

C hronicles of Civil Resistance

Oleksandr Cheremisin on the Research
in Kherson and About Kherson

*The conversation was recorded at
the Center for Urban History on August 23, 2023*

■ **Oleksandr Cheremisin (O. Ch.):** I earned my master's degree from Kherson State University, where I also completed my postgraduate studies. I defended my PhD thesis at Zaporizhzhia National University in 2007. Following this, I worked at Kherson State Agrarian University and returned to Zaporizhzhia National University as a doctoral student from 2010 to 2013, ultimately defending my doctoral dissertation in 2017. I continued working at Kherson State Agrarian University until 2021, when I joined the Department of History, Archaeology, and Teaching Methods at Kherson State University. Just days before the full-scale war began, on February 21 or 22, 2022, I signed a five-year contract. I remained in Kherson throughout the entire occupation and continued to live under fire for seven months afterward.¹

My scholarly work focuses on the history of urban self-governance in southern Ukraine, which was the subject of both my PhD and doctoral dissertations. I have published six articles in Scopus and Web of Science, along with an additional twenty in professional Ukrainian journals. Before the full-scale invasion, I had not planned to stray far from this research focus. I intended to publish sources I uncovered in various archives, many of which, I confirmed, had never been published. Among the most valuable are materials from the State

¹ A portion of this text was published as the introduction to *Chronicle of Kherson Civil Resistance in the Dimensions of Russia's Full-Scale Aggression Against Ukraine* (Sumy: Universytetska Knyha, 2023).

Archives of the Donetsk Oblast and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, which I managed to copy before 2014. My goal was to begin processing these documents.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** I know you have a range of academic interests, but for now, let's focus on your work in documentation. Looking back, what motivated you to begin documenting the war, and why did you choose this particular approach?

■ **O. Ch.:** The full-scale war brought significant changes to my work. While I was still under occupation, I did not consider shifting away from my usual research topic. I even managed to write and publish several articles. But I also began to realize I was living through a profound historical moment, one that I was experiencing from the inside. This shift in perspective started in the winter of 2022-2023, as I began to think about documenting my experience, almost like a memoir—what I jokingly called “How I Spent the Occupation,” inspired by the typical “How I Spent the Summer” essays. As scholarly articles on the occupation started to appear, written by those who had left Kherson earlier, I noticed that many seemed incomplete or superficial. This realization pushed me closer to taking up the subject myself, despite having no previous experience with oral history. My first step was to establish a theoretical and methodological foundation for approaching it. I already had clear ideas about the substance of the work, since I had lived through these events, but I still needed additional grounding in oral history theory and methodology. Ultimately, I decided to expand the project beyond my own experiences. I wanted to capture the stories of various residents of Kherson—those who had contributed, each in their own way, to the resistance and survival under occupation.

We live in a time of abundant photographic and video evidence, which documents the general flow of events but often misses inner, personal experiences. Certain interactions, such as conversations with the occupiers, could not be documented safely on film, so they needed to be recorded in other ways. That's why I began to think more broadly about these processes and decided to involve a wide range of sociological categories—people of different ages, genders, professions, and so on. Every resident of Kherson noticed something special and unique, and by incorporating these diverse voices, it becomes possible to present a more objective and complete picture. This way, the full mosaic of experiences is revealed, rather than a one-sided narrative. The goal was to create a more or less objective portrayal of the experiences of Kherson's occupation, from the be-

ginning to its liberation, and to ensure that it is as multifaceted and versatile as possible.

A key motivation was to preserve sources for the future. Much of Kherson's written records were destroyed to prevent them from falling into enemy hands, leaving us with a significant gap in documentary sources. And then the occupiers additionally destroyed the rest of the sources or took them away. What we have now are mostly oral accounts of what people saw and lived through. The key idea behind this project is to document several distinct time periods. First, to capture what life was like before the full-scale war, how people felt, and how they assessed their lives. Second, to document the occupation and its aftermath, and to understand what is happening to those people now. Third, to look toward the future—recording people's hopes and visions for how the war will end. What makes this approach unique is that historians typically examine such processes after the war has concluded. In Kherson's case, although the city has been de-occupied, the war is still ongoing. I am particularly curious to see what predictions people have for the future and whether they will come true.

■ N. O.: Could you share more about your approach to this work? What were the conversations you held about, when did you begin recording them, and how did you prepare for them?

■ O. Ch.: I began recording interviews in the spring of 2023. It took me some time to think through the process—I needed to understand what questions to ask and what kinds of stories I wanted to capture. I wanted to visualize the final result and understand how the work would come together. Around February 2023, I started drafting the questionnaires, but it wasn't until the end of May 2023 that I finished them. I chose interviews as the best method because there are various ways to approach surveys, and interviews allowed for more personal and detailed accounts.

My approach was to create a questionnaire that followed the chronological course of the occupation, focused on what people saw, heard, experienced, and even tasted. There are slight variations in the questions depending on how long someone had been under occupation. I started conducting interviews in mid-May 2023, initially with members of the local government and the Yellow Ribbon² movement. My recording activity picked up momentum during my residency at

² Yellow Ribbon (Ukr. «Zhovta strichka») – a resistance movement in the occupied territories of Ukraine (translator's note).

the Center for Urban History in Lviv, from June onwards. The topics of occupation, liberation, and civil resistance soon became central at Kherson University. We realized that while memories were still fresh, it was essential to start recording oral histories to preserve them for the future. This project aims to be large-scale and will involve substantial publication activity.

When I recorded my first interviews in Kherson, there was constant shelling, and moving around the city was extremely dangerous. Once I arrived in Lviv, I began recording conversations remotely. Many Kherson residents are now scattered in different places—some remain in Kherson, others are abroad or in various cities across Ukraine. It's hard to meet in person, so technology has become crucial. Now, I use two main methods: Zoom for video recordings and phone calls for audio recordings.

■ N. O.: How do you find your storytellers?

■ O. Ch.: This is a very interesting question. Initially, I thought about posting on Facebook, saying something like, “We’re working on this topic, come get involved and share your story.” However, I quickly realized that if I did this on a large scale, it would result in a lot of unstructured information, or worse, information that would need to be critically processed. It could end up being more of a “venting” space—expressing frustration and resentment—rather than a coherent record of events. At the symposium “The Most Documented War”, I met a colleague from Kherson who confirmed my concerns. They agreed that gathering information en masse would make it difficult to create a cohesive narrative. So I decided to take a different approach. I deliberately sought out individuals I knew—people I was confident had experienced the occupation firsthand and could reflect on it meaningfully. I was also guided by recommendations from people in the Municipal Guard and the Yellow Ribbon movement.

Unfortunately, some individuals declined for various reasons. Some didn’t want to talk, others were afraid of their workplace superiors, some had become too busy with volunteering after the de-occupation, and a few were simply tired of being interviewed. Some interviews have been postponed, and one person asked to remain anonymous for now. As of today, I have recorded nearly a hundred interviews, with people from various professions—university professors, schoolteachers, social service employees, local media workers, private entrepreneurs, and volunteers. The group also includes young people, pensioners, and military spouses. These different voices contribute to a mosaic of experiences that together form a picture of the occupation. Kherson

had a particular nuance: although it was captured, it was never truly conquered. What does resistance look like in that context? If we usually think of resistance as something that involves holding a weapon, the Kherson experience shows us that resistance can take many forms. There's civil resistance, like the Yellow Ribbon movement, intellectual resistance, and even resistance expressed in protests and rallies.

■ **N. O.:** I believe it is crucial that you are the one conducting these interviews, as you share a common experience with your narrators. This connection allows you to build rapport and be sensitive in your questioning, ensuring that you don't ask anything inappropriate or hurtful. It creates a certain intimacy, which makes the work easier in some ways. However, this shared perspective can also complicate things. While it reveals certain aspects, it may also leave others hidden.

■ **O. Ch.:** Mostly, it simplifies things. Almost every other person says, "We're going to tell you because you were there, you experienced it. We won't tell anyone else." I had the chance to witness this firsthand. Right after the de-occupation, as soon as communications were restored, I started getting calls. Both my wife and I were contacted by people introducing themselves as journalists, asking for interviews. We agreed, and then the questions started: "Tell us how you were tortured, how you were electrocuted?" I had been detained several times, but I somehow managed to be careful and escape [torture], understanding that it might happen. They listened to me and then said, "Well, then we're not interested in your story." On the other hand, my friends abroad also called and asked how I was coping: how I managed my living space, what food I stocked up on, what items were best for long-term storage.

I want to approach this differently because I know what people have been through. This shared experience makes communication easier. Respondents know that we have common ground, and when something is difficult to explain, we often say, "You know what I'm talking about." I will later clarify in the analytical part of my work exactly what was meant. This research is possible because of the trust people place in me.

However, sometimes those who left earlier and know that I spent more of my time in occupation say, "Let's not talk about it, we didn't experience much." To them, I explain that it's still important to talk, because they might have noticed something special or unique. It's not about how long you were under occupation, but about what you saw and felt. These subtle changes in the atmosphere, the shifts in statements at different times, help illustrate the dynamics. They provide a

more complete understanding of the occupation and the resistance experience.

■ N. O.: How do you manage the balance between your own personal experience and the stories of others that you hear?

■ O. Ch.: At first, I didn't really think about it. After a few months, I began to realize that it was difficult for me, but more in terms of physical fatigue than psychological. I processed it psychologically over the winter, but it's harder for my wife, so we try to avoid talking about it too much together.

Since I've worked through much of it internally, it's a bit easier for me. But of course, I feel a deep sympathy for what people have endured. The real exhaustion comes from the sheer volume of interviews—I conduct so many, and there are so many people eager to share their stories. At first, I didn't expect that so many would come forward. But as we began talking, rumors spread among my friends. Now I get calls from people saying, "I heard you're doing this. I want to be part of it. I know some people who want to share their stories too. Here are their contacts." So, three or four interviews a day has become the norm. And on top of that, we're also transcribing everything.

■ N. O.: Do you transcribe the interviews yourself?

■ O. Ch.: Yes. Intonation is very important to me, so I choose to do it myself to ensure there are no distortions of meaning. Once I finish the transcript, I let the narrator read it to confirm that everything is accurate. If possible, I also try to supplement the text with visual materials, like photos. Some people who left have photos or videos buried in Kherson, and they say, "When we return, we'll be able to dig it all up." There's very little material like that, though—on average, I get one photo for every ten people I interview.

■ N. O.: How do you store all the material you have collected?

■ O. Ch.: First of all, I keep a list of all the respondents, which includes the date of the interview, the length of the recording, basic socio-demographic information, and whether photos or videos are included. I have separate folders for storing Zoom recordings and audio recordings. When I transcribe the interviews, I have a master file where I keep all the transcriptions in order. Each interview also has a separate transcript, with notes indicating what was agreed upon, what wasn't, what was supplemented, what wasn't, and what was edited or left as is.

■ N. O.: Do you plan to transfer this to an institutional archive later? Or is it rather an individual collection?

■ **O. Ch.:** Initially, I had the idea to create a separate archive and publish it as a website. However, I quickly realized that I lacked the necessary programming skills, and I didn't have access to the professional equipment required to do it properly. So, I concluded that this material should be published. As a scholar, I am familiar with the process of publishing monographs and have experience working with printing houses. I am also convinced that this material should be shared abroad. In the future, I plan to engage in active publication work: I intend to publish the texts as sources, add analysis to them, and use them to reconstruct the history that unfolded. Currently, I am preparing a monograph that I aim to publish on the first anniversary of Kherson's liberation, which is November 11.

■ **N. O.:** If you think about the multiple projects that document the war, including through oral history, how should they continue to live on? Should there have been some kind of state institution, an archive, where research can be conducted and where individuals or institutions can deposit their materials? Is there a need for a framework organization that will take care of the memory of the war? Or should it be a network of organizations that connects people and institutions that recorded stories from the war? What do you think would be the optimal model for preserving the memory of war and war experiences that could function in Ukraine?

■ **O. Ch.:** In my opinion, it is impossible to come up with an optimal model at the national level. Each region, each locality has its own specifics, its own peculiarities. If a model for a nationwide approach is developed, some people on the ground will still feel overlooked or underrepresented, and a certain hierarchy will inevitably emerge—some will be seen as greater victims, while others will be seen as lesser ones. Although comparisons are unavoidable, we need to accept that they are part of the process. These comparisons allow us to understand the broader picture and recognize the diversity of local experiences. While it may be painful, acknowledging this reality is necessary. At the same time, we are all interconnected. Some have suffered more, and others less, but “less” does not mean “better.” That said, every region has its own unique challenges and experiences, and these differences help us see the bigger picture. If you're undertaking a national project, you will need to focus on materials of national importance. However, at the local level, each community should maintain its own databases to capture how residents experience the war. I believe this responsibility should fall to local communities, as they are best positioned to preserve and document their own histories.

■ **N. O.:** My last question is about advice: What advice would you give to yourself when you first started imagining this work, or to others who are embarking on similar activities?

■ **O. Ch.:** Given the situation, I wouldn't advise myself. However, I'm sure I took the right steps, choosing the right methodology, approaches, and questions. I focused on oral history, on the theory of everyday life, and on the frontier.

■ **N. O.:** What advice would you give to others who are doing similar projects?

■ **O. Ch.:** It's hard to give advice because you likely need to experience something similar to undertake such projects. Without a personal, inner connection, the work will feel very superficial.

■ **N. O.:** On the other hand, we need to stitch Ukraine together. We need to build bridges between experiences, including through joint documentary or research projects that would bring together scholars from different regions with different sensibilities.

■ **O. Ch.:** This is a complicated question. Well, historians work on projects about times in which we didn't live. When I write about what happened in the nineteenth century, I realize that I don't feel the depth of the process as it was experienced by the people involved. As an outside observer, I can only draw conclusions from the sources I have access to. I understand that there are many more sources I won't be able to see and that won't be included in my work. So, others can carry out similar projects, but they may not fully grasp the depth of what happened on the ground. They can only capture specific facts externally.

■ **N. O.:** That's why I think it's important to have collaborative projects. What you said about comparisons resonates: it's crucial not to create a fragmented history but to view it in relation to other experiences. The goal should be to craft a coherent narrative about the war, even though it will always remain incomplete in some way.

■ **O. Ch.:** As historians, we can only approach an understanding of a period, notice patterns, or rethink certain aspects. But we can never truly enter from the inside. When I myself ventured into the heart of the experience, I realized how profound it is—it's a layer that cannot be fully uncovered, understood, or rethought. Yet this is where the benefit of the outside observer comes in: this is someone who can theorize from a distance and assist in comprehending and finding connections.

■ **N. O.:** I believe that we also have to find ways to comprehend it. When we explain something to ourselves and talk about Ukraine

to the world, we must theorize our experience. This means not only collecting documents and describing them but also offering explanations. We need to produce theory ourselves and communicate to the world not just our experience, but also our theory, concepts, and notions.

■ **O. Ch.:** Yes, but first, to offer such analysis, you need to collect sources. This is equally important.