

Ukrainian Voices: Women

INTRODUCTION

Evelyn Reynolds

On the morning of February 24, my husband and I woke up to the news that Russia had invaded Ukraine. My husband's family is Slovenian; he had spent time in Russia in college. As ScholarLeaders (SL) staff, I had been closely following SL's work with seminaries in the region. In fact, that week of February 24, Taras Dyatlik and Evan Hunter (also SL staff) were in Moldova to meet with seminary leaders, to encourage and counsel with them. As tensions grew early that week, those meetings were canceled, and SL staff became very concerned.

So the news from Ukraine that dark morning filled us with nauseating horror. We watched Russian helicopters shelling Kyiv; we saw kids who looked just like my husband's high school students hiding in basements; we saw women picking up guns to defend their country. Our grief, rage, and frustration have not abated. That morning, SL staff had our regular weekly call: It was supposed to be about onboarding our new president, but most of us could barely hold back tears. Lynn, our CFO, read from Psalm 9: "The Lord reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He rules the world in righteousness and judges the peoples with equity. The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you. Sing the praises of the Lord, enthroned in Zion; proclaim among the nations what he has done. For he who avenges blood remembers; he does not ignore the cries of the afflicted."

That morning, we prayed for Evan as he joined the many people exiting the region, and we prayed for Taras as he returned to Ukraine. Since then, we have prayed the psalmists' words for Ukraine over and over as we have seen Christ's strength and majesty reflected in the Ukrainian people – especially in Ukraine's women. Women are choosing to remain with their husbands under fire. They are sheltering in subways and basements for hours with children and elderly parents. When the sirens stop, they are coming out to care for one another – without the help of schools or other infrastructure – until the next siren. They are scrambling to find food and medicine, to comfort children and animals terrified by the sound of rocket fire. Women are overseeing shipments of weaponry and food into Ukraine and the flow of refugees out of Ukraine – most of those refugees, women, are taking their children alone on days-long journeys, leaving their husbands behind, to seek shelter among strangers.

Women are ministering in hospitals, which are often targets for Russian shelling. Women are taking up arms to fight back the invaders. As we all know very well, it was a woman early in the war who put sunflower seeds in Russian soldiers' pockets, whose courage the whole world has seen.

As so often happens in our lives as women, Ukraine's women are carrying many responsibilities. We all know what it means to have a husband, parents, children, church, a household, even a couple of "paying" jobs, all at the same time – but these women are shouldering that load while walking through the valley of the shadow of death. That shadow shapes and adds to their load.

During a webinar in late March 2022, six Christian Ukrainian women leaders participated in a webinar hosted by Eastern European Institute of Theology, ScholarLeaders, and Overseas Council. They described their heroic ministries during the war; told stories of grief, anger, bewilderment, and hope; and reflected theologically on suffering and on the ideologies driving the war. Their voices communicate prophetically to us, calling us to see truth and act with Christ's compassion. As an editor of the *InSights Journal*, I am honored to publish their reflections here.

Author Bio: Evelyn directs SL's LeaderStudies program and serves as Editor for the InSights Journal for Global Theological Education. She joined SL in 2019. She has a PhD in medieval English literature and an MFA in poetry, and she and her husband live in Indiana, U.S.A.

THE WOMANLY ASPECT OF WAR

Maryna Ashykhmina

War is horror, destruction, death, sorrow, violence, and social/emotional/spiritual deviation. Now in Ukraine, war has shown its inhuman face. Its distorted features are reflected in the destruction of all we can see. It wrecks architecture. It invades culture, corrupting the stories so carefully composed by poets, playwrights, and film directors. It changes a person: from self-identity to conscious national identity. It changes values and shifts worldviews. It triggers reconsiderations of God's transcendence and immanence, His election and mercy. War has become part of the Ukrainian lifestyle; it has shaped the very core of Ukrainian society.

War is oppression, abasement, and discrimination, as it stems from a patriarchal worldview. Yet, if war had a voice, it would sound like a woman's lament, a child's fearful cry, a mother's quiet prayer.

What is a woman's voice in war? Is it still melodious and euphonous, or is it set in a very different tone? Or, perhaps, it's altogether silenced. Even back in 1980, Nobel Prize laureate Svetlana Alexievich so aptly noted, "All that we know of war is told by men's voices." Society's brush paints a manly face for war – men's victories; men's analyses. Yet war changes a woman; it alters the way she views herself and relates to others. For the record, Ukrainian women stood on par with men during the Euromaidan protests in 2013-2014, participating in various initiatives. Some formed Women's Sotnyas (military squadrons). As evidenced by media reports, even now Ukrainian women are on active duty, fighting in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Yet women must still pursue equal recognition from the government and society during war.

When women confront this war with its inhuman face, they take on a double responsibility. First, the Scriptures give us many examples of women playing integral parts in strengthening the home country and promoting peace. We read in Judges 4 about extraordinary Deborah, that war-chief to whom Barak deferred, even though she was a woman, because her inner strength was greater than his. Beginning in verse 21 of that chapter, we read of Jael's audacity, exceptional decision-making skills, and unbelievably strong will. She rose up to do to a man's job without rousing enemy suspicions: "But Jael the wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand. Then she went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground while he was lying fast asleep from weariness. So he died."

Second, women are involved in so-called reproductive labor. They weave camouflage nets, assist displaced persons, prepare meals for soldiers, transport medical humanitarian aid into the country from drop-off points at the borders, make Molotov cocktails (petrol bombs) to arm their local territorial defense squads, and translate Ukrainian news for foreign mass media. In a patriarchal society, such labor is relegated to women, as it is undistinguished, poorly compensated, and largely unnoticed. And yet it is enormously necessary behind-the-scenes work that not only sets up the success of more visible, public endeavors but also advances Ukraine's victory.

War can dehumanize men. As Erich Maria Remarque once said, "We've transformed into horrible beasts. We do not fight but rather save ourselves from destruction." It cannot do such things to women. Even in war, a woman is still a woman – emotional, sensuous, inspiring. And even though she's less protected, such times require her to balance vulnerability and mettle. Heart and guts. Womanhood and heroism.

Public discourse expects a woman to fulfill roles that are first and foremost connected to motherhood and beauty. Indeed, a mother's role is even more important when an entire nation is at war. It is a mother's task to maintain psychoemotional health because the trauma of war will have long-term consequences like PTSD and depression. (According to some estimates, 85% of Ukrainian children will likely have PTSD or depression because of this war.)

Today every Ukrainian woman is under acute stress. Emotions can trigger a wide variety of physical symptoms. We may ask, "Where am I going?" Or, more deeply, "Who am I inside?" Life makes no sense; the future is gone. It is impossible to continue working on projects begun before the war. Parts of our souls have lost responsiveness or sensitivity. Simple tasks can take hours to accomplish. We may lose normal communication with others; or, inversely, we may be in constant contact. We make outbursts of hate towards certain things; we feel anger and betrayal. We become irritable over trivial things or undergo bouts of existential loneliness. We feel as though the world is coming apart when someone dies; or, inversely, we feel joy and relief quickly followed by shame for having such feelings. Euphoria. Physical sensations of falling apart. Insomnia or, inversely, persistent sleepiness. Continuous nightmares. One's mind is unable to shake off horrible images.

Every one of us is kneeling prayerfully. As Abraham Lincoln said, "For us to get this country on its feet, we must first get on our knees." Every one of us is weak, but let us heed Spurgeon's encouraging words: "All the faint and weary are under the protection of the King of Zion: let them hasten and talk to Him, let them lift their eyes toward Him as He is looking out for them." I want to encourage Ukrainian women to search for God's face. He is searching for them.

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WHAT DOES ONE THINK AND FEEL AT THE TIME OF CATASTROPHE?

Tanya Gerasymchuk

I will speak from the perspective of an ordinary woman. I am a mother of two daughters. I was born in Odesa, and almost all my life I've lived in this city. Whenever I thought about reasons for hypothetically moving someday, it never crossed my mind that my family and I would move somewhere else fleeing from war. However, here I am, in Moldova. Even

though we are staying at my husband's mother's house, I understand that our stay here is more than just being on a visit to our relatives in Moldova. As the days go by, I realize more and more that our current status gravitates toward that of refugees (although very lucky ones) rather than guests.

When I was asked to share about my perspective on this war, at first, I couldn't structure what I thought. What does one think and feel at the time of a catastrophe?

When the war began, I felt as though the infrastructure of my life had been ruined: You are uprooted; you start to live in a place where you don't belong. No matter how many good and kind people you meet on your way or how comfortable your conditions are at the moment, a feeling of detachment seems to prevail. It gets its hold on you and never leaves you.

Another feeling that I and many other Ukrainian women possess now is uncertainty about the future. It is next to impossible to make long-term or even middle-term plans. And when you think you can at least make short-term plans, life can prove you wrong just like that. At the moment, we are in Moldova, but no one can guarantee that Moldova is not the next dish on Putin's menu. When I think about what to do with our lives next, I feel like I am trying to solve an equation with too many unknowns.

Speaking more about feelings: I try not to think too much about people in Mariupol because I know that at this moment some child is probably dying a terrible and painful death from hunger, thirst, cold, or injury. You feel sorry, you feel helpless, and you feel guilty, because you are comfortable while others are suffering immensely. Do you remember Matthew 24:19? It says, "Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days!" During war, the fate of these vulnerable groups is often very tragic. If your enemy is under the devil's control (and I think that Putin is under the devil's control), he doesn't care; he doesn't think about those he kills. His goal is to create the greatest possible destruction and pain. The fact that we live in the 21st century in civilized Europe means nothing.

Separated families are another negative reality that confronts millions of people because husbands and adult sons have to stay in the country while their wives and children are in safer places. And nobody knows how long these families will be separated. In my experience, when the war started and our family decided to flee Odesa, my elderly mom refused to go. This is a common attitude among old people. They say, "We've lived here all our lives, and we will stay here, and we will die

here.” So we left my mom with a relative and went to Moldova. A few days later, we got the news that she had suddenly and rapidly deteriorated in health. As I was travelling back to Odesa to reach her, I prayed for just one thing: to find her alive. Praise the Lord, in our case, we had a happy ending. We managed to stabilize her condition and eventually to persuade her to come with us. But in the scale of the whole country, separated families have become a painful norm.

However, amidst all this mess, I see some positive aspects:

1. War is a time of intense experiential learning. It is a hard way of learning because you are learning from your own experience. You learn to live in the given circumstances; you start to understand what is truly important and what isn't. You're restructuring your priorities. You learn to trust God more. You learn to appreciate nice, simple things that you used to take for granted. You praise God for great people with kind hearts whom you meet. You learn to rely on God's grace that envelopes you.
2. You start to pray more. Actually, many people have started to pray more. I wouldn't be surprised if almost everyone in Ukraine is praying these days – both Christians and non-Christians. This war has touched every single person in Ukraine, every family. The lives of almost every Ukrainian are split into two: before and after the war. When this war is over, people will not be what they were before the 24th of February. Many people will be totally lost and broken, many will have PTSD, many will be driven to the point of suicide. Our country will also be very different. I am not talking now about its territorial integrity. I am talking about the nation that has undergone incredible trauma, pain, and anguish. I hope this war somehow will change many of us for the better. This is what I pray for. I pray for people to turn to God.
3. You begin to see the truth more sharply than ever before. You begin to notice not only the blackness of lies but also the treacherous grey-ness of semi-truths, propaganda tricks, and soothing nonsense about how we as Christians should stay away from making political statements or calling the Russian army our enemy because it's none of our business. Not only do we begin to see the truth more distinctly, but also we begin to feel a greater desire to make the truth known. As my husband, who is an Old Testament lecturer, said, quoting Walter Brueggemann, “The practice of grief is an exercise in truth-telling” (*An Unsettling God*, 41). I agree. I think our primary task now is to be faithful agents of God's truth in today's reality that is darkened by tremendous falsehood and distorted perceptions.

I also have certain fears. I do hope that Ukraine will change for the better, but I fear that Russia won't change. Many of its people – people that I used to respect, who are intelligent and well-educated – sincerely believe that what Russia is doing is right! And this is a huge problem. It is one thing to sit in the kitchen, quietly cursing Stalin, quietly drinking vodka out of despair. It is quite another thing to feel comfortable about what Stalin is doing, to justify him, to drink vodka to his health. Too many Russians drink to Putin's health and cheer on Putin's "special military operation." This fact is a huge problem for both Ukraine and Russia because it means that after this war ends, another war will break out as soon as Russia restores its army. They will do their homework, consider their mistakes, and start all over again. Many people around the world are praying for Ukraine, but a substantial part of my prayer now is about Russia. I pray for Russia to change. I don't ask God to make them miserable, poor, hungry, or sick, but I pray that God would open their eyes, that something would change in their minds and hearts.

What I've shared here is a very light version of the female war experience in comparison with what other women in Ukraine have faced. People who have managed to escape Mariupol don't talk about how they feel when they lose their homes; rather, they talk about what one feels when one loses one's loved ones in an instant, when one sees the body parts of what a minute ago was someone cherished – a son, daughter, mother, father....

Let us continue to pray for those who are staying in these besieged cities. We are talking about praying for a miracle. However, when I listen to people who experienced this hell, I see that God continues to produce miracles on a daily basis. He is very good at it.

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CRUELTY AND TERROR
Helga Dyatlik

It is so hard to choose the right words to describe the cruelty and terror that has been perpetrated by Russian soldiers in Ukraine over the past 36 days – but also by the Russian federation over the past 8 years. The Russian army continues to harm Ukrainian people day and night; Russian aggression has ruined people's lives and homes since early 2014.

After Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and its occupation of territories in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, Russian and pro-Russian soldiers did so much violence: kidnapping, rape, murder, occupation of homes, churches, and theological institutions, and constant threats toward individuals and the Ukrainian nation. Now, a woman who was raped by many Russian soldiers in front of her little child in Mariupol for a few days recently died because of her wounds.

Such tremendous brutality is only the most recent iteration in a long sequence of other aggressions. As I work with theological educational institutions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, I have talked to many faculty members whose families have lived in Russian-occupied territory since 2014. One friend told me that before this war, when she was going to visit her mother in Luhansk, she had to stay in the bus in line for the checkpoint for over eight hours; the Russian soldiers would not even allow them to use the toilet. Last week, my other friend – who was distributing food in the occupied territories of Luhansk – was completely undressed and searched several times because the Russians were looking for anyone with nationalistic tattoos. If they find any so-called nationalistic tattoos on someone, they imprison that person, and many such prisoners are “disappeared.”

In the early morning of February 24th, with many others in Ukraine and around the world, I woke to cruel news. My brother said, “Olya, wake up. The war has started. Russia is bombing cities all over Ukraine.” Then he left our home to join the army as a paramedic.

Exactly eight years ago to the day, February 24, 2014, we attended the funeral for our cousin who was killed during the Maidan, the Revolution of Dignity, by pro-Russian snipers. On that day eight years ago, twenty thousand people came out to honor three people – including our cousin – who were shot. So this date, the 24th of February, is a very dark day for me. After my brother's words, I was suddenly re-immersed in memories of the 2014 funerals – the bittersweet smell of millions of flowers that I have since hated for years.

Since 2014, my close friend Kate Samchuk and I have served families who lost relatives during the Revolution of Dignity. We have also served in war zones in Donetsk and Luhansk. During our service, I looked into the eyes of mothers, sisters, wives, and children who cried desperately, who couldn't say a word. They needed help. Kate and I were their voices to the local government to protect their rights, to speak to journalists, to speak to lawyers. After a few years, Kate and I found ourselves hopeless-

ly burnt-out. We needed help ourselves to rebuild our mental health, to rebuild our routines, to rebuild our dreams, to find new purpose.

So now, since the first day of this full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, I have reminded myself that no matter how far I go with helping people, I need to take care of myself. But how can I do this when I receive thousands of calls and texts – especially during the war’s first two days – with the words, “Please help us! Please evacuate us”? Our team at the Eastern European Institute of Theology has been deeply involved in evacuation efforts, coordinating evacuations during this war’s first few weeks.

For example, I helped international African students escape the bombing in Kharkiv. By God’s miracle, they made it onto the last evacuation train before the bombing became even worse. They reached Kyiv, but Kyiv also was being bombed. They sent me their location, so I traced their journey from Kyiv, which is close to where I live, to my city. This normally short journey took them almost 12 hours because the train kept changing its route. Many other international students were trapped in their cities because they couldn’t leave safely.

I watch this even as I receive many questions from people outside Ukraine about how Ukrainians will work for reconciliation with Russians. Honestly, I am not ready to work with Russians. Since 2014, even though our cousin was killed by a pro-Russian sniper, even though my friends died defending Ukraine, even though I’ve seen so much pain, our team has worked to build bridges with Russians and Belarussians. We’ve created different theological initiatives, and through this work we have counted some Russians colleagues as friends. But when this invasion began, I suddenly understood that I do not have any Russian friends. No Russian friend has texted me, “I’m sorry for the cruel things that Russia is doing.” Relationships must have two sides. We have been building bridges for eight years; now it’s their turn to build bridges, otherwise we will simply build our own country. Our beautiful souls must find God and treasure how God has made us uniquely Ukrainian, not Soviet.

The Russian invasion exposes hidden, painful wounds, memories of the hybrid war that began in 2014. When a young man who escaped Irpin under shelling told his story to my friend, my friend suddenly remembered the event during the Maidan when he himself was shot by a sniper (February 20, 2014). That was the exact date when our cousin was shot. Immediately, my friend felt guilty for comparing his suffering to this young man’s suffering. But that was the first time that he clearly remembered the tragedy he had experienced. How many more hidden wounds

will be exposed during this war? How will we respond to them, to these painful memories that we ourselves have experienced?

I do see something wonderful, though: A church – that was split on denominational lines – at this moment is losing its walls. Last week, I finished reading *Theology after Christendom* by Joshua Searle. He says, “In the coming years, we will witness a flowering of solidarity among diverse Christians as the walls of denominationalism and sectarianism come crashing down. Instead of institutionalized religion, there will be a gospel movement of compassion that expresses itself in a new vision of church without walls. And God will delight in this.” I want to challenge us to break the right walls, to break the walls that separate us as human beings, but to respect national identity, to respect our value as human beings – not as Russians in the so-cold “holy world.”

I am very grateful for all my friends who helped to evacuate people – Christians, Muslims, people with disabilities – to safe places where they can rebuild their lives. These people struggle as they leave Ukraine, though they are safer outside the country. I continue to be in touch with them. Similarly, I encourage you to take one person or family and to guide them for a few years, supporting them in all ways that you can. Taras Dyatlik did this for Dima Shevchenko and his family after evacuating them from Donetsk in early 2015 under shelling.

In addition, I want to challenge you to stand against Russian propaganda, including its so-called Biblical versions. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not asked to kill, to rape, to murder; they were asked to fall down and worship king Nebuchadnezzar, but they didn’t. They paid the price, but God saved them. So I encourage you to advocate for Ukraine, to stand against Russian propaganda. Do not bow. Do not worship this ideology.

Finally, I want to ask you not to question me the way people do who read Russian propaganda. They ask me, “Why is God punishing Ukraine?” That is not what I think. I recommend *The Shack* by Paul Young and *Where Is God When It Hurts?* by Philip Yancey. I have found both books so helpful during many dark times.

And I thank you again for your courage, for the brave actions that you take to support Ukraine and especially to support our team.

Author Bio: *Helga Dyatlik is Associate Regional Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia for Overseas Council-United World Mission.*

The war started for me a month before it started because I had a dream that my sister's husband and I were hiding from a Russian tank. So when there were three big explosions in Dnipro early in the morning on February 24th, I knew that the war had started and that I should stay in Dnipro, that I shouldn't flee. My heart was troubled, mostly for my twin sister, her kids, and my church. So my family made sure that my sister's kids and our mom were safe (we sent them to Western Europe, as millions of other Ukrainians did). Next, we arranged the basements in my house and in the church building as bomb shelters.

My volunteer work started with the realization that many of my friends worldwide are ready to contribute to help Ukrainians financially, so I can't leave because I'm more useful here in Dnipro. In addition, we needed to rescue my older sister's friend's family from Kharkiv, which was being severely bombarded. So we asked a pastor from Dnipro to go to Kharkiv and bring them to Dnipro. He did so, and I settled that family in my flat. I myself moved into my dad's house. I admire those brave church ministers from Dnipro who are willing to risk their lives daily by going into war zones to evacuate people.

We continue to do this work. Some people settle for a while at our church, which now looks more like a combination of hostel and warehouse (as, I believe, many other churches also look). This is my everyday routine now: We receive trucks of humanitarian aid in the church building, make individual food parcels, and have them distributed to the people who are hiding in the basements of Kharkiv.

On the second floor of our church, refugees from war zones are staying. Often, those refugees come to our church having literally nothing but their very lives. They have lost everything. They have no spare clothes or shoes, no bags, no phones; their houses are totally demolished. So we give them food, water, a bed to sleep in. We buy them clothes and shoes and phones so that they can contact their family members. We help them find proper jobs and apartments if they want to stay in Dnipro.

As Christians, we understand that this volunteer work is not just about meeting people's needs for food, clothing, and shelter. One night during the war's second week, I woke up with a clear understanding of what exactly I needed to be doing apart from buying, packing, and sending food parcels, apart from evacuating people. I need to be with the refugees. Some refugees have lost their friends or family members. They've seen death. When they come to us, they often are not able to speak. They are

devastated, shocked, grieved. When you see them, you understand that you need to sit with them in silence, cry with them, hug them. You need to be sensitive: do not ask too many questions, do not preach at them, but bring them the hope and peace they need. Usually the next day they are ready to talk. And then all you need to do is listen to them, pray for them. It's emotionally hard. Yet it brings me so much joy to see them after we share, accepting Jesus as their Lord and Savior! One woman I know was healed after prayer.

One hardship we face locally is that we need more ministers to do this work. Just the other day, we were making food packages at church, and I found myself thinking that here I am at church volunteering with about 10 other people, none of whom (except one) is also a church-goer! Of course, church people also come to help, but I wish there were more, especially brothers, able to minister to the refugees.

To keep going personally, from the war's very first days, I tried to be diligent in two things:

1. My habit before the war and even more so now is to start every day with Bible reading and meditation on the Scriptures. It helps me focus on God's love, not pain.
2. I avoid all the debates, popular in some Christian circles, about why this war happened or who is to blame. I consider it a waste of time. Seeing some Christians refuse to cooperate with other Christians because of past divisions upsets me.

There will always be some religious people who play the role of the priest or the Levite on the road to Jericho. I want to be the good Samaritan who just helped someone in need.

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RESPECT YOURSELF
Tetiana Kalenychenko

I am a native of Kyiv. Last year, I lived in a cozy community near Bucha in the Kyiv region. For me, the war started on the Maidan in March 2014, when military chaplains, myself, and others tried to help as best we could. After two years of helping people and telling their stories by working as a journalist, in 2016, I was devastated and burnt-out. I had to

step back from the abyss. In addition to this work, I am a sociologist of religion. I am also the wife of an anti-terrorist operations veteran whose career ended when he was injured and had to leave the front. Now, we work together to serve society. We thought that we were morally and psychologically ready for the events that unfolded on February 24 this year, but we did not believe them until they actually began.

My professional vocation is peacekeeping. Back in 2016, when it became clear that the humanitarian field had overwhelmed me, I studied in Bosnia and Herzegovina, decided to give up journalism, and, together with colleagues, founded the Dialogue in Action initiative, which aims to bring together secular and religious leaders. We seek to inspire collaboration for the common good. Through this initiative, we have developed dialogue and learning. We have been given great hope that people are finally beginning to feel the value of peace and its vision as a process, not a “shoot-out” goal.

For me, this stage of the war began when I found myself in a siege zone with my son. We realized that where we were living, near the Zhytomyr highway in the Kyiv region, was a grey zone. We survived for over 10 days without water, communication, light, or heat. Sometimes, we could not go outside due to the density of shelling, and later we were afraid to show signs of life when Russian troops passed through our dachas. One morning, my neighbors and I took a risk and, under fire, drove a convoy of cars to Zhytomyr region, from which we began volunteering to help our community, which remained under occupation until April 1. Our work is ongoing, as is the coordination of assistance between various religious activists with whom we previously worked in Dialogue in Action.

Has this brutal war disillusioned me toward peacekeeping? No. I know that every war ends sooner or later. Life begins again. Living, not surviving, is a science that we still have to learn. We know how to survive; we have proved our courage to the whole world. Ahead of us is the most difficult challenge – victory over the war within themselves. Victory over rage and hatred, over anger and contempt. Titanic work to preserve our hearts, our peace, our breath, and our sleep. The search for the remaining drops of love, the search for elements of life. When we passed the first Ukrainian checkpoint as we escaped the siege, I had a powerful thought: We can walk the streets. We can make choices. We can choose life over death. And we have something to live for.

A priest I know said that he has observed that people have different desires – harmony, happiness, health, prosperity, joy, fulfillment – but he has almost never heard that they want peace. Peace in your heart, which

only you see. This heart-peace does not reject the unbearable pain that deepens every day, the endless sorrow and passionate desire for justice. But each of us alone bears responsibility for whether the sprout of hope will germinate in our heart.

What I know from my work is that peace is possible. This is an extremely important message that I want to pass on: “Peace is possible.” It comes, and it can be profound, not necessarily when I feel safe on the streets, but when I am ready to speak, share, feel, dare, dream, and embody. When I am not afraid. When I feel supported. When I am respected, and when I respect in return. When I can disagree but not feel angry. When I celebrate diverse views.

Peace is a process. It is formed every second in our hearts, in our thoughts, and in our decisions. It will not be written about in the media because it is not a topic that will arouse interest. But we can take this path. And we can lie down in it if we cannot bear to keep moving in that direction. As long as the wound hurts, we can imagine its healing and the emergence of something new and beautiful, which we can only create if we save our hearts.

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“RUSSIAN WORLD” IDEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN TRUTH

Olga Kondyuk

When this war broke out, my family and I were living on the campus of Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary in a northern suburb of Kyiv – in fact, the place from which the offensive on the capital was attempted through Hostomel and Bucha. Over seventy people were living on campus at that time. We managed to leave only on the fifth day because of intense fighting on all the surrounding roads.

Before the war started, we equipped shelters in basements and stored food and fuel. The problem was that UETS only had two relatively small basements. Sometimes, shelling lasted all night. Quite a lot of people had to spend many hours in a narrow, closed space. Some people had panic attacks; it was most difficult to maintain normal psychological conditions.

So on day five of the war, a family bought a bus to evacuate us. As of today, this bus has shuttled back and forth many times, bringing necessities to Kyiv and evacuating people from it. A part of the team stayed at the seminary to serve people and help the military.

As soon as we came to a safe place, we began organizing other evacuations. We received calls and drew up lists. It was very sad to realize that we were not able to help everyone.

At the beginning of the war, I had a short-term goal: to evacuate a large group of people to a safe place. In the course of time, however, fewer people asked for evacuation. So, I started thinking about what to do next. I understand that we need not only to survive but also to preserve our independence as a country, to protect everything that is really valuable. We need not only to fight but also to maintain our economy, jobs, culture, and values. So now I would like to share what I think about the present and future.

Any war ruins life. It not only kills people but also destroys all manifestations of life, everything people have created. For example, over the last 30 years, we have built theological education in Ukraine literally from scratch. Now, shelling is damaging our seminary facilities. So I believe that I have to do my best to help our seminary continue to function. Theological education may not seem to be the most important thing in terms of survival during a war, but I am of a different opinion. Let me try to prove it.

Every war has ideological components. For ten years before this war, we watched Russian authorities disseminate propaganda about the “Russian world” in order to prepare their people and to justify their aggression in the eyes of the international community.

As a matter of fact, the “Russian world” propaganda often uses religious rhetoric. For example, “We are brotherly nations,” a common phrase, sounds somewhat Christian. Brotherhood is a good idea. The one who stands for brotherhood is good and kind. The one who is against it is bad and evil. It seems simple. However, this idea is based on the following assumptions:

- We are brotherly nations
- Actually, we are one nation
- You are not a separate nation
- So you have no right to sovereignty
- If your political decisions harm our interests, we will stop you by force

Or take another religious message: “The mission of the Russian people is to save the world from the moral decay of the West.” This message appeals to everyone who is concerned with the moral condition of present-day society. However, this message also includes significant assumptions. It exists only to convince religious Russians that their war is sacred. Many Russians believe that they are saving Ukrainians from the West’s ruinous and sinful influence. They believe that they are a sword in God’s hand to punish evil. Yet, if one compares statistics from different countries, one can see that the country that has decided to save others from sin has, in fact, significantly worse rates of abortion, divorce, family violence, alcohol addiction, and crime than countries of Western Europe. Furthermore, this idea has messianic overtones that position Russia in place of Christ, who saves people from sin through love rather than by force.

Or take another popular message aimed at an international audience: “The Russian authorities are guilty of the war, but ordinary Russians are the ones suffering from sanctions.” This communicates the idea that an ordinary person bears no responsibility for their society’s choices between good and evil. This message echoes the “commonplace evil” of World War II, when German soldiers thought they were not committing crimes because they were just following orders. However, the Bible gives us a totally different principle of power and responsibility. Every person can make a choice; every person is responsible to God; every person is socially influential. Today, we see how “ordinary” Ukrainians contribute to the coming victory without abandoning their own responsibilities. We see how David is confronting Goliath in many places, often without weapons, in order to protect freedom.

For this reason, I am strongly convinced that theology is very important at this time. The war challenges us to name good as good and evil as evil. Unfortunately, many Russian Christians – as well as some Ukrainians and representatives of other nations – have found themselves influenced by the ideas of the Russian world. This ideology is a heresy that requires theological reflection and firm condemnation by the whole Christian community.

Words are powerful. We can see that false words disseminated for a decade have led to the deaths of many people. We need to spread good words that bring life, hope, and restoration. We are called to teach people to think so that they can distinguish the former from the latter.

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