

MANY UKRAINIAN CHILDREN HAVE LEFT HOME. SOME DISPLACED CHILDREN END UP IN LVIV

Insights into the state of a society, as well as that of the historical mini-epoch, are to be gained by listening to children's conversations and observing what games they play. I remember fifteen years ago noticing that children played at being bank employees near our house. In 2014, however, when the war broke out in eastern Ukraine, local young boys organized big battles in this same place. I once heard the roles being assigned – who would be “zombies” and who would be “humans.” There were no kids willing to be zombies at first, but in the end someone agreed – because the game was about to begin. Now, as the cities of Ukraine are under constant fire, it is no wonder that a colleague's four-year-old daughter Daryna informs her doll: “We are having a war and you probably have a war too.” Little Danylo, of the same age, was recently absorbed in a car race. When asked what he was doing, he replied that he was very busy because he was saving his friend. The next day, it turned out that it was at this very time that his father was driving a pregnant woman, his colleague's wife, out of a place being shelled by missiles. Sophia, age 5, knows for sure that the war has adjusted her plans for the future: “Mom, I don't want to be a paleontologist anymore. Those bones have lain in the soil for a million years, they will remain there for another million and will wait for someone else. I want to build. Do you see how well I build the toy walls? We will rebuild all the destroyed schools, hospitals, supermarkets, every little shop.” She speaks from the heart of Ukrainian hope, which these days looks exactly like this – we are going to rebuild our country, to be reborn from the ashes, and heal the wounds.

DURING THE FIRST month of the war, more than half of the children in Ukraine left

their homes. Many of those who came out of hell arrived in the relatively calmer west of Ukraine as well as to neighboring European countries. Some were displaced after weeks of hiding in basements, dilapidated houses, in cars or even lines of vehicles under the enemy fire. When a crying child quickly runs to the bomb shelter in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv, reacting to the blaring sirens, a local mother, who also heads to the shelter, sighs: “This is one of the migrants, a kid from a displaced family; our local children do not react like that.” Some families have moved out of the danger zone, mourning the deaths of relatives

“We will rebuild all the destroyed schools, hospitals, supermarkets, every little shop.”

and friends. The statistics of losses with each week of the war become more and more shocking. More than two hundred children have been killed and 360 wounded over fifty days of war. In the early days of Russian attacks and war crimes, we sought comparisons based on familiar cross-cultural realities and symbols. But we soon moved on to superlatives. “As in Syria” seemed to be an image of absolute destruction and crimes against civilians because it was hard to imagine that anything could be worse. My colleague, journalism professor Borys Potyatynyk, questioned this comparison, referring to a Syrian who works in Lviv: “My neighbor, a dentist from Syria, says the destruction of Mariupol is incomparably worse than what happened in Aleppo.” This city was targeted from all the sides – bombs from

sky, artillery from the ground, and missiles from the sea. A total of 1200 missiles were fired on the territory of Ukraine during the first month of the war. Over the first three weeks, more than 1,400 bombs fell on Ukrainian soil, and about half of them targeted Mariupol. Cluster, phosphorus, thermobaric, vacuum bombs – we used to know about these means of destruction from someone else's bitter experience, but now we have to learn the alphabet of forbidden weapons in connection with the names of our own Ukrainian settlements.

IN MARCH, THERE WERE days when Russian aircraft dropped bombs on Mariupol every twenty minutes. Some Ukrainian media outlets report a death toll in the city of over 20,000, while locals say it is twice as many – 40,000. Of course, the statistics will be updated later, but, as the authors of publications in the media and social networks observe, regardless of exactly how many, the fact is that more people died in Mariupol during the current Russia – Ukraine war than in any other European or former Soviet city that suffered from the Nazis in the period prior to and during World War II (such as Guernica, Lidice, Warsaw, or Brest in Belarus). A maternity hospital, a swimming pool where mothers with children and pregnant women were hiding, and hospitals have all been destroyed in Mariupol, and then it was the turn of the local drama theater. Satellite images documented the fact that the inscriptions “Children” in Russian were clearly visible near the drama theater building. Undoubtedly, the signs were perfectly noticeable also for Russian pilots who dropped bombs, yet they still targeted this site.

“My theater does not exist anymore,” said the artistic director Lyudmyla Kolosovych over the phone. She had moved

to Lviv after the occupation of Luhansk in 2014, then later relocated to Dnipro, and had recently been working in Mariupol. Another of her workplaces, the College of Culture and Arts, which was next to the theater, was also burnt down. She tells us that the most devastating blow fell on that wing of the theater where the dressing rooms were located and where many women who were preparing to give birth

were hiding. “They were all killed, they died,” says Lyudmyla Kolosovych. Her friend Vira Lebedynska, an actress and sound director, miraculously got out of the ruined film studio, climbing out from under the rubble of the building over dead bodies. Now she considers March 16 her second birthday. According to preliminary data, three hundred people died, out of more than a thousand who were in

the theater. “The city with a population of half a million is gone, 90% of the buildings are destroyed”: Those who escaped the horror share their pain. “It was beautiful, modern, European, green, and it seemed that it should develop in the direction of life,” remarks Lyudmyla. The enemy in Ukraine resorted to total genocide and ethnocide, combining the practices of extermination with methods of intimidation



Burned residential apartment building in Luhansk, July 28, 2014.

PHOTO: PRYSHUTOVA VIKTORIA

and moral humiliation of people. In the town of Bucha in the Kyiv region, Russian soldiers, after asking local inhabitants about their professions, shot local teachers and educators – simply because they worked in schools and kindergartens, the institutions of the Ukrainian state. The director of the kindergarten in neighboring Irpin was also killed, together with her husband. A friend from the southern city of Kherson writes that the occupiers kidnapped Oleksandr Knyga, the general director of the Kherson Regional Music and Drama Theater, the president of the Melpomene Tavria International Theater Festival, and the head of the Eurasian Theater Association.

AT A TIME WHEN children and their mothers are trapped under the rubble in Ukrainian cities and villages, people are dying of dehydration, starvation and depletion, and artists, journalists, and mayors are being held hostage by Russian terrorists, thousands of theaters continue to operate in Russia. There are more than five hundred of them in Moscow alone. During such a war, every word on the stages of these theaters seems to be false and self-deceptive. Millions of people watching the plays do not want to know how painful their neighbors' reality is. Within the context of Kremlin policy, modern Russian culture is nothing more than business as usual, or even worse, it is a means of legitimizing Putin's regime. Most representatives of the cultural and educational sphere in RF have failed to explain to society their position on the essence of the system created by Putin. The worst episodes of the symbiosis of the cultural elite with the authorities were when artists and intellectuals consciously and voluntarily joined the propaganda campaigns and approved of the Kremlin's aggression. In March 2014, the Writers' Union of Russia published an open letter on its website, in which this organization personally supported Putin and the decision of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation to start the war in Ukraine. In 2022, 305 rectors of Russian universities officially approved the actions of the Russian president, who believes that "demilitarization and denazifi-

cation of Ukraine" is a way to protect their country from "growing military threats."

AS VARIOUS SURVEYS conducted in RF showed, between 50 and 70% of Russians shared and supported this far-fetched motivation for war and the very idea of a "special operation," the official Kremlin name for this invasion and military action. According to the most recent Levada center poll, conducted in the end of March, support for Putin rose by about 10% to more than 80% over the period of war (since the attack on Ukraine). The bloodier the regime, the more support it receives? Not only the elites, but also a large part of Russian society, the so-called "ordinary people", have chosen unconditional trust in propaganda in matters of war. While some children refuse to be zombies during games, elsewhere some adults readily agree to be zombies in real life. Time will tell whether the war will free the Russians from the illusions of their "great mission." At present, it seems that only a few individuals in Russia are able to speak out publicly against the war. Some do this for pragmatic reasons – hoping for future lifting of the sanctions, they signal that not all in the country are ideologically preoccupied morons. Some express just ordinary human compassion – and it is good not only for Ukraine, but for the world and their own souls. My Ukrainian friends, as well as some foreign colleagues who came to Lviv in 2014, well remember the first wave of immigrants from Donbass, in particular communication with an upright Donetsk resident named Oleg, for whom the key word for understanding the prospects of Ukraine and, by the way, Russia too, was the notion of "de-zombification." He was shocked by the susceptibility of so many people from his region to the propaganda of their neighboring country and believed that the future expected (and demanded) de-occupation, that the return of the occupied Ukrainian lands should come together with a change of consciousness, its liberation from the influence of Kremlin ideologemes and narratives.

Ukraine is the Russia's neighbor which has historically, for centuries, been enslaved in Russia's "prison of the nations."

Having escaped from captivity upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has gone through a not ideally successful, but a truly free path of development during its thirty years of independence. Now our country is once again threatened with undisguised genocide and the erasure of its culture. In a political sense, it is jeopardized by the regime that promises total slavery to those who are silenced and jail for activists – like in Russia. The stakes in the current military conflict are therefore very high – it is about where the line of demarcation of the Iron Curtain will be drawn. The task for Ukraine is to leave behind the borders of this Curtain and to separate itself once again from the laws (lawlessness) of the Evil Empire. This is not only a battle for the future of Ukraine, but also a global battle, because nuclear weapons, chemical agents, as well as huge amounts of conventional weapons could leave the world with countless environmental problems. While adults in Ukraine are fighting for freedom and safety, Ukrainian children are well aware of the alternative to negative scenarios of destruction, and this alternative is simple – to save lives, rebuild cities, and revive the Earth. As for paleontology, it will have to wait for a while. ✕

Lyudmyla Pavlyuk is Associate Professor at the Department of Journalism at Lviv Ivan Franko National University.