Holding on in Irpin

For the moment, the Ukrainians are winning by simply not losing.

Tim Judah, *New York Review of Books*

April 7, 2022 issue

"Hurry up! Get a move on…Sniper! Sniper!" Soldiers shouted at people, who began running under the elevated road leading to the bridge over the Irpin River. They had spent days in basements and shelters in Irpin—less than two weeks ago a green and pleasant suburb on the northwestern edge of the capital—while Russian troops attempting to reach Kyiv were attacking their houses and apartment blocks, and they were terrified. Above them were dozens of abandoned cars where the roadway ended; the bridge, on the road between Irpin and Kyiv, had been blown up by Ukrainian forces to slow the Russian advance. A man sprawled by a yellow bike, presumably shot dead by the sniper.

Watching the exodus from Irpin gave me flashbacks to the first days of the war in eastern Bosnia in 1992, when tens of thousands were in flight. And now, thirty years later in a modern European state, thousands are in flight again from a small city, lugging small suitcases, carrying pets and children, their relatives in wheelchairs or struggling breathlessly on crutches. By March 9 more than two million were reported to have fled Ukraine.

Under the section of the bridge that remained standing, people caught their breath. Some soldiers on their way back to Irpin had made a pile of their knapsacks, sleeping bags, and rocket-propelled grenades. They also had shopping bags of food, and one of them had some Nivea men's shower gel, which in a way was symbolic of the victory they believe in. You would have to be an optimist to expect a shower in Irpin, where the electricity and water have been cut off.

The refugees gingerly crossed the fast-flowing river over planks and boards laid on the rubble of the destroyed bridge. Rescue workers helped the elderly and the disabled. Two men fiddling with some electronic equipment said they were trying to fix the connection for Irpin's street CCTV cameras, presumably so that the army could see where the Russians were and attack them.

On the other side of the river, two soldiers checked men's IDs to make sure that Russian saboteurs in civilian clothes were not trying to infiltrate behind Ukrainian lines. Then people clambered up a muddy path to the road. From there it was a couple of hundred meters to the Fora supermarket parking lot. Again rescue workers shouted, "Hurry! Hurry!" When they thought they heard a Russian drone, everyone sprinted for cover. At the parking lot, ambulances, vans, and cars were arriving every few minutes to drive the refugees a few miles down the road toward Kyiv, where buses were lined up to take them into the city or to the train station.

In a side street soldiers were coming and going. Some were making their way back from Irpin while others were heading there. They huddled over a cell phone as a man in civilian clothes zoomed in on a map of the city and showed them where he had seen the Russians with his drone. A soldier, in no mood for a chat with me, strode purposefully toward the makeshift plank bridge carrying an antitank missile. When the history of this war is written, the Javelin antitank missiles, the Next Generation Light Anti-Tank Weapons, and the Stinger antiaircraft missiles will feature prominently. It was Stingers that helped tip the balance of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

At moments it was quiet. Then there were periods of intense artillery or missile barrages, and smoke rose from Irpin. "There was nothing to be done in the shelter, just waiting for the bombs to get closer," said Dmytro Krauchenkov, a twenty-year-old philosophy student. "It was not a good idea!" A few hours later he WhatsApped me to say he was safe with friends in Kyiv and had volunteered for the war effort. He would be working to help the newly formed Territorial Defense Forces, which civilians have been flocking to join by the tens of thousands, while thousands more are volunteering in makeshift canteens, cooking for soldiers or pitching in any way they can.

People came out of Irpin in waves. For a few minutes there was no one and then there were dozens. Mariana Bezuhla, a member of President Volodymyr Zelensky's governing party who is a deputy in Ukraine's parliament and a deputy chair of the Committee on National Security, was helping

coordinate the evacuation. She said that neighbors were coming together because “they feel safer in a group.” The refugees looked calm enough, but as soon as they were out of the bombarded town and in the relative safety of the parking lot, their looks of grim determination gave way to tears, relief, anger, and ultimately shock.

Two days earlier at the same spot I had met Olena Kadyuk, a fifty-eight-year-old gastroenterologist who was struggling with two suitcases. She had left Irpin, she said, out of terror of the explosions she had heard overnight and also because her friend Natalya Konopelko, a geography teacher, and her husband had been killed in the nearby town of Vorzel. Her phone was dead, and she asked me if she could use mine to call her husband, who was in Kyiv, to tell him she had gotten out.

The defense of Irpin, which is ongoing as I write, is crucial for the fate of Kyiv. Beyond Irpin to the northwest lie Vorzel, Bucha, Hostomel, and, farther away, Borodyanka. Videos of these towns show they have been devastated. In one, forces loyal to Ramzan Kadyrov, Russian president Vladimir Putin’s Chechen strongman, drive around Borodyanka, Chechen pop music playing in their armored vehicle, showing off their brutal handiwork. Beyond this ring of destruction is a column of Russian vehicles strung out over some forty miles whose aim is, or was, either to encircle Kyiv or to occupy it.

A few hours after I left the Irpin bridge I ran into thirty-four-year-old Konstantin and his wife on the platform of Kyiv’s central train station. Konstantin told me that he had left Irpin two hours earlier and that he had been an artillery spotter there. The fact that he was leaving seemed ominous to me. Did it mean that, for all their bravado, Ukrainian forces were about to lose Irpin and that soon the Russians would break through their defenses and open the road to Kyiv? Not at all, said Konstantin. He had been on the roof of a high-rise on the edge of town. He whipped out his phone and zoomed in on satellite mode to show me the building. From there he had had a view for five miles, but a column of tanks had entered the city and turned down the street in front of the building. Then the Russians started jamming communications, so Konstantin and his group decided it was best to escape. He would be going back in one or two days, though, after he had slept and showered and collected more men.

As of the afternoon of March 7, said Konstantin, Ukrainian forces still held 70 percent of Irpin. They had not unleashed their full military power in counterattacking because there were still a lot of civilians there. The bulk of Ukrainian forces had not lost communications, he told me. Then I remembered that next to the pile of soldiers’ belongings under the Irpin bridge were some empty walkie-talkie boxes.

I asked Konstantin how he had got out from behind Russian lines, and he laughed and tugged at his black jacket. “As a civilian!” They had slipped out through the streets of Irpin “like rats.” He had escaped from the Russians once before, he told me, and was not accepting any offer of safe passage that might come. “I was a platoon commander at Ilovaisk,” he said.

In the history of modern Ukraine, the shattering defeat at Ilovaisk in August 2014 was a pivotal moment. After initially losing territory to a Russian-created separatist militia, Ukrainian forces had begun retaking it, so Russian forces moved across the border to shore up their proxies. Soon they had pushed the poorly armed and organized Ukrainian troops back and surrounded some in the little town of Ilovaisk. Russian president Vladimir Putin ordered that a corridor be created for them to retreat, but on their way out they were ambushed. Afterward I saw the resulting carnage and wrote: “I counted the remains of sixty-eight military vehicles, tanks, armored personnel carriers, pick-ups, buses, and trucks in which a large but as yet unknown number of Ukrainian soldiers died.”

To this day it is unclear how many perished, but the figure is in the hundreds. In the village of Novokaterinivka, where part of the convoy met its end, I saw something that will be seared into my memory forever: a dead Ukrainian solider who had been blasted out of his armored vehicle was hanging over the electric lines above the road.

A couple of days later the Ukrainians, in full retreat, were forced to sign a deal known as Minsk II, which could have led to a peace settlement, but on Putin’s terms. Russia never abided by the deal, and the Ukrainians resisted it, because although it would have brought the breakaway regions in the Donbas back under nominal Ukrainian rule, in fact they would have been controlled by Moscow. This in turn would have given the Kremlin an indirect means of controlling Ukraine’s government and, in

particular, of vetoing any of its moves toward joining NATO and integrating its economy with that of the EU. One of the reasons Putin has gone to war now is because Minsk II failed.

The ghost of Ilovaisk haunts Ukraine. In the last few days I have seen many videos on social media of columns of destroyed Russian armor, and every one of them resembles what I saw of the Ilovaisk convoy. It makes me think that Ukraine is wreaking a bloody revenge.

Konstantin said that the Russian soldiers he had seen in Irpin were young conscripts from the town of Ulyanovsk. They were frightened, some were drunk, and they were breaking into shops to steal alcohol and food. I heard this from others too, and it is consistent with stories from all over Russian-occupied Ukraine. The Russians appear to have anticipated a lightning victory and now it has slipped from their grasp, so they are stepping up the violence against civilian areas, while at the same time their troops are running out of food and fuel. It is clear that, for the moment at least, Russian military supply chains are breaking down.

“Whatever their original intentions, it is clear they have failed,” says Mykola Kapitonenko, a regional security specialist. “Now it seems they are not sure what to do next.” After fourteen days they had captured only a few small towns and no major urban areas. Their devastating attacks on the center of Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second city, might have been revenge, not just for being pushed out of the city center when they tried to take it, but because they expected that the Russian-speaking population there would welcome them. Maria Avdeeva, an analyst there who has been taking videos of the ruins close to her home, says she would not be surprised if Putin believed his men would be welcomed as liberators, because that is what he had been told, and money that could have been allocated for influencing opinion there had been stolen. In any case, she said, everyone had seen how miserable life was in the Russian-controlled breakaway regions, so no amount of money could persuade people that welcoming the Russians was a good idea.

Since the invasion began on February 24, the citizens of Kyiv have been bracing for attack, but except for a very few missiles the center of the capital has remained unscathed. Every day there are rumors of a major assault, but as of the morning of March 9 it had not come. The defense lines on every main road into Kyiv are being built and strengthened. Zelensky, the Jewish comedian turned unlikely president, has stunned his people and especially his skeptics by growing overnight into an inspirational wartime leader. Putin, by contrast, comes across as isolated and verging on insane, raging that Zelensky is a drug-addled Nazi. For now, since there are no independent media left in Russia, many Russians believe him, but it can only be a matter of time before hundreds, or if you trust the Ukrainians and now the CIA estimates, thousands of coffins of young soldiers reveal to Russians that something very different is happening in Ukraine than what they are being told.

In the short term, simply not losing is winning for Ukraine, and that means Ukrainian morale is soaring. We see videos from small occupied towns of residents demonstrating in front of and defying Russian troops. It seems extraordinary that the planners of this war perhaps believed that, like in 2014 in Crimea and the Donbas, entire parts of local governments would start to serve them. It is unimaginable that Putin will walk away from the catastrophe he has caused without something he can claim as a victory. Thus far all he has done is strengthen Ukrainian resolve to resist, and even formerly pro-Russian parties from whose ranks he might have expected to draw collaborators for a puppet government have rallied to the Ukrainian cause. Some sort of deal to end the fighting looks unlikely for now and so, says Kapitonenko, “most probably we could be facing a long conflict.”

The very first article I wrote about Ukraine, ten years ago, was from Irpin. I had gone there while reporting on the 2012 general election. In the article I quoted an elderly woman complaining about her pension, which seems positively quaint now. But I also quoted Leonid Kozhara, a former ambassador and foreign affairs specialist for the then pro-Russia Party of the Regions. After the election he became foreign minister, only to be ousted during the 2014 Maidan Revolution. In 2012 though, at an elegant restaurant in Kyiv, fingering the buttons on his jacket sleeve, he told me, “Kazakhstan and Belarus are like buttons on a sleeve,” but “for Russia, Ukraine *is the sleeve* and you can’t walk around without your sleeve.” That is why, he explained, his country had such geopolitical importance.

It was a wonderful metaphor, but who in their wildest imagination could have foreseen that Russia’s actions a decade later would leave the whole arm bleeding and as good as amputated?

Then again, who could have foreseen that in 2020 the urbane Kozhara would be arrested and tried for murdering one of his oldest friends during a quarrel after a six-hour drinking binge in his kitchen? I am sure there is another metaphor for Russian-Ukrainian relations somewhere in that story, even if it is not clear exactly what it is. —*March 9, 2022*

Tim Judah is the author of *In Wartime: Stories from Ukraine*. He has reported for *The New York Review* from Ukraine, the Balkans, Niger, Armenia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. (May 2022)

Originally published at
https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/04/07/holding-on-in-irpin-ukraine-judah/