

Weekend Review

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Fertility funding

Ireland ranks 40th out of 43 nations for access to fertility treatment. Page 6



IS RUSSIA USING RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR IN UKRAINE?

Russian officials dismiss accounts of rape by Russian soldiers as Ukrainian and western propaganda but work to document the number of cases is ongoing



Lara Marlowe in Kyiv

She was a 12-year-old schoolgirl, living quietly in a suburb of Kyiv with her parents, until her childhood ended brutally one night last March. Viktoria Osypenko, the gynaecologist who cared for the girl for one month, is on the verge of tears as she recounts the story. She initially tells me the child's lovely name, worthy of a sarina. Then Osypenko catches herself. "She did not want her name or surname to be disclosed. She did not want anyone to know why she was brought to hospital. She was ashamed."

Osypenko decides to refer to the girl as Maria, like one of two angels, a boy and a girl, which the child made for her as a farewell gift when she joined the flow of refugees to Poland at Easter.

Maria made the angels from blue and yellow yarn, in the Ukrainian national colours. Osypenko keeps the girl angel at her mother's house, in memory of Maria, and attached the boy angel, Ivanko, to the mirror of her car.

Maria was evacuated on one of the last buses from Bucha, the town 30km

northwest of Kyiv which has faced the worst atrocities of the war so far. "I don't know how she survived," Osypenko says. "Townpeople must have helped her. She was covered in bruises. They pulled her hair and choked her. When they were done, they threw her on the ground."

The medical doctor was horrified when she examined the child. "Her genitalia were ruptured. She was in terrible pain. I tried to repair her organs, under general anaesthesia."

"For the first two weeks she said nothing more than hello. She cried a lot. She does not look like a developed woman. She has no breasts. No menstrual function. She is only a child, about 1.5 metres tall, with light brown hair, skinny, a pretty child. She is modest, shy, intelligent."

On that night when Russian soldiers marauded through Bucha, Maria and her parents hid in the back garden with the lights out. Two soldiers wore balaclavas. A third did not. All three raped the child. Then they shot Maria's parents dead, along with the family dog.

Maria's psychologist heard more details of the child's ordeal, but Osypenko was nonetheless destabilised by what she heard. "I came home every night and cried. I simply did not know how to help her. I still think about her every day. I am a Christian. I pray for her."

The 28-year-old divorced mother of a six-year-old boy, Osypenko says her "maternal heart" could not cope with Maria's grief. "I wanted to be a friend to her. I prepared food for her and talked to her and watched cartoons with her. She got used to my presence."

Because Maria did not receive immediate post-rape care, she must undergo repeated blood tests over months to ensure that she did not contract certain diseases. "If she has no serious infections, such as HIV or hepatitis, which affect you for the rest of your life, she may recover physically," Osypenko says. "Psychological recovery is more difficult."

What should happen to the three men who raped Maria and killed her parents? I ask Osypenko. "I hope they did not make it out of Bucha alive. I hope they rot in hell."

Some of the victims of sexual violence in Ukraine cannot speak because they are dead.

There was the woman found naked, but for a fur coat, in a cellar in Bucha. The New York Times photographed her lying face down on the ground on a blanket while police and rescue workers bustled around her corpse.

Karina Yershova's cut and lacerated body was also found in Bucha. Her grieving stepfather, Andriy Dereko, told the Kyiv Independent he believes Russian soldiers raped 22-year-old Karina before they killed her. Several inhabitants of the area said some Russian soldiers warned them to "hide the girls".

Paris Match magazine photographed bloodied sheets in the ransacked bedroom of a woman called Tetiana, a widowed mother of two children in Markariv, 50km west of Kyiv. "We buried her body in the garden", the soldiers scrawled in lipstick on the mirror of Tetiana's vanity table.

A 31-year-old woman from Malay Rohan, near Kharkiv, told Human Rights Watch (HRW) how a Russian soldier

broke into the school where she, her family and other villagers were sheltering on March 13th. He singled her out of the group, took her upstairs and raped her repeatedly through the night.

In an account verified by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, a woman from a small village near Kyiv said a Russian soldier shot her husband in the head, then told her: "You don't have a husband anymore. I shot him with this gun. He was a fascist." Two soldiers then gang-raped the woman repeatedly.

Three drunken Russian soldiers raped a woman named Viktoria and her neighbour Natasha in their village near Kyiv after shooting Natasha's husband, Viktoria told the New York Times. The soldier who assaulted Viktoria was 19-years-old, the same age as her son.

Russian officials dismiss accounts of rape by Russian soldiers as Ukrainian and western propaganda. Vassily Nebenza, Russia's ambassador to the UN, said: "The ratcheting up of accusations of Russian service personnel committing crimes of a sexual nature since the very beginning of our special military operation in Ukraine has become a favourite tactic of the Kyiv regime and our Western colleagues." Mr Nebenza said that "no evidence" of such crimes has been provided.

It is difficult to assess the scale of sexual violence in the Ukraine war, or to determine if rape is being used as a deliberate weapon of war, as alleged by Ukrainian officials, the European Parliament, the British and Canadian foreign ministers Liz Truss and Mélanie Joly in a joint open letter, and many western media outlets.

"At this point, we don't have a good sense of scale, and my impression is that no one does yet. We at Human Rights Watch have confirmed three cases," says Hillary Margolis, senior women's rights researcher at HRW.

"Obviously, that is not to say that it is not happening or that case reports are not accurate," Margolis continues. "We just don't have enough information to say it is happening on a widespread or systematic scale."

"Nor do we have evidence of it happening as an intentional weapon of war," Margolis says, "which again does not mean that it is not, only that we do not have evidence of that. The cases we have documented appear to be opportunistic."



Activists protest rape during war and support for Ukraine in front of the Russian Consulate in New York earlier this year. Gynaecologist Viktoria Osypenko (left): 'If she [a 12-year-old rape victim of Russian soldiers] has no serious infections, such as HIV or hepatitis, which affect you for the rest of your life, she may recover physically. Psychological recovery is more difficult.' Below left: An angel, in Ukrainian colours, given as a gift to Osypenko by the 12-year-old girl. PHOTOGRAPH (MAIN): KENA BETANCUR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



told her partner.

"A lot of big numbers were being thrown around, by (Denisova) but also by others, without clear evidence," says Margolis. "That is dangerous because people may come back and say, 'This wasn't actually happening after all'. It feeds the myths around 'Oh, women lie about being raped'. Again, it's not to say these things are not happening or that people report cases that are not true. We simply do not have clear information about those 400 cases."

The focus on sexual violence in April and May was "not just journalists", Margolis says. "It's politicians. I've heard about politicians visiting and wanting to speak to [rape] survivors. It's people from the prosecutor's office. It's international investigators. It's NGOs. It's everyone. There is a real appetite for these stories, which was also fed by the report of 400 cases and the constant reference to this being a weapon of war."

Margolis is concerned that survivors of sexual violence may be retraumatised by "the race to get the story and to prosecute the cases". The ethical question "of how that information is going to be used, whether it's useful and the impact on the survivor and their family members" is sometimes neglected. "I worry about people being asked to go through this over and over and over."

Pramila Patten said that in the past, rape victims have sometimes been questioned more than 15 times.

At the end of May, the Verkhovna Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, voted to dismiss Denisova, saying she had focused too much on sexual violence and neglected other aspects of her brief, including humanitarian corridors and prisoner exchanges. Several human rights groups opposed Denisova's dismissal.

Denisova admitted to the Ukrainian website lb.ua that she had used "cruel" or "harsh" language. In an ambiguous quote which was interpreted as an admission of guilt, she said, "Maybe I exaggerated to achieve the goal of convincing the world to provide weapons and pressure [on Russia]." Denisova insisted that she had only repeated the testimony of victims in phone calls to her office. "It has been confirmed that there is sexual violence. Now the investigators need to prove it," she concluded.

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Is Russia using rape as a weapon of war in Ukraine?

From page 1

Some of those who had spoken out earlier declined to comment. The head of investigations at the Kyiv Independent, who conducted an in depth study of rape in the Kyiv area, did not wish to speak to me. Neither did the mayor of Bucha, who had talked about 25 women being held as sex slaves in a basement in his town.

Oleksandra Matviichuk, the human-rights lawyer who heads the Ukrainian Center for Civil Liberties, fears that the focus on sexual violence may distract attention from other Russian war crimes. She also warns that delving into sex crimes can harm both the survivor and the investigator.

Working with regional human rights groups across Ukraine, Matviichuk has documented what she calls 13,000 “criminal episodes” involving Russian troops. These are only “the tip of the iceberg”, she says. Though her group refrains from asking about sexual violence and refers such reports to trained specialists, it has nonetheless received five complaints of rape.

The inability of the Ukrainian and international justice systems to handle such a huge number of cases is one of Matviichuk’s main concerns. “The International Criminal Court has started an investigation here. But they will select only a few cases. Who will provide justice



■ Human rights lawyer Oleksandra Matviichuk fears that the focus on sexual violence may distract attention from other Russian war crimes

for thousands of others who will not be selected by the ICC?” she asks.

“In July of this year, our former prosecutor general Iryna Venediktova said she had opened 23,000 criminal proceedings (against Russian forces),” Matviichuk continues. “Even Scotland Yard could not cope with such a huge number of crimes.” She advocates the creation of international hybrid tribunals on war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, in which national investigators and judges would work alongside international investigators and judges.

“It will be difficult to achieve the political will,” Matviichuk warns. “Because there is a lack of bravery to say, ‘Putin, we will prosecute you’.”

Testimonies

I ask Matviichuk what cases have left the deepest impression on her. “I try not to focus on my own emotion, because I will be broken,” she says. “We have testimony from a mother who told how Russian soldiers killed her daughter before her eyes. We have testimony of people who were forcibly put in a basement and Russian soldiers ordered them to choose volunteers because they wanted to shoot somebody, and they shot them.”

What Matviichuk calls “the accountability gap” is particularly wide in cases of sexual violence because evidence is often scant, victims are reluctant to come forward and the knowledge of commanders must be demonstrated – as it was in Bosnia and Rwanda – for rape cases to reach the level of an international tribunal.

“It is possible that troops are extremely undisciplined but that commanders are still aware of what they are doing and do not take action to stop it,” Margolis points out.

Matviichuk says Russian prisoners are also being used as combatants, a possible explanation for the apparently high number of war crimes. Ethnic minorities recruited from outlying regions of the Russian Federation are often accused of atrocities by Ukrainian refugees from occupied areas.



■ Yevgeny Prigozhin shows Vladimir Putin around one of his food factories outside St Petersburg in 2010; graves of Wagner soldiers on the outskirts of Bakinskaya village, in the Krasnodar region of Russia, in February; and a security guard outside the Wagner building in St Petersburg.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES; NEW YORK TIMES; EPA-EFE/SHUTTERSTOCK

WAGNER DANGER THE WEST FINALLY WAKES UP

Yevgeny Prigozhin is seen as the man who does Vladimir Putin's dirty work. The former gangster founded – and rules over – the mercenary group that has a reputation for barbarity in Ukraine, Africa and the Middle East



Lara Marlowe

Yevgeny Prigozhin was, like Russian president Vladimir Putin, a street fighter in his youth in Leningrad in the former Soviet Union. He served nine years of a 13-year prison sentence for robbery, became a gangster and restaurant owner, government contractor, caterer to Putin, warlord, media mogul and propagandist.

These days Prigozhin rules over the Wagner mercenary group that has earned a sinister reputation in Ukraine, Africa and the Middle East.

Prigozhin's mercenaries used the sledgehammer as a weapon of terror in Syria and Ukraine, so he turned it into their emblem. In January his television channel showed the heavysset, bald 61-year-old in combat fatigues distributing sledgehammers engraved with the words: Happy New Year 2023. "I brought you a new tool, a new weapon," Prigozhin said mockingly. "Teach new recruits how to use it."

When the European Parliament voted

last November to declare Russia a state sponsor of terrorism, Prigozhin displayed a bloodied sledgehammer in a blue velvet-lined violin case which he promised to send to MEPs.

After years in the shadows, Prigozhin admitted last September that he founded Wagner in May 2014. Asked about the lawsuits he'd filed against those who linked him to Wagner, including jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Russian website Meduza, and the investigative website Bellingcat, Prigozhin said it was just sport.

"Prigozhin is a genius at marketing," says Alexandra Jousset, co-director of a documentary entitled Wagner, Putin's Shadow Army, which won France's highest journalism award, the Prix Albert Londres, last November. Prigozhin "created the Wagner brand" by flooding social media with ultra-violent recruitment videos packed with action heroes, blood, flames, explosions and blaring music. "Then he hijacked representation of the conflict in Ukraine."

'Limelight'

By admitting authority over Wagner last September, Prigozhin guaranteed that his many enemies within the Russian system could not eliminate him discreetly. "And by putting himself in the limelight, he was able to say, 'The war in Ukraine is me. The few Russian successes in Ukraine are me, Wagner, not the army,'" Jousset says. Prigozhin has known Putin for many

years, Jousset says. "He's the man who does Putin's dirty work, one of few people he really trusts. Putin has Prigozhin taste his food. Prigozhin serves Putin at [the] table. They have a close relationship, but not as close as men like Vladimir Yakunin, who served with Putin in the KGB."

Tracey German, a professor of conflict and security at King's College, London and co-author of a book on non-state actors in Ukraine, says Prigozhin moved from his former, covert role to a highly visible role on the front line in Donbas by arguing that Wagner was more capable than Russian ground troops and would succeed where they failed.

"Wagner plugged a gap," German says. "When the official Russian military were struggling with manpower last summer, Wagner began taking on a frontline fighting role. In that respect, they have been very useful for the Kremlin."

The British ministry of defence estimates there are 50,000 Wagner mercenaries in Ukraine. The US National Security Council says 80 per cent of them are convicts. Prigozhin leaked a video of his recruitment speech in a prison yard. He warned convicts they would probably die. If they survived, he promised they'd be well paid and gain freedom after six months.

"Initially Wagner used battle-hardened military veterans with experience in the Russian armed forces or security services," German says. "Recruiting convicts diluted their effectiveness as a fighting force. I hate the term cannon fodder, but they just keep throwing fighters in waves, again and again. If they were conscripts, the huge casualty numbers would be terrible for Putin. Because it's Wagner, they don't report their losses."

Until the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine 13 months ago, Wagner also offered the advantage of "plausible deniability", German says. "The Kremlin could say: 'No, no. Nothing to do with us.'"

'Hammer of Revenge'

Wagner's reputation for brutality, what German calls the fear factor, can also be an advantage.

When the US treasury imposed sanctions on Wagner in late January, it described the group as "a transnational criminal organisation implementing Kremlin policy". In the Central African Republic and Mali, it said: "Wagner personnel have engaged in a continuing pattern of serious criminal activity, including mass executions, rape, child abduction and physical violence."

Josep Borrell, the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, recently described Wagner as "the praetorian guard of military dictatorships". In exchange for protecting Arab and African dictators, Prigozhin has secured access to petroleum fields, diamond and gold mines.

Videos of summary executions of alleged deserters in Syria in 2017 and in Ukraine last November left the deepest im-

pression of Wagner's barbarity. The scenes posted on social media were intended to instil terror and deter would-be deserters.

Mohammed Taha Ismail Al-Abdullah was accused of deserting from the army of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. The modern-day gladiators spoke Russian on the video, did not attempt to hide their faces and have since been identified by Russian journalists. First the Wagner men bashed the Syrian with a sledgehammer. Then they dropped a grenade into his trousers, shot him, cut off his head and arms, hung his body upside down and set fire to it.

Dmitri Utkin, a veteran of the Chechen wars and Wagner's top field commander, was placed under EU sanctions in December 2021 for allegedly ordering Al-Abdullah's torture and murder.

Utkin is a former special forces officer in the GRU, Russia's military foreign intelligence agency. Wagner's training camp at Molkino, southern Russia, is adjacent to a GRU base. Utkin's nom de guerre, Wagner, became the group's name. He and three other Wagner commanders were photographed alongside Putin in Decem-

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ber 2016, after he pinned medals on their chests.

Wagner posted its second such video, entitled "The Hammer of Revenge" on the Grey Zone Telegram channel last November 13th. Wagner operatives had captured Yevgeny Nuzhin, a convicted murderer and Wagner recruit, who defected in September.

"On November 11th I was hit on the head in a street in Kyiv and I lost consciousness," Nuzhin recounts in the video. His head is bound to a piece of debris with clingfilm. "I woke up in this cellar where they told me I would be judged."

A man in combat gear smashes a sledgehammer into the side of Nuzhin's head and neck. He falls to the ground. The second blow crushes his head. "He did not find happiness in Ukraine and ended up meeting people who are hard but just," Prigozhin said sarcastically. "This film

should be called 'a dog's death for a dog'."

Two Wagner defectors, Andrei Medvedev, now in hiding in Norway, and Marat Gabidullin, in France, have revealed that Wagner runs its own intelligence service, the Sluzba Bzopasnosti (SB) that coordinates with the Russian FSB, the successor to the KGB. Within the SB a group called MED is responsible for liquidating traitors and unwanted witnesses. Medvedev said he knew of at least 10 such executions.

The fiction that Wagner's crimes were somehow independent of the Kremlin was refuted in recent weeks when hackers pirated computers in Prigozhin's galaxy of 400 companies, including his "troll farm", a digital headquarters in St Petersburg called the Internet Research Agency, which spreads disinformation on the internet, his Concord restaurant and catering group, and Wagner.

Prigozhin boasted last autumn that he favoured Donald Trump's election, saying: "Gentlemen, we interfered, we interfere, and we will interfere."

Jousset and her co-director, Russian journalist Ksenia Bolchakova, reported the Wagner Leaks in Paris Match and on Arte television. Welt am Sonntag and Business Insider shared the story. The biggest trove of Prigozhin documents was released on March 18th by Dossier Center, which belongs to Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a Russian billionaire who was jailed for a decade by Putin and now criticises the Russian dictator from exile in London.

Lie detector

The leaked documents show that, as Le Monde summarised it, Prigozhin's vast holdings constitute "a quasi-Russian state company, but also a unique criminal enterprise".

Prigozhin employees are vetted with a two-hour lie detector test, Dossier Center reported, to cut out anyone with opposition, media, or police contacts. Applicants are asked their opinions about the war in Ukraine. Affiliation with neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups is not a problem.

Sources who know Prigozhin say his attitude remains that of an ex-convict. A European who worked in his restaurants in St Petersburg told Paris Match: "I've seen him thank us for our work by providing us with prostitutes, and I've seen him have guys beaten up by his thugs because they tried to find a job elsewhere."

Prigozhin positions himself politically as pro-Putin, anti-elitist and ultra-nationalist. "Prisoners have a much higher level of consciousness than the Russian elite," he replied to a written question from a website in Siberia. He condemns the elite for "choosing their own comfort over the good of the people" by refusing to send their children to fight in Ukraine.

Prigozhin and Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu disputed credit for the fall of the Ukrainian town of Soledar last January 11th. A Wagner militiaman waved the group's black, red and white death's head flag from the window of a gutted building. Prigozhin posted a photograph of himself in combat gear, surrounded by fighters in

Soledar salt mine. "It was us and us alone who took Soledar," he boasted, addressing himself to the Russian army. "Go fight and stop comparing your [sexual organs] to those of my fighters!"

Bakhmut, a rail and road hub 18km from Soledar, has seen the longest battle of the Russian invasion and is often compared to Verdun. Wagner mercenaries hold the eastern part of the now ruined city, while Ukrainian forces are dug in on the western side and have blown up bridges across the Bakhmutka river.

On February 22nd, Prigozhin violated the taboo regarding Russian casualties by posting a photograph of about 50 Russian corpses lined up in the snow at Bakhmut. "Half my guys die because certain military bureaucrats don't want to move their ass," he complained in a voice message on Telegram. "Those who prevent us winning this war are working directly for the enemy, helping the enemy to break Russia's back. Let us be clear: hundreds of thousands of soldiers have died on the front."

Outbursts

Such outbursts fuel Prigozhin's feud with the Russian military establishment. He and Shoigu have long been rivals, "for the simple reason that Shoigu also possesses a private military company called Redut", Jousset says. "They have been in competition in Syria and elsewhere."

At a time when many predict Prigozhin's demise, others see him and his ally, pro-Putin Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, as possible successors to Putin.

Prigozhin and Kadyrov are not foolhardy enough to plot against Putin but could be considered alternatives by the ultra-right nationalist fringe of Russian politics if something happened to Putin. The Wagner Leaks revealed that Darya Dugina, the assassinated daughter of far-right ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, was on Prigozhin's payroll.

Wagner has spearheaded Russian expansion in Africa, reaping support for Russia in the UN and securing a hold on natural resources. "For a long time Wagner were regarded as scruffy mercenaries and not taken seriously," says Jousset. "Western armies have finally woken up to the danger."

Prigozhin's propagandists in Africa emphasise the colonial crimes of the French and other Europeans and tell Africans that the West causes their poverty. The governments of Mali and Burkina Faso have expelled French forces from their countries and replaced them with Wagner.

Khodorkovsky says that westerners' fear of death are no match for Putin, who believes all problems can be solved through violence.

So how do you fight men who use sledgehammers as murder weapons? Nato sends arms to Ukraine, but isn't fighting. In Africa the West is focused on the information war.

"We didn't engage enough in the battle against disinformation in the beginning," Borrell told Le Monde. "This fight will continue, and we must continue to explain. It is about winning public opinion."

How to... let go

Expert answers to everyday questions

Take it on the chin, suck it up, you'll be grand – if you've experienced a challenge, family and friends can be impatient for your recovery. "Sometimes we get a message that emotions like anger, disappointment, resentment and jealousy are seen as bad or wrong," says Keelin O'Dwyer, behavioural psychologist at online therapy platform, Fettle.ie.

But every emotion has a function, she says. Instead of trying to repress or battle difficult emotions, which can make them bubble up even stronger, acknowledge them. "In Ireland, we are very dismissive of our emotions. But if we kind of acknowledge the let-down we faced and allow ourselves to feel the sadness, we will feel a lot better in the long term."

Let it out

If you are wrestling with difficult feelings, expressing them can help with letting them

go. "There are a lot of studies with regard to people who have been through a difficult break-up. Psychologists have found those who wrote down their thoughts and feelings recovered much quicker than those who didn't," says O'Dwyer.

"They also had better physical and mental health in the months after the study," she says. "Talk to a friend, write down your feelings or express them in some creative way – getting your feelings out can help you recover."

Forgive and forget?

If someone has done you wrong, don't feel you have to skip straight to forgiveness. "Acknowledge your own pain and be kind to yourself first," says O'Dwyer. "When we are kinder to ourselves, we are more likely to be compassionate towards other people, but I think you need to go through the



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A lot of how we process disappointment and get over things has to do with our past. That's why it's important to be compassionate towards ourselves

process of feeling your feelings first."

It isn't good to hold on to challenging feelings towards someone, research shows. "The more you process the disappointment, the more likely forgiveness will show up naturally when it's ready. But it is not something to be forced."

In your own time

We recover from some things faster than others and that has a lot to do with our history, says O'Dwyer.

If you have a really difficult relationship with family members, a break-up might hit harder because of losses you suffered before. Someone may be especially triggered by workplace bullying if they were also bullied at school.

"A lot of how we process disappointment and get over things has to do with our past," says O'Dwyer. "That's why it's important to be compassionate towards ourselves."

No Ted Talks

If a loved one is struggling with difficult

emotions, try not to Ted Talk them out of it. "It can be hard if someone is going on about a certain situation constantly. You want to help, but you don't have to have the solution," says O'Dwyer. "Even sitting there saying, 'I'm here for you. How would you like me to help?' It's just about letting the person have that space. That's really helpful in them moving forward."

Hang on

Holding on to anger and disappointment is bad if it stops you from living the life you want to lead.

Feeling resentful after a difficult break-up, for example, can block you from pursuing a healthy relationship.

Feeling angry with an employer can impact your work. If you feel you are getting caught up in difficult thoughts and emotions and can't get over a setback, talk to a trained professional, says O'Dwyer. "Having guided help to process things can help you get from where you are to where you want to be."

JOANNE HUNT



Odesa and Russia: 'First they send a ballerina. Then they send a tank'



Lara Marlowe
in Odesa

An artist and an intellectual in the Ukrainian port city explain their perspectives on the role of Russian culture as a weapon

Stas Zhalobnyuk, an artist aged 45, offers us bread made with sunflower seeds and dates, goat cheese, ginger and lime tea in his kitchen during an air raid alert. "It's the safest place, because the walls are concrete and there are no windows," he explains. Zhalobnyuk says he is "mental with love" for his country. "I want post-war Ukraine to be a humane, western-looking society that saves animals and builds museums."

But for now, Zhalobnyuk is inescapably angry. The mental torment that consumes him from the inside and keeps him awake at night has made him a proponent of a growing movement to expunge the Russian language and culture from Ukrainian society.

Zhalobnyuk's home city of Odesa is predominantly Russian-speaking. "I don't have a single Russian book in my library," he boasts. "My mother tongue is Ukrainian. I learned it at the age of 40."

Zhalobnyuk's collages and paintings show bloodied bodies and dismembered limbs, stamped with the words GENOCIDE OF THE UKRAINIAN PEOPLE. He stencils the letters TOXIC over the faces of Russian writers and composers. He fills the foreground of a Russian landscape with coffins, beneath the words "Russia = DEATH". His depiction of the massacre of hundreds of Ukrainian civilians at Bucha last March is a swirl of human organs, blood, a military truck.

"Damn you all Russians", it says in boldface black letters.

As a male of military age, Zhalobnyuk cannot travel outside Ukraine, but his art has been exhibited in Amsterdam, Berlin and Rome since the war started. A collector in Paris has acquired 10 pieces. An exhibition will soon open in Brussels. "These are powerful works. They will live after me," he says.

Tax on fruit trees

"My albums explain how I became anti-Russian," Zhalobnyuk continues. Successive generations of family members died in famines created by the Soviet Union. "People know about the Holodomor (the famine imposed by Stalin in 1932-1933, which killed perhaps five million Ukrainians) but not many know about 1947," he says with emotion. "My father's brothers died. Stalin imposed a tax on fruit trees, so they had to cut down their trees. They ate grass and leaves. Without documents, they could not leave their village. Russia is like Mordor (in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings), a territory of total evil."

Another photograph shows Zhalobnyuk's grandmother and great uncle. During the Holodomor, "her family were Kurkuls (farmers who refused collectivisation). Her parents were killed in Siberia. She and her brother, aged 15 and 16, walked to Odesa. Every communist holiday, he sent her a communist postcard without an envelope, so the authorities would see it, because he was afraid."

Zhalobnyuk's grandmother was killed in the second World War, so his mother was half-Russian. "This blood that is in me. I don't know what to do with it... Some people are afraid of the verb 'hate'. I just want to be in a world without them." Zhalobnyuk dreams of a physical separation, the Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall or the wall that Poland is building on its border with Belarus. "The higher the better. Up to the sky."

The Russians, Zhalobnyuk argues, "have always used culture as a weapon". He makes a cup on pushka, the Russian word for canon. "Pushkin is a canon." Alexander Pushkin, the 19th-century author of Eugene Onegin, is one of the main targets of Ukraine's semi-official campaign of de-Russification.



Pushkin's sin? To have mocked the Ukrainian Cossack leader Ivan Mazepa, and to have praised the conquests of Peter the Great in poems. Busts or statues of Pushkin have been toppled in about a dozen Ukrainian cities. Dozens more monuments to Soviet or tsarist figures have met the same fate since the war started in February.

Cruelty, past and present

Surely it is unfair to hold Russians collectively responsible for their country's cruelty, past and present. I object.

"I have to survive," Zhalobnyuk replies. "I cannot allow myself to meditate about tolerance of enemies. These albums are about my family being killed. That information was covered up. Now, when Bucha happens, the world is watching. Do you expect me to say there are nice people in Russia as well? Would you tell me to go and negotiate with nice people? I know the world is getting tired of this war. We are getting tired as

well. We didn't start it. This is an ideological war between people with European values and people who torture children."

Hardliners like Zhalobnyuk believe Russian culture cannot be dissociated from Russian aggression. "First they send a ballerina. Then they send a tank," he says. Ukraine's National Opera has ceased performing works by Russian composers. "If you love Russian culture, you have to love detention camps, deportation, everything that comes with it," Zhalobnyuk adds.

Yevgeny Golubovsky receives us a few miles away in a ground-floor apartment in a shabby concrete high-rise. The walls are lined with books and oil paintings. The 85-year-old former engineer, journalist and editor has been called the living memory of Odesa. He has published books on the art and literature of many countries, including Greece and Italy, Russia

and Ukraine. "I think that culture has no borders," he says.

Golubovsky remembers the second World War well. His father was wounded fighting the Nazis. His mother was a medic. "For me, the enemy were the Nazis, the Germans. I am a Jew. You understand how it could have ended..."

Many of Odesa's Jews fled pogroms in the early 20th century. After the first World War, early Zionists left Odesa for Palestine, where they founded the city of Tel Aviv.

Until the second World War, Odesa was home to 180,000 Jews, the largest Jewish community in the Soviet Union. Most perished at the hands of the Nazis. Jewish culture nonetheless left a lasting influence on the city's cuisine, dialect and humour.

Golubovsky did not like the Soviets either. He self-published, and organised clandestine art exhibitions. He rejects the idea that Odesa was a Russian city, though it was founded by Catherine the Great in 1794. She named it after the Greek hero Odysseus (Ulysses) but insisted on feminising the name.

Political spelling

Even the spelling of the city's name has become politicised, with Ukrainian patriots abandoning the Russian Odesa for their own spelling, Odessa.

"Odesa is a European city," Golubovsky says. "It was built above a Greek settlement. It embodies Mediterranean culture. The Turks were kicked out by the Russians in the 18th century. Then it became part of Ukraine and a crucible where many nationalities were melted."

Golubovsky has spent virtually his entire life in Odesa. He loves the Black Sea - whose shore has become inaccessible in war - and its neo-classical architecture. "Most of all, I love the free spirit of Odesa," he says. "When Pushkin lived in exile in Odesa in the 1820s, he wrote, 'Everything breathes freedom here'. It was a free European city in a Russia as brutal as the Mongols."

The anti-Pushkin campaign "are blaming him for two or three poems he wrote at the end of his life, and for failing to support the Polish revolt against the Russians", says Golubovsky. "You can say this was a mistake, but he was not a poli-

■ Smoke rises from a fire after a missile strike on a warehouse in Odesa on July 16th.

Left: Artist Stas Zhalobnyuk: 'I cannot allow myself to meditate about tolerance of enemies. These albums are about my family being killed... Do you expect me to say there are nice people in Russia as well?' PHOTOGRAPH BY LARA MARLOWE. GIMANOV/AFP & LARA MARLOWE

tician. Before Pushkin, the Russian language was archaic. He created the modern Russian language."

But it is precisely that language which many Ukrainians now object to, I interrupt. "No language is ever guilty," says Golubovsky. "We fought with Germany. No one ever banned Beethoven. When I hear they are banning Tchaikovsky, I feel shame for people with twisted minds."

Passionate hatred

Golubovsky understands the passionate hatred that many Ukrainians now feel towards Russia. "When you see dead children, it creates an emotional deflagration. I think that in five years it will calm down."

He cites as an example the statue of Catherine the Great - Ukrainians refer to her simply as Catherine or Catherine II - which dominates a roundabout high above the Black Sea. Zhalobnyuk wants it dismantled.

The original statue was removed by the Soviets after the 1917 revolution, and replaced with a statue of the Battleship Potemkin, where the Bolshevik revolt started. Following Ukraine's independence in 1991, the city council, where Golubovsky was a representative, moved the Potemkin statue and brought Catherine back.

I tell Golubovsky what Zhalobnyuk said about Russian culture being an instrument of imperialism, about sending a ballerina in front of a tank.

"That is possible," the old man says, smiling. "But in 1968, when the Soviet Union decided to punish Czechoslovakia and sent the Red Army to Prague, the only (Soviet) person who raised their voice was (the poet Yevgeny) Yevtushenko, who published Tanks in Prague. Sometimes it works the other way around."

