



Oral History of the Russo-Ukrainian War

Tetiana Kovtunovych and Tetiana Pryvalko
on Interviewing for the Ukrainian Institute
of National Remembrance's Projects

*The conversation was recorded on June 13, 2023 during
the Witnessing the War on Ukraine Summer institute in Krakow*

■ **Tetiana Pryvalko (T. P.):** I graduated from Taras Shevchenko Luhansk National University, Faculty of History. Later, I pursued post-graduate studies in Kyiv at Taras Shevchenko University, specializing in Archival Studies and Special Historical Disciplines. This field of study has been immensely beneficial in my current work, as it provided me with skills in working with sources, archiving, and analysis. After completing graduate school, I briefly worked as a teacher in Kyiv. In April 2013, I joined the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, and later that year, the Maidan protests began. My work at the Institute has been deeply intertwined with these pivotal events—the Maidan and the war. During the Maidan, the Institute took the initiative to start recording testimonies.

■ **Tetiana Kovtunovych (T. K.):** I graduated from the History Department of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. During my fifth year, as part of an ethnological internship, I participated in expeditions and recorded stories from people living in the Chornobyl zone. Following this internship, I was invited to pursue graduate studies at the Institute of Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences. Afterward, I briefly worked at the Institute of Psychology before joining the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance in 2011. My background in history, ethnology, and psychology naturally came together in the field of oral history, shaping my work at the Institute.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** This is an interesting topic for discussion—how much we build on previous experiences and how, in extraordinary circumstances, those experiences can become invaluable. Both for you and for me, the experience of working with stories from the Maidan is incredibly important, and we often refer to it. Today, I'd like to talk about the challenges researchers face when working with events that they are directly involved in and that are still ongoing. What motivated you to begin recording stories from the war back in 2015?

■ **T. K.:** We had planned to start recording these stories back in 2014, when the war had just begun. However, with only two people working on oral history at the time and being fully absorbed in the Maidan project, we didn't have enough time or resources to begin this work. At that point, we were still focused on publishing the collection *Maidan in the First Person: 45 Stories of the Revolution of Dignity*, based on the material we had gathered as part of the *Maidan: Oral History* project. Our goal was not only to record and preserve these stories but also to make them more widely known, as the topics of the Revolution of Dignity and the war were still highly relevant in society.

■ **T. P.:** We began recording systematic interviews about the war in 2016. To put this in context, by 2015, key events like the battles at Donetsk airport, Ilovaïsk, and Debaltseve had already occurred, and the Minsk II agreements had been signed. At that point, the war had shifted into a positional phase, with a kind of tentative conclusion. While the first individual recordings took place in 2015, they often involved people like one man who arrived for his interview about being a participant of the Maidan in uniform, as a combatant. He spoke about both the Maidan and the war, making these interviews double-layered in nature.

■ **T. K.:** In 2016, we launched a new oral history project titled *Oral History of the ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation in Eastern Ukraine)*, which we initially carried out in collaboration with a volunteer organization working with veterans. At that time, we recorded about twenty interviews with military personnel. It's also important to note that in 2015, the Institute began working with Zaporizhzhia National University and the Zaporizhzhia Regional State Administration, a partnership that led to the publication of five volumes in the series *Oral History of the Russo-Ukrainian War* between 2015 and 2019.

We also had a publishing project focused on military chaplains. Unlike our previous collections, which were based on already-record-

ed material, this book project came first, and in the spring of 2018, we began recording interviews with chaplains. We conducted a total of 35 interviews, and the book includes 23 conversations with military chaplains from various religious denominations.

There were two other collaborative publishing projects within the oral history field: “Girls Cut Off Their Braids” (2018) and “Warriors of the Dnipro. Values, Motivations, Meanings” (2020). In 2021, even before the full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, in partnership with several organizations, launched the *Virtual Museum of Russian Aggression*. One part of it focused on the annexation of Crimea, so we decided to create an oral history section and recorded 20 interviews with people who witnessed the occupation of Crimea. These interviews were used to create the thematic collection “Crimea: Occupation” on our Oral History Archive portal. However, we have since closed access to the site to protect our narrators, many of whom are now in the occupied territories.

■ **N. O.:** After the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, when did you return to recording interviews?

■ **T. P.:** During the first few months, we were in evacuation. One of the first decisions our management made was to safeguard the records that had previously been collected. Since the Institute is in the government quarter, we had to find a way to secure our servers and move them. For a while, our websites were offline. The online resource Oral History Archive, which we launched in 2021 and where we had posted more than 200 of our 1,700 interviews, is now disabled for public access and is only accessible in office mode—we have access to the backend, but nothing else.

When we were able to return to Kyiv, we began discussing our next steps. As civil servants, our work plan had to be approved by the Ministry of Culture. We had a plan prepared in early 2022, but after the full-scale invasion, it needed to be revised. After submitting our proposals and receiving approval from the Minister of Culture, we were able to proceed by around September 2022, when we resumed recording.

By then, we had already developed a methodology based on the same interview techniques we used for our Maidan projects. But there was significant debate within the professional community about the appropriateness of recording at this time, and how much ethical consideration should factor into these circumstances. As a result, we gradually refined and expanded our methodological prin-

ciples, placing a greater emphasis on the psychological and ethical aspects of our work.

■ T. K.: Earlier, we held seminars to exchange experiences working on the oral history of the Maidan, involving colleagues from across Ukraine. The historian Halyna Bodnar recommended that we create a survey program rather than using questionnaires. The Lviv team has extensive experience in this area, and their survey programs have been published. We began to adopt this approach and started using semi-structured interviews. The first part of the interview is narrative, where the person speaks about themselves and the events to the best of their knowledge, in as much detail as they wish. The second part consists of answering questions from the survey program, which is organized into thematic blocks. This method is very convenient because it allows us to skip over blocks that are not relevant to the person's experience.

■ N. O.: What were the key changes in the methodology—what did you have to revise or add?

■ T. P.: In our recommendations, we emphasize that the interviewer should have a list of necessary contacts, such as volunteer centers, government hotlines, and so on. If the person is confused or in need of help, the information should be readily available—this way, they can be directed to the appropriate resources. If the situation becomes volatile, the interviewer should have a list of emergency professionals' contacts and should not hesitate to ask the person, "Do you need help?" If necessary, the interviewer should be prepared to accompany the person to a psychologist, psychotherapist, or other medical professional. But it's important to adhere to the principle of voluntariness and only intervene if the person requests help.

Regarding the readiness of both the interviewer and the interviewee to talk, we rely on our experience and do not conduct the interview during the first meeting. If the interviewer sees that the person is becoming overwhelmed or is in a state of stress, we do not push them to continue. Especially in the current situation, we also use the introduction phase to help the interviewer gauge whether they are ready to hear the person's story. This initial meeting is when the sensitive topics that will be discussed later are broached.

There have also been changes to the security component. Even if there is written consent, we now require approval and additional permission for each publication. We understand that the situation can change quickly. Today a person might feel safe and willing to share, but tomorrow, their circumstances might change, and they

may no longer want to be part of the publication. At the same time, we don't want to completely remove the data at their request, but instead offer them the option of complete anonymity. After all, a great deal of effort and resources go into each conversation.

■ T. K.: I am very empathetic and tend to absorb the emotional experiences of my narrators. If I notice that emotions are taking over, I try to “pull myself out” by focusing on certain rationalizing techniques, like observing the interviewee's gestures or listening to the sound of their voice. This helps me shift my focus away from the emotional intensity. In general, it's crucial for an interviewer to master the psychological technique of self-observation during a conversation. You engage with the interviewee emotionally, but at the same time, you need to remain an impartial and objective observer. Ideally, this state of observation should be maintained throughout the interview, though it's not always easy.

Each interviewer should develop their own techniques for grounding themselves, for returning to the present moment. This can involve stopping the conversation, taking a breath or a drink of water, or delicately changing the subject.

Also, it's important not to focus too much on recording every detail or chasing numbers. The interview should happen when you feel emotionally prepared for it. Sometimes, crying together with the interviewee becomes a form of mutual therapy.

■ N. O.: How do you deal with the emotions that accumulate during your work?

■ T. K.: It depends on the situation. Sometimes, you experience burnout and feel unable to control yourself. In those moments, I may spontaneously burst into tears and need to pause and recover. I rest, socialize, and switch to other activities, like watching movies, which I find rehabilitating.

But interviews aren't always emotionally heavy. For example, I recorded a soldier who participated in the defense of the airport in Hostomel on February 24, along with a number of other soldiers who had endured horrific experiences. These stories are inspiring, and I cry less with soldiers because they often approach their trauma with dignity and sometimes humor. They may come across as stern, but after a two-hour conversation, they open up, smile, and want to share their experiences again. It's clear they have a need to speak out, and that's very rewarding.

In contrast, I tend to cry more with civilians—perhaps this is more typical for women. The most inspiring moments come when some-

one opens up and shares experiences they may have never told anyone before. I believe in the power of talking about these experiences rather than suppressing them. These emotions are still raw and alive, and sharing them brings a sense of presence, a vivid connection to the here and now. Over time, these events fade, and the emotions become harder to access.

■ **N. O.:** How do you store the recorded stories? What principles guide you in describing them? I imagine that your background in archival studies is crucial here.

■ **T. P.:** We strive to store everything in multiple copies—on servers, network storage, and physical disks. Naturally, this entails significant costs. Initially, we handled the processing of recordings ourselves, but we soon realized it was beyond our capacity and began outsourcing the task. We preserve both the video and an additional copy of the audio track.

This approach aligns with classic archival practices, where collections are structured by the collector—whether an institution, organization, or private researcher. For each contributor, we create a fond within our archive, which is further divided into detailed descriptions organized by subject and chronology. Within each description, the individual records—interviews—are arranged alphabetically by the interviewees' names. Each unit of record centers around the recording itself, accompanied by supplementary materials like photos or transcripts. This process ensures we create a complete and well-organized archival file.

■ **N. O.:** How do you envision the future of this project and the various initiatives you've undertaken since the war began in 2014, and following the full-scale invasion? How do you see them evolving in the longer term?

■ **T. P.:** It's difficult to say. On the one hand, these initiatives originate with us—we're the ones directly executing and implementing these projects. On the other hand, we submit our ideas for approval, and the leadership, sometimes even the Ministry of Culture, determines the direction. So it's a two-way process. That said, it's clear that this work must continue. We've accumulated a substantial volume of records, and at the seminars we're hosting, we tell people: "If you lack the resources to preserve your records, please send them to our archive. Over time, we'll be able to transcribe and make them accessible to the public." We also promote the establishment of fonds within other organizations. This combines the essential tasks of accumulation and systematic processing.

■ **T. K.:** Yes, I would like to see things become a bit more centralized. I understand that everyone is engaged in their own work—managing various short-term projects that begin, end, and are then forgotten. People report to the grantors, and that’s usually the end of it. Afterward, no one knows where the materials go or where the source files are kept—maybe in private archives, maybe in some institutions. Far too often, a project’s history ends right there. It would be great if these initiatives could feed into a larger archive and become an integral part of it, ensuring their preservation and accessibility.

■ **N. O.:** I believe the stories we are recording now form our digital heritage and rightfully belong to the community that lives and documents them. This is why they must be preserved within Ukraine while also being entrusted to institutions—whether archival, museum, research, or educational—that can safeguard this heritage in meaningful ways. Institutions represent sustainability and a continuity of responsibility.

■ **T. K.:** Absolutely. Tetiana and I are here now, but in 50 years, we won’t be at the institute. The archive, in contrast, will remain, and its mission should carry on. That’s my hope. I think we’re gradually moving toward a reality where our institutional memory won’t be disrupted by changes in government, and everything accomplished so far will be passed down and continue to grow. To achieve this, it’s vital to establish solid, universal foundations for the archive—ensuring it can expand, that a unified platform exists, and that people can rally around it. Even if we’re talking about copies, they should be centralized in one place. This way, future researchers studying the war or the Maidan will have a single, comprehensive destination instead of hunting through 25 different archives with scattered collections.

■ **N. O.:** What advice would you give to those currently recording interviews in Ukraine?

■ **T. P.:** My first recommendation would be to consult a psychologist. I recently followed this advice myself and reached out to the Kostiuk Institute of Psychology. They referred me to a specialist in historical topics, Dr. Andrii Masliuk, a psychologist. I shared our guidelines with him and showed him a few interview examples. He even joined me for one of my sessions—it became a collaborative interview, where he observed both me and the narrator. In today’s context, one crucial piece of advice is not to dig too deeply into details. While details are important and can provide unique insights into events or moments, it’s essential to let the interviewees speak freely without pressing them too much.

I also want to share some advice, particularly for those just starting out. During seminars, I always emphasize: “There’s no such thing as a perfect interview.” The idea of perfection is entirely subjective. While there are common methodologies, the same interview might be seen as flawed by one researcher and praised by another. From my own experience, the best interviews are those that are well-prepared. The more time and effort I invest in preparing for a conversation, the more engaging and complete the result. Equally important is being open with the interviewee—the more open I am, the better the interview turns out.

■ T. K.: I would also say there are no perfect interviews, but I see it from a slightly different perspective. Tetiana talks about external evaluation—experts assessing whether an interview adheres to methodology and how “perfect” it is. I want to address this from the interviewer’s own viewpoint, as they evaluate their own work.

When we teach, we explain how an interview should be structured: “Here’s the narrative section, here’s where to ask questions, here’s how to engage the person you’re speaking with.” I emphasize these points but also frequently remind our students: “You have to remember that there are no perfect interviews.” This is especially important for beginners, particularly perfectionists, who often place excessive demands on themselves. They might record an interview but then hesitate to share it, thinking, “I won’t show it to anyone because it’s not perfect.” Even for myself, I’ve learned that the ultimate goal isn’t to follow every rule flawlessly—it’s to truly hear the person’s story. If you focus on the individual and their narrative, the story will naturally unfold.

Of course, thorough preparation is crucial for every conversation. But readiness grows with experience. The more interviews you conduct, the better your intuition about what questions to ask in a given moment and what topics to avoid. That’s why practice is so important.