

Ukrainian Voices: Men

INTRODUCTION

Evan R. Hunter

“It has begun”: Taras Dyatlik and I looked at each other in the hallway of the apartment we shared on the campus of University Divitia Gratiae (UDG) in Moldova. Four days before, we had arrived in Chisinau. For the first two days, against the backdrop of rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine, we had planned for meetings with seminary leaders from Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine. Leaders from a seminary in Russia had arrived at UDG, and for the next two days, we had stayed optimistically focused on their future. In the background, though, the Ukrainian schools had canceled their travel to Moldova, fearing an impending Russian attack. We encouraged the leaders from another Russian school to stay home. The situation had become extremely fluid.

On the morning of February 24, missiles began to fly. Russia had attacked Ukraine. War had begun. Moldova closed its airspace. A few hours later, having booked a night bus from Chisinau to Bucharest, I said goodbye to Taras. I was headed home. So was he; but his home was now in a war zone. As I found increasing safety, he chose to move closer and closer to danger. Somehow the hardships of my travel seemed insignificant. Fervent prayer became my new normal.

Very soon after I returned to the U.S., Taras and I began what has been nearly constant communication as he started to coordinate relief efforts. Alongside seminary leaders across Ukraine, he created relief hubs, tailoring the work of each location to that community’s needs, resources, and evolving situation. Seeing the war’s injustice, outside donors gave generously.

From the beginning, the Ukrainian team identified a three-part strategy:

1. Conduct relief work that includes evacuating people from dangerous areas, helping refugees and internally displaced people move west toward safety, and providing food, medical supplies, Bibles, and spiritual care. Seminaries mobilize faculty, alumni, and pastors to meet immediate needs.
2. As the situation stabilizes, continue theological education, using technology to connect faculty and students now scattered throughout Ukraine and beyond.

3. Eventually, rebuild what has been broken and destroyed, possibly reframing theological education for the church in a post-war Ukraine.

These leaders have worked tirelessly to meet the needs of so many while not losing sight of a long-term vision for theological education. They are the church, the body of Christ, in action.

For the last several weeks, these seminary leaders have reported on the realities they witness – the air raid sirens, the damage, and the advances (and retreats) of national troops. They have cataloged needs for food, diapers, and medicine. They have shared heroic stories. Drivers have risked their lives to bring supplies into areas under fire and then to exit with vanloads of people, many of them elderly or vulnerable. Leaders have provided spiritual care for victims and soldiers. Their work is small-scale and intensely personal. Often, their reports include names and photos of the people they serve. By coordinating their work, they mobilize resources to the places where they are needed most, ensuring that the work is efficient and effective.

And while they do all of that, they continue to reflect theologically, asking significant questions about the presence of God in the midst of horrific realities. They wrestle with the call to pray both against and for one's enemies; they confront the need to condemn sin, extend grace, and seek justice. Each day, I exchange messages with them. Doing so, I am struck by the gravity of doing theology in the context of constant artillery barrages, sleepless nights, and betrayal and abandonment, often from sisters and brothers in the broader church with whom these Ukrainian leaders have worked for years. I see the toll of witnessing the evil of war, of seeing senseless destruction, and of realizing that restoration will require years of work – in the physical world, but also emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. I appreciate these colleagues for the raw “realness” of their theology.

A few weeks into the war (and without any sense of how long this war would last), this group of theological leaders hosted a webinar, “The Russia-Ukraine War: Evangelical Voices.” Through their stories and observations, they challenge the church to take action through support and advocacy for the sake of justice and with the love of Christ.

After the webinar, these leaders wrote a statement, [“Voices from the Ruins: Appeal of the Representatives off Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Educational Institutions regarding the War of the Russian Federation against Ukraine.”](#)

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THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION MELTED IN THE FIRE OF SUFFERING

Ivan Rusyn

I am speaking to you today from the office of the Ukrainian Bible Society, where I now live in the literal sense of the word. My apartment is in Russian-occupied territories, and my seminary campus was damaged. 99% of my colleagues are refugees in different parts of Ukraine and other countries. The vast majority of Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary's students are also scattered in various cities and countries, seeking protection from this vile, satanic, full-scale war created by the Russian Federation. All around me there are dead and missing persons.

I want to say this as clearly as possible: This is a full-scale, unprovoked war by the Russian Federation against the Ukrainian people. The enemy is destroying homes, hospitals, schools, theaters, even seminaries and churches. Obviously, his goal is the complete destruction of Ukraine.

War influences people's characters and brings out both evil and good. Indeed, I have witnessed inhuman evil, indescribable suffering, and the deaths of civilians and soldiers. Someone has said that the expression "How much longer, Lord?" is as spiritual as the word "Hallelujah." I want to take this idea a step further: I have come to the conclusion that the words, "God, break the bones of my enemy," are as spiritual as those of the Aaronic blessing.

Along with great suffering, I see great unity, strength of spirit, cooperation, and love in Ukrainians. I will never forget:

- The tears of the elderly who I had the opportunity to evacuate from Irpin. They were constantly asking, "Are our guys close? Are our guys close?"
- The facial expressions of people coming out of bomb shelters and trying to understand who we are. That fear on their faces in the first seconds and then the joy when it becomes clear that we are bringing them food, water, and medicine.
- The voices of soldiers saying "Amen" to the words "the body of Christ crucified for you" while partaking of the sacrament on the battlefield.

The war really brought all Ukrainians close, like brothers and sisters. I see a lot of work done by churches helping refugees. In this time, I begin to understand more deeply the theology of presence, of incarnational mission and holistic mission. If the church really follows Christ, she follows him to the greatest need and remains there, embodying faith, hope, and love. It is impossible to show love at a distance.

In this setting, what is the future of theological education? Theological education has a future and a great task. It will melt in the fire of Ukraine's suffering and will become more honest, real, deep, and therefore godly. It will serve the Church and society in new ways, trying to shape new contours for the ministry of healing. Denominations will not matter as much, but our theology will be more clearly defined.

Specifically, what is happening and what will happen with UETS? As I said, currently, 99% of employees are refugees. The campus is damaged, and we do not have access to it due to fighting (in mid-March 2022). We had a crisis plan in case of war and were able to implement it. We were able to evacuate not only students and workers but also many other people who needed our help. Until recently, the campus was used as a storage and feeding place for people, but we have had to change the location of our humanitarian mission.

UETS will continue its mission with or without a campus. We are planning to resume teaching online starting Monday (March 21, 2022). Also, our mission in Central Asia will continue.

In conclusion, I will say the following. Martin Luther King once said, "Afterwards we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." The perverted narrative of this so-called "Russian peace" seems harmless to many. The silent support of Putin's actions in Russia by Christians – and the great but cautious concern of the rest of the world – are of little inspiration. This is a catastrophe not just for Ukraine but for Russia and the entire world. Something is wrong with our understanding of the Gospel and mission. It seems that we inform, but we do not transform.

If the enemy destroys Ukraine, the civilized world will never be able to enjoy democracy, because democracy, freedom, and justice will always have the taste and smell of innocent, bloody Ukrainian corpses. It is impossible to have full democracy, freedom, and justice when at the same time an entire nation is being slaughtered for these values.

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GOD MANIFEST THROUGH PEOPLE

Valentin Siniy

Our meeting is especially symbolic for me because today is the first morning after Purim. The story of Purim is familiar from the book of Esther. It is about how the Lord responded to evil – not just evil but unjust aggression. When we talk about the origin of evil, we naturally recall the book of Job, which speaks of the disproportionate evil that came into the life of righteous Job. However, if in the book of Job we talk about evil that we cannot control (the death of relatives, a fatal illness, a tsunami, or an earthquake), then in the book of Esther we see a kind of evil that we can and must resist. One of the most famous texts from this book:

And Mordecai sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:13-14)

We understand that the aggression against the Israelites had a long-term missional goal of returning Israel to Jerusalem. However, despite that purpose of God, evil is still evil. We see the Lord’s attitude to this evil: the Lord is on the side of the oppressed Jews.

Before the start of the war in Ukraine, I did not understand why the book of Esther did not mention God. Now I am going to share my personal opinion: I think that in times of war, God may be manifesting Himself mainly through people, through their compassion, their help, their ministry following their gifts.

About myself: I was raised in a family of believers during the USSR. I come from a part of Ukraine where there was a strong Mennonite influence. During the Soviet dictatorship, my parents experienced persecution for their faith, and my grandparents were fired from work. They had to live in a field, in a pit covered with straw, as their house was taken away from them. I remember how they constantly told me about humility, about non-resistance to evil. They often repeated that all power comes from God. Growing up, I understood them to mean that the Lord is actually always on the side of the strong, on the side of power, on the side of the offender.

My theology started to change around the age of 14 or 15. One day, my brother and I were returning from church, and a block away from us, a

drunken man attacked a girl and tried to rape her. We did not know what to do, and then suddenly several men jumped out into the street from a neighboring yard. They rushed to the girl's defense, and a fight broke out. Another situation took place when I was 19-20 years old. This time, going home from a church service, we were able to protect a girl from attack.

Now, in the context of this war, the theology of many Christians, including my own, is transforming. It is shifting. Completely different biblical texts come to the fore compared to what we thought about in the time of peace – like this one from Judges 5:23: “Curse Meroz, says the Angel of the Lord, curse, curse its inhabitants for not coming to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord with the brave” (Judges 5:23). The part of me that is committed to democracy says that lack of courage brings shame. But the other part, which is committed to an honest understanding of the biblical text, says that lack of courage entails a curse. The word “curse” is repeated three times in the text. Curse is separation from God's grace. Why? Because our role as Christians is not only to fulfill the mission of God in a soteriological manner but also to strive actively to return this world to the Divine plan, to the extent that we can do this. We must speak out against slavery, against injustice, against violence. And we must have our say against this unjust war.

This war is terrible. During the shelling of Kherson, a young guy helped to evacuate families of staff members of Pioneer Bible Translators to Western Ukraine, as these missionaries did not have a car. Meanwhile, this guy's grandfather stayed in his home city, which was soon occupied. With food scarce, his grandfather went fishing to catch some fish for the family. He was shot by a Russian sniper. So we see that this war is also insane. It is one of few wars that its perpetrators will not call a war. It has no logical or economic reasons. It was started by one man because of the silence of millions.

The age-old conflict between good and evil becomes incredibly intense during war. War makes the presence of goodness and the showing of mercy incredibly important. Now the people of Ukraine are united as never before; people support each other as best they can. And under these circumstances, leadership becomes incredibly important – not political leadership but leadership in small groups. Not only administrative leadership but the leadership of pastoral care. So, finally, here are some testimonies of how the church is showing its leadership in this war:

1. The pastor of one of the small churches in the suburbs of Kherson worked with a Catholic priest, an Orthodox priest, and the mayor of

this town, and for 7 days they buried executed civilians. Some civilians were killed because they sat in their cars or for some other ridiculous reason. Sometimes they found corpses in ditches along the road.

2. The church in Kherson found out that an orphanage for children aged 0 to 4 had been seeking shelter. So the church provided facilities for the orphanage's children and employees. The church gave its small worship hall and several Sunday school classrooms to house these children. Now this church serves 57 orphans who were left without proper care during the war.
3. The other day we donated potatoes to a city in southern Ukraine. When I spoke to the pastor of the church, he burst into tears because there had been no food in their city for many days.

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UKRAINE WEeping FOR HER CHILDREN

Stanislas Stepanchenko

I want to start with three Bible verses:

How long will you show partiality to the wicked? (Ps. 82:2)

Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the realm of the dead, for evil finds lodging among them. (Ps. 55:15)

I was a stranger and you invited me in. (Matt. 25:35)

Tonight I woke up around 4 a.m. because of an air raid siren in Lviv. Waking up several times per night has become the new normal because of possible or current air strikes. This time, the target was the town of Sarny. I checked my phone and saw a news report saying that Russian invaders had already killed 108 children. This is happening here, in Europe. Over 100 innocent kids, toddlers, infants – as well as thousands of civilians. Why? Why are our kids dying? Herod is killing our children for no rational reason, just because he can: “A voice is heard, weeping and great mourning, Ukraine weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more” (Matt. 2:18).

Since the beginning of the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine, Lviv Theological Seminary has hosted 60 to 120 new refugees daily. They come

from various parts of Ukraine where the ugly jaws of war are tearing apart their lovely homeland. We serve as the first place where refugees, in their long effort to get to safety, can take a breath and get some food and rest for a day or two before the next round of fighting. Most of them are trying to go to Poland and Romania. Some families can't cross the border immediately for various reasons. We are trying to find places for them to stay in Lviv and to fulfill their basic immediate needs.

All evacuees are scared, lost, and in great emotional distress. Most are in desperate need, without any support – mothers of many kids, pregnant women, seniors, disabled people, and weakened people who were being treated for various diseases, whose treatments have been interrupted. All of them evacuated abruptly. They have no luggage; they have only a passport in their hand.

Right now, the seminary is directing the work of about 40 volunteers. Sometimes they meet a fleeing family at the train station and simply explain what to do next; sometimes they hold a cellphone for someone so that they can make a call because they are so disoriented that their hands are shaking too hard. Other volunteers help at the seminary's campus, providing necessary services for refugees. Others drive refugees on the next stage of their journey, going back and forth between Lviv and the border with Poland.

Right now, Lviv is not experiencing active street fighting, as other Ukrainian cities are. So we see the war not only through the news and air raid sirens but also in eyes of escapees. Their stories are so similar and so unique at the same time. Most of them want to come back to their homes after Ukraine achieves victory. Recently, we helped a 70-year-old woman, an escapee from the Dnipro region, to reunite with her relatives in Italy. When she left, she was confident that she would return to her homeland, even though no buildings may be left standing: "I'll sleep right on the ground but in my homeland."

In Matthew 15, Jesus speaks to people on judgement day: "I was a stranger, and you invited Me in" (Matt. 25:35). And people ask Him, "When did we see you a stranger and invite you in?" (Matt. 25:38). And He responds, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40). Those words are always in our minds. We think of them as we serve each refugee: "I was a stranger, and you invited Me in" (Matt. 25:35).

Just the fact that people had to flee and leave their homes is enough to call this war wrong, unjust. We often hear rhetorical question from

refugees: “Why Putin is killing us? Why do we have to leave our homes?” I think of the Psalm that says, “As fire consumes the forest or a flame sets the mountains ablaze, so pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your storm” (Ps. 83:14-15 NIV). Ukraine is weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more. God help us!

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RUSSIA – UKRAINE WAR: REFLECTIONS OF A REFUGEE RECTOR *Oleksandr Geychenko*

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Svalyava, Trans-Carpatian region
Ukraine

For the last three weeks many Ukrainians, including myself, experienced many things for the first time. We were awakened by the sounds of missile strikes on February 24. We were in deep shock for a couple of days, not believing how we were awakened. Families packed their belongings and went to other parts of the country or abroad. Many people fit their lives into a suitcase and left not knowing where they would end up.

A female student from a town in eastern Ukraine came to Odesa for a residential study session at Odesa Theological Seminary (OTS). The war caught her there. She could not return to her hometown because the frontline was very close to it, and all trains were cancelled. We convinced her to evacuate to a western region. Meanwhile, her elderly mother was still in their hometown. When the fighting escalated, the apartment block where she lived was partially destroyed, set on fire by the invaders. Thank God, she survived and has now been evacuated to join her daughter. They have no place to live; they have no job. They are refugees now. Multiply this case by 2 million, and you will get an approximate projection of what is happening now in Ukraine. But who can estimate the pain, suffering, and psychological damage done to Ukrainians by those who orchestrated this unjust war? The lives of millions of Ukrainians have been smashed. All we knew has been wiped out. Nothing is left. Just a wilderness.

We have witnessed the invaders' atrocities and senseless and irrational cruelty. We died with the pregnant lady and her unborn baby severely wounded during the bombing of the maternity hospital in Mariupol. We were hit by a mortar with those people lined up for bread in Chernihiv. The Russian soldiers shot us with those who were trying to flee Irpin, Hostomel, Bucha, Kharkiv, and Sumy. Many souls are burnt to ashes. The pain is real, almost tangible. We feel rage. This war is acutely inhumane because the invaders shoot civilians and bomb obviously civilian buildings that shelter kids and women. Mariupol has no undamaged buildings – a city of over 450,000. And we see no end to it yet.

What is extremely puzzling, saddening, and discouraging is the level of support for this war among fellow evangelical believers in Russia. Unfortunately, most “experts” are wrong when they say that this is Putin’s war. No. This war is supported by a significant portion of the Russian people. Over a week before the invasion, it became obvious what direction things were developing. So my colleagues in theological education proposed that we compose a joint statement from educators from different countries across Eastern Europe and Central Asia condemning the threats and preparations for war. In this initiative, Russian colleagues said that we should not paint the situation in black-and-white. They said that the statement should be as generic as possible, just calling to prayer for peace. A week later, our cities were hit by missiles, and these colleagues started changing their perspective. Unfortunately, the wider circle of Russian ministers, evangelical celebrities, and average Christians still have not done this. They avoid condemning the perpetrators and standing with the victims. Let me add a personal example. When on February 24 I wrote on Facebook that we are living in another reality because a new phase of the war has started – now an open, brutal phase – my cousin from Moscow called me a Nazi because I disagreed with the “Russian world” narrative she was promoting. I think this is a representative case.

Recently, Ukrainian churches celebrated the Lord’s Supper, the first Lord’s Supper during the Russia-Ukraine war. For me personally besides the usual reflections on Christ’s sacrifice for our sins, participation in the life of the Trinity through Jesus Christ, and expectation of the Second Coming, the high point was identification with the pain of other fellow believers and citizens – especially with those who lost their dear ones in Mariupol, Kharkiv, Bucha, Hostomel, Irpin, Chirnihiiv, Sumy, and Izum. Those who save lives by driving dangerous Ukrainian roads. Those who miss their dear ones, thrown into foreign lands. In that moment, I knew that God was and is amidst the suffering of our people. He is sharing the pain and sorrow of all who have been impacted by this cruel and

inhumane war. I took the bread, and I knew that I am part of the Body of Christ scattered all over my poor country: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:26-27). I felt very sorry for those who still think about the Russian invasion in terms of the Russian geopolitical narrative, its mass-media propaganda. Their attitude increases my pain. I pray that they regain spiritual sight, courage to stand with the victims of war, and an ability to make moral judgements. I have been very grateful to all those who have stepped in to share the pain of my people. It is thanks to their generosity and sensitivity to the needs of others that we could, in turn, help those in most desperate need.

When the war started, most of OTS’s faculty and their families evacuated. For example, the dean’s wife and three daughters went to their hometown in western Ukraine, while he and his elderly, fragile father stayed in Odesa. When things in Odesa got even more threatening, his family went further, to Poland; he and his father evacuated in an overcrowded train to a relatively safe place in western Ukraine. These family members are hundreds of miles apart now. When they will reunite is hard to predict.

Some OTS employees decided to stay in Odesa and are involved in different volunteer activities. Those who evacuated, myself included, are working now as a decentralised office, connecting Moldova, Poland, Odesa, Lviv, and the Trans-Carpathian region. Teaching is postponed till the end of March, but we are working on a model that will fit our students and their needs. Instead of running educational programmes, we are working as a hub, connecting those who have needs with those who have means to help them as well as helping people directly. Our primary focus are students, graduates, their churches, and the ministries with which they are involved. This ministry encompasses not only Christians but all who suffer from this war.

From our students, we hear tough stories about their experiences. A young family from Sumy region reported that because of heavy shelling, they had to sit in the basement for several days. A young Christian couple and their little daughter from their town were killed when they were trying to evacuate by car.

Against this background, we observe tremendous unity. Churches, educators, and Christians of different traditions join the efforts to help those who have needs and to support the Ukrainian army that is protecting us. Wherever it is possible, local churches hold prayer meetings daily. Many

Christians volunteer to drive people from war zones to safer places or to distribute food and water among those who have need. They also dig trenches and guard their neighborhoods as members of territorial defense units. Churches open their basements for those who do not have places to hide or shelter people for a night or two on their way to the west of the country or abroad. The local church where my family and I are staying is hosting over 60 people from different corners of our country. Their stories tear the heart apart.

Unfortunately, the longer-term situation for theological education is quite unsure now. We cannot predict how it will develop if the war continues for another year or so. We are sure, though, that theological education will only survive if Ukraine wins and remain whole. The war will certainly change theological education; we do not yet know how, but it will be different. But we recognize that seminaries and colleges are not the buildings themselves but the faculty and students. So we need to help maintain the faculty and staff of Ukrainian theological schools. We need to find resources to help them to survive evacuation, cope with stress (and in some cases trauma), and return to more or less normal educational activities. I urge our brothers and sisters to support our educational community these days and through this community to support our churches and the Ukrainian people.

Many people are asking, “How can we help you?” Please keep praying for Ukraine – for the survival of its people and for courage for churches as they continue serving our wounded and terrorized people. Please advocate for Ukraine on different levels. Do not allow Realpolitik to be more important than the lives of innocent people. Do not think that your voice is weak and that because of that you can hide in your private life. Unite your voice with others, and it will turn into the storm that will disperse the aggressors and evildoers who think they have the right to take civilians’ lives because of their geopolitical interests. Please help this war to stop, the wholeness of our country to be restored, and stable peace to be re-established. Walk with us.

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