# Eyewitness Accounts of the War in Ukraine

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*Inna is a young wife and mother of two from Odesa, currently living as a refugee with her family in Warsaw. Her husband is an engineer of fighter planes, now working for the Ukrainian army. On May 12, Inna spent several hours with me sharing her story of survival during the war. I began by asking her about the initial days of the invasion and how she escaped to Poland.*

We knew that soldiers and tanks were amassing in occupied Crimea and that people there anticipated a war. We also knew that the Russian army was gathering on the border with Belarus. People were talking openly about an invasion. Because of the nearby threat from Crimea, many people in Odesa believed that they should evacuate and move to a safer part of the country. Something bad was brewing.

On February 23, terrible panic started, but I did not want to leave the city. I have two young children, and I truly did not believe that Russia would invade us. I thought, in this day and age, it's unheard of. However, I packed an emergency bag, in case we would have to evacuate quickly.

On the morning of February 24, we started to hear the bombs and rockets. Some of the first targets were Soviet-era arms factories that were now being used for workshops and businesses. The Russians were using old maps that still listed those buildings as operational factories.

Early that morning, the whole city started to escape. Everyone was packing their things and ran to their cars and the train station. At that point, I decided to get my family packed, but I wasn't sure where to go. I have family in Vinnytsia (a city approximately 250 kilometers southwest of Kyiv), which I thought might be a safer place, but the road would be dangerous. We knew that they were bombing along highways and in towns we would have to pass. There had also been reports of shooting in Vinnytsia. In the end, I decided to go to stay with my sister and her three children, who also lived in Odesa. At least my sister had safer places to hide the children. We risked the drive through the city and had to pass an old chemical plant that now housed thousands of people's workshops. We saw it explode when a rocket hit. Thankfully, it was before the start of the work day, so no one was inside.

Everyone on the road was panicking, driving chaotically, trying to get out as quickly as possible. There were ambulances everywhere. At this point, my main concern was to keep

my kids safe and calm. I hoped that they wouldn't ask too many questions, because I didn't know what I could tell them.

When we reached my sister's house, we saw that the aftershock from the explosion of the nearby chemical plant had shattered the windows of neighboring houses. Thankfully, my sister had had the front and back door open at that moment and that had absorbed some of the shock for the house. Nothing was damaged.

My sister and I hid the children in the bathroom, because it had compact walls and no windows. I remembered the safety tips I had learned in case of earthquakes, and I applied the same logic to the threat of another explosion. The smallest child slept in the bathtub, and the rest on benches along the walls. My husband obtained a gun, and we made Molotov cocktails. The city was encouraging everyone to get any weapons they could find ready to defend themselves. At this point, the grocery stores were still stocked with food, but we started baking our own bread in case of shortages.

We could hear the shooting the whole time, and we learned how to differentiate the sounds of Russian and Ukrainian shooting. We could tell where it was coming from and what kind of weapons they were using. Even the children started getting used to the sound and calmed down when they recognized the sound of Ukrainian fire. They knew that our soldiers were defending the city.

*Inna's children hiding in her sister's house in Odesa*

My mother and other sister live in Warsaw, and they were calling us frequently to convince us to come to Poland. However, none of us had international passports, and in the early days of the war, there was no way to cross the Ukrainian border without passports. As soon as the border control lifted the passport requirement, we bought tickets for the train from Odesa to Przemyśl (southern Poland). The train was our only option. It was the only international train out of the city. The roads were too dangerous because of the constant random shelling, and the train route went through safer towns.

I had to go to the train station to buy the tickets in person, since we had no internet. They weren't even selling tickets with assigned seats; the tickets were standing room only. I saw the pandemonium on the platform. The only way out of the city was to get into the four-car train, and thousands of people were trying to board every day. Moreover, the train departed after the city-wide curfew started at 6 PM. If you didn't make it on the train, you might not be able to make it back home safely.

We tried to get on the train for three days. We got to the station before 6 PM, and the platforms were already packed, mostly with women and children. Everyone was pushing their way through, and I was scared that the children would get trampled in the crowd. I tried to ask the station master if there was any chance to board with my children, but he just threw his hands in the air. The staff were not able to control the situation anymore.

On the third day, we finally managed to board the train. I got onto one end of the car with my children, and my sister and her children got onto the other end. People were jumping onto the train as it started to move. As we left the station, all the city lights turned off, so that the Russians could not see the train leaving the station. It would have been an easy target.

It was a forty-hour journey. The windows and shutters had to remain closed, to hide the fact that the train was carrying civilians. We knew that even if we wrote "CHILDREN" on the train, that they would shoot. In fact, we had heard that the Russians were specifically targeting vehicles and buildings marked as hiding places for children.

People were sitting on their suitcases, lining the narrow corridors. There was no way to get to the toilet or to move around. In each compartment, at least ten people squished themselves into two bunks and on the floor. In our compartment, we had four children on the top bunk and three mothers with small children on the bottom bunk. At each station, volunteers gave us water bottles and sweets for the children, as we didn't have any provisions on the train. We were all dehydrated and starving, and it was hot and stuffy. There were five hundred people in our car, and we couldn't get out to get some fresh air. A lot of people got sick with fevers and coughs, and many people fainted from the lack of oxygen. Ambulances waited for us at each station. The train staff were very kind and helpful and tried to do whatever they could. Even though they couldn't get through the wagons, they would pass out cups of tea from volunteers through the crowd.

We stopped for ten hours at the Polish border, but at least we could get out and stretch our legs. I was shocked by how organized the local volunteers were. The entire village on the

Polish side of the border seemed to have been transformed into a humanitarian aid center. As we left the train, we walked down a corridor of stalls run by villagers, who offered us hot meals, water, medications, clothes, baby strollers, medical attention, a bed for the night, whatever we needed. They gave sweets and toys to the children; mine still keep their stuffed animals with them as good luck charms.

Afterward, everyone had to load back into the train for the rest of the journey. My sister's husband picked us up in Przemyśl. They had been waiting for a whole day in the car, as it was nearly impossible at that time to predict when the trains from Ukraine would arrive.

Looking back now, I can't believe that my family and I made it through such a horrible journey. I never want to ride a train again for as long as I live. My daughter is so traumatized by the ordeal that she refuses to even get into a city tram.

Soon after we arrived in Warsaw, I took my daughter to our local church. She prayed that Russia would leave her country alone, that their soldiers would stop fighting us, and that her dad would be safe and healthy.

I am especially concerned about the impact of this war on young children, both in Russia and in Ukraine. From such a young age, they are desensitized to images of war. They will not remember a time when bloodshed was not a daily norm. The notion of a war like this will not be as shocking to them as they grow up, and they may be more likely to join one in the future. I see it in my own children: my son can recognize and name different missiles, which never interested him before. When a rocket hit the playground of my children's preschool back home, I couldn't fathom how to explain it to them. They asked me, "why would the soldiers want to fight kids?"

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*Inna's husband is still working in Odesa, and many of her friends and family members have chosen to remain in Ukraine. I asked Inna about the current situation in her hometown and in other cities across the country.*

Back home, the citizens of Odesa have gotten used to the war. Many people have remained in the city, and most people are working as normal. It's important that people are unafraid to go to their jobs, keep the economy afloat, and produce supplies for the army and the home front. At this point, whoever hasn't evacuated is likely going to see it through to the end. Civilians in Odesa are helping the army by organizing their own volunteer brigades which defend the city's borders and set up blockades. This is happening in cities and towns across the country.

The attacks come in waves, but it was particularly bad over Easter weekend (April 15-17). We saw on the news that a mother and three-month-old baby had been killed in the shelling of an apartment building. They are definitely targeting civilian infrastructure: homes, student dorms, churches, and the most populated workplaces. They are using Crimea to export all that they have stolen back to Russia, from wheat to toilet seats. They

take whatever they can carry. There is no gas at all in the city, but there is water and electricity, which we are also supplying to Mykolaiv [the region directly east of Odesa] as it defends us from the Russian army's land advances.

My husband is still working at the aviation facility to produce parts for Ukrainian fighter planes. The Russians bombed the airport and his workplace twice. Miraculously, he was not in the building both times. He is still living in our home, but he sleeps in the front hallway, fully clothed, with his gun at his side. From our balcony, you can see the Russian war ships just off the coastline, periodically shooting rockets at the city. There are estimated to be around fifty ships and three submarines.

When I talk to my husband, he is never able to give any concrete information about the war in the city. The government has asked civilians not to spread information about the locations of hit targets, or to share photos or videos, as the enemy can use them to strategize further attacks.

I have many friends who are fighting for our freedom, and morale is high. The people believe in victory and are unafraid to sacrifice everything for it. For example, I could tell you about my husband's close friend Ivan, a pilot in the air force, who was captured after his plane was shot down on March 8. Everyone else on the plane was killed, and Ivan was seriously wounded. The Russians took him to their prison and called his wife, telling her that her husband was a POW and could be released for ransom. They said they would contact her soon with details, but that she was to tell no one about the situation. Meanwhile, they sent a video of Ivan lying on a stretcher, clearly in critical condition, having suffered serious burns, a head injury, and a broken leg. He read off a script to the camera, saying that he was safe and being treated very well. His wife heard nothing else for two weeks, when Ivan finally called her from a POW camp in Russia. He told her not to send any money. It was a common scam that soldiers were using to make some extra cash. He would wait for an upcoming prisoner exchange.

Ivan first had the opportunity to be exchanged for a Russian pilot who was notorious for shooting at apartment buildings and killing many civilians. Ivan refused, as he did not want such a war criminal to be released on his account. Eventually, he agreed to be exchanged for a pilot who had only been involved in military skirmishes, and he was taken to Kyiv for complex surgeries. When Ivan was finally reunited with his wife, he told her, "The war is not hell. The POW camp is hell." The Russians filmed themselves torturing prisoners and posted the videos on social media. They took turns jumping on Ivan's broken leg. They starved them and kept them in squalor.

When I heard about Ivan's experience, it was a breaking point for me. I no longer knew about war crimes just from stories on the news but from a close friend's personal experience. I had to come face to face with the inhumanity of the Russian army. There can be no forgiveness for this war. Human beings cannot do this to one another. Somehow, the Ukrainian soldiers are able to treat their POWs according to international conventions and even give them compensation for throwing down their weapons. War is hell, but there is a way for an army to maintain some standard of humanity in combat.

*Ivan and a fellow POW following their release from the POW camp in Russia*

I could also tell you about my cousin from Donbas, who has lived in a war since 2014. A month before the invasion, he fled to Mariupol. After the war started, he was stuck in Mariupol for a long time, but he managed to escape to Zaporizhia in a humanitarian bus. He finds himself in an awful predicament. He wants to join the Ukrainian army, but his family is in occupied Donbas, in which men are being drafted into the Russian army, forced to fight their own people. If my cousin were sent to the front, he could very well end up fighting against his own father.

My aunt and uncle live in Borodyanka [50 kilometers northwest of Kyiv], one of the cities which was under heavy attack. First, the invaders killed all the local men with military experience or connections. Then, they killed anyone they found.

My family lived in their basement for weeks, terrified to leave the house, as people were being shot at random in the streets and houses were being looted. They had to live on whatever they had in the pantry, and their only source of water was their well. They were lucky to have a well; many people in the city died of thirst, because there was no running water in the city. Their neighbors cut their daughters' hair short and dressed them up like boys, so that they would be less likely to be raped if soldiers found them. Because phone connection was disrupted, their son couldn't contact his parents for weeks during the occupation. He had no idea whether they were alive or dead. My uncle had a heart attack because of all the stress.

There are thousands of stories like ours, and we are the lucky ones. Millions are no longer able to share their stories.

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*Joining us for the interview was Inna's friend Tatiana, a young woman from Lviv who has been living in Warsaw for several years, and who has been organizing humanitarian aid and activism since the start of the war. Her brother and his family live in Kyiv. His wife and children fled to Poland but have since returned to the city. Her brother stayed behind and is among the soldiers defending Kyiv's borders. Tatiana shared the story of her family's escape and of her friend currently fighting in Donbas.*

My sister-in-law and her teenage children lived in an underground parking garage for two weeks. The air raid sirens went off so frequently that there was no point going back and forth to the eleventh floor of their building. They would just run upstairs from time to time to get food and water.

It was impossible to evacuate the city for some time. Like in Odesa, trains were the only somewhat safe option, and the platforms were packed to the brim every day. My sister tried several times, but she saw the chaos, and she saw how many mothers with babies and people in wheelchairs were trying to get on the train. She felt that she could not take the place of those who were even more at risk than her and her children.

Finally, she got a call from a priest who was organizing a transport to Lviv by van. They knew how dangerous it was to take the roads, but the attack on Kyiv was intensifying, and they decided to risk it. They hid in the van with other families. The windows were blacked out so that no one could see that it was transporting people. Thankfully, they made it to Lviv safely, and then crossed the border to Poland.

Many of my friends from university are fighting in the Ukrainian army. I have daily contact with one of them who is on the front lines in Donbas. His mother begged him not to join the army, but he told her that he could not possibly hide at home while others are dying for their country and even coming back home from abroad to enlist. A few days ago, a rocket hit their base, and they had to flee in the middle of the night. All of their weapons and supplies were destroyed. They didn't even have bulletproof vests or boots. They were helpless and hiding for a couple of days, but an emergency transport from Lviv reached them, and they were able to re-equip their unit. It is amazing how quickly civilians across the country are able to mobilize and save countless lives.

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*At the end of our interview, I was curious to know what Inna thought of the Ukrainian government's reaction to the invasion, and especially of President Volodymyr Zelensky's leadership. I also asked her about the response from other countries.*

I voted for Zelensky in the last elections, and I agree with all of his decisions as our leader. I think he is very wise not to accept Putin's alleged terms for a ceasefire, as it would mean surrendering the occupied territories. We are not talking about some peaceful, democratic referendum, but brutal colonization. The inhabitants of these regions have made their choice very clear. They do not want to be annexed by Russia, and they are willing to pay for that choice with their lives. They are already suffering unimaginable horrors or being deported en masse to labor camps in Russia, so I do not even want to think of what would await them if they were officially handed over to Russia. We've seen what has happened in Crimea. Zelensky is well aware of this.

As for the reaction of the West, I believe that Poland deserves particular praise for all that they have done for our refugees, army, and government. Were it not for Poland, we would have been wiped off the map long ago.

In closing, I want to push back on the absurd notion that Russian civilians are not aware of the realities of the war. This notion plays exactly into the Kremlin's hands. By framing the invasion as "Putin's war" alone, it exculpates the majority of Russians, soldiers and civilians alike.

Ivan's story is prime evidence against this lie. The soldiers are in constant contact with their girlfriends, wives, and mothers and post public updates on Russian social media. Our army is constantly intercepting their communications, and we see that they tell their families everything. It seems that it is especially popular for soldiers to send videos of war crimes to their loved ones. For example, there were the films of the young man raping and killing a baby, and of some soldiers gangraping several women and then running over their bodies with a tank, laughing the whole time. I myself have seen how my Russian family and friends have completely cut off contact with us since the start of the war, because they are convinced that Ukraine must be "denazified" and that the ends justify their army's means. Even children in preschools are now being indoctrinated about this "heroic" war against the "nationalist terrorists." Believing in the ignorance of the Russian public at large is simply believing Kremlin propaganda. Russia knows what is going on. The responsibility is on individuals to actively oppose the war.

I want to stress that the Ukrainian army is not the aggressor in this conflict. They are defending their country from annihilation and defending women and children who are constantly being targeted. It is absolutely imperative for the West to support Ukraine militarily, and for neighboring countries to prepare their own defenses. Putin's plan was never to stop with Ukraine. If Ukraine falls, then he will move on to the next, and the next, and the next.

*To find out more about how to support Ukraine through donations, volunteering, or activism, visit the government's official webpage at* https://war.ukraine.ua/support-ukraine, or visit www.defendukraine.org *for a list of verified fundraisers and charities.*