The Extraordinary Efforts of Ordinary People in Ukraine

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Introduction: Background on the Ukrainian Conflict

After Russia again invaded Ukraine in 2022, the lives of many Ukrainians were forever changed. Over 10 million Ukrainians have been displaced by the invasion, with an article from June stating that the rate of Ukrainian casualties are between 600 and 1000 a day.[1] The Russian invasion of Ukraine has created the largest refugee crisis in the world, its scale comparable to that of Syria and Venezuela, according to the United Nations.[2] As a result, many Ukrainians are reflecting on their skill sets to see what they can do to benefit their country and help their communities. In June, Ukrainian civilians raised over $20 million for 2 Bayraktar armed drones, with Forbes saying that 42.3% of the donations made were less than $3.40.[3] Musicians are organizing charity concerts to raise money for military and medical equipment, medical professionals provide first aid training, citizens arrange clean ups and local fundraisers, with some even creating non-profits in order to best support their communities. This phenomenon is happening all across Ukraine, from Lviv to Kharkiv, Zhytomyr to Mykolayiv.

To understand the war in Ukraine as it stands now, one must first erase the idea that Russia and Ukraine are—or ever were—"brothers" as many politicians, including French President Emmanuel Macron, seem to believe.[4] During the period of Kyivan Rus, which began in the ninth century, Ukrainians emerged around the center of Kyivan Rus in Kyiv.

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[1] Trevor Hughes, "'We Are Too Tired to Be Nervous': Some Ukrainian Refugees Return Home, despite Escalating Russian Attacks," *USA Today*, March 23, 2022, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2022/03/23/ukrainian-refugees-return-despite-russian-war/7128658001/. Dan Sabbagh, "Ukraine's High Casualty Rate Could Bring War to Tipping Point," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/10/ukraine-casualty-rate-russia-war-tipping-point.

[2] Anna Giaritelli, "Displaced Ukrainians now tie for largest refugee crisis worldwide," *Washington Examiner*, August 31, 2022, https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/displaced-ukrainians-now-tie-for-largest-refugee-crisis-worldwide/ar-AA11ktJT.

[3] Любов Петрушко, "Майже половину збору «Народний Байрактар» забезпечили внески до 100 грн. У фонді Притули розповіли, як люди скидувались на безпілотники," *Forbes*, July 5, 2022, https://forbes.ua/news/kozhna-kopiyka-mae-znachennya-mayzhe-polovinu-zboru-narodniy-bayraktar-zabespechili-vneski-do-1000-grn-u-fondi-prituli-rozkazali-yak-lyudi-skiduvalis-na-bayraktari-05072022-6997?fbclid=IwAR1MSiT7uxGVWhy_ISgFyK_krNOKiLSSxwZ1MdlCx70MChq71_O7kIP9cWA.

[4] Simon Bouvier, "Macron rejects use of the term 'genocide' to describe Russian atrocities in Ukraine," CNN, April 13, 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-04-13-22/h_e5589f9c279f7e5568fb9aebe5dfdb8e.

The state of Kyivan Rus was broken up by the Mongol invasion in thirteenth century.[5] The Grand Duchy of Moscow emerged, which would later become Russia, while Ukraine and Kyiv were absorbed by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In the sixteenth century, the term Ukraine came to refer to the area between Poland-Lithuania and the growing principality of Moscow.[6] Many Ukrainians fled religious persecution and serfdom from Poland, and the Cossacks led a successful revolution against Polish rule in 1648.

After breaking from Polish-Lithuanian rule, a treaty was created with Moscow that allowed Ukraine a measure of autonomy while still recognizing that Moscow was "superior";

Photo of the Holodomor Museum in Kyiv taken in February 2020.

however Russia did not respect the terms of this treaty and treated Ukrainians with contempt.[7] After becoming disillusioned by the alliance and the treatment of the Ukrainian people, Ukraine created a new treaty with Poland.[8] Ukraine did not gain full independence until January 1918, but this was short lived and followed by years of violence and oppression perpetuated by the Soviet state. In 1932, Josef Stalin committed genocide, referred to as the Holodomor—an artificial famine that was created by the Soviet state. It is estimated that 4 million Ukrainians starved to death between 1932 and 1933 (although some scholars estimate that the number may be higher than 7 million).[9] In 1991, Ukraine gained independence once again from Russia, but in 2014, Russia invaded again and has since occupied the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. Years of violence and oppression at the hands of the Russian state fractures the view of many Western countries that the two nations were ever brotherly.

[5] "Ukraine—History," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine/History, accessed September 4, 2022.

[6] "History—The Past that Shaped Present Day Ukraine," Ukraine.com, https://www.ukraine.com/culture/history-of-ukraine/, accessed September 10, 2022.

[7] "Ukraine—History," *Encyclopædia Britannica.*

[8] "Ukraine—History," *Encyclopædia Britannica.*

[9] "Holodomor," University of Minnesota Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 2018, https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/holocaust-genocide-education/resource-guides/holodomor, accessed September 4, 2022.

With this longer history and the lasting impact of the Holodomor in mind, it is easier to understand why Ukraine must resist against Russian aggression and why so many Ukrainians have become involved in this resistance movement. There are hundreds of stories of ordinary Ukrainians who have worked hard since the Russian invasion to support their country and community. Stories emerged of teachers who began projects to raise money and organize the transportation of thousands of IFAKS (Individual First Aid Kits) from America to Ukraine for the Ukrainian military. Examples such as Anna, who is a Ukrainian social media consultant but began working with the charity organization Star Life after raising money independently to coordinate humanitarian aid for people of Poltava and the purchase, transport, and delivery of bullet proof vests and military equipment to military regiments. Or even stories like that of Yulia Tymoshenko, who was an analyst at a consulting company in Kyiv prior to the invasion but now works in activist spaces for organizations, such as Saint Javelin, and raises money to support families who were victims of Russian occupation in her hometown of Zavorychi—changing the entire trajectory of her career path as a result of Russian aggression. Even organizations such as schools and hospitals had to pivot dramatically in the face of war and their focus and approach to work has changed dramatically since February 2022. Schools in the West converted into refugee centers and schools in the East, such as the school I once worked at in Konotop, raise money to support the demining of their area after the Russian troops receded or collect funds to help schools in other areas heavier hit like Chernihiv.

It is impossible to condense each Ukrainian's experiences and incredible stories of strength, resilience, and resistance to Russian oppression uniquely into one article. When I asked two Ukrainians about their experiences, they described how their perspectives have transformed with the war and the changes they saw in Ukrainians in their community.

Interview with Oleksii: Working to Provide Humanitarian Aid in Mykolayiv
Oleksii is the owner of Concord Project Ltd. and CEO of a medical facility in Mykolayiv, a city that has been bombarded by Russia nearly every day since the beginning of the war.[10] Since February, he has been coordinating not only humanitarian aid but also courses on tactical medicine, raising funds, and acquiring necessary equipment, such as ambulances and trauma kits, and even establishing a water filtration system to give citizens access to clean drinking water.

How would you say your mindset and your approach to work has changed since February 24th?
Once the war began, we started organizing and focusing on how we could provide immediate help—anything we could do to help the community. Because of my project management skills, I knew I would be really helpful in organizing within the community. My friends are here, my work is here, and I understood that leaving the country was not realistic or helpful.

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[10] This interview took place in July. Since then, there have been renewed attacks on Mykolayiv.

As for my approach to work and my profession, business is difficult due to the invasion, so we all shifted to volunteering and helping actively within the community. We started focusing on local problems first. For example, we knew that stores didn't have any food, so we started working on gathering food for the community. We tried to be responsive and help with any new issues that arose. Now that stores have food, we are able to focus on new issues like ambulances and water filtration systems.

How has your work changed as the invasion continued? What would you say things looked like in the early weeks compared to now?

Photo of Oleksii's office in Mykolayiv after it was bombed on September 15, 2022.

With volunteers and donations from abroad, I reached out to people I had been interacting with previously about how they can help us. As things continued, Mykolayiv was getting bombed every day, so working on architecture would be futile. We have recently started to begin rebuilding Mykolayiv. We opened a market, and the clinic began providing humanitarian help free of charge. We also began helping the nearby city of Kherson because our situation in Mykolayiv is improving. We offered them free medical care and labor.

Right now, the situation is a little different [and Mykolayiv is not being bombed as often], the danger seems more distant. We are doing our jobs and must continue to live and work. We must focus on systematic and economic assistance instead. If we don't work, if we don't continue our economic processes, then we will have an issue for the whole nation.

What role did other Ukrainian civilians play in your war effort? For example, volunteering, fundraising, etc.?
We had over 100 Ukrainians who assisted as volunteers, but every Ukrainian fundraises and works actively to help with the war effort. We had a lot of help in the beginning. In Mykolayiv everyone tried to become very actively involved in the war effort. We did not want the Russians to move into Mykolayiv. In Kherson they took longer to organize

themselves and were unable to slow Russian forces as a result. Our work was to ensure that they would not take Mykolayiv and Odesa. Ukraine is the type of nation that is very united and works hard. We always come together to persevere in difficult situations.

Interview with Zhanna: Finding Opportunities to Help in Zhytomyr
I also spoke with Zhanna, the director of a non-profit in Zhytomyr, called the Zhytomyr Community Fund, which was founded in 2012. When the war began, the non-profit which typically focuses on microgrants and supporting local businesses and entrepreneurs turned its attention to community efforts to provide humanitarian aid.

Can you explain what you did for work prior to the invasion in February?
I worked in the nonprofit sector and my main goals were to help and sustain the community and programs focused on business and entrepreneurship. [The Zhytomyr Community Fund] had experience working with internally displaced people (IDP) from 2015 to 2019. We partnered with the state's agency of immigration, and we focused primarily on jobs and things for Zhytomyr. Working with IDPs is not new for this organization and on the first day of war, we realized it was necessary to do something. I made the choice for the direction of the program and worked with the organization. I went to city council to raise money with the community fund. I was thinking, "What are my strengths and experiences? What can I do? I don't know what I will fundraise for or what goals we have, but I need to do it." I asked the city council what goals we had for our community and what ends we are working towards. The deputy of the city council called on February 25th to ask if I could start the campaign by myself. At first, my colleagues did not want to be a public face for the campaign because of the inherent risks associated with it. Since then, we managed to raise over $450,000 over four months as just a small local community foundation, and we received money from all around the world. We managed to help IDPs, victims of Russian soldiers, the military, etc.

We are currently working to buy military cars and to support students from Lyceum 25, which was destroyed. The war made us professionals in many different fields. We would modify our roles as new people joined the team and remain flexible as some members were evacuated and work remotely while others stayed and worked. Everything is very transparent—people from abroad wanted to provide humanitarian aid and now the IDPs are able to receive that support. Everyone was just trying to look for opportunities to help.

How would you say your mindset and your approach to work has changed since February 24th?
You start to feel professional burn out—it influenced emotional well-being and physical well-being. I realized that it is necessary to find at least one day per week to rest. The work had such an influence on everyone, and we have all aged so much since the invasion. It is impossible to make long-term plans. You must plan only for the short-term. We are looking for different opportunities to help—Lyceum 25 buys materials for these students such as desks, chairs, and computers to organize a place for them to study. For the older students, maybe they can study online, but younger students need the structure of in-person classes.

Right now, we are focusing on uniting people and fundraising for cities beyond Zhytomyr to help other children in Ukraine.

Lyceum No. 25 in Zhytomyr, Ukraine, after being bombed on March 3, 2022. Photo from Zhytomyr Community Fund.

Since the invasion, would you say that there is a stronger sense of identity and community among Ukrainian civilians?
The Ukrainian spirit—people came to realize that they are Ukrainians. Their identity became stronger, and they united because they found common ground fighting against Russian terrorists. People can unite their resources and information.

This organization has been working with philanthropy long-term—you can volunteer, provide your expertise, and you can provide information to others as a volunteer. This war made it so that every single Ukrainian became a volunteer in some capacity. They give whatever they can—cook food at home and bring it to defense centers, bring information and share, etc. The war relief effort has been extremely unified. Everyone realized that they should do something to defend the community, the city, their own family, and themselves. It is really valuable. For the people who are opposed to Russia, it is very valuable to be Ukrainian. They are giving their lives and are victims of aggression and violence at the hands of Russian soldiers. Ukraine is the wall between Russia and Europe. Ukrainians are giving their lives to defend not only Ukraine, but all of Europe and their values. If Ukraine were to stand down, they would move on to Moldova.

What role did other Ukrainian civilians play in your war effort? For example, volunteering, fundraising, etc.?
A lot of new initiatives and non-profit groups have started in Zhytomyr. People started to create charitable organizations and civil society, but they don't necessarily follow the rules.

There are some problems with this because they may be criminal and embezzle money—whether intentionally or due to lack of experience and knowledge. [The Zhytomyr Community Fund] can be an example to these new organizations of how to do things properly. We can also provide support for smaller initiatives that started after the Russian invasion, organizations which could give a bad reputation to humanitarian organizations and civil society because of their inability to properly track finances or provide transparency. People realized they could be useful in some way after the invasion, and they noticed another purpose for life. They recognized that they could be helpful to their community, city, and country, even if by only helping one other person. It is something that helps motivate them to keep going. They noticed a reason they can be helpful and become a part of something in a positive way.

It is not possible to work with just humanitarian aid for a non-profit. The community foundation is a charitable organization to work on things that we need in the community such as microgrants and financial assistance.

How has your work changed as the invasion continued? What would you say things looked like in the early weeks compared to now?
We added support of military units and of individual soldiers. Before the invasion, we didn't have that experience—it was only the victims and IDPs. Right now, we are looking for programs to help IDPs—we made a survey of IDPs in Zhytomyr. It is interesting to me that food is the most important issue; 82% confirmed that food is the first priority. Second priority is housing and homes. Third category is work and employment. We focus our activities and projects on these priorities and modify our approach based on their feedback. It is necessary to change things because of the war as our ongoing projects were frozen and we had to modify our new plans. We had a project for a civil society organization and were creating plans for education, operations, subgrants, etc. Now we've signed with many local civil society organizations to conduct activities in their communities within the context of war. We provide information to these new organizations for them to learn about fundraising and project management.

What impact do you think the Zhytomyr Community Fund has on the community? How would you describe the relationship of the organization and the community population?
We follow the principle that we should understand the needs and respond to these needs. As a civil society organization, we did our best with the resources we had. We became helpful and we assist in any way we can—if we had more human resources, maybe we could be more effective, but always you can be more effective. But with the resources we have, we just did our best. It is truly the results of our whole team and not just of me as a single person. We are responsible for the donations, and it is our responsibility to spend the money in an effective way. Our activity could leave an impact as we can show how civil society organizations need to make reports, be transparent, and be an example to others. Maybe there is a chance for other organizations to follow this example and show the city and government that civil society can provide support. The government could feel like they have a partner in civil society sphere. I don't think that we did a lot of things, we just did something, but it is not enough to just stop the war. Everything we've done and what we will do doesn't stop the war and it's hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Donation boxes to support IDPs at the Zhytomyr Community Fund's office. Photo from Zhytomyr Community Fund.

For others outside of Ukraine, what would you say is the most important thing for them to know about the work of non-profits like Zhytomyr Community Fund? How can we continue to support Ukraine on the ground?

It's important to understand that Russia has more resources and money and they abuse the situation with Ukraine. It is important to help us by giving Ukrainians a voice in your country and uplifting Ukrainian experiences and voices whenever possible. It is great support to show that this is not only a war in Ukraine, but it is a problem for everyone all over the world. So the first way to help is to help with spreading information and using Ukrainian sources to combat disinformation from Russia.

Second, if you have any ability to help us acquire weapons, especially for long distance weapons, this would be really useful. Ukraine has only four of these machines to cover hundreds of kilometers on the frontline.

Third, it is important to provide assistance to the Ukrainians who are abroad. It is important to support those in your country. It is impossible to know when this will end, and it is important to continue to support these communities over the long term. The Russians have truly destroyed everything, and many refugees don't have a place to live in Ukraine as Russians burn the land afterward.

Fourth, if there is any opportunity to provide assistance and support for Ukrainians at the frontline, this would help immensely. You may have the ability to provide anything that can be useful or to give something to support them.

Concluding Thoughts

While the war in Ukraine is ongoing, it is important to remember the people affected at the center of it. While news sources focus on how Russian aggression continues to demolish infrastructure and threaten nuclear power plants, it is important to remember the effect the war continues to have on civilians. Ukrainians continue to lose their lives and livelihoods to Russian aggression and are often subjected to war crimes in occupied territories.[11] It is the tireless work of ordinary Ukrainians like Oleksii, Zhanna, and many others that has made the difference in not only taking back land from Russian occupation but holding their position in the East and supporting their communities in the aftermath. Ukrainians continue to unite to fight, rebuild, and support one another through countless acts of bravery and resilience. It is imperative to recognize the sacrifice many Ukrainians make in their fight against oppression and for freedom and independence in Eastern Europe.

To support Zhanna's organization in Zhytomyr, visit Фонд громади Житомира/Zhytomyr Community Fund for more information, including detailed reports of financial records and spending. To support Oleksii and Mykolayiv, visit In United Force for more information. To learn more about other ways to support Ukraine, 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. To support refugees, you can look into refugee resettlement programs working in your area. For the US, information can be found at Ukrainian Assistance Resources | The Administration for Children and Families (hhs.gov).

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[11] Russia's War Crimes: Beyond evil, even during war, Ukraine.ua, 2022, https://war.ukraine.ua/russia-war-crimes/, accessed 1 September 2022.