Chapter 1

Experiences of Rootedness

Humanitarian Aspects of the Russian-Ukrainian War

Svitlana Makhovska on Expeditions to the De-occupied Chernihiv Region

The conversation was recorded online on May 29, 2023

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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