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.