege. In 2022, Russian forces surrounded Ukraine from the south, east, and north, but the siege is not just about this physical dimension. In a siege, people cannot afford to focus on their personal goals; instead, they postpone them to protect the very possibility of living in their home, in their community, with the

3 On 25 February 2024, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy revealed for the first time that since February 2022, 31,000 Ukrainian serving military personnel had been killed in action. The figure included only identified and confirmed cases, without numerous missing soldiers. According to the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, more than 10,500 civilians were killed in Ukraine from the start of the full-scale war, from February 2022 to February 2024. However, this number of civilian casualties is significantly undercounted in cities that were occupied after the intensive fighting in 2022—such as Mariupol, Lysychansk, Popasna, and Sievierodonetsk, where it was impossible to determine and verify the exact number.

people dear to them. Ukrainians saw that freedom is not personal, it is ultimately political—the freedom of self-expression, movement, and choice is impossible without a free state and nation. Since 1708, the year Moscow conquered the then capital of the Ukrainian Cossack State, Baturyn, and massacred all its residents, Russia’s perception of international relations has not significantly changed. To this day, Russia does not treat Ukraine and other neighbors as equal parties, choosing to wage wars rather than focusing on developing its vast territories.

Each of these stories reveals an important theme of life during wartime: how the “Ukrainian hive” functions during war, using the example of one town; how it is to live under Russian occupation; how the defense of Ukrainian cities was bolstered by units formed by civilians without military experience; how quiet villages in the forests suddenly became places of torture and murder; what life is like after having a limb amputated; what strategic technological goals Ukraine has set to gain an advantage in the war; how Ukrainian children grow up during the war; how it feels to fight for ten years; and more.

During 2022–2024, while working for Euromaidan Press, the independent Ukraine-based English-language publication, we conducted over 300 interviews across various regions of Ukraine, writing hundreds of articles about the critical events in the Russia-Ukraine war. At the same time, we gathered stories that would become the foundation of this book. The vast majority of what is written here, including the smallest details, is either what we saw ourselves or what our interviewees told us, and we kept all the recordings of these conversations and photos in our archive. In the rare cases when we used secondary sources, except for well-known facts, we indicated them in footnotes or within the main text. We made every effort to verify all stories and provide their broader historical and political context. Overall, these stories can be read in any order; however we did not provide the same context repeatedly throughout the book if it had been described previously. The idea to write this book arose in April 2022 but we continued collecting stories until May 2024, when the last story included here was recorded.

These stories are primarily, of course, about the years 2022–2024. But telling them would be impossible without delving into the past and exploring the vision of the future that drives the individuals featured in this book. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukrainians were finally able to breathe freedom during the subsequent years of independence. A new generation was born and grew up in an atmosphere inspired by the possibilities of creating a new political system, rediscovering their own national culture—which had been banned for centuries—and establishing institutions and businesses where totalitarianism once reigned. That is why it is a great pity for Ukrainians to interrupt everything they had just begun to implement and go to a war which they did not choose. They were only left to choose their role in it. This book also reflects how a war of this scale affects society and changes the lives of artists, entrepreneurs, farmers, scientists, politicians, educators, the military, and many more—all of whom are the heroes of these stories.

We tried to depict the life during the war as it is—with all its difficulties, hesitations, and inner conflicts—and how two realities, peaceful and military, coexist in constant tension. We hope this book will give its readers the opportunity to immerse themselves in Ukrainian reality and will help to explore how Ukrainians perceive this war and what gives them faith and strength.