

## PHOTOJOURNALISM – INTERVIEW

# Images of War : Ukraine

DEBRA LIVINGSTON, BRENDAN HOFFMAN AND OKSANA PARAFENIUK

### The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Relations between Ukraine and Russia had become increasingly hostile after a pro-western government replaced the pro-Russian President in February 2014. In March 2014 Russia annexed Crimea and provided increasing amounts of military aid to two pro-Russian break away regions in the east of Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk. In a series of speeches in February 2022 Putin denounced the expansion of NATO towards Russia and claimed that Ukraine was an integral part of Russia'. (Beauchamp 2022; Fisher 2022). He began massing Russian troops on the border. And despite initial denials Putin then announced a 'special military operation' to 'demilitarise and denazify' Ukraine. (Berger 2022). This was particularly ironic as President Zelensky was Jewish and after law school became a comedic actor. Russia then launched a full-scale invasion. Tanks headed for Kyiv, missiles and bombs targeted the infrastructure and the civilian population. Attacks in the south were mounted from the sea. Casualties mounted but after initial successes in the south and east the invasion descended into stalemate, the attempted occupation of Kyiv failed but Russian missiles and bombs continued to cause havoc and mounting casualties. Millions were displaced and despite some Ukrainian gains almost one fifth of Ukraine's territory is occupied by Russian troops. However, Putin did not achieve the rapid conquest he was expecting as Ukrainians rallied to repel the invaders.

Amid carnage and catastrophe Ukraine photojournalists have continued to project images of the war and its effects on the Ukrainian people to the world. The work and lives of two of these, Brendan Hoffman and Oksana Parafeniuk are featured in this issue.



This selfie was taken of Brendan and Oksana in Avdiivka in December of 2021, when they both had assignments on the frontline. Oksana was already pregnant. 'We took it to one day show it to our son, Luka'.

## **Brendan Hoffman and Oksana Parafeniuk**

Brendan Hoffman is a documentary photographer based in Kyiv. His work reflects his interest in themes of identity, history, politics, conflict, and the environment. Since 2013 he has primarily covered revolution and war in Ukraine. His work has been published widely, shown at festivals including Visa Pour l'Image, the Zoom Photo Festival in Canada, and the Singapore International Photography Festival, and exhibited across Ukraine, in a major solo show at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art in Chicago, Illinois, and in various galleries and educational institutions across Europe and the United States (Hoffman 2023)

Oksana Parafeniuk is an independent photographer based in Kyiv, Ukraine, where she explores manifestations of human resilience and dignity among people facing hardships. Her focus is on exploring creative approaches in documentary photography. In addition to her personal projects, Oksana has worked with and published her work in The Washington Post, The New York Times, Time, Le Monde, Der Spiegel, NBC News, BuzzFeed News, The Wall Street Journal, Al Jazeera English, Rest of World, U.S. News & World Report, Newsweek, MSF Doctors Without Borders, UN Women, UNHCR, L'Oeil de la Photographie, and others.

Brendan and Oksana met when working together in eastern Ukraine in spring 2014 during the earliest days of Russia's intervention in Ukraine (Ferguson 2022). They married in January 2022, six weeks before the Russian invasion.



Brendan and Oksana's son Luka, 14 months old in this photo. Oksana takes cover in the subway with Luka at 3:30 am at night during the massive missile attack by Russia in Kyiv, Ukraine on May 25, 2023. We spent 4 hours in the subway from 1am till 5am. Photo: Oksana Parafeniuk.



Yelena Pravda, who runs the Pravda fashion label, poses with ukraine-themed wings in a photo shoot for a fundraising campaign to support women who were displaced from the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut on Tuesday October 17, 2023 in Kyiv, Ukraine. Photo: Brendan Hoffman.



Stanislav Sotnik, 27 left, and Olha Koliadiuk, 26, donate blood at the city hospital after local government announced a request for additional donors on Monday June 5 2023 in Odesa, Ukraine. Photo: Brendan Hoffman for the New York Times.



Students of the Odesa Professional Lyceum of Maritime Transport hold Ukrainian flags before the march dedicated to the newly-created Day of Unity, announced by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Odesa region, Ukraine on February 16, 2022. Photo: Oksana Parafeniuk.



Tymofii Shapoval, 10, a Ukrainian patient who has a brain tumour, waits in the ambulance while medics plan his evacuation from the Medyka border crossing via helicopter in Medyka, Poland on March 30, 2022. Russia invaded Ukraine in late February creating a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, and shortly after St. Jude teamed up with foundations in Poland to evacuate children with cancer from the war zone. Photo: Oksana Parafeniuk.



A displaced Ukrainian girl sleeps in a room reserved for women with small children near the main train station on Tuesday, April 12, 2022 in Lviv, Ukraine. Photo: Brendan Hoffman.



Maryna Ponomariova, 6, holds a lollipop after a physical therapy session with her mother Nataliia Ponomariova, 41, left, physical therapist Nazar Borozniuk, and aunt Liuba Kostina, 36, right, at Ohmadyt Children's Hospital on Thursday, October 20, 2022 in Kyiv, Ukraine. Maryna, who is from the Kherson region of Ukraine, lost her left leg due to Russian shelling. Photo: Brendan Hoffman for The New York Times.



Serhiy Kopsychyk, 25, holds his one month old son Marko in Pokashchiv village, Volyn region, Ukraine on October 3, 2023. Svitlana and Serhiy got married in January this year and their son Marko was born in August. He joined the army the day after the invasion and he suffered severe injuries on July 27, 2022 in Kherson region, which resulted in him losing both legs, one above the knee, and eyesight in one eye. They live with Svitlana's parents and dream to buy their own house. Photo: Oksana Parafeniuk.



Participants of the civil-defence training, organised by a far-right political organisation National Corps was held on the grounds of an abandoned heavy machinery factory on Kyiv's western outskirts. They train with wooden makeshift weapons in Kyiv, Ukraine on February 6, 2022. In the months leading up to the full-scale invasion by Russia, civil-defence training became more widespread in Kyiv and in other major Ukrainian cities, some of which are organised by formal institutions like the Territorial Defense Forces, that is a reservist force of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Photo: Oksana Parafeniuk.



NYTUKRAINE For a story by Marc Santora KYIV, Ukraine – People look at destroyed Russian military equipment put on display on Mikhailivska Square outside St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery on Wednesday, August 31, 2022 in Kyiv, Ukraine. Photo: Brendan Hoffman for The New York Times



Mourners attend the funeral of Yegor Bartosh, a member of Ukraine's Azov Regiment who was killed in action, on Tuesday, April 25, 2023 in Kornivka, Ukraine.



Svitlana Zdor, 44, and Iurii Zdor, 42, a married couple from Chernihiv, pose for a portrait in Iurii's hospital room at the Oberih medical center in Kyiv, Ukraine on July 31, 2023. Iurii is a war veteran and he had his leg amputated due to a battlefield injury. He also had severe injury to his other leg and his abdomen and lungs. In Oberih medical centre he is undergoing rehabilitation and some planned surgery. Svitlana and Iurii, who have been married for six years, participated in the promotional video for the Veteran Hub project Resex, a platform about sex life for wounded warriors. As part of the project Veteran hub developed two manuals for men and women veterans that are freely available, which help to establish a relationship with the body and turn trauma into a new sexual experience. Each guide is based on the Veteran Hub team's research on post-injury sexuality. Photo: Oksana Parafeniuk.



For a story by Marc Santora Damian plays the accordion for passersby on Andriivskiy Descent after dark on Saturday, October 29, 2022 in Kyiv, Ukraine. Photo: Brendan Hoffman for The New York Times.



People gather on escalators in an underground metro station after air raid sirens sounded in Kyiv and there were reports of explosions, either from Russian missiles or from Ukraine's air defense system taking them down, on Tuesday, November 15, 2022 in Kyiv, Ukraine. Photo: Brendan Hoffman.



Fellow soldiers carry in the coffin containing the body of Taras Diduh killed on February 26 during the funeral ceremony held at the Church of the Most Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in Lviv, Ukraine on March 11, 2022. Photo: Oksana Parafeniuk.



Local residents came for the Sunday service to the Saint Paraskeva church in Kalynivka, Vinnytsia region, Ukraine on February 27, 2022. Russia launched a full scale war on Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Photo: Oksana Parafeniuk.



Mariia Myskiv, 26, gives birth to her daughter Sofiia at the Kyiv Perinatal Centre in Kyiv, Ukraine on October 9, 2023. Mariia's husband is in the military. They got married 1 month after the full-scale invasion and have known each other only for two months. Her husband has an amputated leg due to a previous injury, but he keeps serving on the frontline as a brigade commander. Photo: Oksana Parafeniuk.



Teachers at School Number 5 make dumplings with meat to feed soldiers, volunteers, and displaced people in Vinnytsia, Ukraine on March 1, 2022. Around 35 people, many of them teachers and their families are currently living at the school because it has a basement bomb shelter. Photo: Oksana Parafeniuk.



Men hold a blanket to catch a frightened cat that fell from the fifth floor balcony of a residential building that was struck by a Russian missile the previous day on Thursday, November 24, 2022 in Vyshhorod, Ukraine. Photo: Brendan Hoffman for The New York Times.



Local residents wait in line to receive free loaves of bread next to high rise residential buildings that were heavily damaged during airstrikes in March on Wednesday, October 19, 2022 in Chernihiv, Ukraine. Photo: Brendan Hoffman for The New York Times.



A couple Sofia Chygyryn, 19, and Vadym Beilakh, 19, pose for a portrait during the territorial defense training in Kyiv, Ukraine on February 5, 2022. Sofia, student in business psychology, and Vadym, student in management, both also work on the side, came to the training for the first time in order to prepare while the situation is still peaceful. They said "Prepare for the worse, believe in the best". They said they are lucky that they didn't see people in the military uniforms eight years ago. They packed an emergency bag a few days ago and they worry most to lose someone. They added that "every citizen is responsible for the situation and for his family". Photo: Oksana Parafeniuk.

Adam Ferguson published an interview on his website with photojournalist Brendan Hoffman in 2022 about his experiences over eight years living in Ukraine. He published 'Hoffman stayed committed to the story of Ukraine' (Ferguson 2022). Adam put me in contact with Brendan and Oksana so that *Social Alternatives* could archive the photojournalists life in Ukraine during the invasion of Russia.

## INTERVIEW

**Debra:** When we left you in the original interview, you were in Lviv and it was noted you then went to Poland. What happened?

**Brendan:** As mentioned, we were expecting the birth of our son in June 2022 and we needed to be in a safe and stable place for that. Poland made it exceptionally easy, essentially automatic, for us to register as refugees and have access to the public health system, which is what we did. Luka was born healthy and on time in Krakow.

**Debra:** When did you return to Ukraine? Why?

**Brendan:** Russia withdrew from areas near Kyiv at the end of March 2022, so by the time Luka was born Kyiv was relatively safe. We came back at the end of July, because at the time there was essentially no reason not to. We have a comfortable apartment here, family and friends nearby, and we wanted to get ourselves settled and think about going back to work, which I did in late August.

**Debra:** You say "at the time" there was no reason not to go back. What changed?

**Brendan:** In October 2022, Russia began targeting Kyiv again, specifically the power grid, so we had months of blackouts.

**Oksana:** Since we returned from Poland, I had been pumping breast milk, slowly building up a supply in the freezer so I could at some point begin taking assignments again. I did a few assignments but then, of course, the power outages spoiled all of it. Luka and I ended up spending most of the fall in my family's rustic country house outside Kyiv because it wasn't near any military targets and had a more stable power supply. Then we left Ukraine entirely in case the blackouts worsened or we lost heat or water for an extended period.

**Debra:** Oksana, are you working now?

**Oksana:** Yes. Luka and I spent the winter in the U.S. and Spain. Brendan visited when he wasn't in Kyiv working. We all came back home for the second time in April 2023, and soon after I started taking assignments again.

**Debra:** How do you determine that it's safe to be there?

**Brendan:** There are no guarantees of course, but when we returned last spring, the power situation had stabilised and the air defence, particularly in Kyiv, had gotten better with the arrival of the Patriot system. Telegram channels offer surprisingly detailed and accurate information about threats, so when the air raid siren sounds, we check to see whether it's missiles or drones coming or maybe just a plane taking off in Russia. Then we respond accordingly, which means if there is something flying toward Kyiv we go to the underground metro station across the street, even if it's in the middle of the night. It sucks, but it's much less stressful than staying home and listening to explosions.

**Debra:** What has your work consisted of these past 18 months?

**Brendan:** I've mainly been in Kyiv, mostly working for The New York Times covering the war from here rather than the front lines. It sometimes feels like I'm missing the action, but also it lets me do the kind of work I find most interesting, exploring the strange contradictions of regular life carrying on in wartime. And obviously it means I see my family almost every day and can be present and involved.

**Debra:** What contradictions do you mean?

**Brendan:** There's of course the stoicism of people who seem utterly unfazed by missile attacks, but it's more nuanced than that. Many people ARE bothered, but they bring their folding chair and their cat and sit in the metro with a book, or maybe just find a coffee shop in a basement where they're mostly protected and use the moment as a bit of 'me time'. It seems improbable but there are new cafes and restaurants opening all the time. When there's not an ongoing attack (which overall fill only a small percentage of the time), life in Kyiv is completely normal and a visitor could be forgiven for not realising there's a war on.

**Oksana:** Yeah, it's hard to explain this weird new reality. For example, sometimes I take Luka to the swimming pool, there are other mostly mothers with little children. Often everybody is discussing the recent missile attack and what each of them heard.

**Debra:** How about you Oksana, what have you been doing?

**Oksana:** I've also mostly been in Kyiv, doing assignments for The Washington Post and NBC News, among others. Many of my assignments have involved civilians or soldiers undergoing difficult or inspiring recoveries after being injured. This is of course a huge issue that Ukraine will face for decades.

**Debra:** What does the future hold for the two of you?

**Brendan:** It's honestly hard to say. For now we have no plan other than to be here and carry on, hoping for a miracle that brings a proper end to the war as soon as possible. We realise, however, that it's tough going for Ukraine, that foreign assistance is more and more difficult to come by, and that the war in Gaza and the presidential election in the United States are sapping attention and could result in the return of Trump as president, which would probably not bode well for Ukraine's effort. Luka is getting older as well, and at some point he'll begin to understand what's happening. The last thing we want is for him to be afraid.

**Oksana:** I truly just want to live here. Being next to my family and friends in these turbulent times is priceless and important. Today there was an air raid alert in the morning, and Luka immediately went to his stroller showing that he is ready to go down to the subway. For now, he doesn't know what is going on, he loves watching the metro trains going by, and we will do our best to make sure he is shielded from trauma for as long as possible.

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## Author

Dr Debra Livingston is a photo-media artist, and lectured in photography at the Queensland College of Art and the University of the Sunshine Coast. Her work is presented in solo and collaborative exhibitions locally and internationally in private and public collections.