

Russia-Ukraine War: Evangelical Voices

Project Notes

On February 20, 2014, Russia started a hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine, occupying Crimea and parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine. On February 24, 2022, Russia escalated to a full-scale military attack on Ukraine. The new, more brutal phase of the war devastated the world for Ukrainians and left almost the entire population of the country in shambles. This act of aggression affected evangelical churches and theological educational institutions. Since the early days of the war, Evangelical Protestants have been engaged in volunteer activities and assisting refugees affected by the war, the Ukrainian army, and territorial defense detachments. They have become witnesses and victims of the horrific consequences of Russian aggression.

The Eastern European Institute of Theology has initiated a series of events, attempting to voice the pain of the Ukrainians from the full-scale Russian invasion and to call on other Christians to help, defend and support their ministry by all possible means.

On March 17, 2022, the first meeting, “Russia-Ukraine War: Evangelical Voices,” was held with representatives of the Evangelical Seminaries: Ivan Rusyn (Rector of the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary), Valentyn Siniy (Rector of the Tavriski Christian Institute), Stanislav Stepanchenko (Dean of the Lviv Theological Seminary), Oleksandr Geychenko (Rector of the Odesa Theological Seminary). About 400 people joined in, most from the USA, Canada, and the UK.

The seminar opened with the testimony from Ivan Rusyn, the Rector of the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary. This seminary is located in the Kyiv region, which saw heavy fighting; it came under Russian shelling and most of the study hall building is damaged. Fortunately, due to the seminary leadership’s timely efforts, the students and teachers were evacuated. But Ivan Rusyn and his team stayed behind to volunteer and assist those who couldn’t be evacuated. He shared his experience of these trying times: the war waged by Russia destroys houses, churches, and theatres; it tortures, rapes, and kills men, women, and children, as it is driven by the desire to exterminate Ukrainians. 99% of his colleagues and students are now refugees outside Ukrainian borders or internally displaced persons. Under such circumstances, the curse and desire to destroy the enemy gains the weight of blessing. But, despite the suffering, Ukrainians are experiencing great unity, love for each other, manifested in support of the Army, self-sacrifice for evacuating people who cannot leave the occupied territories on their own, and financial sacrifice for the needs of the other. This is the theology of presence: if the church imitates Christ, it follows Him to where He is most needed. Only in this way does the church fulfill its mission: through the embodiment of Christ’s actions on earth. But despite the unity that helps to survive today, the most memorable things after the war will be not the cruel actions of the enemy but the silence of friends. Especially those Christians who, by their silence, support the so-called “russkii mir,” which is but a thin disguise for the policy of terror. If Russia destroys Ukraine, it will be a disaster for all democratic values, the foundations on which the Western world rests today, since this democracy will never be able to wash its hands of the innocent Ukrainian blood it betrayed. This is a war not only

against Ukraine but the foundations of these values. And here is the moment of choice for each one of us: do we want to be the source of suffering or the source of care and support for the other.

Like Ivan Rusyn, Valentyn Siniy, the Rector of the Tavriski Christian Institute, was involved in evacuating his colleagues and students from the Kherson region. Having been through the traumatic experience of war, Valentin Siniy draws attention to two types of evil in the Bible: one type, as in the book of Job, over which a person has no power, and the other, as in the book of Esther, over which a person has the power – and obligation – to stop it. That is, God openly calls evil – evil, He remains on the side of the oppressed and reveals Himself in the one who helps the suffering. Christians often solely think of the soteriological aspect of God’s mission. But it is also essential to talk about God’s mission as the return of all creation to God’s design. When evil manifests itself, we will see the need to spread the Kingdom of God through our lives.

Stanislav Stepanchenko, dean of Lviv Theological Seminary, shared his experience of volunteering with refugees from the central and eastern parts of Ukraine: mothers with children, pregnant women, the elderly, people with special needs, who often arrived in Lviv despaired and disoriented, without any help and any belongings, only with a passport in their hands. More than half a million displaced persons are in the Lviv region, and more than three million have crossed the western borders of Ukraine into neighboring countries. The evangelical churches, together with the seminaries, help these people with the basic necessities for life: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger, and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:-36 NRSV).

Oleksandr Geychenko, the Rector of the Odesa Theological Seminary, joined the discussion with his testimony. He elaborated on how we became eyewitnesses of the atrocities of the war and the senseless cruelty of the invaders. But he also noted that the level of support for this war by fellow evangelical believers in Russia is extremely puzzling and troubling. Unfortunately, most “experts” are wrong to say that this is Putin’s war. In fact, a significant number of Russians, and, in particular, a large number of Russian Christians, support this war. But we remember that Christ identified with the pain of other fellow believers and citizens. And, imitating Christ, we must identify with those who have lost relatives, found themselves in a foreign land, or lost their homes and livelihoods.

On March 31, 2022, the second meeting took place, entitled “Russia-Ukraine War: Women Voices.” The war in Ukraine affects everyone, making no distinction between civilians and soldiers, between young and old, between men and women. Women, mothers, daughters, and sisters do not flee the violence of war and become a symbol of courage, pain, and suffering of Ukraine. On the front line are women who, with weapons in hand, defend their country, home, and family. There are women who pray for hope, relief, and enlightenment of the hearts. They plead for justice and call for an end to the war. In large cities and tiny villages, there are women who support soldiers and civilians by providing medical care, nutrition, and psychological support. There are women who lost their parents, husbands, and children. Women live in combat zones and in occupied territories; they become refugees and prisoners.

The second meeting of “Evangelical Voices” intended to reveal the experience of war through the eyes of a mother, a wife, a volunteering woman, a theologian, a refugee woman – just a woman who one day found herself at the center of this terrible war with an inhuman face.

The second meeting began with the testimony of Marina Ashikhmina, Vice-Rector for Educational Work of the Tavriski Christian Institute, psychologist, and defectologist. Marina Ashikhmina raised the problem of “masculinity” of war and the silencing of women’s participation in the war: the war changes a woman, it alters the way she views herself and relates to others. For the record, Ukrainian women stood on par with men in Yevromaidan protests in 2013-2014, participating in various initiatives, including militaristic, as Women’s Sotnyas (squadrons) were formed. As evidenced by many media reports, even now, Ukrainian women are on active duty, fighting as part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Yet, as the speaker underscored the importance of this, we still must pursue the matter of recognition by the government and society as a whole of the presence and role of women – on equal footing with men.

Tetiana Gerasimchuk, a PR assistant at the Odesa Theological Seminary and a worker at the Odesa Crisis Pregnancy Center, shares her experience of being a refugee. When the whole infrastructure of life instantly collapses, the person is uprooted and scrambles to adapt to a new place where she does not belong. But despite all the suffering, the war teaches us what is truly valuable and what is not; it teaches us to recognize the significance of little good deeds; it teaches us to pray, to see the truth more clearly, and to share it with others.

It is important to remember, emphasizes Olga Dyatlik, Associate Regional Director of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Overseas Council, that the onslaught of aggression committed by Russia over Ukraine began eight years ago. However, on February 24, 2022, it moved to a new level as the horrifying testimonies started pouring in: Russian soldiers brought more pain to Ukrainians and a new wave of worries and needs for help. But the hurt that just breaks our hearts arises from the questions from people outside Ukraine: how do you plan to reconcile with the Russians? After 2014 having gone through the pain of losing loved ones, we still worked to develop relations with Russian Christian communities and promote evangelical intellectual culture. However, with the beginning of a full-scale war, we have not seen their readiness to share our experiences despite years of joint work. Therefore, it is probably the turn of Russian Christians to make efforts to build relationships. We are called to build bridges but also to respect the boundaries that make us diverse, both as individuals and as nations.

Valeriia Chornobai, Ph.D. in Theology (graduate of the Ukrainian Doctoral Program), a lecturer on sociology and Christian ethics, shared her experience of encountering the horrors of war. She spoke about the risk of staying behind to help others evacuate from the border towns with Russia, which are constantly shelled by heavy artillery. That’s how her volunteering began: with a willingness to risk her life for the lives of others. She shared how her church is at work right now: like many other churches, it looks more like a combination of a dormitory and a warehouse. Often refugees come to church from active combat areas with literally nothing but their lives. They don’t have suitcases, phones, even clothes or shoes; their homes are completely destroyed. And so, says Valeria, we give them food,

water, a bed to sleep in, we buy clothes and shoes, phones so that they can contact family members. We also help them find work and apartments if they want to remain in our city. It is also essential to help the displaced people understand that they are not alone in these experiences.

For me, the war began in 2014, so eight years ago, says Tetiana Kalenychenko, a sociologist of religion, facilitator, and coordinator of conflict transformation projects. In 2014 she was on the Maidan as a journalist, and later, when the war began, she traveled with chaplains and was on the frontlines in the Donbas. Eight years of war have changed a lot in our lives. Living under the occupation, cut off from water, electricity, and communication with the world, in complete silence, you more acutely understand the need not only to stop the war but also the necessity of peacebuilding as a joint process for the transformation of conflicts. People of different religious, political, and national views in joint efforts and actions, which are based on the value of human life and guided by the desire to build peaceful coexistence through the acceptance and assistance to each other to the extent of the ability of each person. To do this, we must think about how to build a peaceful relationship with ourselves and preserve peace in our hearts: in moments of shelling and in moments of despair, and loss of words, and even when the war ends. To do this, we need the quietness to begin frankly admitting to ourselves what is happening in our hearts, what is happening around us, and how we should react to what is happening. According to the speaker, the Church should become a place of such quietness, a space for rethinking challenges and finding peace for the future.

Olga Kondyuk, head of the communication and development department at the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary, emphasizes that the war not only kills people but also destroys everything that they have managed to build during their lives. Case in point – 30 years' worth of efforts to develop theological education in Ukraine. Therefore, when a threat of destruction looms everywhere, there is an understanding and desire to preserve the country's independence and defend all that is vital for an individual's safe and free present and future. And for this, it is necessary not only to fight with weapons but also to make efforts to develop the future: economy, culture, and education. And it may seem that theological education does not play a special role here. Still, theology should not only describe the world in which we live and offer answers to the anxieties of human existence but also deconstruct threatening messianic narratives, often used to build a totalitarian or authoritarian system.

The Eastern European Institute of Theology would like to thank all the participants of this project and express hope for its continuation.