



# **NOTES FROM A WAR**

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**“Ukraine, a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire.”**

**- Zbigniew Brzezinski**

**W**hen a missile, launched by the terrorists in Eastern Ukraine, downed Malaysian Flight MH17, killing 298 passengers, the world looked on with shock and confusion, but not the Ukrainians. By the time this atrocity had occurred, we had endured five months of death that left the entire nation crippled by fear, unrest, and rage.

At that moment, the world was pushed closer to a new cold war. Europe had already started to shift its borders; there was a violent and deadly war between Ukrainians and Russians unfolding in Eastern Ukraine. However, most of the world, and especially Europe, did not seek clarity on what exactly brought down a passenger jet with nearly 300 innocent people on board; nor did they want to acknowledge war. Instead, they preferred to define the fighting as “riots” and to identify the Russian troops as “pro-Russian Ukrainian rebels.”

I’ve been to Eastern Ukraine dozens of times. The men there—the ones who are supposedly rebelling—are a kind of Eastern European redneck: hard workers and heavier drinkers, most have lived there since birth and never traveled even as far as Kiev. They work in coal mines and steel factories, and when work slowed in Ukraine, they would go to Russia to do random construction jobs. However, these men would always come home to their land and small domestic farms.

These are not pro-Russian thinkers; these are Ukrainians, and they have neither the rationale nor the capacity to fire missile launchers at their fellow citizens. This contortion of the truth, this insanity, is where the world’s ignorance has let us down.

I witnessed the moment everything shifted. They say that people witnessing history do not fully understand what is happening, but that is bullshit. I and everybody else around me very clearly understood what was happening and realized that nothing would ever be the same again. It was Sunday, January 19th, 2014, a big church holiday known as the Ice Baptism. I had taken my camera to document the events—people jumping into the freezing cold water, believing the ritual washes away troubles and brings peace.



*Nobody would ever expect an ancient city with baroque buildings to have a frontline – Kiev. January 2014*

What happened next was exactly the opposite of such sentiment. I followed the ice divers to the main square, Maidan Nezhalozhnosti, where protesters had been gathering every Sunday to oppose the government's resistance to join the European Union. Then, from nowhere, the police attacked and began to beat the protesters. The protesters did not fight back; instead, outraged by the violence, many more people went to the streets to ask for justice. People wore masquerade masks and colanders on their heads to mock the new anti-democratic laws—a James Ensor unfolding in real time. It was still peaceful, almost colorful. Then the protesters headed to the parliament and met the police, and in a blink of an eye the bloodshed started. I remember looking on, thinking, "This cannot be happening, I will wake up, we are civilized." What became eminently clear at that moment was how fragile peace is, and how no nation can consider itself so civilized or so protected that it could avoid such violence.



*People, mostly women, wore masquerade masks, colanders and buckets on their heads, mocking the new anti-protest laws banning wearing masks and helmets in public*

I came to Maidan Square for the next several days. I walked inside the protester's encampments. People from all over the country arrived to support the activists, bringing food, warm clothes, and medicine. They helped to cook and built barricades. I walked to the frontline. "No girls in here, it's too dangerous, please go back," the guards said, trying to convince me to go back. I found my press card and they had to let me go. But I felt incredibly grateful that those tired men were still gentlemen and still cared.



*Protests were still peaceful in the morning, with lots of people bringing their children and carrying Ukrainian flags as they headed onto a bridge that overlooked Maidan square*

On the frontline, ashes and snow kept falling from the sky. The activists defended the encampments from the police, throwing firecrackers, stones, and Molotov cocktails. The government forces struck back with bullets and put snipers on the roofs. A young man, standing so close to me that his shoulder touched mine, fell to the ground, shot. The police were targeting journalists and doctors—I saw fire and death on the streets of my peaceful city.

At least one hundred more protestors would be killed the following month. But I wasn't witnessing this anymore.

Away from home, studying in the States, I could hardly talk to people; the petty issues of those around me clashed too sharply with the suffering of others that filled my soul. I wasn't there when the Ukrainian ex-president fled to Russia and protestors seized his palace. I regret this a lot, as I had been trying to get inside that palace for many years.



*Activists put up a Christmas tree on Maidan Nezhalzhnosti, decorating it with flags and posters*

By spring Ukraine had become extremely fragile, caught in the struggle to recover from the rule of a dictator and the efforts to build a new country. The economy was crashing and order was diminishing. It was at that moment, while Ukraine was crippled and crawling toward democracy, that the Russians attacked and the war started—a war strategy that amounts to little more than sneaky blackheartedness, much like knowing that your neighbor has the flu and breaking into his house because he can't fight back.

At first no bullets were shot. The Russians faked a referendum in Crimea, an invaluable peninsula in southern Ukraine. Then they invaded it, saying that the people there wanted to reunite with Russia. Ukrainians didn't fight; they did not shoot a single bullet; they just stared on in dismay as foreign soldiers stormed Ukrainian military bases. A nation, shocked after the hundreds of deaths in Maidan Square and still reeling from the

internal violence of its own revolution, stood dormant as its large and formidable neighbor Russia claimed ownership as if twenty-two years of independence had never transpired. Within several months, the Russians began to play the same game in Eastern Ukraine, sending their intelligence officers and establishing covert operations that would result in weirdly suspicious separatist movements—the groups that the Western world blindly called “pro-Russian separatists” and in fact “terrorists” or, more specifically, “Russians.”



*Protestors threw Molotov cocktails at the police located on the other side of the barricades*

This time, however, Ukrainians fought back, first with several volunteer battalions driving into Eastern Ukraine. Then, with a newly elected President seated, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians began to raise money, buy weapons, acquire uniforms, and build a larger, stronger group of soldiers. In most cases it was the women of Ukraine raising the money, making sure that the families of the thousands of soldiers were getting support, overseeing the wounded, and making sure that life at home went on as normally as possible. This may sound like a turn toward more traditional gender roles in a time of crisis. However, there are women among the volunteers, and within the army, and they also die, like men do, though they are more often held captive like Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko,

who was kidnapped and is now under a court trial in Russia, accused of killing Russian journalists.

In its own right, Ukraine is a progressive and feminist country where women have better access to both abortion clinics and senior management positions than in the United States. Its political movements have helped global left-wing causes; for example, Ukraine gave the world the radical movement Femen, which aims to fight patriarchy in its three manifestations: sexual exploitation of women, dictatorship, and religion. But in the haze and horror of war, as if a switch had been pulled making all of us brothers and sisters in the face of threat and loss, most of the feminists I was in touch with had shifted roles to those of supporting, caring for, and comforting the waves of returning soldiers.



*Protestors burned tires to create a curtain of smoke. Covered by it, a man approaches the barricade and throws a stone at the police.*

My friend Julia from Kiev was one of these women, she is very well educated, was well employed, giving money regularly to her parents—a kind of familial support rarely seen in the states. Now her salary is diminishing along with Ukrainian currency, which is almost half of its value since the beginning of the crisis, while the war has caused the prices of nearly every need to have doubled.



*A field hospital, made in the hallways of the Trade Union building in Kiev and headed by a woman, opened to treat protestors*

Julia, like my father, and like nearly everyone else in Kiev, hasn't had hot water in her apartment for months. But she doesn't complain because she knows that those in Eastern Ukraine have it much worse. "We don't have to live in basements and survive shelling," explained Julia. Soon after the war began and the first thousand soldiers had died, Julia started to volunteer at the hospital for soldiers in downtown Kiev. She cooks food, buys cigarettes, acquires personal toiletries, and tries to keep things as normal as possible through the madness of invasion. Throughout her volunteering Julia has kept a diary. Below is a selection of passages that I feel go much further than my own words could in offering a sense of humanity maintained against the pressures of geopolitical insanity:

*I come to the farmer's market and ask to put the fruits in small separate bags. The salesgirl asks is this is for a sick person in a hospital. "Yes, for many, but I don't know them yet." Once the salesgirl learns that this is for the wounded soldiers, she adds more peaches. Her assistant brings some grapes, saying, "For the boys. Tell them to feel better."*

*I and the other girls come to the hospital and try to figure out which soldiers have no relatives and friends in the city. We will be their friends. Both we and the boys are very shy. We are hesitant to approach and give them the bags with our home-made food. The guys are even more shy. They blush and chain smoke.*

*One eye is missing, however the remaining one looks optimistic. His name is Valera. He is 47. "Please, just come and visit us," he says, "and we will fight for you even blind." Valera and others show us some photos from Eastern Ukraine. I look at the images of armored trucks. Another one is of an RPG missile. Somebody wrote on its gray side with a black marker, "From Russia with love."*

*What the soldiers say is very different from the media coverage in Ukrainian and Russian media. "Tell me, who are we fighting? Are they Ukrainians or Russians? Is it a civil war?" The soldiers are careful with words. They say that the rioters are sometimes fellow Ukrainians, but all the bosses, officers, arms, and weapons are Russian. I hold my tears. I can't cry while I am here.*

*Surprisingly, there is no hatred. "Don't assume all the Russians are like that", tell the soldiers. Why, oh, God, why, are they killing each other? The Ukrainian guys are fighting for us, and I understand why they are dying. But what for are the Russian guys dying for? I really don't understand what idea or emotion or intention makes a Russian soldiers do this to their neighbor.*

*I leave the hospital into a beautiful summer night. I listen to the cars and passers by, and the music from the street cafes. I walk home and cry*

*with big tears. These are the tears of a person in a peaceful city. It's really difficult to control myself. The war is the best test. It shows what is inside our soles. And everything starts and ends inside each individual.*

*It's better not to talk about war a lot. What can I do? Just remember that I'm a woman and my hands should bring cure, comfort and support. That's why I started cooking for strangers, who risk their lives for me. There's a lot of aggression around. There's confusion. There's evil and hatred. And here I am, cooking pies. I won't stop the war. I won't change anything for the country. But I may change something for these soldiers, maybe not their lives – but their souls.*

Nothing unites a nation better than an imposing evil, and a war never fails to out the best and the worst in people. Too bad that it happened with my people. I wouldn't ask anybody to understand what Ukrainians are going through. Nobody will, until they experience it themselves. If there's ever a moment when you realize how fragile peace is and how fortunate you were to live in its midst, you're done: your world will never be the same again. I sincerely hope this won't happen to you.