

# “They Came to ‘Liberate’ Us and Left Us with Nothing”



## Life Under Russian Occupation in Ukraine

**Study** by Julia Friedrich

# If you only read one page...

- 1** **Russia's occupation follows a clear strategy.** Where it has lasted, the occupiers have aimed to erase Ukrainian identity, permanently alter demographics, and integrate Ukrainian territory into Russia's administrative and economic structures in increasingly irreversible ways. The longer occupation has lasted, the harder it has become to reverse - and the more difficult it is for the local population to refrain from activities that could be considered collaboration.
- 2** **The use of violence by the occupiers against the local population is systematic.** Russian forces have specifically targeted those considered to be "pro-Ukrainian," but violence has also occurred randomly, particularly during the more chaotic phases of occupation.
- 3** **Occupation ruptures social ties.** While there exist heartening stories of support and solidarity between neighbors and within Ukrainian communities, Russia's occupation has fueled mistrust between people through experiences of denunciation and betrayal.
- 4** **The reasons why people escape or stay are multi-faceted.** On an individual level, the decision of whether to stay or to escape occupation is shaped by a multitude of factors, including whether there is an opportunity to flee and whether the person has access to the knowledge and resources that are needed to follow through. The fact that someone remains in an occupied area, even for years, cannot serve as a clear-cut indicator of their political allegiance.
- 5** **The human cost is immense.** While occupation is often framed in territorial terms, its real impact is on the people who live through it. In the words of one person interviewed for this study: "It was very difficult to live through all this. I do not wish it on anyone."

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# Introduction

“Occupation means fear. The fear is a total, all-encompassing emotion.” This is how one Ukrainian described daily life under Russian occupation. “You never know what happens next,” said another. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, President Vladimir Putin clearly stated his aim: to subjugate Ukraine. A means to this subjugation was and is occupation: Moscow occupied parts of Ukraine’s north, east and south, in addition to Crimea and the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, which have been occupied since 2014.

“Occupation means fear. The fear is a total, all-encompassing emotion.”

Interviewee from Kharkiv region

Moscow’s initial war aims failed; the Ukrainian government remains in place and Kyiv a free city. The Ukrainian Armed Forces first succeeded in pushing Russia’s army out of the occupied territories in the Kyiv and Chernihiv regions in the spring of 2022, then liberated Kharkiv region in September and Kherson in November later that year. These military successes also brought to light the dark reality of occupation. In its most extreme form, the aftermath revealed dead civilians on the streets of Bucha and the mass graves of Iziium.

Where Russia’s occupation persists, the consequences are dire. The Russian Armed Forces and de-facto authorities are implementing policies to erase Ukrainian identity, permanently alter local demographic realities, and make these changes as hard as possible to reverse. Moscow staged fake referendums on joining the Russian Federation in the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk regions in the fall of 2022, thus illegally annexing these areas despite only partially controlling them. Much of Russia’s occupation practice follows methods that Moscow tried and test in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics and in Crimea between 2014 and 2022.<sup>1</sup> As of summer 2024, almost 18 percent of Ukraine’s territory remains occupied<sup>2</sup> and the outcome of the war is yet to be decided.

This research aims to shed light on the experiences of Ukrainians who lived or continue to live through Russia’s occupation since the full-scale invasion of 2022. It takes their views as a starting point to understand how Russia has implemented its occupation, namely through extreme violence and transformative politics, and how Ukrainians adapted to life under occupation. Each of the stories presented here belongs to an individual and offers only a glimpse of the fear, horror and contempt felt by those who were thrown into a state of lawlessness, often cut off from basic supplies, lifesaving information and their loved ones, and whose primary concern had to become survival.

The individual and social consequences of occupation will affect Ukraine for a long time to come. Across the liberated territories, the occupying forces have left behind traces of war crimes,<sup>3</sup> destruction, and trauma. Some of these areas face an acute danger of re-occupation. Should Russia succeed in (re-)conquering further territory, the experiences I recount here will not be a tale of the past but represent the future for those who end up under Russian control. In public discourse about Russia’s occupation, the territorial aspect of it – the number of square kilometers taken or won back – tends to take center stage, and there is value in measuring this.

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- 1 Karolina Hird, “The Kremlin’s Occupation Playbook: Coerced Russification and Ethnic Cleansing in Occupied Ukraine,” Institute for the Study of War, February 8, 2024, p. 8, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/kremlins-occupation-playbook-coerced-russification-and-ethnic-cleansing-occupied>.
  - 2 “War in Ukraine,” Global Conflict Tracker, Council on Foreign Relations, May 20, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>.
  - 3 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, “UN Commission Concludes That War Crimes Have Been Committed in Ukraine,” September 23, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/un-commission-concludes-war-crimes-have-been-committed-ukraine-expresses>.

But the sharp end of occupation is felt by the Ukrainians who populate these ‘spots on the map’, making it crucial to shed light on the human cost.

## Methodology

Researching occupation is not a straightforward endeavor. While there are a myriad of testimonies and news reports available,<sup>4</sup> along with documentation of human rights violations,<sup>5</sup> more systematic research on the subject remains limited, albeit growing.<sup>6</sup> It is thus important to add to it by generating more original knowledge. At the same time, the risk that potential interviewees might be unintentionally endangered must also be taken into account. Many do not want to speak about their experiences and others fear further repression in case they find themselves under occupation again.

The findings I present in this study are based on 17 conversations. Of these, nine were direct interviews, which were conducted online in English (1 interview), German (2), and Russian (6). Six interviews were conducted in written form (in Ukrainian) and two more were conducted by a third party (also in Ukrainian). The individuals I interviewed all lived under occupation – for durations ranging from three days to one-and-a-half years – until they were either liberated by the Ukrainian Armed Forces or escaped. Ten interviewees were female, seven were male (one conversation was with a couple), and one preferred to stay fully anonymous. They experienced Russia’s occupation in Kyiv (3), Kharkiv (5), Kherson (8), and Donetsk (1) regions. To protect their anonymity, individual villages and smaller cities will not be specified. In addition to these conversations with affected individuals, I conducted six interviews with key informants who did not experience occupation themselves but by the nature of their work as journalists, researchers or officials possess insight into Russia’s occupation practices. Where possible, the interviewees’ experiences are contextualized with information from investigative and research reports.

Because I identified the interview participants using a snowball sampling technique, for which I took my personal sources and contacts as a starting point, most of them represent a certain segment of Ukrainian society that can be broadly described as educated and having some experience with or exposure to international researchers and organizations. All of the interviewees are against the notion that Russia should rule over Ukraine, an attitude that will be described as “pro-Ukrainian” going forward. My own positionality as a researcher, and in particular the fact that the conversations were held online and often in a language that is neither my own nor the interviewees’ native language, surely influenced these direct conversations about highly personal and traumatic events.

Personal experiences of occupation are a particular type of source: they represent oral history. These individual perceptions of reality may be indicative of larger patterns, but in retracing them I do not pretend to offer quantifiable proof for these patterns. Still, people’s lived experiences are an essential part of understanding both Russia’s occupation practices and intentions and the societal and political consequences of occupation in Ukraine. Every one of their stories deserves to be told.

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4 See e.g., collections of stories at Ukraine World, “Stories,” <https://ukraineworld.org/en/articles/stories>, for instance “Story#113: Village Chief Sheds Light on Aftermath of Russian Occupation,” <https://ukraineworld.org/en/articles/stories/story-113>; Liz Cookman, “Killing Was a Game for Russians,” *Foreign Policy*, February 24, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/24/ukraine-russia-putin-war-crimes-bucha-kherson/>.

5 See e.g., Natalia Okhotnikova, Oleh Hnatiuk, Borys Petruniok, Onysia Sinyuk, “Enforced Disappearances and Arbitrary Detentions of Active Citizens During the Full-Scale Armed Aggression by Russia Against Ukraine,” Human Rights Centre ZMINA, 2023, [https://zmina.ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/07/lost\\_people\\_eng\\_web\\_03.pdf](https://zmina.ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/07/lost_people_eng_web_03.pdf), p. 57; Vadym Chovgan, Mykhailo Romanov, Vasyl Melnychuk, “Nine Circles of Hell,” *Dignity Publication Series on Torture and Organised Violence*, March 2023, <https://dignity.dk/wp-content/uploads/42-Nine-circles-of-hell.pdf>.

6 Karolina Hird, “The Kremlin’s Occupation Playbook.”

# How Occupation Started

Occupation in the context of Russia’s war of aggression did not necessarily begin on February 24, 2022, the day Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. All interviewees described a state of chaos and surrealness following these events, but only some were immediately caught in the storm. For one interviewee, “occupation began in the night of February 25. Some were in shock, others were [already] dead.”<sup>7</sup> For some in Kyiv region and Mariupol, the cutting of electricity, water, gas, or all three, was a sign that occupation had begun. For others, including those in Kherson, it was the sight of Russian tanks rolling through the streets of their villages and cities that announced the beginning of occupation.

In a highly chaotic situation, Ukrainians had to make rapid decisions about whether to stay, to flee, or to fight, all potentially with life-or-death stakes. As others have argued, explanations for the choices that civilians make in war are usually assembled retroactively and therefore often presume that individuals have more knowledge of the situation than they actually did in the moment. Instead, it is “the perceptions of anticipated risk, or threat ... [which] shape their decisions.”<sup>8</sup> For instance, many Ukrainians chose to retreat from the cities to

“Occupation began in the night of February 25. Some were in shock, others were already dead.”

Interviewee from Kharkiv region

summer houses in the countryside when the invasion began,<sup>9</sup> because they assumed these were safer spaces where they would be better able to sustain themselves. This was not wrong in all cases but proved disastrous in some – most prominently in the suburbs surrounding Kyiv.

Others opted for immediate escape, such as one interviewee from Kyiv region who, after the first days and nights of shelling in close proximity to their home, decided that “it was better to die on the street than in our house.”<sup>10</sup> Together with their neighbors, they put together a convoy of several cars. However, once everything was packed, their mother-in-law refused to get in

the car. After they argued, cried and yelled at each other, the mother-in-law finally decided to stay behind with food and water supplies.

Scholars have noted that “Russian occupation was often initially chaotic.”<sup>11</sup> And indeed, some interviewees corroborated the media reports from late February 2022 about Russian soldiers not knowing where they were going. One interviewee from near Kyiv cited their relative saying they had watched the Russians deal with old maps, in an attempt to find a bridge which had not existed for decades.

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7 Interview, Kharkiv region.

8 Anastasia Shesterinina, *Mobilizing in Uncertainty*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2021, p. 2.

9 Viktoriia Kolomiets, “Переїхали у село»: Містяни, які оселилися у сільських хатах під час війни – про свій досвід” [“‘We moved to the countryside.’ City Dwellers Who Settled in Rural Houses During the War Share Their Experiences”], *BZH*, July 19, 2022, <https://bzh.life/ua/lyudi/pereehali-v-selo-gorozhane-kotorye-poselilis-v-selskih-domah-vo-vremya-voyny-o-svo-em-opyte/>.

10 Interview, Kyiv region.

11 David Lewis, “Russia’s Economic Occupation of Southeastern Ukraine,” *Ukrainian Analytical Digest* 3 (November 2023): pp. 26-29, DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000646799.

# Everyday Life Under Occupation

Given the limited amount of time that most interviewees spent under Russian occupation, their descriptions of “everyday life” in most cases reflect the early stages of occupation, which were often highly chaotic and violent. The processes of consolidation and institutionalization that led up to and followed annexation, which also meant more predictability for the local population, will be discussed further below.

## Food, Water, Money, and Basic Services

“They destroyed the existing social security system, but the first month or so, they could not be bothered to replace it in any way.”

Interviewee from Kharkiv region

Ukrainians living under Russia’s occupation found themselves thrown into a state of lawlessness. Suddenly, there was nobody to ask for help and basic services shut down. As one interviewee put it: “They destroyed the existing social security system, but the first month or so, they could not be bothered to replace it in any way.”<sup>12</sup>

With few exceptions, occupation meant the absence of electricity, water and sometimes gas. The struggle to manage daily life without these basic services and acquire food and water became the major element that structured interviewees’ days. One individual had to get 30 liters of water to their house every day from a nearby well. Getting water was one of the few opportunities for social interaction and brief exchanges between locals, but it could be a dangerous activity. This was the case for one interviewee who reported that they had to retrieve water from a creek about one-and-a-half kilometers from their home, even as shelling was ongoing.<sup>13</sup>

Supermarkets closed and were often raided by incoming troops or, as recalled by an interviewee in Kyiv region and documented in Mariupol,<sup>14</sup> by locals. In a suburb in Kyiv region, shop owners told people to come and take their supplies before the Russian occupiers could do so.<sup>15</sup> In Kharkiv region, “the logistics from Russia only started improving in the third month of occupation.”<sup>16</sup> An interviewee from Kherson recalled that by Easter 2022 (at the end of April), eggs were back in the stores, alongside other products from the occupied territories and Crimea as well as from Russia. Interviewees from villages close to Kyiv and close to the frontline in Kharkiv said there was no food to buy and that no humanitarian aid got through to them, but that for them individually, this was less of a problem because they had larger storages. Cooking without electricity and water, and sometimes without gas, was another challenge: interviewees from Mariupol and Kharkiv region cooked on an outdoor campfire under shelling.

To make up for the lack of basic services, “people started organizing trade amongst each other.”<sup>17</sup> In one village in Kharkiv region, some farmers sold their produce<sup>18</sup> while one

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12 Interview, Kharkiv region.

13 Interview, Mariupol.

14 Mstyslav Chernov, dir., “20 Days in Mariupol,” PBS Frontline 2023, <https://20daysinmariupol.com/>.

15 Interview, Kyiv region.

16 Written answers, Kharkiv region.

17 Interview, Kharkiv region, similar information from Kyiv region.

18 Interview, Kharkiv region.

interviewee from the same region started selling milk and other home-made products.<sup>19</sup> These informal structures emerged quickly, together with the so-called perevozchiki (or smugglers) who could smuggle goods or people across the frontline. Several interviewees used these smuggling services to escape and one shipped Ukrainian goods from Lviv to occupied Kherson in this way. Another informal service that was mentioned during several interviews: access to a Russian SIM card without having to register with the occupiers.

Finding the money to pay for products or services posed an additional challenge. In many occupied areas, ATMs stopped working at least temporarily. According to an interviewee in Kherson region, card-to-card transfer<sup>20</sup> was sometimes possible. Both in and around Kherson and in Kharkiv region, Ukrainian hryvnia and Russian rubles were used in parallel, but the occupiers fixed the exchange rate at 1:1 (the actual exchange rate in February 2022 was 1 hryvnia to 2.7 rubles). Where occupation lasted, the occupiers opened Russian banks.<sup>21</sup>

Medical services functioned sometimes but did so poorly: according to interviewees, at least some hospitals were kept open but were often “lacking specialists”<sup>22</sup> or equipment that had been looted.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, many clinics had difficulty operating without electricity.<sup>24</sup>

“The city was not protected, people were defenseless against their own bandits and against occupiers.”

Interviewee from Kherson region

One interviewee had a friend who needed cancer treatment which they did not receive. The friend subsequently died during occupation. Others stressed how poorly the emergency services were working, with ambulances sometimes taking hours to arrive.<sup>25</sup> The absence of police present also meant that locals lived at the mercy of the occupiers. In the words of one interviewee: “The city was not protected, people were defenseless against their own bandits, who had plenty of room to roam, and against occupiers.”<sup>26</sup>

## Movement and Work

“The streets of the city were eerie.”<sup>27</sup> “People were scared to just ‘stick their nose out into the street.’”<sup>28</sup> Restricting their movement to a minimum and only going outside when absolutely necessary was a common strategy among interviewees, especially in zones with high combat activity. One interviewee even spoke of an acquaintance who did not leave their home for the entire six months their town was occupied by Russian forces. The imperative to restrict one’s movements often clashed with the need to go out to secure water and food to survive. For one interviewee in Mariupol, for instance, the first distribution of humanitarian aid about three months into the siege happened some seven kilometers from their home.

In addition to such self-imposed limitations, the occupying forces heavily restricted movement, mainly through checkpoints, which were set up “everywhere.”<sup>29</sup> One interviewee said they had to pass through nine checkpoints to travel from Kherson city to a village in

19 Written answers, Kharkiv region.

20 This is a popular payment method in Ukraine whereby money is transferred directly from one credit card to another.

21 Written answers, Kherson region.

22 Written answers, Kherson region.

23 Interview, Kherson region.

24 Interview, Kyiv region.

25 Interview, Kherson region.

26 Written answers, Kherson region. The experience was originally relayed in the present tense.

27 Written answers, Kherson region.

28 This is a translation of a Ukrainian proverb which was used by two interviewees: “Вони боялися висовувати носа.”

29 Written answers, Kherson region.



the region; it took them six hours to travel just one kilometer. Another interviewee in Mariupol recalled that once they controlled most of the city, Russian forces began requiring a permit (“propusk”) from those who wanted to go from one area of the city to another. In

“People were scared to just stick their nose out into the street.”

Interviewee from Kharkiv region

all occupied areas, checkpoints were an inescapable point of interaction between local populations and their occupiers, and they could pose a danger: “At checkpoints, if the Russian soldiers did not like someone, they could beat them up.”<sup>30</sup>

Continuing to work proved to be another major challenge for those living in an occupied area. As one interviewee recalled: “Most people, like my husband, have lost their jobs.”<sup>31</sup> This also put a mental burden on residents: people were “used to work for their own food, but suddenly you had to live off humanitarian aid.”<sup>32</sup> Where it was possible for locals to continue to work, it could still prove dangerous: “My husband had to go to work to make money. Every time he had to bike to his work, I would pray for him. He would call me every time he made it. He even went to work under shelling.”<sup>33</sup> Another interviewee continued working as a journalist despite living under occupation, mainly by reporting observations from around the city and analyzing social media channels. Under prolonged occupation, work environments typically changed considerably, as one interviewee’s experience illustrates: “At work, everyone spoke only Russian. All the ‘ukrops’<sup>34</sup> as they called them ... were fired ... documentation was translated into Russian, work programs were changed, and our [Ukrainian ones] were removed and burned.”<sup>35</sup> Essential workers – such as those at water or energy plants, trash companies, etc. – faced significant pressure from the occupiers to continue to work, which under Ukrainian law could constitute collaboration. One interviewee declined to work as a librarian because they considered it collaboration.<sup>36</sup>

## Communication and Information

For those living under occupation, communicating with others and gathering information was both incredibly important and very difficult. Many interviewees experienced their mobile networks being either cut or disrupted. In Kherson, after the local mobile network was completely cut off months into occupation, an interviewee traveled by car to the other end of the city to find out if relatives were still alive. Later, Russian networks were established. In other places, finding a signal could be an all-day activity: one interviewee had to cycle over ten kilometers into the woods.<sup>37</sup> A complete absence of information, as was the case in Mariupol, could lead to despair: “People thought the world had forgotten about them.”<sup>38</sup> Where mobile networks did function, disruptions of the electricity supply meant that it could be very difficult to charge phones.<sup>39</sup> In many places, the radio became an important source of information; however, it was easier to receive Russian channels than Ukrainian ones.

30 Written answers, Kharkiv region.

31 Written answers, Kherson region.

32 Interview, Kharkiv region.

33 Interview, Kharkiv region (conducted by third party).

34 A derogatory term for “Ukrainians.”

35 Written answers, Kherson region.

36 Interview, Kherson region.

37 Interview, Kharkiv region.

38 Interview, Mariupol.

39 Interviews, Kharkiv region (conducted by third party).

All interviewees had to navigate difficult, life-or-death choices – escaping or staying, finding food and water – in a confusing information environment ripe with misinformation and deliberate disinformation. One interviewee in Kharkiv region had an aunt who, whenever she could get a message through, told them to escape and join her in Kharkiv city, but they did not believe her: “we thought Kharkiv no longer existed.”<sup>40</sup> Rumors were widespread and most interviewees had internalized at least some of them; they often shared what they had read or heard from others as part of their own occupation experience, mixing and matching such claims with things they had seen themselves. This chaotic environment was highly conducive to Russian disinformation: in Mariupol, for instance, there was a rumor “that if Russia had not attacked them, then others – meaning Ukrainians, ‘Azovtsy’ – would have.”<sup>41</sup>

**“People thought the world had forgotten about them.”**

Interviewee from Mariupol

Such targeted disinformation at the local level endangered the civilian population by “obscuring frontline developments, creating panic, complicating civilian efforts to evacuate from conflict-affected areas, and misleading civilians about the availability and nature of some critical services.”<sup>42</sup> In addition, these hyper-localized disinformation narratives were very difficult to debunk because they were not easy to distinguish from misinformation fueled by widespread panic.<sup>43</sup> An interviewee who fled Kyiv’s suburbs in the first days of the occupation explained that their choice to evacuate was very difficult to make in this information environment: their neighbors said that Russian soldiers were already inside their home, prompting them to want to escape, while others were claiming that friends high up in the Ukrainian administration told them now was not a good time to flee.

Under occupation, disinformation could also pose a direct threat to life. In a Kharkiv region village, the occupiers had told an interviewee to wear white bands on their arms and legs whenever they left the house, otherwise they would be shot on the spot. It was only when the Ukrainian Armed Forces liberated the village weeks later that residents learned that the white bands did not denote unarmed civilians but rather Russian troops. Because of this Russian disinformation, some residents wearing white bands were killed by Ukrainian troops as they moved into the village according to the interviewee.

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40 Interview, Kharkiv region.

41 Interview, Mariupol. The term “Azovtsy” refers to the Azov regiment, part of the Ukrainian National Guard and responsible for the defense of Mariupol. Russia uses it in its propaganda to refer to “Ukrainian Nazis.”

42 Lauren Spink, “When Words Become Weapons: The Unprecedented Risks to Civilians from the Spread of Disinformation in Ukraine,” Center for Civilians in Conflict, November 8, 2023, p. 20.

43 Ibid.

# Interactions with the Occupiers

Interviewees' descriptions of their interactions with the occupying forces inevitably varied depending on the location. They also changed over time. For instance, one interviewee described that in the early days of the occupation the Russian Armed Forces were disappointed about the fact that nobody was waiting for them waving flags.<sup>44</sup> An interviewee from Kherson region noted changes over time: “[t]he first soldiers who were there in February walked with the muzzles of their guns down, but later they started walking with them pointed at people. They are afraid, they walk in groups even when they go to the market to buy food.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in a village in Kyiv region, it took ten days after the start of the occupation for soldiers to check the street where one of the interviewees lived. The interviewee presumed this was because the soldiers were anxious about partisan activity in the adjacent forest.<sup>46</sup>

Some interviewees encountered occupying soldiers in grocery stores once they reopened. Others, as was the case for one interviewee, ran into them practically every time they left their house. The risk of being killed or hurt during an interaction with Russian troops was present from day one: “Soldiers were always with firearm and grenade in their hands. If anything happened, they could immediately throw the grenade.”<sup>47</sup>

At times, Ukrainians were forced to live in close quarters with their occupiers because the latter would move into private houses or apartments. One interviewee from Kherson region recalled how a Russian soldier came into their house in the middle of the night, asking if he could spend the night there, telling them not to be scared, he would not shoot them, he was just lost.<sup>48</sup> It is well documented that elsewhere, Russian soldiers confiscated property or demanded cohabitation, forcing Ukrainians to provide and cook and often raping them.<sup>49</sup>

## Gathering Information

According to interviewees, the occupiers used all available methods to gather more information about their new “citizens.” In consequence, interactions occurred most frequently at checkpoints or as soldiers moved from house to house or from apartment to apartment to conduct searches. In Kherson, for instance, locals had to provide their passport data to obtain a Russian SIM card once Ukrainian mobile networks disappeared – a practice one interviewee suspected to be a form of “census” taking.<sup>50</sup> “Filtration,” the process of screening Ukrainians as they moved from Russian-occupied territory to Russia or to the rest of Ukraine, serves a similar purpose, among others.<sup>51</sup> This process was widely feared among

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44 Interview, Kherson.

45 Written answers, Kherson region.

46 Interview, Kyiv region.

47 Interview, Kyiv region.

48 Interview, Kherson region.

49 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine,” October 19, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A-78-540-AEV.pdf>.

50 Interview, Kherson region. Other interviewees stated that it was only possible to obtain a SIM card with a Russian passport.

51 Yana Lysenko, “Filtration: System, Process, and Goals,” *Ukrainian Analytical Digest* 3 (2023): pp. 7–12, DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000646799.

interviewees because it could lead to detention and torture, and men in particular would be checked for tattoos or any other indication that they did not agree with the new ruling authority. Confiscating Ukrainians' cell phones, both during filtration and house-to-house searches, was a main way for occupiers to obtain information about the political attitudes of local residents. Several interviewees explained that they hid their phones and showed old phones to the Russian Armed Forces when they came to their homes to inspect them.

## Differences Among Occupiers

Prompted to describe their interactions with occupying forces, several interviewees differentiated between the soldiers they had encountered, both in terms of their behavior and backgrounds. Regarding the former, interviewees described a range of types – from extremely violent, brainwashed “fanatics” to those displaying “adequate” behaviors. During the first days of occupation in particular, some individual soldiers apparently felt the need to explain themselves to the local population. As one interviewee recounted: “Some soldiers approached me, it was clear that they wanted to get something off their chest; one said: we do not understand what we’re doing here.”<sup>52</sup> Another interviewee had a similar memory of a Russian soldier who told them that nobody needed this war. However, the same interviewee still came to the conclusion that “they knew exactly why they came and what they were doing here.”<sup>53</sup>

“They knew exactly why they came  
and what they were doing here.”

Interviewee from Kyiv region

Interviewees also differentiated between the social backgrounds and ethnicities of the occupying soldiers. One of them described a journey through several checkpoints on the way between Kherson and a nearby village: “in the beginning, you could tell by their hands that they were intelligent people who told us that this was just a routine check and not to be scared. The further away from the center we got, the more working class they became, and the more aggressive. At the end were the worst – soldiers from Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics” (DPR and LPR).<sup>54</sup> Several interviewees from the south of Ukraine stated that soldiers from the DPR and LPR were noticeably more violent and aggressive than others, since “they had learned to hate Ukraine for eight years.”<sup>55</sup> However, as corroborated by two key informants, this was not a universal experience and some Ukrainians felt more connected to these soldiers since they were “our people.”<sup>56</sup> Interviewees also expressed bewilderment at soldiers from Russia’s far east (referred to as “Buryats” without distinction) who had never seen a toilet before or thought that villages were big cities because they had paved roads.<sup>57</sup> It was not always clear whether these perceptions stemmed from direct interactions or from rumors or prejudice. One key informant stressed that local residents under occupation felt not only fear and horror but also contempt that these “barbarians” were coming and destroying the local order.<sup>58</sup>

52 Interview, Kharkiv region. The described conversation occurred while the interviewee was arrested.

53 Interview, Kyiv region.

54 Interview, Kherson.

55 Interview, Kherson region, also In2, “Dependency and Dissonance: The Ground View of the Process and Realities of Russian Subjugation in the Occupied Territories of Ukraine,” *Insight Report*, November 2023 (not publicly available).

56 Interview, key informant (journalist).

57 Interview, Kherson.

58 Interview, key informant (journalist).

# Violence as a Strategy

Violence, whether war-induced, targeted or random, was a key tenet of the occupation experience, even though the extent of its use by the Russian army varied. It became clear from the interviews how challenging it was for interviewees to make sense of this variation – why a certain occupied place or population experienced more violence than others. This also made it difficult for Ukrainians to develop strategies to protect themselves and loved ones.

## Combat Activity

In some settings, the daily routines described above were rendered impossible because people lived in close proximity to the front lines. In Kharkiv region, right at the front, “there was no daily life. There was always only today and now.” An interviewee in Mariupol echoed this by saying: “We survived – as best as we could.” In these settings, constant shelling and the lack of heating presented a major challenge to individuals’ survival, with some interviewees having to sleep in very cold temperatures as their windows had been blown out. In a Kharkiv region village, an interviewee drew tally marks on the walls of their basement, one for every missile launch or strike they heard. At one point, these sounds became so numerous that they switched to counting on their fingers, drawing a tally mark for every ten launches and strikes. They spent most of their time in the basement and tried to only come up to warm up and eat.<sup>59</sup>

In these settings, interactions with occupiers were less frequent. After an interviewee in Mariupol asked Russian soldiers for medication for their sick neighbor, the soldiers gave it to them but said not to bother them anymore, as they were agitated enough by the fighting. In Kharkiv region, an interviewee stressed that they never actually spoke to the occupiers due to the constant shelling. However, whenever they made a fire outside of their house to cook, the occupiers would start their helicopters – creating wind to render making the fire as difficult as possible. The interviewee presumed the soldiers wanted to get them to leave their house:

“I was outside to cook [on a camping stove]. A sniper was at his position, playing around with his gun.

I noticed that he handled the optics and saw a red dot on my coat, on my shoulder, breast, stomach.

I understood that I could be shot any second and running was pointless. I think it was entertaining to him.”

Interviewee from Kharkiv region

Interviewees from Kyiv region and Mariupol also shared that there was no possibility to bury the dead. In Mariupol, “corpses were lying on the street, next to the trash. People put mattresses on them so that dogs would not touch them.” These individual experiences are corroborated by a multitude of media reports.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Interview, Kharkiv region (remote).

<sup>60</sup> See e.g., Mstyslav Chernov, “20 Days in Mariupol” and “Ukraine: Russian Forces’ Trail of Death in Bucha,” Human Rights Watch, April 21, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/21/ukraine-russian-forces-trail-death-bucha>.

## Targeted Violence

There were other, more targeted ways in which the occupiers used violence. As one interviewee described it: “the local population was controlled by intimidation, through searches, abductions, interrogations, and beatings of those the [occupiers] did not like. Even hair color or eye contact for more than one second could be the reason. The Ukrainian language, songs were undesirable and could provoke the aggression of the occupiers.”<sup>61</sup>

Occupying forces would conduct searches from house to house or apartment to apartment to look for persons supporting the Ukrainian authorities or holding “pro-Ukrainian” positions as well as those suspected of anti-Russian sentiments or of refusing to cooperate. A particular target were individuals alleged to be supporting the Ukrainian Armed Forces (including by transmitting information about Russian positions).<sup>62</sup> Interviewees indicated that for these reasons, Ukrainian veterans who had fought in the Donbas since 2014 were especially at risk. One interviewee who was already an internally displaced person (IDP) after having fled their home in the Donbas in 2014 also feared being targeted for disloyalty to Russia. Several sources state that when the occupiers conducted these searches, they often had “a list of activists, volunteers, representatives of local self-government bodies or had information about their names and surnames, family composition.”<sup>63</sup> Whether or not these lists exist has been a matter of much discussion, though there is limited publicly available evidence for them.<sup>64</sup>

Local collaborators contributed information about targets, as did denunciations from neighbors and others who were either forced to or willingly gave up names. An interviewee from Kherson region who is a Donbas war veteran, for instance, was reported to the occupiers by an acquaintance of their daughter’s. Other important sources were public records, such as lists of war veterans kept at police and administration buildings which the Russian Armed Forces occupied. Luckily for some, this information was sometimes outdated: according to an interviewee in Kherson, Russian soldiers kicked in and destroyed a door because they had information that a veteran, who had in fact sold the apartment a few years prior, was still living there.<sup>65</sup>

## Detention and Torture

“The FSB monitored pro-Ukrainian sentiments in the population and could take those who voiced them away at night.”

Interviewee from Kharkiv region

People who were accused of one or more of the abovementioned “offenses” were systematically detained, abducted and tortured by the occupying forces.<sup>66</sup> This was and is widely known, and rumors about it were widespread: “The FSB monitored pro-Ukrainian sentiments in the population and could take those who voiced them away at night, sometimes with a lead from former police officers, in an unknown direction. Many were never seen again.”<sup>67</sup> An interviewee in Kharkiv region was detained in a local police basement and tortured with electric shocks administered to their fingers and toes. They

61 Written answers, Kherson region.

62 OHCHR, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine.”

63 Okhotnikova et al., “Enforced Disappearances and Arbitrary Detentions.”

64 The mayor of Bucha, for instance, confirmed having seen such lists. See: Oleg Timchenko, “У Бучі окупанти вбивали людей за задалегідь складеними списками, – Федорук” [“In Bucha, the Occupiers Killed People According to Pre-Compiled Lists – Fedoruk”], *Obozrevatel*, April 27, 2022, <https://incident.obozrevatel.com/ukr/crime/vojna-protiv-rossii/u-buchi-ok-upanti-vbivali-lyudej-za-zazdalegid-skladenimi-spiskami-fedoruk.htm>.

65 Interview, Kherson.

66 Chovgan et al., “Nine Circles of Hell.”

67 Written answers, Kharkiv region.

remained in this basement until the area was liberated about a week later, and they later returned to collect the torture device that was used against them as evidence. Another interviewee in Kherson region was tortured in their own home, where they were beaten and electrocuted through a device attached to their ears. They continue to suffer from back problems and high blood pressure. These experiences match other reports about systematic and widespread torture and abuse by Russian occupiers.<sup>68</sup>

## Patterns of Violence

Interviewees also described instances of more indiscriminate violent excesses by the Russian Armed Forces: “their violence had no aim.”<sup>69</sup> An interviewee in Kyiv region said that frustration often led to violence and that the longer the occupation lasted and the less the occupiers were able to detect who was communicating Russian positions to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the more the occupiers displayed an “incomprehensible aggression.”<sup>70</sup> The interviewee described several instances of random killings they witnessed or had heard of. Another interviewee discussed an episode from their village that they had heard of: as residents were hiding from shelling in the local school’s basement, an armed Russian soldier arrived and forced them all to kneel on the basement floor and not move. He then took a woman upstairs to a classroom where he repeatedly raped and hit her while cutting her with a knife.<sup>71</sup>

**“Their violence had no aim.”**

Interviewee from Kyiv region

The enormous body of evidence of war crimes committed by the Russian army in Ukraine indicates that violence was and is used systematically to intimidate and control the local population.<sup>72</sup> In interviews, it became clear that there were substantial differences across and within regions in how violent the occupiers were. This could be true even in the same village: it was only after liberation that an interviewee who had interacted with occupiers at the edge of their village learned of the atrocities that occupiers had committed in the village center. One interviewee differentiated between “more professional” and “more chaotic-looking” soldiers, claiming that the latter seemed like conscripts but that there was no obvious correlation in terms of one group being more likely to commit atrocities than the other.<sup>73</sup> While the motivation for targeted violence was relatively clear and understood by the interviewees who were tortured or detained, to others it was less evident why they were spared from direct violence. Some had an individual explanation – they were being very careful or they lived in an apartment which looked poor and was therefore unattractive for

68 Okhotnikova et al., “Enforced Disappearances and Arbitrary Detentions”; Chovgan et al., “Nine Circles of Hell.”

69 Interview, Kyiv region.

70 Interview, Kyiv region. Others have suggested that Russian soldiers’ frustration over the Ukrainian population not welcoming them as expected contributed to their brutality. Kseniya Oksamytna, “Imperialism, supremacy, and the Russian invasion,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, 44:4 (2023), pp. 497–512, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2259661>.

71 Interview, Kharkiv region. This incident was documented by Human Rights Watch: “Ukraine: Apparent War Crimes in Russia-Controlled Areas,” Human Rights Watch, April 2, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/03/ukraine-apparent-war-crimes-russia-controlled-areas>.

72 Julia Friedrich and Niklas Masuhr, “Why Is Russia Being So Brutal in Ukraine?,” *Political Violence at a Glance*, May 23, 2022, <https://gppi.net/2022/05/23/why-is-russia-being-so-brutal-in-ukraine>.

73 Interview, Kyiv region; interview with key informant (journalist).

occupiers to loot, effectively shielding them from typical situations in which soldiers would have used force – which, objectively, may or may not have played a role in why they did or did not experience violence.

## Gender-Based and Sexual Violence

Overall, occupation affected different genders differently, and interviewees had gendered perceptions of their safety. A female interviewee stated that it was she who left the house to see if the occupiers had gone, rather than her husband, because they considered it more dangerous for him. Another female individual was worried about her husband who had previously worked in the security sector. At the same time, though not mentioned as a personal experience by any of the interviewees, the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war by Russian troops, including in combination with torture, is well documented. While rape and other forms of sexual violence under Russia's occupation have been mainly directed at women and girls of all ages, sexual violence against men or the threat of it seems to occur more frequently in detention settings.<sup>74</sup> Reportedly, Russian troops often force other family members to watch their mothers, girlfriends or daughters be raped, which shows an intent to destroy social ties more broadly. Moreover, occupying soldiers have explicitly stated their intention to rape in order to stop Ukrainians from reproducing, revealing genocidal intent.<sup>75</sup>

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74 OHCHR, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine," March 5, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/a-hrc-55-66-auv-en.pdf>.

75 Kateryna Busol, "When the Head of State Makes Rape Jokes, His Troops Rape on the Ground: Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Russia's Aggression against Ukraine," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 25: 3–4 (2023), pp. 279–314, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2023.2292344/.



# Efforts to Erase Ukrainian Identity

As others have already established, the long-term aim of Russia’s occupation of Ukrainian territory remains “the destruction of Ukraine’s distinctive political, social, linguistic, and religious identity.”<sup>76</sup> Evidence across occupied areas shows that once occupation outlasts an initial stage of chaos and turns into annexation, Russia introduces more fundamental changes: “over the course of 2022 and 2023, the Russian authorities moved quickly to consolidate administrative and economic control” and doubled down on indoctrination and propaganda to forcibly “russify” the local population. For those interviewed for this research, of whom only a few experienced Russia’s occupation for more than a year, this mainly manifested in two ways, which will be discussed in more detail below: first, in attempts by the occupiers to win the “hearts and minds” of Ukrainians by using incentives and propaganda; and second, in the forceful transformation of Ukrainian identity. Other elements that were not mentioned by the interviewees also belong in this category, such as the forced deportation of Ukrainian children<sup>77</sup> or the ‘economic integration’ of occupied territory into the Russian federation,<sup>78</sup> including the theft of tons of Ukrainian grain and foodstuff by the Russian state.<sup>79</sup>

## Hearts and Minds

While violence and intimidation were and are essential parts of Russia’s occupation regime, one interviewee described them as one side of a “carrots and sticks” approach.<sup>80</sup> An example for “carrots” they named was the use of humanitarian aid: according to an interviewee in Kherson, the occupiers seemingly wanted to present this aid as a gesture of generosity by the new ruling authority. This is highly plausible considering Russia simultaneously blocked international and Ukrainian humanitarian aid from reaching occupied territories.<sup>81</sup> Russia still uses humanitarian as a reward – for instance, for people who join the United Russia party – or withholds it as punishment for refusing a Russian passport.<sup>82</sup> According to interviewees, Russian occupiers also used other “carrots,” including to target retirees: they elevated pensions significantly. Vacation offers for Crimea and the Krasnodar region (in Russia) were other incentives mentioned. This strategy seemed to work in some cases: “a lot of citizens have switched up their views, especially pensioners ... They had a bad life under the Ukrainian government, a small pension, and now they have a better standing.”<sup>83</sup>

In places where the occupying forces did not have time to implement a formalized propaganda campaign, the most important source of propaganda were the direct interactions Ukrainians experienced with occupiers at checkpoints and in supermarkets, where Russian soldiers would

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76 Hird, “The Kremlin’s Occupation Playbook.”

77 Humanitarian Research Lab, “Russia’s Systematic Program for The Re-Education & Adoption of Ukraine’s Children: A Conflict Observatory Report,” Yale School of Public Health, February 14, 2023, <https://hub.conflictobservatory.org/portal/apps/sites/#/home/pages/children-camps-1>.

78 Lewis, “Russia’s Economic Occupation of Southeastern Ukraine.”

79 “Agriculture Weaponised: The Illegal Seizure and Extraction of Ukrainian Grain by Russia,” *Global Rights Compliance*, November 16, 2023, <https://globalrightscpliance.com/2023/11/16/new-report-reveals-large-scale-organised-russian-plan-to-systematically-pillage-ukraines-grain-using-proceeds-to-fund-occupation-and-illegal-war/>.

80 Interview, Kharkiv region.

81 See e.g., “Russia Declines UN Request for Aid Access to Areas Flooded by Ukraine Dam Breach,” *UN News*, June 18, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137832>.

82 Olha Hlushchenko, “Russian Occupation Officials in Donetsk Oblast Hand Out Humanitarian Aid to People Who Join Putin’s United Russia party,” *Ukrainska Pravda*, January 27, 2024, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/01/27/7439111/>; Lily Hyde, “Forced to Fight Your Own People: How Russia is Weaponizing Passports,” *Politico*, January 1, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-citizenship-war-russia-weaponize-passport-passportization-mobilization-draft>.

83 Written answers, Kherson region.

claim: “We came to save you.”<sup>84</sup> A few interviewees stated that occupying soldiers gave identical answers to many questions, presumably because they had used a small guidebook for soldiers (known as “metodichka,” a standard document to be handed out to armies during a military operation).<sup>85</sup> The propaganda operation was aided by the fact that Ukrainian mobile networks were shut down, making it difficult for residents to access any other information. Once Ukrainian mobile networks were capped, there was no cellular connection or internet without a Russian SIM card. Access to Ukrainian media and social networks only became possible via VPN. In an environment ripe with fear, uncertainty and propaganda, it is difficult to ascertain how successful Russia’s propaganda efforts really were. One interviewee said that in their experience, “the most popular answer to anything during occupation was: ‘I don’t know.’”<sup>86</sup>

“The most popular answer to anything during occupation was: ‘I don’t know.’”

Interviewee from Kharkiv region

Where occupation lasted long enough, Russian forces reverted to a Soviet-style propaganda campaign to pursue indoctrination: billboards, leaflets, banners hung around cities and villages, and parades.<sup>87</sup> In Kharkiv region, an interviewee wrote, Russians “were constantly saying on loudspeakers that they were saving us.”<sup>88</sup> Another interviewee, from Kherson, said the overall approach was one of “very Soviet ‘agitation’” and seemed “quite primitive,” mentioning also that the occupiers were selling an enormous quantity of a very cheap alcohol produced in Russia, which they distributed in sketchy-looking plastic canisters: “a very traditional Russian approach to getting people on their side.”<sup>89</sup>

## Russia’s Transformative Politics

Schools were and remain an important battleground for indoctrination. Initially, all schools were closed, as described by several interviewees whose school-age children were either taught online or not at all: “Schools did not work. There are very few children left in the city. Playgrounds are empty.”<sup>90</sup> Over time, the occupiers reopened schools. One interviewee stated that in Kherson, where schools reopened in September 2022, teachers did not want to work with the occupiers, so schools were forced to take on unqualified people.<sup>91</sup> Others remembered rumors about teachers being detained for refusing to cooperate. Some teachers did cooperate: “There was a lot of pressure on parents and teachers to organize education according to the Russian rhetoric,” and there is evidence that teachers in occupied territories obtained specific certificates and “trainings” in Russia to teach the altered school curricula,<sup>92</sup> which feature a Russian version of Ukrainian history, Russian literature and the Russian language, while marginalizing Ukrainian.<sup>93</sup>

84 Interview with key informant (journalist); interview, Kyiv region.

85 Interview with key informant (official). An alleged version of it was published on Telegram by the Ukrainian Main Directorate of Intelligence as mentioned here: “ГУП показало методичку российских агитаторов на захваченных территориях” [“GUR Showed the Methodology of Russian Agitators in the Captured Territories”], *Slovo i Dilo*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.slovo-i-dilo.ua/2022/08/23/novyna/suspilstvo/hur-pokazalo-metodychku-rosijskix-ahitatoriv-zaxopenyx-terytoriyax>.

86 Interview, Kharkiv region.

87 Mentioned by several interviewees and in In2, “Dependency and Dissonance.”

88 Written answers, Kharkiv region.

89 Interview, Kherson.

90 Written answers, Kherson region.

91 In a city in Kharkiv region, they were supposed to re-open on October 1, according to an interviewee, but the city was liberated before this date.

92 Interview with key informant (journalist); See also: Anna Chernenko, “Змусили записати відео, що підтримує «русский мир»: як росіяни нищили освіту та брали у полон освітян на Харківщині” [“Forced to Record a Video Supporting the ‘Russian World’: How Russians Destroyed Education and Captured Educators in Kharkiv Region”], *Hromadske Radio*, October 30, 2022, <https://hromadske.radio/publications/zmusyly-zapysaty-video-scho-vona-pidtrymuie-russkyy-myr-iyak-rosiiany-nyshchily-osvitu-ta-braly-u-polon-osvitian-na-kharkivshchyni>.

93 Hird, “The Kremlin’s Occupation Playbook.”

In some settings where occupation was not permanent or long-term, Ukrainian local administrations were able to remain operational and organize evacuations,<sup>94</sup> but in others the Russian occupiers immediately took over. Officials who refused to cooperate could be subjected to torture.<sup>95</sup> As occupation turned into annexation, administrations of the occupied territories began to be fronted by local collaborators: “Some people who had been selling apples on the markets were suddenly working in high levels of the administration.”<sup>96</sup> In reality, however, these institutions were controlled by the FSB and Russian civilian officials.<sup>97</sup> A few interviewees had heard rumors that Russian civilians were being resettled to occupied areas but had not experienced this firsthand. Research suggests that this resettlement practice by Russia is becoming more prevalent.<sup>98</sup>

“Some people who had been selling apples on the markets were suddenly working in high levels of the administration.”

Interviewee from Kherson region

By making life under occupation very difficult if not impossible for those without a Russian passport, significant pressure was and is put on locals to accept a Russian identity document: “over time inhabitants with Ukrainian passports lose access to essential medical care, and education services, and are not entitled to employment, social benefits, or salaries in the public sector.”<sup>99</sup> An interviewee who spent some 18 months under occupation in Kherson region stated that “the forceful passportization was humiliating ... One can imagine how difficult it is to pledge alliance to the occupying state ... [People] cry when they leave [the passport office].”<sup>100</sup>

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94 As was the case in an interviewee’s location (Kyiv suburb).

95 For instance, the head of the Tsyrukun community near Kharkiv. See: Brian Dooley, “How the Ukrainian Village of Tsyrukun Survived Russian Occupation,” Human Rights First, May 24, 2023, <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/how-the-ukrainian-village-of-tsyrukun-survived-russian-occupation/>.

96 Interview, Kherson region.

97 Lewis, “Russia’s Economic Occupation of Southeastern Ukraine.”

98 Elina Beketova, “Behind the Lines: Russia’s Ethnic Cleansing,” Center for European Policy Analysis, July 27, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/behind-the-lines-russias-ethnic-cleansing/>.

99 Fabian Burkhardt, “The Four Modi of Russia’s Forced Naturalization of Ukrainians: ‘Passportization’ and its Implications for Transitional Justice,” *Ukrainian Analytical Digest* 3 (November 2023): pp. 13–24, DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000646799.

100 Written answers, Kherson region.

# Adapting to Occupation

Interviewees coped and adapted to occupation in a variety of ways. During the first, messy phases of occupation, they were often thrown into a chaotic state of lawlessness and lacked basic resources. Later, many endured the increasingly forceful transformative politics of Russia's occupation. But they also spoke of resistance and collaboration and discussed why they did or did not decide to escape.

## Coping Strategies and Social Ties

When asked what made them resilient and helped them cope with the situation, interviewees stressed the importance of having something to do. Examples they mentioned were day-to-day efforts to survive, cleaning, and volunteer work. Another coping method was keeping track

**“You need a light at the end of the tunnel, even if it is very small.”**

Interviewee from Kyiv region

of time and of what was happening, such as counting missiles as they struck. A social network and family were important factors too – one interviewee mentioned that a family dog helped them with anxiety. Communicating with others and breaking out of the information vacuum was crucial for some. Interviewees handled the state of permanent fear in different ways: one stressed that “attack seemed the best defense. I understood that if I would give into the fear, I would immediately die.”<sup>101</sup> Others mentioned the importance of hope, the conviction that the horror could not go on forever: “You need a light at the end of the tunnel, even if it is very small. Without it, it is very difficult.”<sup>102</sup> A key informant also stressed the importance of people identifying as Ukrainian, being able to tell themselves that “we are not like that.”<sup>103</sup>

Several interviewees shared stories of communities pulling closer together. They reported feeling responsible for their neighbors' homes and protecting them from looting, for instance, by writing “people live here” on fences and walking around in neighbors' yards so that it looked like someone was home. Another interviewee took care of their sick neighbor and shared food and water with them. However, obviously not everyone reacted with kindness to the war: “I did not see only good sides of people,” one interviewee shared. “For instance, when the shops were raided, it was not only the Russians.”<sup>104</sup> Violence and occupation generally fuel mistrust and erode social cohesion,<sup>105</sup> and denunciations in particular had this effect on interviewees: “The hardest part is when people you've known all your life then decide to go for the ‘Russian world’ and betray you.”<sup>106</sup>

**“The hardest part is when people you've known all your life then decide to go for the ‘Russian world’ and betray you.”**

Interviewee from Kherson region

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101 Interview, Kyiv region.

102 Interview, Kyiv region.

103 Interview with key informant (journalist).

104 Interview, Kyiv region.

105 Julia Friedrich and Niklas Balbon, “What Should We Have to Say About It? Perspectives on Peace in Eastern Ukraine,” Global Public Policy Institute, April 20, 2022, <https://gppi.net/2022/04/20/what-should-we-have-to-say-about-it-perspectives-on-peace-in-eastern-ukraine>.

106 Interview, Kherson region.

## Resistance

In the early days of occupation, there were demonstrations in some places, most notably Kherson,<sup>107</sup> but these stopped after they were violently dispersed and participants punished.<sup>108</sup> As a result of arbitrary arrests and kidnappings by occupying forces, Ukrainian civil resistance gradually turned into “clandestine and ‘invisible’ actions.”<sup>109</sup> Such actions took different forms: one interviewee organized a meeting to discuss the situation with all neighbors on their street in a village near Kyiv. Another “had to hide the [Ukrainian] flags in a safe place, just like partisans in World War II.”<sup>110</sup>

Even more dangerous forms of resistance were acts of sabotage and passing on information about Russian army positions to the Ukrainian Armed Forces – an act for which one, if caught, could immediately be shot, according to interviewees.<sup>111</sup> Still, this also had an empowering effect: an interviewee who passed on such information appreciated the feeling of connection to the Ukrainian army and seeing the results of their actions when Russian positions would subsequently be attacked.<sup>112</sup> In Kyiv region, an interviewee was preparing to shoot Russian soldiers with a rifle and had made Molotov cocktails but in the end opted for escape. Another collected other useful information about Russian occupation practices and smuggled it out of the occupied territory on their laptop by hiding this device and showing a second laptop at checkpoints.

Some interviewees described themselves as  
“soldiers of the invisible front.”

Deceiving and misinforming occupiers was another regular strategy. To keep occupiers from looting their neighbor’s house, an interviewee in Kharkiv region told occupiers that an elderly man had died there from tuberculosis. Since they knew that the soldiers were afraid of Covid-19, this person also wore a face mask to scare them away. Others recalled giving cheeky responses when directly interacting with occupiers,<sup>113</sup> such as a Mariupol resident’s neighbor who called out Russian soldiers for shelling their apartment. Other interviewees chose a different approach: they feared being targeted for their work as journalists and described themselves as “soldiers of the invisible front.”<sup>114</sup> A Kharkiv region interviewee simply stated: “I did not argue with the occupiers.”<sup>115</sup>

## Collaboration

The interviewees, who all opposed occupation, also mentioned witnessing or hearing of different forms of collaboration with the occupiers. Most did not consider this a widespread phenomenon, but there was also some uncertainty about this, in part because collaboration remains ill-defined. One estimated the number of active collaborators in Kherson during

107 Felip Daza Sierra, “Ukrainian Non-Violent Civil Resistance in the Face of War,” ICIP and Novact, 2022, [https://www.icip.cat/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ENG\\_VF.pdf](https://www.icip.cat/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ENG_VF.pdf).

108 Interview with key informant (journalist); see also: Iryna Balachuk, “У Херсоні тисячі людей вийшли на мітинг проти окупанта, росіяни відкрили вогонь” [“Thousands of People Rally Against the Occupier in Kherson, Russians Open Fire”], *Ukrainska Pravda*, March 13, 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/03/13/7330971/>.

109 Daza Sierra, “Ukrainian Non-Violent Civil Resistance in the Face of War,” p. 60.

110 Written answers, Kherson region.

111 Interview, Kherson region.

112 Interview, Kyiv region.

113 In Kyiv region, a Russian soldier at a checkpoint wished one interviewee a safe trip, and they responded, “Safe trip to you, too, back to Belarus.”

114 Interview, Kherson.

115 Written answers, Kharkiv region.

the occupation to be very low;<sup>116</sup> another former Kherson resident stated that more people voluntarily worked for the Russians than were forced to.<sup>117</sup>

Interviewees stated that some people wanted to work with the occupiers and passed on a lot of information to them, that the Russians “did not know anything, it was all locals who were paid to give away information.”<sup>118</sup> One interviewee recalled a rumor about a nurse giving up the names of veterans who were hospitalized and whose identities had been covered up to protect them from occupiers in Kherson. Another mentioned a priest from Kyiv region who had allegedly collaborated with the occupiers, and a key informant also stressed that the Russian Orthodox Church served as a popular entry point for Russians into Ukrainian communities.<sup>119</sup>

Collaboration could also occur due to coercion. As one interviewee put it: “Under significant pressure, they forced teachers, doctors, and government officials to cooperate with them, to use their symbols and language. Those who disagreed with their actions and conditions were sent to the interrogation basement.”<sup>120</sup> The distinction between voluntary and coerced collaboration is not clear-cut, and the way collaboration has been dealt with in liberated territories was not necessarily considered fair by some interviewees. They used the example of a waste management company that was being prosecuted for continuing to operate under occupation while others were not.<sup>121</sup>

## Escape

Political allegiance was not the main consideration for interviewees when it came to why they stayed or eventually left an occupied area. Elderly Ukrainians in particular did and do not want to leave their homes – out of fear of the danger of escape, but also because they are weary of having to build a new life and losing all their belongings<sup>122</sup> – which caused several interviewees to stay to take care of elderly or sick parents.

Perhaps the most important factor was the danger that is inherent in planning and implementing an escape: an interviewee from Kyiv region saw with their own eyes shot-out cars with dead people still inside them, which discouraged the person from attempting escape.<sup>123</sup> Rumors regarding filtration also deterred Ukrainians who feared interactions with the occupiers, and indeed, there is evidence that this could lead to detention and abductions.<sup>124</sup> From the research that already exists, it is evident that filtration can last up to several days, which rendered it impossible for Ukrainians travelling with elderly parents. Deciding whether or not to flee was therefore a constant weighing of risks – and of waiting for a moment when the risk of staying would outweigh the risk of leaving.

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116 Interview, Kherson.

117 Interview with key informant (journalist).

118 Interview, Kyiv region.

119 Interview with key informant (researcher). See also: Isobel Koshiw, “The Enemy Within? Ukraine’s Moscow-Affiliated Orthodox Church Faces Scrutiny,” *The Guardian*, April 25, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/25/the-enemy-within-ukraines-moscow-affiliated-orthodox-church-faces-scrutiny>.

120 Written answers, Kherson region.

121 Interview, key informant (journalist).

122 Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, “What It’s Like When Your Loved Ones Won’t Leave Ukraine,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/06/nyregion/ukraine-older-people.html>.

123 Interview, Kyiv region.

124 Lysenko, “Filtration: System, Process, and Goals.”

Furthermore, information regarding evacuation buses or so-called “green corridors” was difficult to come by. In Mariupol, an interviewee’s friend asked Russian soldiers about evacuation buses to un-occupied Ukrainian territory, but they just said, “forget the word ‘Ukraine’.”<sup>125</sup> Escape required extensive resources: in terms of knowing when and where it was possible to flee, and to identify smugglers who could bribe Russian soldiers to get someone out of occupied territory without having to undergo filtration. It also required financial resources. A couple who fled Kherson region through Russia to re-enter Ukraine via the EU paid \$10,000 for this escape. The available evacuation routes also influenced interviewees’ decisions: for some, the only way to escape was through Russia, which some considered too dangerous, while others were principally reluctant to seek safety in the country that had attacked them.

There were also incentives to leave, the first being the realization that occupation would not be over soon. One interviewee had set a fixed deadline for themselves after which they would leave. Another decisive factor was when the dangers of occupation became too concrete: one interviewee’s husband was at risk of being personally targeted, prompting them to make the dangerous journey. A couple sent their children to non-occupied territory once rumors of widespread rape were emerging. Finally, the ability and resources to imagine a different life in another place or country also played a role. Having an aunt to pick one up halfway or international acquaintances to offer a place to stay in an EU country – such circumstances also facilitated escape.<sup>126</sup>

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125 Interview, Mariupol.

126 Interviews, Kharkiv and Kyiv regions.

# The End of Occupation

Those interviewees who experienced liberation by the Ukrainian Armed Forces described an uptick in combat activity leading up to it: “everything was burning, bombs and mines flying everywhere.”<sup>127</sup> An interviewee in Kharkiv region was detained in the basement of a police department; there, they heard the sound of fighting, but they did not think liberation “would be this fast.” There was also an initial feeling of disorientation, as described by an interviewee in Kyiv region: “We heard very loud shelling for about 24 hours. Then it was incredibly silent. We sat at home for another 24 hours. Then, I went to the village center to ask why everything had gone silent ... Others told me that [the] Russians had gone. But we were all unsure whether they just drove away their equipment. A few days later, the first volunteers came to tell us that they left for good. This was very emotional.”<sup>128</sup>

The advances of the Ukrainian army and dawning liberation could also be accompanied by an increase in violence and looting: “When the Russians retreated ... there were more robberies, the Russian soldiers were stealing everything they saw.”<sup>129</sup> In Kherson, retreating occupiers were taking museum exhibits and artworks, “anything of material worth.”<sup>130</sup>

Unfortunately, liberation did not always equal a return to safety. Incoming Ukrainian soldiers in a village in Kharkiv region advised an interviewee to leave, since their village would now become a target for Russian shelling. Kherson has been shelled daily by the Russian Armed Forces since its liberation, causing many to leave. At the time of writing, Russia also attempted the renewed occupation of settlements close to the Russian border in Kharkiv region, while simultaneously attacking previously occupied Kupiansk, also in Kharkiv region, which was liberated in September 2022. In other places, the slow rebuilding of infrastructure, in some cases under constant shelling, has meant that not everyone who fled occupation has been able to return. Overall, economic opportunities in liberated areas remain scarce and social ties are strained by perceptions that the process of prosecuting collaboration is unsatisfactory and unfair.<sup>131</sup>

Still, some interviewees were amazed at how many people returned after liberation, including families and children. In the words of one interviewee<sup>132</sup>:

“Life still goes on. Even though I thought it had already gone.”

Interviewee from Kharkiv region

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127 Interview, Kharkiv region.

128 Interview, Kyiv region.

129 Written answers, Kharkiv region.

130 Interview, Kherson. This is matched by news reports, see e.g.: Ian Lovett, “Russians Systematically Loot Art, Ancient Relics from Ukraine’s Cultural Sites,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russians-systematically-loot-art-ancient-relics-from-ukraines-cultural-sites>.

131 Left Bank Analytics, “Request for Information 14: Social Cohesion in the Deoccupied Territories,” January 27, 2023 (not publicly available).

132 Interview, Kharkiv region.



# Conclusion

“It was very difficult to live through all this.

I do not wish it on anyone.”

Interviewee from Kherson region

In this study, I compiled individual experiences of Ukrainians who lived under Russian occupation between early 2022 and late 2023. As such, the results primarily reflect personal experiences and the way individuals made sense of them – not universal truths. That said, taken together and situated in the context of the other available research, these individual stories allow for important conclusions about Russia’s occupation practice:

- Even if initially chaotic in some places, the Russian occupation followed a clear strategy of erasing Ukrainian identity, permanently altering demographics, and integrating Ukrainian territory into Russia’s administrative and economic structures in increasingly irreversible ways. It is clear from this research that Russia will follow this same playbook, with potential variations based on the lessons it has learned so far, in other areas of Ukraine if given the chance to occupy them (again) in the future.
- The longer occupation lasts, the harder to reverse become the trends I outlined in this research, namely, the forceful and violent integration of Ukrainian territory into Russia’s legal, administrative and political system; and the more difficult it becomes for the local population to refrain from activities that could be considered collaboration (like accepting a Russian passport or working for or in cooperation with occupation authorities).
- The use of violence by Russian forces against the local population was and is systematic. It specifically targets those considered to be “pro-Ukrainian,” but it can also occur randomly, particularly during the early, typically more chaotic phases of occupation. To understand why atrocities were large-scale in some places and occurred at a smaller scale in others would require extensive comparative qualitative and quantitative research.<sup>133</sup>
- Occupation, no matter how long it lasts, has disastrous effects on social ties. The stories of Ukrainian neighbors moving closer together are heartening signs of humanity in the face of horror. However, the mistrust fueled by denunciations, betrayal and violence has ruptured Ukraine’s social fabric in many places and will have long-lasting effects.
- On an individual level, the decisions whether to stay under occupation or to escape is shaped by a multitude of factors, including having an opportunity as well as the knowledge and resources needed to flee. The nature of family obligations (which may cause people to stay or to flee) also plays a role. Therefore, the fact that someone remained in an occupied area, even for years, cannot serve as a clear-cut indicator of their political allegiance.
- While occupation is often framed in territorial terms, its real impact is on the people whose only ‘options’ to live as free Ukrainians are liberation – or escape. In the words of one interviewee: “It was very difficult to live through all this. I do not wish it on anyone.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Such research could build on and expand the hypotheses of Stathis Kalyvas and others who have examined the dynamics of violence in civil war to reflect full-scale, inter-state war. See: Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>134</sup> Written answers, Kherson region.

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## **Reflect. Advise. Engage.**

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Cover photo: Citizens in Balakliya freely move across a destroyed bridge after the city was liberated from Russian occupation in September 2022.

Photo credit: Vitaliy Holovin / Shutterstock

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