CULTURE AND POLITICS

Liberties

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The Battle of Irpin

On the day the Russians invaded Ukraine, Patol Moshevitz, a landscape architect and painter, woke early and looked out the window of his apartment on the fourteenth floor of one of the newest, most desirable buildings in the city of Irpin. He could see for miles in almost every direction: Kyiv, Bucha, most of Irpin, and the Hostomel airfield just across the marsh to the north. A big bear of a man with a shaved head, he saw a swarm of Russian helicopters descending on the airport. The noise was deafening even where he was, and a dark plume of smoke rose on the horizon.

Moshevitz dressed hurriedly and went into town, hoping

to sign up with a Territorial Defense unit and fight alongside the regular army. But the recruitment center was swamped with volunteers, and there were no guns, so he went back to his apartment. "I decided to help in my own way," he told me later. He spent the next nine days in his crow's-nest flat observing the region with binoculars and providing detailed reports on enemy positions — approaching tanks, gun placements, checkpoints, and other vital information — to the fighters defending Irpin.

I met Moshevitz in early June, eight weeks after the battle of Irpin. We sat in his apartment, subsequently shelled and now partially restored, as he narrated the month-long fight, using a spoon to point out strategic locations on a map I pulled up on my iPad. If he had been found and caught, he understood by then, he would almost surely have been tortured and shot. At the time, he didn't stop to think. "I was caught up in the moment," he said. "It seemed like a game — the little tanks and armored vehicles seemed so far away. I can't call myself brave. I just found a place for myself — a way to be useful."

Before the Russian invasion, Irpin was a charming commuter town — a mix of old Soviet-style dachas and new high rises ringed by forests and scenic marshland. Many poems have been written about the beauty of its surroundings. By the time the Russians left in March, Irpin was a patchwork of charred ruins. Almost all of the city's hundred thousand residents had evacuated in the weeks after the invasion, leaving Russian and Ukrainian troops to battle for a month at close range. Seventy percent of the buildings were severely damaged or destroyed. Hundreds of civilians were killed. But ultimately the defenders prevailed. Strategically located between Bucha and Kyiv, less than five miles from the outskirts of the capital, Irpin was one of a handful of places that prevented the Russian army from reaching Kyiv. The savage battle of Irpin was a pivotal battle of the war.

I spent a month in Irpin after the battle, talking to people about it and listening to their stories. Ukrainian acquaintances introduced me to friends, who introduced me to other friends — doctors, nurses, priests, small business owners, city officials, soldiers and volunteers like Moshevitz. People were eager to talk. The conversations lasted two, three, four hours — and even when the talk ran out, some people wanted to meet again the next day. Several fighters walked or drove me around town, pointing out where they had fought or where a friend had died.

I asked everyone the same questions. Why did you do what you did? What were you fighting for? What is the war about for you — and what do you hope will come of it if Ukraine wins? Many people, like Moshevitz, started with a simple answer. "It was my duty." Or, "It seemed obvious — I couldn't imagine doing otherwise." As Orwell wrote about going to fight in Catalonia, "at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do." But almost everyone I spoke with in Irpin, from the deputy mayor to the cook at the university, also had a more complicated answer — something to do with freedom and democracy and their vision of what those grand ideas could mean for Ukraine.

By the time I arrived in Irpin, the city was starting to rebuild. Some thirty to forty percent of the residents had returned. Shops were open; there was traffic in the streets. Lilacs were blooming and children were playing in the parks — so it wasn't always easy to imagine the fighting that had taken place in the

same streets just weeks before. Yet even in the spring sunshine, it was hard to not to fixate on the mutilated buildings. Some had been burned to the ground. Many others were missing their top stories. Very few had all their windows — much of the city's glass had been shattered by shock waves. At first, the destruction seemed inconceivable, then infuriating — how can you train human beings to be this brutal, especially at close range?

I often spent evenings in my rented flat watching news videos of the fighting, and after a while I felt I was living in parallel universes: one green and recovering, the other cold and gray — desolate streets, fires raging on the horizon, rubble strewn chaotically everywhere you looked, a tank waiting around every corner. One soldier with whom I walked the city was suffering from the same kind of double vision. "It used to be all black and white," he said. "Now, it's in color. I can't get used to it." Then he reminded me that war was still raging in eastern Ukraine: just four hundred miles away, many cities still looked like the Irpin of late February.

This was not the first battle of Irpin — far from it; and almost everyone I met mentioned history, either of the city or of Ukraine. Unlike in most other places where people look back on the birth and blossoming of a nation, for Ukrainians history means an old longing for a nation-state that rarely existed until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. What people remember is a story about an old feudal monarchy, the Kievan Rus', and a long string of wars — a centuries-long fight for independence. In medieval times, before all of Europe had settled into nation-states, the enemies were Lithuanians invading from Europe and Mongols pushing west from Asia. For much of the eighteenth century, the Irpin River served as the border between Poland and Russia, two hostile powers bent on suppressing Ukrainian identity. In World War I, the Ukrainian people were again caught between two rival empires — this time Austria-Hungary and Russia. In World War II, it was the Nazis and the Red Army. And even in peacetime, the territory now claimed by Ukraine was usually controlled by some larger power: Russia, Poland, Austria-Hungary, or the Soviet Union. Like other Ukrainians, the city of Irpin often had to take sides, stalling the Wehrmacht, for example, on its way to Kyiv in 1941, just as it stopped the Russians in 2022. But these were usually alliances of convenience — siding with the lesser of two evils.

I stumbled one morning on the town's history museum, a nondescript storefront in a shopping complex just coming back to life after the battle. Its old-fashioned glass cases featured relics from many previous fights: shells from both world wars, dog-eared images of soldiers and partisans, a fraying document attesting to Irpin's death toll in the Holodomor, a montage on the mid-twentieth-century Soviet writers' colony that gave the town its dachas and its reputation for dissidence, plus a final glass vitrine of fading color photos — soldiers from Irpin who died fighting the Russians in eastern Ukraine in 2014. "This war is just another cycle in an old history," one military man told me a few days later, sitting out in the sunshine by a concrete bunker built for World War II and now in use again as a shelter. "We've been fighting the Russians for centuries. The difference this time is that we might be strong enough to win."

It was the dozen or so fighters I spoke with who did most to help me understand the recent battle. Within a day or two of the attack on Hostomel, Russian troops had occupied Bucha. The first Russian soldiers were seen in Irpin on February 26, and the first battle occurred the next day at a small shopping center called Giraffe on the road between Bucha and Irpin. Several dozen Ukrainian fighters,

mostly inexperienced Territorial Defense volunteers, held off a large column of Russian tanks that was then destroyed by Ukrainian artillery. On March 4, Russian tanks broke through on the western edge of the city, not far from Moshevitz's apartment in the high-rise development known as Synergy. By March 6, the invaders were in control of the whole west side of town, setting the stage for what one fighter called a "dynamic stalemate" — a chillingly antiseptic term for the vicious three-week struggle that followed. Tanks roamed the deserted streets. There was constant shelling from every direction — thousands of artillery and mortar shells — punctuated by occasional aerial bombardment and close-range firefights at three strategic locations.

The battle at Giraffe continued on and off throughout the month. Some of the most intense shelling occurred at the Romanivka Bridge on the southern tip of the city. Known to many Westerners from news photographs, the bridge was destroyed by Ukrainian forces to prevent the Russians from entering Kyiv, requiring tens of thousands of evacuees to ford the river on foot. The third hot spot, scene of a decisive battle at the end of March, was in the northeast corner of town near the Ukrainian military hospital and another new high-rise development called Lipky. According to city officials, some three hundred civilians were killed over five weeks. Many of the people I spoke with thought that the toll was much higher, maybe as many as fifteen hundred.

The first weeks of the battle were a time of hard decisions for just about everyone in Irpin — whether to stay or leave the city, whether or not to sign up to fight. Viktoria Mogolyvets and her family left the first day. A thirty-six-year-old speech therapist with three small children and a premium apartment in the Synergy complex, she got into her car at 7 a.m. and drove out of town — one of the last cars to cross the Romanivka Bridge before it was destroyed. It took her three days to reach the Polish border, normally an eight-hour drive, and another several weeks to get to Germany. But looking back, it was an all but miraculous escape compared to what would come later for many others.

Viktoria Ismestyeva, 43, a cook at the city's Fiscal University, made the opposite decision. She didn't know anyone outside Irpin — had no friends or relatives elsewhere in Ukraine, much less abroad. For her, it seemed safer to stay at home than to "head out into nowhere, like a ship lost at sea." As the fighting intensified, she and her fourteen-year-old daughter took shelter in the basement of the university, and she soon found herself cooking for several hundred people hiding there. Looking back, she can't imagine doing anything else. The people in the basement needed her, she told me, and she was glad to do what she could to help.

Many of the city's fighting-age men made the same kind of calculation. Roman Shklyar is a former security guard with friends in progressive political circles. In the wake of a recent accident that left a piece of shrapnel in his skull, he has been prone to epileptic fits and is not supposed to drive or expose himself to loud noises. Yet he joined the Territorial Defense on the first day of the war and saw action all around Irpin as a paramedic assistant. Stefan Protenyak is a professional skier who was supposed to be on a plane to Switzerland on the day the war started. Vlad Ruma was out of town on a business trip, and when he found out that the trains had stopped running he hitchhiked his way back into war-torn Irpin. The fireman Vitalii Kravchenko is fifty-seven — no one expected him to sign up to fight. Vitalii Petriv, nineteen, is a student at the national university's elite international relations school,

where most of his peers expect deferments or privileged spots as officers.

It wasn't easy to get a place in the Territorial Defense in the first days after the invasion. In Irpin, the line of aspiring recruits waited for hours in a park in the freezing cold. When they got to the front of the line, there were no guns, no helmets, no bulletproof vests. A few older men with military experience stepped up as commanders and set up a first checkpoint on the road to the Hostomel airfield. But even there, on the first day, the only weapons were shovels. The next day, five guns arrived for a ragtag unit of twenty men. Yet none of this deterred the fighters I spoke with, many of whom had to try several times before being admitted to a volunteer unit. Kravchenko the fireman made do for several days with his hunter's shotgun. Ruma fought for two weeks with no weapon at all; his unit had nothing but a bucket of grenades. Why did they fight? Shklyar spoke for many when he told me he couldn't imagine doing otherwise. "How can you run away and leave your home behind — or your family or your homeland? Of course, we had to protect what's ours — our nation and our right to choose our own way, free of foreign domination."

Other people in Irpin had more questions than answers in the first days of the invasion. Did the Russians mean business — or was the goal just to scare the city? Would most residents stay or go? What would they do in case of a siege — where would they get food and other supplies? Many people packed an emergency bag and slept in their clothes. But by the third or fourth day the grim true picture was coming into focus, and large numbers of residents started making their way out of the city. On February 24, about a hundred people showed up to sleep in the basement of the Baptist church, the largest

in Irpin, which took charge of the effort to evacuate civilians. A few nights later there were four hundred and fifty people, and requests for help getting out to safety snowballed as the fighting intensified. In the first week of the war, the Baptists estimate, they evacuated four thousand people. The biggest push was on March 5 and 6, when the crowds crossing the river on foot under the Romanivka Bridge caught the attention of the international media, and four civilians, including a volunteer from the Baptist church, were killed by a Russian shell on the Kyiv side of the span.

The overwhelming majority of Irpin's residents left town in those first two weeks. But evacuations continued through the month, even after the Russians retreated, when authorities estimated there were no more than five thousand civilians left in the city. More than ninety thousand people had managed to escape.

The hardest part was getting people to the bridge. It is only five miles from one side of town to the other, but the constant shelling made it impossible to walk even a block or two. So the Baptists and other volunteers stepped in with a slightly safer alternative: a civilian car or van would pick people up at their homes and bring them to the bridge. Territorial Defense fighters and regular soldiers helped with the next leg of the relay, supporting evacuees as they descended through the ruins of the old span and balanced on a walkway over the rushing water — at first just two pipes, later a shaky plank. Then a different fleet of vans and buses organized by humanitarian aid groups picked people up on the other side of the river and drove them into Kyiv. The largest challenge came when the Kyiv TV tower was shelled on March 1 and most phones went out; suddenly there was no way of knowing where people were hiding around town — in which basement,

in what part of the city — or where to pick them up to ferry them to the bridge.

I sat with a Baptist volunteer named Andrii Rizhov on a sun-dappled bench on the church's wooded campus and marveled as he spoke in a quiet matter-of-fact way about driving directly into the shelling to find evacuees. Rizhov called his forays "raids," and another volunteer, a toughened fighter, underscored the point. "Evacuations or fighting," Artur Arestenko explained, "they're not that different. You're driving into artillery and mortar fire. You have no idea what to expect. There could be a tank waiting — there's danger around every corner." Rizhov told me that he often felt close to death but never questioned the task he had taken on. "Morally, I had no other option. Of course I cared about my own life, but there was something bigger at stake. Putin's goal is to destroy us — our nation and our identity. This has to be stopped — stopped here and now. And I did what I could to be part of it."

On one of my last days in the city, a Territorial Defense fighter walked me across Romanivka Bridge. The span was still impassible, and we had to trace the same path as the evacuees, balancing on a rough plank to get across the river. But what struck me most — what I hadn't understood from countless photographs — was how exposed the route was, an easy target in a vast expanse of open marsh, within reach not just of distant artillery but also of snipers in the high-rise buildings on the horizon. Standing there, out in the open and completely vulnerable, I realized that the Russians shelling of the bridge could have no intention other than to kill civilians. There were no other targets anywhere nearby.

The Baptist senior pastor Mykola Romanyuk illustrated the danger in a different way — with his phone. Many of the people I met in Irpin used their phones to tell me their story: a parade of grisly photographs and harrowing videos. For many, this visual chronicle was a way of making sense of what they had just experienced. "Here's me facing a tank," one paramedic said as he scrolled through his photos. "Here's me with an enemy corpse. Here's a dogfight I filmed out my window." Then, after a moment of silence: "Sometimes it's hard to watch — and hard to believe it really happened to me." Pastor Mykola's video was grey and grainy. Even on his tinny phone, the rat-a-tat of the shelling was almost unbearable. The road to the bridge was littered with debris, and there was smoke at several points on the horizon. A battered van emerged. Four men jumped out and scrambled to extract an old man on a stretcher. You could assess the danger from the speed of their movements: even a few seconds in the open could be lethal. But they trotted the stretcher past a line of body bags and set it down under the bridge. Then the video loop began again.

The lack of weapons and training took its toll on the west side of the city in the first week of March. A small band of Ukrainian fighters with a few weapons had managed to hold off a large force at Giraffe in late February with little except daring and ingenuity. A couple of men with a shoulder-fired rocket launcher hid by the side of the road from Bucha to Irpin and struck the lead vehicle in an armored column from the side, immobilizing it and all the tanks behind it. On the west side of town, the Russians attacked across a wider front with a large convoy of tanks and well-equipped elite fighters. As at Giraffe, the Ukrainians had no regular troops, just inexperienced volunteers. "We had one tank and one armored personnel carrier," Kravchenko the fireman recalled. "They had dozens." "We had no one to send in," a top commander admitted ruefully, "so we used drones to break up the enemy column. But the tanks and APCs scattered in the city,

dispersing in civilian neighborhoods where they knew we'd hesitate to fight." Moshevitz saw the vehicles entering the Synergy complex and watched as they found places to hide between the buildings.

Andrii Kolesnyk knew something was wrong when he heard automatic rifle fire just a block or two away from his Scandinavian-style boutique hotel. Later that day, he saw an armored personnel carrier in the woods outside the building. He wasn't sure if it was Russian or Ukrainian, and he was afraid to go to the window to check. Then the shell hit, tearing a hole through the third and fourth floors of the stylish guesthouse. At seven the next morning, there were tanks in the yard and men shouting in Russian as they smashed their way through the cars in the parking lot. Kolesnyk's wife and their guests had left a few days earlier, leaving him and another man whom he called by his first name, Pavel, to protect the business. The Russians who broke down the door searched them both and then searched the building. They didn't like what they found: Kolesnyk's hunting rifle, his passport, and about $11,000 in reserve cash. "The commander had never seen Euros before, and he found them suspicious," Kolesnyk remembered, with laughter. Many people I met in Irpin laughed at what seemed like anything but a funny story. Even more suspect were the visas in Kolesnyk's passport — German, French, English, American — and the photos of a Russian helicopter in Pavel's phone.

Even so, Kolesnyk thought the intruders were joking when the commander told a young recruit that he could "decide," and the deadpan soldier answered that he would execute Kolesnyk and let Pavel go. The fighter took both men into the kitchen and told them where to sit, then left the room and closed the door. Within seconds there were shots and bullets tearing through the kitchen. Kolesnyk was wounded just below the knee, and the leg of the stool he was sitting on was cut clear in half. But thanks to the thick wooden door, he was still alive. The ordeal played out for another few hours almost as senselessly as it had begun. The shooter shrugged when he found Kolesnyk alive, and his comrades laughed. Later the Russians ordered Pavel to run to a nearby shop for cigarettes and warned that if he wasn't back in twenty minutes they would shoot Kolesnyk again, and this time they wouldn't miss.

What ultimately saved him, Kolesnyk believes, was that the invaders were afraid he would find some way to signal their location to a Ukrainian artillery unit, and so he and Pavel were allowed to leave the house and spend the night in a nearby basement. Then, the next day, the Russian unit moved on. After four more days of nearly constant shelling, Kolesnyk decided to leave Irpin, walking under heavy fire to the Romanivka Bridge. In the three miles between his house and the river, he counted eight corpses.

For most of the residents of Irpin who remained in the city throughout the battle, life revolved around a basement, where they huddled with others from their apartment block or neighborhood or church. The word that came up again and again when they talked about their experience was "community." Some basements were dank and dingy, others comfortable and well-equipped. Some communities held together with prayer; others had little parties now and then, "toasting the heroes in the armed forces," as one resident put it. Some groups dispersed after a few days as people fled the city. Others endured through the five-week siege and even beyond in buildings where the apartments were no longer habitable.

Olha Malach's eighty-family apartment building is located between Synergy and Kolesnyk's guesthouse, in the heart of the neighborhood that was eventually occupied by Russian forces. Malach and her husband run a small construction business. But as important to her as her day job, she is the elected head of the building's tenant council, known in Ukrainian by the acronym OSBB. OSBBs are the grassroots cogs of Ukraine's fledgling democracy. In Soviet times, most apartment blocks were managed by hired watchdogs who reported to the secret police on suspicious behavior — who seemed to have extra money, who went in and out at odd hours or had unusual visitors. In the years since independence, the new Ukrainian state has worked to devolve power from the national government to the local level, granting taxing authority to mayors and creating OSBBs with elected leaders. In the battle of Irpin, many of these managers played an essential role organizing life in the basements where people hid through the occupation.

Like other OSBB heads across the city, Malach had no instructions to speak of and no playbook. "Everyone pitched in," she recalled. "Each person found their way to be helpful." The first task was equipping the basement: filling sandbags, finding bedding, organizing communal chores. Men were assigned to patrol duty and fetching water from a nearby well; women took charge of the cooking. In Malach's building as in others, many tenants who fled the city gave their keys to those who remained and told them to take what they needed from the freezer — so the building soon had a surfeit of food that had to be preserved before it went bad. This got harder on March 5, when the invaders cut the electric line providing power to the city. But Malach and the other women organized an outdoor grill, and they soon had enough canned meat for several months.

On the first night it was ready, Malach's basement housed three hundred people — her tenants and several dozen from the nearby Synergy complex. In the days that followed, she urged people to leave the city, working with other OSBB heads to organize evacuations, and over time the headcount dwindled, down to forty-three after two weeks and just fifteen by the end of the month. The residents knew because they kept careful track, gathering most mornings in the courtyard and counting heads — just to make sure that everyone was still alive.

In the first weeks, the basement group had relatively little contact with the Russian troops marauding through the neighborhood. Malach saw an armored column roll by on March 5. Residents heard heavy shelling in the streets, along with gunfire and grenades. But most of the tenants rarely left the courtyard except to go to the well, and they could only guess what was playing out in the neighborhood. One thing was different in the occupied part of the city: unlike other basements, where Territorial Defense fighters and volunteers stopped by on a regular basis, Malach's building had no visitors. "We had no humanitarian aid, no news, no information, no power to charge our phones, almost no cell connection," Malach said. "It was as if we were alone on an island — and most people had no way of telling their loved ones they were still alive."

Then things took a turn for the worse. The shelling in the streets intensified; there was a noisy firefight a few blocks away. Virtually everyone was in the basement on the morning of March 23, when a missile sheared the roof and most of the top floor off the five-story building. The shock wave knocked Malach to the ground, and she remembers "the walls trembling." Then a tank appeared in the courtyard. Like

many people in Irpin, Malach calls the invaders Orcs — a name borrowed from Tolkien, who coined it to describe a race of brutal and malevolent monsters — and true to form, the Orcs who entered her courtyard did their best to terrorize her and her tenants. They collected phones and smashed them. They issued meaningless make-work orders to move from one part of the basement to another, and anyone who left the shelter to cook or to retrieve water was followed at gunpoint by a Russian soldier. Then the looting began — everything that could be removed from an apartment, from warm clothes and bedding to kitchen appliances.

Yet Malach was not intimidated, and her phone still worked. She had rarely turned it on since the invasion, so it still had a charge, and she could still get a connection in one corner of the courtyard. In the days before the tank entered the building, she had worked out a simple code with her daughter in Kyiv and used it to relay Russian positions that the daughter passed on to the armed forces. That was even more dangerous now with Russians in the courtyard, but it was also much more useful, and Malach didn't hesitate to collect intelligence on the occupiers, radioing three times in the three following days.

The one thing she couldn't stop was the murder of the building's abject shut-in, a man known as Genya. Malach described him as a sullen drunk. Few people in the complex knew or liked him, and he had taken no part in basement life, preferring to drink alone in his apartment, which Malach said reeked of alcohol. When the Russians searched the building, they found him and fastened on some paperwork that they picked up in his apartment. Malach says it was poker bets that the invaders mistook for a sketch of Russian positions. Malach and some other tenants watched as two soldiers marched the frightened man out of the courtyard, and a few minutes later they heard the shot. After the Russians left the neighborhood, some tenants found the body and buried it, under heavy shelling, in a nearby park.

When I asked Malach why she did what she did, she brushed off the question. "I'm not a hero," she insisted, "I did nothing special." I pushed back a little: very few people I know would have taken the risk she took, relaying information about the invaders even as they held her and her tenants at gunpoint. "Someone had to do it," she answered, shrugging. "My neighbors fought on the front lines. Others risked their lives to deliver food and medicine to basements like ours. Someone had to help here, coordinating and organizing. I did what I could. But everyone who stayed was a hero. Everyone found a way to play a part."

By the time I arrived in Irpin, most elite fighters — armed forces regulars, special forces, and volunteer international brigades — had moved on, following the war as it shifted eastward. But the city was still full of soldiers. You saw uniforms in the streets and in every shop as well as at the checkpoints, several of which were still controlling who went in and out of town. Most of these men were Territorial Defense volunteers, and everyone I met was eager to talk — eager to tell me what they did and why they did it.Vlad Ruma is a thirty-one-year-old marketing manager with two young children who was still serving full time in the Territorial Defense when I met him. After our first conversation, he asked to meet again and then again, a third time, and on the third day we spent several hours walking around Irpin — visiting the places where he had fought and his

comrades had fallen. He said it was duty that drove him to do what he did during the battle, and he brought the same earnest good will to our conversations — he was determined that I get the full story and understand everything. He wore fatigues on the hot day we walked the town and carried a heavy Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder. We started at the old Soviet House of Writers — it served as Territorial Defense headquarters in the first days of the battle — then walked north through what had been no-man's-land between invading Russians and defending Ukrainians. The next stop was the Giraffe shopping center, then the Romanivka Bridge. The only spot we missed was the west side of town, where Ruma's unit had fought for several days not far from Kolesnyk's guesthouse.

It took me a while to understand exactly what part Ruma had played in those engagements. Some Territorial Defense units serve largely in auxiliary positions, enforcing curfew or monitoring security on public transportation. Others fight in blended units alongside the regular armed forces. Still others see combat in a support role, serving just behind a front line manned by elite forces. Ruma was one of several volunteers I met who told me that he was dissatisfied with the first unit he served in and asked to be moved to more active duty. "I didn't sign up to guard a café in Kyiv or police dog walkers breaking curfew," he said. "I wanted to fight — and eventually I was transferred to a fighting unit." But like others in the Territorial Defense, he also drew a bright line between himself and the elite troops he fought alongside. "Our orders were to hold the line," he explained. "We built defensive positions — checkpoints, trenches, gun placements — and we manned them. We used our guns when the enemy approached. But our task was to hold the invaders, not to advance. That's a job for people with military training and experience."

Still, Ruma had a lot to teach me as we traversed the town. He demonstrated how to cross an intersection in an occupied zone, crouching low with your gun at the ready. He explained the difference between a reconnaissance skirmish and a full-scale engagement. At one point I gave him my notebook and he filled a page with drawings — the different parabolas traced through the sky by artillery, mortar, and tank-fired missiles. He also helped me to understand exactly what had happened at Romanivka and Synergy. The most sobering lesson was at Giraffe, where we turned off the road to Bucha — the artery that Russian troops had hoped to use to enter Irpin — into a big open area where defending forces had stood waiting to ambush the invading column. The lines of sight were different now, obscured by summer foliage. But otherwise it didn't look as if much had changed since the February battle that stopped the Russian advance.

You could see the positions where Ukrainian gunners had stood, the surrounding ground littered with cigarette packages. There was debris everywhere and occasional pieces of discarded gear. At one point Ruma crouched to the ground to pick up a handful of rusting bullets. And it was then that it hit me, naïve as I was and eager to romanticize the fight for freedom: even defensive forces must be ready to kill — not just to sacrifice their own lives but also take the lives of others.

I returned to Giraffe a few days later. A forensic team was scheduled to visit and exhume three Russian corpses thought to be buried under the rubble of the destroyed mall. Two of the three had been killed in the first moments of the firefight. The third was wounded, then waited cunningly until Ukrainian fighters approached to blow himself up with a grenade. By the time the shell fire that consumed the building burned out, more than twenty-four hours later, all three bodies were

buried under several tons of charred metal and loose brick. I and the owner of the mall waited a few hours for the forensic team. It didn't show until the next day, so I didn't witness the disinterment. Later that night, when I saw the photos of the gruesome corpses, I was glad that I missed it.

The day I walked the city with Vitalii Petriv had a happier ending. A fresh-faced university student with no military training or experience, Petriv signed up for the Territorial Defense in Kyiv in the first days of the war. He spent a couple of weeks on guard duty before being transferred to what he was told would be combat in an undisclosed location. When he arrived and got his bearings, he learned that Irpin was then ground zero. He was defending the east side of the city against Russians attacking from the north.

He and the rest of his five-man unit — all inexperienced, with just a few days of training — asked to be sent as far forward as possible, and they were told to dig a position on a residential street just three blocks south of Russian forces trying to break through near the military hospital. "We were eager to do something important," Petriv recalled when we met the first time in a busy café in downtown Kyiv. "We had no idea what we were getting into." Petriv grew up a lot in the next ten days. It was bitter cold in the streets of Irpin. There was no one — no other soldiers — between him and the enemy. The shelling was constant. At night the sky was as light as day. He and his comrades rotated two hours on, two hours off — but as he remembers it, he hardly slept, powered mostly by adrenalin. A few days after he arrived, the pontoon bridge that his unit had used to cross the Irpin River was dismantled, so there were no further supplies. This left him and other units to live off the all-but-abandoned neighborhoods where they were stationed — to find someone local who they felt they could trust to provide food and water and an occasional hour inside by a stove.

Everyone in Petriv's unit eventually made it out alive. But when I first met him, he was worried sick about the two civilian families they had found to help them — a construction worker and his wife with ties to the Baptist church and the owners of a neighborhood veterinary clinic. Like Moshevitz and Malach and anyone else in Irpin who helped the Ukrainian forces, both families were risking death if the Russians overran their neighborhood. And the last time Petriv had seen the construction worker, his house, where Petriv had slept, was engulfed in flames, with enemy troops approaching.

I suggested that Petriv come back to Irpin with me to look for these families, and frightened as he was about what he might find, he eventually agreed. We walked through the neighborhood on a perfect summer's day, and the young man marveled — could these really be the hard-fought blocks he thought he knew so well? We expected to have to search for Ivan, the construction worker; Petriv was convinced that his house had been demolished by a Russian missile. But when we arrived at what we thought would be a burnt-out shell and knocked on the fence, Ivan came to the gate. Half the house was a rubble-filled ruin, but the other half was still standing, and Ivan and his wife had stopped by to pick up a few things. Petriv gasped when Ivan appeared — a man he believed dead, in part because of him, was standing before him in the sunshine.

Later that afternoon we followed Petriv's retreat from his unit's initial placement in front of Ivan's house to a second position, just two hundred yards to the rear, where he and his comrades had spent the next week. He showed me what was left of their trench and the rude graffiti they left on the wall to greet any Russians who got that far south. Petriv was starting

to feel better and hoping for the best when we knocked at the clinic. The woman who answered stared at the young man for a few seconds and then let out a cry of joy, hugging him and peering at him again and hugging him some more. In this case, it turned out, it was the civilians, Nataliya and her husband Vitalii, who had been most anxious in the months since the fighting ended, convinced that Petriv and his comrades had saved their lives but worried that they were dead. We sat at the family's kitchen table in the fading afternoon light, drinking tea and eating chocolates: Nataliya ransacked her cupboards for the most festive thing she could serve us. When her husband arrived, he broke into quiet tears as we chatted casually about nothing in particular.

What struck me most as I listened to them catch up was that they, too, seemed to be living in parallel universes — constantly reliving the battle even as they tried to put it behind them. Nataliya and Vitalii told us about one recent evening when they found themselves eating in the dark, trying to conserve electricity as they had when their only power was a generator. Someone else said it was so quiet now — no mortar fire, no artillery — that they couldn't sleep. "Yes," someone else said, as if marveling at a dream, "it's hard to believe we lived through it." And yet, for most of the people around the table, the trauma of the siege seemed almost more real than the present.

Why did the Russians retreat at the end of a month from Irpin? What turned the tide of the battle? Everyone I met during my visit had their own theory. What I realized as I made my way around town was that each individual had fought their own war, in their own small corner of the city. People such as Malach and Petriv knew only the block they lived or fought on, and even others such as Rizhov and Moshevitz, who had seen more of the battle, knew only their own experiences.

But by the time I visited, two months after the fighting stopped, many people were piecing the story together, and they sometimes argued among themselves about what kept the Russians out of Kyiv. A few things seemed obvious. The terrain posed a huge advantage for the defenders. Tanks and armored personnel carriers cannot cross a marsh except on a road, and the Ukrainians were able to control most of the roads and bridges in and out of Irpin. It didn't hurt that the city had grown exponentially since Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union — so Russian maps showed forest and swamp where there were now high-rise apartment buildings. A handful of military men helped me to understand the context — how Irpin fit into the larger battle of Kyiv. Still true to Stalin, who called artillery "the god of war," the troops advancing on Kyiv were counting on artillery — if only they could position their guns within fifteen miles of the capital. They got close in Irpin, almost within range, but never close enough. Then, in late March, a Ukrainian counteroffensive north and east of the commuter town threatened to encircle the invaders, and they withdrew abruptly — shelling Irpin with everything they had left as they pulled back from the city.

Another critical factor was local intelligence — what one commander called "our eyes and ears on the ground." The armed forces drew on information from scores of informants such as Malach and Moshevitz, some civilian, others military. Some spotters texted friends or relatives in the armed forces. Others used a government app, Yevorog, to report anonymously on enemy positions. And even with sophis-

ticated technology, the Russians seemed unable to match Ukrainian intelligence. On the contrary, many Ukrainians told me, the invaders sorely misjudged what they were up against in Irpin. "The Russians often thought there were more of us than there were," Territorial Defense coordinator Aleksandr Shemetun explained. "If they had only known we were so few," Ruma echoed, "with almost no anti-tank guns, they would have overrun us easily. Instead, again and again, they retreated."

Other survivors of the battle stressed the "unity" that they had witnessed in Irpin — a shared determination to do whatever it took to win. "Look at Ukrainian history," one seasoned fighter told me. "We don't have much experience governing, but we know how to defend ourselves. We've been a battlefield for centuries, and we have always survived." In the streets, in the basements, under the bridge, among the legions of humanitarian aid volunteers who showed up to help, driving food and medicine into the city and ferrying evacuees out: here was civil society at its best, rallying under threat. From the volunteer fighters to the evacuees who left their apartment keys, everyone did what they could and pitched in with whatever they had. "I didn't expect it," recalled Olha Vereha, an OSBB head from the northern part of town. "People are people, and let's just say — they don't always cooperate. But everyone found their place. Everyone did what they needed to do, and somehow, together, we prevailed."

I wasn't always sure how to ask the bigger questions that brought me to Irpin: why people chose to fight and what they were fighting for — what they thought was at stake in the war with Russia. Some of the people I met thought this was too obvious to need explaining. Others shrugged it off as irrelevant. "I'm not a philosopher," one soldier told me. "I did what I did — that's what matters." But in this case too, after a while, there emerged a handful of shared answers. I came to think of it as a kind of hierarchy of needs.

"The fundamental instinct is simple," Aleksandr Yurchenko, a member of the Ukrainian parliament, or Rada, explained to me. "To resist aggression from outside — someone who comes to your house and tries to take it." "It's not highbrow," a young instructor at the Fiscal University said. "It's in the details. My home, my gym, my cat, my friends and family, the land where my ancestors are buried — I needed to stay and protect them." A second common answer was the appeal to duty. Doctors talked about duty to their patients, priests about their congregations, soldiers about their comrades in arms, OSBB heads about their tenants — and many about their families or some sense of a larger common good. Firdosi Kitankyshyiev was the security guard at Giraffe, at his post on the morning of February 27, and he helped dispatch the first Russian fighters who arrived in Irpin. "It was simple math," he recalled, "the life of one man or the fate of Kyiv. That's why the military exists — for soldiers to die so that others may live." And a third answer, offered in their own way by almost everyone, was the desire for an independent Ukraine. Anatoliy Zborovsky, a graying, mustachioed man who has been running the town's history museum for thirty-five years, declared that "You don't have to be a historian. All Ukrainians understand — this is a war for independence and sovereignty."

Many of the people I met in Irpin, educated and less educated, see the present through the lens of the past — most often, the hated Soviet years or the Cossack era. Nomadic seventeenth-century fighters who practiced a kind of rough democracy in the frontier forts where they withstood waves of Russian, Polish, and Turkish invaders, the Cossacks are widely viewed as the standard-bearers of Ukrainian independence.

Some neighboring peoples at the time and since, especially the Jews, have seen the Cossacks as murderous outlaws. But most of the Ukrainians I spoke with looked back on the Cossack era with a deep reverence. Two of the Ukrainian military's most elite units — the Azov battalion and the Carpathian Sich — are named for Cossack forts, and people idealize both the bravery of the pre-modern fighters and the soldierly egalitarianism that prevailed in their frontier settlements. "The Cossacks had a written constitution," one militiaman reminded me. "They were electing leaders when most Europeans were still bowing down to monarchs."

The unity of purpose was extraordinary. "Ukrainians have never been enslaved and never will be," proclaimed the military chaplain Father Vitalii Voyetza, evoking the spirit of the Cossacks. "We've never fallen on our knees before a foreign ruler. No tsar or dictator has been able to impose their way of life." And of course Vladimir Putin fits this mold exactly — the overpowering foreign potentate who must be rebuffed. "Russians don't see Ukraine as a sovereign state. They see it as their land," explained Nastya Melnychenko, a former student activist and a writer with a home in Irpin, now living as a refugee in England. "The terrors, the purges, the Holodomor were all about breaking our collective will. Russia wants to erase our sovereignty and identity. We have no choice but to resist — and continue resisting."

It is a simple, powerful answer, and for many of the people I spoke with it was enough: Ukraine is fighting for its independence. But what would independence look like? An independent state is not necessarily a free and democratic state — just look at Russia. How do Ukrainians want to live once they are free? What will they do with their independence? For many, the answer is defined negatively. Putin claims that "Russians and Ukrainians are one people — a single whole." Just about everyone I met in Irpin begged to differ, often fiercely. "We are not Russia," Kolesnyk told me emphatically, sitting in the yard outside his ruined guesthouse. "Over nearly a thousand years, we developed differently from Russia. We live completely differently. We have a radically different worldview. Russia is a KGB state — no freedom, no opposition, dissenters go to prison. We're a freedom-loving people — we always have been. I can go to the Maidan and shout, 'Zelensky is an idiot!'" I heard the same point made in a different way. "You can't have a good life under the Russians," the fireman and Territorial Defense fighter Kravchenko told me. "You can't aim for anything or earn anything or achieve anything. That's not what we want in Ukraine. It's not what I want for my children." Many if not most people in Irpin seemed to have visited Europe. They went as students or as tourists, as migrant farmworkers or on business trips — and many volunteered European life as a way of life to strive for. "We're tired of being a battleground," one Territorial Defense fighter told me. "We want to join Europe."

In Irpin, as everywhere, it often seemed easier to declare in favor of freedom than to define exactly what it means or should look like in practice. Many people reeled off a list: freedom to think what you want and say what you think, to pray in your own way and speak any language you wish to speak — Russian or Ukrainian. Others spoke about freedom to travel and to spend and to invest. Near the top of the list for many was the right to protest. "We have a long history of protest," one Territorial Defense fighter told me. "The Maidan revolutions of the last two decades are just the most recent." But others recognized that it can be easier to protest than to govern. "We were disappointed by our early presidents," Andrii Lubenko, the owner of Giraffe, told me. "They betrayed

our hopes with their corruption. They ignored our yearning for independence. But we're still fighting for those hopes — and for our right to choose our own leaders. We may not always make the best choices, but we want to choose our own way." So, too, with joining Europe: many seemed to understand that it might not be easy. "It is a clash of civilizations," the Greek Catholic priest Andrii Nahirniak, director of services at Caritas Ukraine, maintained. "The East stands for darkness and tyranny. Europe is about freedom and free expression, science, justice, property and the rule of law. We've been trying to make the choice for centuries, and we've failed over and over. We still don't know if it will work this time. But winning the war is an essential first step."

What he didn't say, but what he could have said, is that the war has made the choice much more appealing. Judging by what I saw in the rubble of Irpin, the West has never looked more attractive to most Ukrainians.

I thought I must have the wrong address for Luda Rudenko. I had walked by the ruins of her café before — a huge pile of charred metal in front of a burnt-out building in the northeast corner of town where the fighting had been most intense. I checked the address and made my way in, and the first room looked as I expected: torched beyond recognition and piled high with rubble. But it led to an open terrace, freshly plastered and painted, overlooking a dock and an idyllic sunlit lake. Then Rudenko came bustling in, a fountain of energy and hopeful good cheer. What did I want to see first, she asked — the old, destroyed part of the building or the new, bigger café rising out of the ashes?

A handful of photographs pinned to the wall told me her story. Here was Rudenko in late February, unloading a crate of food and medical supplies for the fighters on the town's first checkpoint. In the next picture, a long line of freezing-looking neighbors snaked into the café, by then one of the few places where they could find food or water. The next photo was the luxury high-rise complex known as Lipky, just a few blocks up the street. Every window was shattered, and many apartments had no exterior walls — some of the worst destruction sustained in the battle. And the last image looked like a jack-o-lantern: it was the café on fire. The shell hit on March 23, just days before the Russians retreated, and Rudenko still had it, and kept it on display in the kitchen. Now, like everything else she was restoring, it was as clean as new — a cluster bomb about a foot taller than she was.

We started on a tour of the restaurant, walking through the debris to the restored terrace, where Rudenko was sanding chairs and nursing a pallet of plants back to life. An old woman from the neighborhood wandered in and interrupted us, her voice full of emotion. I needed to understand, she insisted, how many elderly people such as herself Rudenko had saved, feeding and housing them until the end, then helping them escape the city. But gradually it dawned on me that, as courageous as Rudenko had been in battle, her most heroic act was to restore the café. "It's just bricks. We'll rebuild," she remarked. "It's not a big price to pay to defeat the Russians." She had left Irpin on the day the café was destroyed, stepping over a corpse and running through the blackened streets, one of the last people still alive in the gutted city. But after about two weeks she came back to town and began by cleaning up the rubble and broken glass at her house a few blocks away. That took nearly a month. Then she moved on to the café.

"Yes," she said, looking around a little wistfully, "two stories of the building have been destroyed. But we'll build back three stories — it will be even better than it was before."

Not everyone in town was so hopeful. One fighter whose home had been destroyed railed angrily at the municipal authorities. "They used me when they needed me," he sputtered, "and now they're throwing me away like trash." Others worried about corruption — that funding allocated for reconstruction would be siphoned off before it reached them, leaving them with fifty cents on the dollar for the value of their property. Baptist Pastor Mykola's biggest fear was that the town's collective trauma could take years to heal — and like many, he wondered how many residents would return to Irpin. When we met, in June, about forty percent of his congregation had come back. He expected another twenty to thirty percent to return in the next month or two. But he wasn't sure about the rest; he thought the town might shrink by a full third.

Rudenko, however, was having none of it. "None of us have had any help yet," she said. "But you have to find a way to start — we need to rebuild." We sat for a couple of hours on her terrace and at one point she reached for her phone — she wanted to read me a poem. "I'm a people who has never been conquered," she recited in a stirring voice. "I'm a people whose strength is truth." She paused for a moment and then added: "We have been fighting the Russians for centuries. They advance, we resist. Maybe this time the cycle will be broken, and Ukraine will take its place — its rightful place — as a beacon of the Western values that we are fighting for."

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Liberties — A Journal of Culture and Politics is distributed to booksellers in the United States by Publishers Group West; in Canada by Publishers Group Canada; and, internationally by Ingram Publisher Services International.

LIBERTIES, LIBERTIES: A JOURNAL OF CULTURE AND POLITICS, is published quarterly in Fall, Winter, Spring, and Summer by Liberties Journal Foundation.

ISBN 979-8-9854302-0-2
ISSN 2692-3904

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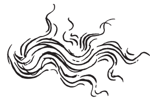
Printed in Canada.



The insignia that appears throughout *Liberties* is derived from details in Botticelli's drawings for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which were executed between 1480 and 1495.

In the American moral crisis, the first requirement was to experience what was happening and to see what must be seen. The facts were covered from our perception. The increase of theories and discourse, itself a cause of new strange forms of blindness, the false representations of "communication," led to horrible distortions of public consciousness. Therefore the first act of morality was to disinter the reality, retrieve reality, dig it out from the trash, represent it anew as art would represent it.

SAUL BELLOW

Liberties Journal Foundation
Copyright 2023
ISBN 979-8-9854302-0-2
ISSN 2692-3904
libertiesjournal.com