

“Violence is woven into the stream of consciousness as terrible and normal at the same time.”

Everyday Life in Ukraine’s War Zone

GRETA UEHLING

After more than three years of fighting, Ukrainians have become accustomed to war. Two billboards that I saw on a recent trip through eastern Ukraine dramatically made that point. The first, on a road into the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR), said, “Welcome to Hell.” Clearly, peace and reconciliation are not the predominant vision here. The second, located in the Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR), warned, “We Won’t Forgive and We Won’t Forget,” suggesting that further violence will be rationalized as a brand of justice.

Both billboards convey a sense of the atmosphere of protracted conflict in the region of eastern Ukraine known as Donbas. In this essay, I will explore how ordinary people in the region have maintained their lives on the front lines, and how a new kind of subjectivity (the felt interior experience of each person) is now produced through their engagement with violence. A second and related question is how the experience of conflict is shaping Ukrainian identity and the prospects for peace and reconciliation. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Ukraine between 2015 and 2017, including Donetsk Oblast (province), I suggest that ways of speaking, acting, and thinking about the conflict are transforming the ongoing violence into something that seems normal, despite widespread criticism of the war.

The Revolution of Dignity—also known as the Maidan movement, after the central square in Kiev where the protests began—overthrew Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. Soon after that, demonstrations took place in the eastern oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk. While some protesters supported the political transition going on in Kiev, others, using a variety of incendiary terms, countered that the postrevolution-

ary government was illegitimate. In March 2014, administrative buildings and the police station in Sloviansk, a city in Donetsk, were stormed by people waving Russian flags. Similar actions soon followed in other eastern cities and municipalities. By April, Kiev launched a military operation to retake Sloviansk and the first shots were fired.

That was the beginning of a bloody armed conflict, sometimes called a hybrid war because of Russia’s covert intervention on behalf of the rebels, that continues today. As a result of the conflict, some 1.8 million people have registered themselves as displaced, according to the Ministry of Social Policy. If those who did not register were counted, this figure would be much higher. The widely published death toll is 10,000 to date, but that number was considered too low by virtually everyone I spoke with.

SUSPENDED RIGHTS

Of the two common explanations for the war, one ethnolinguistic and the other economic, the one that resonated more strongly with the people I interacted with over the three-year period of my visits centered on the political economy of the region. There is considerable evidence that the “pro-Russian” segment of the population in Donbas favors Russian-backed rule not because of ethnicity or language but because the region’s economic stability and prosperity depend on trade with Russia. That trade was jeopardized by agreements that the new authorities in Kiev signed with the European Union in the wake of the Maidan. Locals critical of the oligarchs who control—and compete over—the main industries in Ukraine believe that had the oligarchs been better able to balance their power relations, the war would not have begun.

In response to the self-declared independence of the “people’s republics” in Donetsk and Luhansk, the Ukrainian government created what it called an antiterrorist operation (ATO) zone around the

GRETA UEHLING is a lecturer in international and comparative studies at the University of Michigan.

region. The statelets are also collectively called the Occupied Regions in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, or ORDLO. They qualify as a zone of exception in the full sense of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's term: in his account, a state of exception is a form of governance in which the rule of law has been suspended due to a declared emergency. The suspension of the law leads to what Agamben calls "bare life"—a condition in which one is not protected by the law because one's life has been devalued. Under the state of exception, it is the sheer biological fact of life that receives priority over the quality of that life.

In Ukraine's antiterrorist operation, even provisions of the Geneva Conventions, such as civilians' freedom to leave a place of battle, have been suspended. Both entering and leaving the ATO have been complicated by a permit system that is costly for travelers and lucrative for the border guards who accept bribes. During some periods, these permits have been virtually impossible to obtain, in violation of the Geneva Conventions. Waiting lines to pass the border posts stretch for kilometers and it can take days to get through, a delay that becomes a health issue for many. Although the checkpoints are explained as a measure to prevent terrorists from entering government-controlled Ukrainian territory, it is obvious to residents of the region that pro-Russian fighters who seek to weaken Kiev's influence have the resources and connections to bypass the posts.

Inhabitants of the ATO and the occupied territories, like those in refugee camps, are excluded by the new extralegal order of the conflict from some but not all of the basic rights of citizenship. A whole set of Ukrainian policies reinforce this exclusion. Pensioners are the most adversely affected. They live a difficult existence that is often centered on receiving humanitarian aid. Their right to collect their pensions while living in occupied or war zones was suspended while some officials argued against paying them and the public engaged in a vociferous debate on social media.

In addition to referring to a geographic space, the ATO acronym is incorporated in a term used for the people who fight there, *Atoshniki*. This new vocabulary is a form of abstraction that is also a mode of political domination. The discourse surrounding the zone helps politicians and oligarchs

legitimize and prolong the violence in spite of a series of cease-fire agreements.

Inside the ATO, the same lexicon is used by ordinary people to minimize the significance of military action and the death toll, which rises daily. At the most elementary level, the people who live there have had to unlearn fear of violence. Their subjectivity is formed through the uninterrupted engagement with violence that has become part of everyday life.

STARK CHOICES

A recent drive through Sloviansk, a city that was briefly occupied by separatist forces before it was retaken by the Ukrainian army in July 2014, laid bare the destruction that has taken place. Road signs were riddled with bullet holes. Schools, health clinics, and homes were polka-dotted by scars from shelling. Buildings with roofs destroyed by bombing stood quietly with their architectural bones exposed to the sky. Some municipalities are so damaged that the government in Kiev has deemed them irreparable, if and when they return to Ukrainian control. The DNR and LNR are extensively mined. A European Union study issued this year ranked Ukraine fifth in the world in the number of land mines.

Without meaningful support from the state, many of those who initially fled the fighting have had to return because they were unable to raise enough funds to survive in other regions of Ukraine. The small stipend issued by the government to internally displaced persons (IDPs) to offset the cost of housing in government-controlled areas was perversely taken as justification to raise rents. With earnings, if any, that did not match the cost of living, many people had little choice but to move back to the homes and apartments they own in the occupied territories.

Given how many ordinary people on the front lines express a sense of being neglected, the question arises why the Ukrainian state has not made the civilian population a higher priority. Part of the answer is that from the perspective of the government in Kiev, IDPs are not so much the bearers of rights as cogs in the labor force. Adult IDPs who register as such (about 80 percent of the total, according to one state official), receive 440 hryvnia per month (about \$16), but only as long as they are working. (The average monthly income is ap-

The same oligarchs who distribute humanitarian assistance are sponsoring the violence.

proximately 5,000 to 6,000 hryvnia.) These payments are halved if an adult does not find work within two months, and are terminated for those who fail to find work within six months.

Echoing the grim sentiments articulated on the billboards, IDPs express skepticism about returning because they believe that hatred and vengefulness will persist for a long time after the shooting stops. They ask what is going to be done with the toxic emotions left over from the conflict.

Cynicism is not limited to those who have been displaced. Soldiers I spoke with informally said that even if there is a lasting cease-fire, they will find a way to go on fighting to avenge fallen comrades. By contrast, those who live inside the DNR and LNR admonish their displaced relatives to come home, assuring them that “everything is fine” in the occupied territories.

LIFE UNDER SIEGE

The conflict is characterized by a shifting map of pockets of fighting interspersed with areas of calm. While it is difficult to generalize, the prevailing descriptions of daily life in the conflict zone normalize the ongoing state of siege. As a 30-year-old female informant in my study said:

In the morning you go to work, and in the evening, you come home, cook, feed your child, and at 10 o'clock they just start shelling you, and so you sit in the corridor, or in the bathroom—well, that's the way you live through the night. And in the morning, you get up again, whether you slept or not, and take your child to school and go to work.

Similarly, a man who was unable to find a job in government-controlled Ukraine returned to work in Donetsk. His routine was Sisyphean: during the day, he restored cables and Internet systems that had been destroyed in the night and were likely to be knocked out again before long. He and his elderly parents slept in the corridors of their apartment fully dressed in case it became necessary to flee. Since they had seen shells fall on neighboring buildings, they knew that was well within the realm of possibility. “You just sit and nothing depends on you; you don't know whether you will be lucky or not,” he told me.

The governments established by the self-declared republics have begun to build functioning institutions, but they lack any accountability to the citizens. This is not to say that people

are entirely lacking in agency. But the violence of war deepens society's preexisting socioeconomic and demographic fault lines. While those with the means to do so left early and are now making new lives for themselves in other parts of Ukraine, those who remain have limited choices. One man I interviewed had a leg amputated after it became diseased while he lived “like an animal” in a building without heat, water, or even glass in the windows.

How do the people who are left behind reinhabit their world with the full knowledge that some of the war's perpetrators are also their neighbors and colleagues? The residents of the ATO make the space of destruction their own not by transcending it but, to use the anthropologist Veena Das's term, by descending into the everyday. They engage in the tasks of daily living in the midst of ongoing violence.

Pensioners sell jars of milk and homemade cheese or bunches of herbs and lettuce on one street while there is active shooting on the next.

Parents send their children to school across minefields. “At least there are bomb shelters in schools. There wasn't anything of the sort in our apartment,” one parent explained. Young children recount to visitors such as myself not what sound each animal in the barnyard makes, but the sound that each type of weapon makes.

While violence begins as externally motivated and politically expedient, it seeps into interpersonal relationships. A therapist described how one child in a school, upon learning that another child's parent fought in the zone, promised, “I'm going to grow up to be a sniper and kill you.”

Children are especially vulnerable when families are separated by the conflict. A man who now lives in Ukrainian-controlled Sloviansk related a conversation with his mother, who lives on the other side of the front line. She asked him to bring her the grandchildren for a summer vacation, a common practice in Ukraine, adding that the cherries on the trees in her yard were ripening. In the same conversation, however, she also described how some of the branches had been blasted off. She had apparently managed to disassociate the signs of war in her backyard from concern for her grandchildren.

Trauma therapists told me that people in the region have lost the instinct for self-preservation.

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Freud speculated that there is something about the fear of death specifically that prevents us from taking its threat seriously enough. A social worker I spoke with would probably agree. She drove vans into Avdeevka, a town near Donetsk, to temporarily evacuate a group of 20 children, but was told, “No, our children will stay with us. Maybe we’ll die, but we’ll die together.”

This could be seen as parental neglect. However, the structural violence against the people who have stayed raises a different possibility: in reclaiming their daily routines, they hold onto what little agency remains to them. It may not be a dramatic act of political defiance, but reinhabiting their previous worlds was a decision they made themselves. Here, violence was no longer the subject of fear, fetish, or even fascination. Violence is woven into the stream of consciousness as terrible and normal at the same time.

GAME OF THE OLIGARCHS

One of the recurring phrases I heard while living in Sloviansk was that “one can get used to anything.” A 36-year-old woman who had been displaced by the war and became a social worker told me:

Over these three years I came to understand that a person can get used to anything. They learned to live under gunfire, they learned to live without heat and electricity, they learned to live in basements, they learned to walk through minefields. At some point in the beginning it was frightening, but with time that edge is erased. Of course it's not safe. They don't think that it is.

But you know, when people left in 2014, what were they thinking? That they would be supported. That they would be helped. That they would not be abandoned. But in the end what happened? In the end, they understood that they had been abandoned. No one had any use for them. And they went back.

These ideas about human resilience in a culture that is notoriously stoic are part of a larger process of making sense of the conflict. From this vantage point, it is not the individual parents sending their children to school across minefields who should be viewed as unreasonable. Corruption, economic inequality, and weak governance are the primary issues behind this undeclared war. These problems of political economy played into Russia's hands.

The violence that people in eastern Ukraine have experienced is shaped by oligarchic power and state neglect. Their experience of daily life

in and around the conflict must be situated in its broader political context, in which the very same oligarchs who distribute humanitarian assistance to residents of the Donbas are sponsoring the violence. “Crippling people on one hand, and healing them on the other,” as a 45-year-old male IDP put it, is the self-perpetuating logic of this war.

Rinat Akhmetov, one of Ukraine's richest men, is a case in point. Akhmetov gained most of his wealth by taking over coal and steel assets through rigged privatizations and rent-seeking when the planned economy of the Soviet Union dissolved into a form of crony capitalism. He is widely believed to be funding separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, though he denies it.

At the same time, the Rinat Akhmetov Humanitarian Center has provided assistance to over one million people since the conflict began, according to the organization's website. That has been by far the largest humanitarian effort in Ukraine, by some accounts providing at least 80 percent of the aid in Donbas. Services provided by the center include evacuation and temporary accommodation of civilians, delivery of food packages for children and adults, assistance in obtaining medications, targeted psychological counseling, medical care and physical rehabilitation for injured children, and summer camps away from the fighting for children.

Although I heard accolades for this humanitarian operation, the delivery of aid has not been without incident. Pro-Kiev volunteer militias have periodically blocked the shipments, in violation of international law. They argue that Akhmetov's aid is not being used for humanitarian purposes. These militias are backed by another oligarch, Ihor Kolomoiski, who funds four different pro-Kiev battalions.

To be fair, this is a complicated playing field and Akhmetov has lost significant industrial properties in Donbas as the war has progressed. But on the whole, these oligarchic maneuvers resemble a game whose rules have been made up by the players themselves.

DISRUPTED RELATIONSHIPS

The interplay between sovereignty and subjectivity in a protracted war has ripple effects in friendships that are disrupted and family ties that do not always withstand the political rupture between eastern and western Ukraine. Perhaps one of the most disturbing and significant features of this conflict is that it is occurring between people

who know—or thought they knew—one another.

Some families make a decision not to discuss the conflict to preserve the integrity of their bonds. This entails tuning out the news and lingering only on safer topics like weather, prices, food, and health. Families that do discuss politics often find themselves deeply divided.

A grandmother in one family chose to financially support the Russian-backed forces in Luhansk, and later took a job in the administration of the LNR. Her daughter took a pro-Kiev stance and supported her son in his decision to enlist in an elite Ukrainian airborne division. He was soon killed by a grenade just a few miles from his grandmother's home. My respondent no longer speaks to her mother who, as the saying goes, greeted Putin with bread and salt. She thinks the grandmother indirectly caused the boy's death. Similar stories are painfully common.

In addition to such rifts, there have been reversals of normal roles, with young children calming mothers and teenagers working to earn money to buy gear for fathers volunteering at the front. A young mother recounted how her child sought to reassure both her and her friends as they passed armed soldiers, charred bodies, and human intestines hanging from a pine tree while fleeing to government-controlled Ukraine. Although she told her mother that “everything is going to be all right” as they were leaving, the girl now struggles with incapacitating mood swings.

The conflict in Ukraine has also radically transformed friendships. Only some of the changes stem from the lack of interaction imposed by geography. IDPs who maintain friendships with people in the DNR or LNR have, as a rule, also made the decision not to discuss the conflict. A woman who lived through the shelling around Donetsk told me that throughout the major battle that destroyed the city's airport, she had friends fighting on both sides of the conflict. They even sat across from each other at her kitchen table, knowing that discussing politics was forbidden in her home. It was almost as if war was their day job.

Avoiding the propaganda that exercised such a powerful polarizing effect (some would say “zombification”) was regarded as a key to preserving one's social universe. Although the conflict had been known to cause tension in churches, some of my informants who were religious spoke of their common faith as a potential bridge across the political divide.

The vast majority of the people I interviewed spoke of adverse changes in their circle of friends. This is particularly significant considering that the notion of a “friend” is more exclusive in Russian than the corresponding word in English. Friendship presupposes shared experiences over a long stretch of time and an emotional connection and commitment. Most don't expect to have more than a few true friends over the span of their lives. Nevertheless, friendships that had been built over decades cooled or were broken apart by the conflict.

These divisions even affected people who identified as apolitical. While arguments over showing respect for official flags or anthems might be avoided, seemingly innocuous and yet symbolic things like fairy tales and songs could lead to disagreements. One woman related how a friend became upset with her when she sang a lullaby in Ukrainian to her own infant.

So, I lost my friend. One comes to understand that it is not you who is different, and it is not they who have changed, but something in our heads has been turned over such that we can't be together or communicate anymore.

As the situation changed, so too did the everyday worlds of ordinary people, who now blame not each other but the system in which they live.

Along with the loss of friends came the making of new ones. Sometimes new friendships grew out of gestures of kindness and offers of aid. At other times, they started with being able to confide in someone about their experiences of war. New friendships were nested in a broader change of values. Having survived war, IDPs and soldiers alike reported placing less value on possessions, status, and material wealth. A volunteer fighter who was demobilized and moved to western Ukraine described his past life as a wealthy Moscow-based businessman before he joined a volunteer battalion. “I didn't have friends before,” he said. “I only had acquaintances. Now I know what [friendship] means.”

TRAUMA TREATMENTS

To say that war has been normalized in Ukraine is not to say that people go unharmed. Doctors have noted that some school-age children have stopped speaking, or can no longer control their bladders. Some cringe or hide behind furniture when approached by an adult. Middle-aged respondents spoke of the war finding its way into their bones when fillings simply fall out of their

mouths, and invading their bodies through strokes and heart attacks. All the classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including sleeplessness, inability to concentrate, mood swings, depression, aggression, and flashbacks, are prevalent from Ukraine's border with Russia in the east to the border with Poland in the west. One person I interviewed referred to the country as "PTSD-land."

A woman described how she made the rounds between cardiologists, neurologists, and endocrinologists, only to eventually realize (when nothing was determined to be abnormal) that her symptoms were psychosomatic. Throughout our conversation she smiled and cried simultaneously, and noted reflexively that this, too, is a sign that three years after her flight from Luhansk, she needs more time to heal.

Even as war becomes a habit, there are efforts being made to address the naturalization of violence and ameliorate the aftereffects of conflict. One of the popular ideas among activists working with Western nongovernmental organizations is that violence and conflict begin inside the individual, in his or her subjectivity. If ways of thinking and relating interpersonally were less violent, the thinking goes, war would be less addictive.

A church group's work with veterans is a good example of this kind of emotional education. The pastor, speaking of demobilized soldiers who suffer from PTSD and depression, and face a host of other challenges from employment discrimination to domestic violence, acknowledged that the psychic wounds inflicted by combat can never completely heal. He stressed, however, that one can learn to think differently. Although war is evil, he suggested that one positive lesson it teaches is that life is precious and worth preserving. The group also considers it a success if a soldier knows people are thankful for his or her service. Persuading soldiers that they are valued is a big challenge, since a part of Ukrainian society views the war as a playground for the powerful, a perspective that renders the soldiers' sacrifices meaningless.

The front lines are far from an ideal setting for this type of work. A psychologist who runs workshops for IDPs observed that "any word can be a time machine that takes a person back to the traumatic experience." The layering of PTSD with

substance abuse, domestic violence, depression, and suicide suggests that a great deal of effort lies ahead. The professionals who work on these issues appear to agree that talk therapy is not always the best method. With shots being fired and grenades exploding on a daily basis, the first step toward rehabilitation is to move a person away from the sounds of warfare.

Outside the ATO, and farther from the line of contact, people deal with trauma through a wide range of techniques that include psychotherapy, mindfulness training, psychodrama, movement and dance therapy, drumming circles, play therapy, and art therapy. It is worth noting that some of these programs are funded by Akhmetov, the oligarch who has also been accused of funding the fighting.

At the same time that there is a militarization of subjectivity within the zone, there is an emotionalization of culture outside it. But the psychological vocabulary of healing, in focusing on the individual and self-help, works in part by ac-

quitting the state of its responsibility. The zone of exception creates a geography of emotion that, like sovereignty, is territorially defined.

IDENTITY CRISIS

The protracted conflict has had major implications for Ukrainian national identity. When I arrived in the region in 2015, many Ukrainians were euphoric, thinking that the Revolution of Dignity would bring unity and a new civic identity to a country without an established, or at least consolidated, sense of national identity. In 2017, that euphoria has faded. A 52-year-old pastor told me:

I used to be a big patriot of Ukraine. Now I understand that it's a government that has sold its people. To be a patriot to one's family, to one's church, to God, that makes sense, but to Ukraine? What for?

The patriotism that remained was described in terms of caring for one's fellow Ukrainians rather than being loyal to the government of Ukraine.

Officials in government-controlled parts of Ukraine admit that beyond the line of contact, even when it comes to egregious problems like violence against children, there is simply no authority to turn to. Life in the ATO has become bare life in a zone of exception. There is a visible sex

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trade that involves young girls, and two different doctors said that some corpses have been sent to the morgue without internal organs, raising suspicions about organ trafficking. In the “people’s republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk, there are no viable channels for recourse. As the conflict drags on, those closest to the fighting sink into a daily existence with a close horizon. They live for today: tomorrow is not guaranteed.

It is difficult to predict whether Ukraine will hold together territorially. If this is a crisis of political identity, the rupture branches out and spreads through civilians’ lives. The disintegration of ev-

eryday life, in which subjectivity is reconfigured through engagement with various forms of physical and structural violence, must be recognized as the context in which Ukrainian national identity is taking shape. Thus the conflict will leave a lasting imprint on this region as a whole.

As violence becomes a habit, what was once called a line of contact may become a recognized border between Russia and Ukraine. At this point in time, however, there is no end to the conflict in sight. A deeper understanding of Ukraine’s scarred emotional geography will be necessary for any lasting peace. ■