

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 inter-agency 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.