

THE WAR DIARY*

(AN EXCERPT)

BY YEVGENIA BELORUSETS



*First published on the website of ISOLARII; reprinted in the anthology *In the Face of War*: isolarii.com. Reprinted here with the publisher's permission. Photos on pages 7, 8, 10, and 11 are from *The War Diary*, courtesy of Yevgenia Belorusets.

DAY 1

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24

The Beginning

I woke up early this morning to eight missed calls on my cell phone. They were from my parents and some friends. At first I thought something had happened to my family and that my friends were trying to reach me because for some reason my parents had alerted them first. Then my imagination traveled in another direction, and I pictured an accident, a dangerous situation in the center of Kyiv, something to warn your friends about. A cold anxiety gripped me. I called my cousin because her beautiful voice, brave and rational, always has a calming effect on me. She just said: “Kyiv has been shelled. A war has broken out.”

Many things have a beginning. When I think about the beginning, I imagine a line drawn very clearly on a white surface. The eye observes the simplicity of this trace of movement—one that is sure to begin somewhere and end somewhere. But I have never been able to imagine the beginning of a war. Strange. I was in Donbas when war with Russia broke out in 2014. But I had entered the war then, entered into a foggy, opaque zone of violence. I still remember the intense guilt I felt about being a guest in a catastrophe, a guest who could leave at will, because I lived somewhere else.

The war was already there, an intruder, something strange, alien, and insane that had no justification to happen in that place and at that time. Back then, I kept asking people in Donbas how all this could have started, and I always got different answers.

I think that the beginning of this war in Donbas was one of the most mythol-

ogized moments for the people of Kyiv, precisely because it remained incomprehensible how such an event is born. At that time, in 2014, people in Kyiv said, “The people of Donbas, those Ukrainian Putin-sympathizers, invited the war to our country.” This alleged “invitation” has for some time been considered an explanation for how the absolutely impossible—war with Russia—suddenly became possible after all.

After I got off the phone with my cousin, I paced around my apartment for a while. My head was absolutely blank. I had no idea what to do now. Then my phone rang again. One call followed the next, friends came forward with plans to escape, some called to convince themselves we were still alive. I quickly grew tired. I talked a lot, constantly repeating the words “the war.” In the meantime, I would look out the window and listen to check if the explosions were approaching. The view from the window was ordinary, but the sounds of the city were strangely muffled—no children yelling, no voices in the air.

Later, I went out and discovered an entirely new environment, an emptiness that I had never seen here, even on the most dangerous days of the Maidan protests.

Sometime later I heard that two children had died from shelling in Kherson Oblast, in the south of the country, and that a total of fifty-seven people had died in the war today. The numbers transformed into something very concrete, as if I had already lost someone myself. I felt angry at the whole world. I thought, “This has been allowed to happen. It is a crime against everything human, against the great common space where we live and hope for a future.”

I’m staying with my parents tonight. I’ve visited a bomb shelter next to the house, so I know where we’ll all go when the shelling comes later.



“ALL OF A SUDDEN THE NIGHT IS SILENT.”

(From *The War Diary*, Day 2)

The war has begun. It is after midnight. I will hardly be able to fall asleep, and there is no point in enumerating what has changed forever.



DAY 2

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 25

Air Raids

I wake up at seven in the morning to the sirens warning of air raids in progress. My mother is convinced that Russia will not dare to shell the thousand-year-old St. Sophia Cathedral in our city. She believes that our house, which is in the immediate vicinity of the cathedral, is safe. That’s why she decides against going to the bomb shelter. My father is sleeping.

I think if a UNESCO monument could actually stop the Russian army from shelling, this war wouldn’t have started in the first place. My head is throbbing with thoughts: Kyiv under fire, abandoned by the whole world, which is ready to sacrifice Ukraine in the hope that it will feed and satiate the aggressor for some time.

Kyiv is being shelled for the first time since the Second World War.

I am struggling with myself. I know that slowly the world is waking up and beginning to see that it's not just about Kyiv and Ukraine. It's about every house, every door—it's about every life in Europe that is threatened as of today.

[...]



DAY 4

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 27

An Extinguished City

Normally, the many brightly lit windows in Kyiv warm the city's cold February days. The lights have something secret, private, but at the same time cozy about them. But now the lights of the city have gone out. People are afraid of Russian missiles and artillery fire. I tape my windows shut so that they won't shatter in case of shelling. I go out on the balcony to see if my apartment is dark enough. I put only one lamp in each room—they hardly give off any light where they stand on the floor. It is difficult for me to find my way

around the apartment, but I am trying to discover a new form of comfort.

The sirens that warn of air strikes wail with a long signal that is somewhat reminiscent of the playful sounds elephants use to communicate. In Kyiv, the wailing of sirens is also a form of communication, but the message is always the same: "Hide, hide well!"

When dawn came, I decided for some reason to clean my apartment. I thought, "Right now you have to stick to the plans, to the usual routines." From the outside, my apartment is almost black, with its empty, dark windows greeting all the other dark and empty apartments in the city.

The darkness is frightening, but at the same time I sense that the city has decided to defend itself. On official Telegram channels, I read about so-called "diversionary groups," Russian units moving into Kyiv as a vanguard. Like terrorists. Their goal is to destabilize the city, carry out attacks on politicians, and ultimately take Kyiv. One such group appears to have shot at the car of two women who had decided to flee the city with their children this morning. The women and their children died.

My thoughts become as dark as the windows of my apartment. While cleaning, I thought that when I write this diary, I should make a joke about house-keeping during war. My tip would be: "Cleanliness is a must in a dark room with taped windows—if you were going to do it earlier and are almost crying now, go ahead and mop your apartment anyway. True, you will not see anything, and the apartment may not get much cleaner, but following procedures and implementing plans is more important."

The fourth day of the war is over. Half the city is resisting the normalization of violence that is knocking on every door. War also tests us to see if we have even a touch of compassion for those sent here to murder. Since the war began, sixteen children have been killed across the country. In my town, nine "civilians" (I hate that word more and more) have died so far, and forty-seven have been injured, including three children.

The destruction of the small town of Schastia, "Happiness," in northeastern Ukraine, began with the shelling of an electrical station. At some point it was destroyed, the lights went out, the water, the heating. In distress, people, especially elderly residents, went outside to get water or food. Then the soldiers attacked, with artillery and rockets. A bus with fleeing people was fired upon. There are no journalists in this area at the moment. No one counts the injured, the murdered. Who will describe what Putin has done to Donbas since the beginning of the war, since his operation to "Protect the people of Donbas from Ukrainian fascists"?

By occupying these territories and waging information warfare, Putin has managed to isolate this region from the world. The occupied territories have not been observed by human rights organizations since 2014, and now the Russian

"PHOTOGRAPHY IS SOMETHING THAT YOU CANNOT CONTROL COMPLETELY, AND THERE ARE ALWAYS, IN EACH PHOTO, FOOTPRINTS THAT YOU DIDN'T PUT THERE."

(From *The War Diary*, Introduction)

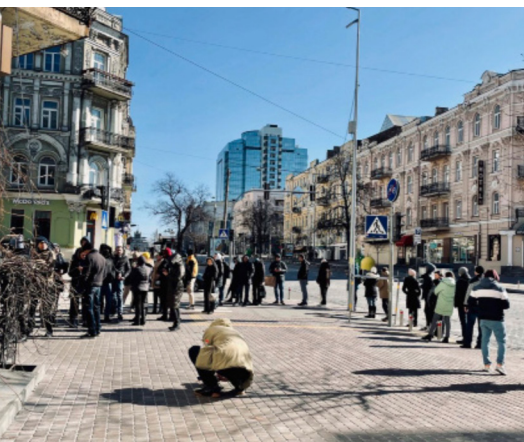


Photo of Yevgenia Belorusets by Olga
Tsybulska. Courtesy of the Columbia Institute
for Ideas and Imagination (Paris).



army is once again showing how little it values the lives of these people.

From the news, I learn that the Regional History Museum—in the settlement of Ivankiv, in Kyiv Oblast—was destroyed. In it were the works of Maria Prymachenko, one of the most famous twentieth-century artists in Ukraine. A joint exhibition of my photographs and her paintings had been planned for the fall, which is a great honor for me. I am sure that somehow, somewhere, this exhibition will take place.



DAY 15

THURSDAY, MARCH 10

Illusions

In a diary, a day feels like a self-contained unit. An entry feeds the illusion that conclusions can be drawn—the illusion of a logical narrative.

This war takes shape through many such illusions. For example, it had a preface that preceded the actual attacks: Russian divisions gathered at the border of Ukraine, politicians spoke of war, dip-

lomats left the country. The war followed upon this expectation, this prediction, like a play where the plot is told in a preamble, as a prophecy to be fulfilled.

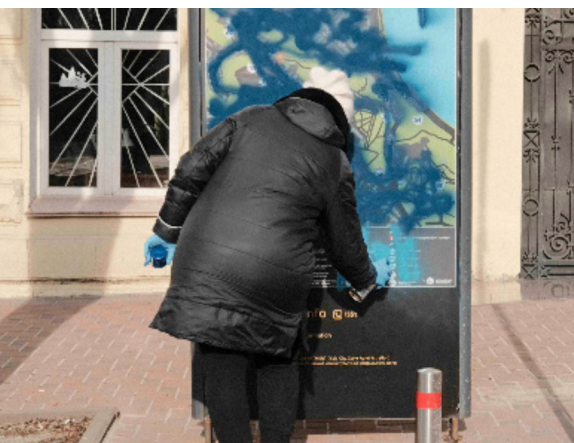
I am still struggling to imagine what happens when you learn that a war is knocking at the door, a war whose cycle will terrorize peaceful cities with bombs and murder thousands of people. Today, the news in Ukraine said that civilian casualties are much higher than military casualties. I suspect that before the war started, even the politicians who predicted it did not believe it would happen and kept hoping it could be avoided. Otherwise, the world would have done everything—or much more than “everything”—not to allow this abyss. The war was unrealistic, absurd, and frankly unthinkable. And when you wake up in the midst of war, it remains the same: still unimaginable.

At the political level, the unimaginable was compounded by the fear of a huge phantom—a phantom that a corrupt and aggressive dictatorship had spent years constructing with propaganda. This phantom even managed to convince itself that it was powerful enough to capture Ukraine in just a few days with a blitzkrieg. It would be like

**“I AM STILL STRUGGLING
TO IMAGINE WHAT
HAPPENS WHEN YOU
LEARN THAT A WAR
IS KNOCKING AT
YOUR DOOR.”**

(From *The War Diary*, Day 15)





**“IT’S ONE OF THOSE
MOMENTS WHEN I
THINK I’VE DISCOVERED
SOMETHING
FUNDAMENTAL:
I UNDERSTAND WHAT
PHOTOGRAPHY IS FOR.”**

(From *The War Diary*, Day 16)

a vacation for the soldiers—they would be greeted with flowers. A quick victory was guaranteed. Fear tied our hands, and caution seemed the wisest option. Everyone waited until the catastrophe really began. Now, in Kyiv, and together with the whole world, I have to watch as houses, lives, and memories disappear in a huge fire.

And still, in the midst of war, in the midst of senseless death, injury, suffering, and loss, more crimes are predicted. Russia comes forward almost daily with old and new demands, always based on territorial claims. A new preface is being written into the war narrative once again. If its demands for more territories are rejected, Russia will announce even more war, even more death.

As I write, a friend calls to say that her mother, who still lives in Kharkiv, was out on the balcony when she spotted a man speaking Russian. He was relaying the coordinates for a bombing on the street outside her house. He was apparently a *navodchik*, an antiquated word meaning “gunner”—someone who decides the location of the next strike and helps to shell peaceful districts. The distribution of food was supposed to happen next to her house.

Perhaps that is why the *navodchik* chose this spot.

The father of another friend stayed in Kharkiv because the employees of his small company could not escape the city. He wanted to help people on the ground. For days he endured the rocket and mortar attacks unharmed. But now, my friend is trying to find psychological help for her father, in this city under fire. He can no longer understand where he is or what is happening around him.

In Kharkiv, during the first days of the war, the animals in a small private zoo were injured. The zoo staff stayed in the city to care for them. Today, some of the staff were deliberately shot at on their way home from the zoo. Some were injured. Some died.

An acquaintance of mine spent twelve days in her basement in a small town outside Kyiv—without light, almost without food. She was rescued today.

I myself was detained today on the street in Kyiv by an elderly couple. They noticed that I was taking photos and suspected that I might be spying for Russia. They took me to a checkpoint in the hope that I would be disarmed. And all I had wanted was to take a hopeful photo of the city. I wanted to show that food

delivery services were running again, bringing meals to the elderly and the sick. The few remaining employees walk around the city to make deliveries! This means that those who need help but cannot shop for themselves will have a little more security and care. ■

Yevgenia Belorusets, born in Kyiv in 1980, is a Ukrainian artist, writer, and photographer. Her collection of short stories, Lucky Breaks, for which she received the International Literature Award—Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2020, was published in Eugene Ostashevsky’s English translation by New Directions Publishers (2022). The War Diary, co-published daily in English translation by Art Forum and ISOLARII, was presented alongside the wartime work of Ukrainian artists Nikita Kadan and Lesia Khomenko on the occasion of their exhibition at the 59th Venice Biennale. Belorusets is currently a fellow at Columbia University’s Institute for Ideas and Imagination (Paris).