

# Ukraine: Stories of Occupation (Ethnographic Fiction)

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Citizens of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia remember the occupation of their countries by the Soviet Union that lasted half of the twentieth century. The Russian Federation, the successor of the USSR, has been waging wars since the USSR collapsed in 1991. The two wars in Chechnya took place from 1994 to 1996 and 1999 to 2009. The war in Georgia started in 2008, the first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022. Since 2015, Russia has carried out military intervention in Syria as well. Russia has military bases in Transnistria (Moldova) and Tajikistan.

Russia's war in Ukraine is the largest and deadliest war in Europe since the end of WWII. This war brought to a halt the post-WWII global security order. After Russia's full-scale invasion in February 24, 2022, the Russian Army controlled about one fourth of Ukraine's territory. By late 2022, during counteroffensives in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Kherson the Ukraine Army reclaimed 54 percent of the land Russia had captured since the beginning of the full scale invasion.<sup>1</sup> Some people have lived in occupation since 2014, as in Crimea or Donbas, others lived in occupation

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<sup>1</sup> Duggal, Hanna and Marium Ali. "How much territory does Russia control in Ukraine?" <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/14/trump-putin-meeting-how-much-territory-does-russia-control-in-ukraine#:~:text=The%20siege%20of%20Mariupol%20was,has%20historically%20struggled%20to%20capture.>

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*Mykhailivka-Rubezhivka village near Bucha. Photo: Neringa Klumbytė. Winter, 2026*

for several weeks in 2022 in the Kyiv oblast, about a month in the Chernihiv oblast, half a year or more in Eastern Ukraine. As of February 24, 2026, Russia occupies about 115,600 sq km or 18,9%,<sup>2</sup> almost the size of Greece.

The stories below on occupation, document real events and people's lived experiences during Russia's occupation of Ukraine in 2022. They are written in a genre of ethnographic fiction. Each story is fictional in form, yet factual in content. They are grounded in research data collected since the summer 2024 from occupied and de-occupied cities and villages of Ukraine. For more information on N. Klumbytė's research on Ukraine's occupied territories see <https://neringaklumbyte.com/2025/08/15/ukraine/>.

## Helicopters

From my high-rise apartment window, I saw helicopters in the distance landing at our airport. That morning I started counting. Six, seven helicopters. A rocket hit. A house in black smoke.

<sup>2</sup> Слово і діло, December 17, 2025, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/70472,2/20/2026>.

Other rockets, bursts of flares. Eleven, twelve... the air filled with constant, deafening whooshing and slamming. Twenty-two, twenty-three... There were thirty-eight helicopters. It was the first day of the war.

After four days, electricity, water, and heat disappeared. Every time missiles were fired, my cat would hide under the blanket on a chair. The phone could not catch any signal. Soon the screen turned black. I hoped my parents were safe. People were leaving the city. The neighbor's dog was howling. After five days, the dog's howling stopped. I took my cat and left.

Our soldiers were on the street.

"Where are you going?" one soldier stopped me.

"Where should I go?" I asked.

"The battle will start soon, you have to leave the city," he responded eagerly.

"Which direction?"

He gestured into the opposite direction from the airport.

"They sent thirty-eight helicopters," I told him.

"Thank you," he nodded and smiled at me.

I walked down the street to a bus stop. But no bus came. It was getting late, and the cat was meowing restlessly. I trudged further down the street. At the outskirts of the city there was a big oak tree. *I will wait by the tree for the battle to be over and get back home*, I thought. So I did. The snow that started falling was black. I stopped feeling my feet and hands. The cat under my jacket clung to my chest and fell asleep.

A man emerged from across the street. He hesitated, then approached me.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked.

"The end of the battle," I uttered in frozen words.

"Russians are in the city."

I felt thick air surrounding me. It was hard to breathe.

He took me in, gave me food. We covered the windows with cardboard and blankets. In the coming days, most of the time we sheltered in the basement among cabbage and potatoes. In the dark, surrounded by dust and mold. The cat searched for mice for hours. But the mice must have dug in deeper than we

into the ground. He never caught any. When it was quieter outside, we baked some bread from buckwheat flour on a fire pit. We would eat and take turns reading about apocalypse. We read about the sun wrapped in darkness, moon turned to blood, the falling blackened stars, the heaven split open and stripped away like a skin; about the oceans in blazing fire and burning mountains; about the earth shaken, turning upside down; about the Angel blowing the trumpet causing everyone in the earth to swoon or die. There was nothing about black snow. There was nothing about cats refusing to eat buckwheat bread.

Everything around us felt like gray sticky matter. When we had to move, it was like making our way through thick air. The man disappeared into it when he went out to search for food one morning. The cat died the next morning. I buried him in the garden. I waited another day for the man to return, then went to the city to search for him. The streets were empty. Explosions were heard all around, some missiles rippled the air and tore through my body. The buildings looked like bodies stripped of skin: kitchen cabinets, tables, sofas, chairs, lamps, stored empty jars, and children's clothing. Radiator heaters were sticking out from apartment buildings without walls. Other houses were in ruins, everything was meshed together. Some houses were still standing with blown out windows. Smoke was everywhere.

He was shot by the bus stop. There were four other bodies around. Down the street, there was a car with burnt people. I could hardly move through the thick air. I turned away and walked back to the man's house, pulled a wheelbarrow from the shed. The wheelbarrow twitched and squeaked running over the spent assault rifle casings on the street. I could feel somebody watching me and I started twitching from fear. I pulled his body on the wheelbarrow and gently covered him with my jacket. A few shots were fired at my feet. I pushed the wheelbarrow down the street fast, suffocating and waiting for more bullets. But they did not come. *They will let me bury the man, so they do not have to do it themselves*, I thought. I passed the oak tree and reached his home. The March earth was coarse and cold. The sky was red and eerie. Until midnight, I labored in the garden, digging. When

I finished, I put the last piece of buckwheat bread on his chest and wrapped him into a white blanket. Then covered him with the soil. I laid down on his grave. *Who will bury me?* I thought. *Will anybody ever find out what has happened to us?*

The morning came. I wrote “Kostiantyn and Kotyk. 2022” on a ribbon, went to the street and tied it around the oak tree. As it was blowing in the cold wind, I heard a roar from a military caravan approaching. I hid under the tree and started counting.

## **We Started Killing in Our Dreams**

The helicopter hovered above Oleh’s head. The Ukrainian forces in balaclavas looked around through the helicopter’s open door, then descended rapidly on the ropes. They hit the ground in a tight, kneeling circle, their muzzles flashing as they laid down a ring of fire in every direction. He saw his grandmother, mother, and a niece being shot and turned back to run. That’s when the bullet pierced his head and he fell on the ground. He felt blood flowing through his head. He also felt the soil of his garden on his lips before he died. He then woke up still feeling the taste of it.

*The Russian propaganda got inside my consciousness,* Oleh thought. They claimed that Ukrainians will come to shoot civilians in cold blood since those who stayed in occupied Ukrainian territories will be considered traitors. Then, in occupation, he anxiously waited for Ukrainians. The helicopters in his dreams were from a computer game. Oleh liked to play this game before the war when they still had internet...

Next time in his dream, it was the Russians who arrived for a “security check.” Some stood by the door, others were inspecting the house. Two soldiers were just hanging out without their guns. Oleh slipped into the kitchen and gripped a knife. His heart was pounding in his chest. He was about to attack a soldier just as the dream shattered and he jumped awake.

I dreamt I was laying in trenches. It was a dark night and the lights of a huge projector were screening the area. Then, I heard somebody. These were Russian soldiers coming towards me through the trenches. I thought if I lay quietly, snug in the dirt,

they would not notice me. As they were approaching, I realized, they will step on me. I clutched to the soil. Waiting seemed unbearably long, and they were almost there. I woke up from the heaviness of fear. I must have been killed like Oleh, but could not dream through it...

Next time, I was attacked by squirrels. On the city streets, huge and armored, they walked between skyscrapers and wiped everything away with their guns. Then I caught one. I saw myself holding it in a transparent plastic bag. Somehow it was tiny, like a squirrel from the Ukrainian woods, red brown and beautiful. With dark eyes and pointy ears. I was striking the bag against the ground in rapid succession suffocating from my own action. The blood was splashing inside the bag. I felt nauseous and strangled in a body that did not feel like mine. I woke up before it died. The plastic bag was likely from my childhood. My pet guinea pig, when it got sick, was taken away in a plastic bag and buried alive. Killing itself was recent. I never killed before in my dreams. It came from the war. And the trenches, maybe I dreamt of them from Vlad's life?

Vlad did not dream. He *was* in the trenches. He walked in cold and wet dirt through trenches for three days until he reached his own troops. *Rats ate dead bodies starting with the face*, Vlad would remember. One would come and snuggle under his jacket to warm itself up when he lay down to sleep.

Vlad would say the war was like a dream. He could not believe it and could not wake up from it. He wanted to go back to school to teach the Ukrainian language. But after Russia occupied his city, the school was gone, children were gone, the Ukrainian language was eliminated. His grandmother died, and he moved to her apartment, where nobody knew him. Grandma's orange cat would sit on the windowsill, and Vlad would lean next to him, watching the street. He counted the military equipment that the Russians were bringing. At night he would write a message, climb to the highest floor of the apartment building and wave his cell phone into different directions to catch the internet signal. Sometimes it was hours before a message was sent. He had nothing to eat on some days. His mother would bring him food.

He needed a gun. If Russian soldiers would find out that he was in the territorial defense, he would end up dead. At 2 am one night, Vlad risked going out. By the bar, he ran into a drunk soldier, who came out to smoke. They hugged each other and said that Crimea is “nash” (“ours”) and then Vlad stabbed him with his kitchen knife. The soldier stiffened and looked at Vlad in surprise. *I do not think he understood that he was killed*, Vlad remembered. He searched him. There was no gun.

## Liberation

The explosion rumbled, leaving the stillness even more haunting than the sound itself. It lingered until the air began to vibrate with the low, rhythmic growl of armored vehicles, tanks, and artillery. *They'll be gone soon*, I whispered to myself. *A day, maybe two*. War cannot happen in the twenty-first century.

But the war was moving closer with every minute. The sniper settled into the neighbor's attic and started pointing at me when I got out to feed the chickens. I stayed mostly inside, still hoping to keep the war away. After a few days, they came into our house. Wardrobes were wrenched open, and they searched drawers, pocketing some jewelry. In grandma's room, one soldier paused, his eyes catching the framed photo of my son in a military uniform of the Ukrainian Army on her bedside table. “Who is he?” he took the picture and turned towards me. I froze in fear my heart pounding. Grandma could hardly stand, yet she managed to pluck the picture from his hand with a sudden, desperate strength. “He is dead,” she said. “Died a long time ago.” She held the photo of Andriy to her chest, shielding him from the unwelcome eyes of the soldiers.

I opened the door and stepped outside. There was a soldier by the door, smoking. He looked like a child, with a gun hanging low to his knees.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“From a village near Ryazan,” he mumbled.

“Why did you come here?”

“To liberate you,” he did not hesitate.

“From what?” I wondered.

He did not say anything.

“It’s a beautiful house. I’d love to live in a place like this,” he uttered after a pause sounding friendly.

“There will never be anything like this house here if you come here and bring your people. It will become like your village near Ryazan.”

We had to pack and leave. With each day relentless explosions were turning homes and streets into ruins. People started to disappear after *zachistka*.<sup>3</sup> Grandma sat on her bed rocking with a frantic intensity and whispering her grievances to God:

“They came to liberate us from our land, our home, our language, our *vyshyvanka*.<sup>4</sup> We will take it all with us. I will carry my house we built for many years, so I could live peacefully in my old age. We will take our Gerda the goat and pack her favorite cookies, and the dog Max who likes to chase crows and chickens. And the eleven chickens that wander in the yard and a rooster with its morning crowing. Well, there won’t be eleven chickens left since the sniper from the neighbor’s attic shot two of them when he got bored. Two cats, one, a friendly sort named Beibi, and the other, silly, fluffy, dark Diesel. Beibi likes to bring us mice as trophies for our praise. Diesel would stare at a hole in the rye field for hours until he, too, caught one. We will take with us the little hedgehog that comes to visit in the summer, and clattering storks on an oak tree. We will carry the oak tree with storks’ nest and all the birds on it. And *kalyna* bushes bowing to the land with their branches full of red berries.<sup>5</sup> We will take our dark land, everything grows here, everything. We will carry buckets of potatoes and carrots. There were so many this

<sup>3</sup> “Clean up” operation of the unwanted.

<sup>4</sup> Traditional Ukrainian embroidered clothing, a symbol of national identity and cultural heritage.

<sup>5</sup> The bush *Kalyna* (Lat. *viburnum opulus*) is a major national symbol in Ukraine, appearing in traditional songs, embroidery, and folklore.

year. We will take the sour smell of borsht and softness of *syornyky* and dumplings, the melting saltiness of *salo*, and the sweetness of honey cake.

I will also take a pillow on which I rest my head after a hard work-day, and the blanket I covered my children with when they would fall asleep. The smoke of my late husband's cigarettes that surrounded the house like *vyshyvanka* threads. I hated it then, but I won't leave it. The giggling of my children, the sound of a door being shut, and a cry for help after falling off the bicycle. And my Andriy's ball. I will collect his steps from every corner of the house, from the yard, and from the fields. Those running, jumping, walking, and escaping. Those steps that he left when he passed through the door the last time after being called to the Army. I will spool all roads he travelled on, to the school, college, to his friends, like a yarn ball. And the roads that wind to the fields and the forests.

And we will all line up in a procession carrying it all. It will be me, then my daughter Olena and her husband Volodymyr, then granddaughter Valia, then goat Gerda, dog Max, two orange cats, a rooster, nine chickens, a family of storks, a hedgehog, seven crows, and mice. I will walk with a lantern ahead of them, showing everybody the way."

We packed two bags with a laptop, photos, and some clothing. I left the door open, so they don't kick it out next time they come. The sniper fired again from the attic, and another chicken landed dead by my feet. Eight chickens. I stepped over it, pretending not to notice, walked to the barn and released the goat and the dog. *They want to liberate this land from us*, I thought. Grandma showed up by the door and leaned heavily on her cane: "I am not going."

I looked at her in disbelief.

"I need to plant potatoes soon. When Andriy returns home, I will make him potato dumplings."

She picked up a piece of white chalk and scrawled a message on the door for a soldier from a village near Ryazan: "Liudy" ("People"). And a message for God: "Save us."