UKRAINE

How joining the army makes intellectual sense for scholars

Nathan M Greenfield 07 March 2024

"War is the stolen future of millions of people" – Sergeant Fedir Shandor, deputy company commander and professor of philosophy

At 6am on Friday 1 March, I saw I'd received an email from Mykhailo Liakh, a PhD student in history at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy who has put aside his doctoral dissertation and joined the Ukrainian army, asking to postpone our online interview due to take place later that day.

A few days earlier, the soldier, who is on active deployment, had written that he hoped to have "spare time on Friday" but that "we have no actual schedule here and tasks always arrive suddenly", likely referring to what in English-speaking armies are called "fatigue duties", such as the digging of trenches and filling of sand bags.

The email's first words, "I regret to inform you", told me that the call, scheduled for 7am in Ottawa, Canada, where I live, was off. But their business-like formality hardly prepared me for the stark reality of what Liakh had lived through not long before he connected to the internet via Starlink.

"This day itself turned out to be very hard for me – both physically and morally. I am in a combat unit … and earlier today my already depleted unit has suffered heavy casualties.

"That's why I had another sleepless and nervous night and morning – I am on duty today and I still have a hard time accepting our losses despite over 1.5 years of service and being now in the trenches," he wrote.

"I am very sorry to let you down today, but now I am morally and physically exhausted and can barely communicate even in Ukrainian, let alone English … I [should have] warned you earlier, but I also hoped that my exhaustion would've somehow withered away by the time of the interview. Unfortunately, it hasn't … I really need some time to process th[ese] events," he wrote.

Guided by philosophy

For civilians, myself included, the gap between being a professor in a lecture hall or scholar in a library and willingly choosing the soldier's reality – the fear and chaos of battle and the risk of violent death – is unbridgeable. But for the professors and graduate students interviewed for this article, it was a straight line, charted by their scholarly work.

Exempted from military service because of his age, 47, and his profession as a professor, Fedir Shandor, who taught philosophy at Uzhhorod National University (in southwestern Ukraine, close to the Hungarian border), joined the Ukrainian army hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin unleashed full-scale war against Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

In an email to *University World News*, Sergeant Shandor wrote that his decision was made without emotion and against the background provided by his study of philosophy.

Among the philosophical teachings that led him from the classroom to the battlefield are those of the American political philosopher Francis Fukuyama and the 19th century Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831).

In a book published in 1992, the year after Ukraine gained its independence from the Soviet Union, Fukuyama famously predicted the triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism – and more recently has added that liberal states organised on national lines, for example, Holland, are the best protectors of liberal societies.

While Shandor was undergoing basic training, Fukuyama **wrote of Ukraine**: "With their bravery, they have made clear that citizens are willing to die for liberal ideals, but only when those ideals are embedded in a country they can call their own."

Clausewitz's classic definition, "War is merely the continuation of policy by other means", led Shandor to join the army because it links the present war to Russia's long history of imperial possession and repression of Ukraine.

"This is the war of the whole people for survival. Either them or us," writes Shandor, who became famous after he was photographed in military fatigues, lecturing to his students from the field via a phone on a subject conceptually as far from his reality as possible: the sociology of tourism.

Informed by history

Lieutenant Maxim Osadchuk joined the army after Russia's invasion of Crimea, his home province, in 2014. He left the army in 2015 and moved to Lviv where, until two years ago, he was working on his PhD thesis, a study of 19th century Ukrainian socialists. Osadchuk, who married two years ago, did not avail himself of a student deferment. Instead, he joined the army again when what he called "this Great War" began.

Osadchuk knew first-hand that war was "scary, hard work … You lose friends, sometimes several a day. There is always dirt and moisture, heat or cold". Yet, he was driven back to war by both his study of history and philosophy.

History, he wrote in an email to *University World News*, prepared him for "the inevitability of an armed conflict with a new iteration of [the Russian] empire". Ukraine and other post-Soviet republics, he says, "will remain under threat as long as the Russian Federation exists. The only way to guarantee security in Europe is the final disintegration of Russia into a number of independent states", which, he believes, will benefit the Russian peoples, "because democracy and liberal values are incompatible with the existence of the imperial state".

The recondite works of existentialist thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre seem quite far from a rational decision to once again pick up a gun, but, as Osadchuk wrote, these philosophies undergird that decision.

"Producing meaning is a basic human task, and what could be more meaningful than conscious participation in repelling barbaric aggression that threatens the very foundations of civilization?" Osadchuk asked.

An advocate for equality

Thirty-one year old *Soldat* (Private) Alona Nyasheva, who was teaching sociology at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and working on a post-doc through the University of Bremen, was not expected to become a soldier.

Now, nearing the end of her training as a medic in the eastern part of the country (that was all she could tell me), she will soon be deployed as an ambulance medic, which means she will be close to the front lines. Her decision to join the army is at one with what drove her to become a sociologist.

“I wanted to make life in this country better. I mean, I was teaching my students how to make society more equal, about human rights and how housing rights are part of human rights. I advocated for social housing and now Russia destroys all that.

“It makes no sense to teach about social housing because there is no one left to teach to, because they are fighting for their lives – and when you know Russia destroys cities…

“On what you call the level of values, political level, there is a straight line to [me] becoming a service woman,” she told *University World News*.

Drawing on her sociological analysis of Putin’s decision to wage war, Nyasheva provided a trenchant critique of Marxist economist and geographer David Harvey who is a distinguished professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, whose work shone brightly in her intellectual firmament – and through this, sketched a profound political argument about how both Ukrainians and the West mis-read Putin's intentions in the years before the war.

The war has shown, she said, that looking at “Russian regimes through the lens of Western regimes was a mistake”.

Harvey’s analysis was drawn from Western countries where there are countervailing forces, such as elected legislatures and courts that limit executive power.

“There has never been an empirical case such as Russia, where there is such a concentration of power [in one person’s hands],” she said. “Russia is a completely different imperialist country than even China. For it, political power is more important than economic factors,” Nyasheva added.

Staying human

Though, as Osadchuk wrote: “There is nothing [about war] that a mentally healthy person could aspire to.” For millennia soldiers have sought ways to encompass and understand their experiences of fear, terror and sorrow – famously, in English, through the poems of the War Poets of the First World War.

Osadchuk’s first answer to my question about how he understands the experience of battle, begins with staccato phrases that suggest the mind’s inability to make sense of a world in which explosions rent the very air he breathes before this sensitive writer intones something like a lament.

“It’s frantic adrenaline, a constant lack of information and the desire to do everything more efficiently. But still very often things don’t go according to plan. From my point of view, the main measure of success in battle is the absence of losses,” he writes.

In a second email, Osadchuk was more analytical and described the horrifying scenes that unfold during Russian advances against Ukrainian positions on the banks of the Oskol River in the Kharkov region.

“Typically, the occupiers initially send small groups of former prisoners or poorly trained conscripts to storm positions. We strike at them with artillery and automatic grenade launchers, which are corrected by drones in the air. Most of them die,” he wrote. Osadchuk chose not to use the term ‘Storm-Z’ soldiers to refer to those soldiers that serve as Putin's cannon fodder and undertake what are called ‘meat assaults’ on Ukrainian positions – all phrases widely used in Ukraine and picked up in Western media.

“But some of them manage to approach our fortifications and a

shooting battle begins, using automatic weapons. The wave of attackers dissipates and after some time everything repeats again," he wrote.

Shandor's answer moved quickly from the grit of war – "taking away corpses and the wounded", going on dangerous duty and ... [leading] confused soldiers – to the role of philosophy. "Philosophy helped me adequately to perceive death," he wrote. "Philosophy and lectures allowed me to remain human," he added. The alternative was to revert to being "blood thirsty animals".

Making sense of battle

Making sense of battle or, to be more precise, helping the men in his platoon make sense of battle and their mission was the essence of Corporal Volodymyr Dehtyarov's answer to a question about how his scholarly interests manifested themselves in his military life.

Dehtyarov (44), who did not have to enlist, has, in addition to owning several business communications companies, taught business and organisational communications at, among other universities, the Kyiv School of Economics and Kyiv Mohyla University.

At one point before he was "pulled from the trenches" so that he could oversee valuable communications projects for the Territorial Defence Forces, Dehtyarov found that his knowledge of organisational communications and psychology became important on the battlefield.

Because of his training, he understood that the fact that he and his comrades did not know why they were holding a forward operating position in the Kharkiv region in 2022 lessened their military effectiveness. He went to his commander who explained the larger picture to him.

"By us being there and being able to stop the enemy early on," he later explained to his patrol, "we will be able to ... [prevent them from] discovering our main fighting position and [thus be able to] destroy them with direct fire, and that we have several layers of plans [for] how our withdrawal [if necessary] was to be covered by our forces."

Dehtyarov said his education and teaching experience played a major role in his understanding of the cost of an army's effectiveness when the men on patrol did not understand the tactical picture.

"If you're on the platoon level, it's good if you understand what your platoon is doing and then what your company's doing – and then in broader terms, what your battalion is doing," he said.

The cost of trauma

Dr Maksym Kozhemiaka, an associate professor of trauma affiliated with the Zaporizhzhia State Medical and Pharmaceutical University, began our interview by telling me that the Russians were a mere 40 km (25 miles) away. His second tour of military medicine began the day the Russians invaded, and a senior doctor told Kozhemiaka that because he had experience of military medicine in 2014, he was to go to the regional military hospital and prepare for casualties.

"And for the next five months, I lived there," Kozhemiaka told *University World News*.

The casualties started arriving the next day: blast traumas, fall traumas, bullet traumas, dramatic amputations, tourniquet amputations. Evacuation by ambulance, instead of helicopters, which, as the 1970s situation comedy M*A*S*H shows the Americans doing in the Korean War (1948-52), meant that more often than not, patients arrived long after the 'Golden Hour', after which morbidity and mortality rose steeply, had passed.

There would be others. But the first patient to die from the war in Kozhemiaka's arms was a civilian, a fireman "who had tried to save civilian people after a rocket attack". In military parlance, he was the victim of a 'double tap' attack, the purposeful (and **illegal in international law**) targeting of the same site twice with the

intention of killing first responders.

“We tried to help but, unfortunately, the first victim, we couldn’t help him. Unfortunately he had a very hard [extensive] trauma. And after that, something broke in my mind,” Kozhemiaka said, before adding that he and other medical staff in Ukraine go on by “being something like a stone”.

Kozhemiaka’s and some of his medical colleagues’ stoicism was put to the test as Russian forces were only a few kilometres from the hospital, close enough that they could hear the explosions of Russian shells. Plans were made to evacuate the hospital but since not all patients were in a fit condition to travel the medical director told Kozhemiaka that he and a few other members of the staff would remain and that Kozhemiaka would be in command.

“And we knew what the end would be because some colleagues [who had escaped from] Mariupol came to us after the bombing and rocket attacks there.

“We were scared because we know that to stay to the end is to die,” Kozhemiaka repeated himself. “If we stay to the end…” He finished the sentence by crossing his arms over his chest as is done with a corpse.

Living with fear

“I’m not trying to be brave,” Nyasheva told me in an audio message. “I’m trying to accept my fear,” which is driven partly by what she knows about the dangers of being close to the frontlines, where, as an ambulance medic, she definitely will be.

But the fear she must accept is also partly driven by what she knows has occurred in cities such as Melitopol and Kherson where the Russian army immediately started taking activists, like she was before enlisting, into captivity, and torturing and killing them.

Thus, in some ways, it makes more sense for people who do not want to end up resisting at the level of a city to join the army, she explained.

Still, as the “case of [Alexi] Navalny shows, anyone can be captured and tortured and killed. That’s what's happening with Ukrainian activists, that’s what’s happening with Ukrainian Tatars, that’s what’s happening with religious minorities in Russia and all occupied territories. And that's what will happen to me if I am under Russian occupation”, she explained.

Then, in a strained voice, Nyasheva said: “So as not to be captured, raped, tortured and killed because of my political position, I need to be part of the Ukrainian army.

“That’s my understanding, how I think about these topics, but, of course, emotionally, it’s very difficult and scary.”

‘We could find no contrition’

Of the soldiers interviewed for this article, only Kozhemiaka has had close contact with Russian soldiers – those injured and brought to the hospital. When I asked what dealing with them was like, Kozhemiaka paused a few moments before looking straight at me and answering in measured tones that spoke of the strained memories of ministering to Russian invaders.

“First of all, I’m a doctor. In the deep layer of our mind, we understand that this is the enemy. But, first of all, I’m a doctor and we medical staff help them,” Kozhemiaka said.

“Did they thank you?” I asked.

“You know, we tried to talk with the Russian soldiers and, you know, we could not find justice,” he replied.

Kozhemiaka turned away from the computer to look up a word. Looking back and straight into the computer camera, in a solemn and hushed voice, he said: “In their eyes, we could find no *contrition*.”