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.