



Natalia Otrishchenko. Stories from Within the War

History as a discipline is constructed around the temporal gap between an event and narratives about that event. Sources' value increases the "closer" they are to the event. Conversely, social scientists engage with individuals in their ongoing present, employing distinct tools for analysis and theorization that differentiate between first-hand experience and description. Typically, the academic community only acknowledges assessments from a distance as valid, on the assumption that this approach mitigates against biases and prejudice. The insistence on distance as an essential condition for constructing a reliable interpretation is so ingrained in scientific thinking that we—scholars, researchers, and readers of academic texts—seldom question this methodology.

Sociologists Harry Collins and Robert Evans reconsider the notion that "distance lends enchantment" in the context of knowledge production. They state that "the more distant one is from the locus of the creation of knowledge in social space and time, the more certain will the knowledge appear to be" (Collins and Evans 2007: 20). As individuals distance themselves from events—whether chronologically, geographically, or culturally—they tend to construct more stable and lucid narratives about them. As a researcher and sociologist whose professional endeavors are primarily associated with Ukrainian, German, and North American academia, it is a common practice for me to cite these scholars in my text. But my experience over the last few years demonstrates that not all conventional theories and tools are effective in the context of a full-scale war. Excessive abstraction and generalization are perceived as acts of violence. The distinction between living in the moment, undergoing its sensory and bodily aspects, and the interpretive framework in which this experience will

later be encapsulated—either by individuals distanced by time or by observers in a different space, often armed with more resources to promote their interpretations—becomes increasingly apparent.

Amidst a war, it proves challenging to blend direct experience with reflection on it. In such circumstances, experience closely aligns with the words employed to articulate it, if those words emerge at all. In a conversation with journalist Kateryna Yakovlenko, historian Marci Shore contends that metaphor becomes “inadequate because it is overshadowed by the empirical, the everyday, and the sensual” (Yakovlenko 2023a). Searching for the right words amidst a shattered language is a crucial step in constructing connections between diverse embodied experiences. Furthermore, it is simpler to find the right tone when you’re face-to-face with another person. Thus, it is telling that the quote I cite here is from an interview. And not just any interview, but one featured in a Ukrainian online media. This is because academic texts typically deal with more extended timeframes, whereas time during war is maximally compressed. Publication cycles struggle to keep pace with a rapidly evolving reality. Hence, one of the central ideas behind this collection is to capture the moment of contemplation from within, preceding the establishment of narrative frameworks for documenting the war. This is a **gesture of honesty**, acknowledging the potential for uncertainty and doubt.

Conversations during wartime differ. Words create plots, which are sometimes challenging to weave together into a coherent narrative. Consequently, stories from the war are frequently incomplete. This encompasses candid exchanges with strangers encountered at the train station late at night, communication with loved ones often beginning with the iconic question, “How are you?”, responses to journalists’ questions, and the formal recording of crimes by investigators. Fragments from such conversations formed projects like the *Dictionary of War* (Slyvynskyi 2023) and the collection *Deoccupation* (Lohvynenko 2023); oral testimonies have also been used as evidence in submissions to the Hague Tribunal. While it may be tempting to believe that talking can heal, psychotherapist Ghislaine Boulanger highlights the distinction between engaging in therapy and providing testimony for history. The latter’s objective is to counter an impersonal social science with personal narratives (Boulanger 2014: 111). Historian Mark Cave observes that oral history interviews validate human experiences within the realm of collective memory (Cave 2014: 2). Furthermore, testifying for future use establishes a connection with others—those around us and those who will follow

in our footsteps. This is a **gesture of empowerment**, signifying our present existence and our future continuity.

In conversation, it is simpler to ascribe meaning to your experiences and open up in the presence of the other. What's more, the urge to speak precedes the ability to write: my colleagues and I found it easier to overcome the silence induced by the horrors of war through dialogue than through crafting texts. Hence this collection is rooted in conversations. We discuss topics that are usually addressed in methodological guides within the academic realm, but we do so in a manner that feels more natural for us during times of war.

War is a period of radical vulnerability and protracted uncertainty, during which not only are your physical existence and the lives of your family and friends endangered; so too are the relationships that anchor you in space and time. Conversations from within are precisely those that occur in the space and time of war. War, as an event, has a beginning and must come to an end. Yet even the frame of reference depends on the narrative you choose to recount. For many, the turning point is February 24, 2022, marking the commencement of the full-scale Russian invasion. But the initiation of Russia's war against Ukraine can be traced back to March 1, 2014, when the Russian Federation Council authorized the use of Russian armed forces on Ukrainian territory. Alternatively, it could be dated from February 27, 2014, when an armed group seized the Supreme Council of Crimea, or even from February 18, 2014, when the shooting of protesters on Kyiv's Independence Square began. Some narrators and public commentators have extended the chronology of aggression back to the collapse of the Soviet Union or even World War II.

Regardless of the date we choose to place the war's start in the past, its reality is our present, and its end lies in the future. Consequently, our war narratives lack conclusions and must be continuously reassessed. Speaking candidly about such reconsideration poses a distinct challenge. An illustrative example in this context is a text by cultural manager Ivanna Skyba-Yakubova, filled with italicized comments on a text she had previously written (but not yet published) in light of a Russian missile attack on the village of Hroza: "[T]oday, much of what was said earlier is no longer permissible... *here, I will erase the previous final paragraphs and invite us all to a moment of silence—to remember those who perished in Hroza, and for all those who were audaciously claimed by the war, and for those we couldn't mourn during the war because their deaths appeared 'insignificant' against the backdrop of the overall catastrophe*" (Skyba-Yakubova

2023, italics—I. S.-Ya.). Even the written word can be, and often is, reinterpreted, especially in a wartime scenario. The contemporary historian Rüdiger Graf cites researchers in the field of narrative studies, asserting that the ending imparts meaning to an action—events are reassessed due to how they end (Graf 2021: 86). But can we truly know the end of any story? (I will refrain from alluding to the grand “end of history” that still hasn’t happened.) Perhaps our narratives from within the time of war require not so much closure but internal coherence and connections to the stories of others?

War spreads in time and unfolds in space. The literary critic Hanna Uliura draws attention to one of the most famous images that testifies to the crimes of the Nazis in World War II, the gate of the Auschwitz camp (Uliura 2023: 12). She emphasizes that the photographer captures it from the outside. This observation leads Uliura to consider that war is predominantly perceived from the standpoint of an observer, rather than from the viewpoint of someone experiencing it from within, residing in a specific location. The space of war is a threatened space, a space fraught with danger. It can be delineated by the physical borders of a country, its territory. But this space is populated by individuals. Sociologist Markus Schroer posits that the body and space function as containers filled with life, and as such, they possess boundaries that are occasionally indistinct (Schroer 2018: 86-7). Furthermore, in the context of war, these boundaries are displaced, and therefore they are being defended, attempted to be maintained.

This collection unites the voices of individuals who gather testimonies amidst the time and space of war. The concept of documenting the experiences of those who document emerged from the recognition that numerous conversations, both formal and informal, go unrecorded, leaving us without a foundation for continuity. The format of the book, dialogic and polyphonic, is also **a gesture of gratitude** for the numerous conversations that proved invaluable in the initial months following the full-scale invasion and have remained a significant part of both my personal and professional life. In 2022, I wrote almost nothing. Delivering monologues on paper or screen proved challenging for me, but discussions with colleagues became my salvation. Through these conversations, we developed methodologies, sought solutions, and clarified our own experiences. But I felt the lack of a text to share, one that could convey my questions and solutions. In the scholarly realm, fundamentally cumulative, fixation serves as a crucial point for further movement.

This collection serves as a sort of “rapid response”: a point in the timeline that will enable us to grasp the journey we have undertaken. It encompasses documentation for research, advocacy, and educational purposes, providing only a brief mention of initiatives that record testimonies with a focus on justice. During her address at the Congress of Culture, human rights activist and Nobel Prize winner Oleksandra Matviichuk highlighted that there are over 50,000 instances of war crimes cataloged in the database of the Tribunal for Putin initiative. Oleksandra maintains that she is not documenting crimes but rather human suffering. Simultaneously, she deliberately avoids employing the term “victim” and suggests referring to survivors instead: “The position of the victim is perilous. In a society where millions are grappling with the impacts of war, we must find a way to transform pain into energy that begets life” (Matviichuk 2023). War constitutes a large-scale aggression against society as a whole, while disintegrating into hundreds and thousands of crimes against individuals. Those who have lost their lives in war cannot speak about it, and not everyone can provide testimony. Nevertheless, documenting and preserving the history of war allows people to transcend the role of the victim and operate under the assumption that the future still belongs to us, that our stories will endure.

Exploring the horizon of the future was another idea that influenced my work on the collection. It is not only about documenting conversations during full-scale war, considering ethical, methodological, security, or legal challenges. It also revolves around the question of “what comes next.” The preliminary title of the book was *Long Durations of a Rapid Response*—I used this title in the invitation extended to my colleagues for the discussion. Collectively, we are documenting the war’s narratives from within, in the present moment. Also, we strive to envision the future of these records, despite constraints in our planning and potential Russian attacks. Our reactions during this unprecedented period will yield enduring consequences for ourselves, our narrators, the academic community, and society as a whole. Contemplating the future involves our capacity to foresee risks and seek opportunities. It is about planting seeds that will one day sprout, either expectedly or not.

I entered into this publication initiative as an interviewer and the leader of the international project *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War*. Launched in March 2022, this initiative was spearheaded by the Center for Urban History, alongside several other documentation projects (Shumylovych, Makhanets, Nazaruk, Otrishchenko, Brunow 2022). Its objective was to capture narratives detailing the

alterations in daily life within the backdrop of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Just like my interviewees, whose stories you will find here, I encountered similar problems and questions. The gatherings that subsequently evolved into chapters in the book were for us a chance to juxtapose our experiences and collectively address the challenges of working in unfamiliar circumstances. This represents our endeavor to theorize and formulate certain generalizations regarding approaches to documentation.

I knew some of those involved in recording war stories long before the full-scale Russian invasion. I met some of them during the symposium on documentary and archival projects titled *The Most Documented War*. This event was organized in early June 2023 by the Center for Urban History, the Center for Governance and Culture in Europe at St. Gallen University, and the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, in cooperation with the International Foundation “Vidrodzhennia”, Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO), and Suspilne. Culture. Originally envisioned as a small gathering, the event instead generated significant resonance, drawing more than 150 participants. This ultimately became a decisive factor for me to undertake this collection.

I conducted the initial interviews for the book at the close of May and the final ones by the end of August 2023. Half of the sessions occurred face-to-face, while the rest were conducted remotely. Each initiative was recounted by one or two of its participants, with the sole exception being the final conversation in the collection, where I served as both interviewer and narrator. Ahead of each interview, I provided my interlocutors with a list of questions. Aside from requesting information about their initiative, its team, goals, development, key decisions, and work challenges, this list included inquiries regarding personal motivations and details of self-care. An integral aspect of the conversation involved inquiries about the future: how the records are stored, how access to them is planned, and how their future trajectory is envisioned. Ultimately, each session concluded with a question seeking advice that researchers could offer either to their past selves or to those presently undertaking documentation of the war.

Following the initial interviews, several recurring themes surfaced: reconstructing professional identities intertwined with civic ones; discovering a niche for meaningful engagement; identifying knowledge and skills instrumental in project implementation during the war; and exploring the potential for centralized archives or extensive networks to unite various initiatives. The participants in these conversations are

individuals documenting the war in Ukraine as Ukrainian citizens. Most of them did not leave the country. Their experiences illustrate varying degrees of vulnerability and the inability to escape the impacts of the war. Even if they temporarily go abroad, their bodies remain spaces affected by the war. They possess diverse professional backgrounds and trajectories, yet they share the commonality of feeling compelled to respond to the war through interviews. For many, volunteering was their initial response to Russia's full-scale invasion. At the same time, the shift towards documenting the war served as both an act of resistance and a demonstration of a certain privilege—having a sufficient sense of security and resources to engage in activities not directly tied to one's survival or that of their loved ones.

The book is divided into five sections. The initial section brings together initiatives documenting the stories of individuals living near the front line or who have experienced occupation, and whose towns or villages are now de-occupied. It commences with a conversation featuring the anthropologist Svitlana Makhovska discussing her visits to the de-occupied Chernihiv Oblast. Following that, historian Iuliia Skubytska discusses the initiative to document testimonies in the Kharkiv Oblast. Historian Oleksandr Cheremisin, who remained in Kherson during the occupation, conducts interviews with city residents. Journalist Olha Hvozdetzka and memory researcher Oksana Dovgoplova delve into the stories of Odesa residents. The concept of "rootedness" [*vkorinennia*], which Olha encountered in one of her interviews, serves as the focal point of this chapter. These discussions revolve around the significance of place and emphasize the idea that theorizing is possible from any perspective.

The second section comprises interviews with those documenting the experiences of internally displaced people. Historian Andrii Usach and cultural manager Anna Yatsenko discuss conversations with individuals who relocated to Lviv, while historian Albert Venher concentrates on recording interviews with those relocated to Dnipro. Although not singled out as distinct thematic chapters, the stories of volunteerism and armed resistance emerge as focal points of documentation in many of the initiatives discussed in the book.

The third section lies at the intersection of research and advocacy, featuring projects that engage with individuals sharing similar experiences and confronting analogous challenges. Apart from documentation, these initiatives aim to consider the testimonies of representatives from these groups in the realm of policymaking, be it in social or educational contexts. Sociologist Hanna Zaremba-Kosovych and

manager Viktoriia Kharchenko share their experience of conducting interviews with individuals with disabilities. Sociologist Mariia Shvab discusses her dissertation project focusing on the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth during wartime. Sociologist Inha Kozlova and historian Nadia Ufimtseva are gathering testimonies from history teachers who have collaborated with the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies.

The fourth section concentrates on methodologies developed abroad and localized by Ukrainian teams before the full-scale invasion. The interviews delve into how these teams adapted to new challenges. Historians Svitlana Osipchuk and Viktoriia Nesterenko introduce the War Childhood Museum, founded in Sarajevo after the Bosnian War, which has had a Ukrainian representative office since 2020. Cultural manager Yevheniia Nesterovych discusses her collaboration with Czech NGO Post Bellum, which expanded its reach to Ukraine in 2020. During our conversation with Yevheniia, we revisit the importance of documenting and preserving the stories of military personnel, given the profound changes in their lives due to Russian aggression and the distinctions in their experiences compared to civilians.

The fifth section looks at initiatives focused on establishing archives. Historians Tetiana Kovtunovych and Tetiana Pryvalko from the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance discuss its oral history archive, which has been systematically documenting the war since 2016 and preserving interviews with civilians, volunteers, veterans, and combatants. Project manager Mariia Buchelnikova and human rights activist Yaroslav Kyryienko describe the Docudays initiative, *Ukraine War Archive*, actively working to gather evidence for justice. The chapter is rounded out by historians Artem Kharchenko and Valentyna Shevchenko, who share their experiences working on the international project *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War*, implemented by the Center for Urban History in collaboration with colleagues from Poland, Luxembourg, Germany, and the UK. I also contribute to this conversation as a narrator, illustrating the intersection of various roles in war documentation initiatives.

In a discussion with Kateryna Yakovlenko, historian Katherine Younger, one of the initiators of the *Documenting Ukraine* program, points out that today the Russian war in Ukraine is portrayed by a diverse array of voices: “While we may be listening to more voices and have more sources, does that necessarily mean that all these sources and voices are truly heard?” (Yakovlenko 2023b). Who among those inquiring about war experiences is not represented in this compilation? Due to

security concerns, the book excludes projects related to regions currently under Russian administration. Additionally, the narratives of my foreign colleagues who came to Ukraine to conduct interviews after the full-scale invasion are not included here, as much of the literature on war and violence documentation pertains to work conducted outside their native countries (Cave and Sloan 2014; Mac Ginty, Brett, and Vogel 2021; Nordstrom and Robben 1996). Special attention should be given to the experiences of researchers of Ukrainian origin who were already affiliated with institutions outside Ukraine at the time of the full-scale invasion or who were compelled to relocate abroad thereafter, and who have undertaken the task of studying the lives of their compatriots in host communities. Lastly, this book maintains its focus on projects utilizing interview methods, excluding various initiatives involving visual and digital documentation or artistic reflection.

Recognizing these limitations indicates the next direction for progress. Through the compilation titled *Conversations with Those Who Ask about War: Practices of Interviewing during Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*, my colleagues and I intend to initiate a series of publications delving into various facets of operating in a profoundly open and precarious period. In doing so, we aim to establish a platform for collective reflection, where we can explore solutions to the challenges and queries that researchers encounter within the context of a full-scale war.

The conversations documented for this book encapsulate the reality of collecting war testimonies as of the summer of 2023. I am finalizing the introduction in early October. The future remains uncertain, but “as long as we are alive, nothing is final.” With this phrase, sociologist Iryna Bekeshkina concluded her rather pessimistic article on the state of democracy in Ukraine in 2003, a year before the Orange Revolution. She used the same words to title a column about Ukraine in 2009, four years before the Euromaidan began (Bekeshkina 2009). Being within history means acknowledging its unpredictability. It also implies that how it unfolds depends on us.

This publication came about under extraordinary circumstances, thanks to several collaborations. I am deeply grateful to the Körber-Stiftung and the Foundation for Polish Science for their support in my work on this book.

With this volume, *Documenting Ukraine* at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM Vienna), the Center for Urban History, Max Weber Foundation's Research Centre Ukraine, and INDEX: Institute for Documentation and Exchange are launching a series of publications—a crucial step in reclaiming the future as a space for planning. Sofia Dyak

and Katherine Younger developed the concept for the series and have been instrumental in guiding its progress. My colleagues at the Center for Urban History reviewed the initial draft of the introduction and provided invaluable feedback. Their unwavering support continues to motivate me daily, as it is thanks to their dedication that we are realizing the project *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War*. Many steps lay between my first vision of this publication and the moment you are now reading it—from recording and transcribing conversations to editing, layout, proofreading, and printing. I deeply appreciate everyone's contributions to this work, which often go unseen yet are profoundly important. I extend my heartfelt thanks to all whose voices fill this collection, for their trust, openness, and commitment to documenting the war. Special thanks to Alevtina Kakhidze, who contributed her artwork to form this book's visual narrative. Her drawings stand as a poignant testament to the first days of the full-scale invasion.

I have the privilege of working on this text while residing in Lviv, made possible by the men and women who have joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine and are holding the frontline. To those individuals who work tirelessly every day to ensure the future of war documentation projects in postwar Ukraine, I dedicate this book.

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