The Russian Terror

As Russian forces have retreated from some parts of Ukraine, more and more evidence has emerged of summary executions, looting, and destruction.

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“Get out! You don’t have permission to be here! Didn’t you see the sign on the gate?” shouted the official. But it was open briefly when I walked by on the evening of March 28, and sixty seconds were enough to sear the image on anyone’s mind for a lifetime: some one hundred dead bodies lined up and, in one section, piled up to three deep in the courtyard of Kharkiv’s central morgue. Frozen by the cold, some were in body bags; many were not. Some had shoes; some were in socks. Bare legs protruded from under sheets. Some were old. Most appeared to be civilians.

The Russian-speaking city of Kharkiv, in Ukraine’s northeast, is about twenty minutes from the Russian border, and the distant sound and vibration of artillery and rockets, incoming and outgoing, rolled in spasms throughout the day and night from the battered district of North Saltivka, about twenty minutes from the city center. But no part of Kharkiv has been spared by the war. Entire sides of apartment buildings hit by rockets have been sheared away. Schools, universities, hospitals, and government buildings have all been struck.

Five weeks after the beginning of the war, the Russians retreated from Kyiv, Chernihiv, and the north of Ukraine. Now, with every passing day, we learn more about the Russian terror—the murders, summary executions, and looting in the territories they occupied.

But this is just the end of the beginning. Having failed to capture Kyiv or any other big city apart from the Black Sea ports of Kherson and, as of the end of April, all but a last redoubt in Mariupol, much of which they had to nearly raze to seize, Russian president Vladimir Putin and his generals have now regrouped their forces and launched a new offensive that aims to take control of as much territory as possible in the Donbas, in the east of Ukraine, and to consolidate their hold on the land they have conquered connecting Russia to Crimea along the Black Sea. Even if the Russians fail to take Kharkiv, by shelling and threatening it, they tie down Ukrainian forces who would otherwise be fighting them in the Donbas.

In the meantime the horror continues to mount. The day after I was thrown out of that courtyard in Kharkiv, Yuri Kravchenko, the official in charge of the region’s morgues, agreed to talk to me. With the exception of very rare events like plane crashes, he told me, the courtyard had only been used twice before to store bodies: during World War II and in 1933 during the Holodomor, Stalin’s man-made famine that killed millions in Ukraine. We stood on the pavement outside while families and a line of undertakers’ vans waited in the street to collect the dead. Finally he let me back into the courtyard, where three local officials with clipboards stood over the unbagged bodies to determine causes of death.

Kravchenko said that the reason the bodies were in the courtyard was that, with Kharkiv under attack, municipal officials could not produce death certificates fast enough. Even if they had enough space for all the corpses, which they did not, storing them in the regular way would slow down the process of issuing the certificates even more. You could only take them up from the freezer room one at a time in a special elevator, he said: “Once a determination of death has been made, then they put the body in a bag and, unless they are claimed, we bury them in ten days.” The number of unclaimed bodies has soared because so many families have left.

On February 27 Russian reconnaissance troops had penetrated Kharkiv’s center, but they were forced back within hours. Fierce fighting over the next few days pushed the Russians out beyond the suburbs, but ever since they have not ceased to bomb Kharkiv and attack it with missiles. A few hours after I arrived in the city on March 26, a missile strike less than a ten-minute drive from the city

center gouged a crater several yards deep. The blast gutted a historic 1886 fire watchtower and the school opposite.

After three in the afternoon the streets of Kharkiv were deserted, but even before that there were few people out. Except for a small number of supermarkets and drugstores, nothing was open. The economy of the city, which, like that of much of the rest of Ukraine, had recently been growing after decades of post-Soviet collapse, has shut down. Kharkiv's factories, offices, and universities, as well as its institutes of higher education and research institutions—all have been closed and many have been shelled or hit by missiles.

In a residential area in the Pavlovo Pole district, the front of a five-story building had peeled off and fallen into the street. From one apartment a bed teetered out of a bedroom, and in all of them were the remains of comfortable lives that ended with the explosion. Clothes were still folded neatly in cupboards, coats hung on pegs by front doors, and in one room, the books, pencil case, fluffy toy, unopened lollipop, and dancing competition trophy of a schoolgirl remained on her desk. In another apartment a saucepan of soup, a bowl, an unfinished cup of tea, and some chocolates were still on the table. In all of the surrounding buildings, windows were shattered and no one appeared to remain.

In the Shevchenkivs'kyi district a cat popped into a hole in the side of a nine-story building hit on March 14 by a rocket. Someone had folded a blanket for it to sit on. Igor and Nina, friends both aged sixty, sat on a bench sharing a Carlsberg lager and said that some people remained in the basements of the surrounding buildings, but the rest had left because their windows had been shattered and the electricity and heat had gone off. "The only people who have stayed have no money and nowhere to go," said Nina. Igor said he remained because despite the freezing weather, his apartment was warm enough if he left his gas stove on.

Although buildings throughout Kharkiv have been burned out, reduced to rubble, or pierced by missiles, fighting was now concentrated in the northeast of the city. On the way there I saw hundreds of people lining up for humanitarian aid in front of a blown-out bank in the Saltivka district. But a few minutes' drive beyond them, the streets were deserted. Black smoke billowed in the distance.

Emerging from behind an apartment building, two soldiers carrying empty water containers told me that Russian troops were less than a mile away. "They are digging defensive positions now," said one of them. While territory had been retaken to the southeast of the city, in North Saltivka the lines had not moved since the Russians were pushed back at the beginning of the war.

Sitting at a shattered bus stop, friends and neighbors Ludmila, sixty-five, and Sasha, sixty-six, gladly accepted the offer of a lift and told me that this was the first time they had come back to the area since the war began. They had tried to get to their apartments in North Saltivka to retrieve some possessions. When they had fled at the beginning of the war to neighboring Saltivka, said Ludmila, "we took nothing but the clothes we were wearing." Soldiers told them it was too dangerous to get back to their building. Ludmila suddenly burst into tears. "Please let us off here," she said, by the people lining up for loaves of bread and frozen chicken legs. "We need to get some aid."

For everyone who remained in Kharkiv, life was getting harder by the day. Those who stayed were running out of money. Either they were being laid off or their companies could no longer pay them. Even those with some savings were lining up because, as one man said, "if they are giving help, it is better to take it because who knows what will happen tomorrow."

Many people in line were collecting food for elderly and infirm family members or neighbors who found it hard to go out. Because the electricity often went off when there was a rocket strike, elevators had been turned off so that people did not get trapped in them. But that meant many then got trapped in their apartments, unable to manage ten or fifteen flights of stairs. When I left Kharkiv I was asked to take an elderly lady with me to her daughter in Kyiv. At first she had not wanted to leave, even though she could not manage the stairs by herself, but gradually all of her neighbors, who had helped her survive, had left, and so she had to do as her daughter insisted.

There are only very partial figures for the number of dead and injured in Kharkiv, but Nataliya Zubar, a veteran local political and human rights activist now collecting evidence of possible war crimes committed by the Russians in her city, believes that "close to a thousand civilians" have died.[1]

It is also unknown how many people remain in Kharkiv, which was home to 1.5 million before the war. Ihor Terekhov, the mayor, said that 70 percent remain and that he “bowed with respect toward those who have stayed.” Zubar believes the number to be no more than 700,000, while Maria Avdeeva, a think-tanker turned wartime videographer filming the fate of her city, estimates that as few as 300,000 remain.

It was not all death and destruction, though. Underground, life was thriving. In a metro station that I visited, Superman, Batman, and a giant pink rabbit in a blue dress were entertaining children, many of whom have been living there since the beginning of the war. People were sleeping in the metro because either they were frightened their home would be hit, it had already been hit, or they had fled fighting in outlying districts. Between 600 and 1,150 slept in the station each night.

The war had given new meaning to the lives of some of them. Olha, a twenty-nine-year-old English teacher before the war, was now a volunteer at the station. “I am only sleeping two or three hours a night,” she said as she gave a guided tour of its back offices. They had been converted into rooms to store food and medicine and a makeshift kitchen where other volunteers made sandwiches and soup for hundreds.

The lack of privacy was a big problem, said Olha. If you slept inside a train car, it was warmer than the platform, but it might smell bad. If you slept on the seats you were also warmer, but the seats were narrow. The granite platforms were cold to sleep on, but some people had brought inflatable mattresses. Extension cords meant people could plug in their phones, but they could not plug in their kettles because they blew the fuses.

When he was not delivering aid, forty-seven-year-old Vasil Ryabko played music. While I was in Kharkiv, his rock band Papa Karlo played a concert in the basement of a nineteenth-century factory where Oleksandr Honcharov, aged forty-two, had recently been building a music studio. The livestreamed concert was to raise money for Ukraine’s volunteer Territorial Defense Force.

Honcharov said his nearby home had been damaged early in the war, so he had moved into the basement, and now up to fifteen people a night also slept there. The atmosphere was more hipster club than stuffy shelter. Yuliia Iliukka, a forty-year-old poet from North Saltivka, came to read her new poems “about war and love.” She said that she had sent her nine-year-old son to live with his grandparents in a village outside Kharkiv and that this war was being fought so “our children can live in their own land, in Ukraine, not in Russia.”

In this historically Russophile city, people were baffled and angered by the invasion. Avdeeva told me that since the Russians had failed early in the war to seize Kharkiv, their missile and rocket attacks were now a deliberate policy aimed at “terrorizing civilians and making any kind of normal life in Ukraine’s second city impossible.”

What was happening in Kharkiv has been happening elsewhere as well. The Russians bombarded Chernihiv, one hundred miles northeast of Kyiv, for almost a month before withdrawing at the beginning of April when their attempt to seize it failed. There conditions had been particularly bad, since, unlike in Kharkiv, water, gas, and communications had gone off in large parts of the city for much of the time that the Russians had been on the outskirts, and in some areas they have still not been restored.

In the city’s Yuri Gagarin sports stadium, there were some of the deepest craters I have seen in the war so far. Just outside were the ruins of a small but elegant nineteenth-century gothic-revival library, where books still clung to the surviving shelves. You can see the ghost of the library, like many of the other destroyed and damaged buildings here, by “driving” past on Google Street View.

You can’t “drive” through the outlying village of Novoselivka, but from the main road you can get an idea of what it was like. I wanted that idea because it has been completely flattened. There Oleksandr Chuhay, aged fifty-three, and his family were poking about in the wreckage of their house to see what they could salvage. The village was “unlucky,” he said, because it had been destroyed once before, in 1943, when the Germans, in a revenge attack, had gathered people together, executed them, and then burned it down. But he added, surprisingly cheerfully, “If they announce tomorrow that the war is finished, we will start rebuilding.” There were no military positions here, he

said, but Ukrainian tanks would pass by on the main road on the way to the front. The road did not look like it had been hit.

Volodymyr Boyko, a civil servant and historian, showed me around the town center. He pointed at buildings such as the Hotel Ukraine, half of which was in ruins after a direct hit, and said, “Germans built, Germans built, Germans built…” He told me that by the end of World War II, 75 percent of Chernihiv had been destroyed and so, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, German POWs had been deployed as laborers to rebuild it. Now, he added, “Germans built, Russians destroyed!” and joked about the possibility of having Ukraine’s Russian POWs rebuild his city. We visited a pizza restaurant, the Barashaka restaurant, and some warehouses. In all of them, teams of volunteers were sorting truckloads of humanitarian aid, which was now flowing into the city. Parcels were being bagged up and drivers were setting off to find the elderly and others who depended on these deliveries.

It is not well understood abroad just how sophisticated and well organized Ukraine’s volunteer networks are. Many of them grew out of the Maidan Revolution of 2014, and even if many had been dormant since then, they have sprung back to life now via social media, giving people the opportunity to help. And that feeling of pulling together and wanting to be involved in however small a way is widespread. To get to Chernihiv I hitched a ride with some Ukrainian journalists. As we returned to Kyiv I took out some cash to pay for my share of the gas. Then, while we sat at a checkpoint waiting to enter the city, the colleague who was driving whipped out his phone and the money was promptly donated to the Ukrainian army.

Borodyanka, about thirty miles northwest of Kyiv, is another town that was heavily bombed by the Russians. Unlike Chernihiv, however, they actually captured it. Much of the horror here has yet to be revealed. Entire apartment buildings were brought down at the beginning of the conflict by Russian aerial bombardment. When I visited, a team from the emergency services was standing on top of the rubble of one and clearing the debris. When it was bombed, people had been in the basement and were either crushed as it collapsed on top of them or entombed alive.

When a town has been liberated, teams have gone in to look for unexploded shells and missiles, which remain scattered everywhere, along with booby traps. I was skeptical that the Russians would leave booby traps behind. What was the point? I was quickly disabused of my doubts. Walking down a street in Borodyanka, I saw a soldier come out of a house holding a tin, similar to the type that might hold a scented candle. He told me that it was a booby trap and beckoned me inside the house, where Larisa, aged thirty-two, was cleaning up the mess left by the troops who had lived there. The soldier showed me the fuse that had been sticking out of the tin and then pointed out that it had been left inside the washing machine. Larisa had been alerted to the fact that something might be amiss because Russian soldiers also stuck a piece of blue tape on the door “to warn other guys,” said someone from the explosives unit. Everyone I spoke to in Borodyanka told me that Russian troops, and then locals, had looted houses. Larisa said that, oddly, from her house there was only one thing missing: her iron.

Just outside Kyiv, in the part of Irpin that the Russians managed to occupy,

[2] I met Mykhailo Kyshchynskyi, aged forty-three, a businessman who was cleaning his house, which was undamaged except for some broken windows and some graffiti left by Russian soldiers. Clothes and belongings were scattered all over the floors, and empty jewelry boxes littered a dressing table. “They took all the money, jewelry, and electronics,” he said. The remains of a meal were on his veranda and in his garden were Russian military ration packs and empty bottles. “They drank all the alcohol they could find,” said Kyshchynskyi. “I talked with my neighbors and we think there must be a thousand empty bottles here.” Then he added, “I hate them.”

Last July Putin wrote an essay, which was published on the Kremlin website, in which he discussed the idea of Russians and Ukrainians being one people, from which follows the idea that Ukraine has no right to exist as a state separate from Russia. The legacy of this war is that millions of Ukrainians now hate Russia and Russians with a passion that, for many, was not so strong even after the annexation of Crimea and the creation of the two pseudo-states in Luhansk and Donetsk by

Russia in 2014. In the liberated towns and villages around Kyiv and Chernihiv and elsewhere, people are cleaning up now, if their homes have not been destroyed, but what is fanning the hatred even more than the experience of invasion and occupation are the murders, summary executions, and reports of rape.

It was not as though the Russians tried to hide what they had done. When they left the town of Bucha, between Hostomel and Irpin, they left bodies of people who had been shot lying in the streets. Some had their hands tied. By a street of charred Russian tanks and armored personnel carriers, a man indicated that I should come with him. We went through holes in garden fences to a house a few doors down. There two men in civilian clothes lay dead and decomposing in a back garden. There was no damage from shelling around them and they both appeared to have been shot in the head.

When they were in Bucha, some Russian soldiers lived in the Lightening children's holiday camp. Its buildings are decorated with Soviet-era mosaics, one of which depicts happy children in national costumes representing the friendship of the different Soviet peoples. You can see where the Russians had dug in at least six tanks here. Behind one building the soldiers had built a makeshift area to wash with a bucket and nailed up a mirror and soap dispenser. They had built a place to cook with bricks and left half a loaf of bread on the table along with their plates and bowls, a frying pan, and a kitchen sponge. They had been throwing their trash in a bag that had overflowed, revealing that they had been drinking Coca-Cola and a lot of milk. By contrast, they made no attempt to clean up the basement of the building next door, where they had left the sprawled bodies of five men and a blood-soaked floor testifying to the apparent fact of their executions. Three of them were slumped on top of one another.

A police team came to take the bodies out of the basement, and as they were put in body bags, an official cut off the plastic ties that had bound the hands of four of them. At least one had had his head bashed in. Putin has claimed that scenes like the ones I and others had witnessed were "fake," and his ally Aleksandr Lukashenko, the president of Belarus, said they were a "psychological operation carried out by the English."

In Borodyanka and Hostomel I met men who told me they had been detained, interrogated, and beaten by Russian troops. In Hostomel Volodymyr Chuprina, aged sixty-two, still had scabs on his wrists where they had been tied. He said he had come out of his house during the Russian occupation and been grabbed by soldiers who hooded him and kept him for several days. Made to lie face down on the floor, he was not sure where he was, but "maybe" it was "in a hotel" in Bucha, because he was released there. Perhaps he was kept in the children's camp. He said that the Russians accused him of telling the Ukrainian military where their positions were, then demanded the names of others who had done so, but he said he did not know. They put a pistol to his head and asked him how he could help them.

When I met Chuprina, he had just come back from the hospital, where he had been diagnosed with a broken rib. "They are crazy people," he said of the Russian troops. "We should kill them all."

The soldiers who interrogated and beat him were not wrong to be paranoid about locals telling the Ukrainian security services where their positions were. I was in Hostomel with Dmytro Lysovyy, aged thirty-eight, who had been staying with his parents when the Russians arrived and who had indeed told the security services where a Russian convoy was by using a chatbot they had set up. The convoy was then attacked by the Ukrainians.

In the two weeks he was in occupied Hostomel, before he and his family could get out, Russian soldiers had come four times demanding phones and any other means of communications and smashing any they found. When he left, on a day an evacuation convoy was allowed, he hid his phone underneath the cat, which was in its carrier, hoping, correctly, that Russians at the checkpoints would not risk being scratched by reaching underneath the champion British shorthair.

On the gates of the Lysovyy house the family had written: "Peaceful People. Children. Old People." Similar messages had been written on gates across town in a bid to deter aggressive Russian raids. They had also written a "V" on the gate which, along with "Z," is one of the two letters

painted on all invading Russian armor. “They told us to write that,” said Lysovyy, “to show we had been checked.” After the family left, Russian troops slept in their house and then ransacked it.

The day I was there, many people had come back to Hostomel to check on their houses, and there were tearful reunions on the street as friends and neighbors embraced one another, overjoyed at finding they were still alive. Over the next few weeks we will find out how many did not survive. In Borodyanka I met Volodymyr, aged forty-one, who was sheltering from the rain in a bus stop. He lived in Myrcha, a nearby village. After the Russians occupied the area he was rounded up in a group of eleven men, but he knew of only seven who had come home.

He had been beaten. He said he thought the Russians were looking for soldiers or former soldiers or men who had been members of the Territorial Defense Force. When the war began, he had tried to join, but they had more men than they could take on, and so, he said, “I guess that saved my life.” He said that he knew of up to twenty men from his village who were still missing. By April 11 the Ukrainian authorities were reporting the deaths of hundreds who appeared to have been executed, but there were no definitive figures.

On the day in January I left Vienna for Ukraine, I attended a discussion about the future of Europe. One of the participants was Grigorij Mesežnikov, a preeminent Slovak analyst who was born and brought up in Russia. He said we needed to discard any considerations of logic to understand what was about to happen in Ukraine. What we had to understand was that Putin was driven by a deep-seated irrational hatred of the country, “and he will try to destroy it.” At the time Mesežnikov’s insistence that Putin wanted nothing short of physical destruction made him sound as though he, not Putin, was verging on the irrational. But he was right.

According to the World Bank, even if the war stopped today, Ukraine’s economy would contract by 45.1 percent in 2022, and the Kyiv School of Economics put the country’s total economic losses at up to $600 billion so far. While the EU has allowed four million Ukrainian refugees to stay, to work, to send their children to school, and to bring their pets, with every day that passes more and more of them will put down roots and never return. Destroying a country means more than just demolishing buildings and murdering people.

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[1] For more on prosecuting war crimes in Ukraine, see Fintan O’Toole’s Our Hypocrisy on War Crimes in this issue.

[2] See my Holding On in Irpin, *The New York Review*, April 7, 2022.