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MY GENERATION'S STOLEN YOUTH

My generation learned what violence was far too early.

I grew up as a happy child in Kyiv. I was seven years old when I entered the first grade of school in September 2013, and the Revolution of Dignity began in November of the same year. Of course, at that time I did not yet know the word "revolution", but I already felt its consequences. My parents' quiet conversations turned into anxious whispers, while the footage from opposition television channels, broadcasting live from Independence Square around the clock, grew ever more horrifying before my eyes.

One morning, my mother and I were going to school, and a column of thick black smoke could be seen over the city center, although we live far from the city center and Independence Square (10 kilometers, no less). It was protesters burning tires. In the middle of the lessons, the teacher messaged all the parents that it was better to take the children home as soon as possible, because in one of the districts of Kyiv anti-Maidan activists and the Berkut (a special police unit used to stop mass riots) had begun to seize schools and turn them into their bases. The next morning, my mother said that no one was going to school today. Every child in my place would feel the joy of an unplanned day off, but even then I realized that something was wrong, the tension of the adults around me was palpable.

February 2014 changed my perception of what is scary. I used to be afraid of the dark, because who knows what might be hiding in it, but as it turned out, what you can see in front of you is often much scarier. In the news, they talked about increasingly brutal attacks on protesters, which turned into the first deaths. A boy from our family came from the Kirovohrad region to the Maidan just from the school desk, he was an 11th grade student at the time. After some time, he was detained by the police with other protesters, so his mother had to go to Kyiv to take him back home. He studied at school, received his good certificate, passed exams and had the opportunity to enroll at several prestigious universities. But after the annexation of Crimea, he chose to join the army. He changed his name, made up a story that he was of legal age (which was not true), a Crimean who lost his documents. There were many such young men who lost their own home, but not themselves, so no extra questions were asked. He fought in the hottest points of the anti-terrorist operation, was repeatedly wounded, lost a leg, entered a military university, got married, had a daughter, who was so symbolically named Vira (in english Faith), but in February 2022 he put on a military uniform again and continues to defend the country to this day. Max has been at war for 12 of his 30 years of life.

Daily news from the front continued, reports of the dead became more and more frequent. My parents helped volunteers financially and physically. They bought walkie-talkies, ammunition, delivered food to the hospitals and anything else needed. At school, we, children, drew pictures and wrote letters to people in the military (many soldiers then and now carry children's drawings

with them as charms). As a class, we collected gifts for children in the temporarily occupied territories, and added short postcards to the gifts. School charity fairs were held (and still are held regularly) to help those who protect us. One of these fairs was particularly memorable, because we collected money for volunteers my parents are still friends with (one of them joined the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in 2022, as a military paramedic, although in peaceful life he was an architect), they bought first-aid kits for the front, because then the military did not have body armor, tourniquets, or helmets – many things that are now standard and are issued by the army, were then bought by volunteers with money from the concerned citizens. The army of Ukraine, which had been purposefully destroyed by the pro-Russian government of Yanukovych, was just forming and getting back on its feet.

The war was territorially far away, but there was always an understanding in my head that it was going on. New children began to appear at the school – relocated families of those who fled from Donbas because they did not want to live under Russian occupation. During this period, I had an idea that did not leave my mind for a long time – it was clear that sooner or later Russia would launch a full-scale invasion, go to Kyiv through Belarus and the war would come to my home. Almost a decade later, it will happen.

The period of the Corona virus has become calm before the storm. The focus shifted to the killer virus. My focus has also shifted to distance education, forced online socializing, the health of my family and myself. The complete restriction of freedom of movement and forced self-isolation distracted from the fear of war, which was still raging in the country. Gradually, we all learned to live in a new world, but soon we had to adapt to completely different problems and threats.

The year 2022 began with palpable tension. The broadcast of the Winter Olympic Games was accompanied by news about "military exercises" of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine. In social networks, videos about emergency kits became more and more common. The parent council of my school tried to find out from the administration the condition of the basement, which could theoretically serve as a shelter. The school administration ignored the question, because officially there was no war and there was not supposed to be an attack either. Each class organized its "emergency suitcase" in case of an emergency during classes: a few warm blankets (because it was winter), a first aid kit, water, sweets with a long shelf life, radio, flashlights, power banks. Literally a week before the full-scale invasion, I witnessed a telling scene near the school: a grandmother was meeting her grandson from classes, and the boy shouted to her from the threshold instead of "hello": "What's in the news? They won't attack us, will they? There won't be a war, right?". Everyone knew something was coming.

The night before February 24, 2022, remains etched in my memory with remarkable clarity. I was suffering from insomnia at the time, which was nothing unusual for me. My cat was spinning at my feet, and I was thinking about a biology project on genetics that I had to present at school that day. In this project about the inheritance of eye color, relatives living in Russia were still considered family members at that time. A few days later, after their messages like "Be patient, we will save you, it will all be over soon. It's just a preventive measure, we will capture you so that NATO does not attack us", these people will cease to be considered members of our family. I was not the only one who did not sleep that night. My younger brother and my mother worked late into the night doing a "swan on the lake" crafts project for an art lesson. Everyone went to bed late.

In the morning, my brother and I woke up to the sounds of explosions and airplanes above Kyiv, the fact that our parents quickly packed the most necessary things, documents, warm clothes,

some food, water and a first aid kit into backpacks. Many people with suitcases got into cars and left already at 5 in the morning. The yard became unusually empty and quiet, only the janitors and the garbage truck did their work as usual. "It has begun" immediately flashed through my mind, my childhood fears about the war at my home came true. On the same morning, it was announced that the school was moving to a remote format (the experience of such education during a pandemic had already been worked out). The English lesson took place the same morning, the teacher distracted everyone with grammar, for us it became an island of normality in a completely abnormal situation. Almost all lessons were held according to the schedule, teachers tried to hold lessons from phones on the bus, from train stations, even just on the street, where they were lucky to catch a connection and relative silence.

Throughout the day, my eyes were glued to the phone, the TV did not turn off for the first time in many years, and the news kept getting worse. We live on the northern edge of Kyiv, so we understood that our side would be the first to meet the enemy. The parents immediately began to tape the windows (it somewhat protects against windows broken by explosions), moved furniture throughout the apartment, removed all mirrors, because during an explosion any of them could become deadly. Thick curtains were hung over the windows, and stacks of books were placed, which could theoretically slow down the debris. The apartment quickly turned into a bunker. Life awaited us in a narrow corridor, because the walls of the apartment were the thickest there.

We learned that the nearest shelter at my school was not ready for use on the second day of the full-scale invasion, during an air raid alert. By then, heavy military vehicles were already moving through our neighborhood, and in the distance we could hear the sounds of tank battles and artillery fire drawing closer. The terrible condition of the shelter became one of the reasons why we spent the biggest attacks at home, instead of going to the nearest shelter, as was recommended. Inside the basement, everything was covered with a thick layer of red dust, because no one had used those rooms for decades. On top of all that, the coronavirus was still going on. People huddled closely together, sat on the dirty floor, but in disposable masks, with cats, dogs, pets and children in their arms. Both people and animals were nervous, there was not enough space for everyone. We left our cat and pet mouse at home for the time being, so we looked outside every five minutes to check if our house was still intact, because there was no communication in the basement, but we could hear the distant vibration of the explosions. Some people settled into the shelter and did not come up to the surface for several days. Whenever new arrivals came in, they would ask what things were like above ground and just how bad the situation had become.

Having survived the shelling that day, we returned to home, and for the next few days we all coughed up that red dust and remembered the basement filled with horror. That same day we bought a carrier for the cat, because if suddenly we would have to run away from home, no one was ready to leave her alone in such a situation. From then on, we actually lived in a narrow corridor – it was the safest place in our apartment – on a narrow mattress lying on the floor. Day after day we shuddered from explosions that shook not only us, but also the walls. There were several artillery shells that landed in our area, literally a few blocks from us. Many people left, but public transport did not run, and the train stations were incredibly crowded in Kyiv. My disability did not allow me to endure such an evacuation. Our neighbors had a bedridden sick grandmother, so they also stayed home. Through the windows that were lit up in the evening, it was clear that there were 10-15 families left (out of 144 apartments) for each large 9-story building.

It was good that the traumatic historical experience of our ancestors somehow accumulated. We had canned food, flour and some grain at home for the first time. But the food was running out

quickly, so my father went out to buy groceries and stood in long lines under explosions at the shops that were still open, in between digging frozen sand by hand on the river to set up checkpoints and digging trenches. There was a catastrophic shortage of equipment, people tried to help the soldiers in any way they could. People who were complete strangers to each other united: some were digging, some were transporting people, some were bringing food and something hot to drink, some had a supply of gloves at home, some had shovels or buckets. Every time we were afraid that my father would not return. The news showed photos of the dead, who were killed by rocket fragments in lines for drinking water (we had public water pumps, so at least there were no problems with water). Checkpoints were set up right on the streets. Kyiv was preparing for resistance. Those who remained received weapons and were ready to fight for every house, every yard, every street.

In the house chat, we exchanged information about which store had delivered some food, alerted everyone when someone with a vegetable truck arrived at a stop nearby (some sellers gave away their food for free, some took some purely symbolic money), who should take bread for older neighbours, who had painkillers or cough pills. We started exchanging food with our neighbors: a chocolate bar for a beet, a grapefruit for a carrot, whatever each person had. The exchange rate was very strange, but in this way we just wanted to do something nice for each other. It felt as though we had gone back to the time when people in primitive communities also exchanged food with each other, a natural exchange of everything for everything. The menu consisted of whatever food could be found today. Those who left their flats left the keys and products to those who stayed, so there was always something to do: feed someone's pet, water the flowers, go check if the windows were intact after another attack. The browser queries were about: evacuation teams, which clinics are open, first aid, how to overcome a panic attack, what to do when you haven't slept at all for several days.

At the end of March 2022, we went outside for the first time just for a walk, not on business. The smell of the city burning, the rustling of missiles overhead, the sounds of explosions did not let us forget that we were in the center of war, but the spring sun, nature waking up after winter, and warmth gave us hope. All the streets of Kyiv were blocked by checkpoints, anti-tank hedgehogs. Seeing someone in military uniform, our eyes immediately looked for signs that we were dealing with a Ukrainian soldier, not a Russian who would not hesitate to shoot us.

The enemy was shamefully retreating from the Kyiv region, but continued to destroy everything. Public transportation and shops in the area were gradually returning to work. However, a direct hit from a Russian missile near the railway station, where evacuation trains were parked, soon occurred. Short-term hope for evacuation was cast aside, because without a car, our family could not even get to the station, which in an instant turned from a place of salvation into one of the most dangerous places in Kyiv.

On April 2, 2022, the de-occupation of Kyiv and the Kyiv region was announced. The horrors of Bucha and Irpin, which shook everyone, were then revealed to the world. It was my birthday. Usually on this day we had a picnic on the riverbank, which was now dug up and mined, and there was no way to buy fresh food for the barbecue. But mom baked brownies, because she was lucky to buy fresh eggs. We ate them to the sound of explosions, watching movies on a laptop, while sitting in the hallway. That's how I spent my 16th birthday.

In June of the same year, I finished the 9th grade. According to tradition, we were supposed to have a loud and bright graduation party. We wanted to celebrate the completion of an important stage of life, receive certificates of basic education, say goodbye to classmates, because many were

going to college or were going to leave Ukraine. However, thoughts were not focused on celebration at all, but on survival. None of us were able to truly experience the day that comes once in a lifetime. Sleepless, tired from nightly air raids, callous to any positive emotions, we simply came and collected our documents. Loud explosions in the background made me think about everything but the future happy adult life, in which I should have uncompromisingly believed.

I continued my studies at an online school, which became especially difficult when in November of 2022 the Russians began carrying out targeted strikes on energy infrastructure throughout Ukraine. We gradually got used to the blackout schedules, but on November 23rd, the first total blackout happened that I will remember forever. For almost 3 days, we did not have not only electricity, but also mobile communication, or even water. The only salvation was an old mobile phone that was able to catch the radio, it then became our only news channel. On the second day of the blackout, all our gadgets and power banks were low, which is why we had to go to the nearest Nova Poshta (one of the postal services in Ukraine) to charge them, the electricity there was from a generator. The business adapted little by little and was working again. We already knew then that blackouts would be something we would have to get used to, because the electricity situation was only going to get worse. During December, our house had only 6 hours of electricity per day, and even that was becoming a luxury.

Throughout 2023, Kyiv tried little by little to return to at least the illusion of "usual life". The danger was still real, as were the frequent air alarms, but life did not stand still, new matters and problems arose. A person can really adapt to many things, the Ukrainians proved it. Adults went to work, children to schools and kindergartens, often going down to shelters. Life went on, and all the children, including my younger brother, grew up incredibly fast.

I spent the beginning of 2024 preparing for NMT (National Multi-Subject Test) in conditions of frequent blackouts and air raids. At that time, I had already decided that I would stay in Ukraine and enter the university in Kyiv. I graduated from school with honors, passed the exams quite successfully, and was very lucky that it was quiet at night, and there was no air alarm during the 4 hours of the exams. However, my cousin, who passed the NMT this year, was not so lucky. She wrote the exam after a sleepless night of explosions, and even during the exam she was forced to pause due to the air raid. But she managed to pass exams, like thousands of other Ukrainian children.

On June 30, 2024, a UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) landed in a residential building across the street from mine. It was incredibly fortunate that there were no casualties. However, people were left without their property and housing. The force of the blast wave shook our windows, the window in one of the rooms still stubbornly refuses to properly close.

On July 8, 2024, Russia launched a massive attack on Ukraine and, in particular, on Kyiv. The Russians purposefully hit the Okhmatdyt Children's Hospital. The largest children's hospital in Ukraine, where children with the most severe diagnoses were brought from all over the country for treatment. Two adults died, 32 people were injured, among them were children. The feeling of indescribable horror was paralyzing, I couldn't imagine how they could aim the missile directly at the children's hospital. Schools, hospitals, kindergartens, and residential buildings are always transformed into "NATO bases" and "military facilities" in Russian reports. It was then that I became convinced we were defending ourselves against people who possessed neither morality, nor conscience, nor humanity. In the years that followed, we were reminded of this truth again and again.

Having enrolled into the chosen university in August of 2024, I began a new phase of my life. Meeting new people, a different pace and schedule of the day, it was sometimes difficult to get used to a new environment after 4 years of distance education. However, I gradually found what I was looking for – my people, who became close friends, the conviction that I had chosen the right profession, because I fell in love with history anew. However, something remained unchanged – the war, which was still raging. Sleepless nights, drone debris scattered across our yard, strikes on buildings just nearby, hours spent in the university shelter during air raid alerts, and donations to support the army never let us forget. My parents did not stop in their financial support of volunteers since 2014, it only became more active (because more and more acquaintances, from completely civilian professions, became military and fought in hot spots), and now I have joined this help with my own funds, from my scholarship. The help was not limited to money, it was at the university that I learned to weave camouflage nets, and I began to do it as often as possible, in a sense it became a meditation for me: the monotonous work calmed my brain a little.

May 2025 brought what I had feared for a long time. After a series of massive bombardments, our cat died. This cat has been with me since I was six years old, and my younger brother has never known life without a four-legged friend by his side. She bravely survived the beginning of a full-scale invasion, often alerting us to danger, hearing things we hadn't yet noticed with her keen hearing, comforting us with her purr and warmth on cold days. Because of stress, she periodically became ill, but over time she was always feeling better. After three years of constant shelling, especially intense and frequent recently, she could not take it anymore. We still haven't come to terms with it and can't get another pet.

However, the losses in our family did not stop at the cat. At the end of the summer of 2025, my mother's cousin, who was a farmer but mobilized in 2024, was killed in the Sumy region during Russian shelling. Three daughters are left without a father, a woman without a husband, an old mother without a son, a sister without a brother, and a small granddaughter will grow up without a grandfather. His nephew, the same Max I wrote about above, was wounded at the same time. After the hospital (for him, far from the first), he returned to the front, although he could have been discharged long ago due to his health. But he repeated again and again: "Who will do it, if not me?".

The year 2026 has traditionally started with increasingly bad shelling. On January 5, the Russians hit a private medical facility in the Obolon district, a man, a patient after surgery, died. We have been proved right many times that the words of the Russians "we only hit military facilities" are a complete lie, because there was absolutely nothing military nearby, only a park and residential buildings.

A little later, in the winter of 2026, my other uncle, from my father's side, was seriously injured and is still being treated. He returned from a business trip abroad a few days before the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, to celebrate a friend's birthday. They still have not been able to celebrate it, because both of them have been on the front lines since the very first day of the full-scale invasion.

The winter of 2026 was unusually cold, on some days the temperature reached -22 celsius outside. The already cold situation was made worse by the fact that the Russians were repeatedly destroying energy facilities throughout Ukraine. We again lived in conditions of blackouts, but this time they were accompanied by a terrible cold in our flat – the Russians were also destroying the centralized heating system throughout Kyiv. I especially remember the day when I had to take

one of the exams remotely at home due to an emergency. Trying to keep warm, with a hat on my head and the warmest clothes on, I sat on the floor of our flat, connected to the Internet cable directly with my laptop, because at that time we had no electricity for almost a day, the WIFI at home did not work, and the mobile connection was getting worse every hour. Fortunately, I still managed to take the exam. Yet all I could think about was how profoundly abnormal the circumstances were in which I was taking it.

Having survived such a difficult winter, we witnessed how each shelling became a new "record" and worse than the previous one. The Russians continued to hit "military facilities", for them this category includes not only hospitals, but also museums, because on 24 May 2026, the Russians hit the newly renovated, with an updated exposition, the National Museum "Chornobyl" in Kyiv. As a result of a direct hit, 40% of absolutely unique exhibits were lost.

In the summer of 2026, the Russians set several new anti-records. One of them was the massive attack on Kyiv on June 15, 2026, which further reinforced my conviction that, for the Russians, our culture is one of their highest-priority targets. As a result of this attack, many cultural monuments and objects were damaged, among them were the cultural spaces of the Ukrainian House and Mystetskyi Arsenal, the Dovzhenko film studio, where the largest and oldest costume collection of Ukraine was destroyed. However, I was most shocked by the attack on the National Reserve "Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra", where in the summer of 2025 I had an archaeological internship. The Russians hit the Dormition Cathedral, a landmark of architecture and religion. This cathedral was built in the 11th century, when Russia did not even exist yet. As usual, the Russians immediately started an active disinformation campaign, reports began to appear on social networks that the videos and photos of the burning Dormition Cathedral were generated by artificial intelligence, or that paid photographers waited all night for the planned attack on the spiritual monument by the Ukrainian authorities in order to discredit Russia, Facebook began to remove Ukrainian posts about Russia's guilt. Russia once again tried to convince the world that it does not attack civilian objects. Yet I see the truth as clearly as I see the smoke rising from the building across the street with my own eyes – Russia is waging war against residential buildings, hospitals, universities and schools, kindergartens, maternity hospitals, bookstores, museums, temples, antique markets, even a McDonald's on Lukyanivka.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, shelling has damaged the following in Kyiv alone (according to official figures as of January 2026; sadly, the numbers are even higher now):

- 2,960 residential buildings;
- 330 institutions of culture and science;
- 15 social institutions;
- 39 cultural institutions;
- 93 administrative buildings;
- 11 sports infrastructure facilities;
- several churches and temples.

Only one attack on the night of July 1-2, 2026, during which 74 missiles and 496 UAVs of various types were used, killed 30 people in Kyiv and injured 100 people. The rocket simply destroyed part of an apartment building, entire blocks are now without windows, hundreds of people were left without their homes and belongings in one night. The ambulance station, the O. V. Palladin Institute of Biochemistry of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, a five-star

hotel in the historical center of the city, a warehouse of an online store, and the logistics center of Nova Poshta were destroyed.

While this article was being translated, another massive shelling occurred on the night of July 5, 2026. At least 18 people were killed in Kyiv, and about 60 were injured. A nine-story building was damaged, apartments from the ninth to the fifth floor were completely destroyed, and structures from the second to the fifth floor were also destroyed in a 21-story building.

Since 2022, more than 425 people have died due to shelling in Kyiv alone. As of 6 July 2026, Kyiv had experienced 2,236 air raid alerts since 24 February 2022. Together, they lasted a total of 2,642 hours and 11 minutes – the equivalent of 110 full days.

*Air-raid sirens across the country
It feels like everyone is brought out
For execution*

*But only one person gets targeted
Usually the one at the edge
This time not you; all clear*

(«Sirens» by Victoria Amelina
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