

## A Bitter Winter in Ukraine

di Tim Judah

*Four years after their full-scale invasion, the Russians are trying to freeze Ukraine into submission by relentlessly attacking the country's energy grid*

In August 2014 I went to see the Ukrainian novelist Andrey Kurkov in Kyiv.

Ukraine was emerging from the pro-Europe Maidan Revolution the previous winter; Russia had seized Crimea and was aiding and abetting pro-Russian rebels in the east of the country. Kurkov had just published *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev*, in which he imagined digging up potatoes at his country house in September, “regardless of the military situation,” and asked:

Where will I be? Where will my wife and children be in September? I want to believe we will be at home in Kiev, going to our country house every weekend like we usually do—grilling shashlik, gathering the harvest, making apple jam and spending the evenings in the summerhouse with a glass of wine, talking about the future.

He added, “It’s funny, but the future we talk about never seems to come.”

On the night of February 23, 2022, Kurkov invited me to dinner with friends at home in Kyiv. “I will cook borscht,” he said. The atmosphere was febrile. We made toasts “to victory” but had no idea of what was about to happen. A few hours later the Russians began their full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

For a while Kurkov set aside fiction. He wrote essays about the war, and last year he published *Three Years on Fire: The Destruction of Ukraine*, his fourth nonfiction book chronicling the revolution and then the war. The essays in *Three Years on Fire* accurately reflect the atmosphere of the Ukraine I know and have been reporting from for many years. In one he writes about a soldier who campaigned against the country’s predatory gambling industry—in the last few years gambling addiction has

become a serious problem among soldiers who place bets on their phones—until he was killed in battle. In another essay we learn about the owner of the tropical fruit farm close to Kyiv who developed miniature banana trees that Ukrainians have been buying. At the beginning of the war, shelling cut the gas and electricity that kept his greenhouses warm, but he found that the trees were frost-resistant. Kurkov comments, “You could say the astonishing survival of these trees mirrors the unexpected staunchness with which Ukrainians are facing adversity.”

In January I was back in Kyiv. Kurkov and his wife had just returned from their country house. “Does the future still not come?” I asked. Well, he said, reflecting a common feeling of resignation, “the future is just too far away. We live every day only in reality and we wait for the next morning and then we take that as reality.”

In the first part of the war in 2014–2015, it was easy for people in Kyiv to think of the fighting in the east as very far away, but four years into this second part it is anything but. In 2022 the Russians reached the outskirts of Kyiv before being driven back. Now they are trying to freeze Ukrainians into submission by relentlessly attacking the country’s energy grid. For much of the day there is no electricity in Kyiv or most of the rest of the country. Some 60 percent of Ukrainians get their heat and hot water from power stations, which have also been under attack. Kurkov’s radiators were cold, but he said his apartment was still warm because the building was old and took a long time to cool down. However, in many districts radiators are only lukewarm even when they are on.

When Russia began the full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainians at first could not believe that it was launching a war to conquer the entire country rather than a more limited operation in the Donbas region in the east. Then came fear, followed by euphoria, as the Russians were driven back that summer and winter. Many in the West admired the Ukrainians’ resilience—so many volunteered to fight that the armed forces had to turn people away, and civilians mobilized in huge numbers to help their soldiers and refugees. Later came admiration for the drone technology Ukrainians have developed, which has transformed warfare. Now things are different again. “People are changing,” said Kurkov. “Attitudes are changing, dreams and hopes are changing.”

In Kyiv it was –17 degrees Celsius (roughly 1 degree Fahrenheit), and the trees, with their bare branches coated in glistening ice, looked as if they had been turned to glass. The streetlights were on in some streets, but others were completely dark. Kurkov described the mood as “like when you get an overdose of bad news. You stop reacting, you just accept it.” He said he had stopped counting the children of friends who had been killed in the fighting and people he knew who had died after they had stopped seeking care when they were ill, “because they think that doctors should be paying attention to wounded soldiers, not to civilians.” The nation, he said, was living through a

massive nervous breakdown because people don’t see the exit from this situation. People don’t understand how it can end. And they can imagine only a very bad ending to this story, because you cannot stop the war. I mean that is not up to Ukraine.

One night, in the southeastern city of Dnipro, I was in bed working on my laptop when I heard explosions. At first I ignored them, and then I sent a WhatsApp message to my Ukrainian colleague Taras Semenyuk: “Did you hear that?” He replied:

Yes

News reporting about Shaheds

It’s a massive attack going on

Shaheds are Iranian-designed drones that are now produced in Russia and are much more sophisticated, powerful, and destructive than earlier models. I checked local Dnipro channels that report where drones are and where they are heading and replied:

Yes, I can see on Telegram

Strange my air alert did not go off

And that was it. I went on working. For the first two years of the full-scale war Semenyuk, like many Ukrainians, was extremely anxious and always went to a shelter when there was an attack. That was not surprising. In the first weeks of the war, his apartment in Kyiv had been destroyed by a missile aimed at a nearby heating plant. It was only by chance that he was not there, and his wife and child had already left for Poland. But now, like millions of others, he just shrugs. This is not to say that people are not frightened by major drone, cruise, and ballistic missile attacks but simply that

the chance of being killed or injured in one is actually quite small. According to the UN, in government-controlled territory in 2025, 2,395 civilians were killed and 11,751 injured, but 63 percent of all civilian casualties on both sides were in frontline areas. The attacks in Dnipro that night were aimed at energy facilities, and the next day there was no electricity in the city.

Russian drones and missiles are often inaccurate, says the military analyst Ivan Stupak. Between 60 and 80 percent of them are shot down, though falling debris from them also causes damage, as do Ukrainian anti-aircraft misfires. For civilians it is often hard to know what hit their building. Stupak says it is possible that 10 percent of attacks target residential blocks in order to strike terror, which has the intended effect. “I don’t want to pretend we are all Rambos!”

From Dnipro, Semenyuk and I went to Zaporizhzhia, a major industrial city on the Dnieper River. In 2022 the Russians seized roughly 75 percent of Zaporizhzhia province, including its nuclear power plant, which is the largest in Europe. It used to supply about one fifth of Ukraine’s electricity and is now shut down. The Russians failed, however, to take the city of Zaporizhzhia. Many of its people fled, but they were replaced by refugees from occupied areas. Like all big cities it has been subjected to missile and Shahed attacks, and now the Russians are creeping closer from the south. In November a southern district of the city was hit by its first FPV (first-person-view) drone attack. These are short-range drones with a video feed that are controlled by a pilot using a screen or goggles and that can chase and target individuals, unlike Shaheds and other long-range drones whose target is preset.

The telltale sign that you are within range of FPVs is netting, which snarls drones that fly into it. We drove to the village of Balabyne, a few minutes south of the outskirts of Zaporizhzhia, and found that a net tunnel had been erected to protect the entire main street. People were beginning to leave, we were told by Tetiana, who works in a local shop. The drones attack civilians and their cars for no reason, she said. There is a reason, of course: to terrorize. On social media there are endless films from FPV drones released by both Russian and Ukrainian military units that like to show off their prowess. You see the drones carefully maneuvering through windows and buildings

and zeroing in on soldiers who see them and run or try to bat them off. The last image is someone's face a split second before the drone explodes and kills them.

In towns in the east of Ukraine from which I have reported, FPV drones are an increasing menace. In Kramatorsk, which was held by pro-Russian rebels in 2014 for almost three months, people have begun to leave because of them. After Bakhmut fell in 2023 and then Avdiivka nine months later, then Pokrovsk was next. As the Russians crept closer the drones made ordinary life impossible, and now it has all but fallen. Kostyantynivka, another town I have reported from but did not name because the unit I was with did not want me to identify their location, has now become part of the drone-terrorized zone and is gradually being reduced to rubble.

The center of Iziium, southeast of Kharkiv, has also been netted up to protect people. Much of the twenty-eight miles of road from the Kharkiv provincial border southeast to Sloviansk and neighboring Kramatorsk has been turned into a net tunnel.

It is wise to take other precautions as well. Just over a year ago I wrote about traveling with soldiers with a drone detector.

That was the first time I had seen one. Now they are commonplace. The Journalists' Solidarity Center of Kharkiv, organized by Ukraine's journalists' union, loaned us one. It was handheld and the screen fizzed like an old-fashioned television with no reception. If it suddenly came to life with a picture, though, that meant it had locked on to a nearby drone and we could see what its pilot was seeing. It could, of course, be flying somewhere else, but if it was flying toward us, we would have just a minute or two to find cover. At the checkpoint-cum-junction where the net tunnel between Iziium and Sloviansk begins, some cars, like ours, drove straight on while others, including delivery trucks, turned off to take a detour out of Russian FPV drone range.

All these towns, except for Iziium and Kharkiv, are in the Donbas, which has become a major point of contention in the peace talks among Ukraine, the US, and Russia. Vladimir Putin wants this entire rust belt region, which consists of the provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk. In the military campaigns of 2014–2015 and 2022, Russia took 99 percent of Luhansk, and it now occupies about 75 percent of Donetsk. Taking the rest is Putin's "minimum plan," said Major Viacheslav Shutenko, the commander of the Legion North drone battalion of Ukraine's 44th Mechanized Brigade, as he showed

me the massive fortifications of razor wire, anti-infantry wire, and anti-tank ditches and berms that snake as far as the eye can see around Kramatorsk and Sloviansk. Putin desperately needs an achievement to show off to Russians, he said. After all, in the time it took the Soviet Union to recover from its initial defeats by the Germans in World War II and its men to raise their flag above the Reichstag in Berlin, Putin's troops have failed to retake even little Kramatorsk.

Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, has resisted ceding this territory to Russia, and there has been vague talk of turning it into a "free economic zone" and of "demilitarization." Since the biggest local industries have always been mining and old-fashioned heavy manufacturing, it is hard from here to see why anyone would invest in the Donbas in the future, although clearly things look different from Mar-a-Lago. Yet it is obvious why handing it over to the Russians or demilitarizing it without rock-solid security guarantees is a trap. Major Shutenko and I stood on the crest of a hill from which, beyond this so-called fortress belt, Ukraine is as flat as a pancake for more than six hundred miles, all the way to the Polish border. The Dnieper, which flows from the north down to the Black Sea, divides all of Ukraine, including Kyiv, into two parts and is the only natural barrier after these soft, rolling hills.

No one I have met in Ukraine believes that a cease-fire will come this year or would be anything other than a limited truce, as the one in 2015 was, rather than part of a full peace deal. If Ukraine were forced to accept a truce that included handing over to Russia the last bit of the Donbas that Ukraine controls, which is what the US has been reported to have demanded, it would be akin to Czechoslovakia being forced by France and Britain to hand over the Sudetenland to Germany in 1938, despite the fortifications it had built in those border areas. As a result the Czechoslovaks could not defend themselves when Hitler proceeded to take over the rest of the country a few months later. Yevhen Hlibovytsky, the director of the Frontier Institute, says, "Russia won't want a deal unless it becomes really vulnerable, and if it does, then Ukraine won't want one."

Hlibovytsky may be right, but Ukrainians are struggling to survive the slow erosion of their economic and military capabilities. They lack men, they lack energy, and their economy is being ground down. The Russians are advancing very slowly and tens of

thousands of them are dying in the process, but there is no evidence that Putin cares. Apart from the energy grid, says Stupak, the Russians are now choosing high-value targets like ballistic and cruise missile plants rather than trying to take out the hundreds of small drone companies. Although such matters are a tightly guarded secret, it is likely that the Russians have caused significant damage to military production, but thus far he has not heard of any disruption of drone and ammunition deliveries to the front. And the Russians have not broken Ukrainian morale.

At the front both Ukraine and Russia have been making up for flagging numbers by recruiting thousands of foreigners. Ukraine does this because its mobilization system is inefficient, nontransparent, and sometimes corrupt. Clips on social media of men being chased, caught, and bundled into vans by recruitment officers are a boon for Russian propaganda, and grabbing people off the streets who don't want to fight is a poor way of replenishing the ranks. Putin, meanwhile, does not want to risk unpopularity by drafting people rather than offering recruits huge salaries compared with what they can earn in their often far-flung and poor provincial regions. Today 30 percent of Russian troops captured or surrendering to Ukrainian forces may be Africans and other foreigners, depending on the location. On the Ukrainian side, one of the largest contingents of foreigners fighting for money is from Colombia.

Ugandans and other Africans, who are derided on social media as “disposables” by Russians filming them, are unlikely to change the course of the war, though North Koreans did help eject the Ukrainians from Russia's Kursk region, which they had briefly occupied in the summer of 2024. In any case, Putin now seems to be counting on the winter to swing things in his favor, just as it helped Russia defeat Hitler and Napoleon before him. But Ukrainians are used to winter combat, so the result may be different this time.

Just before the full-scale invasion started, Ukraine had 33.7 gigawatts of electrical generation capacity; in early January it had only fourteen gigawatts, and if the winter remains as exceptionally cold as it has been, it will need seventeen gigawatts to keep electricity flowing 24/7. Not all the loss of generation capacity can be attributed to destruction. The Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, which has been another point of dispute in the peace talks, used to provide six gigawatts and could again.

In the past Ukraine produced more electricity than it needed and even exported some. Now its surplus capacity has been destroyed, and its energy officials are scouring the rest of Europe and farther afield for replacement equipment. Russia, meanwhile, is changing its tactics. Previously it concentrated its attacks on large power plants that had relatively good air defenses. Now it has switched to targeting some 3,500 smaller substations that are the essential links between the power plants and consumers.

From the news coverage, one might have the impression that all Ukrainians are hapless victims freezing in the dark. In fact, extremely difficult though this winter is proving to be, four years into the war most Ukrainians have made some sort of preparations to help them get through power outages, especially if they have some money. Power companies publish schedules showing when districts will have power, which allows people to plan their days, although in mid-January this system broke down in Kyiv, and on January 20 many in the capital woke up to find that temporarily they had no water either.

Shops have generators, small industries have invested in battery capacity, and larger companies have installed their own electricity production facilities using natural gas. Everyone has power banks, rechargeable lamps are common, and those who can afford them have bought large portable batteries commonly known as EcoFlows, after the best-known brand. In apartment buildings residents have often joined together to buy generators to keep elevators and heat pumps working. Getting stuck on higher floors is a real problem for the elderly and families with small children.

“We are holding on, but people are getting angrier and angrier,” said Valentina, a kindergarten teacher I met, along with her five-year-old daughter, as she was charging her phone and power banks in a well-heated orange tent erected by the emergency services in Rusanivka, a neighborhood of Kyiv. In the next tent I met a couple of cheerful pensioners who told me it was only 13 degrees Celsius (around 55 degrees Fahrenheit) in their apartments. When I asked why there were not many people in the tents trying to keep warm, they said it was not necessary because everyone in the area had gas stoves and if you kept them on then you could at least keep your kitchen warm. Ukrainians might be resilient, but attacks on the energy system and other targets are harming the economy. According to Andrii Dligach, who heads a coalition of business

associations, attacks and power outages shaved 0.6 percent off Ukraine's GDP in the last quarter of 2025. When sirens sound in the center of Kyiv, for example, McDonald's loses business, as does the Globus Mall next door, because its scores of shops and cafés close. Many other shops and restaurants stay open, though. The McDonald's at the Lukianivska metro station opposite the Artem defense complex, which has been targeted several times, has installed shatterproof windows. The plate glass windows of the metro, long since blown out, have just been boarded up. Dmytro, the owner of a chain of shoe shops, said that all his colleagues agree that the last few months have been the hardest since the full-scale invasion began: "When it is cold at home and when you have no power, you are just not in the mood to go shopping."

Some are also not in the mood to stay in the country. Dmytro said that in the last few weeks two of his shop assistants had decided to leave. One was going because her entire family was already abroad, and another was taking her twenty-two-year-old son out of Ukraine. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion men age eighteen to sixty have not been allowed to travel abroad without an exemption. In August the lower limit was changed to twenty-three. Men can be mobilized at the age of twenty-five. While I was writing this in Lviv, in Ukraine's west, I was asked to give a talk to journalism students at the city's Ukrainian Catholic University. Journalism courses have always attracted more girls than boys there, I was told, but among the twenty students in the room, there was not a single boy. The last few had left when the travel age limit changed. Tens of thousands of young men are estimated to have gone since August.

An opinion poll published at the end of January found that 65 percent of Ukrainians were willing "to endure the war" for "as long as it takes." But Ukraine cannot fight alone. The US is no longer supplying much equipment directly; instead it is selling it to NATO countries, which then pass it on to Ukraine. "The war costs us nothing," boasted Donald Trump in an interview with *The New York Times* in early January. "We make money with the war now." What the US does continue to supply, though, is satellite military intelligence. It is crucial for the guidance of Ukraine's deep-strike drones, which are inflicting heavy damage on Russia's oil installations.

Still, Ukraine could become collateral damage from utterly unrelated events. On January 9 Trump provoked the worst crisis in transatlantic relations in our time by

insisting that if the US could not acquire Greenland “the easy way,” it would have to get it “the hard way.” On January 21 he said he would not use force, but his demands helped accelerate the loss of the Europeans’ trust in the US as an ally. In the preceding weeks Britain and France thought they had received assurances from Washington that it would participate in security guarantees for Ukraine in the event of a cease-fire, though it would not send troops. Kurkov remarked of Trump that “nobody believes he is willing to do anything” about Ukraine because he was trying to “copycat [Putin] by going into Venezuela and with his desire to take over Greenland.”

After the Greenland crisis erupted, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said, “The European leaders will come around.... What would happen in Ukraine if the US pulled its support out? The whole thing would collapse.” In fact, Ukraine would probably not collapse, but defending it and shoring up its economy, military, and morale would certainly become harder, and anti-Western sentiment there would grow if defeats were ascribed to a stab in the back by the US and weak Europeans.

As the Arctic crisis unfolded, the glee in the Russian press about Trump’s demands and the damage done to NATO could hardly be contained. But Hlibovytsky said that Ukrainians do not have the luxury of worrying about all that: “We accept these things the same way we accept the weather.” Then he cautioned:

There is an error in the calculus of many Western politicians that the alternative to not helping Ukraine is the status quo and that if they don’t help then everything stays the same. No, it doesn’t. If they don’t help Ukraine, the hidden cost that they will have to face is so tremendous that if their societies would be aware of that cost, they would probably wish that the governments of the Western countries did more.

Those hidden costs could include, for example, open Russian attacks on NATO countries such as the Baltics and Poland.

In gas stations across Ukraine you can buy the Ukrainian translation of former British prime minister Boris Johnson’s biography of Winston Churchill. It does not take much imagination to connect the historical dots. After the Czechoslovaks were betrayed in 1938, Churchill famously told Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, “You were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour and you will have war.”

When you stand on a hill in the Donbas it is very easy to see that, as Mark Twain is reputed to have said, history doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes.

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