

Olena Skachenko

Unconquered Ukraine

The librarian's thoughts out loud

More than three months have passed since the Russian-Ukrainian war started. It is an unprovoked, full-scale, and murderous one. Ukraine has been defending for more than 100 days. It burns in the fire, suffers from air and missile strikes, and mourns and buries the killed heroes. But it keeps fighting for its independence, statehood, and identity. It is fighting for Slovyansk, the occupied Mariupol and Kherson, and Odesa at the front. It fights for the life-restoring in Bucha, Borodyanka, Sumy, and Chernihiv. It fights to avoid a food crisis by demining fields and sowing them with wheat. However, the struggle takes many lives.

Anyone who knows Ukrainian history well will answer why there are few palaces in Ukraine, but many fortresses, castles, and defensive ramparts. Ukraine has always wanted to be free and fought for it for centuries. We wanted to live happily and prosperously, that is why we built temples, raised children, and grew wheat. Ukrainians never invaded or were occupiers. However, we often had to defend all we own: state, cities, freedom, faith, and language.

Those familiar with Ukrainian folk choral art know how many historical, Cossack, riflemen songs we have, often sad and mournful. It is because a song is a unique element of our lives. The lyrics express our gratitude, respect, and honor to the fallen soldiers-defenders. It is how we remember their incredible victories. Thus we pass the history of unconquered Ukraine on from generation to generation.

For 28 years, I have been working in the Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts Library. It is the only job I have. My family lives in the suburbs, 35 km northeast of Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine.

On February 24, we woke up to the sounds of explosions in our city's air defense system. Thus, my family and I faced the war. In two months, more than 5 million Ukrainians went abroad. More than 7 million have become internally displaced persons. It turned out that there is no safe zone in Ukraine. Ukrainian children have been living in bomb shelters for a long time. They do not need to read books on light masking and air alarms, they have learned these rules from life experience. Russian soldiers drop bombs on kindergartens, schools, and universities; destroy factories and grocery stores; and export grain. Ukrainian books are burned in the occupied territories, pro-Ukrainian activists and teachers are tortured and killed, and no sowing work is allowed.

It also turned out that Ukrainians are ready to defend the state, Ukrainian values, and culture. Thus, information, art, cultural, cyber and IT fronts, and music defense were launched further to the military front.

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In the first hours of the invasion, I was very stunned and confused, unable to comprehend the war's purpose. My neighbors and I set up a shelter from possible missile strikes in the house's basement, stocked up on water and food.

On the second day of the war, I received emails from librarians from Hong Kong, Croatia, and the United States. All asked me about my safety and proposed protection. It brought me strength. I realized that I was not alone and had to share my strength with others. For a while, my daughter and I helped prepare dinners for the city's defenders.

A week later, I learned that not all of my friends were safe. Colleagues from Kharkiv and Sumy failed to get to a safe place, and librarians from Melitopol were occupied.

During the first days of the war, I kept notes and shared them with Ukrainian and foreign librarians. I received words of support and prayers for Ukraine from many librarians from Croatia, the Georgia Library Association, and librarians from Penn State University and the University of Illinois.

Then I got permission to post words of support on my Facebook page. I wanted to bring strength to those Ukrainian librarians at the epicenter of hostilities and occupation. Also, with the support of the university teachers, I posted on Facebook a series of works by our students against the war.¹

After a while, the library resumed work. Escaping from air and missile strikes on the Ukrainian capital, some employees worked from the bomb shelter in the Kyiv metro. Some people evacuated to other parts of the country and worked online. Some colleagues with children went abroad, as my daughter and I did. It took four days, more than 2,300 km, 4 trains, a ferry, and 2 buses to get to a safe place. We are currently in Sweden under the Temporary Protection Directive. I work online as the university scientific journal reference editor. Unfortunately, there is no option to work from abroad. We

should have official trip permission only. I have no idea about my work prospects.

In general, many Ukrainians have a different understanding of life. Internally displaced persons and those abroad are looking for answers to their questions. What should they do next? How to live with such pain? How to forget what will not be forgotten? How to fight?

I made my choice back in February 2014. After the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbas, I completely isolated myself from consuming Russian culture. Since that time, I have put all music, films, and books by Russian authors who supported the war against Ukraine out of my life. And now, after the atrocities of Russian murderers in Bucha, Mariupol, Borodyanka, and Chernihiv, there is neither contemporary Russian culture nor art for me. All the crimes committed by the occupiers against my country cannot be forgiven and nor forgotten.

The symbol of the French Resistance, Charles de Gaulle, said: "Everything great is done by great people, and they are great because they wanted it." Today, more than ever, I realize that Ukraine's victory in the war with Russia is possible only through the joint actions of each of us: Ukrainian armed forces, volunteers, territorial defense fighters, cybersecurity, railroad workers, medical workers, and rescuers, including people of culture, art, education, information and library institutions, and all Ukrainians.



Caption on the photo reads: "Whoever you are now or used to be, lift up your hands and pray!" —Anastasiia Shevchuk

In my opinion, international assistance and support are vital. I witness rallies in support of Ukraine in Stockholm. Residents of different countries go to demonstrations and honor Ukrainian heroes. “I do not doubt the strength of the Ukrainian people!” a librarian from Penn State wrote to me.

We hold the Ukrainian flag firmly and sing the National Anthem of Independent Ukraine. Today we are not fighting alone. Thank you for being a #StandWithUkraine too.

*Don't stop. With your support, we become stronger.
And together, We Will Win.*

Note

1. Helen Skachenko, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=3078886595758809&id=100009124976272. *~*