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HEROIC CITY OF CHERNIHIV

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INTRODUCTION

"Since ancient times, there has been a saying: 'To Kyiv to trade, to Chernihiv to fight.' When the war broke out in Donetsk and Luhansk Regions in the spring of 2014, there were similar movements in the Chernihiv Region as well. We had a case that became key. At that time there was no militia in Chernihiv, because our militia 'distinguished themselves' on the Maidan, and they fled. The older residents of our city are quite old-regime minded; on the other hand, the youth and middle-aged people are pro-Ukrainian. We simply defended ourselves. And when 10 buses full of pro-Russian gangsters came to us to make a 'Chernihiv People's Republic' here, we gathered in the square. Our central square can accommodate about 10 thousand people. And so, at that time a whole square of people gathered and waited for these 'visitors'. On the edge of the square there were guys with fishing bags, and what was in those bags — 'history keeps silent'. These buses reached the city, stopped, turned around and went back. That's how the 'ChNR' was stopped in Chernihiv" says well-known local public activist and volunteer Olha Palkova-Svirchevska.

In 2022, Chernihiv was less fortunate than in 2014. Around 4:30 a.m. on February 24, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that he had decided to launch a special military operation to Donbas following a request

from the self-proclaimed DPR and LNR groups. He said that Russia's plans do not include the occupation of Ukrainian lands, and at the same time he called on Ukrainian servicemen to lay down their arms and "go home." "You strive for decommunization, well, we will arrange for you the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine" said the Kremlin dwarf, and planes and missiles flew into Ukraine.

The first arrival of an enemy projectile in the Chernihiv Oblast happened just at this time: at 4:30 in the morning.

"People, who understood that the war has been going on in the country for eight years, expected that our region could also find itself in a similar situation. Since 2014, I have been saying: 'It will take half an hour for Hrad multiple missile launchers to cover Chernihiv; it is not far from the war in Donbas.' It's only an hour's drive to the border with Russia." Since 2014, fighting began on the border with Chernihiv. At that time, our border guards did not have such experience and equipment, and the Belarusian and Russian troops dispersed, drove up to the border in tanks and drove back. We understood that they were nearby. We were waiting" says Olha.

It is only a two-hour drive from Chernihiv to Kyiv, so the defense of the city in a full-scale war in 2022 was of strategic importance for the defense of the capital. Chernihiv's residents blew up bridges, felled trees on roads, blocked roads, prepared "Molotov cocktails", and stopped Russian tanks with their bare hands. The region, which has always lived celebrating festivals near the "Three Sisters"—a monument at the crossroads of Russia and Belarus, has

shown that it will decide for itself whether it wants to live in the "Russist world", and not just celebrate an imaginary brotherhood or sisterhood once a year.

The heroic resistance of the citizens of Chernihiv became a phenomenon of unification of Ukrainians, when people proved that we can be dissatisfied with the authorities, countrymen, and each other; but when a foreigner comes, he is greeted with weapons from every window. "Russian soldier go to your last journey", the poster said, and the arrow pointed to Chernihiv. Here, local residents were partisans, helping the military, delivering humanitarian aid, united in every possible way to support each other, the military, doing their job, did not let the Russians into the city, and the local and Regional authorities were just a phone call away from their citizens.

"Chernihiv is a city of heroes. Here you can list endless categories. Heroes are our military. People who defended our region and forced the Russians to retreat from the region and not occupy Chernihiv. I understand the resources and forces, the plans that were implemented. When you see from the inside the filigree skills, bravery, hunting the enemy, you understand how cool our military is. I have the honor to know and to work with Nikoliuk, Khoda, and Bryzhinsky. The 58th Brigade also played its role in the region, but the main work was done by the 1st Tank Brigade and Dmytro Bryzhinsky, who was in charge of the city's defense", says the head of the Regional Military Administration, Vyacheslav Chaus.

He adds that the city and the region experienced very terrible events, but at the same time warm memories of that

time remained: *"When Nikoliuk called, and you understood that you don't have to do it, but you want to do it. In the same way, when you need something, you call Nikoliuk and you know that it will be done"*.

Viktor Nikoliuk, the commander of the North Operational Command, confirms Chaus's words: *"There was a full tandem with the head of the region. For example, on the first day that we went off, we couldn't refuel the 58th Brigade, I called him, he resolved the issue by order of the governor. We held joint meetings every day. The evacuation was carried out together with the head of the region. This was not advertised, but every day three to five thousand residents left Chernihiv. Although, people didn't really want to go either. I went to Chaus, he organized the evacuation. We provided security, and he provided buses and lists. The governor ruled the civilians"*.

In fact, at the time of the liberation of the city, there was almost no information about the city and its defense in the mass media in the national television marathon. Some people were really offended, because they know what battles took place in Chernihiv and its surroundings. They say: *"It's as if Chernihiv was deprived, as a region that took a very significant blow. As if they did not support him enough"*.

Even the military say: *"Actually, it was a bit insulting when the whole March was all about Kyiv. It is clear that this is the capital. But at that time the hottest spots were Mariupol and Chernihiv."*

The head of the region explained certain informational isolation by the fact that this was the decision of the autho-

rities together with the command. Almost all journalists left the city. Two people from *Suspilny TV* remained here, several people from the local *Ditynets TV* channel, who went to the points at the request of the city council and filmed the destruction, and people from the *Noviy Chernihiv Channel* remained. They filmed a lot, but for some reason they were not included in the "marathon".

"For a certain period, we didn't let the media in, because after every visit of journalists there were 'arrivals'. Indeed, there were few representatives of the region and the city on the air, because during the whole month Chernihiv was without electricity, without the Internet. In the center of the city, we tried to maintain contact, we moved around the city a lot. In fact, there was neither time nor technical possibility for this. But I went on the air of Belarusian channels, talked about what was happening in our country, told Belarusians: "Don't come, because we will kill you and perceive you as invaders."

■ ■ ■

On March 6, 2022, the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, awarded Chernihiv the title of Hero City of Ukraine. On the same day, the title of "Hero City" was awarded to Kharkiv, Mariupol, Kherson, Hostomel and Volnovakha.

"If we lost Chernihiv, we would not be able to hold Kyiv" Viktor Nikoliuk said.

But everyone understands it.

A city without people is a dead infrastructure, and empty houses that will be taken over by nature over time and replaced by itself, asphalt that no one needs, empty

playgrounds, and a lack of services. It's iron, metal, and concrete, and they don't make sense unless it is filled with people. Therefore, the city of heroes is about the people who shape the city, protect it and develop it. If we all decided to unite and stand up, then we stood up.

Chapter 1

THERE WILL BE A WAR...

"The shadow of a full-scale war was flying on the airwaves and in the news half a year before it began. I understood that the long-term deployment of shock battalion groups, much less the movement of hospitals and blood supplies to the borders, as reported by Western intelligence, was before the start of the war.

But back in February 1980, when I was in the Soviet army, at large exercises near Murmansk, as part of the 70,000-strong army, I understood something. We then 'scared NATO' — their 16,000-strong group on the Soviet-Norwegian border. Our equipment, preparedness, and 'adaptability' to the war in the north, and the organization of supply, were etched into the memory forever. And also, the training and fighting capacity of the NATO and Finnish military, which we studied. Therefore, I had no special illusions about the strength and fighting capacity of the 'second army of the world'" such memories swirled in the head of Chernihiv journalist Vladyslav Savenko.

The "duration" of the exercises, which were already longer than standard, maneuvers and crowding at the borders, did not give any chance for peace.

Savenko's last doubts were dispelled on **February 8** by General Kryvonos, who came to Chernihiv and met with

the patriots and the Mayor. *"He said more, that we need to prepare for street battles and resistance at every crossroads. Even then, he predicted the retreat of the Russians from Kyiv Oblast, Sumy Oblast, and Chernihiv Oblast, because he said that it would cost, for comparison, 100 hryvnias to get Russian troops here, and 100 dollars to withdraw them."*

On **February 10**, Vladyslav's sister from France wrote that they were showing Chernihiv and the border with Belarus and asked: will there really be a war? And he answered: the occupation is 80 percent possible.

My husband packed up alarm suitcases with documents, a supply of food, dried crackers, push-button phones, spare SIM cards, batteries, power banks. *"I knew that the 'brotherly people-neighbor' destroyed everything Ukrainian after Bohdan, and during Shevchenko, and under Lesya Ukrainka, and 100 years ago, and in the 70s during the Brezhnev's regime."* There were no illusions.

"My husband Sasha always said that there would be a big war. His backpack, with which he traveled to the East in 2015, fought in Mariupol, was wounded at the Butivka mine, was always fully equipped. We kept hearing that there were some trainings in Belarus, they kept arriving and arriving. Although no sane mind would have estimated that it would be like this." This is what Natalya says, she is a doctor, and her husband, despite his profession as a construction worker in peaceful life, fought as a volunteer in the first years of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Their family knows how to weigh and analyze. And Sasha, like all military men, clearly knows

that the appetite of the Russians cannot be appeased by any negotiations. There will be a war that everyone will feel.

At the beginning of February in Chernihiv, there were only conversations on war-related topics. But the psyche did not accept this situation. As if she understood, but "it can't be!" pushed out bad thoughts. The most likely scenario was an escalation of hostilities in Donbas. Even a breakthrough from there was imagined. And most of the people of Chernihiv did not believe, did not even allow the idea that the city could repeat the fate of the fighting events in Donetsk and Luhansk. Despite the fact that almost everyone heard and memorized the conversations that took place from December 2021 and throughout January-February 2022 — about a very likely full-scale Russian attack on Ukraine.

This seems to be mostly due to their close family ties to Russia and Belarus. No matter what, people in border areas always have closer ties with neighboring states.

There is such a monument "Three Sisters" in the Horodnya District of the Chernihiv Region, where the border of three states: Ukraine, Russia and Belarus converges. Until 2014, joint festivals were held there every year. Each year in turn, each country celebrated the holiday. Just in 2014, they celebrated their anniversary: 30 years of "sisterhood-brotherhood." *"I didn't believe it until the end, although I understood that our region is also a border region, we had very close relations with both Russians and Belarusians. Many Chernihiv residents have many relatives in those countries,"* says Vadym Fesyun, chief forester of the Chernihiv Regional Department of Forestry and Hunting. Even among the foresters of the region, an interesting sports competition

between Ukrainians, Russians and Belarusians was started. Fesyun says: *"We started with three states, then Russia refused. Somehow we didn't establish a relationship with them right away, but we competed with the Belarusians until 2018, one by one: they went to us, then we went to them."*

Chernihiv reporter Vira Kuriko-Agienko comes from Volodymyrivka, from the same Horodnya District, where Belarus already begins beyond the field, and a checkpoint is located in the neighboring village. *"As a child, I didn't have Ukrainian television, we fell asleep to the Belarusian "kalihanka" (a lullaby TV program) and had absolutely no feeling that it was something foreign. Russian news, no Ukrainian connection. To make a call, you need to get out somewhere and find a spot. There was also a Belarusian operator, with the help of which people communicated with each other in the village, because it gets the signal in the house. For a long time, I did not feel the difference between Ukraine, Belarus and Russia at all; there is also nearby Senkivka, the Friendship of Peoples festival..."*

The girl began to fear war in the Chernihiv Region at the age of 17. At that time, the war had just started in Donbas, and Vira's father was fighting in the Popasna District, Luhansk Region. *"My mother was told that my father went to kill brothers... it depressed her a lot. My mother worked in a store and I often visited her, I heard conversations about how the Russians are good, 'I would join them myself', or not so much to Russia, as to Belarus, to Lukashenko.*

Dad often said that we need to prepare in Chernihiv because they will attack. And I was afraid that if they entered

the village, they would immediately surrender my family. I even told my would be husband about it.

*But when the news appeared in the information space that the Russians had drawn their equipment up to the border, I did not immediately react, because they had done that more than once. And already in January, I started paranoia, and the attack 'happened' almost every three days: February 12, February 16, February 19... I constantly talked to my mother and convinced her to leave the village. Before **February 19**, I especially persuaded her to come to my place for a few days. Mom refused.*

*My husband's parents ended up in the Mensk District, also on the side of the offensive, but not on the border itself. My husband did not believe in full-scale war. He believed that the informational noise was actually made in order to prevent this war. Perhaps, as a journalist, I argued with him. There were nights when I opened my eyes and said: "Let's buy scotch tape, flashlights, candles...". I also **imagined the war, something like the Second World War**. He calmed me down and told me that I was a bit overloaded with information.*

I was convinced that I would definitely not miss the war, because if something happened, my father — a reservist — would be called up before we knew it. But dad said that he called his Brigade and the Military Commissariat; he was told everywhere that there was no need to come.

*On **February 19**, we stayed up jokingly, read Malanyuk's poems until 2:00 am and waited for the explosions. Nothing happened at all.*

*And on **February 23**, sirens were supposed to be tested in Chernihiv, and suddenly they canceled it so as not to scare*

people. It was the final understanding for me that there would be a war and that when the sirens really sounded, people would understand. My husband was not scared, like me, and in the evening he went to meet his friends. And I stayed at home, read about Victor von Graff, who greened the Donbas and contained the sands in the Kherson Region and tamed the steppe...

At night, my husband and I talked and I told him that I was very afraid that my father would go to war again. I said, he survived once, and he won't survive the second time, that he had enough wars already, and it's unfair. I was overcome with hysterical emotions."

"As practice has shown, **it is impossible to prepare for war if you do not get into its context at least once.** It is possible to pack an alarm suitcase or take first aid training only when it is a conscious decision. Part of the population had such a conscious decision, but many rejected this necessity. It seemed that even if the president called to rally, take pre-med courses, pack an alarm suitcase and somehow act in advance, he would most likely be laughed at. The vast majority was so sure that there would be no attack on Chernihiv, Kyiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv that it was impossible to convince them" says Anastasia Ulyusheva.

Nastya packed an alarm suitcase in advance, it is not the first year she has been volunteering and communicating with the military. She discussed an approximate plan of action with her relatives. And all the same, I understood that it is impossible to be 100 percent ready. "The phrase: 'We are preparing for war' does not work" she says. "Whoever wanted

to prepare for it did so back in 2014." *"The maximum that the state could do was to train the army, teach the Territorial Defense and purchase ammunition"...*

On Sunday, **February 20**, Natalya Didushevska baked bread with her son, and also wrote a post on Facebook: *"We hope for peace, we are preparing for war, but we are baking bread."* She says that at that time she did not think about a full-scale attack by the Russians. It all happened subconsciously.

Her friend, Ira Timofeeva, has been helping and supporting the military hospital since 2014. In 2018, volunteering slowed down a bit, and at the beginning of February 2022, the commander called Ira and asked: *"Well, what, are you ready?"* And she answered: *"I'm always ready."* The commander clarified whether she was planning to leave anywhere in case of any events. But Ira had one thought: *"If I didn't go in 2014, why should I go now?"*

Inna Adrug decided not to leave the city in any case, she is a well-known curator of various literary projects and festivals in Chernihiv, the owner of a souvenir shop in the city center and... the owner of 12 cats. *"On the one hand, I was always aware that a war with the Russians could not be avoided. And on the other hand, I didn't want to believe that it would be like that. The information was contradictory. Military friends were actively on duty all winter. We lived as long as there is life. My husband and I talked and decided to stay. We won't leave the cats, and it's impossible to leave with them, besides, we don't have a car."* Everything was decided.

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