

## EDITORIAL

# War In Ukraine: A Tale Of Unspeakable Horror, Unprecedented Unity And Unquenchable Thirst For Freedom<sup>☆</sup>

### HOW IT STARTED

At about 04:00 (Kyiv time), on 24 February Russian President Putin announced the start of a military operation aiming to “demilitarise and denazify Ukraine”. A few minutes later Russian troops crossed the Ukrainian border and started shelling. Russian ships approached the Ukrainian coasts from the Black and Azov Seas and bombed Mariupol.

Countless Ukrainians were awakened that day by heavy explosions. While nobody knows for certain where Putin was when his army attacked Ukraine, President Zelensky was at home with his wife and two children. It was they who woke him early on February 24<sup>th</sup>: “They told me there were loud explosions.” After a minute he received the signal that a rocket attack was underway. America offered him a passage to safety. He chose to stay.

### KHARKIV

As it turned out, Kharkiv, the hometown of Maksym Karpusenko (MK) became one of the fiercest battlefields. Since day one and for more than a month, it has been besieged from the northwest, the north and the east, and its outskirts have been shelled indiscriminately. According to Mayor Ihor Terekhov, 1292 residential buildings have been destroyed, as well as 70 schools, 54 nurseries, 15 hospitals, and 239 administrative buildings, including the university (Fig. 1). All but deafened by artillery shelling, anti-aircraft defence systems, machine guns and airplanes, people are forced to hide several times a day. From the very outset, Russians exalting “liberation from fascists and denazification” were shooting and killing. Kharkiv endured huge civilian casualties, including numerous dead and wounded children. As evidenced by video recordings and telephone conversations between Russian military personnel and their relatives in Russia, they were expressly targeting ambulances, private vehicles, residential facilities, orphanages, and hospitals.

Located close to Russia, Kharkiv has been bombarded every day. MK hears the squealing of Russian planes overhead and the sound of explosions. He wakes up trying to determine whether his bedroom was a military target. Since that day, the people of Kharkiv and other Ukrainian cities have spent most of their time in queues for food and drugs. Medicine is very scarce. Many old people have been stuck

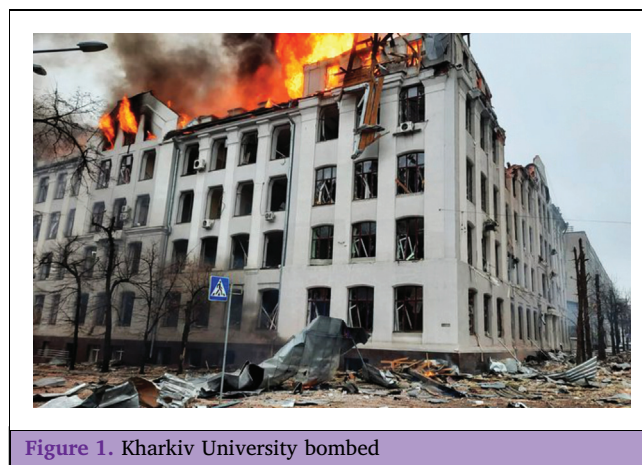


Figure 1. Kharkiv University bombed

on high floors in buildings where the lifts are disabled. All the time they hear shells in the distance falling in waves; while MK never imagined that something like this could happen, he feels proud and inspired by the many Ukrainian friends and neighbours who have helped unstintingly.

Despite superb work by local utility services, the city’s infrastructure has been severely damaged, leaving hundreds of blocks without gas or electricity. In some outlying areas, all food shops have been destroyed, which means that elderly and disabled people now rely on volunteers to bring food. One of the few landmarks of the residential district of Saltivka, “Rost” supermarket, was obliterated by a missile, with some Russian media claiming that it was a military warehouse. From the very first day, thousands of Kharkovites have sheltered in underground stations or cellars. Outside, everywhere, even in kindergartens, unexploded shells litter the ground (Fig. 2). Evacuation has been organised by the Ukrainian railway and volunteers, carrying primarily women and children to towns in western Ukraine. Fantastic work is being done by charity foundations such as “Dobra Samarytyanka” (<https://good-samaritan.pp.ua/реквізити/>), which delivers food and medicines, and evacuates residents. With most of its inhabitants more fluent in Russian than Ukrainian, Kharkiv appeared to the Russians to be a pro-Russian city, where they expected to be cheered. Instead, Kharkiv has become an unassailable citadel.

When Vladimir Putin ordered Russian troops into Ukraine, he was not alone in thinking victory would be swift. As the war enters its sixth week, the side contemplating victory is not conquering Russia, but tearful Ukraine.

<sup>☆</sup> The Editorial was submitted on April 2nd 2022



**Figure 2.** Unexploded shell in a kindergarten of Kharkiv.

## MARIUPOL

Kharkiv was far from the only town hit. In Mariupol, Russian bombardments have cut off the city's water and power supply. Families have been huddling together for days, freezing in the dark. Dead bodies are reportedly strewn over the streets, with bombs falling. For weeks, hardly anyone was allowed to leave. In recent days, however, survivors have managed to flee, bringing first hand testimony according to which, every building has been hit. Missile casings litter the streets. People spend most of their time underground sitting in the dark, running up at times to rescue babies and the elderly from the ruins. Many have relatives in Russia, some of whom refuse to believe what has been happening. According to the Kremlin line, only neo-Nazis have been hit.

Today the city is practically ruined, the infrastructure is destroyed, as are hospitals, administrative buildings and factories. Civilian evacuation is blocked on the route to Zaporizhia by Russian checkpoints in Melitopol and Vasilievka.

## ZAPORIZHZHIA

In Zaporizhia, and elsewhere, the Russian leadership has expressly targeted factories, agricultural equipment, and medical and pharmaceutical plants. That is why Andriy Nykonenko (AN), a vascular surgeon, had difficulty finding drugs and sterile linen to care for the wounded. Plants in or around Kyiv have been destroyed or were under constant rocket fire and inaccessible. In times of dire emergency, a decisive role has been assumed by volunteer organisations, which in the nick of time appeared in every city. Most

consisted of young people with their own vehicles organising collection of drugs and food. Their heroism was of critical importance in the first month of the war, when healthcare systems were in a state of shock. With the active help of European colleagues, Ukrainian volunteers developed a network to ensure supply of medicines and medical devices. One of us, Jean-Baptiste Ricco (JBR), was present at the border. The goods collected by volunteers throughout Europe were being transported by train or truck. The entire continent was mobilised in support of the Ukrainians' fierce and unyielding resistance.

Under catastrophic circumstances, organisation was the key. In Zaporizhia, one of us (AN) organised vascular surgery procedures in active warfare zones. The first week of the war had caught everyone unaware. As many patients as possible were discharged from his vascular unit, but some could not go home as there was no transport available or because their towns were occupied by the Russian military. Since wounded persons were expected and the hospital was in danger of being bombed, scheduled operations were postponed. Moreover, supply chains from Kiev and other centres had been disrupted, and no one had previously experienced such an emergency.

That said, what the Russians did not expect was the unprecedented unity of the Ukrainian people, which prevented them from capturing large Ukrainian cities and destroying the country's economy,

## A NATIONWIDE HEALTHCARE NETWORK

Against his will, AN left Zaporizhia with his family for the relative safety of Uzhgorod. The journey to Uzhgorod was a four day ordeal with air raid sirens and rockets in cities along the way. When arriving in Uzhgorod, near the Slovakian border, AN discovered a city sheltering over 600,000 refugees. With the support of a few of us, AN and his colleagues created a nationwide network designed to provide hospitals with much needed medical supplies. During the first weeks, many had received humanitarian aid, but in most cases, it was not logistically coordinated and failed to meet their needs. Via Viber and Telegram, AN and colleagues organised a first aid package conveying selected medical supplies to war zone hospitals for the treatment of all types of injuries, including vascular trauma. A few days later, a report was presented to the Executive Committee of the European Society for Vascular Surgery (ESVS), describing the organisation, indicating its needs, and requesting accelerated aid that would circumvent bureaucratic European holdups.

A few weeks later, organisationally equipped to deal with immediate emergencies, AN and colleagues were performing more complex surgical procedures in safe medical centres. In parallel, they were dealing with chronic pathologies whose evolution required rapid treatment.

## WHY UKRAINE MUST WIN

While Ukraine has won the first phase of this war by surviving, is the reason why the Ukrainian flag flies over all

European capitals and on Pennsylvania Avenue, more Western help is needed in a context where President Zelensky has stayed with his people, constantly evoking the sanctity of human life, the need for compassion, and the fight for freedom.

The Kremlin initially planned to destroy the Ukrainian army, force the government to surrender, recognise the “people’s republics” and Crimea as Russian territory, change the Constitution and declare Ukraine’s neutrality. From the outset Russian tactics involved high and low precision missile attacks, which caused massive infrastructure and residential destruction, killing servicemen and civilians alike.

This war is a continuation of the conflict started by Russia in 2014 in Crimea and Donbas. The 2nd of March 2022 UN General Assembly resolution condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Nobody knows how this conflict will evolve, and history is littered with wars meant to be short, but which dragged on for years.

To conclude, we have written this editorial to inform the readers of this journal of the war in Ukraine, the resources deployed to help the population, and the urgent need for European assistance.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

## FUNDING

None

## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank all the Ukrainian volunteers who accompanied us in this struggle for freedom as well as Mr. Jeffrey Arsham who helped us in an emergency to translate and to edit the manuscript.

**Andriy Nykonenko<sup>a</sup>, Maksym Karpusenko<sup>b</sup>, Jean-Baptiste Ricco<sup>c,\*</sup>**

<sup>a</sup>*Vascular surgery and transplantation unit. Chief of the Department of Surgery, Zaporizhzhia State Medical University, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine*

<sup>b</sup>*Karazin Kharkiv National University, Kharkiv, Ukraine*

<sup>c</sup>*University of Poitiers, Medical School, 86021, Poitiers, France*

\*Corresponding author. University of Poitiers, Medical School, 86021, Poitiers, France. +33 607155726

E-mail address: [jean.baptiste.ricco@univ-poitiers.fr](mailto:jean.baptiste.ricco@univ-poitiers.fr) (Jean-Baptiste Ricco)