

Every Field, Every Yard

James Meek reports from Kyiv



THESE WAS a corpse on the street where I stayed in Kyiv, among the caryatids, 19th-century tenements and boho joints near the Golden Gate. It was an amiable June day, warm, fresh and cloudless, and most of the living wore bright summer clothes. The paramedics had covered the dead man in a dark grey plastic rubbish sack, cut along the seam to make a rectangle, but it wasn't long enough. His bony shoeless feet stuck out and his socks had holes. A trio of teenage girls went past, and I could see the sight of the body ripple through them, from one to the other: shock, curiosity and a laughing, embarrassed excitement. Relief, maybe, that the death had no obvious connection to the war. The lack of bloodstains, rubble, shrapnel or broken glass seemed quaint. And relief, perhaps, that it was someone else, putting a shiver of triumph in your own working limbs and heartbeat. The scene was an enactment of the world vis-à-vis Ukraine: we care, it's a tragedy, we'll send stuff, but we do have our own lives to live. It was also, in a way, an enactment of Kyiv vis-à-vis the war. The city is committed, indignant, defiant and, in respect of the Ukrainian troops fighting at the front, gnawed by guilt. An aspect of that defiance, and a source of guilt, is the refusal to renounce comfort or pleasure. The greatest source of resilience against the shock, anxiety and grief of invasion, Tatyana Li, a psychotherapist in Kyiv, told me, is the universal desire to live. She repeated this several times and laughed when I finally got what she was driving at, the double meaning of 'Everyone wants to live.' Everyone wants to survive; but even in wartime, especially in wartime, the urge is to go beyond mere existence, to the point where you feel you have a life.

There are parties, dinners, picnics, plays, conferences, concerts. While I was in town thousands came to the annual book fair at Kyiv's former arsenal. Market counters are piled high with cherries and slabs of local veal at £4 a kilo. Curfew is from midnight to six, and since restaurant staff need time to clean up and get home, nightlife begins to shut down not long after nine. After eleven, the streets fill up with people rushing home. Mikhail Dubinyansky, a columnist for *Ukrainska Pravda*, describes the city as being like Paris during the First World War, almost within the invader's reach for a time, before the front line moves further away, without quite disappearing. He quotes the Kyiv-born Russian poet Max Voloshin's description of Paris in 1915:

Before the Battle of the Marne it saw streams of refugees and hundreds of thousands of soldiers pass through, didn't sleep for several nights in anticipation of the hoofbeats of the German cavalry, then settled down and got used to the idea that the Germans were eighty kilometres away. Life got back on its feet and adjusted to new circumstances.

'We may periodically forget the war,' he went on, 'but the war will, every so often, remind us of its existence.'

What might seem a diversion from war often turns out to have war as its subject, or to intersect with war. I went to a concert at the Ukrainian House, at the Dnieper-pointing end of Khreshchatyk, where the great thoroughfare splits, left to the old port district, right to the government quarter, straight ahead to the parks decorating the escarpment down to the river. The shortest taxi route took me past super-shareable landmarks: the Golden Gate, St Sophia's cathedral and St Michael's monastery. In front of the monastery, in front of white and sky blue walls such as a confectioner might have iced, a squadron of neutered Russian armour has been dragged and lined up for everyone to see and touch, to believe in the humiliation of Vladimir Putin. There are tanks, a huge self-propelled howitzer and armoured troop carriers into whose burned-out insides everyone peeks to see if their occupants have left something of themselves behind. The hulks are both disturbing and ridiculous, redolent of death and of hubris. The great slabs of steel still seem indestructible, and yet there they are, destroyed.

The taxi barrelled down the hill towards the Ukrainian House. The driver wasn't watching the road. He had his eyes and fingers on his phone, clipped to the dashboard. I recognised the map, produced by an outfit called DeepState, which gives one of the more truthful pictures of the movements of the front lines. The driver's yearning for news must have been strong, as the map doesn't update often enough for most people to feel the need to keep refreshing their phone, especially at the wheel. Ukraine's counter-offensive had been going on for weeks, but the army's progress over the downs and barrows of southern Zaporizhzhia, three hundred miles away, is slow and bloody. Some of the second-hand American infantry fighting vehicles and German tanks the West gave Ukraine after a year of pleading have already met the fate of the Russian tanks displayed on St Michael's Square. A video was doing the rounds showing a Ukrainian soldier stepping out of the rear door of an American-made Bradley IFV and immediately being blown up by a mine. (He survived, minus a leg.)

'You're watching the counter-offensive? It's hard,' I said to the driver in Russian. He was an older man; he might not speak English, I don't speak Ukrainian, and I thought he probably wouldn't mind my speaking the language of the aggressor, which is also one of the languages of Kyiv, unless he objected to the fatuousness of my remark.

'Nyet aviatsii,' the driver said. 'We don't have the air power.'

The Ukrainian House, a grand late 20th-century building between a palace and a shrine in appearance, faced and lined with white marble, has a large open ground floor and circular galleries rising up, Guggenheim-style, though separate and connected by stairs rather than a single spiral. Daylight comes in through a cupola clerestory and in the centre of the ceiling hangs a vast golden nozzle, its tapering sides marked with corrugated rings, like a rocket engine scratched from the final cut of David Lynch's *Dune*. The concert was at the top, and in order to get to it I passed through an exhibition of art created since the invasion, *Ty Yak? How Are You?* One of the curators, the artist Katya Libkind, had left a comment on the walls: 'Basically it's much too early for this exhibition, so you can't understand anything in the right order. I'm just trying to bear witness to this archive.'

Zhenya Laptiy's photograph of a village house in Eastern Ukraine is printed two metres high and cut in half from top to bottom. In the foreground of the left-hand panel is a bare tree suffused with a foggy crimson light; the tree's redness seems to seep back over the house and the snow, as if one were viewing the scene just after receiving a blow to the back of the head. The word *deti* – 'children' in Russian – has been daubed on the gate to the yard, meaning something like 'Children live here, and for this reason, spare us.' Laptiy's cut runs through the word *deti*, so that the words *de* and *ti* appear on separate panels; the phrase *de ti* means

‘Where are you?’ in Ukrainian. Thousands of Ukrainian children have been illegally taken to Russia since the war began. In its early months, Laptiy found herself in Russian-occupied territory. Her family was a few miles away, on the other side of the front line, but the only way she could get there was by making a journey of three thousand miles, through Russia and four other countries.

Anna Zvyagintseva’s photograph *The Same Hair* shows a young child sitting on the floor in a patch of sunlight, covering her face with her forearms and chaotic strands of her long, fair curling hair. Above it is a screenshot from a message thread written in English. ‘How are you?’ the first message asks. Two and a half hours later the reply comes: ‘Air raid sirens sound all around Ukraine now. I didn’t know I can feel hatred so deeply. I saw a photo of a dead kid, who had the same hair as my daughter has.’

The concert, organised by Sasha Andrusyk, a promoter of experimental music in Kyiv, included the premiere of a new work by Edward Sol, *Dam*, marking the destruction – most plausibly by Russia – of the dam in Sol’s native city of Nova Kakhovka two weeks earlier, on 6 June, flooding more than two hundred square miles near the mouth of the Dnieper, killing 58 people and wrecking the irrigation system of an entire farming region. The cupola resonated to the menace of Sol’s steady bass note as the setting sun came through the clerestory windows, almost covering him in a rectangle of light. The audience members were mostly in their twenties and earnest. There were men with outré haircuts and vintage clothes, liable for military service, and forbidden to leave the country in case they are needed to replenish the ranks.

One Saturday morning I boarded a coach to the village of Yahidne, in Chernihiv region, two hours north of Kyiv, with a group of volunteers gathered by a project called Repair Together, which combines reconstruction work with weekend rave parties. I was the oldest on the coach, and the worst prepared for dance-based manual labour in the summer heat. My neighbour on the ride was a Netherlands-based IT worker called Alex, putting in a shift before she headed south to the much bombarded Black Sea port city of Mykolaiv to visit her parents. We headed past the colossal steel Motherland statue, a third as tall again as the Statue of Liberty, crossed the Paton Bridge over the Dnieper and hit the dual carriageway to Chernihiv. As we entered the village, just before noon, we passed a sign warning of unexploded ordnance.

Yahidne was captured by Russian troops in the early days of the war and badly damaged in the fighting with Ukrainian forces that followed. After killing a number of men in cold blood, the invaders herded the remaining population of the village, 367 people (including seventy children, the youngest a 21-day-old baby), into the basement of the local school. They were kept there for 26 days and nights, with less than half a square metre of space per person, four buckets for toilets and barely enough air. Ten people died of suffocation, untreated medical conditions and neglect. As the bodies piled up, the Russians allowed a burial party, but opened fire on it in the cemetery. The villagers carried the wounded back to the basement in the wheelbarrows they’d used to carry out the dead. At the end of the month the Russians retreated.

The coach pulled up outside the village’s ruined House of Culture. In front of it were neat stacks of white concrete bricks; next to them, a heap of rubble, all that remained of a sports hall deemed not worth restoring. Our job was to pick bricks out of the debris and make new stacks for future rebuilding projects. The young people laid out yoga mats and camping kit under the trees, a firepit was dug, pails of well water fetched, volunteers set to work chopping

vegetables and roadies began erecting a shaded stage, setting up lights, speakers and decks. I got talking to a Ukraine-born American, also an IT worker called Alex, who'd returned to the land of his birth some years before the war. I was interested in his experiences since the invasion. He told me he'd managed pretty successfully not to think about the war at all. But here he was. As a US citizen, he was free to come and go, unlike other Ukrainian men of fighting age, and yet he stayed.

We divided ourselves into gangs and were issued with gloves and hammers. One group used the hammers to separate the bricks and chip off any residual mortar. The rest of us formed lines and passed the bricks from hand to hand, from the rubble to the stacks. It was monotonous work, and pacy, but it was easy to fall in with the rhythm of the techno tracks the DJs started pumping out. The bricks must have weighed about two kilos each. I couldn't tell where the brick dust ended and the fog from the smoke machines began. The sway of your body as you took a brick from your upstream neighbour, twisted to hand it to the one downstream and twisted back to take the next, became a kind of dance. It was quickest if everyone moved to the beat.

Dima Kyrpa, one of the organisers of Repair Together, took me behind the House of Culture to show me the areas still off-limits because of the danger of mines and unexploded shells. Underfoot, rusted cartridge cases lay thick as beech mast. When he and other idealistic non-combatants arrived in the just liberated village last April, every fourth house was destroyed, and none was undamaged. There were only thirty people on Repair Together's first foray. By the sixth trip, there were three hundred. 'Back then, in society, it felt as if there was some kind of taboo on happiness,' said Kyrpa. 'Most people not on the front line had a feeling of guilt. One day I was sitting there speaking with this guy and asking why he kept coming again and again. He said these events we organised were the first and only moments since the war started when he felt like a normal person, like it was possible to speak, to laugh, to make jokes, to meet new people. Actually I felt the same way . . . We arranged this clean-up rave with a DJ, even though we were afraid of how society would react.' Kyrpa now wants to bring in volunteers from abroad. He plans a permanent camp near Chernihiv where foreign volunteers will provide labour for reconstruction, party in their down time and use satellite internet to keep up remotely with their jobs.

In the afternoon, the work went on. It seemed faster. Small village children joined the chain. Instead of handing the bricks carefully to the next person in line, we began to throw them. At one point, my neighbour in the chain was one of the DJs, a woman with a purple bob and black chaps. I asked her if they raised the tempo of the music after lunch and she laughed and denied it. The beats thumped out over the village. Beyond the camp I could see an ancient woman in a faded summer dress, bent double over her potato patch.

I spoke to a few of the villagers about the visitors and their music. They seemed pleased at the attention Yahidne was getting. Their gates still have bullet holes, but they have new windows. I talked to a middle-aged man, Oleksandr, at his well (the village, built in the 1950s to supply the Soviet military with fruit, didn't have running water). I struggled to understand him. He spoke Surzhik, the mix of Russian and Ukrainian common in villages outside western Ukraine. I gathered he'd been born in Vladivostok and served as a merchant seaman. I touched on the school basement, and saw his face become not less but more cheerful, perilously so, as he tried to use a bigger smile to cover a feeling he didn't want to feel. Lots of outsiders have brought their questions to Yahidne since the Russians left. We changed the subject. He made me try his well water. He'd sunk the well himself. I lifted the steel pail, filled to the brim, my brick-stained wrists making the clear water slosh from side to side, and drank

from it. It was cool and tasted slightly of iron. ‘The villages are dying,’ he said. ‘Everyone is trying to move to the city. This generation, they don’t want to work. One of my sons, he’s a business consultant. He doesn’t want to dig potatoes. I have a 16-year-old and he doesn’t want to work on the land. They only wear glasses and sit at a computer. And everything will die.’ In the early evening, the volunteers got back on the coach and were taken to a lake where they pitched their tents, drank beer and danced around a bonfire. On Sunday morning, they were back at the worksite, and on Monday, back in the big city.

IN ‘Steppe, Empire and Cruelty’, an essay from 2019, the philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko identified three oppositions that have defined Ukraine. First is the nomadic, unrooted edgelessness of the steppe versus the rooted, delineated space of the forest. Second is the republican impulse, forever coming up against the imperial tendencies of Catholic Rome and the self-proclaimed Third Rome of Moscow. Most intriguing is Yermolenko’s treatment of the dynamic between hedonism and asceticism, which he sees as a cycle in Western European history. Ukraine missed out on the hedonistic swings experienced by the countries to its west, from the Renaissance to the psychosexual-consumerist revolution of the 1960s, because of the centuries it spent in thrall to Russia. In the second half of the 20th century, Yermolenko writes, Western Europe came to see progress as ‘a hedonist project of enlarging the space for pleasure’, while in Soviet Eastern Europe, progress was an ascetic project ‘of achieving great things through great suffering’. ‘Marxism was essentially an ascetic doctrine,’ Yermolenko writes. ‘This asceticism was only radicalised on Russian soil: throughout the history of the Soviet Union the seeking of pleasure was considered a symptom of petit bourgeois attitude.’ The hedonistic shock to Russia and Ukraine in the 1990s, delivered from the West via consumerism, arrived in a place where, Yermolenko argues, pleasure was still considered a rarity. He sees Russia’s invasive policies and the endemic corruption of both countries as a response to the idea that there can never be enough good things for everyone, so you have to grab what you can before anyone else does.

It’s not necessary to accept Yermolenko’s analysis to see how critical to Ukraine since before the Maidan revolution in 2014 the question of the nature of the good life – the thing you’re fighting for – has become. In so far as there’s a disconnect between the left-liberal middle class in the West and their ideological kindred in Ukraine it’s because we feel alienated enough from our consumer-capitalist, relatively democratic system to hate it, but too dependent on the pleasures, security and freedom it provides to get it to change. The not unreasonable response of the left-liberal middle class in Ukraine – academics, artists, journalists, social entrepreneurs, professionals of all kinds – is: let us get the system first, and then we’ll see if we hate it.

Not long before the invasion, while Ukraine’s eight-year war with clandestine Russian forces and their separatist proxies in eastern Ukraine – known then as the ATO, or Anti-Terrorist Operation – was rumbling on, Haska Shyyan, a novelist from Lviv, published *Behind Their Backs*, about a successful young IT headhunter in western Ukraine, Marta, whose live-in boyfriend meekly accepts his call-up papers and goes off to the army. Marta is enraged by the passivity of his courage: he has never been a vocal patriot, or shown the slightest interest in politics, yet he makes no attempt to bribe his way out of service. The novel turns on the nature of loyalty and betrayal. Is Marta the traitor for failing to make the sacrifice of loyalty and patience to her partner (she cheats on him)? Or is it the boyfriend who, without any thought or explanation, abandons her and their comfortable, peaceful, Western life to go to war?

The billboard reading 'Don't dodge the draft!' across from the office of one of the largest IT companies sounds more like, 'IT or ATO? It's your choice!' They were all over the city, and, in front of every single one, I wanted to cover your eyes and stick your nose in the timid message written in marker on the wall of the recruiting office – 'You aren't born a soldier, you die a soldier' – in this simple, candid statement that not everyone is brave enough to say aloud, in this sincerity that my being wanted to scream. 'I don't need you to measure the steel content of your balls for me to love you!'

'She's struggling with this mix of moral duty and the individualistic, selfish approach, that, basically, we all finally felt we were allowed to have before the war started in 2014,' Shyyan told me when we met in Kyiv. 'We had this image of ourselves as kidults, like young Western people who can travel and live their lives till they're 35-40 and then think about families, but aren't obsessed about politics, about things happening in their country and abroad.'

The invasion has changed things. Shyyan's friends have reacted in unexpected ways. Loud patriots have left the country, with no plans to return; cynics have become idealists. The petty corruption Shyyan writes about in the novel has dwindled. 'I know so many people who got their driving licence without a bribe, which wasn't possible when I got mine. There's no question now of paying a bribe to get your child into school, or to get a job as a nurse at a hospital.' Judging by recent scandals, bribery to avoid conscription persists; the Odesa recruitment office was allegedly selling draft exemptions for €5000 a pop. Is this a sign that Ukrainian public administration is as rotten as ever, or does the outrage, intense scrutiny of the case and official intervention to fix it show that the light is being let in to previously dark corners? In the aftermath of independence, Ukraine's big cities were captured for exploitation by autonomous local elites, and it would have surprised Ukrainians to hear that Odesa recruiters might refuse a bribe. Now public servants in every locality are expected to yield to national disapproval. No longer can anyone in Ukraine feel, as Shyyan's west Ukrainian Marta feels when the fighting is confined to Donbas, that the war is not really in her country.

The war never left Kyiv. It shows itself beyond the news from the front, the funeral processions, the flags over the fresh tombstones, the grief of the friends and kin of the fallen, although there's plenty of that. A Ukrainian friend in London, originally from Donetsk, was in Kyiv a couple of weeks before I arrived. She noticed that the customers in TSUM, a high-end department store on Khreshchatyk, had changed. 'The main clients used to be IT guys,' she said. 'Now it's a family shopping for small, expensive pieces of technology from the fourth floor. The man of the family is dressed up in a military uniform and you immediately understand where the money came from. Some men earn more as a soldier than they ever earned as a worker. Now's the perfect time to buy something for the kids that you always wanted to get them. It's a bit heartbreaking.'

You see a few soldiers on every metro train. You see crutches and slings; you see prostheses, not many, but when a young man is larking about and laughing with his right lower leg made of steel and rubber, you make your guess. I heard about an injured soldier, the brother of a friend's friend, who was sent to a hospital in Kyiv. He was put on a ward with men who'd lost arms and legs, and was so traumatised by guilt that his sister found him worse when he was discharged than when he was admitted.

One afternoon on Khreshchatyk I saw a slight, pale, bearded soldier in cammos smoking outside a restaurant called Mafia. He had a Union Jack patch on his sleeve. I asked if he was British. He said he was from Scunthorpe. He used to be a shipbuilder, but, he said, he was 'attracted to war'. He'd fought in Syria. Now he was serving with a Ukrainian unit in

Kramatorsk in Donbas, about fourteen miles from the front. He didn't tell me his actual name, only his nom de guerre, the handle that serving soldiers on both sides tend to go by: his was Sunny.

'Why Sunny?'

'Always sunny in Scunny.'

We exchanged numbers. I was leaving that night, but I hoped I might be able to talk to him before that. He went back inside the restaurant to finish his meal and a few minutes later I followed for a last word. He was eating with another soldier, who looked like any other young guy as far up as the chin. Not so above. Everything in the restaurant was in some sense familiar, but not this. The comrade in arms had survived a wound in the centre of his face to live what would now be a different life. I wanted to stare; I wanted not to look; I wanted to avoid making it look as if I was staring, or as if I was trying not to look. I told Sunny I hoped to see him later and shook his comrade's hand. 'Nice to meet you,' I said.

Sunny didn't contact me, and I boarded a night train to Poland. En route news came in of a Russian strike on Kramatorsk. Two Iskander ballistic missiles, originally designed to be fired at the most valuable Nato targets, had hit a pizza restaurant, killing thirteen people, including four children. The next day Sunny messaged to say that due to 'a couple work situations' he'd been forbidden any contact with journalists.

'Your friend,' I messaged back. 'Is there a hope he will be able to have further facial reconstruction?'

'He's happy with it,' Sunny said. 'Puts the fear into the opposition when they surrender haha.'

Kyiv is still under direct attack from the air. After each strike, the streets are cleaned and repaired, the rubble removed, and the scars become a little less obvious. A large city – before the war, Kyiv was the seventh most populous in Europe – can take many blows before the damage leaps out at the visitor. In summer, it's shaggy with trees, and the foliage helps hide the marks. One day outside Lukianivska metro station, which was busy with people, in a street with heavy traffic, I realised half the windows in a nearby skyscraper were missing. I turned and saw the row of shops opposite was boarded up. A slogan on the plywood in the window of Flora de Luxe, a flower shop, read: 'Even in wartime, flowers bloom.' All the glass in the windows of the six floors of apartments above the shops had been blown out, and the roof was a mess of shattered bricks. Later I searched online to see what had happened. The area had been hit by Russian missiles a few weeks after the invasion began, when Russian troops were still on the outskirts of Kyiv. Pictures of the immediate aftermath show the street barricaded against Russian ground assault with tyres, concrete blocks and makeshift tank traps. All that's gone now, but the flats, offices and shops haven't been repaired. The residents have joined the displaced. The invasion has escaped the confines of eventhood and become a narrative, with episodes. Instead of an extraordinary thing that happened, it threatens to become the entire framework within which personal memories have to find space.

In the international chain hotel where I stayed, the multiple glazing on the windows muffled the sound of the air raid sirens, but there was no danger of missing the alerts. A recorded message was broadcast directly into the room. Often in the small hours I would be woken by a woman's voice, seemingly close to my ear, loudly and calmly urging me, first in English and

then in Ukrainian, to make my way to the shelter. The voice would come back an hour or so later to say that the all-clear had been given. Like many locals, I didn't go to the shelter, but went back to sleep. Kyiv is protected now by layers of radars, guns and missiles, some inherited from Soviet days, but more and more donated by the US and European countries.

Thirty years ago, in Saudi Arabia, I watched American Patriot missiles being launched to intercept Iraqi Scuds. At night, from a distance, as everyone said, they looked like cheap fireworks. There were some big bangs but it turned out that most failed to hit their targets. The technology has improved since then. As fast as the fastest Russian rockets are, the missiles intended to stop them don't have to catch up with them; the idea is that they should calculate the incoming rocket's path and meet it. Most Russian rockets and drones are shot down before they hit Kyiv. The residual danger is of falling debris. One night, fragments from the interception of a Russian cruise missile fell on an apartment block a couple of miles west of where I was staying. Five people were killed, and walls and floors were torn out of the building.

IT HASN'T BEEN the same city through this time,' Sasha Andrusyk, the organiser of the concert I went to at the Ukrainian House, told me. She has been in Kyiv with her husband and two young children for the duration of the war. When I met her briefly at the concert she seemed strung out. She lives in a flat in a three-storey house near Lviv Square, close to the centre, on a hill that gives views across the city and down to the river. She and her husband, Ian, didn't believe Putin would try to conquer all Ukraine; they expected, at worst, a new attack in the Donbas. Half of their friends thought there would be a full-scale invasion. The other half, like them, were in denial. Andrusyk's first anxiety came on the eve of the invasion, a Wednesday, when the cafés and streets were unusually empty. Early the next morning she was woken by her husband, who told her the Russians were attacking everywhere.

The next three days were like a universe in themselves, incomparable to anything they had experienced before or since: each day seemed to last a week. Their children were one and two. Everyone they knew with young children left, or was planning to get out. They decided to stay. 'I realised how much of a Kyivite I am,' Andrusyk said. She posted on Facebook that she wasn't leaving. 'I remember feeling very clearly that if I and my children are to die in this city because some stupid Russia is attacking us, then so be it. It's such a catastrophe of everything I believe in that it doesn't matter any more.' At this stage, the risk seemed that they'd be hit by a stray shell or bullet or missile; the idea that their lives might be in danger if the city capitulated didn't occur to them. They assumed they'd simply be able to leave as refugees. Like many Kyivites in their thirties, they kept in touch with friends who'd volunteered for the military, getting tip-offs about how close the city was to being encircled. As it turned out, it was never close, but in those early weeks, there was no way to know that.

Andrusyk and her husband realised that their children were absorbing their fear and anxiety and experiencing it more intensely than they were, so resolved to behave as if everything was normal. They kept to their usual routine, except that the children couldn't go outside. 'You do hear the explosions, of course; when you're close, you get the tremors. But you don't hear them as aggressively as in houses with older windows. We'd hear an explosion and if a child asks what's happening we just say it's a firework, or something's happening outside, never indicating something is out of the ordinary.' She didn't leave the house until the third day. The city was shockingly empty; the only people she saw were queuing at pharmacies. The noise of shelling could be heard from the north. Andrusyk's house had become crowded with friends, partly because the presence of the children forced visitors to suppress their panic and

hysteria; but the guests needed to be fed. It was impossible to get ordinary food like meat or eggs, but if you had the money, delicacies – duck, pâté, avocados or pineapple – were easy to find.

After the first three days, the Russians came closer, throwing their weight against an arc of suburban towns to the north-west of the city – Irpin, Hostomel, Bucha and Moshchun. Outnumbered Ukrainian troops were holding back the assault about as far from central Kyiv as Versailles is from central Paris. Andrusyk's grandparents lived in Irpin. Both are in their mid-eighties. Her grandmother has dementia. In early March her grandfather said on the phone that he could see the Russians from his window; at that moment, he was cut off. Days passed without their hearing anything. It was bitterly cold. In the second week of March, the missing grandparents made it to Kyiv. Somehow Andrusyk's grandfather had got his demented wife into a car and struggled with her across the broken bridge over the Irpin river. Thousands of elderly Ukrainians made, or tried to make, the same journey.

For those in the north of Kyiv, the nearby battles were loud and menacing. The centre felt safer. Like medieval villagers seeking refuge in the castle keep, more and more of those who hadn't left altogether moved into the city centre. But by mid-March, the tension eased. By the end of the month, it was clear the Russian attack on Kyiv was faltering. Some of Andrusyk's friends who had fled returned. Another child, Platon, appeared on the street with his mother, refugees from fighting in the south-east. When it became clear Russian troops were pulling out from around the capital, it wasn't a surprise. But it was still one of the happiest days of their lives.

Next day, Kyiv was wrapped in thick mist. Andrusyk sees it now as an absurdly apt metaphor for her own naivety about the nature of the threat the decision to stay had exposed her family to. No sooner had the mist lifted than reports began to come in from newly liberated Bucha, Irpin and nearby Borodyanka of killing, rape and torture. 'In this moment we realised how close to catastrophe we all were,' she said. 'It's one thing to hear the sound of fighting ten or fifteen kilometres away. But when it turns out you're just ten or fifteen kilometres from a mass grave ... It was one of the darkest days in my life, and it was a bit like this for everyone. I realised that my optimism was tied to this tiny thread. And this thread was holding me, and there was an abyss there, and the thread was really, really thin. And I'd made this decision to stay, and in the name of my children. And when you see the risk that you were taking, put so bluntly into your face, it just kills you.'

Russian is Andrusyk's first, and preferred, language: Ukrainian Russian, she calls it, her language, her family's language for generations, which she has no intention of stopping speaking. This doesn't, she said, make her a Russophile. 'I think I broke any ties with Russia as early as 2013, 2014. To me, the fact that they would be waging a war on us seemed very stupid, but also not shocking. But this cruelty, this barbaric cruelty, was shocking ... Even the Kyiv of the first days of war was not as shockingly different as Kyiv in the first two weeks of April 2022. It was just sorrow everywhere. People would really be crying on the streets ... I think in this moment it was very clear that Ukraine might still win this and will most likely win this. But can it ever be called a victory? If it comes at this price?'

Last summer was a relative lull for Kyiv. Many who'd fled came home. Early autumn saw victories for Ukraine in pushing the invader back, but from October Russia began its campaign of missile strikes against Ukraine's energy system. Throughout winter most Ukrainians endured blackouts. They were tests of the fragile wartime solidarity between the classes. Residential buildings in central Kyiv, where the capital's most privileged live, tended

to have fewer power cuts, either because the residents had bought generators or because, like Andrusyk, they lived next to a piece of critical infrastructure. Her childminder commuted from the western fringes of the city, from an apartment block where the heating pipes were kept just warm enough to stop them freezing, and spent the winter in her kitchen, using an electric heater to raise that one room to fourteen degrees. Kyiv's oldest power station isn't far from Andrusyk's house and she learned to tell from a distinctive hissing sound that a particular type of Russian projectile was about to fall. 'I heard the hissing, the explosion, the hissing, the explosion. It's so close. It might be coming to your place. In this second you experience the possibility of death that might be coming right now. There's no time to run anywhere. You're just waiting and hoping that it's going to be somewhere else, not you.'

Spring came, air defences improved, optimism rose that the counter-offensive would succeed. The family met Platon's father, on leave from the army for his son's birthday. The air attacks went on, as Russia tried to show it could break the missile shield. One night Andrusyk saw four Russian drones shot down by the bright red dashes of Ukrainian cannon fire. She was still awake when news came in that the Kakhovka dam had been blown up. Two days later, she heard that Platon's father had been killed at the front. Everyone in the city, she said, is on medication for anxiety, panic attacks, depression or sleeplessness. For her, the night of the drones, the dam-burst and the death of Platon's father brought on a nervous collapse. She felt a compulsion to smile every time she saw someone crying. To prevent herself, she had to make a strong physical effort; her jaw muscles ached from it. 'Apart from everything else,' she said, 'I have never lived in a place where everyone you speak to is on something.'

SASHA and I spoke on the margins of the book fair, in the cool vaults of the Arsenal, crowded, glamorous and smart. Among those speaking was the poet, novelist and activist Victoria Amelina. On the day the fair opened, a Thursday, she took part in the launch of a book by another poet, Volodymyr Vakulenko, abducted by occupying Russian troops from his home in Kharkiv region last spring and months later found buried, with two pistol bullets in him, in a mass grave outside the newly liberated town of Izyum. On the Saturday, Amelina read her own poems from a new anthology, accompanied by the philosopher Yermolenko on keyboard. Soon afterwards she set off for eastern Ukraine with a group of Colombian writers and journalists, hoping to do something about Latin America's sympathy for Russia. Three days after her last festival performance, she was in the Kramatorsk pizza restaurant when it was hit by Russian missiles, one of Sunny's 'work situations'. She died in hospital of her wounds.

The steady stream of deaths and injuries of Ukrainian artists and intellectuals at Russian hands has hardened the mood among those who remain. The formula 'four hundred years of Russian oppression' is often heard, sometimes from a person who insists they always thought that way, sometimes appended to the notion 'Before I was blind, but now I see.' People evoke the 1920s, when Ukraine's language and Ukrainian urban culture were flourishing. Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union then, and the Communist Party was in charge, but it was Lenin's Soviet Union rather than Stalin's, a looser association of more genuinely autonomous socialist republics. Lenin eased communism's grip on the economy, allowing small businesses and markets. Modern Ukrainians refer to the era less to glorify it than to draw attention to its brutal end in the 1930s, when Stalin, having vanquished his political rivals in Moscow, restored the command economy and put paid to Ukrainian self-government, imposing Russian language, culture and history. The Ukrainian language was frozen as a folkloric rural relic, alien to modernity. Leading Ukrainian intellectuals were co-opted or killed; Ukrainians today call it the 'executed renaissance'.

A central text of that period is Valerian Pidmohylnyi's novel *The City*, which describes the rise of a clever, unworldly young villager, veering between selfishness and idealism, who makes his ambitious way through the capital. Pidmohylnyi was executed in Russia in 1937, aged 36. His Kyiv teems with energy and a striving optimism; the novel seems to assume the permanence of the dispensation it portrays. What was, with hindsight, a brief moment of respite for Ukraine, appeared to many at the time the beginning of something better and long-lasting: the worst was behind them, the exploitation by aristocrats and big capitalists, Russian imperialist chauvinism, war, war communism, pogroms, illiteracy. As we now know, the worst was yet to come, the return of institutional Russian chauvinism, terror, forced collectivisation, famine, Nazi invasion, the Holocaust, multiple forms of slavery.

A century later, the mood in Kyiv is mixed. The war is not over, but it has receded. People are beginning to think about how it might end, and what kind of Ukraine might come afterwards. What will happen when the soldiers come home? Many will be traumatised, some changed beyond recognition; some will feel unrewarded; some, what one person described to me as the nation's previously dormant 'warrior class', will have been empowered. There is optimism, even confidence, that Russia will be defeated. At the same time there is a dread of what Russia might still do, a fear that, as for Pidmohylnyi's Kyiv, the worst might be yet to come. There is a sense that what began as a war of subjugation has become a war of revenge, to punish Ukraine for daring to resist. Why else would Russia have blown up the Kakhovka dam, wrecking the irrigation system of thousands of square miles of rich agricultural land that it currently occupies, and claims as its own? Few Ukrainians doubt Russia was responsible; surely, the popular assumption goes, the next step would be for Russia to blow up some or all of the six reactors of Zaporizhzhia nuclear power station, which it also occupies.

All spring and early summer, hopes were high for Ukraine's counter-offensive, which began in earnest in late May or early June – no formal 'D-Day' was announced. Officially, and in the eyes of the most optimistic, the offensive is the biggest step yet towards driving Russia out of internationally recognised Ukraine completely. If it is successful, Russia would be forced to retreat from the lands it has held since the invasion began in February last year: in the east, a small patch of Kharkiv and northern Luhansk, together with southern Kherson, southern Zaporizhzhia and the area around the Donbas port of Mariupol, which made up much of Ukraine's pre-invasion coast. It would have to abandon, too, the territory it annexed or took control of in 2014: the rest of Donbas, including Donetsk city, and Crimea. It would have to give up its Crimean naval base in Sevastopol, which it inherited from the Soviet Union in 1991, and which the Soviets, in turn, inherited from the Russian Empire. Russia would admit its guilt; Russia would pay reparations.

Russia will do none of these things willingly. Putin still demands more Ukrainian land, and still insists on Russia's right to dictate who runs the rest, and how. Each side is, officially, waiting for the other to beg for terms, which neither is going to do. Many Ukrainians believe complete expulsion is the only way to prevent future Russian aggression. Even before the counter-offensive began, some Ukrainians were sceptical, not about its necessity – talks with Russia at this stage would be seen as a gross betrayal, not least by the military – but about maximalist talk of total victory. The sceptics tend to lower their voices at this point, not for fear of official reprisals, but because they don't want to be accused of a lack of patriotism. Their view is that Russia should be driven back as far as possible, but not at the expense of tens of thousands more dead and maimed Ukrainian troops, and not if it takes Ukrainian soldiers into areas, such as Crimea, where many would not see them as liberators.

‘I don’t really understand how we are to cope with this territory,’ one Kyivite told me. ‘What are we to do with Donetsk? How are we to reintegrate Crimea? I have no idea. I’m not sure that taking Crimea back is worth any life at all. But I understand there are millions of people who have a different opinion, because we have paid such a high price for this.’

The startling military successes in Kherson and Kharkiv last year gave Ukraine a solid margin of defence, more or less guaranteeing its continued existence as some form of free republic. But to enable that republic to thrive, Russia must be driven back from the east bank of the river Dnieper and Enerhodar. The Ukrainian counter-offensive one would have expected would take this as its goal, while reassuring the maximalists of its being only a step on the way to total victory. And that’s exactly the counter-offensive Ukraine got. Ukraine has attacked Russian defences in several places hundreds of miles apart, but the main assault seems to be directed at the city of Melitopol, close to the Azov Sea. Were Ukraine to capture Melitopol, it would slice Russian forces in two, cutting the land bridge from Crimea to Russia. The crossings from Crimea would be vulnerable to Ukrainian bombardment; Russian forces between Melitopol and the Dnieper, including at the nuclear power station, would have little choice but to withdraw. It wouldn’t end the war, but it would be a propitious moment to start talking about how to stop it; or, the maximalists might say, the moment to demand from Ukraine’s allies the tools to finish the job.

The revered Ukrainian commander in chief, General Valery Zaluzhny, doesn’t seem to be a maximalist. In a rare interview with the *Economist* last December, he spoke about the importance of taking Melitopol. ‘This is enough for us,’ he said. He meant militarily, to dominate Crimea at a distance, but he went further. ‘It is not yet time to appeal to Ukrainian soldiers in the way that [the Finnish commander] Mannerheim appealed to Finnish soldiers [to accept the loss of Finnish territory in exchange for peace],’ he said. ‘We can and should take a lot more territory.’ ‘Not yet time’ suggests the time might come. ‘A lot more’ suggests not necessarily all.

Zaluzhny gathered tens of thousands of troops, some of them trained in Britain, on the southern front. Brigades were formed and organised with existing units in two new army corps. Hundreds of armoured vehicles, mine-clearers, battlefield tow trucks, ambulances, fuel tankers and mobile bridges, many of them donated by the West, were prepared, and thousands of tons of ammunition. Nobody thought it would be easy, and when the attack began, it went badly. The Russians had spent more than a year constructing deep lines of defence against an incursion from the north: digging trenches, exploiting watercourses and the natural contours of the land, designing enfilades, creating strongpoints and kill zones, sowing mines. The whole edifice is sometimes called the Surovikin Line after the general now in disgrace for being too close to Yevgeny Prigozhin. But the actual master of Russia’s southern fortifications is a relatively intellectual general called Alexander Romanchuk, who co-published an article in a Russian military journal this year about the art of modern defence, which he argues should be nimble, proactive, dispersed.

Ukrainian forces went head-on towards the thickest part of the Russian defences, aiming to take the shortest route from their starting point at Orikhiv to Melitopol, fifty miles away down the Milk River valley. A Nato army in a similar position would have spent weeks or months beforehand using aircraft to destroy Russian air defences, freeing its planes to support the ground troops. Ukraine has none of that: *nyet aviatsii*. Russian attack helicopters picked off Ukrainian armoured vehicles from five miles away. Mines, sometimes planted several layers deep, or blowing sideways from the trees, or dropped remotely onto an area Ukrainian sappers had just cleared, wreaked havoc. Ukraine’s most experienced brigades, those who

have learned from actually fighting the Russians, were exhausted after a winter spent in the Donbas meat-grinder. They are still there; the new brigades in the south have some training, but less experience, and some mid-level commanders remain in thrall to piecemeal tactics or conservative Soviet doctrine. A pattern of attacks, small gains, small counter-attacks set in. Optimists point to the success with which Ukrainian drones and artillery have reduced Russia's advantage in big guns, but is it enough for a breakthrough? In Kharkiv, Ukraine took brilliant advantage of Russian complacency; in Kherson, Ukraine was able to force a retreat by destroying the handful of bridges Russia relied on for supply. This time, the only option seems to be brute force and attrition. If Melitopol is too far for this campaign, what about Tokmak, at the head of the valley, not twenty miles from where the offensive started? But as I write, the offensive has been going for two months, and Ukrainian troops are five miles from where they began, taking losses, having to fight for every treeline, every field, every yard.

ONE OF THE MOST striking things about Kyiv this summer is the freedom with which people are imagining, and in some cases already making, their own future. There is a recurring motif in recent Ukrainian history in which entities set up as imitations actually become the thing they were only supposed to pretend to be, beginning with Ukraine's parliament, a fake Soviet legislature that became a democratic body with real powers and destroyed the country that created it. Volodymyr Zelensky, the actor playing the president, who became the actual president. The Ukrainian army, a crumbling façade in 2013, which ten years later fought the Russian military leviathan to a standstill. St Michael's church is a replica, built from the ground up in the 1990s to replace the original, blown up by Stalin, but it has in a way become the real thing just by being there. There was a plan in Soviet times to build a Lenin Museum on the site, but they ended up building it on Kreshchatik instead; it's the building that is now the Ukrainian House. The externally imposed cult of Lenin became a centre of actual culture.

Ukraine, as a country, and Ukrainian as a language, were never fake, but it was awkward for the patriotic tendency that the Russian language was so dominant in the Ukrainian capital. The Putinists' inability to distinguish between Ukrainians who habitually use Russian in everyday affairs, who were many, and Ukrainians who wanted to be controlled from Moscow, who were vanishingly few, doomed the invasion. Since then, the use of Ukrainian has surged. Ruslan Kuznetsov, a massively popular Ukrainian video blogger and musician, always used Russian before the invasion. When he switched everyone was surprised, not that he made the change but that his Ukrainian was so good, despite having been dormant for most of his adult life. He said he'd had a good Ukrainian teacher at school. It hasn't been so easy for those less linguistically skilled. Andrusyk told me about a friend from the predominantly Russian-speaking region of Kherson who abandoned Russian for Ukrainian after news of the massacres in Bucha. 'To see how a grown-up person cuts off their native language because he or she feels that this language attaches to this act of barbarous repression is really tragic ... The choices are very basic. They're made in positions that can come from such places of pain that you can't really understand, you know, how much longer it will last, but I see already that for many people it will last.'

I dabbled in Russian at university, but I barely spoke it when I arrived in Kyiv in 1991, and to the extent I have the language now, I learned it there. I remember my private tutors: the one who berated me about the pillagers of the British Empire; the one who mispronounced adjective endings because he thought I wouldn't be able to manage the correct ones; the second wife of the Armenian film director Sergei Parajanov; the university teacher who excitedly brought a huge radio along one day because he expected an announcement that a Ukrainian writer had won the Nobel Prize. Nobody asked me why I was learning Russian and

not Ukrainian. The northern language was ubiquitous. And yet I was always aware of the city's bilingualism, of the possibility of waking up one morning and discovering that Ukrainian had taken over. Although there's plenty of unembarrassed Russian still to be heard, it's far more common than it was to hear Ukrainian in everyday use. What's unexpected is the extent to which Kyiv is becoming an English-speaking city. Although national surveys show the number with knowledge of the language at just over 50 per cent, if you're in Kyiv, and you only speak Russian and English, it's politic to try English first. I was resigned to the waning of Russian in Kyiv, but not to the prospect of the city's essence moving a little further away from foreigners, as in northern Europe, behind a veil of ESL politeness.

The Anglicisation of Kyiv is a marker of wary openness towards what are seen, in this still highly gendered, socially conservative country, as 'European values'. A new law privileging the use of English, requiring senior civil servants to know the language, which in its original form barred the dubbing of English-language films into Ukrainian, begins with a reference to 'the European identity of the Ukrainian people and the irreversibility of Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic course'.

What are the 'European values' Ukraine aspires to, when its staunchest West European ally has flounced out of the European Union that Ukraine is desperate to join? One obvious aspect of European values is essentially leftist, a welfare-rooted social contract between capital and labour, but socialism, even social democracy, is all but dead in Ukraine. Mention of the executed renaissance seldom leads to discussion of the nature of the communism under which it flourished. Even now, in the middle of the war, civil politics continues in Kyiv: posters outside my hotel bearing Orwellian slogans like TRUTH IS OUR STRENGTH and WEAPONS ARE THE LANGUAGE OF WAR turned out to be from an army fundraising campaign run by Petro Poroshenko, Zelensky's predecessor and rival. Yet neither the Zelensky nor the Poroshenko camp have ideologies in the usual political sense, just a list of tasks: beat Russia, join Nato and the EU, fight corruption. When Zelensky's quickly formed party won a parliamentary majority in 2019, the new intake went to a summer school in a Carpathian spa to learn from the Kyiv School of Economics what economics was.

The government, most of whose ministers are from Kyiv or Lviv, rather than the big southern and eastern cities of Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro or Kharkiv, has sent out mixed signals since the invasion. Some large businesses have been nationalised, but radical tax-cutting plans have been floated and there has been tut-tutting about 'dependency culture'. Tymofii Brik, a sociologist, rector at the KSE and one of the organisers of the summer school, has carried out research showing that while terms like 'left' and 'right' don't have much meaning for ordinary Ukrainians, the country sits overwhelmingly on the traditional left in terms of what it expects of the state, and by a similarly large margin on the more conservative side of the libertarian-authoritarian axis. 'Ukrainians tend to be very pro-social, caring about the elderly, caring about children, caring about community, believing the state is important, the state should provide us with health, education,' he told me. 'It's just a big part of who we are, of our history and culture over generations. We should accept this as our reality. If you propose some crazy liberal reform, it will not happen, because Ukrainian society will not accept it.' The seemingly contradictory message given by the country's high score on the Cynicism Index, a unique feature of Ukrainian sociology, may be resolved by a reality where Ukrainians are communitarian in respect of people they know, but extremely mistrustful of people they don't. Brik's positive spin was that this would at least make the country recoil from a homegrown authoritarian leader.

Brik's research was carried out before the war. Volodymyr Yermolenko, whom I met a couple of days before his friend Victoria Amelina was killed, had a different forecast. 'Maybe the society Ukraine is going to build with this constant threat is one with a very big presence of the state in security, a big army, big military spending, military training among citizens, with not so many resources going into social welfare,' he said. 'Kind of security libertarians. I do think there is an ideological consensus in Ukraine, which I would call liberal nationalism. Not far-right nationalists, not conservatives, not neo-fascist nationalism.'

I asked Yermolenko about immigration, which I'd noticed creeping into the discourse around the postwar future. Ukraine's population was falling before the war and the outflow of refugees. A government estimate suggests the country will need to find more than four million non-native workers from somewhere. It's one of those areas where Ukraine might feel it has a chance to align itself with 'European values', yet those values are in ferocious dispute in Europe. It's also an opportunity to distance a Ukrainian idea of citizenship, according to which all citizens are deemed to be Ukrainian regardless of ethnicity, from the current Russian one, which maintains that Ukrainians in Ukraine are in fact Russians who belong to Russia. Yermolenko was enthusiastic, while acknowledging that not everyone was going to welcome immigrants. 'These people are already here. They're already Ukrainians. They do an amazing job for this country.'

THERE ARE groups in Ukraine working for progressive causes around gender and sexuality that have been shocked out of their default disdain for anything military and tried to join the war effort. LGBTQ activists have signed up; their deadly enemies on the Ukrainian far right have made peace with them for now. But it is a bleak world. The often-voiced contempt of Putin and his domestic cheerleaders for the rights of sexual minorities is echoed by MAGA America, by the leaders of Hungary and Poland, and by reactionary curmudgeons across Europe. What support they might have expected from activists overseas can come hedged, like the recent resolution by the University and College Union, with calls to cut off the supply of Western arms to Ukraine. In March last year, anti-war Russian feminists gathered support from around the world – but not Ukraine – to sign a manifesto titled 'Feminist Resistance against War', which blamed the Putin regime for starting the war and called for the cancellation of Ukraine's debts. But the manifesto also described the invasion as a 'militaristic spiral initiated by Russia and supported by Nato' and called for a halt to arms supplies. A few months later, Ukrainian feminists responded with a manifesto of their own, 'The Right to Resist', with a list of demands that included the continued supply of arms. 'War narratives,' they wrote,

often portray women as victims . . . in reality, women also play a key role in resistance movements, both at the front line and on the home front . . . The authors of the Feminist Resistance against War manifesto deny Ukrainian women this right to resistance . . . We insist on the essential difference between violence as a means of oppression and as a legitimate means of self-defence.

In Kyiv I met Alisa Shampanska, a gender-fluid queer anarchist and member of the Ukrainian feminist group FemSolution, which until the invasion took a pacifist, anti-militarist line; Russia's limited intervention in eastern Ukraine, starting in 2014, didn't seem to them worth fighting over. Shampanska was in Odesa in the early days of the Russian assault. Overnight they went from being a pacifist to filling sandbags and trying to enrol in the territorial defence force. Their girlfriend lied that she knew how to weld so she could get a job building tank traps. Gradually Shampanska came to the difficult conclusion that one of the country's most unpleasant social minorities, the queer-bashing ultra-nationalist racists, had been right

about one thing all along. ‘All those years, they told us Russia is the main enemy,’ they said. ‘That Russia will attack us, that the Russians don’t give a shit about us and they will come and kill us and we should prepare . . . at the time I thought yeah, this is populism. And this is bad populism and they are bad for human rights. But about this, they were correct.’

It wasn’t easy to be Shampanska before the invasion, with their male ID designation and appearance, their uncertainty over whether to seek hormone therapy, and their difficulties in navigating a gendered language: to use the female first-person ending of the past tense is to expose yourself, to use the male ending is to hide. They still have that to deal with, but now they also worry about their friends and family being killed, and that the troops fighting the Russians in Zaporizhzhia are short of gear. I read Shampanska the UCU resolution; they disagreed with it, not angrily, because it so closely echoed their own lost illusions. ‘Maybe if I was living in Europe, I would be saying something like this. Maybe I would be another kind of person. But for us, there’s no other choice. We don’t have big cool tanks and aircraft of our own. It would be cool if them calling on Russia to withdraw troops would work. It would be a better option. It’s a very nice position. But Russia isn’t listening to teachers in Britain or politicians in Britain or anyone. It doesn’t care what we think would be better.’

When at the start of the invasion some said Putin had lost touch with reality, I argued that he *was* reality. In the parallel between soldiers’ noms de guerre and the self-chosen names of Ukrainian gender-fluid dissidents, which defy east Slavic naming conventions, Ukraine is forming a counter-reality of its own. War, Shampanska said, used to be something they only imagined. ‘In those years I thought there was so much counter-culture in Russia, so much opposition, so many people who like freedom, love, peace and equality and not Putin and his autocratic regime. But these people didn’t do anything, they didn’t win their revolution as we did in Ukraine. So this war is not imaginary for me as it was before. It is real.’

28 July