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Gloom in Ukraine: Two years after the Russian invasion, Ukrainian morale has plummeted

By Tim Judah

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Two years after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, I was on a night train crossing the country from Dnipro to Chełm in Poland, writing notes and organizing my impressions. I had twenty-four hours of travel ahead of me, so there was plenty of time. Serhii is dead. Iryna is crying. Mila is ok. “Ha ha! He is sunbathing!” (He is dead.)

The front line is more or less where it was at the end of 2022, but the Ukrainians are under severe pressure, and some are convinced that the Russians are about to punch through and capture a lot more territory. In the Black Sea, on the other hand, the Ukrainians have pushed most of the Russian navy from its base in Crimea and broken the naval blockade of their grain exports. In the shadow world of cyber war, where both sides are attempting to steal intelligence and disable each other’s infrastructure, it is hard to assess who has the upper hand. Neither side talks about defeats there unless they are so glaring they cannot be hidden.

Two years ago shoulder-fired antitank missiles saved Kyiv, and since then long-range rocket and artillery systems have transformed the battlefield, but now the Ukrainians are desperately short of the munitions—especially shells—promised by their allies. They are also in an arms race with the Russians when it comes to electronic warfare, drones, and drone-jamming technology. All of these are developing with dizzying speed, and the proportion of soldiers killed or injured by drones rather than artillery is rising fast.

In the middle of the war, it is difficult to tie these disparate elements together and come to a meaningful conclusion. After all, from day one the experts, and the Ukrainian public, have been consistently wrong. In the weeks leading up to Russia’s attack, very few Ukrainians could bring themselves to believe that Vladimir Putin was really about to unleash a full-scale invasion.

Many experts also doubted this. His build-up on the border was posturing, they said. In fact Putin wanted and still wants to destroy Ukraine as a state and to reclaim what he

regards as Russian land. On March 4 Dmitry Medvedev, the former Russian president and now deputy chairman of its Security Council, which is chaired by Putin, gave a lecture in front of a map showing a tiny future Ukraine centered on Kyiv, with most of the rest gobbled up by Russia and parts of the west distributed to Poland, Hungary, and Romania. "One of Ukraine's former leaders said at some point that Ukraine is not Russia," said Medvedev. "That concept needs to disappear forever. Ukraine is definitely Russia. Historic parts of the country need to come home."

After the 2022 invasion began, the conventional wisdom was that Ukraine would collapse within days. Not only did it withstand the attack, but by the end of the year the Russians had been driven back from Kyiv, from Kherson, and from huge swaths of the northern Kharkiv area. Buoyed by those successes, many swung toward extreme optimism. Experts and media outlets drew lines on maps showing how, in the summer 2023 counteroffensive, Ukrainian thrusts down to the Sea of Azov would divide and defeat Russian forces. Ukrainians began saying to friends that the next time they saw each other they would be drinking coffee in Crimea, which the Russians occupied and annexed in 2014. They were sure that victory, defined as the restoration of Ukrainian control over all its territory within its internationally recognized borders, was within reach.

The problem was that while the aid that Ukraine needed for the offensive arrived, it was too little, too late. Also, the Russians did not waste time: they built massive defense lines that proved impossible to breach. More than 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been sent to NATO countries for training, but it is common to hear that much of what they learned was irrelevant. Their instructors' experience in Iraq and Afghanistan held no lessons for waging modern trench warfare, for dealing with hundreds of miles of minefields, and for coping with a technologically advanced enemy who can see you almost 24/7 and whom you can see on the front, too, thanks to drones. And so, with the failure of last year's counteroffensive to take more than a few villages, and with Russia now launching its own counteroffensive, Ukrainian morale has plummeted, and many foreign analysts are painting a gloomy picture.

I wanted to visit many of the people I have written about in these pages. I retraced my steps along the eastern and southern front lines, and I met many new people. One of them was Oleksii Erinchak. On February 16 he opened a huge new bookshop called Sens on Khreshchatyk, Kyiv's grand central boulevard. To invest during a war is obviously a sign of confidence. He talked about why he wanted the shop to be a flagship for Ukrainian books, even though he comes from a Russian-speaking family and town in Ukraine. "Until now," he said, Russian books and translations had entirely dominated the

Ukrainian market, but today Ukrainian culture, which had hitherto been "invisible," needed to be "cleaned up and lit up."

Downstairs, young people were reading and working in front of modern book displays. Upstairs, where a space for talks and events was still being readied, I spotted a large trunk of equipment on whose side was written in English: "Everything is illuminated." Having just read Jonathan Safran Foer's 2002 novel of that name, which is set in Ukraine, I asked Erinchak if this was a literary joke. He said he had never heard of the novel and assumed it was "something to do with the lighting." We tracked down the electrician, and he said he had no idea what it was about, and the boss was not there.

Then Erinchak showed me the walls that were being patched up. On the outside, he said, these Soviet-era buildings looked very grand, but they were shoddily built. (I could draw out a front line metaphor here, but I won't.) I asked him about the current pessimism. He said he did not drink alcohol or coffee or consume sugar, so "I don't have dopamine spikes in my life!" He had read books about World War II, he told me, so he knew that the front moves "because it is a war" and "we cannot win all the time and cannot lose all the time." He was confident that Ukraine would eventually win, so it was necessary for him to play his part by opening a bookshop that would contribute to an understanding that Ukraine was part of a common European culture and not something "eastern."

That is not to say that one should discount bad news. The situation is serious. On February 17 the eastern town of Avdiivka fell. It was the first significant gain by the Russians since they captured Bakhmut last May. Avdiivka lies just north of Donetsk, which the Russians and their proxies seized in 2014. It is also part of Donetsk province, which is one of the four that Putin annexed to the Russian Federation in 2022. Avdiivka was a well-fortified redoubt surrounded by Russian-held territory on three sides, and its fall, though it was known to be coming for weeks, sent shock and fear through the frontline communities of the east and across Ukraine. For the pessimists it marked a breach in a crumbling line through which the Russian hordes would now pour. Yet the deputy commander of the Third Assault Brigade, Major Rodion Kudriashov, whose men had just retreated from the town and who has been fighting the Russians for a decade, said, "We have lost a small battle, but we have not lost the war."

In the summer of 2023 I reported from Kupiansk, which the Russians had seized in February 2022, then lost the following September, and have been trying to take back ever since. A few weeks ago I returned with a colleague. Again we crossed the Oskil River, which passes through the middle of town and could be a natural fortification if the Russians return. On my previous visit we could go no further because of the shelling.

This time we were able to drive several miles closer to the front, through the ruined little town of Petropavlivka. Beyond it we saw rows of barbed wire, minefields, and concrete antitank traps known as dragon’s teeth stretching far into the distance. Since the failure of the 2023 counteroffensive the Ukrainians say they have moved to a position of “strategic defense.” I imagine that what they have built here and claim they are building everywhere else along the front mirrors the practically impregnable lines that the Russians have built a few miles away and that successfully thwarted the Ukrainians last summer.

In the distance the sound of shelling was constant. In bunkers dug underground, fortified with logs and surrounded by thick, viscous mud, soldiers complained that they were tired and lacked ammunition. A soldier whose call sign is Tyhyi told me that he came from a Russian-occupied town in Luhansk province, where his ex-wife and children still live. It was quite possible, he added, that his nineteen-year-old son had been mobilized and was only a few miles away in the Russian army.

Back in Kupiansk I wanted to see where Serhii Shalyhin was killed. He was fifty-two and one of the founders of P’yatykhatky-Bam, an aid group from just outside Kharkiv. I had traveled with the cheerful, bearded Shalyhin and P’yatykhatky-Bam for two days at the end of 2022.

Last September 19 he was with a colleague in a minibus, crossing the Oskil on a makeshift bridge, when they were hit by a missile. Both of them, two women they were evacuating, and two others whom they had picked up along the road all died. Tina Pyrozhenko, his partner of eight years, was in a car behind them.

A few days before my visit to Kupiansk, at the aid group’s headquarters outside Kharkiv, I met Pyrozhenko and Shalyhin’s mother, but they did not want to talk about him. It was too upsetting, they said. In a corner of the room they have made a small shrine with two photos of him. In one he is in uniform and in the other he is in civilian clothes with his arm tenderly around Pyrozhenko. In front of the photos are two memorial candles, a shot glass, some yellow and blue ribbons, and a Snickers bar.

Pyrozhenko said the mood was one of “dejection.” Alice Mirovská, a Czech volunteer who has spent much of the last two years with P’yatykhatky-Bam, added a few things that some Ukrainians might be embarrassed to say to a foreign journalist. There were growing tensions “between those who are doing something” for the country “and those who are just living their own lives. There are a lot of Ukrainians who don’t give a shit.” She is not the only person I have met recently who has talked about such tensions. “People don’t have money, and it seems never-ending,” she said.

When I was there in late 2022 P'yatykhatky-Bam's headquarters and storage rooms were overflowing with aid for civilians displaced by the fighting or in desperate need because supplies were not getting through to them. Now there was less of that and much more for soldiers. There were lines of small steel stoves destined for bunkers, homemade candles in tin cans that give off heat as well as light, and boxes of ball bearings to pack inside homemade drone-dropped shells.

Later, driving south from Kupiansk, the sound of shellfire all along the distant front line followed us. The land is flat and wooded, and explosions can be heard up to twenty-five miles away. At night, as my colleague and I were on a forest back road, we saw military vehicles taking advantage of the dark to move around and what seemed like a soldier asleep at the wheel of his quad bike, stopped in the middle of the road. A deer darted past. Since groups of armed hunters could be mistaken for Russians, or indeed be Russian infiltrators pretending to be hunters, hunting has been more or less banned since the 2022 invasion. As a result the deer population, along with that of foxes, boar, and other wild animals and birds, has soared.

Pokrovsk was full of soldiers who had just retreated from Avdiivka, thirty miles to the southeast. Some were packed into the Corleone pizzeria. When I asked them if morale was at rock bottom, they told me the same thing as soldiers I talked to elsewhere: everyone is focused on the job they have to do, their colleagues, their patch of ground. The greatest determinant of morale is whether they trust their commander to make sensible decisions and not risk their lives unnecessarily. Of course, no one was happy that Avdiivka had fallen, but no one I met regretted the retreat. To have fought on would have been reckless, they said. Lives would have been lost uselessly, as in Bakhmut, where thousands died before the city fell.

The fact that the US and other countries had failed to deliver the ammunition they needed was a major reason for Avdiivka's loss, they told me, but it was not the only one. The Russians threw everything they had at the town. A drone operator told me how he had watched as Russian soldiers dashed across open ground, only half of them making it across alive. The Russians also battered the town with incredibly destructive glide bombs, which can be released from planes tens of miles away, beyond the reach of Ukrainian air defenses. No wonder Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, was pleading for more Patriot air defense systems at a press conference a few days later in Kyiv.

In another town I found Mila Makarova, whom I had also written about. In 2022 she was a paramedic close to the front. Now she is responsible for medical evacuations to a full

stabilization unit, the first place the wounded are sent before being dispatched to a hospital. You have to come at night, she said, because most evacuations from the front take place under cover of darkness. That night they began to come in starting at 9:30, mostly with concussions from explosions and light shrapnel injuries, but nothing life-threatening. She introduced me to her colleagues, including Andrii Semiankiv, an anesthetist who heads the unit. She told me that "he is a well-known novelist," something I did not take in at that moment.

They told me that today 30 to 40 percent of injuries were drone-related, compared to almost none six months ago. In the past a wounded man could be carried to safety by his comrades and then evacuated in a vehicle. Now enemy drone operators, who during the day can see everything on the other side of the front line, wait until a rescue is attempted and then strike, since they can kill more that way. As a result, it is taking longer to get the wounded out, and more are dying. This is why evacuations happen mostly at night—because although the Russians have thermal imaging drones that can detect people in the dark, they have fewer of them than the regular ones. At another stabilization unit a doctor told me that 50 percent of the casualties he was seeing were now drone-related.

The building we were in was large, and the windows had been boarded up. From outside only the tiniest slivers of light escaped. Makarova insisted that I not identify the location, as the Russians were after them. This was paranoia, I thought. I was wrong. A week later the town, like others in the east, was hit with a volley of devastating missile strikes, followed by a second wave some days later. I had told Makarova that she and her colleagues were doing an amazing job, and later she wrote to me that it was "not enough. No matter how good we are, medical services don't win wars."

When the strikes happened, I was back in Kyiv and began to gather a parcel of goods to send to her. As I was interviewing Erinchak in the new bookshop, I asked him if he could recommend a book to send her. He asked me about Makarova and said, "She might like this, then": Semiankiv's Dancing With Bones, about a depressed and heavy-drinking pathologist who tries to make some extra cash by stealing organs for transplant from the bodies he examines. It was one of the shop's best-selling novels. When we met, I asked Semiankiv if he was writing anything, and he said he was not, as it was enough to concentrate on the job at hand. At the same time, he is certainly gathering more material than most contemporary novelists can even dream about.

On the southern front the Russians are trying to take back Robotyne, one of the few places liberated by Ukraine during last summer's counteroffensive. The defense is conducted from the little town of Orikhiv just to its north. Every building there has been

damaged or destroyed, and it feels like a ghost town. In a basement the commander of the Third Brigade of the National Guard, who goes by the call sign Chief, sat in front of monitors watching live feeds from surveillance drones. Several colleagues were also glued to screens. In one feed a Russian could be seen lying on his back. He was dead, but they joked that he was sunbathing. Another one suddenly sprinted between two vehicles, and we watched as an attack drone moved over him and dropped a shell. A large quadrocopter, which can carry thirty pounds of explosives, stood in the corner. "The Russians call her 'Baba Yaga,'" said Chief—the name of a witch in Slavic folklore.

The Ukrainian commanders I met said that the desperate shortage of artillery shells forced them to pick their targets with the utmost care. The Russians, by contrast, could choose an entire area and just bombard it with shells. A major reason for the shortage is that Republicans in the US Congress have blocked a $60 billion aid package for Ukraine. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, who met with Donald Trump on March 8, reported that Trump said that if he is elected in November the Ukrainians would get not "a single penny" from the US. On March 12 the Biden administration announced that it was sending Ukraine up to $300 million in weapons, but those will last only a few weeks. The Europeans meanwhile have been able to deliver only half the aid they have promised, but in the past few weeks the Czechs have identified 800,000 shells around the world that can be bought for Ukraine. Now it is a race against time to get them to the front before the Russians make any further breakthroughs.

But shells are not the only problem. In the early months of the war tens of thousands of Ukrainians joined the military to fight the Russians, but now that enthusiasm has evaporated, and although the country has a million men (and some women) under arms, that is not enough. Too many are spending too long at the front without being relieved, and behind the lines you hear people asking questions they never would have asked two years ago. "This place is still so corrupt," said Kyrylo, a sailor who had been on leave in his hometown of Dnipro when the invasion began and could not go back to sea, since most men aged eighteen to sixty are not allowed to leave. It did not mean he didn't want Ukraine to win, he said, but if he was mobilized, he would certainly feel less than enthusiastic for the fight.

Also in Dnipro a taxi driver told me that he was a soldier who had fought in Bakhmut but was now in a back-office job. He complained that he was paid badly and that was why he drove a taxi when not at work. I said that soldiers at the front earned $3,000 a month—a huge amount for Ukraine. "Yes, but maybe only for a week before it is all over for them," he replied. A friend who works in public relations and did not want me to give his name said that he "did not give a shit about Donbas," which makes up much of eastern Ukraine, and feared being mobilized because training was poor, you had no idea how

long it would be for, and there were too many bad commanders who could easily dispatch you to your death. Now the shortage of ammunition sapped morale even more. No one talked like this two years ago.

In the industrial town of Zaporizhzhia I met sixty-seven-year-old Iryna, who manages a team that oversees distribution for a food company. Along with their own shops they supply local hospitals. The authorities are cagey when it comes to military casualty numbers, but as the war drags on, it is clear that they don't reveal the full extent of civilian casualties, either. In a story I could not confirm, a friend in Kyiv told me that near where he worked, a factory producing items for military use had been hit and scores are believed to have died. None of those deaths were reported. I was told that the same was happening in Russia, where Ukrainian strikes are increasingly common.

Iryna told me that while it was a "crude measure," she knew when something really bad had happened because the hospitals suddenly "double their order of potatoes from 100 to 200 kilos." Fear had been coursing through Zaporizhzhia since the fall of Avdiivka, she said. Russia occupies some 70 percent of Zaporizhzhia province, which it annexed in September 2022, so its capital, with nearly half of the region's population and much of its industry, is definitely in Putin's sights. Since the fall of Avdiivka, she told me, "I have prohibited the people in my office from talking about the news. If they do, they can't concentrate, and the whole day is lost."

On social media all sorts of morale-sapping rumors are circulating, many of them no doubt spread by the Russians. "I understand that they can organize these messages," Iryna said, "but I know there are a lot of people who don't." On her phone she showed me a news report on Telegram about twelve civilians, including five children, killed two days earlier in Odesa. Of the more than two thousand who had responded, more than two hundred had clicked an emoji such as a heart, smiley face, or thumbs-up. Of course, those people could be in Russia, working for a Russian troll farm, or in Peru for that matter, but they could also be neighbors. Then she burst into tears. Grinding people down and undermining their will to resist is just as important a Russian tactic as continually pounding the front, towns near it, and cities in the rest of Ukraine.

Despite sanctions, Russia's economy has not collapsed. It has moved to a wartime footing, and there is no political force there to oppose the sacrifice of tens of thousands of men in Ukraine. Russian and Ukrainian sources claim that between 16,000 and 17,000 Russians died in the five months they took to capture Avdiivka. Between 1979 and 1989 the Soviets lost 15,000 men in their failed attempt to control Afghanistan.

Yevhen Hlibovytky, who heads the Frontier Institute think tank in Kyiv, said that as hard as things are, he saw no sign of Ukraine either imploding or succumbing to any pressure to sign a deal with Russia in which it sacrificed lost territory in exchange for peace. There was "no demand" for that, he said, because it was clear that this would simply give Russia time to "rearm and continue." The problem, in his opinion, is that Western countries, while not wanting Russia to win, also are frightened of the consequences of its defeat and thus are not giving Ukraine the "effective tools" to secure it. In the meantime, he said, "Ukrainians have adapted and are continuing to adapt to protracted war." It was important not to be infected by pessimism, because "pessimism renders you ineffective."

Mykola Kapitonenko, who teaches international relations at Kyiv's Taras Shevchenko National University, says that the big difference between now and two years ago is that Ukrainians have become far less emotional and far more realistic in their assessments of the war. What worries him is not so much a major Russian breakthrough on the front but the simple fact that Russia has a lot more men willing and able to fight than Ukraine. Ukrainian legislators are currently discussing a new mobilization law that could lead to as many as 500,000 being drafted, but, he says, "then we will have the same problem next year and then the year after that and I don't see any kind of long-term strategy." In the modern world, wars are unpredictable, and it can be hard for a much stronger military power to defeat a weaker opponent. However, with Russia also adapting to an extended war, "it will be very difficult for us to prevail in the long run to achieve victory as we want it," meaning retaking all the territory lost since 2014.

Maybe so. But as Kapitonenko says, wars are unpredictable. Ukraine's success in the Black Sea is due to devastatingly effective home-developed sea drones. Also, slowy but surely, Russia's energy infrastructure is coming under attack. On March 12 at least twenty-five drones and several missiles targeted Russian oil installations, one reportedly striking a refinery near Nizhny Novgorod, 620 miles from Ukraine, that produces almost 6 percent of Russia's refined crude. Technology is a factor that can make up for Ukrainian weaknesses elsewhere.

Two years ago Dmytro Lysovyy was an executive at Samsung, and his friend Yuriy Ganusyak was a cycling coach whose hobby was drone racing. Last year they went into business and began manufacturing batteries for drones and drone-jamming systems. Tens of thousands of drones are being made or imported every month. Did that mean that drones, whether for surveillance, as kamikaze weapons, or for dropping bombs, were rendering artillery less important? In their workshop in Kyiv, where a handful of men sat soldering and putting together battery packs, they said that drones could not replace artillery, but they could complement it. They added that since basic drones were

so much cheaper than a single artillery shell, Ukraine got a lot more bang for its buck with them.

FPV, or “first-person view,” drones, which have cameras that let the operator direct them, “are helping us survive during this shell famine which we have now,” said Lysovyy. In the meantime, the two are exchanging information with companies that are working on prototype AI targeting systems that will help overcome electronic warfare systems, which can throw an attack drone off course a split second before it hits its target.

When I raised the issue of the current pessimism, Ganusyak said, “We are not optimists or pessimists. We are just doing our job. We are doing what we can. It is like a story from Auschwitz. The first to give up were the optimists and then the pessimists. But only the guys who did something survived.”

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