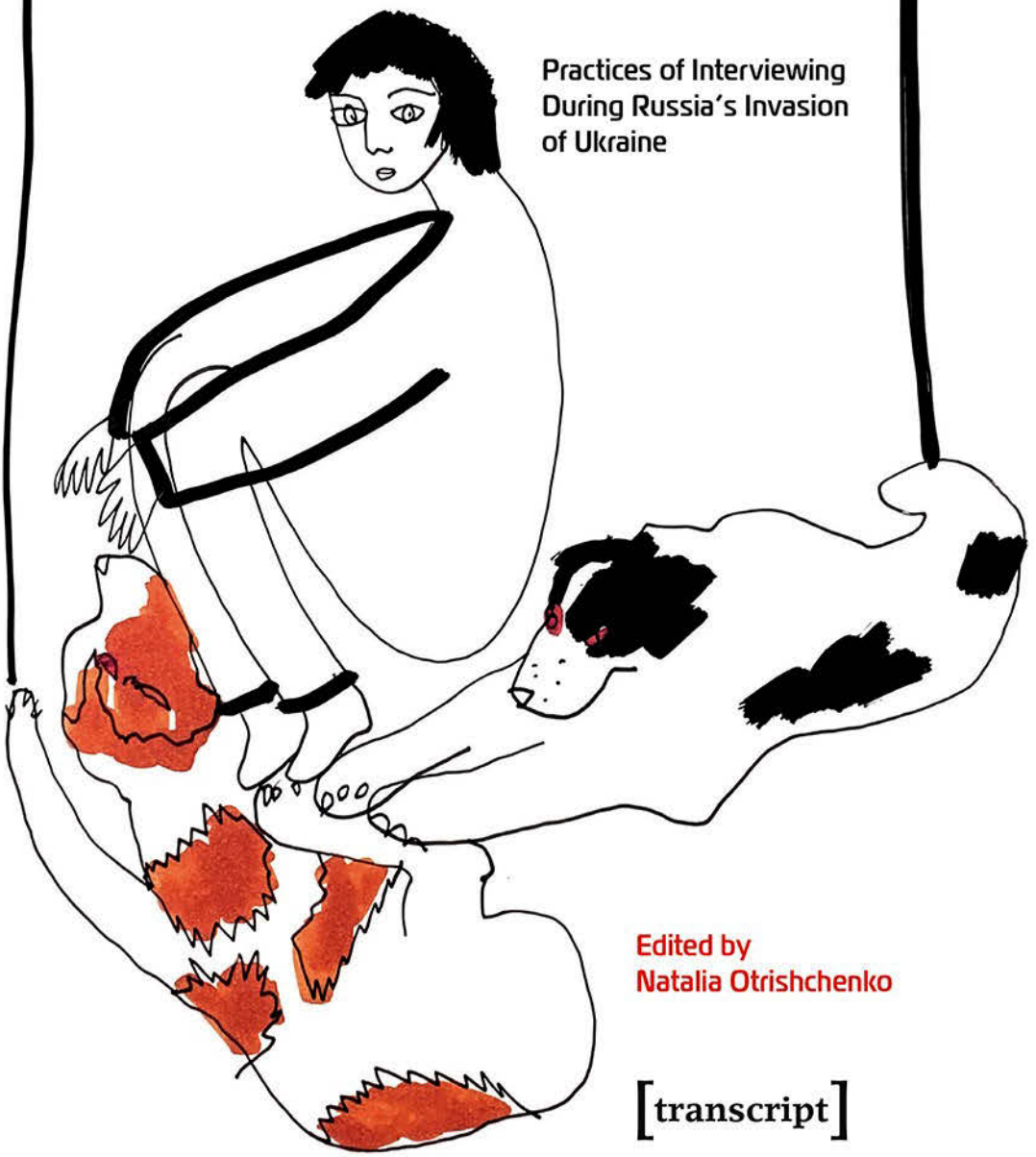
CONVERSATIONS WITH THOSE WHO ASK ABOUT WAR

Practices of Interviewing During Russia's Invasion of Ukraine



Edited by
Natalia Otrishchenko

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Natalia Otrishchenko (ed.)
Conversations with Those Who Ask about War:
Practices of Interviewing during Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Stories of War | 1

Editorial
This series explores how experiences of war are narrated, recorded, preserved, and interpreted. Conceived as an ongoing collective effort, the series examines the processes that shape war archives and narratives. Across diverse formats—interviews, essays, sources, and artworks—the books in the series rethink practices of storymaking and challenge hierarchies of theorizing and documenting, foregrounding the ethical and practical complexities of creating sources and archives in times of war. Taking Ukraine under Russian attack as its point of departure, the series fosters multi-vocal conversations across disciplines and geographies about the responsibilities—and limits—of wartime documenting and archiving.

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Natalia Otrishchenko (ed.)

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Sofia Dyak, Iryna Klymenko, and Katherine Younger. Foreword to the Series

When war comes to your life, archives might be the furthest thing from your mind. But what traces of that war will be preserved in archives is crucial to what the future, and the future's past, will look like. In June 2023, around 150 people—scholars and journalists, lawyers and artists, writers and activists, nearly all of them from Ukraine—gathered in Lviv at the symposium "The Most Documented War" to share their stories of living through and documenting Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. At that moment, all of them, in different ways, had been engaged in documentation for almost a year and a half: some with a view to a future criminal tribunal, some focused on preserving the stories of the places and people closest to them—homes, workplaces, families.

The question "what comes next?" was a major preoccupation in these conversations about documenting, archiving, and access, possible research and possible resources. This underlying question prompted participants and organizers alike to look for ways to continue and indeed broaden such conversations. One way is to convene such symposiums annually, which we have done and will continue to do, and another is this publication series, "Stories of War: A Series on Documenting and Archiving."

The series is conceived of as a collective and lasting effort in rethinking the processes of storymaking in the ways experiences of war are noted, stored, transmitted and made sense of. By considering how narratives frame, but also discriminate; link, but also divide; explain, but also silence, we want to problematize the very act of narration. The series, however, is not focused on narrative structures per se, but rather on the elements that enable these structures:

sources and archives. Furthermore, emphasizing the processes, rather than documents and institutions, helps to challenge the notion of knowledge and history as static and factual.

Thus, the series focuses on documenting and archiving as interconnected yet diverging processes. Some of the questions the series raises are: Who documents—or, rather, who has the capacity to document? Who has the resources to archive and maintain those archives? As a result, which experiences are noticed, which experiences are hard to catch, and which experiences are dismissed as irrelevant—or remain invisible? What choices and options are available to address the reality that not everything can be documented and preserved? Asking these questions in the midst of war might help us to see and discuss the ambiguities and contradictions of different priorities, motivations, and expectations of both those who are directly engaged in documentation and archiving and those who are impacted.

In the long term, we are also thinking about issues of access and maintenance. While documenting can be seen as an act of resilience with a view towards justice, thinking critically about archiving opens a conversation about long-term responsibility—justice in a different way. Both documentation and archiving are practices oriented towards the future. Yet, acknowledging the openness of the future, we see this series as a space where we acknowledge our limits—of knowledge, of awareness—and the need for joint efforts to face what might come.

For this first volume of the series, Natalia Otrishchenko interviewed documentation practitioners, who themselves had conducted interviews with eyewitnesses of the war. In this book, they reflect on their work and on the stories they recorded. Yet, for reasons ethical, practical, or coincidental, those recorded stories might be made available much later, or maybe never. Reflections can be shared before the material that informs those reflections. War confronts us with the different temporalities of what is experienced, documented, archived, and narrated. These are hardly linear relations.

The very design of the series reflects an attempt to engage critically with the issue of the time that is taken to produce and present knowledge, and the inequalities embedded in such timing. Wars result in publications on different timelines. Whereas journalists may file a story within an hour of an event, an academic monograph may take many years to appear. This series is a format that sits in between: publications will take much longer than media coverage, but will be significantly quicker to appear in comparison to traditional academic publishing. Such positioning can be seen not as undermining

the value of these other genres, but rather bridging immediacy and interpretation—allowing for reaction and reflection, emphasizing the process rather than isolated moments or final results, and noticing things that otherwise might later be overlooked. In a way, with this series we are making notes to revisit in the future.

Where one's work gets published conditions visibility. Experiences and their representation happen in different languages and may reflect imbalances, especially when we talk about knowledge production across different geographies. More often than not, wars take place in some locations, while knowledge is produced and capitalized on in others. This series originates in a specific place and time: Ukraine under attack from the Russian Federation. Volumes appear in both Ukrainian and English. Published in Ukrainian, this series acknowledges the immense effort that has been put into capturing mass violence, atrocities, and daily experiences of war in Ukraine. This series is a part of this newly emerging reality and we hope it might be helpful in living through the war and navigating the uneasy terrain of conceptualizing such a life-shattering experience. At the same time, the series is also published in English, a language which can be read broadly. Less a matter of representation and outreach, we see the English edition as a possibility to foster connections and conversations. This is especially meaningful when we are in the process of exploring ideas rather than presenting final results. Connecting precisely in this moment of uncertainty, and maybe even in a moment of academic vulnerability, is a way to effect change, through multi-vocal conversation rather than authoritative speech.

Time and space are resources, and they can be scarce, especially in the context of war. When and where one can publish tends to be unequally distributed, and this in turn conditions what is considered as knowledge and then as the basis for future actions. With this series we would like to address asymmetries in documentation, archiving, and knowledge production. In other words, we hope to add to ongoing efforts that challenge the division between places where there are sources and maybe even archives, on the one hand, and places where authoritative knowledge is produced, on the other. We envision the series as a venue to ponder the notions of source, archive, and knowledge, and to look for ways of building a more sensitive and collaborative process of reflection and research connecting different places.

Positioning this series both in-between and within the customary temporal frameworks of the publishing process calls for some experimentation. The forms of its volumes are fluid and hybrid. There will

be interviews, essays, selections of sources (whether textual, visual, or other), scholarly articles, and even artworks. Especially when brought together in one volume, diverse formats can help in challenging the hierarchy of theorizing and documenting and in questioning who has the right and visibility to make knowledge. Short compilations seem to be more appropriate to existing capacities, especially for people impacted by war, but also better suited to explore what we consider a source, an archive, or knowledge of war. Such an approach reflects where we are now. This can change, and perhaps down the line we may welcome a monograph, a form from which we refrain given its status as the pinnacle of knowledge production, but which we do not aim to exclude. It is also important to us that the series will be available open-access in both English and Ukrainian, as part of our commitment to broadening the conversation.

Our departure point is Ukraine in war. The first volume in this series is *Conversations with Those Who Ask about War: Practices of Interviewing during Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*, created by Natalia Otrishchenko in conversation with over twenty people who document the war. It directly engages with oral testimony practices in documenting war experiences in 2022-23. While the initial publications in this series will focus on the contexts of Russia's war against Ukraine, we see this series as not locked on one place. Instead, it will seek to connect people and places, across different geographies and times, who were or still are impacted and transformed by war.

Stories of War is launched as a cooperation between several institutions and initiatives: the Documenting Ukraine program of the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM Vienna), the Center for Urban History, the Max Weber Foundation's Research Centre Ukraine, and INDEX: Institute for Documentation and Exchange. The scope of the future series will be shaped by conversations among the editorial and advisory boards, and we are grateful to our colleagues from different disciplines and countries who agreed to join this initiative. The Ukrainian edition of the first volume was made possible thanks to the Körber-Stiftung, and in particular Gabriele Woidelko—a collaboration which was not limited to sharing resources but also ideas and motivation. While fuller acknowledgments and thanks will come as a part of the Introduction to this volume, we would like to thank Natalia Otrishchenko, who by conceiving this book in fact gave the impulse to the series that we are honored to inaugurate with this publication.

Lviv-Glasgow, Autumn 2025

Natalia Otrishchenko. Stories from Within the War

History as a discipline is constructed around the temporal gap between an event and narratives about that event. Sources' value increases the "closer" they are to the event. Conversely, social scientists engage with individuals in their ongoing present, employing distinct tools for analysis and theorization that differentiate between firsthand experience and description. Typically, the academic community only acknowledges assessments from a distance as valid, on the assumption that this approach mitigates against biases and prejudice. The insistence on distance as an essential condition for constructing a reliable interpretation is so ingrained in scientific thinking that we—scholars, researchers, and readers of academic texts—seldom question this methodology.

Sociologists Harry Collins and Robert Evans reconsider the notion that "distance lends enchantment" in the context of knowledge production. They state that "the more distant one is from the locus of the creation of knowledge in social space and time, the more certain will the knowledge appear to be" (Collins and Evans 2007: 20). As individuals distance themselves from events—whether chronologically, geographically, or culturally—they tend to construct more stable and lucid narratives about them. As a researcher and sociologist whose professional endeavors are primarily associated with Ukrainian, German, and North American academia, it is a common practice for me to cite these scholars in my text. But my experience over the last few years demonstrates that not all conventional theories and tools are effective in the context of a full-scale war. Excessive abstraction and generalization are perceived as acts of violence. The distinction between living in the moment, undergoing its sensory and bodily aspects, and the interpretive framework in which this experience will

later be encapsulated—either by individuals distanced by time or by observers in a different space, often armed with more resources to promote their interpretations—becomes increasingly apparent.

Amidst a war, it proves challenging to blend direct experience with reflection on it. In such circumstances, experience closely aligns with the words employed to articulate it, if those words emerge at all. In a conversation with journalist Kateryna Yakovlenko, historian Marci Shore contends that metaphor becomes "inadequate because it is overshadowed by the empirical, the everyday, and the sensual" (Yakovlenko 2023a). Searching for the right words amidst a shattered language is a crucial step in constructing connections between diverse embodied experiences. Furthermore, it is simpler to find the right tone when you're face-to-face with another person. Thus, it is telling that the quote I cite here is from an interview. And not just any interview, but one featured in a Ukrainian online media. This is because academic texts typically deal with more extended timeframes, whereas time during war is maximally compressed. Publication cycles struggle to keep pace with a rapidly evolving reality. Hence, one of the central ideas behind this collection is to capture the moment of contemplation from within, preceding the establishment of narrative frameworks for documenting the war. This is a **gesture of honesty**, acknowledging the potential for uncertainty and doubt.

Conversations during wartime differ. Words create plots, which are sometimes challenging to weave together into a coherent narrative. Consequently, stories from the war are frequently incomplete. This encompasses candid exchanges with strangers encountered at the train station late at night, communication with loved ones often beginning with the iconic question, "How are you?", responses to journalists' questions, and the formal recording of crimes by investigators. Fragments from such conversations formed projects like the *Dictionary of War* (Slyvynskyi 2023) and the collection *Deoccupation* (Lohvynenko 2023); oral testimonies have also been used as evidence in submissions to the Hague Tribunal. While it may be tempting to believe that talking can heal, psychotherapist Ghislaine Boulanger highlights the distinction between engaging in therapy and providing testimony for history. The latter's objective is to counter an impersonal social science with personal narratives (Boulanger 2014: 111). Historian Mark Cave observes that oral history interviews validate human experiences within the realm of collective memory (Cave 2014: 2). Furthermore, testifying for future use establishes a connection with others—those around us and those who will follow

in our footsteps. This is a **gesture of empowerment**, signifying our present existence and our future continuity.

In conversation, it is simpler to ascribe meaning to your experiences and open up in the presence of the other. What's more, the urge to speak precedes the ability to write: my colleagues and I found it easier to overcome the silence induced by the horrors of war through dialogue than through crafting texts. Hence this collection is rooted in conversations. We discuss topics that are usually addressed in methodological guides within the academic realm, but we do so in a manner that feels more natural for us during times of war.

War is a period of radical vulnerability and protracted uncertainty, during which not only are your physical existence and the lives of your family and friends endangered; so too are the relationships that anchor you in space and time. Conversations from within are precisely those that occur in the space and time of war. War, as an event, has a beginning and must come to an end. Yet even the frame of reference depends on the narrative you choose to recount. For many, the turning point is February 24, 2022, marking the commencement of the full-scale Russian invasion. But the initiation of Russia's war against Ukraine can be traced back to March 1, 2014, when the Russian Federation Council authorized the use of Russian armed forces on Ukrainian territory. Alternatively, it could be dated from February 27, 2014, when an armed group seized the Supreme Council of Crimea, or even from February 18, 2014, when the shooting of protesters on Kyiv's Independence Square began. Some narrators and public commentators have extended the chronology of aggression back to the collapse of the Soviet Union or even World War II.

Regardless of the date we choose to place the war's start in the past, its reality is our present, and its end lies in the future. Consequently, our war narratives lack conclusions and must be continuously reassessed. Speaking candidly about such reconsideration poses a distinct challenge. An illustrative example in this context is a text by cultural manager Ivanna Skyba-Yakubova, filled with italicized comments on a text she had previously written (but not yet published) in light of a Russian missile attack on the village of Hroza: "[T]oday, much of what was said earlier is no longer permissible… *here, I will erase the previous final paragraphs and invite us all to a moment of silence—to remember those who perished in Hroza, and for all those who were audaciously claimed by the war, and for those we couldn't mourn during the war because their deaths appeared 'insignificant' against the backdrop of the overall catastrophe*" (Skyba-Yakubova

2023, italics—I. S.-Ya.). Even the written word can be, and often is, reinterpreted, especially in a wartime scenario. The contemporary historian Rüdiger Graf cites researchers in the field of narrative studies, asserting that the ending imparts meaning to an action—events are reassessed due to how they end (Graf 2021: 86). But can we truly know the end of any story? (I will refrain from alluding to the grand "end of history" that still hasn't happened.) Perhaps our narratives from within the time of war require not so much closure but internal coherence and connections to the stories of others?

War spreads in time and unfolds in space. The literary critic Hanna Uliura draws attention to one of the most famous images that testifies to the crimes of the Nazis in World War II, the gate of the Auschwitz camp (Uliura 2023: 12). She emphasizes that the photographer captures it from the outside. This observation leads Uliura to consider that war is predominantly perceived from the standpoint of an observer, rather than from the viewpoint of someone experiencing it from within, residing in a specific location. The space of war is a threatened space, a space fraught with danger. It can be delineated by the physical borders of a country, its territory. But this space is populated by individuals. Sociologist Markus Schroer posits that the body and space function as containers filled with life, and as such, they possess boundaries that are occasionally indistinct (Schroer 2018: 86-7). Furthermore, in the context of war, these boundaries are displaced, and therefore they are being defended, attempted to be maintained.

This collection unites the voices of individuals who gather testimonies amidst the time and space of war. The concept of documenting the experiences of those who document emerged from the recognition that numerous conversations, both formal and informal, go unrecorded, leaving us without a foundation for continuity. The format of the book, dialogic and polyphonic, is also **a gesture of gratitude** for the numerous conversations that proved invaluable in the initial months following the full-scale invasion and have remained a significant part of both my personal and professional life. In 2022, I wrote almost nothing. Delivering monologues on paper or screen proved challenging for me, but discussions with colleagues became my salvation. Through these conversations, we developed methodologies, sought solutions, and clarified our own experiences. But I felt the lack of a text to share, one that could convey my questions and solutions. In the scholarly realm, fundamentally cumulative, fixation serves as a crucial point for further movement.

This collection serves as a sort of "rapid response": a point in the timeline that will enable us to grasp the journey we have undertaken. It encompasses documentation for research, advocacy, and educational purposes, providing only a brief mention of initiatives that record testimonies with a focus on justice. During her address at the Congress of Culture, human rights activist and Nobel Prize winner Oleksandra Matviichuk highlighted that there are over 50,000 instances of war crimes cataloged in the database of the Tribunal for Putin initiative. Oleksandra maintains that she is not documenting crimes but rather human suffering. Simultaneously, she deliberately avoids employing the term "victim" and suggests referring to survivors instead: "The position of the victim is perilous. In a society where millions are grappling with the impacts of war, we must find a way to transform pain into energy that begets life" (Matviichuk 2023). War constitutes a large-scale aggression against society as a whole, while disintegrating into hundreds and thousands of crimes against individuals. Those who have lost their lives in war cannot speak about it, and not everyone can provide testimony. Nevertheless, documenting and preserving the history of war allows people to transcend the role of the victim and operate under the assumption that the future still belongs to us, that our stories will endure.

Exploring the horizon of the future was another idea that influenced my work on the collection. It is not only about documenting conversations during full-scale war, considering ethical, methodological, security, or legal challenges. It also revolves around the question of "what comes next." The preliminary title of the book was *Long Durations of a Rapid Response*—I used this title in the invitation extended to my colleagues for the discussion. Collectively, we are documenting the war's narratives from within, in the present moment. Also, we strive to envision the future of these records, despite constraints in our planning and potential Russian attacks. Our reactions during this unprecedented period will yield enduring consequences for ourselves, our narrators, the academic community, and society as a whole. Contemplating the future involves our capacity to foresee risks and seek opportunities. It is about planting seeds that will one day sprout, either expectedly or not.

I entered into this publication initiative as an interviewer and the leader of the international project *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War*. Launched in March 2022, this initiative was spearheaded by the Center for Urban History, alongside several other documentation projects (Shumylovych, Makhanets, Nazaruk, Otrishchenko, Brunow 2022). Its objective was to capture narratives detailing the

alterations in daily life within the backdrop of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Just like my interviewees, whose stories you will find here, I encountered similar problems and questions. The gatherings that subsequently evolved into chapters in the book were for us a chance to juxtapose our experiences and collectively address the challenges of working in unfamiliar circumstances. This represents our endeavor to theorize and formulate certain generalizations regarding approaches to documentation.

I knew some of those involved in recording war stories long before the full-scale Russian invasion. I met some of them during the symposium on documentary and archival projects titled *The Most Documented War*. This event was organized in early June 2023 by the Center for Urban History, the Center for Governance and Culture in Europe at St. Gallen University, and the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, in cooperation with the International Foundation "Vidrodzhennia", Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO), and Suspilne. Culture. Originally envisioned as a small gathering, the event instead generated significant resonance, drawing more than 150 participants. This ultimately became a decisive factor for me to undertake this collection.

I conducted the initial interviews for the book at the close of May and the final ones by the end of August 2023. Half of the sessions occurred face-to-face, while the rest were conducted remotely. Each initiative was recounted by one or two of its participants, with the sole exception being the final conversation in the collection, where I served as both interviewer and narrator. Ahead of each interview, I provided my interlocutors with a list of questions. Aside from requesting information about their initiative, its team, goals, development, key decisions, and work challenges, this list included inquiries regarding personal motivations and details of self-care. An integral aspect of the conversation involved inquiries about the future: how the records are stored, how access to them is planned, and how their future trajectory is envisioned. Ultimately, each session concluded with a question seeking advice that researchers could offer either to their past selves or to those presently undertaking documentation of the war.

Following the initial interviews, several recurring themes surfaced: reconstructing professional identities intertwined with civic ones; discovering a niche for meaningful engagement; identifying knowledge and skills instrumental in project implementation during the war; and exploring the potential for centralized archives or extensive networks to unite various initiatives. The participants in these conversations are

individuals documenting the war in Ukraine as Ukrainian citizens. Most of them did not leave the country. Their experiences illustrate varying degrees of vulnerability and the inability to escape the impacts of the war. Even if they temporarily go abroad, their bodies remain spaces affected by the war. They possess diverse professional backgrounds and trajectories, yet they share the commonality of feeling compelled to respond to the war through interviews. For many, volunteering was their initial response to Russia's full-scale invasion. At the same time, the shift towards documenting the war served as both an act of resistance and a demonstration of a certain privilege—having a sufficient sense of security and resources to engage in activities not directly tied to one's survival or that of their loved ones.

The book is divided into five sections. The initial section brings together initiatives documenting the stories of individuals living near the front line or who have experienced occupation, and whose towns or villages are now de-occupied. It commences with a conversation featuring the anthropologist Svitlana Makhovska discussing her visits to the de-occupied Chernihiv Oblast. Following that, historian Iuliia Skubytska discusses the initiative to document testimonies in the Kharkiv Oblast. Historian Oleksandr Cheremisin, who remained in Kherson during the occupation, conducts interviews with city residents. Journalist Olha Hvozdetska and memory researcher Oksana Dovgopolova delve into the stories of Odesa residents. The concept of "rootedness" [vkorinennia], which Olha encountered in one of her interviews, serves as the focal point of this chapter. These discussions revolve around the significance of place and emphasize the idea that theorizing is possible from any perspective.

The second section comprises interviews with those documenting the experiences of internally displaced people. Historian Andrii Usach and cultural manager Anna Yatsenko discuss conversations with individuals who relocated to Lviv, while historian Albert Venher concentrates on recording interviews with those relocated to Dnipro. Although not singled out as distinct thematic chapters, the stories of volunteerism and armed resistance emerge as focal points of documentation in many of the initiatives discussed in the book.

The third section lies at the intersection of research and advocacy, featuring projects that engage with individuals sharing similar experiences and confronting analogous challenges. Apart from documentation, these initiatives aim to consider the testimonies of representatives from these groups in the realm of policymaking, be it in social or educational contexts. Sociologist Hanna Zaremba-Kosovych and

manager Viktoriia Kharchenko share their experience of conducting interviews with individuals with disabilities. Sociologist Mariia Shvab discusses her dissertation project focusing on the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth during wartime. Sociologist Inha Kozlova and historian Nadia Ufimtseva are gathering testimonies from history teachers who have collaborated with the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies.

The fourth section concentrates on methodologies developed abroad and localized by Ukrainian teams before the full-scale invasion. The interviews delve into how these teams adapted to new challenges. Historians Svitlana Osipchuk and Viktoriia Nesterenko introduce the War Childhood Museum, founded in Sarajevo after the Bosnian War, which has had a Ukrainian representative office since 2020. Cultural manager Yevheniia Nesterovych discusses her collaboration with Czech NGO Post Bellum, which expanded its reach to Ukraine in 2020. During our conversation with Yevheniia, we revisit the importance of documenting and preserving the stories of military personnel, given the profound changes in their lives due to Russian aggression and the distinctions in their experiences compared to civilians.

The fifth section looks at initiatives focused on establishing archives. Historians Tetiana Kovtunovych and Tetiana Pryvalko from the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance discuss its oral history archive, which has been systematically documenting the war since 2016 and preserving interviews with civilians, volunteers, veterans, and combatants. Project manager Mariia Buchelnikova and human rights activist Yaroslav Kyryienko describe the Docudays initiative, *Ukraine War Archive*, actively working to gather evidence for justice. The chapter is rounded out by historians Artem Kharchenko and Valentyna Shevchenko, who share their experiences working on the international project *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War*, implemented by the Center for Urban History in collaboration with colleagues from Poland, Luxembourg, Germany, and the UK. I also contribute to this conversation as a narrator, illustrating the intersection of various roles in war documentation initiatives.

In a discussion with Kateryna Yakovlenko, historian Katherine Younger, one of the initiators of the *Documenting Ukraine* program, points out that today the Russian war in Ukraine is portrayed by a diverse array of voices: “While we may be listening to more voices and have more sources, does that necessarily mean that all these sources and voices are truly heard?” (Yakovlenko 2023b). Who among those inquiring about war experiences is not represented in this compilation? Due to

security concerns, the book excludes projects related to regions currently under Russian administration. Additionally, the narratives of my foreign colleagues who came to Ukraine to conduct interviews after the full-scale invasion are not included here, as much of the literature on war and violence documentation pertains to work conducted outside their native countries (Cave and Sloan 2014; Mac Ginty, Brett, and Vogel 2021; Nordstrom and Robben 1996). Special attention should be given to the experiences of researchers of Ukrainian origin who were already affiliated with institutions outside Ukraine at the time of the full-scale invasion or who were compelled to relocate abroad thereafter, and who have undertaken the task of studying the lives of their compatriots in host communities. Lastly, this book maintains its focus on projects utilizing interview methods, excluding various initiatives involving visual and digital documentation or artistic reflection.

Recognizing these limitations indicates the next direction for progress. Through the compilation titled *Conversations with Those Who Ask about War: Practices of Interviewing during Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*, my colleagues and I intend to initiate a series of publications delving into various facets of operating in a profoundly open and precarious period. In doing so, we aim to establish a platform for collective reflection, where we can explore solutions to the challenges and queries that researchers encounter within the context of a full-scale war.

The conversations documented for this book encapsulate the reality of collecting war testimonies as of the summer of 2023. I am finalizing the introduction in early October. The future remains uncertain, but "as long as we are alive, nothing is final." With this phrase, sociologist Iryna Bekeshkina concluded her rather pessimistic article on the state of democracy in Ukraine in 2003, a year before the Orange Revolution. She used the same words to title a column about Ukraine in 2009, four years before the Euromaidan began (Bekeshkina 2009). Being within history means acknowledging its unpredictability. It also implies that how it unfolds depends on us.

This publication came about under extraordinary circumstances, thanks to several collaborations. I am deeply grateful to the Körber-Stiftung and the Foundation for Polish Science for their support in my work on this book.

With this volume, *Documenting Ukraine* at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM Vienna), the Center for Urban History, Max Weber Foundation's Research Centre Ukraine, and INDEX: Institute for Documentation and Exchange are launching a series of publications—a crucial step in reclaiming the future as a space for planning. Sofia Dyak

and Katherine Younger developed the concept for the series and have been instrumental in guiding its progress. My colleagues at the Center for Urban History reviewed the initial draft of the introduction and provided invaluable feedback. Their unwavering support continues to motivate me daily, as it is thanks to their dedication that we are realizing the project *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War*. Many steps lay between my first vision of this publication and the moment you are now reading it—from recording and transcribing conversations to editing, layout, proofreading, and printing. I deeply appreciate everyone's contributions to this work, which often go unseen yet are profoundly important. I extend my heartfelt thanks to all whose voices fill this collection, for their trust, openness, and commitment to documenting the war. Special thanks to Alevtina Kakhidze, who contributed her artwork to form this book's visual narrative. Her drawings stand as a poignant testament to the first days of the full-scale invasion.

I have the privilege of working on this text while residing in Lviv, made possible by the men and women who have joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine and are holding the frontline. To those individuals who work tirelessly every day to ensure the future of war documentation projects in postwar Ukraine, I dedicate this book.

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Chapter 1

Experiences of Rootedness

Humanitarian Aspects of the Russian-Ukrainian War

Svitlana Makhovska on Expeditions to the De-occupied Chernihiv Region

The conversation was recorded online on May 29, 2023

Svitlana Makhovska (S. M.): I prefer not to speak too much about myself. My professional background can be summed up briefly: I hold a PhD in History and am an ethnologist and anthropologist with a master's degree in philology.

During my postgraduate studies at the M. Rylskyi Institute of Art Studies, Folklore, and Ethnology at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, I first entered the "ethnographic field," where I learned the art of listening to people's stories. My research at that time focused on wedding traditions, often evoking smiles and gratitude from respondents as they fondly recalled the carefree days of their youth. After defending my dissertation, I shifted focus to studying regions impacted by the Chornobyl disaster. This work, at the State Research Center for the Protection of Cultural Heritage from Man-Made Disasters, involved documenting the experiences of people traumatized by forced resettlement from the exclusion zone. Recording these testimonies required specialized field skills that went beyond traditional methods. As Lina Kostenko once aptly put it, our center's expeditionary research was truly "extreme ethnography." Studying disaster anthropology meant utilizing research tools that were unfamiliar to me during my earlier work on wedding rituals. But the biggest challenge I would face as a field researcher was still to come.

On February 24, 2022, Ukrainian scholars were suddenly forced to reassess everything we had been doing. I initially felt that all my

previous research had been irrelevant, a reaction I later understood to be shaped by stress.

After the full-scale invasion, I left Kyiv with my family; survival, daily necessities, and safeguarding my young children became my priorities—my son was three, and my daughter only nine months. Once I began to recover, I noticed that many colleagues hadn't been in contact, and I realized that some might never return. Still, I pushed these thoughts away.

One of the hardest moments was during the intense fighting in the Chernihiv region, where, as we later learned, parts of the territory had been temporarily occupied. I was deeply worried for my colleague and friend, Kateryna Lytvyn, with whom I had completed postgraduate studies and defended my dissertation under the guidance of Olena Boriak. The place to which Kateryna and her son had relocated, hoping to escape the bombardment, fell under occupation for 36 days. When she finally managed to contact me, it was enough just to hear that they were safe. At that time, we had neither the strength nor the capacity to recount or listen to what we had each endured. It took me several weeks to come to terms with the situation and feel ready to take action. So, when Kateryna reached out with an idea—What do you think about going to the de-occupied settlements in the Chernihiv region and working there?—I readily agreed.

We realized that traveling outside the city of Chernihiv was still extremely dangerous due to mines and damaged bridges. With logistics nearly impossible to predict, we decided to focus on recording testimonies within Chernihiv's three hardest-hit districts. Kateryna, as an "insider," saw the importance of capturing the personal stories of Chernihiv's residents. As an ethnologist, she also recognized that our years of fieldwork experience would be invaluable in this endeavor.

At that time, I couldn't personally join the "war field" because I needed to prioritize the safety and well-being of my young children, and my daughter was still breastfeeding. So I took on the role of research manager, reaching out to colleagues and inviting them to join the expedition. My biggest concern was that I couldn't ensure the safety of my fellow researchers, but they chose to go regardless.

For several weeks, we concentrated on preparing for the expedition. I identified key areas for research and focused on developing questionnaires. By the time we set out, we had four questionnaires covering these themes: combat and siege, occupation, evacuation, and volunteering. We held brief Zoom meetings to address various organizational details. In addition to documenting Russian war

crimes in Ukraine, we decided to expand our research topics to include aspects of military daily life: the organization of routines, nutrition, hygiene, setting up shelters, survival strategies under occupation and siege, life in evacuation, the volunteer movement, military folklore, and more.

We soon realized there were significant issues related to the psychological readiness of both our respondents and ourselves to handle the interviews. Talking with my colleagues, it became clear that reactions to sharing personal war experiences varied greatly—some were reluctant, while others felt a strong need to speak. This diversity in response led us to seek guidance from Hanna Chepurna, a PhD psychologist from Chernihiv with extensive experience in trauma and post-traumatic support. At that time, she was already providing psychological assistance to Chernihiv residents in need. First, Hanna reviewed our questionnaires to understand the themes we wanted to explore with people. Then she joined one of our Zoom meetings, where we had a long discussion. By the end, she seemed to give us the green light, noting that the interviews we planned could even have a therapeutic effect.

Still, doubts about working in a "war field" persisted. We were well aware of ongoing discussions among our foreign colleagues regarding the risks of recording testimonies about traumatic events and the potential impacts of conducting "early interviews." However, we also recognized that most of the discourse on this topic focused on trauma that had already occurred, rather than trauma unfolding in real-time. Capturing testimonies "here and now" during an active war was (and remains) an unprecedented approach in global practice.

We recognized that ethical and legal issues in the context of war were taking on entirely new dimensions. Security considerations had become more complex, requiring us to handle personal data with heightened care and ensure confidentiality around sensitive information. Despite these concerns, we decided to proceed. The questionnaires were ready, along with consent forms for the collection, storage, and disclosure of recorded testimonies. We also established the working title for our project: "Humanitarian Aspects of the Russian-Ukrainian War of 2014-2022: Historical and Cultural Perspectives and Modern Survival Strategies." This title has remained unchanged—except that the end year, initially set as 2022 in the hope of a swift resolution, has since lost its relevance.

The first expedition to liberated Chernihiv began on May 14, 2022. Kateryna Lytvyn arranged dormitory accommodations for her col-

leagues, who covered their own travel expenses. But the financial side was not the hardest part. With bridges around Chernihiv and nearby areas destroyed, reaching the destination posed a significant challenge. Kateryna handled all logistical matters with great responsibility and professionalism, creating a database of respondents willing to be interviewed—an approach that streamlined our search and saved valuable time.

Given the project's volunteer status, extended field trips were impractical. Expedition participants rotated frequently, with three to four members departing from Kyiv regularly and others joining in Chernihiv. This change in team composition was not only an organizational necessity but also allowed participants to take a much-needed break.

The first team included nine other members besides myself: Kateryna Lytvyn (PhD in History, Chernihiv), Olena Boriak (Doctor of Historical Sciences, Kyiv), Olha Vorobiei (PhD in History, Kyiv), Anastasiia Pankova (PhD in Philology, Kyiv), Olha Berezovska (Archivist, Kyiv), Serhii Sirenko (PhD in History, Kyiv), Oleksandr Shevchuk (Head of the Department of Culture and Tourism, Chernihiv City Council), Liudmyla Vyhivska (Director at the Chernihiv City Council's Tourist Information Center, PhD in History, Kyiv), and Viktoriia Pavlenko (Administrator at the Chernihiv City Council's Tourist Information Center). Today, I realize that our ability to conduct research so soon after the de-occupation of Chernihiv region—just a month after—was largely thanks to the leadership of the Department of Culture and Tourism of the Chernihiv City Council, particularly Oleksandr Shevchuk, recognizing its importance. Under different circumstances, it is unlikely we would have been able to do it so quickly. This timing enabled us to begin compiling the war archive of the Chernihiv region almost from the very beginning of the full-scale invasion, a resource that is still missing in many other de-occupied Ukrainian territories.

In 2022, our team of volunteer researchers conducted six visits to twelve de-occupied settlements in the Chernihiv district of Chernihiv oblast, documenting testimonies about military life and survival strategies from residents of three neighborhoods that endured the most during the siege and heavy shelling of the city. In early 2023, we were also able to collect testimonies from residents of Kherson, Mariupol, Irpin, Vorzel, Ukrainka, and other areas affected by Russian crimes. In total, we interviewed 107 respondents, recorded about 104 hours of audio, took 617 original photographs, and received 74 photos from informants for safekeeping. Additionally, we recorded seven videos and contributed two diaries to the project archive.

Although I was not physically present with the team, I stayed closely involved. After each trip, I organized Zoom meetings to review the results. Colleagues shared their experiences, consulted with a psychologist, and discussed their emotions and reflections, which was crucial both for their well-being and for refining the methodological approach to fieldwork in a war zone. With each trip, I updated the questionnaires, incorporating insights from my colleagues about how to communicate effectively with respondents. Over time, we created a set of guidelines on what was appropriate or inappropriate in terms of verbal (words, exclamations, phrases) and non-verbal (facial expressions, gestures, hugs, touches) communication during interviews.

We also discussed strategies for debriefing after fieldwork. Each team member had their own approach to recovery, often shaped by their individual stress tolerance, empathy, and emotional responses. Some tried to maintain a scientific tone at the beginning of the interviews, but found it harder to do so as the conversations progressed. Others preferred solitude and limited contact with family after returning home. For some, the emotional impact hit later—sometimes days or even weeks afterward. Everyone needed a different amount of time to recharge: some required more time, some less.

During one of our Zoom meetings, which included our consulting psychologist, I suggested that we document the war experiences of our own team members. Hanna Chepurna agreed, noting that it could serve as an opportunity for us to "unload," considering the nature of our work, which involved dealing with traumatic and sometimes re-traumatizing information. At that point, I didn't feel my colleagues were fully prepared for such interviews. However, later that fall, I received a call from Oksana Ovsiuk, the editor-in-chief of the academic website *Ukraina Moderna*, who proposed that we contribute to a new section she was launching called "In the Thunderstorm of War," which aimed to capture the war experiences of Ukrainian scholars.[1] Without hesitation, I agreed, and today, the website features texts from around ten of my conversations with Ukrainian researchers, including some of the participants from the Chernihiv project.

My colleagues and I developed a list of taboos to observe when interviewing war witnesses, which align with psychologists' recommendations for working with individuals who have experienced trau-

1 All interviews in the "In the Thunderstorm of War" section have now been translated into English. https://uamoderna.com/in-the-thunderstorm-of-war/about/ Accessed February 10, 2026.

ma. Additionally, some aspects of our pre-war fieldwork experience required reevaluation. For instance, before the war, I could comfortably hold a grandparent's hand or even hug a respondent at the end of an interview. Today, I realize that the trauma caused by the war has had a profound impact not only on people's mental health but also on their physical well-being. I have noticed that even some of my friends and relatives have started avoiding hugs or any physical contact that might trigger painful memories. This shift in physical boundaries is also evident during interviews, where it often takes time to even sit close to the respondent. The emotional distance between us only gradually decreases, and it can only happen if we avoid touching on topics that are too painful or that the person does not want to revisit. Moreover, we have learned to avoid saying phrases like "I understand you," as we can never fully comprehend the depth of another's experiences or the extent of their trauma. It is also crucial to refrain from making value judgments or offering overly emotional remarks, as these can significantly alter the course of the interview and affect the person's psychological state.

With a partially updated team,[2] we are preparing to launch a new phase of research, broadening the geographical scope of our project. Of course, it would be ideal to revisit last year's respondents to see how their stories might have changed over time or due to external factors. However, according to Kateryna Lytvyn, most Chernihiv residents have little desire to return to those horrific memories. Additionally, people from the most affected settlements are fatigued by the constant visits from journalists, which has, in turn, impacted our ability to continue fieldwork. But with summer approaching, we have already planned new trips, particularly to settlements in the Chernihiv oblast that we have not yet visited. Furthermore, in May 2023, we were fortunate to win a grant from the Documenting Ukraine project, which I hope will significantly support the continuation of our work.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O):** If you could take yourself back to that spring of 2022—because I often find it challenging to access those memories myself—what were your motivations? What inspired you to reconnect with your professional self and reassemble it? What drove you internally to begin this project?

2 The project team since May 2023 includes: Kateryna Lytvyn, Olena Boriak, Svitlana Makhovska, Olha Vorobiei, Anastasiia Pankova, Olha Berezovska, Oleksandr Shevchuk, Viktoriia Pavlenko, and Oleksandr Vasianovych (PhD in History, Kyiv). In 2025, Mykola Hrynchuk (PhD in Economics) joined the team.

■ **S. M.:** What was driving me then? I think it was a mix of feeling somewhat "disconnected" due to my own, less traumatic experience compared to what my colleagues endured during the occupation and blockade, and a strong inner urge to contribute in a meaningful way. I also noticed that Chernihiv and its surroundings were hardly being talked about, despite being among the first to bear the brunt of the full-scale invasion. I felt compelled to listen to and preserve the "living testimony" of those who witnessed these events, so I did everything I could, even if it had to be done remotely.

■ **N. O.:** In our research initiative, we had a similar division of responsibilities among colleagues. Those who felt less directly threatened—such as those abroad—took on tasks like preparing documents, developing informed consent forms, conducting literature reviews, and organizing seminars with trauma and violence researchers. Colleagues who had more resources recognized this and took on these roles. Our experience deeply resonates with what you're describing. Alongside this distribution of roles, there was a profound sensitivity to one another, along with strong support and trust within the network. This story of spring 2022 is truly one of solidarity, care, and mutual support.

■ **S. M.:** It was indeed a remarkable period of collaboration. Our professional listening skills were crucial. Especially after our first visits to the "war field," we realized how much people who had endured the occupation and siege wanted to be heard. After the interviews, their individual stories seemed to gain significance, bringing some relief to the respondents. Colleagues noted that many of these stories needed no prompting or clarifying questions. People shared each detail with such vividness, as if reliving the events all over again. These stories revealed gaps in our questionnaires, showing us just how challenging it is to anticipate the realities of such experiences from an "outside" perspective.

Moreover, our prior experience recording World War II memories, which we gathered before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, proved invaluable. Many survival strategies we heard from elders a decade ago have resurfaced as relevant in the context of this war.

■ **N. O.:** I also feel that we entered the stage of academic reflection quite swiftly. This, first and foremost, speaks to our remarkable resilience. I have a hypothesis that this early reflection will help us process these events over time—not by setting them aside but by actively unpacking aspects of our previous experiences and assigning them meaning, both within academic circles and in the realm of

public discourse. Additionally, our drive to record these stories stems from recognizing their immense value. To me, this is about reclaiming the uncertain future that has been, and continues to be, taken from us as a community. By creating these archives of interviews, we are preserving something that will live on in that future.

■ **S. M.:** The notion of "reclaiming the future" that you mentioned is very much aligned with our decision to publish some of the materials collected during our expeditions. At the initiative of the Institute of the History of Ukraine at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, the *Ukrainian Historical Journal* launched a section called "Everyday Life of the Russian-Ukrainian War," to which my colleagues and I contributed in the summer of 2022. At the initial stages of preparing these materials, we encountered numerous questions: What kind of material should we submit? What evidence should be omitted for security reasons? How could we protect personal data? Should we retain the distinct features of respondents' speech? How might we capture the emotions conveyed in their stories?

Ultimately, we established a method for processing the interview transcripts, which we have now used for nearly a year in preparing records for publication. We publish texts that retain the nuances of the informants' speech while limiting identifying information—only the year of birth is mentioned, and details like profession or workplace are omitted to protect identities. In some cases, we include whether or not the person has any higher education to provide additional context. Interviews with military personnel, which I am preparing for publication in *Ukraina Moderna*, require even closer scrutiny due to the sensitive information they contain.

Each piece of potentially sensitive information goes through multiple rounds of review. First, the recorders remove or encrypt anything that might pose a risk. I then re-read the text and highlight any sections that may still be problematic. Finally, we consult with experienced historians to gain an external perspective, as it can be challenging to fully assess the long-term safety of our materials. The last review is done by the editors of *Ukrainian Historical Journal*, who may also suggest further revisions. For each published interview, we include a brief reflection by the interviewer, blending personal and professional insights. While we're not aiming for in-depth scientific analysis, a short academic note or a touch of sentiment feels fitting for these publications.

■ **N. O.:** Along with publishing these stories, I'd like to discuss how you preserve them—how do you archive this data, where do you

store it, and what security protocols do you have in place? This behind-the-scenes aspect of research often goes unnoticed, yet it's crucial for projects with archival potential. So how do you handle the archiving of evidence collected in the field?

■ **S. M.:** Establishing an archive for our project has been challenging and remains unresolved. Since the participants in this research initiative come from different organizations, we don't yet have a centralized institutional archive that could officially accept and house our materials. For now, we've opted to create a standalone project archive with the help of local data storage media. This includes archiving audio recordings, photos, and videos, along with essential supporting documents like transcripts and descriptive "passports" for each record. It's hard to envision what a national Ukrainian archive for the Russo-Ukrainian War will ultimately look like or if a unified resource is even the right approach. For these reasons, we're currently focused on archiving locally.

■ **N. O.:** I'm also inclined to consider the creation of local archival centers, all connected within the same network. Different projects should be able to interact with each other, but they don't necessarily have to be concentrated in one centralized organization. However, I'm aware that there will be many challenges when setting up such a network, ranging from capacity and security to ensuring that the servers are robust enough to support the sustainability of grassroots documentation projects. That said, I believe it's important to address these challenges now and start looking for solutions. We need to establish common metadata standards for describing the collected materials to make them easier to process later on. And finally, what advice would you give to those who are just beginning to undertake such projects?

■ **S. M.:** My first piece of advice is not to fear that projects related to the investigation of the Russo-Ukrainian War might be a scientific (or unscientific) false start. As our initiative demonstrates, documenting eyewitness accounts of military life "in hot pursuit"—in the "here and now"—is a unique phenomenon that needs to be developed today.

The second piece of advice is that before starting to study the war, you need to assess your own stress resistance. One's professionalism, however unquestionable before the war, can now be compromised by psychological unpreparedness to listen to, speak about, or process memories of war crimes, or, for instance, the complex survival stories of people during the occupation. It's also crucial not to lose yourself by becoming absorbed in the experiences of others.

Another important piece of advice is to weigh the risks. Traveling to recently liberated or de-occupied territories is highly dangerous without reliable support from people you can trust with your health and safety. This is not a situation where the end justifies the means.

If I were asked what I would have done differently at the beginning of our project, I would say that we should have made as many field trips as possible. Time passes quickly, and unfortunately, many micro-stories remain unheard. In the years to come, these will become entirely different stories, much like the testimonies of World War II. That's why we need to plan carefully and do everything we can to ensure that the collective narrative does not overshadow the individual experiences of Ukrainians in the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Those Who Stayed

Iuliia Skubytska on Interviewing in the Kharkiv Region

The conversation was recorded at the Center for Urban History on August 16, 2023

Iuliia Skubytska (Iu. S.): I am a scholar, a historian. Before the full-scale war, I spent several years working in the civil society sector. I'm from Kharkiv, and I became even more clearly aware of this during the invasion. When the city was heavily bombed, I realized that no place affects me as deeply as Kharkiv. So, this year, I eagerly took on a project in my hometown because of that connection.

I lead a project called *Those Who Remained: Stories of the Residents of the Kharkiv Region*, which is organized in collaboration with the Center for Urban History in Lviv. We use similar methodology to document the experiences of internally displaced people. I am not working alone on this project, and that's very important. I bring my perspective as someone who lived in Kharkiv until I was 17, and though I later lived in other cities, I always kept returning to Kharkiv. I even wrote my first dissertation about the city. When the full-scale invasion began, I was living in Kyiv, and I left the country relatively quickly. But my team—comprising three other scholars: Viktoriia Nesterenko, Olha Chystotina, and Yaroslav Shkabura—are all from Kharkiv. More than that, they survived a year and a half of full-scale invasion in the city.

I truly value the dynamics of our team: I contribute by sharing knowledge and methodologies, while my colleagues bring invaluable insights from their lived experience of war. This has made me realize more and more how difficult it is to communicate the experience of war. I felt this intensely back in 2014, when the war began while I was in the United States. It was an overwhelming feeling of isolation:

living in a state of constant "horror mode," while everyone around you is in "normal mode." It's impossible to explain that disconnect.

That's why it was so crucial for me that my team consisted of people who remained in Kharkiv and, in a way, held onto the city throughout this time. They not only have a deeper understanding due to their lived experience, but they also bring a reflective, scholarly perspective and respect for others who have made similar decisions. This respect is essential when conducting interviews, as we aim to create a space where people can express their own agency and tell their stories.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** If you try to explain to yourself why you chose to take on this work in such difficult circumstances, I understand that part of the motivation is directly tied to Kharkiv and its significance in your life story. But could you elaborate on this question: why did you decide to do it?

■ **Iu. S.:** I thought a lot about it. For me, the "why" is an entirely emotional decision. When I do this work, I feel like I'm in the right place, doing something meaningful. I think the war has raised a lot of questions about how to be honest with yourself—how to balance your "private self" and your identity as a "citizen of Ukraine," especially when, at some point, the private self seems to disappear. Against this backdrop, there are countless discussions, or even real fights, about how to be a "good citizen." Added to that is the typical challenge faced by those who leave: you constantly feel like you're not doing enough, not contributing enough, and it makes you feel powerless.

Another challenge is convincing an institution that has invested significant effort and resources in protecting you that you should go back to Ukraine. When you're as far away as the United States, you're in a place where, logically, you shouldn't leave for a zone where missiles are flying. But, strangely, returning to Ukraine gives you a sense of strength and restores your sense of agency. It's a very odd feeling, but you never feel as connected to your land as you do during a war.

■ **N. O.:** A recurring theme in the conversations I've had is the idea of professional re-education in wartime, especially for people in the humanities and social sectors—those who work with words and ideas and who don't see the immediate, tangible results of their efforts, unlike, say, the work of volunteers. How did you build your professional identity? And what knowledge or skills did you acquire before February 24, 2022, that have helped you reclaim your professional self in these conditions?

■ **Iu. S.:** I've been on an interesting journey with my professional identity. I defended my thesis in 2018, but I felt that I couldn't express the ideas I needed to articulate. The year 2014 had a profound impact on me; it was a time when I had to reinvent myself. When I defended my dissertation, I realized I was too exhausted by academic life. I looked around and realized that, during the six years I spent writing my dissertation, I had only spent one year in Ukraine, the rest of the time was in the United States. Yet it was in Ukraine that I found many of the things that helped me move forward. So, I returned and decided to transition into the civil society sector.

When I became the head of the War Childhood Museum, I was starting a new project from scratch and had no time to think about academia. I entered 2022 as a full-time administrator who no longer considered an academic career, even though museums do research work. I was very comfortable in this role, and I enjoyed it. But then 2022 came: I quit my job, and my academic career was reset. It was during the war that I finally began to articulate the ideas I had been struggling with. It's still hard to say why it took the war for me to express these ideas and why I couldn't do that before.

Since 2015, I have been working in the field of oral history. The first set of interviews I conducted was in 2015-16 in Kharkiv, against the backdrop of the ongoing war, which was very tangible there. So, in a way, I was prepared for this kind of work, having been involved in war-related research since 2015. But I had no experience writing about a war that just exploded right in front of me. That's why, in the first months of the full-scale invasion, while I was still running the museum, we decided to pause. I didn't know how to approach the task methodologically. So, I focused on my writing and also on strengthening my knowledge about transitional justice and how scholars can be involved in these processes.

Almost a year later, my colleagues from the Center for Urban History approached me about the *Those Who Remained* project. I think it was very timely, because now is the time when it is possible to write oral history interviews, and I know how to do that. People's stories about the war have already taken shape, but at the same time, we're working in a very delicate space. These stories exist, but the trauma exists as well. Many people are still in trauma, and this affects the way the interviews are conducted significantly.

■ **N. O.:** Could you tell me more about the challenges of working in such an open, uncertain moment? How did you and your team come up with the idea for this project?

■ **Iu. S.:** One of the key issues we had to address from the start was the creation of a questionnaire. We decided to take the questionnaire from the Center for Urban History's *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War* initiative, and I also asked my colleagues from Kharkiv to suggest questions they felt should be included. By that point, they had already had some unpleasant experiences during interviews with people who came from a different frame of reference and couldn't always listen without prejudice. So, we sat down and combined the tools used by the Center with our own ideas. Some of the questions from the Center seemed like they wouldn't be relevant, but we found that they worked surprisingly well, like those about the perception of time. Interestingly, they resonated in both the small towns in the region and in Kharkiv itself. People found it easier to answer these questions than those about their perceptions of their own city.

I'm really glad we're working as a team. We set a goal of recording at least 50 interviews to start with, and we began in June 2023. A special feature of this work is that people are quite eager to participate—something that was not the case with my previous research, including the research I supervised for the War Childhood Museum. Another unique aspect is that more than one person conducts the interviews. This makes the work very collaborative. We've had several semi-formal meetings where we shared observations, and we also had two field trips to the region. We went to areas that we did not know very well because of the danger of landmines, but this experience really brought us together. It also created an opportunity to talk on the road. You get a lot of energy from this work. The stories we hear are charged with it. Yet this energy needs to flow, it should be exchanged.

We recruited participants using the snowball method. We started with friends, then their friends. We avoided open recruitment because it was important for me to avoid a situation in which we would need to reject potential participants because they were too late, we had already finished our work. We wanted to avoid giving anyone the feeling that their experiences were not being valued. When we approach someone, we do so with respect and a clear message that any type of war experience matters. This more controlled method of communication has enabled us to create a diverse sample, comprising individuals of various ages, ethnic backgrounds, and religious affiliations.

In terms of practical challenges, there are almost no places in Kharkiv where we can record interviews. Coffee shops are unsuitable because of the loud music. We conduct a lot of interviews at people's workplaces. In the summer we also recorded in parks. We've had

some very unusual situations, like when we conducted an interview in a car during one of our field trips. Still, I have to emphasize that during field trips we always work in pairs because we don't know the city and the people, and the safety of female interviewers is important to us.

Working in the Kharkiv region, particularly in the de-occupied areas, is very dangerous. Mines and "petals"[1] are everywhere, so you need someone with you who understands how to navigate these risks. I was fortunate because two of my team members had taken first aid courses. During our trips to the region, we had a tourniquet with us. Also, our driver was a veteran of the Israeli army who, after the start of the invasion, became a volunteer driving people out of the city. It was much easier for me to feel safe traveling with him because I was with someone who understood these conditions.

For me, the uniqueness of this project also lies in the fact that I've found myself in some unusual interview situations, where people give responses that are very powerful in both emotion and meaning. You ask them a question, and they respond with a strong, coherent story. Often, after hearing their story, I sit there and wonder if it's even worth asking the next question, because sometimes it feels like a superfluous kind of question. Not every interview has been like this, but many of my conversations have been. It feels like, for the first time, I'm intuitively and emotionally aware that my interviewees know exactly what they want to tell me. And often, when they share their story, I sit there and think, "Should I continue with the questions?" On the one hand, there is the project framework, but on the other hand, the presence of the narrator is so powerful that I don't want to impose my own perspective.

■ **N. O.:** I can really relate to this experience, as it's somewhat similar to ours. One part of our approach was to send a list of topics in advance to the people who volunteered to share their stories. This way, they knew what we were going to discuss. In the documentation initiative *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War* there were instances when I didn't ask any questions at all. The person had already fully formed their story before we even met, so I simply listened. In the context of war, I believe this approach is effective—being present in the moment of interaction, without interference.

1 A "petal" (Ukr. «peliustka») refers to the PFM-1, a type of scatterable high-explosive anti-personnel land mine, commonly known by this folk name (translator's note).

However, I also see a risk in this. After the interview, these deeply personal interactions, the trust and the intimate experience of the conversation between the interviewer and interviewee, are transformed into an audio recording, which then becomes a transcript and, eventually, just another set of "data." This raises a question: how can we convey the sensitivity of that relationship when the nature of the interaction shifts, and a unique conversation becomes just one of many in a collection? I don't have an answer yet, but I feel this tension and the need to find a solution.

■ **Iu. S.:** I strongly felt that, at least at this stage, only the people who conducted the interviews should be working with this data. Without experience in the field, it's easy to overlook the subtleties. That's why I emphasized to my colleagues the importance of writing research notes to capture what isn't immediately apparent in the recordings.

My perspective is rooted in oral history, so data, in my view, holds slightly less weight compared to, for example, analyzing how people in an interview setting search for their own agency, how they regain an active role, and what situations strip them of it. I also believe it's crucial to produce some form of knowledge at this stage, because in a year, we'll look at these materials in a very different way.

■ **N. O.:** These conversations demand a significant emotional investment. So, my natural question is: how do you take care of yourself and your team under these circumstances?

■ **Iu. S.:** Since I began working at the museum, I've always stressed to my colleagues the importance of self-care. For this project, we brought a psychologist on board and went through training with her. The interviewers had the option to work with her individually. We also made sure the interviewees had access to her services, as well as information about other free psychological support services available in Kharkiv. We talked a lot about staying connected with ourselves and making the interview process as comfortable as possible for our participants.

Another important aspect is how to foster good relationships within the team. At this level, I try to show as much respect, admiration, and support as possible. I continually emphasize that we shouldn't push ourselves too hard because we are our own working tools. If someone agrees to immerse themselves in such a challenging experience with us, what we can bring to that meeting is our full attention. So, in order to be effective in these conversations, we need to manage our resources carefully. For example, I made it clear that recording two interviews in a single day is simply not an option.

■ **N. O.:** How do you envision the future of these stories? Will they become part of an archive, or take on some other form of storytelling, preservation, or dissemination? The next question is: how do we create narratives from these stories? How do we theorize our experiences in the present moment?

■ **Iu. S.:** We are still in the middle of the process, but I can already see some potential paths for what we can do. We are creating an archive, which feels both timely and important because we are walking a fine line: people haven't fully recovered from the intense phase of the war, but they have started to recover a bit, and the region is still in the very early stages of recovery. I believe that if we conduct these interviews in six months or a year, the stories people share will be different. Ultimately, I hope to write a book based on this archive.

It is also crucial to me that we continue to communicate and discuss these experiences, to stay connected to the process of interviewing. It's about creating meaning and finding ways to communicate that meaning through different methods. For example, Olha Chystotina, a wonderful photographer, made a striking visual representation of one of our interviewee's comments, which inspired the idea of creating some kind of visual component for the project. This could be a participatory collaboration between photographers and storytellers to create a visual series. If we are talking about experience and how to communicate it, I think it's important to experiment with different media to rethink the message, to highlight various aspects, and to make it "resonate."

Looking ahead, it is vital for me to continue working with the team. I want to contribute to supporting the scholarly community and young researchers in Kharkiv, as they are in an incredibly vulnerable situation. I want to help those who wish to remain in the profession and give them the opportunity to develop. I also want to amplify the voice of Kharkiv. For many people currently living in the city and the region, it's important to see that they have done something meaningful and that they can continue to make a difference. My approach is that place matters. The place from which we speak is important.

■ **N. O.:** If we return to the concept of an archive, what should its structure look like? Should it be focused solely on this project, or, looking ahead, could it evolve into a single archive encompassing all the documentation of the war in Ukraine since 2014? Alternatively, might it take the form of a network of institutions dedicated to preserving and sharing these stories?

■ **Iu. S.:** I view this project as one key component of a larger archive currently being developed by the Center for Urban History. However, what stands out in these interviews with people who endured the first year and a half of the full-scale invasion in Kharkiv is a deep, local connection to the land. I suspect that something similar will emerge in other regions as well. For that reason, this future joint archive could serve as a model for the entire collection, as the place and time of the recording are essential to the narrative.

One aspect I'd like to further explore in our work is the idea of uniting and building connections among those who made the conscious decision to stay. They share certain values, and as we move into processes of recovery and reconstruction in these areas, it is often a challenging journey for many. It would be beneficial for them to have a support system to rely on, as they already lean on one another in times of difficulty. This support is crucial, as enduring the intense phase of war and the trauma of deoccupation is an incredibly difficult experience. One thing that has quickly become apparent to me is that Ukrainian resilience, while powerful, doesn't leave much room for grieving—grieving for the personal losses that people have faced. I believe it's important to create spaces for this kind of grief, as the need for them is very much felt. We need to find a way to address this.

■ **N. O.:** If you could offer any advice to those planning to undertake similar work as your team is doing, what would it be?

■ **Iu. S.:** It seems to me that, at the very least, you shouldn't approach this with the mindset of "reinventing the wheel." I've always advocated for collegial collaboration, and a lot has already been done in this regard. It's much easier to dive into this kind of work when you can consult with colleagues who have experience in the field. We built our practices, approaches, and methodology based on the work already done by our colleagues at the Center for Urban History, and this has been incredibly helpful. Some of the solutions we didn't expect to work turned out to be very successful.

It's also crucial that we continue the conversation around how to conduct participatory research and think about how we involve people in understanding its results. While I'm eager to write and publish a book, it would be even more exciting to create a collaborative, co-creative product.

Lastly, I believe that, on a larger scale, Ukraine needs solidarity within the scholarly community to strengthen our voices and institutions.

Chronicles 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 Ribbon[2] 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.

Past, Future, Art

Olha Hvozdetska and Oksana Dovgopolova on the Connection with Odesa

The conversation was recorded online on August 25, 2023

Oksana Dovgopolova (O. D.): I hold a Doctorate in Philosophy and serve as a professor in the Department of Philosophy at I. I. Mechnikov Odesa National University. Additionally, I am the curator of the *Past/Future/Art* platform dedicated to memory culture. I have been living in Odesa since the start of the full-scale invasion.

Olha Hvozdetska (O. H.): I am a TV presenter and journalist, and a graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy at Odesa National University. I have been in Odesa since the first day of the full-scale invasion. Although I briefly traveled to Romania through Moldova, I have mostly stayed in the city, working in the information sphere.

O. D.: I was also an advisor for Olha's PhD project, which, unfortunately, was never completed because Olha was already deeply involved in the media. But now I'm joking with her, saying, "We have the material, let's finally wrap this up."

Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.): Can you tell me more about what brings you together now—the project you started after the full-scale invasion? I'd like you to reflect on the spring of 2022 and share what motivated you to take on this work.

O. D.: Why did I do this? When the invasion began, if I had stopped working, I would probably have lost my mind. I needed to do something meaningful. Besides just surviving, we had to make a decision—whether to stay or leave. In order to hold together, we had to take action. But there were many things we could do: some useful in the moment, some for the future. We had to find a balance.

Why did I decide to record people? I could see how dramatically experiences were changing, how differently people were feeling. Given my focus on memory work, I noticed that at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, people often used metaphors from the Second World War, but it soon became clear that this was a very different situation. I understood that in six months, a year, or two years, these views would change completely, and we needed to capture them in the moment. It was important to record this now, as it would influence the development of our relationship with the past.

Very quickly, within about two months, it became clear that the experiences of those who stayed and those who left were beginning to diverge. People were interpreting what they saw in very different ways. For those living through it, their relationship with the city was changing. For those who had left, their connection to the city remained anchored in the past, the same as it was before the invasion. I asked myself: when they return, will they find a different city? For them, it's still their hometown as they knew it before they left, and they'll approach the conversation with the past from that perspective. But the city has already changed. How do they reconcile this? That's why it was important for me to document these transformations, to record the experiences of those who stayed and those who came back to the city.

I started recording in May-June 2022. Around that time, I brought Olha into the project, so it became a joint idea. We discussed it a lot together. Olha was still very active at the volunteer center at that point, and we recorded several interviews with internally displaced people (IDPs). We wanted to understand how they see Odesa.

■ **O. H.:** I'd like to start by saying that I didn't join the project right away—not in the spring. At that time, we were all confused. It wasn't until the end of the summer of 2022 that the idea came about. It started with communication with IDPs, because at that time, I was deeply involved in working with them. Some of them hardly spoke at all, and others gave short answers to simple questions. But there were some who really wanted to talk—it was clear they needed to share their experiences. I offered to record their stories: some refused, others agreed, and we recorded them. These were rather short interviews, lasting 40 to 60 minutes. After two interviews, I couldn't continue—it was very difficult for both the people and for me. I took a break for two or three days, as I couldn't think about anything else.

Then we spoke with different Odesans: those who stayed, those who left and hadn't returned yet, and those who left and came back.

It became clear that there weren't just two different experiences, but many more. In the end, we started conducting interviews that focused more on relationships with the past and active work in the present.

■ **O. D.:** We shifted our focus a little. Last year, we had the idea of recording a diverse group of people with varying experiences. We recorded interviews with IDPs, and it was important for us to understand their perspective on Odesa. But last year, we also launched a friendly newsletter with a Google form containing questions about changing relationships with the past. There was a section that said, "If you want to talk about something more, please leave your contact information." Some of the interviews arose from this Google form.

In the fall of 2022, people began returning, and we have several interviews with this group. For me, it was important to capture the moment when someone had just returned—what were their impressions of Odesa, and why did they come back? We collected some really powerful stories. It was also therapeutic for me—I feel very happy when people come back.

As time passed, I could already see a change in perspective. In 2023, I told myself, "The time for chaos is over. If we're going to continue this, we need to find a clear focus." In 2023, the picture of the city changed for me. I realized I needed to talk to those who were actively contributing to the city, whether by staying or by leaving. That's why we decided to focus on recording the stories of people who were seriously and consciously working on the city's development, with a vision for the future. We've conducted more in-depth, long-form interviews.

We immediately decided to record audio only—no video—so the person wouldn't be distracted by the camera. It's also important that Olha and I share our impressions after these conversations, since I don't see what's happening outside of the recording. We hope to continue this direction, but we don't yet have the time resources to fully pursue it.

■ **N. O.:** Are you two the team behind this project?

■ **O. D.:** Yes, that's right. This is actually an initiative of our platform dedicated to memory culture, *Past/Future/Art*, but Olha and I manage this part of the project ourselves.

■ **N. O.:** Speaking with you, two things stand out. First, the questions you bring into new situations seem deeply connected to your previous interests and skills. Second, initiatives like yours serve a dual purpose. On one hand, they address a real need for people to

share their stories, offering a therapeutic outlet for both you and the storytellers. On the other, they aim to create a lasting resource for the future. You talk about the importance of capturing these experiences before they settle into fixed forms, so we can later observe their evolution. This approach, you suggest, can help us understand the different ways people enter these conversations, fostering dialogue between very different experiences.

I'm curious about your thoughts on how to label this work: should we call it an interview, a conversation, oral history, documentation, or something entirely new? So far, we've been using an existing conceptual framework, but we're increasingly aware that it doesn't quite fit.

■ **O. D.:** We call them "in-depth interviews" because we're not merely documenting people's experiences—we have a specific focus. We're exploring how people's relationships with the past are evolving. When we began in 2022, we felt like we were capturing something immediate, yet we had no clear sense of where it was all leading. I remember telling myself back then that everything was shifting, that in two years, Odesa would have a different way of speaking about its past. It's fascinating to look back and see how we imagined the future during those fluid times.

Initially, the idea was to record in 2022, then again in 2023, and 2024, to create a timeline for comparison. But already, I can see certain patterns forming—trends that hint at how Odesa might come to understand itself, not only as part of Ukraine but as part of the wider region. I feel it's time to enrich our own imaginations with what we've heard in these conversations. In many ways, these interviews serve as a form of therapy, both for those sharing their stories and for us. Personally, some of these conversations have been deeply meaningful; they allowed me to connect and share experiences with people I might never have opened up to otherwise. They've had a real impact.

■ **O. H.:** Speaking of self-therapy, these interviews have brought so many revelations. I've wrestled with existential questions I couldn't answer—why didn't we leave? Why did we stay? What is the right thing to do? During one conversation, I asked the narrator, "Why did you come back? What waited for you here?" She answered, and in the process used the English word "rooting." She paused, unsure of how to translate it, and I repeated, now in Ukrainian, "Rootedness" [vkorinennia]. And then it struck me. Eight months after the full-scale invasion, I was still questioning myself daily: why didn't I leave? But in that moment, I found my answer—"rooting" became my answer. It was like a flash of clarity. Just roots! I realized that if you uprooted me

and placed me somewhere else, I simply wouldn't grow. This image means so much to me.

■ **N. O.:** There's one more observation I'd like to explore. I've noticed that researchers often start with a wide lens, capturing a broad range of stories and valuing diversity as a key selection criterion. Over time, though, the focus tends to sharpen. I've seen this in my own work and in the projects of colleagues—the perspective becomes more defined as clarity grows. If I'm understanding correctly, you're currently honing in on themes of relationship with the past and with place. Could you talk about the main challenges you've faced in this work and what you had to learn along the way? On one hand, you rely on your experience, but on the other, no one taught us how to conduct a project under the threat of missile strikes, with constant risks to your safety, to your narrators, and to the people you care about. How did you manage to navigate these challenges?

■ **O. D.:** Actually, I didn't have much experience recording interviews—I hadn't intended to work this way. When we first launched oral history field trips at *Past/Future/Art*, we collaborated with people who had the expertise. We did conduct some interviews ourselves, but the primary work was handled by others. So, although I'd been involved in previous oral history projects, my role was usually to frame the questions and interpret the results rather than engage directly with people. Here, though, I found myself in direct communication, which was new for me. I eventually asked Olha to join when I realized I couldn't do it alone—I needed her help to connect with the people I wanted to reach. Through this, we built our own approach and have been refining it since.

Before we even founded *Past/Future/Art* in 2017, I had collaborated with the *Odyssey Donbas* initiative in Odesa. There, artist and researcher Darya Tsymbalyuk, along with colleagues Viktor Korvik and Yuliia Filipieva, conducted in-depth interviews that transformed into drawings. One participant in the project went through an extraordinary change—after the interview, she "came out of her cocoon," reconnecting with joyful memories of her pre-war life and addressing life issues she had previously set aside. For me, this confirmed that working with people affected by trauma was meaningful, even though it was not in wartime conditions. Incidentally, one of Olha's interviews captures the sounds of explosions in the background—"bang, bang." Olha casually remarks, "Oh, a strike!" and her interviewee from Mariupol calmly replies, "No, no, it's not a strike. Strikes sound different. It's fine, let's continue."

■ **O. H.:** I have a lot of experience with TV interviews, but in a research project, it's an entirely different experience—a different level of trust and openness. There's a certain intimacy that can emerge in these conversations, something unique to the moment and the specific person you're speaking with.

When it comes to the emotional state of the interviewees, it varies. One person, for instance, cried through almost the entire conversation. Later that evening, she messaged me, saying, "Thank you so much! Talking to you made me realize I need to see a therapist. I thought I could 'handle it' on my own, but now I see I'm not actually dealing with it." This was a positive outcome, a step toward self-care. But there's a more challenging side, too. One interviewee had a panic attack right in the middle of our conversation. We talked about it afterward, but we couldn't pinpoint what triggered it. This was the only time I encountered such an intense reaction—usually, people felt a sense of relief and, in many cases, even admitted they felt better after the interview.

■ **N. O.:** Unfortunately, we can never be certain how a particular story might impact someone. This uncertainty means we need to be even more attentive, ready to respond in various situations. This is our reality now: we've been living in a state of war for nine years, and as interviewers, one of our essential skills is recognizing when an interviewee may be experiencing overwhelming emotions. This has become a fundamental part of our training—almost like part of our own internal system. How do you take care of yourself in these situations? You encounter a wide range of stories, either directly in the interview or later while processing them. What strategies do you use to cope?

■ **O. H.:** Oksana walks by the sea—it helps her. [At the time of this recording, she was actually walking in a coastal park.—N.O.] I can't live without the sea either. I go for runs. Jogging really helps.

■ **O. D.:** I haven't really had any traumatic interviews, but there was a moment that hit me hard. The first time I saw the aftermath of a strike was intense. At first, I only saw a photo, but eventually, I saw the impact site in person—the entry and exit points, how terrifying it all was. I ended up there by chance, about a month later. After that, I bought myself some ice cream. I realized I did it because I needed something simple, something grounding, to remind myself that I was still alive.

■ **N. O.:** Let's return to your project and the point when these interviews are transformed into digital records and text. How do you work

with the stories you've collected? How do you go about describing and storing them?

■ **O. H.:** I quickly gathered the last set of interviews, focusing on people involved in the development of Odesa. I had almost one interview every day. After that, I began transcribing them right away. But it's not a traditional transcription process—it's more of a thematic summary of the conversation, with selected quotes and additional comments on the points we're interested in. First, I record the interview, then transcribe it and add my notes. Afterward, Oksana listens to the audio separately, reads my notes, and adds her own. Finally, we compile everything into a shared spreadsheet.

The recordings are stored on my Google Drive, and I also make copies. I have this constant, almost panicked fear that something might get lost.

■ **O. D.:** We duplicate everything on the *Past/Future/Art* Google Drive and also transfer it to a hard drive, where we keep the most important materials. In general, this is one of the key issues when collecting interviews: how to archive them and make them live on. Even if they're well organized and stored on a disk, if no one is accessing them, it becomes a problem. This is something many oral history projects struggle with—they record a wealth of material, but it ends up sitting somewhere, out of sight and unused.

■ **N. O.:** So, how do you envision access to these materials and their continued relevance after you've recorded them?

■ **O. D.:** I genuinely envision these materials living on in this processed form, eventually being published. Recently, I came across a wonderful Swiss program focused on documenting in conjunction with transitional justice, where they proposed the idea of creating large archives to which individual initiatives could contribute their work, making it accessible. I'm not sure yet where our materials could be transferred, but we do plan to continue working and will think more about it. I realize that this could be useful not only for us but for others as well. When we record these interviews, we fully inform our respondents that the project is part of *Past/Future/Art*. We can't transfer any materials without their consent, so if we're going to create such a central archive, we need to have those conversations with all the people involved.

While most people allow us to use their materials, I don't always think they fully understand the consequences. If we decide to publish something, we will definitely contact them again. And if we want to transfer this archive—thankfully, it's not that large—we'll need to

ask their permission. Personally, I wouldn't hand over interviews with internally displaced people to anyone else, because their experiences are so specific. At the same time, many of our interviewees understand the importance of discussing certain topics publicly, and some even ask for approval before their stories are published.

■ **N. O.:** Absolutely, respecting the wishes of the person is key, and it's also essential to understand what our responsibility as researchers is. My final question is about advice: If you could go back to the moment when you first envisioned this project, what would you advise yourself?

■ **O. D.:** I think I'd advise myself not to be afraid to do it. But it's important to have a clear conversation with yourself: what do I want, why am I doing this, and why am I doing it right now? It's crucial to approach the process mindfully and to seek guidance from those who already have experience. Talk to them, ask them: what scared you, what scares me? For instance, I consulted with my anthropologist colleague, and she told me that I need to understand that conversations can sometimes take unexpected turns, and those moments can be the most fruitful. In other words, don't try to force someone into a box. Sometimes the person you're speaking with will take a roundabout path, and along the way, they may touch on important things and contexts that you didn't expect.

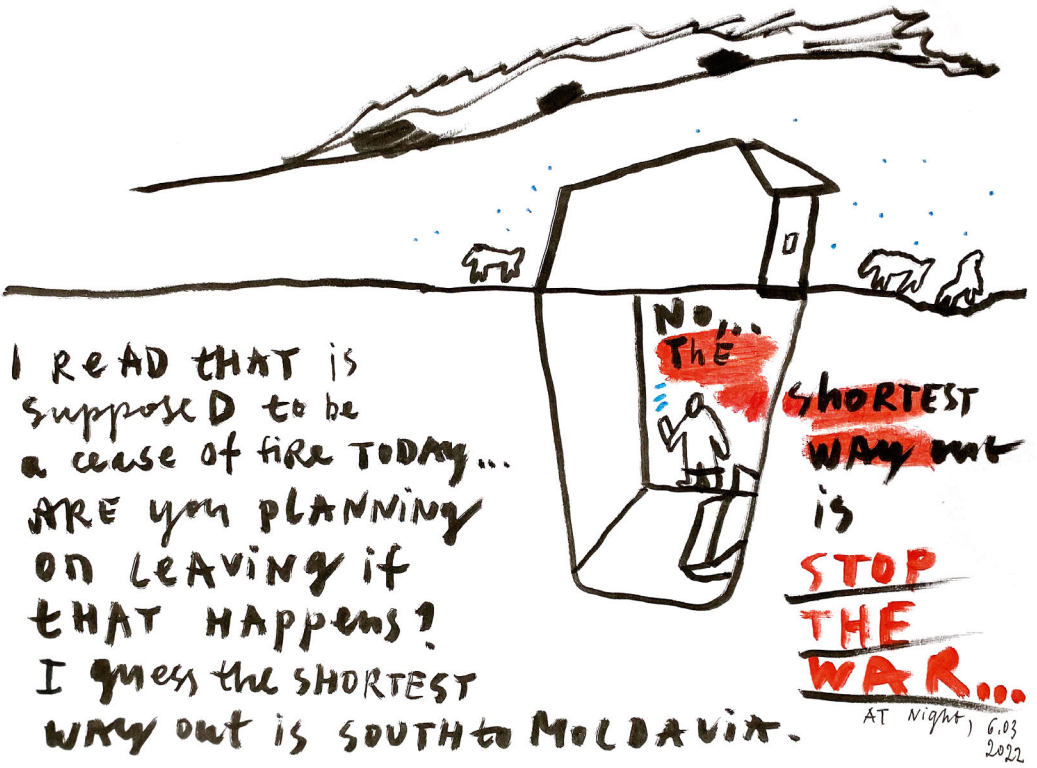
■ **O. H.:** I'm going to focus on the interview aspect because you need to take responsibility for your part in the process. My advice would be to find an inner balance where you can be both empathetic and detached enough to perceive history as history, rather than living it as your own experience. It's difficult; it's not something you're born with, but it's a skill you can develop. You need to be like a membrane through which the communication process flows. You can't avoid being empathetic, because if you aren't, the person won't open up and share anything meaningful. But at the same time, you can't get completely immersed in their story either, because then you risk losing yourself in it. I think that's the key.

■ **O. D.:** And it's essential to think about preserving these stories and ensuring they continue to have life, so that all this immense work doesn't go to waste.

■ **N. O.:** Exactly, that's why this publication was conceived—to help us think about the future together and understand that recording an interview is just the first step. There will be many more steps, and we can move in many different directions from here.

Chapter 2

Forced Displacement



24.02. Life After

Andrii Usach and Anna Yatsenko on Recording the Stories of Internally Displaced People in Lviv

The conversation was recorded at the Center for Urban History on May 24, 2023

Andrii Usach (A. U.): We co-founded the non-governmental organization "After Silence" in early 2021 to document Ukraine's painful 20th-century history and to develop public history projects based on these experiences. Our work involves recording oral history interviews with people who remember the events of the 1930s through the 1950s, as well as digitizing their personal archives. Among those who share their stories with us are survivors of the Holodomor, World War II, the Holocaust, forced labor in Nazi Germany, imprisonment in Gulag camps, and Soviet mass deportations. We strive to bring their stories to a broader audience through documentaries, exhibitions, podcasts, comics, and other formats.

Anna Yatsenko (A. Ya.): When the war began, we were in shock—unsure whether to continue at all. But then friends, friends of friends, and even acquaintances of acquaintances started coming to us, sharing their experiences of evacuation, describing what they had been through, and how they had lived during those early days of the war. We realized that this experience needed to be documented. Our first conversations were with friends and acquaintances who had evacuated from different cities. For some, it was their second evacuation: first from Donetsk to Kyiv, and now from Kyiv to Lviv. We called these recordings "conversations" because we simply listened to what people wanted to share in that moment—without probing questions or extra details—just what they were feeling.

■ **A. U.:** In March 2022, there was much more uncertainty than now—no one knew how things would end. Russian troops were actively advancing, occupying areas that are now back under Ukrainian control. We were documenting in real time, as events were unfolding, with no clear outcome in sight. Our goal was to capture how people processed what was happening to them at that very moment, knowing that a year later, they would likely tell very different stories. Having worked with oral histories from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, we understand that what we record is not so much reality itself as it is each person's interpretation of it.

In the early days of the full-scale war, filming was challenging. Our idea was to capture stories in the city, which we thought might require a permit to film. So, we partnered with Lviv Media and received journalists' credentials, which weren't necessary in the end. Through this collaboration, we also created several stories based on our recordings. This meant we weren't only documenting; we were also sharing these stories publicly, which required additional coordination with participants. We obtained informed consent from everyone, and before releasing any videos, we double-checked with each person. For example, one man agreed to share his story but requested that we alter his voice, obscure his face, and withhold his real name.

■ **A. Ya.:** A young woman who evacuated from Bucha in the early days mentioned that if she were to tell her story again, she'd tell it differently. When we recorded her in Lviv, she still didn't know everything that had happened back in Bucha.

■ **A. U.:** We asked if we could make her initial story public, and she agreed, but she also noted that her perspective would be different now.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** So, it sounds like you recognized that this period of uncertainty offered multiple interpretations, and it was vital to capture stories as they emerged, before familiar ways of narrating them took shape. You drew on your past experience, but also acknowledged that the current circumstances were entirely unique. I'd be curious to know: what aspects of your previous approach proved effective, and what required adaptation?

■ **A. U.:** From the start, we envisioned creating a video project. Our team of five worked on every aspect—managing the project, finding people willing to share their stories, coordinating interviews, and handling technical preparation. We filmed each conversation with two cameras, professional lighting, and high-quality audio; from a technical perspective, it was all very well-executed. In the past, we

only approached this level of production quality for documentary projects. Perhaps we harbored documentary ambitions from the beginning, even if they weren't fully formed. But as we worked, we realized the direction this project should take. What we've completed so far is just the first stage. The second stage will come after we win the war—whenever that may be.

What sets our work apart is that we don't call this an oral history project; instead, it's a series of conversations, a documentation of lived experiences. We didn't use a formal questionnaire. As the interviewer, I'd ask people to introduce themselves, then, "How did you come to be in Lviv?" since the project focuses on those who came to Lviv because of the full-scale invasion. We had only a few questions at the end of each conversation to tie the stories together. These questions were shaped by our previous experience.

■ **A. Ya.:** Those questions were: "Did your family ever talk about their experiences during World War II and how they survived it?"; "What did you take with you, or what didn't you take with you?"; "Do you feel like your home is lost?"; "What do you value most?"; "Why did you come to Lviv?"; And finally, "What are your plans for the future?"

■ **A. U.:** Why did we ask about personal belongings? We had previously interviewed many people who survived forced relocations or evacuations during and after World War II, and these individuals often spoke about the things they still had from home—a toy, an embroidered shirt, anything with sentimental value. In a foreign environment, these items took on symbolic meaning. One of our interviewees deeply regretted not taking a family photo—a large portrait of her relatives from the turn of the twentieth century. She simply couldn't bring it with her.

We also encouraged people to share family stories, asking, "What did they tell you at home about World War II?" Many responded with, "Grandma used to tell us how she hid in the basement, and now we're hiding too." However, we deliberately avoid making direct comparisons with World War II; each extreme situation brings unique features, and we don't want to equate the current situation with the past.

The distinct aspect of our current work is that we don't press for topics or specific questions. If someone doesn't want to discuss something, we respect that boundary.

■ **A. Ya.:** This is also the first time we've considered conducting follow-up interviews to explore how memory shifts over time. We want to see what people will say about their experiences once the story is more settled for them. We haven't conducted many interviews,

though; in June, we paused because many people began to downplay their stories, saying, "What did we go through? Others had it worse—we saw it on TV." We realized there was a "media layer" influencing people's accounts, with some sharing what they had seen or read rather than their own experiences. We're also considering making a documentary out of this project. We still haven't decided whether to focus on a single protagonist or to weave together multiple stories. That's a decision we'll make after the war.

■ **A. U.:** Some people have even started recording their own experiences and observations, which is very different from past conflicts. Now, it's not just researchers documenting events—people themselves have much more capacity to record everything happening around them. In a way, this is even more interesting because it reflects what people want to preserve. This didn't happen before.

■ **N. O.:** The field of documentation is indeed becoming democratized. Scientists no longer hold a monopoly on "the truth," which introduces new challenges. Our roles are also intertwined here—we aren't detached from the situation but are experiencing the war alongside our narrators. How much of your own experience is present in the work you're doing? Are there safeguards you've put in place to protect yourselves emotionally, psychologically, or physically, given your involvement?

■ **A. U.:** We thought about conducting interviews with each other once the war ends. While our experiences may not be as traumatic as those of the people we interview—there were many things they witnessed. And we didn't even set out to look for any of the horrors of war, you know. Unlike human rights organizations, which specialize in documenting evidence for courts or investigations, we weren't looking for any specific type of account. Such organizations ask detailed questions, like, "Where were you standing when the shell hit your house?" For us, that level of detail doesn't matter. If someone's home was destroyed and they choose not to mention it, we won't press them on it. What matters to us is simply what each person feels ready to share.

In the beginning, this was actually quite challenging. Many initiatives, especially foreign ones, offered us money with the vague directive, "Just do it for us." No one really understood what was happening here. After Bucha, this approach began to diminish, perhaps because people started to grasp the complexity of the situation. Before that, it was less clear. Resisting the temptation of easy funding was difficult, but we wanted support that wouldn't impose restrictions on us. So we started working without any financial backing—we simply

picked up our cameras and used our own equipment to film. Midway through the project, we secured some funding, which allowed us to buy hard drives for storing the large files and to pay the people transcribing interviews. Later, we received a slightly larger grant to help us complete the project by June 2022.

■ **A. Ya.:** One of our main concerns was the safety of the people we recorded. Before interviews, we'd advise them that anything they shared could later be adjusted or edited out if necessary to protect them. In past projects, people would sign a consent form, and we tried to keep in contact with them, but in principle, we had their consent, the person told their story, that story was about the past, already thought through and made sense of; here we understood that people might say something that could put them at risk. This was a frequent topic of conversation among our team.

■ **N. O.:** Yes, we are all adjusting our approach along the way. Like our narrators, we're constantly reevaluating decisions, deciding what to let go of and what we can carry forward. Personally, I find inspiration in the methodology of the history of the present—the challenges historians face in documenting events without knowing their full consequences. Historians usually speak confidently, with the benefit of hindsight: "I know how it all ended." But when you're so close to unfolding events, that certainty disappears. Maybe it's good for us to allow this uncertainty, to accept that things can evolve in unexpected ways.

Another influence is narrativism and the idea that the end of a story gives it meaning. Right now, we don't have that ending, and the notion of "after the victory" has become an imaginary milestone that shapes our present perspectives. Even completing an interview, when a person has the chance to share their experiences without judgment from journalists, lawyers, doctors, or therapists, provides validation—a moment of affirming their story for something larger.

Generally, I believe in a procedural approach to this work; it's about remaining flexible, ethical, and process-oriented, rather than relying on a fixed formula.

■ **A. U.:** Now we're more prepared for situations like power cuts, for instance. We might plan an interview, travel to a city, and arrive only to find there's no electricity—and it won't be back for the entire day. We're used to the reality that there may be no power, no internet, no way to charge our phones, even when we need them most. We've adapted to this, just as we're adjusting to the reality of modern warfare. Even people living in much harsher conditions now discuss these challenges as

part of everyday life. This really illustrates how memory works: people start to construct their stories, filtering out certain details, normalizing experiences that once felt extreme. Through our project, we hope to offer insight into this process—how individuals shape their narratives, what they choose to leave out, and how they gradually begin to speak more routinely about events that initially felt unimaginable.

■ **N. O.:** So, how do you see the future of this project as an archive? In terms of preservation, access—who do you envision will work with it?

■ **A. U.:** This collection will be distinct from our interviews on other historical events, set aside as its own archive. Some of it has been made public with the interviewees' permission, and we can provide access on request, but it's not yet meant for widespread dissemination. Currently, we think it's best to keep it more controlled; perhaps in a few centuries, these recordings will be available for wider archival use. For now, if we move forward with a documentary, it's unlikely we'll release everything right away. Our responsibility lies in how we handle these stories and how we protect the people who shared them with us.

We have an archive, and we're actively building it. Last year, we started organizing it properly because so many state archival collections have already been destroyed or looted, and there's no way to know how many family archives have been lost. Much of our work revolves around preserving these personal histories. We realized that a thorough approach was needed, so we began creating a detailed database with comprehensive descriptions. These interviews will eventually contribute to a database documenting the full-scale war, though we're not ready to make it public just yet. Our goal is to ensure everything is carefully preserved, but any future publication or research use will be thoughtfully considered on a case-by-case basis.

We're very aware that there's a lot being written about Ukraine right now, including by people who have little understanding of the realities here. They may take an interview, pull out a single phrase, and present it as "proof" of their own arguments. That's why we need to be careful about who will access and work with these materials. While we can't dictate the conclusions others draw, we want to be certain that our work won't be used in a harmful way. Archiving and preserving these records is essential—that's our first responsibility. Sometimes you read about a project and think, "Wow, look at all that's been done!" But then you try to find the records, and they're simply gone.

■ **A. Ya.:** My main worry is the vastness of it all. The scale of documentation is overwhelming, and it's easy to feel lost or fear missing something crucial. When researching, there's this constant anxiety of

whether I've captured everything I need to know or if there's something critical I've overlooked. It's incredibly difficult to grasp just how much has been documented and how much remains unrecorded—and that uncertainty is unsettling. There's also the question of how we'll approach stories after the war, especially those that challenge us or make us uncomfortable.

■ **N. O.:** This work demands a great deal of sensitivity—much more than people might realize. But if we return to the idea of "completion," I think a lot about it myself. Completion isn't something that's simply handed to us; it's something we create. And for different groups, that sense of completion looks very different. We can talk about the end of individual stories, the end of the war, or a victory, but for some reason, we often view this ending as something external. In reality, it's also about how we imagine and conceptualize it. These stories, for me, are about how we close certain narratives, how we create those full stops or commas between them. Finally, if you had the chance, based on your experiences and the path you've taken, would you offer any advice to others doing similar work or hoping to start it?

■ **A. U.:** The first thing is respect for those you're speaking with and whose stories you wish to hear. Along with that comes the responsibility you take on, as well as the need for empathetic communication. It shouldn't be just a transactional relationship where we do our job and move on. When someone shares their most important life experience with us, it's because it's all they have—their story is all they possess. This calls for deep respect, both for the person and for their story.

■ **A. Ya.:** The second thing is that no idea exists in a vacuum. If it's just in your head and you haven't shared it with anyone or discussed it, then it's better not to act on it. To carry out a project, you need like-minded people or at least people you can consult. There are things you might overlook, but to others, they're obvious.

■ **A. U.:** There are no people who have been taught how to record wartime stories. That's nonsense. Sure, there are people with this experience who can share it with you, but no one can teach you how to do it. You have to learn these skills through practice and build them over time. Between when we started the first interview and when we completed the last one, we gained a lot of experience in asking the right questions, knowing when to stay silent, and when to give the person space to open up. We learned a lot during this process. No courses, no special programs, no schools could have taught us this—we had to watch and learn on our own.

- **A. Ya.:** On the other hand, others can show you things you might not know.
- **A. U.:** You also need to be ready to respond to the various challenges that arise. If you're not agile enough, you'll struggle to succeed. It's important to divide roles within the project: there are people responsible for filming, lighting, management, organizing arrangements with storytellers, communicating, and conducting interviews. Equally important is knowing not to take on tasks that aren't your responsibility, not to deceive people, and not to attempt things you're fundamentally incapable of doing. And lastly, it's crucial to consider who you're working with, both in Ukraine and abroad.

Voices of Our Time

Albert Venher on Documentation in the Frontline City of Dnipro

The conversation was recorded at the Center for Urban History on June 3, 2023

Albert Venher (A. V.): I'm a historian by training and currently work at the Department of History at Oles Honchar Dnipro National University. My research has focused on oral history since my student days. For me, it's both a way to interpret the past and understand the present.

Regarding the impact of the full-scale war on this field, it has been transformative. Like many, I felt an initial shock and asked myself, "What is the role of humanities scholars when missiles are flying and cities are under constant attack?" In this world of explosions and daily losses, I reflected deeply on my responsibilities—not only as a historian but as a witness and participant. The sense of duty to record the immediate experiences for future generations became stronger. Drawing from my work on World War II, I understood the importance of capturing voices close to the event, not decades removed, though those are essential as well.

My wife, also a historian who previously worked at the Czech Academy of Sciences, and I began a project centered on Dnipro, a frontline city that has become a volunteer hub and a refuge for displaced people. Though Lviv initially served as the primary destination for many who travelled by train, Dnipro has also received a large influx, especially those from regions like Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, often arriving by cars.

We started this project just before the New Year in 2023, at a point where the situation, though dire, had stabilized to some extent. The chaos was gone. The Brownian motion that once defined the city

had settled into a kind of order—chaotic, perhaps, but still an order. We had come to understand these new rules, learned how to navigate the altered conditions, and adapted to it all. This adaptation was crucial, not least from a psychological perspective.

One of our main challenges has been establishing connections with internally displaced people. My wife reached out to volunteer centers, built relationships, and received contacts. We recorded interviews both at our home and in others' homes, gathering around 40 interviews so far. We didn't conduct a rigid selection at first, but certain themes have naturally emerged over time—some stories repeat, while others stand out with unique details. In our work with volunteers, we recorded the stories of visible figures, though the contributions of less visible volunteers, like grandmothers knitting socks, remain largely unrecorded. Their invisible contributions represent a vast field of individual efforts, often overlooked. Initially, our project felt somewhat uncertain, but over time, potential pathways for development have begun to take shape.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** Looking back to the previous year, what inspired you to begin documenting and recording the stories of displaced people and volunteers in Dnipro? I understand that your educational background and your awareness of the types of sources necessary for writing the history of the war played a significant role.

■ **A. V.:** Why am I doing this? It's a difficult question. In fact, it's the larger question of the purpose of our profession. I think the key lies in "for whom" we do this work. One defining trait of humans is our natural curiosity about our history—we look back, reflect, and try to understand our place in time.

As for the need for sources, I believe it's something we, as historians, carry subconsciously. We know the challenges of sourcing, the gaps in historical records, and the voices we've lost. We feel the absence of those voices and understand the importance of capturing them now.

There is also a dilemma between the ethics and the aesthetics of research: they are intertwined, but currently, ethics seem to dominate, shaping and often distorting the nature of our research. The questions we ask ourselves now mirror those posed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: How "pure" should our scientific experiments be?

■ **N. O.:** But in social sciences, can there truly be any "pure" experiments?

■ **A. V.:** There are degrees of purity, I suppose. If someone doesn't want to talk, we respect their wishes—we won't record them. How-

ever, if I know a person is a valuable witness, I may push harder to gain their consent, calling them multiple times. From an ethical standpoint, that could be problematic, but what matters more to me: the individual's comfort, or their testimony for the future?

■ **N. O.:** Yes, this is the critical question—why are we documenting? Are we doing it for the future, recording these materials in the fullest form possible to preserve them for history? Or are we also concerned with the immediate experience—the here and now—ensuring that those we interact with, especially in the midst of war, do not feel further burdened by their own suffering? It's a balance between capturing history and maintaining sensitivity to the people whose stories we're telling.

■ **A. V.:** Yes. But I want to emphasize again that I adhere strictly to ethical standards. I feel the weight of this responsibility. For me, ethics must come first. I've heard of situations where oral historians have gone into villages, gathered all the grandmothers, and then recorded their stories and moved on while the women were left in tears. For research, it may be useful to capture these stories, but for those who were made to cry, the cost could be too high. The key question is: Who are we working for?

That's why the interviews we are conducting now can serve as a source not only about the people we interview but about us, the researchers. They say just as much, if not more, about us—about our ethics, our position as researchers, our cultural and anthropological context, and the tools we use. These interviews will tell more about us than the body of the research itself.

■ **N. O.:** How did you decide whose stories to record? What questions did you ask? And how did you determine when to start and stop?

■ **A. V.:** When it all began, there was a certain "omnivorousness"—I would call it that. We recorded conversations with anyone who gave their consent because, at the time, we had no clear information about displaced people or their personal experiences. We were searching for people, not specific stories. My wife visited one of the volunteer centers that supported displaced people, explained our project, and returned several times. She also visited women volunteers who conducted master classes and business training for IDPs. Some were eager to share their stories about their business successes or losses. We also found volunteers through social media and posted about our project on Facebook. People responded, and that's how we started recording.

As for the questions, the first part of the interview was narrative: "What would you like to tell us about yourself?" Then, if the interviewee

was a displaced person, we asked about their expectations for the war, how they reacted to its outbreak, their evacuation experiences, and the challenges they faced in adapting to a new environment. For volunteers, we asked about their motivations, the problems they encountered, society's reactions to their work, their successes, and their future plans.

Recently, we've slowed down a bit. We're still recording, but not as actively. Now I have some clearer ideas on how to narrow the focus of our research. That initial "omnivorous" approach was useful because it allowed us to form a broad collection of stories. However, it also meant the subject matter was a bit too diffuse. For instance, we recorded stories from businessmen, teachers, and an employee from Azovstal. While this eclectic mix is valuable, it doesn't provide the deep, focused insights that a more specific research topic could offer. Now, I'm interested in narrowing the focus to explore the experiences of psychiatric hospital doctors during the war. I already have research on psychiatric hospitals during the Nazi occupation, and some of the mechanisms from then overlap with what is happening now. I want to explore the challenges doctors faced, particularly in terms of evacuation. Some hospitals were able to evacuate under fire, and that experience is largely overlooked.

■ **N. O.:** I observe similar processes in our documentation initiative. At first, the field was very inclusive—we focused on diversification and even set it as one of our selection criteria. We listened to people from different regions, of different ages and genders, with various professional backgrounds and experiences. Over time, however, we developed more specific questions, which were largely motivated by our earlier research. In a way, we bring back or even build upon the continuity of our professional selves. Or perhaps we modify these selves in response to the challenges we see around us. It's interesting to think about how the broadest sieve, initially used to capture diverse stories, slowly narrows as we begin to return to the field with our own research questions, instead of just reacting to the immediate situation around us.

■ **A. V.:** I will say that I don't want to return to these materials, at least not in the way others might expect. I think it's more important for sociologists to engage with the "now." As a historian, I need distance to use sources. I understand that sociology is interested in what is happening in the present, while the pulse is still beating. Historians, however, come in once that pulse stops.

A source is like a good wine: the older it gets, the better it is. Perhaps my opinion will change in the future, but for now, I say that I

do not want to work with these stories as a historian. I've recorded them, and that's it. My function today is to capture them. I'm ready to put them away for now, and in a hundred years, someone else will discover them.

I'm documenting and recording, but I'm not creating oral history in the traditional sense. What we are doing is not about the "transient present" that anthropologists often focus on. This is not a fleeting moment; it's a harsh, ongoing reality that won't disappear soon. I believe these records should simply rest for now. In five hundred years, they will be even more valuable as historical sources. In source studies, we distinguish between ordinary and extraordinary sources. Right now, these are conceptually ordinary sources, but in the future, say, in 500 years, they will become extraordinary, and special attention will be paid to them.

However, preserving these sources is a challenge. What will happen to these massive documentation initiatives in 10, 20, or 50 years? I'm convinced that not even half of what exists today will survive. The issue is not only about media preservation but also about whether people will still be motivated to maintain these records. This will likely be the most documented war in history, but even it will have huge gaps, because we won't be able to preserve everything. Preserving this material requires immense resources. Recording is not financially burdensome, but preservation is serious and costly. Where will we store these materials? In what format? On what media?

We had an experience with my senior colleagues who went on expeditions to the former German colonies in the early 2000s. They recorded a large number of tapes, but these tapes eventually deteriorated and became unreadable—demagnetized or otherwise ruined. What we managed to transcribe was all that remained. The only real solution for preservation is transcription, but it's a time-consuming and expensive process. Of all the initiatives we currently have, I can confidently say that less than half of them will be transcribed. Maybe only a third. The only way to ensure that this material survives is to transcribe it. If it's transcribed, archives or museums will be more likely to accept it.

■ **N. O.:** But in order for this material to be preserved in an archive or museum, it must be contextualized in a certain way. That's why the issue of metadata is so important—it's not just about recording the interviews, but also about describing them.

■ **A. V.:** Yes, that's why each of our interviews has a "passport." We have an established procedure: permission for use, details about

who was recorded, what was recorded, and a summary of the conversation. This is key for researchers who may want to work with this material in the future.

It would be good to keep a field diary, but that's in an ideal world. At the very least, the first stage should be cataloging. Without cataloging at the initial stage, I am convinced that these documents will disappear later. Writing it down means you're still emotionally invested in the resource, and then the more tedious, routine work begins. The vast majority of people don't have the time for that.

■ **N. O.:** I'm also interested in your thoughts on further preservation—whether we need one institution to serve as an umbrella for all documentation, or if it's better to have a network where we just know that, for example, there is Albert Venher in Dnipro, the Center for Urban History in Lviv, and other initiatives in Kyiv. How do you see this in the future?

■ **A. V.:** It's a double-edged sword, and different things are important at different stages. Relatively speaking, at this stage, it's great that the documentation is dispersed—what we call "initiative from below." And this is inevitable—the process will be dispersed. But for the long term—50, 100, or even 200 years—it's clear that there should be a central institution. I don't know how to create it, but when you start collecting everything, the transportation and re-accounting process becomes a challenge. It's like a fire—something is always lost in the process. On the other hand, as long as there's a specific person caring for a small archive, it exists. If that person is gone, it's very likely that the archive will end up in a landfill somewhere.

■ **N. O.:** That's why we need institutions.

■ **A. V.:** That's why we need institutions. So, to the question of whether it is necessary to bring all this together? In the long run, yes. But I don't know the mechanism. Right now, scholarly resources are spread thin because we need to comprehend an ocean of information that is virtually impossible to comprehend. We may be saved by joint metadata, but this isn't something we have. Someone may be doing something, but that's their individual approach to their projects. But conceptually, there is no shared metadata scheme. If there was one institution that took care of this, then we would have common metadata. We could also use quantitative methods, but we can't do that now.

■ **N. O.:** If you were to give any advice to those who are taking on similar work, what would it be?

■ **A. V.:** If I was the only one doing all this, I wouldn't have done the "passport" for the interviews. My wife has a slightly different person-

ality: she sat down and quickly filled out everything. And it weighs on me. I mean, I talk so confidently about these passports, but I don't make them. My wife makes them. If only I had recorded these interviews, there would be no passports, and the conceptual perspective of these materials would be disappointing. So if you can't do it yourself, then you need to find a person in your team who won't be burdened by it.

Because, again, sociologists are used to doing it for themselves here and now, and historians are not. Unfortunately, we have a low level of understanding cataloging and the like. We take it for granted. But when we come to an archive, a library, or somewhere else, there are dozens, perhaps hundreds of years of painstaking, completely invisible work by these people, mostly women. We never notice them and don't know what they look like, but all of our extensive, bravura scholarly work rests on their shoulders, on this cataloging. They build what we stand on.

■ **N. O.:** Perhaps the current situation shows the importance of such invisible work, when we are forced to do it ourselves. Suddenly, we realize the other side of scholarly work, as well as the need for those critical infrastructures that we take for granted and without which we would not be able to work: light, heat, communication. Any other tips?

■ **A. V.:** Not tips, but rather a question to which I don't have a ready answer, but which is worth thinking about: what is it for and is it necessary at all? I mean, where do you want to send the collected materials later, will anyone need them? And how to process all this later? This is a challenge. In other words, if I put myself in this place of a researcher in 100 years, then I will use it. Although, again, the tools will change. Perhaps we will come to automated analysis of intonation, halftones, and tones in a recording. But how to work with this huge array? Since oral history, when it was institutionalized in our modern space, was based on the notion that we need to find those few unique storytellers who still remember. You hunt for them, you find them, you record the stories of all ten or however many of them, and you seem to know what to do with them. But what if there are 20,000 of them? Now the interview has become a mass source. The challenge for the future is how to change the tools of work. That is, the oral history that I, you, and our colleagues have come to know is changing. It will be something else.

Chapter 3

Advocacy and Research

Fight for Right

Hanna Zaremba-Kosovych and Viktoriia Kharchenko on the Experiences of People with Disabilities during the Full-Scale Invasion

The conversation was recorded online on June 23, 2023

■ **Viktoriia Kharchenko (V. Kh.):** I work as an advocacy manager at Fight for Right, an NGO focused on supporting people with disabilities. Until February 24, 2022, I lived in Kyiv and worked exclusively in the public sector, where I was involved in various projects and in defending the rights of vulnerable groups.

■ **Hanna Zaremba-Kosovych (H. Z-K.):** I am the Head of the Community Strengthening Department at Fight for Right and also a researcher, sociologist, and anthropologist. Together with Viktoriia, in the spring of 2022, we began documenting the experiences of people with disabilities following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. I took charge of conducting interviews, while Viktoriia coordinated the process and managed recruitment. I wrote the report that summarized our work, and Viktoriia handled the editing.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** Thinking back to the spring of 2022—though it's not an easy time to revisit—can you recall what motivated you to launch this research initiative?

■ **H. Z-K.:** After February 24, 2022, Viktoriia and I became actively involved in efforts to save people with disabilities, doing as much as we could. I helped evacuate people from Lviv to the Ukrainian-Polish border. During that time, I started keeping a volunteer diary and realized the importance of recording the experiences of people with disabilities—not just those who were evacuated, but also those who remained in various regions of Ukraine. However, I quickly understood that I wasn't ready to conduct interviews at that moment, and

people weren't always prepared to share their stories. Even if they were willing, there was the question of whether they fully grasped the implications of speaking on the record. Personal family circumstances also played a role—by March, I felt too emotionally drained to dedicate myself to interviews.

Then, a more formal and bureaucratic opportunity presented itself. In one of our projects we needed to adjust some activities, and that shift gave us a window to start recording interviews. We realized we could incorporate this work into the project's framework.

We also had a network of human rights defenders for people with disabilities, built through warm and active collaboration even before February 24, in preparation for a possible full-scale invasion. After the escalation, we stayed in touch, checking on how they were and where they were. These were the first people we approached, asking, "Would you be willing to let us record interviews?" With these trusted connections, we felt comfortable sharing our thoughts about starting this work and received their support to proceed.

■ **V. Kh.:** My experience is a bit different. While Hanna was physically volunteering, I was abroad as of February 28, 2022, when we left. From that day, I started working on our hotline. We had opened a psychological support line before the war, but it soon turned into a hotline for evacuation calls. I took charge of medical evacuations, and my work at that time was entirely focused on talking to people—I didn't have the time to reflect or think about anything else.

By April 30, I finished my work on the hotline, and around that time, a donor we had worked with before the full-scale invasion approached us with an offer to use their funds for some of our initiatives. Then Hanna suggested documenting the experiences of people with disabilities, and I thought it was a brilliant idea. By then, I had already moved to the Balkans, and to better understand the context, I read extensively about the Balkan wars. But I couldn't find much about the experiences of people with disabilities in those texts. I didn't want their stories to be overlooked in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Our goal became to document these stories—not in a legal sense, but from a social perspective. Now, I regularly hear from the people we've worked with, asking if there will be some summary of their experiences—whether in the form of a text or a presentation. It's important for people to see their experiences reflected so that they can read about themselves. We are currently finalizing the bureaucratic approvals for the report and hope to publish it soon.

■ **H. Z-K.:** I'd add that Viktoriia and I started exploring theoretical developments and advanced research related to disability and war together. We examined a lot of veteran experiences, from the First and Second World Wars, to the Vietnam War, the Iraq War, and the Russo-Ukrainian war, which was still called the ATO [Anti-Terrorist Operation] at that time. When it comes to people who already had a disability in the pre-war period, however, as opposed to getting it during the conflict, there's very little research on that.

We—or future generations—will need to write the history of the Russo-Ukrainian war, and it must be written as a cohesive narrative, not in fragmented pieces. When we do begin to write that history, we have to reflect the everyday lives of people from various social groups. Of course, there are shared experiences, but there are also unique challenges faced by people with disabilities, things that people without disabilities, or people with other types of disabilities, do not encounter. For example, someone in a wheelchair faces different challenges than someone who is deaf. It was important for us to highlight these differences.

I graduated from the Faculty of History, so I see this as an opportunity to create sources for future historians. But for our colleagues who are human rights defenders, there's also an immediate, urgent need. It was vital for us to understand these experiences in order to adjust our emergency response systems and advocate more effectively for the rights of people with disabilities during wartime. Recording these experiences provided the foundation for several other studies. For example, we examined the specifics of evacuating people with disabilities during the full-scale invasion.

It's important to note that for most of the narrators, sharing their experiences was incredibly significant. Some of them expressed it very clearly: "We realize how much the voices of people with disabilities go unheard—not just during the full-scale invasion, but generally, when it comes to other areas of society. We want our experiences to be preserved and hope that they will be considered when formulating policies."

■ **N. O.:** I'm really struck by your thoughtful and careful approach in deciding when to begin this work, as well as the fact that you've made such an effort to involve the community in these conversations and in exploring this field. Your goal to conduct research for change is so vital, especially in times of war, when we are all incredibly vulnerable. It's crucial to be sensitive to our own feelings and limits—knowing where we can or cannot go—and to be attuned to the feelings

and wishes of others. Could you tell me more about your team and who you've collaborated with on this initiative?

■ **H. Z-K.:** We had a psychologist who worked on the hotline, but she was also available to support our team and, if needed, counsel our participants themselves. Additionally, we had a very sensitive communications manager working with us. We spent a lot of time considering how to publicly announce that we were starting such a project and how to present the experiences we were documenting—how much of it should be made public or kept private. We had several discussions around these issues. Our team also included people who transcribed the interviews, some of whom are members of the disabled community. It's very important for us to involve them in any project as much as possible.

■ **N. O.:** Could you share how you planned this project, how you envisioned it for yourselves, and any key decisions you made throughout the process?

■ **H. Z-K.:** When the idea of recording came up, we discussed using the format of oral history interviews. We prepared several sets of questions that we wanted to address. We began by asking the person to tell us about themselves, then asked them to recall February 24, 2022, and from that point, they built their narrative. We also asked whether they felt the effects of their disability differently after the full-scale invasion, so they could highlight that aspect. We were interested in hearing from both women and men with disabilities, as well as those with visible and invisible disabilities. We tried to conclude the interview with more positive questions, asking about their vision of victory—where they see themselves when it happens. At the end, we would dream together about how it should be, and I found that dreaming to be a helpful part of the process.

The challenge for us was that we realized this project would be public, and part of our narrators' stories would also become public. We didn't know exactly how to handle this, so we had many discussions with our communications manager. We made sure to inform our narrators that, in addition to recording the interviews, we intended to use their testimonies in the media in a slightly modified form, and we asked for their consent. We were very transparent about this and kept records via informed consent documents. Some of the people we interviewed were from the public sector, so they understood how the information they provided could be used and trusted us as representatives of Fight for Right. There were no concerns or objections in these cases. However, I understand that there may have been people

who don't work with the media as often, and they might have been hesitant to be recorded.

■ **V. Kh.:** To find storytellers, we relied on the human rights network of Fight for Right, which includes people with various disabilities, from different regions, and with diverse experiences. These are our colleagues with whom we already work. Another group consisted of people we had helped evacuate. When we invited them to share their stories, we tried to approach it as gently as possible. Some of them had already participated in interviews before the full-scale invasion, while others had no prior experience or were hesitant about being interviewed. In reality, each experience was very different.

■ **H. Z-K.:** I took it upon myself to find people with intellectual disabilities, as I work directly with this group. I reached out to good friends of mine and asked if they would be willing to participate in interviews. There were some refusals, and I'm not sure if it was because they didn't want to talk about the war, or if it was related to the specifics of their disability. In the end, most of our narrators came from this close network, so to speak.

I also noticed that when we began recording in May of last year—the first conversation was held on May 11, 2022—people were more motivated to give interviews. There were fewer refusals at that point. However, by late summer and early fall, it became more difficult to find people willing to talk. I believe this was due to people's psychoemotional state. In the spring, we were all living through a very new experience, and I think there was a strong desire to share it, to talk about it. But as time passed and we began to adapt to the new realities, there was less of a need to define the experience, and perhaps it became more difficult to reflect on it. People no longer wanted to return to the past, and a new layer of reflection had emerged.

■ **N. O.:** If we keep in mind the goal of archiving these interviews to ensure that the experiences of people with disabilities aren't lost among the numerous war stories surrounding us, what policies do you have in place to preserve this data? How do you plan to organize access to these materials—who will have access, and when? How do you envision the future of these interviews as part of an archive? I'd love to hear your thoughts on this.

■ **H. Z-K.:** This is actually a very complex issue. Right now, we are storing notes, transcripts, and photos on a secure Google Drive provided by our organization. Regarding making them public, I understand how crucial it is to do so. There's a larger goal of writing the history of the Russo-Ukrainian war in a holistic way, and this project

will contribute to that overall mosaic, so it should eventually be made public.

We've signed informed consent forms with the people we've interviewed, stating that the materials will be archived. However, I believe that when it comes time to present everything we've recorded as a cohesive whole, we will need to discuss it with our narrators again and get their permission to make their stories public. This raises new legal and ethical questions for us—how to approach it in the right way. We may not receive permission from everyone, and we're uncertain what the security situation will be at that point. We don't know how people will feel about their stories once some time has passed. For those who have suffered from war crimes, people talk about their experiences in very different ways. The timing of their experience matters—whether it happened two weeks ago, two months ago, or six months ago. Many people want to forget their traumatic experiences and may not want to share them at all. So, creating an open archive will be a big challenge. I believe that part of the history may never be made public. However, the overall goal is to eventually make at least some of these materials accessible to the public.

■ **N. O.:** Because we are living through this event, it's hard for us to step back and view it as a whole. We also can't know yet what its long-term consequences will be for us personally or for the communities we belong to. So it's difficult, but also crucial, to talk about potential solutions and explore ways forward. We're discussing whether we need a single archive that can house various projects. If our goal is to write a coherent history, then this approach makes sense. However, there are legal and ethical concerns around obtaining consent from interviewees to share their stories. Many agreed to be interviewed for a specific initiative, trusting the individuals or organizations involved. These issues definitely need to be addressed.

You've listened to many stories, analyzed and reflected on them, all while navigating your personal circumstances. How did you take care of yourselves during this process?

■ **H. Z-K.:** At the time, I don't think I paid much attention to self-care. I was deeply immersed in my work, constantly focused on doing something for the people around me who were also experiencing the war. I didn't take breaks because I kept asking myself questions like, "How can I rest when there's a war? Is it relatively safe in Lviv, and do I even have the right to rest?" This mindset eventually caught up with me by the end of summer 2022, when things became overwhelming. I had to pause the interviews for a while because I no longer had the

emotional capacity to record or reflect on them. Now I'm trying to take steps to stay resilient—getting enough sleep, going for walks, and doing things I enjoy. But I'll admit, I'm not always successful.

■ **V. Kh.:** I think it's crucial to be honest with yourself and acknowledge when you're having a day where you simply can't function—you can't work, you can't be a support to others, and you're just not okay. The sooner you accept this, the better. Instead of pushing yourself further with guilt or overwork, focus on stepping back and taking care of yourself: get proper sleep, eat well (ideally something healthy), do something you enjoy, and allow yourself small, comforting pleasures.

■ **N. O.:** If you had the chance to advise someone who might be planning to conduct interviews during the full-scale war, what would you say to them?

■ **H. Z-K.:** I would suggest reflecting on the same questions you asked us, Natalia, and asking them of yourself. Why are you conducting these interviews? How do you plan to use them? What is the purpose behind these recordings? Then, ask yourself even more: Do you currently have the resources to carry out these interviews? What questions will you ask, and which ones will you avoid? Why do you think certain questions are necessary while others are not? Who is the person you will be listening to, and do you have the emotional capacity to truly hear their story right now? Lastly, consider what resources you might need to sustain yourself during and after the interviews.

I truly enjoy recording interviews, doing fieldwork, and immersing myself in research—it's something I'm passionate about. But now, over a year since we conducted these interviews, I sometimes wonder: How did I manage to do it? Where did I find the strength? Did I deplete myself in the process? We must be acutely aware that interviews involving traumatic experiences can deeply affect not just those we speak to, but us as interviewers as well. These stories, combined with our own experiences of living through these times, leave an imprint on our mental and emotional state. It's essential to be attentive—to yourself, to the people you interview, and to those in your immediate life, like friends and family. These experiences inevitably shape your interactions and communication with others.

■ **V. Kh.:** When you're in the midst of a significant event and working constantly, it's difficult to step back and gain perspective on your own state. It's vital to either remind yourself—or have someone remind you—that what you're doing is meaningful.

Mothers During the War

Mariia Shvab on How to Talk about Pregnancy and Childbirth

The conversation was recorded online on July 21, 2023

Mariia Shvab (M. Sh.): I'm a researcher with a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's degree in public health, both from Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. I then spent an additional year studying in the Epidemiology and Biostatistics program at the State University of New York at Albany. Currently, I am pursuing a PhD at Maastricht University, where my work sits at the intersection of sociology and public health. My research focuses on reproductive services, particularly their quality and alignment with human rights, using childbirth as a case study. This topic has been central to my academic work for many years.

When the full-scale invasion began, I had a deep understanding of childbirth practices in Ukraine and the challenges faced by women during labor. It was immediately clear to me that the war would only exacerbate the problems within an already flawed system that was in need of significant improvement. This experience is closely tied to my academic interest in understanding what happens to women forced to give birth during large-scale conflicts. Initially, when I began exploring publications on childbirth during wartime, I found very few. Most of them focused on Rwanda, which presents a vastly different cultural and military context to that of Ukraine. Moreover, I came to see the importance of this research not only in terms of academic inquiry but also as a way of documenting and disseminating critical information internationally.

Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.): In emergency situations, we inevitably draw on our prior knowledge and skills, but the way we do

so can differ greatly. Recording interviews in a peaceful setting is one thing, but conducting conversations under the constant threat of missile attacks is an entirely different challenge.

The security situation in Ukraine has changed drastically since February 24, 2022. Could you share how you managed to adapt your previous experience to these new circumstances? What adjustments did you have to make, and what new challenges did you encounter in your work?

■ **M. Sh.:** Looking back, I realize that my master's thesis was already quite critical, as I raised many questions about the work of doctors. The core problem with our healthcare system is that it's not patient-centered; instead, it heavily revolves around the doctor's perspective and experience. When the full-scale war began, my focus shifted dramatically. I realized that we are now talking about people who remain in hospitals, who are forced to work in superhuman conditions. It was no longer just about improving the quality of services but about ensuring those services could be provided at all. My current research examines how obstetric care is managed in wartime. Specifically, I'm interested in how the lives of women have changed, how their experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period have been reshaped by the war.

At first, I put off the idea of collecting interviews. I was afraid of the potential trauma these stories might uncover. I discussed these fears with colleagues, some of whom worked in organizations monitoring the quality of childbirth and mothers' rights before the invasion. They shared how, even in peacetime, interviews could unearth painful memories. For many women, childbirth is already a traumatic experience for various reasons. War has only added another layer of trauma.

I worried about destabilizing someone who had managed to achieve some psychological balance. The fear of triggering emotional distress was especially strong when interviewing women from frontline regions or those who had survived occupation. While I didn't encounter as many "difficult" interviews as I initially feared, my colleagues and I decided to prepare for such situations. We sought out a specialist to whom we could refer anyone who seemed overwhelmed during the interviews. Finding this specialist took time, as did refining the questionnaire. Ultimately, we didn't start conducting interviews until October 2022.

That timing, however, brought new challenges. October marked the beginning of attacks on Ukraine's power plants, leading to widespread power outages. The interviews were conducted between

October 2022 and early January 2023, often under challenging conditions. We felt a sense of urgency, as though this was the last opportunity to gather data before losing all internet access and means of communication. By March 2023, things had stabilized somewhat, but at the time, we couldn't afford to wait.

Interviewing women who had recently given birth presented unique difficulties. They were often caring for their babies, needing to breastfeed or manage a crying child. Some had to find someone to look after the child just to participate in the interview. For women who had evacuated, the situation was even harder—many were without their husbands, who were either serving in the armed forces or unable to leave home. These challenges were compounded by the lack of electricity, which frequently forced us to reschedule interviews. Sometimes it was something on their end, and sometimes on mine, but disruptions were almost constant.

■ **N. O.:** When you mentioned the potential trauma involved in this topic, it reminded me of one of the seminars we held as part of our initiative. During our weekly meetings with researchers and scholars studying war, conflict, and various forms of violence, medical anthropologist Cassandra Yuill from City St George's, University of London shared her experience. She spoke about interviewing women and doctors regarding induced labor, highlighting the ethical challenges of such work and the potential for these conversations to be deeply traumatic—for both the interviewees and the researchers.

Did you originally plan this project before the full-scale invasion?

■ **M. Sh.:** Before the invasion, I was planning a dissertation that would cover the entire perinatal period—pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum phase—focusing on the quality of medical services in Ukraine. I intended to study how these processes unfolded, the traumas women might experience, and ways to address and improve their experiences. Then the invasion began, and everything changed. It became impossible to discuss these topics without considering the war. The stigma of war is now inescapable, and it will shape our lives for decades, if not centuries. It quickly became clear that I would have to delve into the specific challenges of childbirth during wartime.

■ **N. O.:** How did you find your interviewees and manage communication with them?

■ **M. Sh.:** My respondents were women aged 17 to 40. To reach them, I used a similar approach to what I employed during my master's thesis. I posted an announcement on Instagram and Facebook, explaining that I was conducting a study. Since these platforms are

popular among young people, they proved effective for reaching my target audience.

Participants could choose to have an online conversation with me or respond to the questions via email by completing a Google form. Naturally, written responses tend to differ qualitatively from those provided in interviews, as people generally write less than they speak. However, this approach offered flexibility: respondents could either share their story in writing or talk about it orally. In the end, I conducted 25 interviews and received approximately 50 responses through the Google form.

■ **N. O.:** Can you tell me about the questions you discussed with the women during your conversations, as well as those included in the online form?

■ **M. Sh.:** The Google form and the interview guide included the same core questions. The main difference was that, during interviews, I could clarify responses or explore topics in more depth—something not possible with the online form. I began by asking about the pre-war period: what the atmosphere in their family was like, and whether they anticipated an escalation. Then, I moved to February 24, 2022: how they felt when the invasion began, what went through their minds, and what they expected. Next, I asked about their pregnancy, focusing on positive moments to briefly steer the conversation away from the war. Afterward, I tailored the questions to the woman's specific situation—whether she was evacuated, had stayed where she lived before the invasion, or had been under occupation. Each scenario came with its own set of questions. The next section was about childbirth: where and under what conditions it took place, how it differed from previous experiences (if applicable), and how the invasion had influenced maternity care practices. I also asked about their experiences with bomb shelters and the adjustments made to maternity care since the start of the invasion. Finally, I explored how their lives had changed overall and how they were managing with a newborn child in the context of war.

■ **N. O.:** As I understand it, you worked alone. How did you manage, and how did you take care of yourself under these conditions?

■ **M. Sh.:** While this is my dissertation project, I didn't handle everything entirely on my own. Someone helped me with the transcription, which is one of the more challenging parts of this research. Once she completed her work, we discussed it as professional colleagues, as she is a sociology student. She admitted that the process of listening and transcribing had been emotionally taxing, and I think it left her

feeling somewhat depressed. However, she also identified some systemic patterns that stood out during her work.

■ **N. O.:** I'm convinced that it's crucial to acknowledge the contributions of those who transcribe interviews. It's not just a technical task—it can be an emotionally demanding experience. Including conversations with transcribers in our methodological reflections is important, as their perspective often adds depth and nuance to our understanding of the interviews.

■ **M. Sh.:** I completely agree with you. As for my psychological state—I've noticed this pattern since working on my master's thesis—you gradually become desensitized to these stories over time. At first, they have a profound impact on you, but as you hear more, they start to blend together, and a kind of "numbing" sets in. You're less shocked or horrified by each new account, even though some stories are truly terrifying. For example, I interviewed people who fled from Mariupol and Bucha, and their experiences were harrowing. Still, I feel like I'm in a state of prolonged shock, which continues to influence my emotional responses.

I also shared some of the more difficult aspects of my work with others—not the details, of course, as I always respect the anonymity of my narrators—but enough to process what I was hearing without internalizing all of it myself.

■ **N. O.:** Last year, I had the chance to meet Mary Marshall Clark, who led a project interviewing New Yorkers shortly after the 9/11 attacks. Her team began speaking to people just days after the Twin Towers fell. She said something that really struck me and that I hadn't fully considered before: "The consequences of these conversations for researchers will reveal themselves later."

When you're in the thick of it—still mobilized and working on adrenaline—it's easy to push through, but eventually the weight of the stories you've heard can catch up with you. That's why it's so important to think about long-term psychological support for those who document and listen to war stories. This isn't just about immediate support but also about providing help at regular intervals over time.

Perhaps this responsibility should fall to institutions, as researchers often have to bear this burden alone. Universities or research centers working with such narratives should consider building in policies—regular psychological check-ins or something of the sort.

What stage is your project at now?

■ **M. Sh.:** Right now, it's in the data analysis phase. My next steps include preparing a report in Ukrainian to share the results of my work locally. Additionally, I plan to write an academic article in English and submit it to an international journal. From the very beginning, I wanted this research to reach a global audience. It's important to share our experiences beyond Ukraine—to provide insights that can inform policy and decision-making on a broader scale.

■ **N. O.:** Do you plan to archive these interviews in a way that would allow other researchers to work with them in the future?

■ **M. Sh.:** I'm extremely cautious when it comes to the safety and privacy of my respondents—probably even more meticulous than necessary. Conversations about childbirth are inherently sensitive, as women often share deeply personal and intimate details. My priority is to protect their privacy as much as possible, which is why I'm hesitant to share the interviews.

It's also important to consider that someone might agree to share their story today but feel differently tomorrow. They could experience regret, embarrassment, or even moral distress later. For this reason, I'm not comfortable making the transcripts publicly available. That said, I might consider sharing them on a case-by-case basis if a researcher approaches me directly. However, this would only happen after obtaining additional consent from all the respondents involved. For now, I don't see any way to make these materials accessible without compromising confidentiality and the safety of the individuals who trusted me with their stories.

■ **N.O.:** How do you see the future of this initiative? Do you plan to continue it in some way?

■ **M. Sh.:** I believe I'll stay with this topic for a long time, perhaps for the rest of my life. I intend to continue collecting women's stories about pregnancy and childbirth. In about a year or so, I plan to enter the second phase of this project, which will involve gathering more stories because I don't think I've collected enough yet. So far, I've conducted 25 in-depth interviews and gathered 50 written responses, but I feel these need to be supplemented by more oral conversations. I recognize that the sample I have is not yet theoretically saturated. For instance, most of my stories come from the western part of Ukraine, where people stayed in their homes, but the southern and eastern regions—areas affected by occupation—are underrepresented. There are only a few stories from these regions, and so we can't yet talk about data saturation there. I understand that these regions hold a great deal of variation, but I haven't been able to cap-

ture it yet for a number of reasons. People there are simply not in a position to participate in interviews right now.

Another limitation of my research is that the women I've spoken to already live in relatively comfortable conditions, considering the circumstances of full-scale war. They're psychologically and materially stable enough to have the resources for this kind of conversation. Many other women, however, don't have the resources for such a conversation right now—they're focused on survival, not on sharing their stories. I believe that, at some point in the future, they'll have the emotional and physical resources to participate—either because they've evacuated or because we've liberated those territories. When survival is no longer their primary concern, that's when it will be time to collect their stories. So, this research must continue to provide a fuller picture, because what we have now is just a small fragment of the overall situation.

■ **N. O.:** But I think it's incredibly valuable that you began recording interviews back in 2022. Conditions are changing, and people will tell their stories differently as time goes on—even the women who are in a more stable situation now.

■ **M. Sh.:** Absolutely, yes.

■ **N. O.:** And it's equally important that you've mentioned this question of resources: to what extent are we able to hear certain voices now, and to what extent are some stories left unheard because some people have the means to speak, while others do not? Perhaps there are even those whose stories we will sadly never be able to hear.

If you could offer any advice to yourself when you first envisioned this project, or to someone taking on similar challenges now—interviewing people in the context of a full-scale invasion—what would it be?

■ **M. Sh.:** I probably should have started earlier, perhaps in the summer. I began quite late, but on the other hand, considering the question of resources we just discussed, I realize that, at that time, women might not have been ready to agree to an interview. In the summer there was still a lot of uncertainty, and people were focused on other things. By the fall, things started to become clearer, and there was a certain adaptation to the situation.

What I noticed in the interviews is that people are very much shaped by the war. Talking about the winter or spring of 2022 feels like old news for them. Had I started collecting stories earlier, the narratives would likely have been different. By October-November 2022, many people had already reflected on their experiences, espe-

cially those who gave birth at the end of February 2022. If I had interviewed them in the summer, the stories would have sounded very different. On the flip side, collecting interviews in October gave me the opportunity to reach women who had given birth during power outages, which added a different thematic layer.

Another piece of advice is that it's much easier to implement such projects as a team. For one, there are more human resources, and secondly, it ensures better control and focus. With a team, the work would go much faster, and it's important to move quickly if your research is to have an impact and possibly lead to change.

The Past Coming to Life

Inha Kozlova and Nadia Ufimtseva on History Teachers in Times of War

The conversation was recorded online on June 29, 2023

■ **Nadia Ufimtseva (N. U.):** I am a researcher at the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies in Kyiv. Our current project focuses on recording interviews with Ukrainian teachers about their experiences living through the war since the full-scale invasion. Additionally, we are looking to capture how they compare and relate these events to the beginning of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine in 2014. In this project, I serve as the project manager and provide technical support during the interviews. Inha developed the methodology and conducts the interviews.

■ **Inha Kozlova (I. K.):** I am an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the Ukrainian Catholic University, which is my primary workplace. I was fortunate to join Nadia in this project, which has been life-saving for me in many ways. It gave me a meaningful way to endure this war while also allowing me to return to the research field.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** If you think back to the spring of 2022, when you first started imagining this initiative, what motivated you? What inspired you to move in this direction?

■ **N. U.:** The idea of collecting interviews and documenting the experiences of our colleagues—Ukrainian teachers—emerged in late spring 2022. At the Center, we were discussing potential activities, what we could realistically achieve under the circumstances, and this idea surfaced organically during those conversations. We stay in regular contact with teachers who have participated in our training sessions, seminars, or schools, and they began sharing deeply per-

sonal stories—rich in experiences, reflections, and intricate details. Around the same time, our colleagues from the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies, including director Dr. Anatolii Podolskyi and educational project coordinator Vitalii Bobrov, who were based in Kyiv, began reaching out through our teacher networks just days after the full-scale invasion. They asked the question that had become sacred: "How are you?"

At some point, it struck us—it's hard to say who first proposed the idea—that we should start conducting interviews. Coincidentally, I came across information about an initiative by the Vienna-based Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) to support those documenting the current war. We saw efforts to record the experiences of internally displaced people, those who fled abroad, and those who joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine. It became clear that we could make a meaningful contribution by documenting the experiences of teachers.

Why did the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies choose to record these conversations? Our work with Holocaust survivors' testimonies has deeply influenced us. We understand the importance of capturing people's experiences and emotions in the moment. Similarly, as we designed this project, we envisioned that the collected interviews might serve as evidence of Russian crimes in Ukraine or inform future policymaking—helping educators, shaping ministry guidelines, and identifying ways to provide support.

On a personal level, I took on this project because I wanted to feel useful. I left Ukraine with my daughter and mother in March 2022, but I returned in June. At first, I wasn't sure if coming back was the right decision, but staying abroad had been incredibly difficult. I wanted to contribute in some way, to listen to people and offer them space to share their stories, if they wished to.

■ **I. K.:** What Nadia said deeply resonates with me. During the first four months of the full-scale invasion, I felt paralyzed—I couldn't read or write anything. That summer, we visited relatives closer to the mountains, and it helped me begin to regain a sense of normalcy. Still, I felt disconnected from my professional field. I have a passion for conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, and I missed it immensely. When this initiative came up, I knew I wanted to be part of it. Documenting what was happening felt crucial from the very beginning of the invasion—not only because it is vital to capture these experiences, but also because this misery that is being inflicted by the Russian army and the indifference of Russian society must be remembered. When the time comes to discuss accountabil-

ity, forgiveness, or attempts to "launder" their responsibility, these crimes must not be forgotten.

I wasn't actively searching for a project—Nadia reached out to me—and it gave me the opportunity to return to the field I love. I teach research methods, and how could I teach about in-depth interviews and interaction with respondents when I had been out of practice for a year? What also struck me was how meaningful this work is. Teachers who have dedicated themselves to studying and teaching the history of the Holocaust and the World War II—events they learned about from books—are now experiencing similarly profound challenges in their own lives.

■ **N. O.:** The full-scale invasion caused the collapse of many professional identities, particularly for those whose work relies on long-term processes. In research or teaching, where results are rarely immediate, an urgent question arose: What can I do now? Why am I needed—or am I needed at all? This sense of despair was widespread, pushing many of us to search for new niches and ways to respond.

This experience has also forced us to reconsider some of the core imperatives underlying how we approach war and violence. For instance, the maxim "never again" has proven inadequate because it was imbalanced: it focused too much on the "never" while lacking tools to prevent the "again." Similarly, discussions about trauma and healing often presuppose a temporal distance—separating the event from the process of reflection. Now we find ourselves in the midst of war, where the conventional tools for understanding and explaining reality no longer suffice. We urgently need to develop new approaches. With that in mind, could you share your perspective on the methodologies you adopted under the extraordinary circumstances of a full-scale invasion?

■ **N. U.:** When we were deciding whom to interview and how, we chose to focus on teachers who continue to teach. For instance, some of our colleagues have been mobilized and are now serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. While their experiences are undoubtedly significant, they are fundamentally different from those who have stayed and are still working with students. We also considered whether to interview people living in the temporarily occupied territories but ultimately decided against it. The primary reason was that we couldn't ensure their safety. Although we anonymize all our interviews, there's no way to predict how this material might be used in the future, and we wanted to avoid putting anyone at risk.

■ **I. K.:** We decided to form our sample according to territory, interviewing teachers from four groups: (1) those who were always far from the frontlines, (2) those who experienced occupation but now live in liberated territories, (3) those who faced forced displacement, either within Ukraine or abroad, and (4) those living near active frontlines. Nadia completely handled the recruitment process—she identified participants and coordinated meetings based on these criteria. She managed everyone's schedules: the participants', mine, and her own. But planning was incredibly challenging. There were constant disruptions—shelling, air raid alarms, and later, blackouts. Meetings had to be scheduled not only for times when there wasn't shelling but also when everyone had electricity. Sometimes I still marvel: how is it even possible to implement a project under such conditions?

■ **N. U.:** We decided to focus on interviewing history teachers, specifically those who had been trained at the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies. These teachers had worked extensively with Holocaust survivors' testimonies, supervised their students' research on topics like the war, the genocide of the Crimean Tatars, and the Holodomor. During their training, they analyzed crimes against humanity and the history of various genocides, with the Holocaust as the central focus. They encountered numerous visual sources, oral testimonies, and documents, giving them a significant foundation of professional knowledge. We wanted to understand whether this knowledge still resonated with them in light of current events—whether it triggered flashbacks or informed their perspectives.

Personally, I experienced such flashbacks. In March 2022, while sheltering in the basement of our building, I was reminded of *Clara's War*, a diary we had published in November 2021. It tells the story of a Jewish girl and her family hiding in a basement in Zhovkva during the Holocaust. I found myself reflecting on how Jews in hiding across different countries endured those conditions. My knowledge of testimonies and diaries came flooding back. Later, when Bucha, Irpin, and other towns around Kyiv were liberated, the images of atrocities immediately brought to mind photographs from the World War II: scenes from ghettos, death camps, and execution sites. As the mass graves were uncovered, these historical parallels grew stronger, and I wanted to know if others were having similar experiences.

For the interviews, we primarily used Zoom, but we were flexible and ready to switch to other platforms if necessary. Once all three of us—Inha, the interviewee, and I—were logged in, I would immediately lock the meeting to ensure no one else could join. I would greet

the interviewee, introduce Inha, and confirm the participant's name and background beforehand. Inha then explained the project terms and clarified that while I would remain in the meeting to manage technical aspects like recording, my microphone and camera would be off. She led the conversation while I stayed in the background.

We began recording interviews in the fall, but frequent power outages made scheduling extremely difficult. There was a month-long break during this time when it was impossible to plan anything. Eventually, we resumed, adapting as best we could. Both Inha and I have small children, which added another layer of complexity to our schedules. However, Inha's unwavering readiness to start interviews at any time was incredibly inspiring and supportive—it made navigating these challenges much easier.

■ **I. K.:** We provided each other with a great deal of support throughout this project. Nadia and I developed a kind of debriefing process after each interview—we would message each other to share our emotions and insights. This practice became essential for our emotional and psychological well-being. I remember that after the first interview, or perhaps the second, I dreamed about Bucha. That experience made me realize how crucial mutual understanding and support within a team are for projects like this. Being on the same wavelength, breathing in sync, so to speak, was vital for us to navigate the emotional weight of the work.

■ **N. O.:** Your project owes much to your prior connections with teachers. Conducting research in wartime underscores the value of both personal and institutional networks—how we establish contacts and work sensitively within those circles. You already had relationships with these individuals, maintained them during the project, and continue them even now. This initiative feels like a natural extension of those ongoing interactions. I've always been critical of "helicopter science," where researchers swoop in, collect data, and then leave, detached from the context or its people. What you're doing feels much more grounded and ecological in its approach.

Another important theme that emerges—and it's a leitmotif of many such conversations—is how we build upon previous experiences. Certain things become possible because of years of investment: in education, research on particular topics, and institution-building. I'm curious about two aspects. On the one hand, what aspects of your prior professional experience helped you in this work? On the other, what challenges arose that required you to adapt or learn new approaches? For instance, Nadia, you've mentioned the flashbacks

linked to your education and research. Inha, you've spoken about teaching courses on qualitative methods in sociology and having to rethink how to conduct interviews, formulate questions, and shape conversations in this entirely new context. Could you reflect on what proved beneficial from your backgrounds and what new tools or practices you had to develop during the full-scale war?

■ **N. U.:** The network of connections you mentioned is one of the most valuable assets we've developed over the years. We already had contacts with many individuals, and we maintained communication with them after the full-scale invasion. When I reached out to them, I didn't need to explain much about the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies—they already knew me from previous events. This prior acquaintance and collaboration created a foundation of trust. When I introduced the project to them, I described it in detail, including the process of obtaining informed consent. They could see that participation was entirely voluntary—they had the right to refuse at any time, skip any question, or even prohibit the use of their names or request complete anonymity. It was entirely their choice.

As for challenges and things we're learning as we go, one of the major questions for me is the preservation of this archive. What should we do with it next? How do we ensure proper permissions for its use? What kind of access should be granted? Where should these materials be stored to guarantee their safety? These are questions I'm still grappling with. An even harder dilemma arises when a participant says, "I don't want these materials stored anywhere." As a historian, my heart breaks at the thought of having to delete such material. These stories are incredibly valuable—both as a source for research and as evidence of crimes. Balancing the rights and wishes of participants with the historical and evidentiary significance of their testimonies is something I continue to wrestle with.

■ **N. O.:** In situations like this, I think it's important to have conversations with people about the significance of their stories as historical documents and offer them different options, exploring various possibilities. For example, we might say, "Okay, we won't keep the audio, but could we keep the transcript? This way, you won't have your voice recorded, but we'll preserve the text, removing all identifying information." I believe there are many middle-ground options between "yes" and "no." Inha, from your perspective, what elements of your experience were helpful in this project, and what new methods or approaches did you need to develop in response to the circumstances?

■ **I. K.:** I've had to get used to repeatedly rescheduling interviews, and it's really toughened me up. I've come to understand that delays are normal. It's actually quite unusual for everything to go smoothly from the first attempt. I was subconsciously prepared for these rescheduling issues—there were always new circumstances that led to changes.

As for new experiences, interviewing always involves a core set of skills, but we are constantly adjusting to each specific narrator and the research question at hand. For me, conducting interviews about the war was a completely new experience. Initially, I was worried: how would it go? There's no clear boundary between our research selves and our personal selves. When the full-scale invasion began, my child was just four months old, and I was constantly grappling with the question of whether I should leave or stay. My own struggles and emotions mirrored much of what I heard during the interviews. One person shared a memory from a movie that had deeply frightened her, and I realized I remembered it too. It left a strong impression on me as well. I mean, I had fears about how I would handle the interviews, whether I could manage my own emotions during them. That's why Nadia's support was so crucial for me.

In these interviews, people share experiences of living through extraordinary circumstances—abnormal situations—and how they try to integrate these experiences into their everyday lives, how they "process" these upheavals. As they describe their journey, you find yourself living through it with them. You come to understand the situation and witness how they've navigated it, and you can't help but admire their resilience. It's a raw, almost primal form of adapting to life under extreme conditions.

■ **N. U.:** By the way, before we started recording the interviews, I was filled with fear. I expected the conversations to be extremely difficult, that they would drain me emotionally and physically—people crying, me crying, Inha crying. I thought this work would take everything out of us. But it wasn't like that. People spoke about awful and painful things, but it was as if they had already processed them in some way. Sometimes, they even shared their stories with a sense of ease, and some even made jokes. While some interviews were tough, they were also surprisingly inspiring and uplifting.

■ **N. O.:** Now that you've gathered these stories, you're encountering the archiving challenges that many initiatives face when starting documentation projects. The question arises: how can you make the materials you've created accessible to those outside your organiza-

tion? Could you share your plans and how you envision the future development of this project?

■ **N. U.:** In 2022, we collected 11 interviews, including both women and men. While it's clear that there are more women in this profession, we also managed to conduct interviews with men. These stories come from both the frontline and those living in the rear. All of last year's recordings have already been transcribed and archived at the Center, and only we currently have access to them.

Now, we plan to continue collecting interviews, aiming for around 30. However, if we start noticing repetition and feel we aren't gaining new insights, the number may be adjusted. Our methodology will remain the same, but since more than a year and a half has passed since the full-scale invasion began, both we and our storytellers have adapted. We want to hear their reflections on what has transpired since the invasion, and perhaps even since 2014, since we didn't ask for these specifics in the initial round of interviews. Additionally, we want to explore how they envision the future and how different experiences can be reconciled within society. Can we come to an agreement without turning it into a competition of who suffered more? Will we be able to avoid devaluing each other's experiences and build a dialogue based on shared ground?

We also plan to conduct separate interviews with the Center's staff, documenting their experiences since they joined the project at the end of February 2022, maintaining contact with teachers across Ukraine. This will form a distinct group of storytellers.

■ **N. O.:** What advice would you have given yourself last year when you first started imagining and launching this project?

■ **I. K.:** I realized that our own experiences resonate with us in these interviews, and we end up reinterpreting them. But for the people we are speaking with, this conversation often feels like a form of therapy. At first, we were unsure if people would be ready for this kind of conversation. It was a pleasant surprise to realize that they were not only ready but actually needed to talk about their experiences. I'm not sure how much easier it makes them feel, but I like to believe that it does help—especially when we give them the space to talk about what they want to, without pushing them into discussing things they're not comfortable with. As interviewers, we need to stay focused on our research questions, but we also must allow the person to tell their story in the way that feels most natural to them.

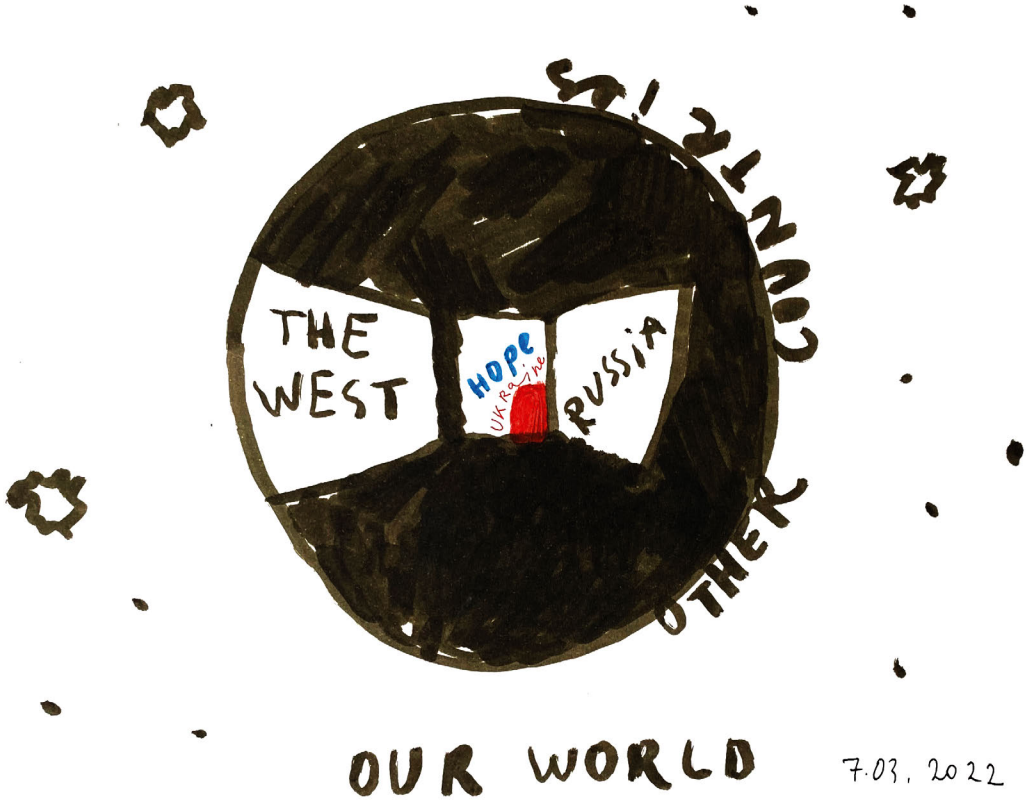
■ **N. U.:** I would tell myself that if I have doubts about whether people want to share their story and experiences, the best thing to

do is simply ask them. Just ask. You might be surprised to find that they've been ready to talk for a long time. Some of our storytellers said, "Thank you so much for this conversation. It helped me organize my experience in a way that made me feel better afterward." Since I stayed in touch with our interviewees after the recordings, some of them wrote to me personally, telling me how important the conversation was for them.

As a historian who works with materials from the World War II and teaches both teachers and students through personal stories from that period, I always emphasize that every experience and every voice matters. Every voice is a personal decision—whether someone wants to make it heard or not. But it's important to offer people the chance to speak. If they're willing to share, it's essential to let them know, "I'm here to listen." I believe that this "I'm here to listen" is crucial and necessary. It's something that can open many doors for dialogue.

Chapter 4

Localizing Methodologies



The War Childhood Museum

Viktoriia Nesterenko and Svitlana Osipchuk on the Stories of Children and Teenagers

The conversation was recorded online on June 21, 2023

Viktoriia Nesterenko (V. N.): I am a historian and urbanist. I've been working at the War Childhood Museum since the fall of 2020. For me, this was initially a research project: to record the history of childhood. Now, it's more about the psychological component and the importance of putting experiences into words.

Svitlana Osipchuk (S. O.): I am the director of the Ukrainian office of the War Childhood Museum. I started working here as a project manager two and a half years ago. The idea of the museum appeared in the mid-2010s. One of its co-founders, Jasminko Halilovic, survived the siege of Sarajevo as a child. To begin with, he interviewed his peers in Bosnia to find out what childhood during wartime was like for them. This led to a book, and then to an institution—an archive and exhibition space where they organize events. In 2020, the Bosnian office decided to open a representative office in Ukraine. We have five people in the Ukrainian management team. As of June 2023, we have four researchers working with us and three more are in the process of joining. The museum's team also includes transcriptionists and a psychologist-psychotherapist.

Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.): If you can recall what brought you to this work, what motivated you to start working specifically with children's stories?

S. O.: I've worked for a long time in non-formal human rights education, which I entered through studying and teaching Holocaust history. This field has already developed a large set of approaches

to creating sources, archiving, and using them. This is where it all began.

■ **V. N.:** I have a somewhat similar story. I've been working with children and with non-formal education for many years. And I've always eagerly participated in historical research projects. Working with the museum combines my interests: research, education, and social work. Over time, my motivation deepened, because I discovered that when you just talk to a child or an adult about their traumatic experience, in a friendly manner, sharing thoughts, the person recounts one thing, and when you take a recorder, sit down in front of them, and say: "Tell me. I'm all ears for an hour and a half, or two hours," then the story emerges in a completely different way. And it's important to preserve it.

As for my current motivation, we now have people in our country with very different experiences: those who stayed in Kharkiv and those who left Kharkiv; those who stayed in Halychyna and those who left Halychyna[1]; those who were in Bakhmut. For each person, these different experiences were traumatic in their own way, but people are beginning to pit their pain against one another. When we're in pain ourselves, it's difficult to be empathetic and compassionate toward others. It became very important for me to collect these diverse stories in order to create spaces where all of them are valued. This is where I see the museum's crucial role as a place where these stories are preserved.

■ **S. O.:** I have something to add to that. It's important to me that they are not only preserved but also serve the community after being recorded. We likely have a shorter path to the audience compared to other projects focused on different aspects of documentation. We know that an exhibition project is planned, and we can use these materials. Now we're analyzing our archive of materials collected before the full-scale invasion, and I want all these stories to be put to work. After February 24, 2022, I've been thinking more and more that the person who shared their story deserves to see their contribution.

■ **N. O.:** When did your museum team resume recording stories after the full-scale invasion began?

■ **S. O.:** We had 2022 planned out. We knew we would be organizing exhibitions—one was completed in Kherson in early February, and another was planned for Odesa in May, but none of that

1 Halychyna – a historical region in the west of Ukraine also known by its Polish-derived name Galicia (editor's note).

happened. Before the full-scale invasion, we had about 140 interviews already recorded. Based on this material, we decided to hold seminars and trainings on how to talk about the war, what needs to be known when it comes to children's experiences, and how to discuss certain topics, losses, changes. We organized these events online throughout last year, and in December 2022, we held a meeting at the Refugee Center in Kraków. There, we came up with the idea that we would try and observe ourselves, the children, and their parents to determine whether there was any readiness for interviews at all, and how suitable or interesting it might be for children currently living abroad. Those few conversations were quite informative, and afterward, we began to think that we could resume recording in the near future. Viktoriia can tell things from her point of view.

- **V. N.:** For me, returning to professional activities was part of getting back to normal, and I wanted to resume my work at the museum. Svitlana and I talked a lot about ethics and how ready children are to discuss what happened to them. In January 2023, we recorded the first interview since the start of the full-scale invasion, and I noticed how quickly some experiences fade. When some children begin sharing their stories, it feels like some details are already starting to blur.
- **N. O.:** Let's talk about the specifics of working with children.
- **S. O.:** I can speak as the mentor of this entire process. The central office [in Sarajevo] is currently working on interviewing children and young people who have experienced various wars and conflicts. They're trying to generalize their approaches. We took certain things from them, but we had to adapt this to our realities, of course. In general, the idea is that we have a certain set of documents that a researcher needs to read, along with a questionnaire. After the start of the full-scale invasion, we shortened and revised the questionnaire to avoid provoking strong emotional reactions. However, traumatic experiences can vary significantly, and you can never know what exactly will be a trigger.

The key point, and one of the main aspects of our work, is that everything at every stage must be voluntary. But, at the same time, this works a bit differently for children. Children still connect their actions to what they think adults expect from them. Parents (or guardians, any significant adults) are particularly influential. We've seen a lot of different reactions. Sometimes, parents try to protect their child in every way possible and don't want them to have any contact with anyone, no matter what the situation is. And that's understandable. Sometimes, on the contrary, it's the parents who want their child to

talk. This is also a challenge for the museum: not taking advantage of such situations and ensuring that the child is truly voluntarily involved and comfortable. Therefore, researchers must repeatedly remind children and their parents that they can stop participating at any time.

■ **V. N.:** You have to build interaction with both children and adults so that they start telling their stories. With children, this can be more challenging. However, since I look quite youthful, children—especially teenagers—sometimes take me for one of their own. Besides, it's a constant search for common ground—moments, interests, hobbies, anything that can help break the ice a bit.

I also adapt to the child. If they keep their distance, I keep mine. If they cry, I get empathetically involved in their story. If they joke about very difficult topics that I wouldn't laugh at in my normal life, I can still smile and share that emotion. It's important for me to create a space where the child's story is accepted and to show them that everything here follows their rules as much as possible. Starting with the simplest things: "Are you thirsty? Aren't you cold? Do you want to take a break? Remember, you don't have to answer if you don't feel like it." And then there are broader issues, like the presence of parents: "Do you want your parents to be present? How would you feel more comfortable?" I completely agree with Svitlana that children's consent is a very complicated thing.

■ **N. O.:** Listening to you, I'm thinking about what our courses on interviewing look like. The default assumption is usually that we will talk to people older than us, those who have lived through a particular situation, who remember the past, and can tell us how things used to be. When it comes to oral history, interviews about World War II and the Holocaust often serve as a model. We then speak to older people, for whom it's a recollection of their youth and childhood. How did you learn to work with children whose history unfolds in close chronological proximity to the moment of its recording?

■ **S. O.:** I took part in the PresentPast program from AMCHA Germany, a professional development program for those working with vulnerable groups who have experienced collective violence. It provided me with a lot of insights into how to recognize my own vulnerability as a researcher working with others, how to recognize someone else's vulnerability, and how to discuss it. Although it wasn't specifically focused on recording oral history testimonies, it was very, very important for me as a specialist working with trauma and traumatic

experiences. There's also constant learning during the work itself. I learn a lot from our researchers.

■ **V. N.:** I first came across oral history when I was studying at the History Department of Karazin University. Then, I transcribed interviews for some projects, and it was a real practical exercise. When you transcribe, you listen: "Yeah, the person asked the question this way, and it was answered like that; and here the person said something like this, and it was clear that the respondent was uncomfortable." You listen to the interviews and learn, you learn all the time.

At the same time, I entered the social sector. We worked a lot with orphans and participated in training programs that emphasized the storytelling aspect, specifically, when a child tells their story. This is how I first encountered trauma in practice, or more precisely, storytelling during recovery from traumatic experiences. So, by the time I started working at the museum, I already had psychological training.

I can't agree that there is a major difference in interviewing people from older and younger generations. When we record stories about the traumatic experiences of older people, in my experience, it often feels like it happened just yesterday for them. And sometimes, they can even react more emotionally than children, because they already understand what the norm is—and that they did not have this norm because of their history. That is, these experiences are still vivid, and they hurt. But the context is constantly changing. You must continually learn in order to understand how to avoid harming the person you're interviewing.

■ **N. O.:** To what extent did you need to adapt the methodology your Bosnian colleagues offered to the situation in Ukraine, where the war was ongoing—and still is?

■ **S. O.:** When we started recording in Ukraine, it was 2018. What absolutely wouldn't have worked for us—and what may have already been changed at the central office—were the questions about any possible loss. We decided not to use them. We excluded them from our questionnaires in any form. We never ask children whether they witnessed a tragic event, saw violence or death. We ask more about the changes from pre-war "normalcy" to the new "normalcy" shaped by the war or hostilities. We talk about what the daily routine was like, how schooling took place, what games were played, and what has changed. Even these questions often reveal a significant shift, a narrowing access to education and security.

As an institution, we are constantly learning, and we are now at a stage where we can work with the central office to understand, in practical terms, what this experience can offer them.

■ **V. N.:** Some things—like the questionnaire, for example—change constantly. The logic of the conversation we had built before the full-scale invasion involved starting with easier questions, then moving on to more difficult experiences, and then gradually bringing the child to their normal, current life with questions about everyday life and favorite foods. The last questions were always very motivating. Even the children themselves, when we asked them, "Is there anything else you'd like to add?", would often start a kind of motivational speech. In other words, we were able to end the interview on such a strong positive note, even though Donbas was still occupied.

And now, since we're still in this episode, it's quite difficult to end an interview. You're constantly looking at the child, searching for that question to wrap up the conversation. For example, some children respond very well to the question about how they imagine our victory. And sometimes it's very difficult, especially when the child has started telling their story, but is still inside it. And when you ask them, "How do you spend your free time?", they answer: "I sit in a bomb shelter". That's why you must look for the right way to end each interview, so that the child can move on after this.

■ **S. O.:** Another challenge is that children often believe we can't be interested in their story because it's too mundane, thinking that we're only looking for extreme experiences. We are working on a way to communicate more clearly that everyday life is just as interesting and important to us in any form. And then, I hope, more people will want to share their stories with us, because it's not necessary to only testify about something extremely traumatic—it's important to tell your unique story.

■ **N. O.:** Yes, this is something Viktoriia has already mentioned: certain hierarchies of experiences emerge, and based on them, we decide whether we want to share our story or not. Therefore, we need to address this somehow and show different stories, because there is no single way to live through the war.

Together with the narrators you are listening to or whose transcripts you are reading, you experience very different emotions. This overlaps with your personal life circumstances and the challenges of a threatened existence. How do you cope in these conditions, and how do you take care of yourselves?

■ **S. O.:** For me, therapy is essential. I think it's crucial for anyone who works with traumatic experiences. I also do sports and pay close attention to my bodily reactions. For instance, an interview with a girl from Mariupol had a profound impact on me, pushing me beyond my physical and psychological limits. I crossed this boundary quickly because I missed the moment when I should've stopped. Later, I discussed it a lot with our transcriptionist who transcribed the interview.

This situation became a reminder of how careful we need to be in our work and that both researchers and transcribers need support as well. We are currently in the process of developing a support system for our colleagues because we, too, are in the middle of a war. We live in war, we work with it, so we must be very mindful of our well-being as well as that of our colleagues.

■ **V. N.:** The stories I recorded for the museum didn't throw me off balance; on the contrary, they helped me a lot. I live in Saltivka in Kharkiv. On February 24, 2022, at five in the morning, we woke up to explosions. In that situation, when missiles were flying overhead and you didn't know where to run, the stories of my narrators became my guiding light. They kept me going. It was the moment when I knew there were people who had gone through a similar experience, who had lived through the crappiest scenarios, so I will cope with this too. Their stories aren't over, and neither are ours.

Besides, I have basic psychological hygiene in my life: psychotherapy, physical activity, sleep, enough food, and talking about situations that have had a strong impact on me.

■ **N. O.:** It's valuable that for you, interviews are not solely about secondary trauma but also about the hope that we draw from stories. It's equally important that when we talk about initiatives to collect and preserve testimonies of the war, we emphasize not only the interactions between interviewer and interviewee, which are central to our work, but also other types of relationships with the stories that may be difficult. It's about the experience of transcribers, as well as immersion in the story through reading and processing it. This contribution and emotional effort should be acknowledged, appreciated, and made visible.

We're now in the midst of one of the most documented wars. While we're currently recording the testimonies, the question arises: what will happen to them next? This brings us to considerations about archiving and access to archived materials.

■ **S. O.:** This is a big question for us. At a recent seminar, I heard the opinion that while the event is ongoing, there should be no access to

archives. I agree with this idea in the sense that as long as the people who have shared some personal information are alive, and if the institution can't be completely certain of all the potential consequences of publication (and it can't always be 100% certain), then access to the archive should at least be carefully moderated, if not restricted. At the same time, if nothing is done with the materials we've collected this year in the coming years, then why did we collect them in the first place? That's a big question.

We're building our archive with the intention of eventually opening it to researchers. At the same time, our researchers who collect the interviews can access the materials anytime—of course, after discussing it with us beforehand. Since the interviews have been entrusted to the museum's archive, we're also responsible for them. If someone shares their story with us, they have the right to expect that we'll handle it with respect, avoid complicating their life, and refrain from making decisions on their behalf that they never consented to.

■ **V. N.:** I can share my experience as someone who wrote an article based on the museum's material. It was a situation where there was a tension between me as a researcher and me as a responsible person. As a researcher, I need to provide as many details as possible—social status, city of origin, and some personal situations that shape a person and their perception. But Svitlana and I agreed this wasn't the way to approach it at the time. For example, I even gave the person's age as a range and described the location as "a town with up to 100,000 inhabitants." There were a lot of restrictions. At the same time, I sent this article to my respondents whose interviews I used. I was interested in hearing their feedback. Those of them who read my text said that it was really cool and useful. They thanked us for working with their experiences in such a way.

On the one hand, we need the archive to be open because we are not collecting all of this to be filed away—we need these stories to live on. But on the other hand, imagine a researcher from, let's say, London coming in, opening an interview, and reading some phrases that reflect Russian propaganda. That researcher, who isn't familiar with the situation at all, then writes that she has found documentary evidence, a person's testimony. Therefore, we bear the responsibility for oral sources because they aren't about hard facts but rather about a person's emotions and experiences. How do we handle this aspect? How do we regulate it at the level of access? I don't have any ideas yet.

■ **N. O.:** That's why we're having these conversations and together mapping our way toward the questions that need to be discussed and that may even remain unanswered. Your arguments made me think about the balance of power in producing knowledge about our region, and who holds more expertise when it comes to talking about the Russo-Ukrainian war. We need to reconsider this, ensuring that we are still asked for our comments. Nothing about us without us.

My last question to you is: what advice would you give to people who decide to engage in documentation?

■ **S. O.:** My advice is simple: it's very important to get to know yourself well, to build a very good and extensive self-support system for yourself, to work on your own skills of self-reflection and self-monitoring. That is, not only reflection, but also observation of your physical reactions. This will be very informative. And it's important on many levels. Firstly, your own well-being and understanding of your own limits, the psychological and physical capabilities of the body—these form the basis for working with traumatic experience. Secondly, it's important not to bring your own experiences into the interview in a form that will be destructive for the respondent. Maintaining balance in working with trauma is possible when one knows oneself very well and understands why one is doing it. Nowadays, there are and will be many reasons why this balance may be violated, because you always want to do more; but if you don't start with yourself, the consequences may be difficult.

■ **V. N.:** I'd like to add just one aspect—responsibility. Responsibility to those whose stories we collect. It's important to keep this in mind so that you're not just chasing after some crappy story or a super-discovery, but simply taking responsibility for the story of the person sitting in front of you.

Post Bellum–Ukraine

Yevheniia Nesterovych on How We Fought and Continue to Fight

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

Yevheniia Nesterovych (Ye. N.): I am a cultural manager and critic. As a program coordinator and communication specialist, I worked primarily on cultural projects until February 24, 2022. When the full-scale invasion began, I was in the process of leaving the Czech Center in Kyiv. In April 2022, I was approached by colleagues who were looking for people to renew the team of the Ukrainian NGO "Post Bellum–Ukraine," founded in 2020 at the initiative of the Czech NGO "Post Bellum" and the Territory of Terror Museum. Coincidentally, on the eve of the full-scale invasion, the international department of the Czech Post Bellum team was joined by documentary filmmaker Martin Ocknecht, who had previously visited Ukraine between 2016 and 2018 to film the documentary *There's No Shooting in Kyiv* and teach Czech to Ukrainians at the initiative of the Czech Center. Actually, he contacted me through the Czech Center and the Ukrainian Embassy in Prague.

I was offered to take over the management of Post Bellum–Ukraine in order to intensify its activities, not only start documenting the war but also expand Post Bellum's activities to Ukrainian territory. The Czech organization is focused on the topic of anti-totalitarian resistance. It's been actively supporting Ukraine in the fight against Russian aggression, helping our military, doctors, and civilians. It's a very broad campaign, perhaps one of the largest public fundraising efforts in Europe in support of Ukraine. Up until now, 676 million hryvnias have been raised by 61,000 Czech benefactors.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** If you can go back to the spring of 2022 and recall your motivations—why did you decide to take on this job?

■ **Ye. N.:** I can. I thought about it a lot then, and I'm going through a cycle of rethinking my motivations now. In the first months of the full-scale invasion, I was very confused. I didn't understand where I could apply my knowledge, competencies, and contacts for the maximum benefit. During the first month or two, we were busy accepting IDPs, finding them a place to stay, helping at the train station, and more; it was chaotic, but we were always engaged in very pragmatic activities. Still, I realized I could be more useful by utilizing professional competencies.

I was deeply involved in various grassroots communications efforts. For example, our foreign colleagues offered residencies for Ukrainian artists—mostly women artists or women with children—and we worked together with our colleagues who were already in Europe to organize this flow. In the information field, I tried to activate our contacts from the Authors' Reading Month festival, which united the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Ukraine into a writers' network. All of these countries have historical experience with the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, so they needed much less explanation about why we were attacked and what was happening. At the time, I thought it would be effective to amplify the voices of all the writers and intellectuals who had been to Ukraine and were familiar with the Ukrainian context, to support us.

On top of that, I could see that reality was very intense and tumultuous, with rapid changes. So I felt the need and the desire to somehow capture it. I also realized that we in Lviv were in a completely different position than people in Kharkiv or those I hosted who fled the East. I was caught off guard by how incommensurate these experiences were, how difficult it was to talk to them, to ask them something without retraumatizing them. At the same time, it was clear to me that it was important to preserve it all in order to stitch it all together later. Perhaps that's why the proposal to record oral history interviews came in handy, as this process offers a methodology that creates distance and allows us to record stories without full immersion in these experiences; and also it was the fact that our documentation would be part of a large international archive that would be able to shed light on our history, who we are, and why we were attacked—this was probably the most important motivator. At the time, it seemed to me that this was a good opportunity to apply my professional knowledge to something that would be useful for the country.

■ **N. O.:** You mentioned that your motivations have transformed. Can you track this change?

■ **Ye. N.:** Today, before our meeting, I had a conversation with my colleagues about what has happened this year, about the fact that we've already collected more than a hundred interviews. Now we see that there's a growing need to present this material in various popular, understandable, and digestible forms to the outside world, in order to continue shaping public opinion in the Czech Republic and the West in general in favor of long-term support for Ukraine. It's now clear that this won't end as quickly as we'd like. Moreover, militarization will affect not only Ukraine but also all of Central and Eastern Europe. And the logic and motivation of Ukrainians defending their independence with arms should probably be given more space in this documentation. We're now actively thinking about how to do this, because, due to a combination of various factors, it turns out that the most threatened and active group in this war—the military—are the least documented, and their experience remains the most distant and hardest to imagine, both for people within the country and for audiences outside.

■ **N. O.:** By the way, I agree with the point that the experience of the military is the least documented. First of all, for security reasons, but also for legal ones. Now, many months after the start of the full-scale invasion, we can already reflect on the fact that many records of war experience will have serious gaps as well.

However, we, those who took up the task of documentation, reacted quite quickly. If we think in terms of the academic field, which has its own time frames for grant applications, their review, then project implementation, analysis, and publication of results, then between an idea and its publication years—if not decades—can pass. And we, in fact, have accomplished in a few months what would normally take years. That's why it's also interesting to see how we reconsider certain things and realize that what may have been the best solution at the time might no longer be the case. We need to somehow change our approaches and reimagine this framework, which can and should include the voices of the military.

■ **Ye. N.:** Actually, there's a great deal of caution surrounding all topics related to the army. For example, revealing the motivations of those who are or have been military volunteers, as well as those who avoid service. This is currently an extremely sensitive issue within Ukrainian society.

We also have a small project on the integration of internally displaced people who moved after 2014. The idea was to process and understand an experience from which we already have some distance, which might help us find effective mechanisms for current integration. But I realize now that this is even more difficult than we thought because the lack of discussion and exploration of this topic within society creates many barriers. How do we incorporate the critical comments that arise in conversations so that the narrators don't feel even more excluded later? With the military, this issue will be even more acute. This motivates me to think actively about what we can do now. Naturally, one wants to avoid pain points, but this approach doesn't work. It only makes things worse. It postpones the trauma, and then, eight or nine years later, it turns out that it's still a traumatic experience for people.

■ **N. O.:** The fact that our 20th century history hasn't been sufficiently studied and discussed in society shows how suppressed issues resurface and continue to follow us, preventing us from moving forward.

Many of our initiatives and projects are possible thanks to our previous experience—we build on something and we update something. Can you think of what aspects of your entire pre-full-scale invasion experience were important and useful in the new circumstances? What was missing and what did you have to invent?

■ **Ye. N.:** I hadn't worked with oral history at all. I was neither familiar with this field nor with the methodology, except for some general knowledge. At the same time, I worked a lot with cultural criticism and had an interest in cultural anthropology. I've always been most drawn to the culture of everyday life, and I really felt the absence of these materials in the Ukrainian context. I think that we have very little of this kind of conceptualized recording, for example, of the first 15 years of our independence, which were very formative. Things have always been moving fast around here, and we've had no time, no space, and no resources for proper conceptualization. Because of this, we seem to be constantly catching up, as we are falling behind in some areas.

The boom in interest in Ukrainian 20th century history that we've seen recently is a delayed perception effect, as these things are highly dependent on the optics. The same set of facts can be interpreted and perceived differently depending on the optics through which you look at it. Thus, what I knew about the history of Ukrainian culture thanks to my philological education works a little differently through the prism of this job.

But this optics came up situationally. The oral history approach used by Post Bellum is based on individual stories. "Everyone has a story" is Post Bellum's slogan. On the one hand, it's a matter of interviewing, a genre I love and probably turned to the most when I was working in criticism and cultural journalism. And it's the long, in-depth interview giving a portrait of an individual that has always been most interesting to me. But here, we also rely on a time frame, on chronology, and aim to record history through the eyes of its eyewitnesses and participants. Not those who write history as the winners or those whose voices have been the most amplified, but those who are directly involved in the events.

■ **N. O.:** Let's focus on the documentation of stories that Post Bellum–Ukraine started last year. It's an international methodology, but some things may have been reconsidered and rewritten based on the experience we have here. Can you tell me a little bit about your approach to work—what has stayed the same and what had to be adapted or changed?

■ **Ye. N.:** In June 2022, our team—that is, me, Viktoriia Soloviuk, who is in charge of communications, and Olha Symonenko, who was invited as a historian—went to Prague for a ten-day training to learn from their experience. Post Bellum has been operating in the Czech Republic for over 20 years. They have a code of ethics, a methodology for working and processing materials for an electronic archive. This is based on a semi-structured questionnaire, organized chronologically. The main idea is to allow witnesses to freely tell their experiences, focusing on historical events they participated in or witnessed. The emphasis is on the oldest generation, as these people are fading away, and their experiences need to be recorded.

The first witnesses recorded by the Czech branch of Post Bellum were World War II veterans who fought on the Allied side. Gradually, their focus began to expand. The founders of this organization are, roughly speaking, the children of people from Václav Havel's circle, so they maintain a core focus on human rights protection and anti-totalitarian resistance. For example, before 2022, they had experience working with testimonies from participants in the Belarusian protests and had begun recording the stories of young people. At the same time, it's the largest multithematic oral history archive in the world, with more than 16,000 testimonies. Initially, they recorded audio, and now they are transforming it into a storytelling format that is as accessible as possible for non-specialists. This isn't an academic project; they position themselves at the intersection of

history and journalism. In this sense, the Czech tradition differs from the Ukrainian one. They have a long tradition of historical journalism, which uses fairly simple language to make it as understandable as possible for the general audience. So, everything is collected not just for the sake of it, but to be continually transformed into popular formats. The Czech Post Bellum has two strategic partners: the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes and Czech Radio. Their materials live on in educational projects, documentaries, and television programs.

Another important aspect of the Czech Post Bellum's code of ethics is its fundamental neutrality. They record testimonies with an eye to the next 20-30 years, ensuring they avoid any value judgments both in the storytelling and in the formulation of questions. An important feature that I think we should actively implement is the tone of voice used to address the audience. Rather than having a voice-over tell you who is good and who is bad, the facts are presented directly, with the assumption that the audience is critically minded and capable of making their own decision about who was on the right side of history.

When we arrived in Prague, familiarized ourselves with the methodology, spoke with different departments, and looked at the scale of their activity, we began to outline the topic we would focus on in our work. We decided that we didn't want to limit ourselves to recording only eyewitnesses of the current war and focusing solely on the 'here-and-now' moment. I came up with an idea that we ended up working with throughout the entire year: "How We Fight: Stories of Ukrainian Resistance". Within this topic, we recorded witnesses from the oldest generation to current activists. An important detail: the oldest Ukrainian witnesses are, on average, 15-20 years younger than Czech witnesses because we have a shorter life expectancy.

I really wanted to show the broad scope of Ukrainian activism across various fields, including the environment, language, women's rights, medicine, education, and culture. Truly diverse fields in which people, in their own communities, chose to reject the established norms and to protest underground or openly, for the sake of what they believed in. When we developed the questionnaire, it became clear that it's very interesting to listen to the segment of people's testimonies about their childhood and what shaped them as individuals. This gives us an opportunity to highlight very different, very cool, and often invisible regional cultural and social contexts in Ukraine. We

have a diverse collection. Now it's about a hundred testimonies. We collected them in Lviv, Kyiv, and Odesa. There are representatives of other cities and regions, but they are rather the exception.

- **N. O.:** How does your initiative find its narrators?
- **Ye. N.:** We searched via our interviewers. We started by holding online training for those who wanted to work with Post Bellum–Ukraine as interviewers and authors. About 60 people joined then. Then the story collectors suggested their heroes. It's a diverse selection, and I'm glad it is, although it was a bit scary at first. It became clear that we have so many untold stories, and this topic can be a lens that will allow us to look at this field and find our bearings.

After our expedition to Odesa, where we recorded 28 very different and magnificent stories, I thought it would be worth planning activities focused on specific regions. While there have been some thematic projects aimed at oral history in Kyiv or Lviv all this time, such projects have been virtually nonexistent in other regions. We hardly ever worked with this local cultural context because there were no opportunities for it. We have a mobile studio now, and we are trying, and will continue to try, to expand regionally. We are currently collecting interviews with IDPs, and the bits about childhood and youth are like describing Atlantis. People who left Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea nine years ago are talking about something that no longer exists and is most likely impossible to restore. But this knowledge is necessary for a conversation about what we should do after de-occupation with this vast and very distinctive layer of culture, history, and social ties.

We record interviews on video mainly because we think about using them for documentaries in the future. We do it all in a mobile studio with Eye Direct Studio technology, which creates the effect of eye-to-eye contact between the witness and the viewer. This is a close-up on a black background. The witness is sitting alone in this booth, looking into the eyes of the interviewer through a system of mirrors. It's an interesting effect. At first, when we saw it in Prague, I was a little caught off guard by the lack of direct contact between the interviewer and the witness; it seemed like it would disturb the interview. But they made the largest studio for us, a three-by-three meter black room. When a person sits inside under the light and has only eye contact with the interviewer through these mirrors, they look directly into the camera. After 10-20 minutes of getting used to it, it really does stimulate self-reflective storytelling. You are not distracted by the cameramen or anything happening outside the frame;

instead, you're focused on your own memories. We hide the camera and the person is just one-on-one with themselves.

We have now collected a hundred interviews and are thinking about how to turn them into media, popular, educational products and share them publicly. The safety of the witnesses is central and most important to us. At the same time, we realize that this is invaluable evidence, unlike anything we've had, for example, since the Second World War, and it opens up entirely new dimensions of knowledge for us—not so much about the war itself, but about the people at war.

■ **N. O.:** Let's continue this topic and talk about the future of these stories: archiving them, ways of communication, and how we can write history together based on the collected individual stories.

■ **Ye. N.:** On the one hand, this evidence is collected for researchers of the future. Everything is written with a 10-, 20-, 30-year perspective in mind. On the other hand, there's an understanding and desire that these testimonies should now become part of the public media discourse. This is the foundation for the idea that interviews should be filmed, so that videos can be created. For the first time, with this project about IDPs, we're going to try making YouTube versions of these interviews, each around half an hour long. We'll see how it goes.

We're translating selected stories into English, and some into Czech as well. But for the most part, it works like this: if you register in the online archive as a researcher, you see an international sample, and our witnesses are displayed under the tag "Ukraine." When you go to a witness's page, in a typical case where the person hasn't indicated during the recording that "this is off the record" and has given full consent for the materials to be shared, you'll find five to seven short video fragments from the conversation, each accompanied by an English translation. It will be just a transcript, both in the original language and in English. There will be five to seven excerpts, a short biography in English and Ukrainian, in which we try to explain why this person is included in the collection. Then there will be their main biographical points. And then you can open this witness's full story, written by our authors according to the Post Bellum methodology. It will include quotes, but only a few of them. At the end, there will be archival photos or documents that are connected to the story. As a registered user, if you have the full consent of the speaker, you'll have access to the conversation protocol and the full recording. The conversation transcript allows you to search for topics and navigate by keywords, but it's not translated. It's designed for those who know Ukrainian or Russian.

Online, you have access only to the audio versions. The videos are of good quality and the files are large, so they are stored only on physical disks. You can request them if you need them for non-profit educational projects. We have our own storage, and there is another copy stored in Prague. We jointly hold the copyright.

As for public communication, for example, we created a series of publications for Zaxid.net based on our recordings—we selected five storytellers from Western Ukraine, specifically from the Lviv context. They were very well received by the audience. We're also eager to collaborate with Radio Kultura to create an audio product, such as a podcast or a documentary series.

We try to work only with those witnesses who are ready to make their stories public. However, we have recorded testimonies that haven't been published and won't be until the end of the war, because the person requested it. Or, for example, think about people from the occupied territories who still have families there. It's a complicated question of how to handle such materials, and our Czech colleagues don't have an answer to this because they've never worked in such conditions.

■ **N. O.:** Tell me more about the team with whom you are implementing this project.

■ **Ye. N.:** We conducted training and brought together documentarists from diverse backgrounds, including journalists, history teachers, scholars, documentary filmmakers who record interviews, and people who work with texts and process recorded interviews. In May 2023, Olha Symonenko left the team, and Svitlana Dovhan took over the documentary work and the archive management. We work as a team of three. Now we also have Andrii Matiunka helping us with administrative tasks, as the volume of work is growing. We cooperate with various experts and involve them in a particular project when necessary. For example, when we went to Odesa, building on our previous experience in Kyiv, we first met with local activists from various organizations. We asked them who they would consider worth recording within this topic. As a result, we collected over 60 potential witnesses. Then we prioritized them, ranked them, met them, and conducted training for interviewers there. Then we came with a studio, spent four or five days with supervision, where our new interviewers conducted interviews—we sat and listened to them, and corrected mistakes in real time if necessary. We're now working remotely with regional teams of 10-15 people—people who are familiar with our methodology and our equipment and who understand and share the values of Post Bellum.

■ **N. O.:** Documentation in the context of a full-scale invasion is also a story of our multi-layered positionality, as we are also involved in the war, we are also living through it. How do you cope? How do you take care of yourself under these conditions?

■ **Ye. N.:** We strive to put people at the center of everything we do. For me, it's crucial that what we do is consistent with how we do it. This principle is the hardest to follow, as it's common in the cultural sector to work yourself to exhaustion, regardless of available resources. It's worth noting that our Czech colleagues emphasized this issue from the very beginning.

One of the key moments of our training in Prague was a meeting with a psychotherapist who had worked with Holocaust survivors and victims of both Chechen wars. She explained to us the principles of psychological safety of interviewers and the challenges of working in an unresolved situation. It was strange for us to hear her saying, "It's very important who will win this war in order to record witnesses." And our immediate reaction was, "What do you mean, who will win?" It was probably the first time I realized how uncertain our position was—how obscure the situation, how threatened we and our witnesses were, and how unstable this whole thing was. In our witness consent form, there is an option for the witness to withdraw their testimony. While we wouldn't want it to be used, we provide this possibility.

Documenting witnesses to major historical events, while those events are still unfolding, is a constant ouroboros. You don't know what will strike a nerve in yourself—just as you don't know what will strike a nerve in your witness. It's important to clarify, however, that we didn't interview, for example, victims of war crimes. The people who come to us for interviews are those who have already come to terms with what they are willing to share publicly.

When we were planning the session in Odesa, we tried to balance the workload, to make sure that one person recorded no more than four interviewees. According to our methodology, each conversation lasts at least three to four hours. This means 12 hours of conversations for one interviewer, even if they don't process the interview afterwards. That's why it often happens that these materials are processed by other team members. We have a chat room where our editors communicate with authors and documentarists. When they send their edited stories for approval or clarification, they always include a few personally words, such as, "Thank you for this story. It was difficult, but very important."

I really want the community that's been gathering around Post Bellum–Ukraine to be united by shared values. This is my primary focus. It's very important to me that people are at the heart of all this. This is the main postulate. When you work under the circumstances we've all been working under in Ukraine for the past year and a half, you come to realize that people are the most valuable thing. And all you can do is protect these people somehow.

■ **N. O.:** My last question is about the advice you would give your past self, looking back at moments of decision-making, imagining and putting together this project, or the advice to someone who's currently taking on similar work and facing similar challenges.

■ **Ye. N.:** My advice would be to use your energy wisely. Double all anticipated complications and halve all plans. We're working not just under high uncertainty, but in the midst of a real crisis. When you're sending grant applications while sitting on the floor in the bathroom during a missile attack, that's a slightly different way of cultural management than usual.

It's crucial to make time to reflect on what you've done. So I would advise, if possible, to plan separate meetings where you can reflect together on the world we live in. Everything changes too quickly—motivations, situations, and the challenges you face. After each "field" activity, we gather to discuss what went right, what went wrong, and what needs to be revisited. We don't have any ready-made answers—no set formulas work. We also need to stay aware of what our colleagues are doing, because a lot of things are being done simultaneously. We often face the problem of people doing the same thing twice because they didn't check if someone else had already done it. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't do it; it's just important to stay aware of the broader situation.

We should listen to each other as much as possible and try to recognize the limitations of our own perspective. If you're going to work with a group you don't belong to, make sure to do some preliminary research and testing with members of that group. This opens up a deeper understanding of the difference in experiences. Don't be afraid to appear incompetent because it's not about competence; it's about the ability to ask questions and listen. Asking questions and actively listening to what's being said will not give you a different experience, but it will at least provide insight into the scope of what you'll be working with.

Chapter 5

Creating Archives

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 postgraduate 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, Ilovaisk, 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.

Ukraine War Archive

Mariia Buchelnikova and Yaroslav Kyryienko on Collecting Stories for Justice

The conversation was recorded online on August 21, 2023

Yaroslav Kyryienko (Ya. K.): I represent the Civil Union "Educational Human Rights House–Chernihiv" and have been coordinating war crime documentation efforts since April 2022. Before that, my work focused on supporting human rights defenders, civic activists, and journalists at risk. Following the full-scale invasion, once we managed to evacuate our families and loved ones from Chernihiv, we reconnected with our team and decided to contribute by documenting war crimes.

We became part of the NGO Coalition "Ukraine. Five in the Morning" and the "Tribunal for Putin" initiative. Initially, we worked remotely, gathering and archiving materials according to the Berkeley Protocol and collaborating with law enforcement agencies. After the de-occupation of the Chernihiv region, our team returned and began conducting monitoring visits.

During this time, we encountered the Ukraine War Archive initiative from the NGO "Docudays". We learned about its objectives, the processes for collecting testimonies, and the protocols for transferring and storing materials. This approach aligned well with our work, so we began collaborating with them.

Mariia Buchelnikova (M. B.): I am the project manager of the Ukraine War Archive, a role I've held since its inception. Alongside this, since the onset of the full-scale invasion, I have been engaging with international media on topics such as Russian colonialism, imperialism, and the complex relationship between Russia and Ukraine.

One of my independent initiatives is *Ukraine Explainers*, an English-language project that has been translated into 11 other languages. With the support of volunteers, we continue to produce explanatory materials, which we share on social media to help international audiences better understand the situation here. Over time, we have reached several million people, contributing, perhaps, to the creation of new narratives about Ukraine. This work represents an additional layer of my activism.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** Let's go back to the spring of 2022. Can you reflect on what motivated you to imagine and shape the Ukraine War Archive, or to join this initiative?

■ **M. B.:** At that time, many Docudays projects had come to a halt, but we felt the need to stay active—to keep our minds engaged and find ways to be useful. Working in the public sphere, you're often driven by the sense that your efforts can help shape civil society, improve your country, or strengthen your community. This is a significant motivation for many in our field. So, we began thinking about what we could do right then and there to make a difference.

Initially, the idea took shape as what we called the *Encyclopedia of War*. It wasn't even an archive at first, just a different concept entirely. Around that time, the SBU (Security Service of Ukraine, Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrainy) started releasing intercepted conversations between Russians—horrific discussions that exposed the atrocities they were committing. We felt it was crucial for these conversations to reach a global audience. Our first thought was to translate these materials into English and launch an awareness campaign. As we worked on this, the idea gradually evolved. We realized that all of these materials—these stories, records, and evidence—could be collected, preserved, and systematically organized. We saw immense potential for these resources to serve various purposes in the future. The concept of an encyclopedia naturally evolved into the idea of an archive.

We recognized that Ukraine and Ukrainians were living through a transformative historical moment—a period of shaping a new history. Preserving and documenting this moment felt urgent and necessary. At the time, we naively believed we could contribute to investigating war crimes. Later, we realized that while the materials we collected couldn't serve as legal evidence, they could still provide valuable tools for professionals conducting such investigations. Our overarching goal has always been justice for Ukrainians. But we also understood the importance of working within our expertise and not overstepping into areas where we lacked the necessary skills. It's

about doing what you do best. For many Ukrainians, this war has been a call to action—a way to help their country and their people. Ukraine War Archive embodies that sense of purpose. It's what we can contribute in the best way possible. That's how the project came to life.

■ **Ya. K.:** I completely agree with that sentiment. Civic activism is fundamentally about being useful during the state's most challenging times. Back then, everyone in the public sector was searching for ways to contribute and help strengthen the country. Once we were in a safe area, when the children were secure, when we'd had a moment to exhale, and after completing medical checkups, we finally had the time to think about our next steps.

We decided to focus on documenting war crimes. The director of our organization suggested I lead this effort because of my extensive experience in law enforcement. I had worked as an investigator, so this task felt deeply personal, and I knew I could be effective in this role. We started by gathering information from open sources. We also shared a phone number, an email address, and an electronic form where people could report war crimes in the Chernihiv region. Soon people began reaching out, and we started recording their testimonies—not so much formal interviews as detailed accounts of their experiences.

At first, our primary goal was to bring the perpetrators to justice. That was the driving force behind our work. But when we returned to the Chernihiv region to conduct monitoring visits and collaborate more closely with law enforcement agencies, it became clear that official processes for collecting evidence were already underway. We could share the information we had gathered, including intelligence, OSINT data, reports, and testimonies, but these were not formal evidence. Law enforcement agencies were responsible for collecting legally admissible evidence. This realization led us to rethink our purpose. Gradually, we began to see the documentation process not just as a way to pursue justice but as a means of preserving the memory of the war and safeguarding history. Our aim shifted to ensuring that what happened during these years would never be rewritten or manipulated. We wanted to prevent future generations—our children and grandchildren—from encountering a distorted narrative, such as myths about "Russian liberators" in the Chernihiv region.

When we visited communities and explained this purpose, people were more willing to share their stories. Initially, when we talked about bringing perpetrators to justice, many were hesitant—they

knew it was unlikely we'd ever track down the specific Russian, Buryat, or Tuvan soldier responsible for a particular act. But when we framed our work as preserving the truth for the future—so that, in 15 years, these first-hand accounts would remain unaltered, accessible, and even available for use in documentaries—people understood the significance. This shift in motivation resonated with them. From there, we began transferring the materials we collected to the Ukraine War Archive.

■ **N. O.:** When I talk with colleagues working on documentation projects, I often notice recurring themes. One is the recognition of the boundaries of one's expertise—understanding where your contributions are most effective and where you can provide the greatest support. This is especially significant in the humanities and social sciences, where outcomes may vary widely: sometimes immediate and tangible, other times delayed or taking unexpected forms. Another recurring theme is the concept of a planning horizon—the idea that the work we do today is an investment in the future. By gathering evidence from primary sources now, we pave the way for crafting a first-person narrative of the war, offering insights into its direct experiences.

Could you tell me more about the team working on the archive? How has it evolved over the past year and a half?

■ **M. B.:** That's an excellent question, as it offers a chance to reflect on the scale and success of our work. One thing I'm particularly proud of is that the entire team we brought together—starting from the initial stages last year and solidifying it over several months—has remained with us. These individuals have grown into remarkable experts in their respective fields. We had to build many processes from scratch, without a blueprint or anyone to consult. We quickly realized that collecting materials required a systematic approach: we needed team members to upload everything to a centralized location in a consistent format and organize it effectively. If we aimed to create a catalog, we needed someone to review these materials and assign keywords to make searching them easier. Beyond that, if we wanted to document war crimes or collect stories reflecting the broader experiences of war, we needed coordinators to manage interviewers and documenters. Bit by bit, as we identified the various directions our work would take, we assembled the necessary team.

For instance, our analytics and tagging team has grown significantly. We started with three members, none of whom had direct experience in this area. Through hands-on work and training, they developed their skills and designed efficient workflows. Now that

team has expanded to seven members plus a manager. This work is incredibly challenging—it involves handling sensitive materials that evoke strong emotions and painful memories. Yet not only have these team members persevered, but they've also become experts in their field.

Similarly, our interview team started from scratch. Our coordinators, Tetiana and Maryna, sought out interviewers and devised ways to connect with witnesses willing to share their stories. They successfully built an outstanding team of experts across Ukraine who record and professionally film these interviews.

The Ukraine War Archive is co-founded by two organizations: the NGO Docudays and INFOSCOPE, a London-registered organization led by Ukrainians now based there. INFOSCOPE handles the technical side, including the development and maintenance of the database. Docudays, on the other hand, manages teams focused on interviews, tagging, analytics, sorting, communications, and partnerships. Responsibilities are divided, but the overall team—the core of the Ukraine War Archive—includes over 50 members and a few volunteers. This team has 17 interviewers working across Ukraine in various regions. Their continued collaboration is immensely valuable, as it reflects the strong partnerships we've cultivated with individuals and organizations alike.

■ **Ya. K.:** The House team operates in somewhat different areas, focusing on OSINT and working remotely with open-source materials. When it came to conducting direct interviews, however, we essentially started from scratch. I had some experience in interviewing and communicating with people, while the organization's director had participated in monitoring trips to areas near temporarily occupied territories. Dmytro Naumenko, who had long been involved with Docudays, also had experience in monitoring visits. But none of us had ever worked in documentation. Everything we have developed so far is the result of our own efforts.

Starting out was incredibly challenging. We lacked a proper team, and everyone had to take on multiple roles. On top of that, there were the risks involved in traveling to territories that might or might not have been mined. Finding individuals willing and able to share their stories was yet another hurdle. For a long time, it was just the three of us working together as a team. Eventually, we bought a small, old minibus, which allowed us to venture beyond Chernihiv to conduct our work. We learned as we went along, adapting and improving our methods. Remarkably, this core team has stayed intact throughout.

■ **N. O.:** On one hand, we are building on our prior experiences—whether professional or personal. On the other hand, none of us were fully prepared to work under the conditions of a full-scale invasion. While we brought some knowledge and skills to the table, we also had to learn a great deal along the way. In circumstances which are challenging in terms of security and psychology, we are not just conducting our work—we are also building institutions and developing practices for how to engage in these conversations and preserve them for the future. I see two key aspects of this work that I'd like to discuss with you now. The first concerns the process of collecting these stories, and the second relates to their preservation, description, and plans for their future use.

There were extensive discussions about the timing of initiating these conversations with people and the best ways to approach them—ethically, methodologically, and safely. Could you share how you addressed these dilemmas?

■ **Ya. K.:** Let me explain how we collect information. We've developed a system that we believe is effective, and we share it in the training programs we offer for documentarians. Before we visit any location, an open-source analyst prepares a case study for the team going there. This study includes background on what has happened in the area, which witnesses have already been interviewed, who might be potential witnesses, and which episodes are worth looking into.

If we find that the information is well-documented by journalists or law enforcement, or if there is public suspicion surrounding the case, we generally avoid interviewing the same individuals again. Journalists' work is different from ours—they often seek emotional content, whereas our focus is on documenting facts and gathering testimonies. Therefore, we aim to know in advance where and with whom we should conduct interviews in each place.

When we arrive, we first connect with local authorities to explain who we are and what we plan to do. It's essential to clarify that the documentarians who come to record interviews are not journalists who will immediately publish information with the names and personal data of witnesses.

After the de-occupation, we had to work quickly. We made three trips within one week, trying to reach as many people as possible. At that time, it was crucial to preserve primary sources while people were still open to talking, though many had started to flee. The emotional and physical toll of those early interviews was immense.

Now we can prepare for interviews more thoroughly, gathering information about witnesses and checking if they've been interviewed before.

So far, we have around 300 recordings and are even starting to link these testimonies. From one interview, we can often determine who else we need to speak with. We have a growing list of witnesses, with whom we've already made contact and scheduled follow-up interviews. Of course, there are people who are willing to speak, but also many who are reluctant, such as victims of sexual violence. Some people give a pseudonym or refuse to be publicly identified for safety reasons. Others agree to record their testimony only on an audio device, not on video. We send all of these materials to the Ukraine War Archive.

As for how the interviews themselves go: we begin by explaining who we are, what project we represent, and why we are conducting the interviews. We answer any questions they might have and discuss the security aspects of the process. We provide information about the settlements we are studying—publicly available reports from the Chernihiv region, for example. As a member of an interagency working group collaborating with law enforcement agencies, we find that this helps clarify our role and mission. Then, we request their consent to process personal data. We collect personal details and have them sign a physical consent form, allowing us to share the materials with international institutions, law enforcement agencies, and other public organizations. The interview itself consists of two parts. In the first, the individual introduces themselves and agrees to the processing and storage of their personal data. This part is not made public, but it is sent to the Ukraine War Archive. The second part, however, can be published. In this section, individuals can use a pseudonym if they wish to protect their identity for security reasons. If any public material is later produced, we always ask for explicit permission to publish their story. This is a crucial part of our ethical approach, adhering to the principle of "do no harm."

■ **M. B.:** Before we began this process, we consulted with several human rights organizations because we understood that the information we would be handling could be highly sensitive. Our primary goal was to ensure we did no harm. To that end, we developed our questionnaire in consultation with the Center for Civil Liberties and the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union. We also made the decision to record video interviews, as we recognized that incorporating multimedia would offer greater opportunities for future projects.

Our work isn't limited to documenting war crimes, and it doesn't always involve sensitive material. People are often very willing to share a wide range of stories or reflections. However, we've built a comprehensive legal framework for this project, which we continue to adapt and refine. Our coordinators are very diligent and take the responsibility of handling and disseminating information seriously. Even when a person has initially consented to being recorded, we always ask for their permission again before using the footage. This is crucial because, unfortunately, in Ukraine, there is sometimes a careless approach to handling other people's personal data. It's essential that people know exactly how and where their information will be used.

■ **Ya. K.:** I would also add that in this work, we often take on the role of psychologists. Many times, people are initially reluctant to speak, but after we talk with them for hours, they open up and we find it hard to stop them as they emotionally recount what happened to them. There are also places that have never been visited by journalists or law enforcement agencies. It's simply impossible to cover every territory. In those places, people feel overlooked and neglected—they've been through so much, yet no one has come to listen to them. When we arrive, people approach us and ask to share their stories. This is where empathic communication and providing psychological support become essential.

■ **N. O.:** That's why creating archives is not just about preserving information—it's also about acknowledging and validating the multiple, diverse experiences people have had. It's a way to show them that they haven't been forgotten and that they are part of the collective memory, that their testimonies matter. However, this work is emotionally challenging, not only in the moment when you're listening to people, but also when you are processing these materials later. How do you take care of yourselves in this process?

■ **Ya. K.:** It's all about motivation. You know that the work needs to be done—it's important to document and upload everything. For example, not all the interviews we've collected have been transferred to the Ukraine War Archive yet. An unfinished task weighs on you more than the emotional impact of the conversations themselves. But I can see that some of my colleagues do need support because the psychological toll is difficult for them. Still, everyone remains motivated and understands the importance of what they're doing.

■ **M. B.:** I don't personally record testimonies, but as a coordinator, I encourage my colleagues to attend training sessions. I'd also

love to organize psychological sessions for our documenters and analysts, but unfortunately no donor has supported this so far. As a team, we're still figuring out how to manage the emotional burden we've accumulated. There's this feeling that a lot of emotions are being stored up, and there needs to be a way to release them. So far, this remains an unresolved issue for me.

■ **N. O.:** I can share our experience with supervision sessions, where we would gather as a team in the same physical space every week. Because it was done systematically, it worked really well. We had a psychologist who facilitated these meetings, but sometimes we would just come together and talk. Simply being together and speaking about our experiences helped alleviate some of the stress and allowed us to track the team's emotional state and any changes over time.

Now, let's shift to the life of conversations in the digital world, where direct, personal interactions are transformed into visual or textual records. Could you tell us about the digital infrastructure you've built around this archive? What happens to an interview after it's recorded?

■ **Ya. K.:** After an interview is recorded, we annotate it. Once it's ready, the video can be uploaded to the Ukraine War Archive. Since we shoot on camera, one interview can be more than 50 GB, so we're only able to upload one or two interviews per day. We also share some of the information—such as facts from the testimonies, details about locations, victims, and alleged war criminals—with the coalitions we work with, including iDoc, the Mnemonics database, and Tribunal for Putin. In addition to this, we write reports and analyze data from individual settlements.

■ **M. B.:** We receive interviews directly from the documentarians. The team responsible for sorting and uploading them to the server manages the entire process. They maintain a detailed table that tracks the name of the interviewer, the number of materials transmitted, when they were recorded, and the time of recording. Each file has its own record with all the relevant incoming information.

Once the material is on the server, it is handed over to our analysts, who watch the video from start to finish and tag it with time codes. This makes it possible for someone searching for something specific to find the relevant fragments using keywords. While personal information is stored in the database, it is not accessible to users. In some cases, the material may be particularly sensitive, so we restrict access to it by assigning a second level of security. A user of the archive can see that such material exists, with details like the informa-

tion provided and what the witness describes, but the content itself remains inaccessible. As a team, we've decided that access to this material will be granted only to law enforcement agencies, lawyers, or human rights defenders. We may reconsider this policy after a certain period, but for now, we cannot and will not make this material public. On the other hand, stories that are not related to war crimes but are more anthropological in nature are given first-level access, meaning they are available for all users to view.

■ **N. O.:** Your archive has different levels of access: administrators and users. Depending on the access level, materials can either be edited, viewed online, or simply listed as existing. My question, which I don't have an answer to myself, is about what you are currently restricting. How do you decide what data to label as sensitive?

■ **M. B.:** For example, we've encountered a situation where a witness shares a story on camera but inadvertently reveals information about another person who hasn't consented to have their story told. This could include not just names, but also sensitive details, such as personal information or accounts of murder or torture. This raises significant concerns. We've consulted with a lawyer to determine whether we can show such an interview to users without jeopardizing the safety of the person being interviewed. One idea we considered was redacting these parts, but that's a labor-intensive process since it requires listening to all the interviews again and having someone else handle the editing. There are many challenges involved, but we're working on finding ways to manage this process more efficiently while still handling the materials with the necessary care.

When it comes to classifying the interviews, we've decided that stories involving sexual violence, torture, abduction, or international war crimes will always be categorized as second-level access. This means that while it will be clear that such material exists, users will not be able to view it. As Oleksandr Pavlichenko, executive director of the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union, explained, if a fact is established—for example, the fact that someone was killed—it is no longer considered sensitive information. But if the testimony includes elements related to war crimes, that information must be protected and withheld from public dissemination.

■ **N. O.:** What is your project focused on at the moment?

■ **M. B.:** The archive is a strategic priority for Docudays, and we have long-term plans for its development. Strategic planning is an incredibly rewarding process, and I highly recommend it if you ever get the chance, even if just to let your imagination roam a little. De-

fining clear goals makes it much easier to chart a path forward and achieve them. We've outlined our main objectives for this year and the next three years, and this planning has given us a renewed sense of hope. Right now, we are focusing on supporting our team, moving forward, developing our expertise, and forging partnerships. We also want to expand internationally, as there is a lot of untapped potential abroad. We've already launched a series of documentaries, *Witnesses*, with English subtitles to share edited materials with international audiences. It's crucial for Ukraine to remain in the global spotlight, so we don't fade from the information space. This is one of our key priorities moving forward.

■ **Ya. K.:** We are now shifting our focus to the use of these materials. This allows us to analyze our work more critically and learn from our mistakes—what collected materials will be useful and what might not be. I believe that the archive will have a long life and there will certainly be many requests for it in the future. We often use this example: if we had been able to capture footage of the Holodomor at the time, perhaps we wouldn't be facing war today.

■ **N. O.:** Recording an interview is just the first step. The continued life of these materials requires even more resources: preserving them, processing them, making them accessible, and finding the right way to communicate with different audiences. It's a process of searching for answers not only about whether to show these materials, but also how to show them, to whom, and where. At the same time, it's essential to have a vision for the future, because that vision gives you the strength to move forward.

My final question for you: If you could give yourself some advice from last spring, when you were first imagining this project, what would it be? Or, do you have any advice for those who are just starting out in this field?

■ **Ya. K.:** I would advise myself to pay more attention to developing action plans and structuring tasks. We took on a wide range of issues, but with the size of our team, it was simply unrealistic to cover them all effectively. So, the first thing is to structure the work, understand why you're doing something, motivate the team, and move forward step by step. Don't try to do everything at once. If you try to be useful everywhere, you'll end up being useful nowhere. Work in a more organized way and keep in mind your limited personal resources, which can quickly become depleted.

■ **M. B.:** I completely agree. I think it's easier to advise those just starting out because they can slow down and plan. Back when we

started, we didn't have that luxury. Everything was reactive. We also took on a lot and started many things, but we couldn't follow through because something else, often more urgent, came up. Some of the things we began a long time ago should have been completed by now. This is particularly true for the legal aspects of our work. If you start collecting testimonies or any kind of information without a solid legal foundation, you'll end up spending a lot of resources to redo everything later.

I believe it's essential to have a clear understanding of your goals and priorities, and to stick to them no matter what. We can't take on everything. It's better to rely on people's expertise and trust them. Doing your job well is far more valuable than starting everything and finishing nothing. I share Yaroslav's feelings here, but I'm glad that we managed to find our own path and stick to it. We didn't have the resources for strategic planning in the beginning, but now we feel that we have both the resources and the need to clearly understand where we are going next.

24/02/22, 5 am:
Testimonies from the War

Natalia Otrishchenko, Artem Kharchenko, and Valentyna Shevchenko on the International Documentation Initiative

The conversation was recorded online on July 21, 2023

Valentyna Shevchenko (V. Sh.): I am a senior researcher at the Institute of History of Ukraine at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine and currently work as a historian and archivist at the Center for Urban History. In the project *24/02/2022, 5 am: Testimonies from the War*, I oversee the database, though at various times I have also been involved in transcribing records, conducting interviews, and managing tasks.

On February 25, 2022, I left Kyiv for the Ternopil region. Over the following week, I felt an overwhelming need to take action as a way of coping with the intense psychological stress. I realized that shifting my focus from my personal experiences to active engagement was essential. Having prior experience with the Center—through summer schools and a residency—I reached out to my colleagues. They simply said, "Come here." And that's how I found myself here.

Artem Kharchenko (A. Kh.): I was born and raised in Kharkiv, and becoming a historian was a childhood dream of mine. I earned a degree in history and defended my dissertation at Karazin National University. For many years, I taught the general course "History of Ukraine" at Kharkiv Technical University while simultaneously pursuing my development as a scholar. This included participating in international internships focused on Jewish and Holocaust studies. Through various educational and academic programs, I had the opportunity to visit different countries, gain experience in conducting

interviews, and observe the operations of various institutions and foundations.

On the eighth or ninth day of the war, at my wife's urging, I agreed to take her and our daughter out of Kharkiv to stay with relatives in Ivano-Frankivsk. Along the way, we stopped for a day in Lviv. I had previously been connected to the Center for Urban History through various activities, including as a graduate of its Jewish History Summer School, and had closely followed its work. In March 2022, Sofia Dyak, the Center's director, invited me to remain in Lviv and join the Center as a fellow.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** I am a sociologist and researcher at the Center for Urban History, as well as the coordinator of the project *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War.* For this publication, I am speaking with colleagues who conducted interviews in Ukraine following the full-scale invasion. This conversation is somewhat unique because it involves an initiative in which I was directly involved, allowing me to both recall and reflect on our shared experiences.

At the outset, I would like to highlight two significant aspects of this work. The first is the importance of networking and the connections that were activated under extraordinary circumstances. The second is the fact that both of you have engaged with contexts of war and violence in diverse ways—through research, teaching, and public scholarship—whether focusing on the Great War, the Second World War, or the Holocaust. This background brings a certain sensitivity and understanding of the field into which you were entering.

Another important point, raised by Valentyna, is the different types of entry into the project and the roles we took. This gradual involvement strikes me as a meaningful practice, given that we were all in very different emotional states at the time. Can you recall your initial motivations for joining this project and reflect on how you reassessed your professional identity in conditions of such radical threat?

■ **V. Sh.:** In Lviv, I initially became involved in volunteer work, which was more physically demanding than intellectually engaging. This shift allowed me to redirect my energy in those early days. When I was invited to join the documentation initiative, I realized how crucial it was to preserve the testimonies of ordinary people in the present moment. As someone who researches ego-documents from the First World War, I understood the immense value of capturing these stories before official narratives—shaped by media and other actors in memory politics—begin to dominate.

Just before the full-scale invasion, I had completed an article on the diaries of peasants from southern Ukraine during the First World War. The significance of those documents lies not so much in their recording of specific dates or events but in their reflection of people's emotional states and the aspects of their lives they chose to emphasize. It was this realization—the opportunity to help preserve emotions and the language people use to articulate their experiences—that became one of my decisive motivations to join the initiative.

■ **A. Kh.:** When I accepted the offer to participate in the documentation project, I didn't give much thought to how it would align with my professional career. Even now, I don't see this work as being fully within my field. I approached it with great caution and even sought your guidance, Natalia, saying, "Please listen to my interviews and tell me if I'm doing this correctly." That said, I also recognize that I brought significant experience to the role. I had spent years reading about similar projects and observing how recorded testimonies function. Over time, my perspective on oral history has evolved. Initially, I was highly critical, viewing it with a sharp skepticism. Later, my attitude shifted—I wouldn't say I became uncritical, but I came to fully acknowledge oral histories as legitimate sources, equal to any other type of historical material. Like any source, they demand a methodologically rigorous approach. I've also come to appreciate the unique challenges of oral history, recognizing that conducting interviews is a skill not everyone possesses. There are specific nuances to the process that require sensitivity and expertise.

■ **N. O.:** I also came to this project with a certain background: I had experience recording interviews during the Maidan in 2013 and 2014, when we conducted conversations amidst the revolutionary events themselves. However, as a sociologist who constantly works in the present, I perceive these challenges differently than historians might.

This raises an important question: what kind of source are we creating? Perhaps it does not fit the traditional definition of oral history, where conversations are recorded decades after the events have occurred. Similarly, trauma studies and PTSD studies typically focus on situations that have concluded or can be discussed with some temporal distance. In this case, however, we are directly inside the event, actively trying to make sense of it—even by narrating it. Moreover, we are not just observers but participants in what is happening around us. Unlike other contexts, we cannot step away from the war and return to the safe routine of everyday life. Perhaps, then, we are contributing to the creation of a new type of source, one that de-

mands additional interdisciplinary reflection to fully understand and utilize.

■ **V. Sh.:** Naturally, the approaches of historians differ from those of sociologists or anthropologists. However, this interdisciplinarity might have been the very strength of our team, allowing us to draw from the methodologies and insights of various fields. I believe that, in the future, we will need to further reflect on what we are doing now—whether we call it documenting, archiving, or something else entirely. Perhaps it will not fit neatly into the framework of oral history, and we may find another term to describe this approach.

■ **A. Kh.:** I don't think we need to search for a new name for this project; instead, we should focus on finding new words more generally. It's also important to remember that oral history originally emerged as a counterpoint to traditional sources, and it has been over seventy years since it was first discussed in Western academia. Broadly speaking, since the Second World War, any historical topic should already involve work with oral sources, which are no longer considered exceptional or unique.

■ **N. O.:** When it comes to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, anyone with a smartphone, anyone recording reality, is already creating digital sources and building their own archive. There's no longer a need for historians, sociologists, or anthropologists to actively prompt people to document or reflect—the process has become much more democratic, producing an immense volume of diverse materials. However, this also poses a significant challenge for us as professionals: what is our role in these new conditions? On one hand, we must develop tools for organizing and describing this information so it can serve as evidence in the future. But description alone is insufficient; we need to approach these materials with specific questions and, likely, new methodological frameworks.

■ **V. Sh.:** My question is whether these materials will be preserved—and for how long. When I consider them from the perspective of the future, it's not certain that this vast array of data will still exist even ten years from now, let alone remain accessible. Drawing on the experience of the First World War, we see that only a fraction of the materials from that period have survived in museum collections or archives. Much of the rest remains in family collections—often with owners unsure of how to handle it—or has been lost entirely, disappearing from the scope of research. I find myself asking a similar question about the present. We are living through the most documented war in history, with an unprecedented volume of recordings

and photographs being created. But to what extent will this material become a proper document, and to what extent will it serve as a lasting source for future study?

■ **A. Kh.:** We must acknowledge that we can never collect all the sources, because people have always created them, are creating them now, and will continue to do so in the future. But regarding the role of professionals: there are institutions that recognize our expertise, and as a result, only those sources of this war that are described by experts will hold significance, whether in Ukraine or abroad. I don't see any special challenges here, at least not since the nineteenth century. In a sense, nothing has changed. There has always been a need for experts to describe something before it can be recognized as a source.

■ **N. O.:** Here, I can step in as a researcher of expertise and offer a comment that things have not been stable since the nineteenth century. The institutions that legitimize expertise are shifting—whether it's the state, academic centers, the third sector, or the media—and the relationship between experts and the public is evolving.

But let's return to the documentation of the full-scale invasion and our initiative *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War.* I believe it's important that we worked as a Ukrainian team, yet we also had—and continue to have—this international context, with colleagues from Poland (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences), Luxembourg (Center for Contemporary and Digital History), and the UK (University of St. Andrews) involved in the work. We also have numerous partners in Germany.

Personally, the international seminars on trauma, conflict, and violence that we held weekly since mid-March 2022 were invaluable. These seminars, organized by anthropologist Diána Vonnák, brought together scholars working in various geographical and chronological contexts. We discussed challenges faced in Rwanda, South Sudan, and Bosnia, interviewing refugees, and Holocaust testimony archives. There were 17 such meetings in total. These seminars provided, first and foremost, a sense of routine, which is crucial in a world that feels as though it is unraveling. Secondly, they offered hope and showed that we are not alone in the challenges we face. They also helped build connections and move beyond our own limited perspective. Finally, these sessions served as a constant check on our decisions, allowing us to ask questions we might not have considered and providing an essential space for learning.

Equally useful were the weekly supervision meetings with psychologist Dana Yakovenko, which involved the entire team—both those conducting interviews and those transcribing them—since this work is emotionally draining. These meetings helped us track our progress, reflect on our experiences, and observe the dynamics within the team. Over the six months of collecting interviews, I saw significant changes in both myself and the team.

This initiative posed a great challenge for me. On one hand, I was organizing people with diverse experiences, trajectories, and emotional responses, all while being in the midst of a war with them. In addition to you two, Yevhen Horb, Mariia Gryshchenko, Oksana Dudko, Myroslava Liakhovych, Roman Moldavskyi, Viktoriia Panas, Serhii Pakhomenko, and Iryna Piatnytskova were part of the Ukrainian team at various times. On the other hand, I was communicating our experiences and engaging in conversations with international partners. Finally, I also took on roles as a recruiter and interviewer. So, these were three distinct levels of challenges for me: interacting with storytellers, coordinating the Ukrainian team's efforts, and communicating externally. That's how it was from my side. Could you share your experience of working with the team and the dynamics you observed during the six months we were actively gathering testimonies in the field?

■ **A. Kh.:** When it comes to the formation of the Ukrainian team for this project, everything seems quite logical to me, without any disruptions. In fact, the core of the team was made up of people from the Center for Urban History, and they were later joined by researchers who received fellowships. Overall, the team was assembled quickly and functioned in an exceptionally democratic way. This routine was there almost from the start: the idea of scientific seminars, team meetings, weekly discussions, and consultations with a psychologist. The fact that such a mechanism was implemented so swiftly demonstrates that you had a clear understanding of what needed to be done, even in such extreme circumstances.

■ **V. Sh.:** When we first entered this project, the initial stress response was still unfolding. Consequently, the team's approach was based on individualized care and sensitivity to each person's needs. As we adjusted, the dynamics began to shift. Meetings with a psychologist proved helpful, as did the supportive environment at the Center. When we had our final meeting with Dana, it became clear that participants and team members initially entered the project with words like "pain," "fear," and "anxiety," but by the end, they expressed

feelings like “calm,” “interaction,” and “sensitivity.” For me, this shift underscores the importance of involving a psychologist from the very beginning of the project. I also concluded that when working with traumatic experiences and the realities of violence, it is far better to work as a team.

■ **N. O.:** Let’s discuss our approach to the work. I’ll begin with some reflections. The first key concept that comes to mind is flexibility. This refers to our readiness to revise our toolkit, respond to security challenges, and continuously assess whose testimonies we were recording—what voices were emerging and which ones were missing. At the same time, we maintained certain unchanging documents, such as informed consent forms and biograms. These documents were carefully reviewed within the international team, as we developed them in accordance with GDPR, European personal data protection laws, and standardized metadata shared by all our international partners. This was crucial for creating a unified archive for the future.

Another significant concept that stands out is agency manifested in details. This applies both to the internal dynamics within the team and to our interactions with potential storytellers. It’s about making thoughtful decisions at various levels: from selecting participants in the project to determining where to sit for the interview and choosing the best approach for data collection. We placed a strong emphasis on the recruitment process to ensure that participants were fully aware of the implications of being interviewed—both at the moment of recollection and once the conversation had been recorded and archived. We also shared a list of topics in advance, though we allowed our interviewees the freedom to structure their stories as they wished. Our interviews with internally displaced people and volunteers centered on how their daily lives had changed in the context of full-scale war. This approach allowed us to address broader issues without confining the conversation to a specific framework. The time and place of the interview were chosen by the storytellers, which further emphasized sensitivity to their comfort and emotions while also being mindful of our own.

The third concept I want to highlight is sustainability. Our goal is to conduct follow-up interviews with everyone whose stories we’ve recorded and who have agreed to be contacted again. In these second conversations, we intend to pick up where we left off, exploring how their lives have evolved since the first interview. We may also ask if there’s anything they would express differently now compared to the initial conversation. Additionally, the second meeting offers an

opportunity to revisit sensitive data from the first interview, enabling us to make decisions together with the storytellers about how their data should be disclosed and preserved. For me, this project is about a participatory approach in practice—one that involves discussion and joint decision-making. While the war has stripped many choices away, we still retain control over to whom, when, and how we share and preserve our stories.

■ **A. Kh.:** I can share a bit about the search for narrators. I began by asking people I was somewhat familiar with, but I made sure they weren't close acquaintances, as I needed to maintain a certain distance. These were people from diverse backgrounds. When we had collected the first 50 interviews and began discussing the content, the principle of diversity remained central to our approach, influencing our subsequent choices. However, we quickly realized that our interlocutors were still quite regionally concentrated. Most of our participants were from large cities, particularly from Kharkiv and Kyiv. Even when I recorded interviews in Mukachevo or Chernivtsi and sought out potential narrators there, I found that many of them were still originally from Kharkiv or Kyiv.

■ **V. Sh.:** The concept of flexibility really resonates with me. It was crucial in all aspects, from adjusting our questionnaire to adapting our recruitment approach. When we recognized the need to conduct more interviews with people who support those forced to relocate, such as volunteers, we introduced a specific set of questions to better understand the activities of these volunteer initiatives. Personally, I felt the drive and had the resources to begin speaking with people as early as June 2022. I was certain that I wanted to focus on this group, so all the interviews I recorded were with volunteers.

As for the results of our work: between mid-March and mid-September 2022, the project team visited 12 cities across Ukraine, collecting a total of 155 interviews. Four of these were double interviews (with a couple or a mother and daughter). About half of the interviews were conducted in Lviv. We spoke with 91 women and 67 men from Kyiv, 14 regional centers, and various settlements in eight regions. Our participants spanned different generations, with an average age of 39. While most interviews were conducted in person, 20 were recorded online at the interviewees' request. Of these, 106 were in Ukrainian and 49 in Russian. All of the materials have been transcribed, and we also updated and refined our transcription instructions as the project progressed.

We're now in the process of preparing for the second wave of interviews, although we're still working with the database from the first wave. This includes developing a tagging system and conducting an initial analysis to identify potentially sensitive information. I now fully understand that such work takes time—it's a labor-intensive process. As we heard from Stephen Naron, director of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, such projects typically take years to complete, not just five or six months. Working with data in this way is both time-consuming and resource-intensive.

■ **N. O.:** We are currently at the stage of describing the data we collected in 2022. At this point, we no longer view the material as an interaction during the interview but as data that requires responsible preservation. This marks an interesting transition for us. We're also considering the second round of interviews and determining how to approach them. Additionally, our international network is expanding, particularly in Germany, where we're collaborating with institutions like the Bavarian State Library, the Center for Contemporary History in Hamburg, and the Public History Program at the University of Hagen.

If we imagine our initiative as an archive that will persist into the future, it implies long-term institutional commitments to ensure high-quality description, preservation, and access policies for this data. We are fortunate to have an international team with expertise in digital humanities who assist with backups. By recording interviews using a common methodology across different countries, we have the potential to create a truly transnational collection. However, since we are still in the midst of a full-scale war, full access to these materials is not possible at this time. When we first began recording, I looked to the Fortunoff Video Archive with its various local access points for inspiration. Perhaps we will develop different models for access in the future. Lastly, if you could go back to the spring of 2022 and advise yourself before embarking on this project, or if you could offer guidance to those planning similar work, what would you say?

■ **A. Kh.:** You need to be prepared to enter this field. If you're not a specialist, it's best not to engage in it. Offering special advice on how to conduct a conversation is, in my view, useless. My experience has shown that until you conduct the first few interviews yourself, you can't truly understand the process. It's like learning to drive: no matter how much theoretical knowledge you have, it's only through actual driving that you gain real experience. For me, interviewing people is a specific skill that is developed through practice. So I have no special advice other than my strong belief in the importance of

expertise, and the fact that anyone engaging in this work should be well-prepared for it.

- **V. Sh.:** If I were to offer advice, not to myself but to someone planning a similar documentation initiative, especially one involving trauma work, I would emphasize the importance of collaborating with a psychologist from the very beginning. Additionally, it's crucial to work as a team rather than individually.
- **N. O.:** For me, this initiative is about recognizing the long-term impact of every decision we make. Each choice shapes the outcome of our work. For example, we may decide to exclude certain topics, weighing the potential risks to people's psychological well-being. We also define what truly matters to us, both in our academic work and in life. In times of war, our values become clearer.

Another important realization is the necessity of understanding your purpose. It's crucial to honestly ask yourself: why are you dedicating your limited resources to this project now? And if you're committing to it, do so to the highest standards, both personally and within your professional field.

Iryna Sklokina. Postwar Life of an Interview

"To me, this is about reclaiming the uncertain future that has been, and continues to be, taken from us as a community. By creating these archives of interviews, we are preserving something that will live on in that future." This is how Natalia Otrishchenko, the compiler of this collection, defines her role as a documentarian and researcher who has been gathering stories about the war since March 2022. This collection of interviews is the outcome of conversations among colleagues who each perceive the significance of oral histories in shaping the future, fulfilling a social role, and contributing to academic and media discourse in their unique ways. In this afterword, I aim to explore how various initiatives reflect on the role of oral history archives in building the future and establishing sustainable projects. What are the distinctive features of oral histories of the Russo-Ukrainian war as sources today? What impact do they currently have—and will they have—on public opinion, justice, and fairness? How are oral histories used to foster communities and whom do they include or exclude? Finally, will personal oral histories become a key foundation for postwar memory culture, competing with or complementing media, artistic, and propaganda narratives?

The Future of Oral History as a Historical Source

Many of the documentary initiatives featured in this collection underscore the profound importance of preserving stories for future historical research. Naturally, this aligns with the traditional under-

standing of history as a scholarly discipline that examines the past from a position of impartiality and distance. But it also highlights the unique challenges of wartime, marked by countless losses—of people, buildings, monuments, and entire cities. The testimonies recorded during such times capture not only individual experiences but also the historical magnitude of these events.[1] Many contributors also stress the critical importance of urgency in recording and narrating events as they unfold, highlighting this as a key feature to prevent the layering of memory politics and personal distortions over time. In these discussions, parallels are often drawn with efforts to document the Second World War, emphasizing the exceptional value of testimonies captured as close to the events as possible. Indeed, many of the earliest accounts collected during the 1940s served for decades as the only sources for understanding aspects of Soviet memory later silenced or marginalized. These include the experiences of Jews and Roma, forced labor in Nazi Germany, and life under occupation.[2] Additionally, mainstream memoirs of frontline soldiers and partisans recorded during the same period later became foundational for reinterpreting the war during the Khrushchev Thaw and perestroika. Historians repeatedly sought "authentic" memories, often returning to those who had previously shared their stories in written or oral form, housed in museum collections. Svitlana Makhovska, Natalia Otrishchenko, and Oksana Dovgopolova similarly advocate for repeated interviews, emphasizing the authenticity and immediacy of stories told during the events themselves. Such narratives are seen as more authentic, "alive," and less prone to distortion by overarching collective narratives. As Makhovska notes:

"We need to plan carefully and do everything we can to ensure that the collective narrative does not overshadow the individual experiences of Ukrainians in the Russo-Ukrainian war" (p. 36).

The task of understanding how war propaganda, media, and the social memory of past wars—as well as the broader frameworks

1 See the case of the war in Syria (Saber and Long 2019, 447).

2 One of the most striking examples is the *Black Book*, a collection of testimonies from the 1940s documenting the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet territories. Although it was suppressed in the Stalin era and initially unpublished in the USSR, it appeared in the United States in the 1940s and later in Israel in 1980. Since its first publication, the *Black Book* has been regarded for decades as a vital source on the fate of Soviet Jews. Over time, it has become evident that the book is not merely a record of the Holocaust but also a reflection of the culture of memory, censorship, and propaganda surrounding its creation and dissemination (see Ducey 2006).

shaping narratives about personal identity and experience—have influenced the personal histories of the Russo-Ukrainian war being recorded today is one that will unfold in the future. Yet even as these narratives are captured in their raw "immediacy," their preservation in lasting archival forms is crucial. Several contributors to this collection highlight how the process has renewed their appreciation for the significance of seemingly "technical" tasks, such as transcription, organization, naming, tagging, and other archiving activities:

"When we come to an archive, a library, or somewhere else, there are dozens, perhaps hundreds of years of painstaking, completely invisible work by these people, mostly women. We never notice them and don't know what they look like, but all of our extensive, bravura scholarly work rests on their shoulders, on this cataloging. They build what we stand on" (Albert Venher, p. 79).

Documentation initiatives have notably begun to reframe the role of transcribers, recognizing them as more than just "technical staff." These efforts involve transcribers in meaningful ways, such as participating in discussions about the content of interviews, attending sessions with psychologists, and engaging in conversations about their emotional well-being during the work process.

Some initiatives place a strong emphasis on transcripts as the most reliable form of archival preservation (Venher, p. 77), while others advocate for the use of video recordings, particularly to reach broader audiences. Organizations like Post Bellum, the War Childhood Museum, and Ukraine War Archive highlight the accessibility and popularity of video as a medium that is easier for audiences to engage with. Another critical consideration emerges: the extent to which reducing an interview to a transcript can distort its content, strip it of nuanced meaning, and hinder the interviewee's ability to "speak for themselves." Various strategies have been proposed to address this issue. For instance, the Palestinian Oral History Archive, created with refugees in Lebanon by the American University of Beirut, employs a sophisticated keyword and tagging system for video content. This system incorporates tags in both local dialects and English while preserving unique concepts that lack direct analogues in other contexts (Sleiman and Chebaro 2018). This approach ensures the preservation of linguistic and paralinguistic elements of the narrative, maintaining its immediacy and performative aspects.

Albert Venher takes a radical stance on the balance between using oral histories to influence the present and preserving them exclusively as sources for future historians. He argues:

"A source is like a good wine: the older it gets, the better it is. Perhaps my opinion will change in the future, but for now, I say that I do not want to work with these stories as a historian. I've recorded them, and that's it. My function today is to capture them. I'm ready to put them away for now, and in a hundred years, someone else will discover them" (pp. 76-77).

Another approach, also centered on future interpretations of interviews, involves publishing the stories as they are, providing them as raw sources for other researchers. For instance, the *Ukrainian Historical Journal* includes a special section dedicated to military stories, preserving narratives in their original form. In contrast, creating videos or films requires a more interpretive intervention, as it involves crafting a cohesive story from fragments.

The interpretation of sources, access, and dissemination often hinges on the institutional framework for archiving them. At present, there is no consensus on a single national-level institution tasked with preserving and providing access to these materials. Notably, centrally strengthened institutions, such as the Institute of National Remembrance, tend to favor a more centralized approach (p. 137). In contrast, many initiatives view their primary responsibility as supporting local communities. As a result, they take on the task of independently developing archiving and storage formats at the local level, often tailored to the needs of those communities.

The Role of Oral History in Shaping Public Opinion

The notion that stories documented during the war should promptly contribute to tangible societal change is a common thread across most documentation initiatives. A widespread goal is to shape public opinion both in Ukraine and internationally, raising awareness about the nature and scale of Russian army crimes, as well as highlighting the experiences of regions most impacted by the fighting and occupation.

The documentary initiatives featured in the collection employ a variety of publication formats, including short videos, half-hour edited films, media articles, and scholarly works aimed at an international audience. But some initiatives prioritize archiving and preservation over public dissemination. For instance, the Center for Urban History provides access to interviews only to individual researchers upon request, while the Institute of National Remembrance restricted access to its online archive following Russia's full-scale invasion to protect soldiers at the front. Each approach reflects a careful balance be-

tween the aim to influence public opinion and the need to mitigate potential risks—whether to the storytellers, soldiers, or society as a whole—arising from security and ethical concerns.

During wartime, certain types of information are widely regarded as inadmissible for disclosure—such as details that could aid the enemy or endanger the narrator. However, there is no unanimous agreement among participants in documentary initiatives regarding the exact nature and boundaries of such information. Existing guidelines include the March 2022 Order of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Commander-in-Chief 2022), recommendations by the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting regarding sensitive topics like children during the war (National Council 2022), and the guidance from the Commission on Journalistic Ethics (Commission 2022). Yet it is evident that universal criteria for this kind of information are difficult to establish. Many interviews in the collection advocate for collaborative decision-making, emphasizing the importance of consulting with colleagues and external experts to evaluate whether a specific interview could pose a risk to national security or the individuals involved.

This raises important questions about the applicability of widely practiced international approaches, such as university ethics committees, to the Ukrainian context. These committees meticulously assess the legal, moral, and security aspects of oral history projects, including their research design and questionnaires. They are often criticized, however, for their bureaucratic tendencies and overly formalized approaches, where anonymizing interviews—removing names and identifying details—is considered the gold standard. It is worth noting that the principle of "do no harm" and the emphasis on anonymization stem from medical research, where a person's identity is generally secondary to their physical parameters, treated purely as "data" (Le Roux 2015, 555).

Informed consent is deeply rooted in the principles of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality, as upheld by ethics committees. These principles allow qualitative sociology, for instance, to portray narrators as social types without identifying them as specific individuals. However, in many cases, anonymization can hinder the goals of oral history and the narrators' intentions. Le Roux highlights that anonymization can erase authorship, sever the narrator's connection to their story as personal heritage, limit their engagement in societal dialogue, devalue their contribution, and even weaken the credibility of research based on anonymized transcripts (Le Roux 2015). Mia

Martin Hobbs, in her research on Vietnam War veterans, demonstrates that interviewees often misunderstand—or interpret differently from researchers—concepts like anonymization, the "sensitive nature of information," and the boundaries of acceptable disclosure (Hobbs 2021). Whether a person wishes to be identified by name or not can also depend on their social status, reflecting the dynamics of power, unwanted "protection," and paternalism in the researcher-narrator relationship. Hobbs advocates for a highly individualized approach, where decisions about retaining or removing names are tailored to each narrator. However, such an approach is challenging in institutional archives that adopt anonymization as a default practice, as seen in the Urban Media Archive of the Center for Urban History. An alternative solution lies in dividing interviews into distinct parts, as implemented by the Ukraine War Archive, Post Bellum, and After Silence projects. This method involves separating publicly available portions of interviews from sections containing sensitive or confidential information. The latter may be accessible only upon special request, such as to law enforcement agencies, lawyers, or human rights defenders, or withheld from public access entirely. This approach, emphasizing the narrator's personal contribution and fostering their openness to ongoing dialogue, supports community building and promotes social integration.

Interview as a Method of Social Integration and Community Building

Some Ukrainian documentary initiatives assert that "capturing testimonies 'here and now' during an active war was (and remains) an unprecedented approach in global practice" (p. 29)—a perspective that is difficult to agree with. The digital era has made capturing military events in real-time significantly more accessible, not only for professional historians but also for community members documenting their own experiences and, in turn, themselves.[3] Since 2014, Ukraine has seen ongoing efforts to record interviews during the war, accompanied by scholarly analysis and self-reflection on these practices. For instance, Yuliia Yurchuk and Liudmyla Voronova have explored the challenges of interviewing individuals directly affected by the war,

3 One of the most widely studied topics in this context is the war in Syria, particularly interviews with witnesses of the events within the country and refugees living abroad. For example, see Saber and Long (2019).

drawing insights from professionals in historical science, journalism, and media (Yurchuk and Voronova 2020). These (auto)documentation initiatives foster a shared semantic field among participants, strengthen connections, and clarify objectives. Community-based archives, whether created with or without professional involvement, empower individuals by allowing them to express themselves directly—bypassing the mediation of scholars, avoiding the constraints of traditional archival standards and classifications, and steering clear of rigid questionnaires that might otherwise frame their narratives. Among the initiatives featured in the collection, only the Ukraine War Archive and the Institute of National Remembrance accept contributions from individuals outside their projects, even if those submissions do not adhere to specific methodologies. These vernacular materials, created by individuals themselves, broaden the scope of documentation efforts. But the long-term sustainability and support for such community archives—both in terms of expertise and institutional backing—remain critical topics for the future.

In the conversations presented here, the notion of involving witnesses directly in communication with audiences was not addressed. Instead, the focus was on the professional work of historians, videographers, archivists, and exhibition designers, who mediate the voices of witnesses for later transmission to audiences. Iuliia Skubytska, however, reflects on the potential for more participatory approaches that extend beyond the witnesses' passive "authorization" or approval of the final media product:

"It is also crucial to me that we continue to communicate and discuss these experiences, to stay connected to the process of interviewing <...> For example, Olha Chystotina, a wonderful photographer, made a striking visual representation of one of our interviewee's comments, which inspired the idea of creating some kind of visual component for the project. This could be a participatory collaboration between photographers and storytellers to create a visual series. If we are talking about experience and how to communicate it, I think it's important to experiment with different media..." (p. 43).

The question of whether and how individuals with personal war experiences engage with the memoirs of others remains largely unexplored. What conflicts of interpretation arise? Are there dominant voices shaping a prevailing narrative framework for understanding the war? Anna Yatsenko from After Silence observes that some potential participants decline to share their stories because they "measure" their own experiences against those widely portrayed in the

media (p. 68). This suggests a need for projects that not only document individual stories but also incorporate the reflections of these individuals on the broader culture of memory, actively involving them in shaping the formats through which their experiences are presented. Sociologist Derya Ozkul underscores this idea, emphasizing that "if we are to undertake creative approaches, we should use the methods that participants themselves would use if they wanted to disseminate information that they think is important" (Dudman 2019, 41).

Support for community building through oral history takes many forms beyond documentation alone. For instance, initiatives from Kherson and Odesa, as highlighted in the collection, explicitly aim to reinforce local urban identities while critically (re)integrating them into the broader framework of the national Ukrainian community. In the case of Kherson, the interviews emphasize themes of resilience, vitality, and resistance—both overt and in everyday forms—against the enemy. These narratives serve to reshape and define a new image of the city:

"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" (pp. 48-49).

Thanks to the shared experiences of researcher Oleksandr Cheremisin—who himself lived under occupation—and his narrators, the recordings foster a sense of community among those with similar lived realities, enabling them to communicate and process their experiences collectively. Viktoriia Nesterenko, representing the War Childhood Museum, broadens this perspective, suggesting that the task of oral history also involves creating a shared communicative space for individuals with diverse experiences:

"For each person, these different experiences were traumatic in their own way, but people are beginning to pit their pain against one another. When we're in pain ourselves, it's difficult to be empathetic and compassionate toward others. It became very important for me to collect these diverse stories in order to create spaces where all of them are valued. This is where I see the museum's crucial role as a place where these stories are preserved" (p. 110).

Similarly, Oksana Dovgopolova from *Past/Future/Art* discusses how interviews can serve as a tool for building communication between those who stayed in Odesa during the war, those who left, and those who are returning.

In particular, oral history plays a vital role in amplifying the voices of less privileged and vulnerable social groups, whose research and visibility have long been key goals in the field, rooted in a leftist and democratic tradition. The initiatives presented in the collection emphasize that including these groups in the narrative not only benefits them but also contributes to the betterment of society as a whole:

"We—or future generations—will need to write the history of the Russo-Ukrainian war, and it must be written as a cohesive narrative, not in fragmented pieces. When we do begin to write that history, we have to reflect the everyday lives of people from various social groups" (Zaremba-Kosovych, p. 85).

In the case of the advocacy organization Fight for Right, interviews represent just one aspect of its broader efforts to integrate people with disabilities. Having already been involved in advocacy before the war, the organization has been running medical evacuations and a hotline since 2022. The recorded interviews are also being used to improve service delivery by providing deeper insights into the needs and challenges faced by this community. Similarly, Mariia Shvab's project on pregnancy and childbirth during the war, along with interviews with school teachers conducted by Nadia Ufimtseva from the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies and Inha Kozlova, a sociologist at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, aimed at producing practical changes. These initiatives sought to influence government policies and improve conditions in their respective fields, demonstrating the potential for oral history not just as documentation, but as a tool for advocacy and policy change.

The Impact of Oral Histories on Policy and Decision-Making

Oral history has traditionally been aimed at fostering societal change, particularly in specific professional fields where the opinions of professionals, experts, and service recipients play a crucial role in assessing effectiveness. For example, Mariia Shvab, who gathers interviews with women who have experienced pregnancy and childbirth during the war, plans to publish the findings for the international community. Her goal is to provide valuable information that can inform policy development and decision-making (p. 95). Nadia

Ufimtseva, who collected interviews with teachers, shares a similar stance:

"As we designed this project, we envisioned that the collected interviews might serve as evidence of Russian crimes in Ukraine or inform future policymaking—helping educators, shaping ministry guidelines, and identifying ways to provide support" (p. 99).

This aligns with the experiences of other countries where oral history, reflecting on massive crises and disasters, has become a foundation for policy changes. Marella Hoffmann's work *Practicing Oral History to Improve Public Policies and Programs* (Hoffmann 2017) provides vivid examples. For instance, oral history collections on the Northern Colorado flood have informed practical lessons and led to changes in local emergency preparedness and response plans. Interviews conducted about the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone uncovered cultural behavior patterns that proved helpful in combating the infection. Retrospective interviews with healthcare providers offered insights into how to respond in the event of a recurrence. Interviews with recent war refugees in Montreal are being used in the city's integration policies and as educational resources in schools. Hoffmann notes that, in terms of influencing policies and decisions, the most effective level is the local one—closest to people, most under their control, and most impactful on their daily lives. She emphasizes that researchers must possess skills in writing policy papers, presenting them to civil servants and lawmakers, and engaging in face-to-face meetings with authorities (Hoffmann 2017).

In the stories presented in this collection, the influence on policy is generally framed in a broader, more abstract sense, with a focus on national-level impact. Initiatives with a strong local identity, such as those from Odesa, Kherson, and Kharkiv, do not prioritize direct communication with municipalities. Instead, they position themselves in relation to the academic and civil society sectors, although they are still active in discussions about war commemoration and postwar reconstruction. For example, Oksana Dovgopolova and Olha Hvozdetska selected activists, volunteers, and cultural figures as key witnesses—individuals who are influencing change in Odesa and across the country.

Oral History for Justice and Equity

The use of interviews as a method spans a wide range of practices, including recruitment, journalism, academic oral history, and even courtroom testimony. Of course, the collection of evidence by forensic scientists and the practice of oral history differ significantly. However, during times of war, oral historians face a significant challenge in engaging with the documentation of crimes, even though this may not hold legal weight.

The Ukraine War Archive's collaboration with law enforcement agencies illustrates how oral history initiatives can contribute to documenting war crimes. To this end, this initiative has been conducting monitoring visits to the de-occupied territories. The previous experience of one of the archive's documenters, Yaroslav Kyryienko, was very helpful. Maria Buchelnikova mentions, "Later, we realized that while the materials we collected couldn't serve as legal evidence, they could still provide valuable tools for professionals conducting such investigations. Our overarching goal has always been justice for Ukrainians. But we also understood the importance of working within our expertise and not overstepping into areas where we lacked the necessary skills" (p. 140).

The need to record interviews now for the sake of future justice is also driven by the awareness that postwar cultures and memory systems often promote forgetting, whitewashing, or even heroizing criminals. For example, despite widespread war crimes, positive memories of the Third Reich were common in Germany after World War II, and in the 2000s, there was a positive attitude toward Slobodan Milošević in Serbia, accompanied by condoning or justifying of his actions and those of his associates (Gordy 2017). As Inha Kozlova states, "Documenting what was happening felt crucial from the very beginning of the invasion—not only because it is vital to capture these experiences, but also because this misery that is being inflicted by the Russian army and the indifference of Russian society must be remembered. When the time comes to discuss accountability, forgiveness, or attempts to 'launder' their responsibility, these crimes must not be forgotten" (pp. 99-100).

The focus on the crimes committed by Russians also reflects a response to an international demand, primarily from the media, for the most emotionally charged stories that could stir audiences both in countries geographically and mentally close to Ukraine, as well as those farther away. Andrii Usach and Anna Yatsenko from After Silence, as well as Oleksandr Cheremisin from Kherson University,

recall media outlets making direct requests for stories about brutality—torture and other crimes committed by the occupiers—and international grant offers that required them to work with such topics in a short timeframe, often exploiting both the storytellers and interviewers, potentially causing them repeated harm.

The projects discussed in the collection broaden the notion of justice beyond legal accountability to encompass a more philosophical and inclusive understanding—recognizing, comprehending, and validating people's experiences. The opportunity for people to be heard and represented is central to these initiatives, which also stress the importance of including diverse voices. At the same time, achieving "fair" representation is complicated by several factors. These include formal restrictions, such as the inability to interview military personnel, and the reluctance of people with little experience in public speaking or those exhausted by constant media attention to participate. Security concerns in frontline areas and the challenges of interviewing individuals in occupied territories also limit accessibility. The personal factor is also present, as researchers rely on their own contacts and those around them to recruit participants. The comfort of a shared worldview and adherence to a supposedly established public consensus make it difficult, if not impossible, to interview those who evaded mobilization, collaborated with the occupiers, or hold pro-Russian views. Other social divisions also play a role, such as the challenges of integrating displaced people, as noted by Yevheniia Nesterovych:

"The lack of discussion and exploration of this topic within society creates many barriers. How do we incorporate the critical comments that arise in conversations so that the narrators don't feel even more excluded later? With the military, this issue will be even more acute" (p. 121).

These reflections suggest that the pursuit of justice and post-conflict equity should extend beyond merely holding individuals accountable for past crimes, including those committed by the enemy during the war. It should also involve addressing the broader challenges of building a fairer and more inclusive post-war society within the country itself. This perspective aligns with examples from different geographical and social contexts. For instance, Sindiso Bhebhe and Mpho Ngoepe, in their study of counter-archives in South Africa, highlight that the most successful archives do not focus solely on collecting stories of the past. Instead, they also engage with people's ongoing experiences. These archives, in addition to their re-

search on apartheid and past civil conflicts, have collected stories and facilitated communication and self-reflection from HIV-positive children whose parents died of AIDS, black nuns whose experiences and rights violations have long been ignored, and generally address human rights issues through interviews (Bhebhe and Ngoepe 2022).

The slogan "Everyone has a story," used by Post Bellum, encapsulates the dual nature of oral history: it has the potential to inspire by emphasizing the value of every individual's experience, showing that "ordinary people" have important narratives to share. At the same time, this abundance of stories can also lead to their devaluation, as some will inevitably go unheard. Oral history can unite people through dialogue, allowing for shared understanding, but it can also divide, as each person's story is unique and shaped by different perspectives. This collection, with its diversity of approaches, self-reflection, and the exchange of experiences, highlights the evolving role of oral history in shaping the future. While it may not be able to "save" the future, it serves as a crucial resource for meaning-making.

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Voices Heard in This Book

Mariia Buchelnikova is an activist, project manager of Ukraine War Archive, and a communications expert. She is a co-founder of the English-language media project *Ukraine Explainers*. Before the start of the full-scale invasion, she was a co-author of the podcast "Anthropotsesho" and a producer and community manager of the podcast "Radio Podil".

Oleksandr Cheremisin is a historian and researcher with a focus on urban self-government in southern Ukraine from 1785 to 1917. He earned a master's degree in history and a qualification as a history teacher from Kherson State University, where he also completed his postgraduate studies (2003–2006). In 2007, he defended his PhD thesis. Between 2010 and 2013, he pursued doctoral studies at Zaporizhzhia National University while lecturing on Ukrainian history at Kherson State Agrarian University. In 2017, he successfully defended his doctoral dissertation, and in 2020, he was awarded the academic title of professor. Since September 1, 2021, he has served as a professor in the Department of History, Archaeology, and Teaching Methods at Kherson State University.

Oksana Dovgopolova is a curator of the memory culture platform *Past/Future/Art*, a Doctor of Philosophy, and a Professor at the Department of Philosophy at I. I. Mechnikov Odesa National University. Her research focuses on collective memory, including local and regional dimensions, memory entrepreneurship, and the exploration of the historical past. Her dissertation explored the mapping of social space with an emphasis on phenomena of the other, alien, and rejected. Since 2014, she has been engaged in public history, as well as memorial, discussion, and artistic projects centered on collective memory.

■ **Sofia Dyak** is a historian and the director of the Center for Urban History, a research and public history institute. She holds a PhD in history from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, awarded in 2010. Her research focuses on post-war urban transformation and reconstruction, particularly in cities of displacement, as well as the role of heritage practices and concepts in socialist contexts. Additionally, she works in public history, curating exhibitions and spatial commemorative projects.

■ **Olha Hvozdetska** is a journalist, communicator, and presenter at Channel 7 (Odesa). She specializes in interviewing and has a professional career in this field. A graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy at I. I. Mechnikov Odesa National University, her research interests focus on social communications and mass media. Olha also joined the *Past/Future/Art* memory culture platform project as an interviewer.

■ **Alevtina Kakhidze** is an artist and performer. She studied at the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture in Kyiv (1999–2004) and at the Jan van Eyck Academy in the Netherlands (2004–06). Since 2018, she has served as the UN Envoy for Tolerance in Ukraine. Kakhidze was awarded the Kazimir Malevich Prize in 2008 and the first prize at the Contest of Young Curators and Artists (Kyiv, Center for Contemporary Art, NaUKMA) in 2002. She has held solo exhibitions in Kyiv, Paris, Brussels, Prague, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Aarhus, and Lublin.

■ **Artem Kharchenko** is a historian and associate professor at the Kharkiv National University of Arts named after I. P. Kotliarevsky. He is also a co-founder of the NGO “Center for the Study of Interethnic Relations in Eastern Europe”. Kharchenko earned his PhD in History in 2012 and has held visiting scholar positions at the Simon Dubnow Institute in Leipzig (2016), New Europe College in Bucharest (2018), and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2018). His research interests encompass social history, Jewish studies, and genocide studies.

■ **Viktoriia Kharchenko** is a human rights expert whose work focuses on human rights, gender equality, and disability issues. Following the onset of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, she coordinated the medical evacuation of people with disabilities for the organization Fight for Right in 2022. She also served as the advocacy manager for Fight for Right from 2021 to 2023.

■ **Iryna Klymenko** is a historian, professor at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, and Head of the Research Centre Ukraine at the Max Weber Foundation. Her research examines the entangled histories of Eastern and Western Europe in the early modern period. She has held fellowships at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and the Historisches Kolleg in Munich, and has been a Visiting Fellow at the University of Cambridge. Her award-winning first book explores the intellectual history of the idea of societal change in early modern Europe. She has recently completed a second monograph on the religious history of food and clothing, for which she was awarded the Max Weber Prize by the Bavarian Academy of Sciences.

■ **Tetiana Kovtunovych** is the head of the Oral Sources Recording and Preservation Sector at the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance. She coordinates the oral history projects *Maidan: Oral History* and *Oral History of the Russo-Ukrainian War*. Kovtunovych is the compiler of three collections in the *Maidan in the First Person* series and the publication *The Chaplains*. She also serves as the executive editor of *Girls Cut off Their Braids* and *Warriors of the Dnipro*, and is the author and director of the documentary *Vohnekhreshcha*, which is based on oral histories.

■ **Inha Kozlova** is a sociologist with a PhD in Sociology, currently serving as an Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology at the Ukrainian Catholic University. She also heads the university's Sociological Laboratory. As a field researcher, her work focuses on urban sociology and urban studies, the right to the city, the collection and analysis of qualitative sociological data, and the internal migration processes triggered by the Russian war against Ukraine.

■ **Yaroslav Kyryienko** is the head of the War Crimes Documentation Department at the Civil Union "Educational Human Rights House – Chernihiv". He has also led the support program for human rights defenders, journalists, and civic activists at risk. Kyryienko is co-author of several key research projects on documenting war crimes, including *Schools of Chernihiv Region in the Crosshairs* (a report on attacks on schools during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation) and a report on the results of monitoring visits to document war crimes in the Chernihiv region.

■ **Svitlana Makhovska** is an ethnologist and anthropologist with a PhD in History. She serves as the Deputy Director and Head of the Museum-Archive of Folk Culture of Ukrainian Polissia at the State Scientific Center for the Protection of Cultural Heritage from Man-made Disasters (Kyiv). Makhovska is also a co-founder of the NGO "Center for Applied Anthropology" (Kyiv) and the Chernihiv Research Center for the Anthropology of War. Her research interests include Ukrainian traditional culture in historical perspective, the preservation and transmission of folk culture in regions affected by the Chornobyl disaster, oral history as a subject of academic study, the anthropology of disaster, and the humanitarian aspects of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

■ **Viktoriia Nesterenko** is a senior lecturer at V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University and a researcher at the War Childhood Museum. She began her studies at the Faculty of History at V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University in 2009 and defended her dissertation at Zaporizhzhia National University in 2019. Since 2020, she has been working at the War Childhood Museum. What draws her to this work is the opportunity to provide people with a safe space to share difficult stories. Her research interests focus on documenting the war through oral history methods.

■ **Yevheniia Nesterovych** is a cultural manager, critic, and writer. She co-edited the culture page for the online publication *Zbruch* from 2013 to 2018, served as program director at the NGO "Art Council Dialog" from 2015 to 2021, and worked as program coordinator at the Czech Center in Kyiv from 2020 to 2022. She regularly contributes essays, criticism, and analysis to various media outlets. In 2016, she published the book *Summa* (Meridian Czernowitz) in collaboration with Yurii Izdryk. Since May 2022, she has been leading the team at the NGO "Post Bellum–Ukraine".

■ **Svitlana Osipchuk** is the director of the War Childhood Museum in Ukraine. A graduate of the Department of History at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, she taught history at the Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute from 2013 to 2022. Since 2014, she has been working in the public sector, focusing on non-formal education and memory culture. One of the museum's key tasks is to implement safe documentation practices for war experiences, particularly those involving the everyday lives of children and teenagers.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko** is a researcher and coordinator of oral history projects at the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe. She holds a PhD in Sociology. From 2019 to 2022, she was affiliated with the Center for Contemporary History in Potsdam. A Fulbright alumna, she conducted research at Columbia University's Sociology Department in 2022-23. Since March 2022, she has been leading the Ukrainian team in the international documentary initiative *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War*. Her research interests include qualitative research methodology and methods, oral history, the sociology of expertise, and urban studies.

■ **Tetiana Pryvalko** is a historian who graduated from Taras Shevchenko Luhansk National University. She defended her dissertation for the degree of Candidate of Historical Sciences at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. She has taught history at both school and higher education institutions. Since 2013, she has worked at the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, and since 2014, she has been involved in the field of oral history. She has conducted interviews with participants and eyewitnesses of the Revolution of Dignity, the Russo-Ukrainian war, World War II, the Holodomor, and the Soviet era. She coordinated the regional recordings for the *Maidan: Oral History* project, and she developed the concept for and administers the Oral History Archive website.

■ **Valentyna Shevchenko** is a historian and PhD in History. She serves as a researcher and database administrator for documentation projects at the Center for Urban History and is a senior researcher at the Institute of History of Ukraine of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Her PhD dissertation focused on the development of banking activities in southern Ukraine during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Her current research interests include documenting the Russo-Ukrainian war, exploring Ukraine's context during the First World War, historical urbanism, and the socio-economic history of Ukraine in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

■ **Mariia Shvab** is a sociologist and researcher with expertise in public health. She studied sociology and public health at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and pursued studies in epidemiology and biostatistics at the State University of New York. Currently, she is completing her PhD at Maastricht University. Since 2015, she has focused on HIV research and data analysis. Starting in 2019,

she began academic research on the birth experiences of Ukrainian women. In 2023, she joined the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy as a lecturer in public health.

■ **Iryna Sklokina** is a historian and researcher at the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe. She defended her dissertation in 2014, which focused on Soviet memory policies regarding the Nazi occupation in the Kharkiv region. She has participated in several projects centered on cultural heritage and regionalism, including www.openheritage.eu and *Un/archiving Post/Industry*. Since 2022, she has also been a researcher in the international project "Sociobord: Social Policy on European Borders in the 1870s and 1990s." Her research interests encompass critical heritage studies, oral history, and the welfare state.

■ **Iuliia Skubytska** is a historian and researcher specializing in Soviet history, childhood history, and public and oral history. She earned her PhD from the University of Pennsylvania in 2018. From 2020 to 2022, she served as director of the Ukrainian office of the War Childhood Museum. Dr. Skubytska has taught at Princeton University and Bard College. In 2023, she led the oral history project *Those Who Remained: Testimonies of Kharkiv Region Residents*, organized by the Center for Urban History.

■ **Nadia Ufimtseva** is a historian and PhD candidate at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Her research focuses on East European and Ukrainian Judaica, Jewish book culture, and museum Judaica. She serves as the program director of the Ukrainian Association for Jewish Studies. Beyond her expertise in Jewish studies, she has a strong interest in Holocaust studies, particularly in the Ukrainian context. At the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies, she works as a lecturer, trainer, and researcher, and she has co-authored several educational projects for teachers and students.

■ **Andrii Usach** is a historian and the co-founder and chairman of the NGO "After Silence". He has contributed as the historical consultant and concept author for the documentary short film *Bezgolosia* and the documentary video project *In Memory*. He is also a co-author of the podcast *How We Survived* and an interviewer for the documentary video project *24.02: Life After*. In addition, he serves as a mentor for the *Recall, Reflect, Retell* summer public history work-

shops. Usach is the author of numerous academic and popular publications on the history of Nazi and Soviet mass violence.

■ **Albert Venher** is a historian, lecturer, and PhD in History. He graduated from Dnipro National University in 2008 and completed his postgraduate studies at the university's Department of World History in 2011, after which he began teaching at the department. Since 2023, he has served as the Head of the Department of World History at Oles Honchar Dnipro National University. His research interests include intellectual history, oral history, and the history of the Second World War.

■ **Anna Yatsenko** is a cultural manager and co-founder, as well as head of the board of the NGO "After Silence." She has produced the documentary short film *Bezgolosia* and the documentary video project *In Memory*. Anna is also a co-author of the podcast *How We Survived* and producer of the documentary video project *24.02: Life After*. She co-curated the virtual exhibition *Deportations. Visual Memory* and the online archive *During My Stay in Germany*. Additionally, she serves as a co-coordinator and mentor for the summer public history workshops *Recall, Reflect, Retell*.

■ **Katherine Younger** is a historian and research fellow in Central and East European Studies at the University of Glasgow. She is also Head of Archiving for the program *Documenting Ukraine* at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM Vienna). Until September 2025, she was a Permanent Fellow at the IWM, where she co-founded *Documenting Ukraine* and oversaw the *Ukraine in European Dialogue* program. Dr. Younger specializes in the history of modern Europe, with a particular focus on Ukraine, and earned her PhD from Yale University in 2018. Her research explores 19th century practices of international politics, the interplay between religion and power, and forms of imperial governance.

■ **Hanna Zaremba-Kosovych** holds a PhD in Sociology and is a researcher at the Department of Social Anthropology at the Ethnology Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Her research interests include disability studies, intellectual disability studies, and qualitative research methods. Following the full-scale invasion, she began documenting the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities. She is a co-author of the WARPATH project (2023) and the book *History Is Not without Us: The Formation of the Movement for the Rights of People with Disabilities in Ukraine* (2023).

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