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.