Kyiv Under Siege

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Kyiv, Ukraine — “You can find me on LinkedIn,” said Taria Blazhevych. She is a quality assurance software engineer, married, with two children and a white rabbit called Fluffy Steve. The other day, while camping, she celebrated her twenty-seventh birthday; for presents, her kids drew her pictures. On her LinkedIn page, she has eighteen skills listed. She is obviously entrepreneurial because the reason I went to talk to her was that she was the first person to have pitched a tent in Kyiv’s Dorohozhychi metro station. “Camping,” here, means living there, in what is now an improvised underground bomb shelter. A darkened train has been drawn up at the station platform with its doors open, for people to sleep in.

“We were somewhere else for three days, but moved here because my husband is upstairs,” she told me. He is one of the armed men guarding the station. This is not her first such relocation. Back in in 2015, she fled Donetsk, which was, and is, held by separatist Russian proxy forces in eastern Ukraine. Now she is staying put in Kyiv, she said, because it is her home and she has no desire to leave—and “I believe in our country’s army,” she added. Besides, she needs to be there to help her mother, who is undergoing chemotherapy but now can’t get safely to hospital for it.

A week ago, Taria Blazhevych might have been enjoying a Friday happy-hour drink with colleagues after work if Russia had not invaded on Thursday. In only a week everything has moved so fast that I can vouch for the literal meaning of the expression “dizzying speed.” On Wednesday, February 23, Blazhevych was doing her job and her kids were going to kindergarten. The day after the invasion began, a missile, or part of one, crashed down in front of an apartment building in the city, destroying half the block. The day after that, another missile hit a high-rise building on Lobanovskyi Avenue, sending debris cascading down onto the road in front of the familiar landmarks of their lives, the Cozy Bar Coffee shop and the Pesto Café.

Along with thousands of others, Blazhevych and the children moved into the metro for safety. Her husband joined the newly formed Territorial Defense Force, a military unit mobilized in time of need that civilians can join. Now their personnel, mostly men, have fanned out across the capital. Taria’s husband was posted to guard Dorohozhychi metro, so the family moved to the station to be closer to him. Later, when we chatted on LinkedIn messenger after we’d met, it dawned on me that when she had patted her backpack to indicate her laptop there, Fluffy Steve was in there, too.

After a week of war, a new normal is setting in. Blazhevych’s kids—Artem, five, and Denys, three—have made new friends, and there is a network of grannies and other families who keep an eye on them while she ventures out to stand in line for food at the few supermarkets that are open.

Like any time-pressed mother, Taria complained that it was hard to work with the kids around. Now she has a bigger problem: as there is no Wifi down in the metro, she gets online on her laptop with a cell phone hotspot. But there are no electrical sockets underground to charge either device. She worries that she won’t get paid if she can’t work properly. Up the escalators, near the entrance to the metro, a man minds five cell phones and one charger pack, plugged into sockets that used to supply a group of ATM machines, relics of pre-war Ukraine now empty of cash.

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If you have ever visited Kyiv, you might well have passed through the Dorohozhychi station because its escalators lead up to Babyn Yar (Babi Yar in Russian), the place where the Nazis murdered some 34,000 Jews in September 1941; over the course of the German occupation, tens of thousands more, who were mostly not Jewish, were also killed there. The mass gravesite is covered with memorials, including a giant Soviet-era monument close to Kyiv’s TV tower, which I had come to see.

On March 1, the Russians fired missiles at the tower. From video footage, you can see that one hit. When I went it was clear that another one, or maybe two, had missed. The explosion was not

powerful enough to bring the tower down; if it had been, the tower would have toppled into the Babyn Yar memorial park. The moment it hit was especially frightening for the kids, though, said Blazhevych: although they were safe deep underground, the electricity went off for two hours and the station was plunged into pitch-black darkness.

The missiles did destroy several buildings below the tower and kill five passers-by, including a journalist. One of those structures was a gym. The treadmills were still burning the next morning.

On February 26, I met a young woman named Yeva in an underground parking garage across the street from the high rise that had just been hit. The building, still standing, looked as though a giant had taken a bite out of it. Yeva, who is seventeen (I am using her first name only, at her request), and fellow residents were using the garage as their own makeshift bomb shelter. Children had drawn hopscotch squares on the cement floor with chalk, and small dogs snuggled with their owners.

It was amazing, I remarked to Yeva, that no one appeared to have been killed when the missile hit the high rise, to which she responded by saying that a lot of people had already fled the city. In her building, she said, there were sixteen floors, and on the first day of the invasion all the neighbors had pledged to stand together and help one another. But now many people had quietly slipped away, and she thought there might be only fifteen or sixteen of them left. By March 3, an extraordinary one million Ukrainians were reported to have fled the country; many more have likely left Kyiv and the other cities now under attack for the countryside.

In the center of town, I visited a local base for a Territorial Defense Force unit. Men of all sizes, shapes, professions, and degrees of physical fitness lined up outside while chanting slogans like “Putin is a dick!” They were waiting for a bus to take them to a checkpoint and roadblock installed at a major intersection in Obolon, a northern district of the city.

As the group waited to depart, I met Maryna Dymyshts, a thirty-four-year-old film director. She told me about a documentary she’d made, *Ice of Chernobyl*, following a group of illegal trespassers—“stalkers” as they are known, after Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 Soviet science fiction film—into the forbidden zone around the nuclear plant where a reactor exploded in 1986, a disaster that hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union five years later.

But all that—her normal life as a film editor and director—was now in the past. When the invasion began, Dymyshts said, “we took pets and grannies” to safety in a village in the countryside. In her case, that meant three dogs, seven cats, three children, and her boyfriend’s hundred-year-old great-great-grandmother, who is a World War II veteran, having served as an artillery captain in the Red Army. She then came to the headquarters with her boyfriend, his father, some friends, and a gallon of gasoline, “because we want to help.” It was obvious what the gasoline was for.

In the building’s basement, volunteers not being dispatched to Obolon were busy making Molotov cocktails. There’s a careful recipe: one group was crumbling polystyrene packaging to be added to the fuel mix; another group was pouring gasoline into glass bottles and adding chlorine tablets, dish liquid, and used car oil; at the end of the assembly line, others were inserting the rags used to ignite them, and sealing the bottles with corks. The end result is an incendiary device that adheres to its targets with a viscous, sticky flammable compound. I talked to a thirty-eight-year-old IT worker, George (again, I am using only his first name, at his request), who said he’d come after finding out how to volunteer online.

The courage of the many Ukrainians who have remained to face the occupation is without question, and the defenders have had some notable early successes. Last weekend, on February 27, lightly armed Russian soldiers drove in small convoys into Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second city, in the country’s northeast. The Russians soon found themselves trapped and defeated. But can that courage hold against escalated attacks?

Just ten days earlier, I had sat in a café in central Kharkiv and discussed with a Ukrainian security analyst, Maria Avdeeva, what the Russians might do if they did invade. She, like many others, thought, *Yes, the Russians could cross the border—but then what?* After the Russians’ initially nonchalant strategy in Kharkiv failed, I called her from Kyiv and asked what she thought might come next. She was frightened, she said, that Putin might order something far more violent, even hitting civilian areas in order to create panic.

She was right. On February 28, rockets bombarded residential areas in Kharkiv and the city center. Then the Russians began to use the same tactics in Kyiv, Chernihiv, Borodyanka, Mariupol and elsewhere.

While traveling in Ukraine for several weeks to report my earlier article for the *Review*, I noted the widespread skepticism that Russia would actually attack Ukraine and its people. Now that Russia has done the unthinkable, and everything has moved so fast, it seems to me that Ukrainians have collectively gone through a version of the five stages of grief: denial, fear, defiance, anger, and now fear again. Still, that question remains: the “then what” becomes “now what?” As I write this, the siren above Kyiv begins to sound again and the safety alert app on my phone sends me a red notification.

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