

Ukrainian Evangelicals and the War

OLENA PANYCH*

The resilience of evangelical communities in Ukraine became evident during the full-scale war started with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as they actively engaged in networking and robust volunteer movements to provide aid and support to those affected by the warfare at the grassroots level. This article delves into the responses of evangelical ministers and believers to the traumatic circumstances arising from the war. The author emphasizes that the war experiences conveyed in the testimonies and narratives of evangelicals are deeply intertwined with their religious experiences and are framed to align with fundamental evangelical values. Confronting the challenges associated with life-threatening situations, irreparable losses, and bereavements, evangelicals interpret these experiences through the lens of their theologically grounded worldview.

Keywords: *Ukrainian Evangelicals, Russia's War on Ukraine, Traumatic Experience, Religion, Testimony.*

Introduction

This article aims to study the narratives developed by Ukrainian evangelicals¹ about their experiences as a result of the Russian invasion in

* Olena Panych, research fellow at the Institute for Slavic Studies at Technische Universität Dresden, Strehlenner Straße 24/301, 01069 Dresden, olen.panych@mailbox.tu-dresden.de

¹ The umbrella term “evangelicals” is used here to embrace representatives of Baptist, Pentecostal, Charismatic, and, with some reservations, Adventist communities. In order to categorize these confessions, Ukrainian scholars sometimes define them as “Late Protestant” (referring to “new-Protestant”) stressing their common origin from pietistic and revivalist movements of 18th and 19th centuries. See, for example: Viktoriya Liubaschenko, *Istoria protestantyzmu v Ukraini* [*The History of Protestantism in Ukraine*] (Lviv: Prosvisa, 1995); Anatolii Kolodnyi and Petro Yarotskyi (eds.), *Istoriia religii v Ukraini: u 10-ty tomakh. Tom 5. Protestantizm v Ukraini. Rannii protestantizm. Piznii protestantizm. Baptysm* [*History of religion in Ukraine in 10 volumes. Volume 5. Protestantism in Ukraine. Early Protestantism, Late Protestantism. Baptism*] (Kyiv: Svit Znan', 2002); idem, *Istoriia religii v Ukraini: u 10-ty tomakh. Tom 6. Piznii protestantyzm v Ukraini. Piatydesiatnyky, adventysty, Svidky Yehovy* [*History of religion in Ukraine in 10 volumes. Volume 6. Late Protestantism in Ukraine: Pentecostals, Adventists, Jehovah Witnesses*] (Kyiv-Drogobych: Kolo, 2008). However, the term “Late Protestant” proves improper for many people of confessional background. Neither is it popular among Western scholars who prefer using “evangelical” at least toward those faith communities who are prone to self-identify this way. More profound discussion on the terminological use within the Ukrainian academic milieu is still to come.

February 2022. The study is based on an examination of fifteen testimonies that were disseminated between March and October 2022 through various Christian YouTube channels. These testimonies are presented in two primary formats: as interviews conducted by journalists within dedicated studios, or as recorded segments of church services in which they are integrated as a component of the worship proceedings. Importantly, it should be noted that none of these testimonies contain confidential information, and the identities of their respective authors (hereafter I introduce them as “informants”) are disclosed within the video records.

The authors of these testimonies represent a diverse group, comprising eight individuals from the Pentecostal tradition², four from the Evangelical Baptist tradition,³ two from the Seventh-day

² *Svidchennia Bozhoyi slavy ta chudes pislia misyatsya v okupatsii – Tserkva: Dobra Novyna* [Testimonies of God's glory and miracles after a month under occupation – Church: Good News], published April 10, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g67qsuwacS4>, accessed February 1, 2023; Bucha. *Vyzhyty v okupatsii. Istoriya Sergiya Voznyuka* [To survive in occupation. A story of Serhiy Vozniuk], published May 5, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Hh0ElyfIXg>, accessed February 2, 2023; *Yim grozyv rozstril | Svidchennia Kostyuk* [Threatened by execution | Testimonies Kostiuk], published May 14, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfU4YhN9W7o>, accessed February 2, 2023; Oleksandr Oliynyk, *Chudes pod chas viyny | Shcho perezhyvayut' kharkiviany* [Miracles in the times of war | What people in Kharkiv are experiencing], published May 10, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prMfZIKvUQY>, accessed February 2, 2023; *Kolony vorozhoi tekhniki ta masovi obstrily. Istoriya Bashtanky* [Columns of enemy's vehicles and mass shelling. A story of Bashtanka], published July 2, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18Oq1IMczXk>, accessed February 3, 2023; *Bilya yogo domu skynuly bombu ta zryvalys' snaryady | Svidchennia mariupol'sya* [A bomb fell and shells exploded near his house. | A testimony of a man from Mariupol], published May 26, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zS96tx0Su0>, accessed February 3, 2023; Oleksandr Rudenko, *Pravda pro Donbas | Volonterstvo ta okupatsiya* [The truth about Donbas | Volunteering and occupation], published June 25, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnzL5bN8G20>, accessed February 3, 2023; *Svidchennia z Mariupolya | Ya navchyvsya tsinuvaty prosti rechi* [A testimony from Mariupol | I have learned to appreciate simple things], published May 18, 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3oQPemr1Q>, accessed February 4, 2022,

³ *Intervyu s pastorem iz Mariupolya Vasisyem Ivanovichem Semenovym* [An interview with pastor from Mariupol Vasily Semenov], published May 14, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwYhwN01_IL, accessed January 31, 2023; *Testimony of a pastor who survived torture from Russian invaders*, published Oct. 16, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyRQVRxDPjM>, accessed January 31, 2023; Aleksandr Savchenko: *o poezii, pobege iz Mariupolya i rusko-ukrainskikh otnosheniyakh* [About poetry, flight from Mariupol and Russian-Ukrainian relations], published September 24, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVikYGPA0Jk>, accessed February 01, 2023; *G. Mariupol'. Svidetel'stvo sluzhytelia Maksimenko Sergeya Vladimirovicha MSTsEKHB* [The city of

Adventist⁴ tradition, and one affiliated with a charismatic Church.⁵ Six of the informants were residing in Mariupol at the onset of the Russian invasion, and they subsequently evacuated the city within the initial two or three weeks of the Russian offensive. Among these evacuees, two sought refuge in safer regions within Ukraine, while others relocated to Crimea, Germany, the United States, and Russia. Additionally, there were authors who resided in various locations such as Bucha, Irpin', Kharkiv, Kherson, Balakliya (Luhansk region), Borodianka (Mykolaiv region). The majority of the testimonies are provided by men, particularly pastors and church ministers, individually. However, a few were given by either women or groups of believers, with both men and women participating in these collective accounts. Furthermore, in twelve out of fifteen cases, the informants conveyed their stories in Russian, while in three instances, they used Ukrainian.

These testimonies serve as a poignant reflection of the traumatic experience endured by evangelical believers who managed to survive extensive bombardments and the occupations of their cities by invading forces during the initial period of the full-scale war. The core emphasis of this article centers on the narratives of personal accounts offered by each informant, as well as the manner in which these narratives are constructed and tailored to engage with their intended audience. This research is based primarily on the approach of Margaret R. Somers, who argues that narratives play a fundamental role in shaping one's sense of identity.⁶ "When we narrate, we simultaneously live narratives: we come to know, understand and make sense of our social world," as astutely noted by

Mariupol. A testimony of a MUCECB servant Sergey Maksymenko], published March 29, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKgXlEdl7Ik>, accessed February 7, 2023.

⁴ *Zhyttia pid okupatsiyeiu, m. Bucha | Na perekhresty [A life under occupation, the town of Bucha | At the crossroad]*, published April 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SMzRvit5MI>, accessed February 4, 2023; Wilhelm Klassen, *Svidetel'stva brata iz Ukrainy [Testimonies of a brother from Ukraine]* UA – (Gebetshaus Minded), published May 24, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3EN1EHThC0>, accessed February 7, 2023.

⁵ *Svidetel'stvo Diany iz Mariupolya [A testimony of Diana from Mariupol]*, published April 11, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hzcS6TO1nk>, accessed February 4, 2023.

⁶ Margareta R. Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (1994): 605-49.

Maija Penttilä.⁷ It is also an essential observation posited by Shahnazarian and Ziemer that the analysis of the war narratives encompasses not only the conveyance of information, but also constitute performative constructions, wherein “individuals express themselves in order to affirm and reproduce the values with their social performance.”⁸ In this regard, the testimonies of Ukrainian evangelicals can be perceived as instances of social performance, both in terms of their content as well as the circumstances surrounding their dissemination. When constructing these testimonies shortly after their exposure to traumatic events, informants do not appear to be overwhelmed by emotions. Their personal narratives of the war align consistently with the fundamental cultural and moral expectations of their communities. Consequently, these oral performances have gained widespread exposure through public channels and are widely consumed by fellow co-religionists, evidently producing an encouraging and cohesive effect within their communities.

The authors of the testimonies expound upon their traumatic experiences through the lens of their core religious principles, encompassing concepts such as “God,” “faith,” “church,” “family,” “ministry,” and “devotion.” Their endeavor involves elucidating their roles during the war-time, comprehending the responsibilities they were tasked with in dire circumstances, and addressing profound existential queries, such as “Why did these events befall us?” or “How did we succeed to survive amidst the ubiquitous loss of life?” In some cases, the interviewers, who shared the same religious affiliations as the informants, guided the discussions with targeted questions and subsequently engaged in an examination of how the recounted experiences align with confessional and Biblical directives. For instance, one of the questions openly posed was, “Should we, indeed, forgive our enemies in the case of such a war?” The religious and, furthermore, denominational background of the respondents facilitated their ability to respond to such inquiries in a manner that was somewhat predictable, thereby enhancing the didactic nature of their narratives.

The testimonies place particular emphasis on the activism exhibited by believers, highlighting their emotional, spiritual, and physical

⁷ Maija Tuuli Penttilä, “Post-Soviet Believer in Migration. Constructing Memory-Based and Space-Bounded Identity Narratives in Finland”, *Journal of Religion in Europe* (2022): 3-4, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18748929-bja10066>

⁸ See: Nona Shahnazarian and Ulrike Ziemer, “Young Soldier’s Tales of War in Nagorno-Karabakh”, *Europa-Asia Studies* 64, no. 9 (November 2012): 1670.

engagement in the events. These accounts illuminate how religious identity serves as framework, enabling individuals to make decisions and seek answers to existential questions arising from the conditions of war. It is noteworthy that the specific confessional background of informants plays a significant role in this context. Consequently, interviews with Pentecostal believers have a distinct objective: to illustrate, through narratives of survival during times of war, that ‘God performs miracles’ by rescuing His faithful in the moments of mortal threats. This thematic element is less conspicuous in the testimonies provided by the representatives of other evangelical denominations. In general, though, the stories are infused with profound belief in the capacity of people’s faith, prayers, self-sacrifice, and mutual assistance to exert a meaningful impact in critical circumstances. The authors invoke God as the ultimate authority, seeking deliverance, protection, and support, while also endeavoring to make sense of trauma induced by the ravages of war.

Although the testimonies are rich in informative details, they notably omit certain elements. In particular, they do not contain explicit political opinions or judgements, nor do they blame the authorities or make accusations against the invading forces. It is important to note, however, that the actual political loyalties of the respondents may be implicitly evident. It should be mentioned that three respondents from Mariupol, who fled to Russia, Crimea and Belarus while providing their testimonies, subtly reflect a loyalty to Russia, although they refrain from directly articulating this in their narratives. This disposition can be understood as a reflection of their addressing pro-Russian audiences with presumed shared opinions and political affiliations. Similar considerations apply to respondents speaking on behalf of their co-believers in Ukraine. They do not find it necessary to overtly declare their political perspectives, as they share common values with their audience. Thus, their deliberate silence on political matters reflects a “shared understanding, which does not necessarily have to be voiced.”⁹

On the other hand, it appears that these narratives strive to place God at the center of their accounts, possibly in lieu of a focus of motherland. In this context, we return to the prominent of memory narratives as “culturally canonical linguistic forms that modulate the organisation

⁹ Robyn Fivush, “Speaking silence: The social construction of silence in autobiographical and cultural narratives,” *Memory* 18, no. 2 (2010): 89.

of experiences events.”¹⁰ When constructing their narratives about the war, the informants aim to fulfil the fundamental expectations of their faith communities concerning the ‘Christian witness’ as a specific genre of evangelical storytelling. This genre revolves around the narrative on *how God saves His chosen people by delivering them from spiritual or physical death*. This message is considered more important to convey to a broader audience than discussions of worldly conflicts and mundane politics. As we consistently grapple with memory, which is “invariably and inevitably selective,”¹¹ in the case of Ukrainian evangelicals, we observe how certain aspects directly related to the war are intentionally suppressed not to erase them from memory but rather to cast them in the shadow of the *more important* elements deemed worthy of remembrance. I will proceed to analyse these elements in greater detail in the subsequent sections of the article.

Evangelicals in Ukraine before and shortly after the Russian invasion

Based on sociological research, evangelicals of various denominations constitute approximately two percent of Ukraine’s population among those who self-identify as “religious believers”.¹² They exhibit an essential characteristic of profound reverence for the Bible, typically approaching it with a literal interpretation, and they hold their local churches in high regard as the pillars of their community life.¹³ Throughout their history of over a century in Ukraine, evangelicals have experienced fluctuating periods marked with repression and forced unification¹⁴ inflicted by

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger, “Unpacking the Unspoken: Silence in Collective Memory and Forgetting”, *Social Forces* 88, no. 3 (2010): 1107.

¹² See: “*Specifics of religious and church self-determination of citizens of Ukraine: Trends 2000-2021. Information Materials. Razumkov centre*. Kyiv, 2021,” https://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2021_Religiya_eng.pdf, accessed February 8, 2023.

¹³ This observation also holds true for Seventh-Day Adventists, who are typically not categorizes as being of evangelical origin, although certain aspects of their communal life and tradition bear resemblance to the evangelical movement in Ukraine.

¹⁴ For a long time, Pentecostals in the USSR were allowed to exist only as a part of the state-prescribed union, called the “Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists”. See: Sergey N. Savinskiy, *Istoriia evangel'skih khristian-baptistov Ukrainy, Rossii, Belorussii. V 2 t. St. Petersburg: Biblia dia vsiekh, 2001* [*The History of Evangelical Christians-Baptists of Ukraine, Russia and Belorussia. In 2 vol.*] (St. Petersburg: Bible for all, 2001); Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals since World War II. Kitchener* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1981).

Russian tsarist and communist regimes before they gained freedom and opportunities for institutional growth following the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁵ In three decades since Ukraine gained independence, the evangelicals have established numerous associations, missionary societies, biblical schools, and seminaries, along with a network of over 8700 vibrant local churches.¹⁶ Leaders of prominent evangelical associations enjoyed membership in the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations, an ecumenical alliance dedicated to addressing various social issues.¹⁷ Due to their frequently proactive and leadership-oriented disposition, evangelicals have garnered the respect of the predominantly Orthodox society. This has been advantageous for them within the social context that Jose Casanova aptly characterizes as a “religious market” in Ukraine.¹⁸

The noticeable development of Ukrainian evangelicals contributing to global evangelism has been explored in research conducted by Catherine Wanner.¹⁹ A significant number of evangelical émigrés have formed numerous diasporas, particularly in the USA and Germany. The increasing global contacts of Ukrainian evangelicals were strengthened too by their stable cooperation with fellow believers in Russia and other countries of the post-Soviet space, at least until 2014 when Russia’s hybrid war against Ukraine began. Throughout the country, except its Western parts, evangelicals maintained the Russian language of their

¹⁵ Yurii Reshetnikov, Sergey Viktorovich Sannikov, *Ogliad istorii Yevangel'sko-baptists'kogo bratstva v Ukraini* [Overview of history of Evangelical Baptist Brotherhood in Ukraine] (Odesa: Bogomysliye, 2000).

¹⁶ The list of religious denominations in Ukraine can be found on the official website of the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of Conscience. See: <https://dess.gov.ua/statistics-rel/>, accessed February 12, 2023.

¹⁷ *Vseukrains'ka Rada tserkov i religiynykh organizatsiy. Zbirnyk dokumentiv* [All-Ukrainian Council of churches and religious organisations. Collection of documents], (Kyiv: Media svit, 2021).

¹⁸ José Casanova, “Between Nation and Civil Society: Ethnolinguistic and Religious Pluralism in Independent Ukraine”, in *Democratic Civility: The History and Cross-Cultural Possibility of a Modern Political Ideal*, ed. Robert W. Hefner, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 203-28. See also: Tymofii Brik and Stanislav Korolkov, “Religious Markets in Ukraine: Post-communist Revivals and New Directions”, in *Ukraine in transformation. From Soviet Republic to European Society*, eds. Alberto Viera-Ramos, Tetiana Liubyva and Evgenii Golovakha (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 145-66. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24978-6>.

¹⁹ Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

worship services and rarely advocated for active citizenship as the desirable disposition for their community members.

The war initiated by Russia in Ukraine has disrupted the familiar way of life and thinking of Ukrainian evangelicals. Their longstanding connections with Russian co-believers were jeopardized due to differences in the moral assessment of the aggression. Certain evangelical organizations reached out to their Russian counterparts, who were found to be openly supporting the invasion. Thus, in July 2022, the executive body of the Ukrainian Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith issued a statement condemning the actions of the leader of the Russian United Association of Christians of Evangelical Faith, Sergei Ryakhovskiy, and indicating that he

Repeatedly, publicly intruded into the internal affairs of Ukraine, expressed ill-founded critics of the inter-confessional dialogue and peaceful coexistence of confessions in Ukraine..., [and] with his colleagues from “religious guild” endorsed Russian Federation’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine.²⁰

A prominent Evangelical Baptist intellectual, born in the Donetsk region, Mykhaylo Cherenkov, has articulated his distress over the animosity displayed by certain Russian co-believers towards Ukraine in the following manner:

... we have learned that the most horrific weapon for mass destruction is propaganda. We had experienced deep disappointment in those relatives, friends, brothers and sisters in faith who observed what is happening with entire calmness and even justified this with references to Russian media. It seemed that now all the adepts of “the Russian world” should be enlightened, and protest or cry of the shame and horror... But the stubbornness in the lie proved to be unshakeable... We faced the abominable strength of untruth. It infected the minds and hearts of people with unprecedented effectiveness. One could admit that people of faith must have immunity towards propaganda, obtain special sensitivity to distinguishing between the good and the evil, and some sort of moral and spiritual compass must be working

²⁰ Statement of UACEF committee regarding the activity of Sergei Ryakhovskiy, <https://www.chve.org.ua/zayava-uchve-pro-diyalnist-s-ryahovskogo/>, accessed January 28, 2023.

in them. Alas, it appeared that one can read the Bible and at the same time approve of the most cruel and dishonest war...²¹

It was not that Russian “brothers in faith” entirely withheld their support for the Ukrainians in the midst of war. However, they were expected to openly denounce Russian military policy, which was hardly feasible at a time when such opposition could incur political repression from the Russian government. There were very few Russian voices raised against the war, and they came across as feeble and insincere because they have never identified the aggressors by their actual names.²² In this context, the disappointment of Ukrainian “brothers and sisters” gave rise to some of the most profound emotions, eroding their sense of belonging to the united “Euro-Asian” evangelical community.

Effects of the full-scale war

Extensive military combat and the short or protracted occupation by invading forces in certain Ukrainian regions have resulted in widespread displacement, massive ruining of residential houses and physical infrastructure, and loss of life. Evangelical communities located in close proximity to the active warzones have sustained significant damage and, in some cases, were scattered. Over the first year of the conflict, more than thirty prayer houses were completely destroyed, with the majority of these losses occurring in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as in the suburban areas of Kyiv.²³

Mykola Romaniuk, the head of the Kyiv Regional Union of Evangelical Baptists, stated that 30 out of the Union’s 186 local churches

²¹ Mykhaylo Cherenkov, “Tserkov’ na voyne” [“Church in the War”], *Bogomysliye*, no. 32 (2022): 205.

²² More on the topic can be found in two recent investigations: Nadiezhda Beliakova, Vera Kliuyeva, *Rossiyskiye yevangeliki v lovushke nevoyny: novaya i staraya strategiya vyzhyvaniya rossiyskikh yevangelikov v sovremennykh usloviyakh* [Russian evangelicals in the trap of non-the-war: new and old strategy of survival of Russian evangelicals in contemporary conditions]. <https://shaltnotkill.info/rossijskie-evangeliki-v-lovushke-nevoyny-novaya-staraya-strategiya-vyzhivaniya-rossijskikh-evangelikov-v-sovremennykh-usloviyah/>, published February 10, 2023, accessed February 10, 2023; Andreas Patz, *Radikalizatsiya vzaimootnosheniy khristian na primerie protivostoyaniya Rossii i Ukrainy*, [Radicalization of relations between the Christians: the case of confrontation between Russia and Ukraine], *Bogomysliye*, no. 32 (2, 2022): 118-45.

²³ Data retrieved from the official website of the State service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of conscience: <https://dess.gov.ua/ussia-ruined-at-least-307-religious-sites-eng/>, accessed February 12, 2023.

were affected by the occupation of Russian troops, and, as a result, some of them were fully displaced.²⁴ Moreover, he mentioned that about thirty pastors rapidly fled abroad during the first months of the war, causing a leadership crisis in some local congregations.²⁵ Notably, Romaniuk later issued a video address, emphasizing that the decision made by church ministers to leave Ukraine during wartime was a matter of personal safety and, as such, should not be subject to judgment or condemnation. Nevertheless, he specified that pastors, who had vacated their positions, thereby leaving their congregations devoid of spiritual leadership and guidance, would not be accepted or authorized for ministerial roles should they opt to return.²⁶

Other religious denominations also suffered significant losses due to the war. For instance, according to statistics provided by the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, approximately 8,000 of their believers fled abroad, constituting roughly 23% of the entire Adventist community in Ukraine.²⁷

Nevertheless, the outbreak of the war was followed by an unprecedented surge in volunteering activities and assistance provided by evangelical believers to those in need. Numerous churches, particularly located in areas under Ukrainian government control, rapidly transformed into shelters for the displaced and affected by the war. It is challenging to calculate the precise amount of humanitarian aid distributed by evangelical centres and associations during the initial months of the war, but their

²⁴ This regional union consists of 10 459 members, according to the official website of the All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, <https://www.baptyst.com/oblasni-presvitery/>, accessed January 28, 2023.

²⁵ *Pidsumky roku i rozvytok sluzhinnia u Obyednanni tserkov Kyjeva ta oblasti. Intervyu z golovoyu Obyednannia evangel's'kykh khrystyian-baptystiv Kyjeva ta Kyjiv's'koyi oblasti pastorom Mykoloyu Romaniukom* [Annual results and the development of ministries in the Union of churches of Kyiv and Kyiv region. An interview with the head of the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists at Kyiv and Kyiv region Mykola Romaniuk], <https://www.baptyst.com/pidsumky-roku-i-rozvytok-sluzhinnya-ob-yednannya-tserkov-kyjeva-i-oblasti/>, accessed February 1, 2023.

²⁶ *Pastoram, yaki zalyshyly tserkvy – zvernennia Mykoly Romanyuka* [To pastors who have left their churches – address by Mykola Romanyuk], published September 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6u4MDo6RPs>, accessed October 16, 2023.

²⁷ *Vtraty ukrayins'kogo adventyzmu pid chas rosiys'kogo vtorgnennia* [Losses of Ukrainian Adventists in the times of the Russian invasion], <https://adventist.ua/news/ukraine/vtraty-ukrainskoho-adventyzmu-pid-chas-rosiiskoho-vtorhnennia/>, accessed February 4, 2023. The total number of Adventists in Ukraine before full-scale war consisted of 40 802 persons.

efforts reached a significant scale. The Kyiv Regional Union of Evangelical Baptists alone distributed more than twenty tons of humanitarian aid provided by a UN program.²⁸ Evangelical humanitarian missions were typically conducted in collaboration with international and foreign organisations, yet they also showcased the capabilities of local communities in terms of effective management and activism.²⁹ The Evangelicals were among the most active contributors to such aid, although, in generally all major Ukrainian religious denominations participated in the process.³⁰ Based on numerous observations, it can be noted that evangelicals primarily operated within their own faith community and had limited co-operation with other religious groups.

The evangelical community's role in offering resilience during crucial junctures is notably significant. Their ability to provide support not only to their own members but also to the broader population made them particularly appealing to locals. As such, there is a compelling scholarly impetus to examine how evangelicals, having faced the profound impact of war, contextualize their experiences within their religious framework. A valuable avenue for gaining insights into this phenomenon is through the analysis of the video testimonies that they documented and disseminated via dedicated channels.

Facing the Mortal Threat

While examining the testimonies, it is evident that we are engaging with the narratives shaped after the events they depict. However, given the apparent freshness of memories, there is a noticeable emphasis from informants on the moments that showcase their internal and external mobilization during the initial weeks or months of the war. This emphasis hints at what bolstered their resilience when faced with the palpable threat of death. It is clear that they leaned on divine intervention and activated support from their faith community in these trying times. A salient sentiment expressed across these testimonies is feeling

²⁸ Pidsumky roku [Annual results].

²⁹ Mark R. Elliott, "Best Practices in Protestant Aid for Ukrainian Refugees: 2022", *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* XLII, no. 7 (September 2022,): 39-76.

³⁰ Tetiana Kalenychenko and Denis Brylov, "Whoever saves one life saves the world entire: Ukrainian religious denominations during the war," *Bulletin de l'Observatoire international du religieux*, no. 37 (Mai 2022), <https://obsreligion.cnrs.fr/bulletin/whoever-saves-one-life-saves-the-world-entire-ukrainian-religious-denominations-during-the-war-english-version/>, accessed February 12, 2023.

of being unprepared for this war. The Pastor of the Pentecostal church from Kharkiv, Oleksandr Oliynyk, captured this sentiment by saying: “None of us was getting ready for that... But in this time God taught us absolute trust”.³¹ Oleksander Savchenko, the pastor of a Baptist church from Mariupol, admits that the people of his city were not surprised by the shelling, they nevertheless expected military operations would stop as swiftly as they had in 2014.³²

As noted by many informants, the war heightened the importance of prayer houses and church facilities as refuge points. Evangelical churches became spaces that locals anticipated would offer safety. Both church members and non-believers alike gravitated towards these locations, hoping for protection from excessive bombardments. For example, the prayer house in Bashtanka, Mykolayiv should be region, accommodated up to 800 internally displaced persons each night during the early weeks of the war. Reflecting on this influx, pastor Oleksander Dushkevych recalled:

We prayed: “Lord, it’s not the walls of this building that matter to you, neither do you care about all the refurbishments, finished and unfinished constructions; but please, protect these people! Save their souls and their lives.” And indeed, God kept them safe.³³

Some other establishments linked to evangelical communities played the same roles. Thus, the Ukrainian Institute of Humanities in Bucha associated with the Adventist community, sheltered around 190 people when the town was occupied. Commenting on this, pastor Vyacheslav observed: “We saw that God protected our entire campus, all of us, in his special way. And people saw that. That is why they referred to our team – some of them said directly to us – «you are angels»...”.³⁴

Prayer houses which had already established themselves as important components of local infrastructure emerged as central points for the distribution of humanitarian aid and the revitalization of volunteer movements. Despite the potential risk of these sites becoming targets for the invaders, church leaders deemed their preservation vital. The destruction of a prayer house was perceived by pastors as an ominous sign of their church’s potential demise. As articulated by Oleksander Rudenko, a pastor from Severodonetsk, “Our main aspiration was to safeguard the

³¹ Oliynyk, *Chudesia pid chas viyny* [Miracles in the times of war].

³² Savchenko: *o poezii* [About poetry].

³³ Kolony vorozhoi.

³⁴ *Zhyttia pid okupatsiyeiu* [A life under occupation].

church and continue our ministry in spite of warfare.”³⁵ A Baptist pastor from Mariupol Vasiliy Semenov recounted the burning of his local prayer house due to intensive shelling as the most heart-wrenching event of his life followed by dispersion of his congregation.³⁶

The testimonies outline the situations when evangelical ministers were thrust into roles where they were expected to exemplify courage, composure and leadership. Their success in embodying these qualities helped stave off panic among the others. Diana, affiliated with the Charismatic Church in Mariupol, emphasised her respect toward a local Baptist pastor emerged as a “true” and dedicated leader, choosing not to abandon his co-believers even when his church was completely destroyed or, as she expressed it, “was razed to the ground.”³⁷

Given the heightened expectation for strong leadership, people conferred trust upon evangelical ministers who volunteered during the war. Pastors, recognizing this unique opportunity, often took the initiative to preach and evangelize among locals. Group prayers, accompanied by Bible readings – hallmarks of evangelical worship services – became essential morale boosters during the times of uncertainty and danger. A vivid portrayal of the ambiance in the Mariupol during the initial weeks of the invasion is offered by Oleksander Savchenko:

...they began to destroy the houses of our brothers; they demolished the house of the pastor of the church in the Vostochny district. And the houses of other brothers... Torrents of shells came from artillery rocket systems – it is simple, 40 shells in one cartridge. A bit later, there were also Sizzlers³⁸ and other, more lethal weapons... Bombs were dropped from above. A helicopter hovered above, attempting to deploy a parachute assault... [We witnessed] people running with bundles of belongings. Everything around was ablaze. Fortunately, we reached our church promptly. A thought of being separated from God’s people filled us with dread... Additionally, we were in need of water, both for drinking and for other purposes, and in need of food. At first, the believers rushed in, hands and legs trembling, speaking with a noticeable stutter. However, after a while, they settle down,

³⁵ Rudenko, *Pravda pro Donbas* [*The truth about Donbas*].

³⁶ *Intervyu s pastorem* [*An interview with pastor*], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyRQVrxDPjM>, accessed January 31, 2023; Savchenko: *o poezii* [*About poetry*]; *G. Mariupol'* [*The city of Mariupol*].

³⁷ *Svidietiel'stvo Diany* [*A testimony of Diana*].

³⁸ Russian cruise missiles.

because they saw that we remained calm, composed, firmly trusting in God and prepared to face to eternity at any given moment...³⁹

In many instances, informants convey their profound conviction about the grave injustice of this war. Articulating their experiences, they express the desire for the invasion to end swiftly. They are also explicit about the notion of forgiving the “enemies,” a term they equate with soldiers of occupying army. They attempt to see the invaders as “sinful people” who are in need of “liberation” from aggressiveness and desire to kill.⁴⁰ Recounts of prayers for these “enemies” usually focus on prayers for their repentance and leaving the country they strive to occupy as soon as possible. In these narratives, Russian soldiers are depicted not as demonized figures but as human beings who, while posing a threat to locals, can still be swayed by dialog and persuasion.

An illustrative account showcasing this attitude was delivered by a Pentecostal woman, Anzhela Kostiuk, when she and her husband, Ruslan, were invited to share their story on the broadcasting channel “The Calling Voice” [*Holos shcho klyche*]. Notably, most of the testimony was provided by Anzhela herself, while Ruslan, present in the studio, spoke infrequently. Hence, this account particularly reflects a woman’s experience of the war although it also shed light on the experiences of the entire Kostiuks’ family. From their story, we gather that Ruslan and Anzhela resided in the village of Mykulychi, approximately fifteen kilometres from Bucha. They shared their home with their 15-year-old daughter and an immobile grandmother dependent on someone’s regular assistance. The scarcities of food, water, and electricity following the Russian invasion placed stress on Anzhela, who, in her traditional role, was responsible for feeding her family and maintaining the household. The presence of a disabled elderly relative complicated the evacuation of the family. Most distressingly, invading troops entered Mykulychi rapidly and positioned their military hardware in the vicinity.

The narrative pivotal moment recounts the unexpected visit of three Russian soldiers to the Kostiuks’ house. As Anzhela relayed, three young men (two in their 20s and one in his 30s) approached their home, demanding mobile phones to inspect any photos that might have been taken, potentially to inform Ukrainian officials about the troop movements.

³⁹ Savchenko: *o poezii* [About poetry].

⁴⁰ *Svidchennia Bozhoyi slavy* [Testimonies of God’s glory].

However, miscommunication ensued as Ruslan mistakenly believed that they were requesting photos and began taking pictures. This angered the soldiers. Recognizing the immediate threat posed by the armed men, Anzhela feared for her family's safety. She detailed the tense encounter as follows:

... They shouted: "Remove the photos"... I understood that a very terrible moment had come. I dropped to my knees and simply began to beg them. I say: "Guys, I'm asking you, go away from here. Just go away. Why should you die? We pray for you that God would give your repentance, that God open your eyes on what you're doing. You are someone's children too. And now you kill peaceful inhabitants here. You kill people." I say: "Do you understand that you are not welcomed here? You will die here for nothing. Why invite a curse upon yourselves? We are Christians; we pray [and] bless you for your repentance. May fear strike you, and you cast away your weapons, and return home alive..."⁴¹

In her affective speech, as it can be inferred from the story, Anzhela resorts on her moral righteousness and authority as a "Christian," while trying to admonish the soldiers. Using all the arguments she deemed relevant to the situation, she managed to change their minds, and the soldiers left Kostiuk's house without causing any harm to their family.

However, communication with the invading militants was, in fact, much riskier and did not always result in a harmless outcome for the evangelical faithful. Particularly notable is the testimony of Oleksander Salfetnikov, the pastor of the Evangelical Baptist Church of the town of Balakliya, who was abducted and tortured by Russian soldiers in May 2022. Balakliya is a small town in the southern part of the Kharkiv region. Before the Russian invasion, it had about 27,000 inhabitants. Balakliya had been under the occupation of Russian military forces for six months, from March to September 2022. During this period, many local people were arrested and tortured in special chambers.⁴² Pastor Salfetnikov was one of them. His story resembles that of four members of a Pentecostal church in Sloviansk, Donetsk region, who were kidnapped, tormented by Russian occupational administration executors in a torture chamber,

⁴¹ *Yim grozyv rozstril* [*Threatened by execution*].

⁴² Alexander Sarovic and Maxim Dondyuk, "The Torture Chambers of Balakliya", SPIEGEL International, 27.09.2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/russian-war-atrocities-in-ukraine-the-torture-chambers-of-balakliya-a-4b785964-a60b-430b-9ee8-f59f464a6c49>, accessed February 8, 2023.

and eventually assassinated in May 2014.⁴³ Unlike them, Salfetnikov managed to survive. He shared his story at the meeting of believers in Balakliya after the town was liberated.

Salfetnikov began his testimony by expressing gratitude to his co-believers who prayed for his release. He believes that being part of the church means assuring “God’s grace” for him. He credits this grace as well as the “prayers of many, many people” both in Ukraine and abroad, for his liberation. Reflecting on the early days of the occupation of Balakliya, Salfetnikov explains that he chose to stay to assist in evacuating church members and to deliver and distribute humanitarian aid. He concedes that their service provided not only a “practical” benefit but also a psychological comfort to the local people, many of whom were deeply distressed. Salfetnikov recounts the impunity of Russian soldiers who entered the town “as if it was their own home” and acted “like kings, like masters,” especially since there were no Ukrainian military or police units to challenge them. Emboldened by their weapons, they exhibited overwhelming dominance over the locals. In May, more than two months into the occupation, he and other “brothers” from his church were invited to a Christian conference in an area controlled by the Ukrainian government. However, Russian soldiers forbade him from leaving Balakliya. Shortly after, he was arrested. While in custody, Salfetnikov endured severe torture and interrogations. He describes this experience as follows:

The man who interrogated me, he utterly hated Evangelical Christians. Due to these people, he cannot breathe freely. And he said that “we will not give you a place here. You will have no life here.” Just like that. At the first interrogation, they beat me. Quite seriously. Quite seriously beat me... At the second interrogation, they labelled me an American agent and said that I am working for America. And they beat me again. When I already crawled on the floor, they kept beating

⁴³ Information about this case was published in official reports, e.g. here: *When God Becomes the Weapon. Persecution based on religious beliefs in the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine*. Report of CCL and IPHR. Brussels, Kyiv, April 2015. https://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/when_god_becomes_the_weapon_may2015.pdf, accessed February 8, 2023; *Religion Freedom at Gunpoint. Religiously motivated terror in the occupied territories of Easter Ukraine*. Report by the Institute for Religious Freedom, Kyiv, September 2018. <https://irf.in.ua/files/publications/2018.10.24-IRF-Report-ENG.pdf>, accessed February 8, 2022. More of remarkable investigations about the state of religion during the period preceding full-scale invasion are presented in the volume: Elizabeth Clark and Dmytro Vovk, eds., *Religion during the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict* (Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2020).

me. And they said that I will not go out. “We’ll finish you off”. You know, when I was in a cell, I prayed to God and said to Him: “O Lord!” You know, there are things that happen in our life unexpectedly. You were just taken around the corner and brought here. Maybe I cannot even understand... I can lose my head... So, when I was in my cell, I prayed to God. I said: “O Lord, lead me out of here. I want to go out alive. Has my life actually ended? I want to see my family again. I want to see the church again. I want to serve you more”. God was silent. The Heaven was silent... Oh God, you had pulled Peter out of prison. You saved Daniel. Help me as well, oh Lord. But God was silent... In the chamber for tortures there were five people. One of them interrogated me. Another one – a big one like a cupboard, with the police baton, he kept beating, and beating, and beating... [and then later] in the morning I began to understand that God has shown mercy to me. That I am not in a cell [anymore]. I am in a hospital. You know, some time passed. I have understood that God found some way, some method to bring me out of there. When I felt extremely unwell, for some reason they did not finish me off...⁴⁴

After being tortured, Salfetnikov spent two weeks in a hospital. Every morning, his wife visited him, bringing food and necessary belongings. When she was late, he feared she might have been arrested too. However, she remained free, even though she too was interrogated by Russian soldiers. Eventually Salfetnikov was released and allowed to leave the town. He only returned to Balakliya in the autumn of 2022.

As we can see in general, despite the testimonies revealing deep stress and confusion to the traumatic experiences they describe, their authors frame their personal stories within the broader narrative of Christian life and the challenges the faithful must endure during trying time. They seek to find meaning in their traumatic experiences and in the war itself. While they may implicitly or explicitly denounce the war as unjust, they still attempt to interpret events as being under God’s control.

The Evangelicals’ personal accounts of war survival emphasize the impact of suffering on individuals’ personalities and their understanding. Therefore, the stories contain characteristically moral insights, such as “in such circumstances, we change,”⁴⁵ “society becomes purer,”⁴⁶ and people

⁴⁴ Testimony of a pastor who survived torture from Russian invaders.

⁴⁵ *Bilya yogo domu* [A bomb fell].

⁴⁶ Oliynyk, *Chudeses* [Miracles].

“become more appreciative of the simple things,”⁴⁷ no longer taking them for granted as inalienable conveniences of daily life. In their testimonies the authors also noted that, they believe, during the war time, people become less driven by selfish pursuits and become more inclined to assist their neighbours. In this context, it can be inferred that the testimonies can serve as an essential edifying role for the evangelical faith community, as they embody experiences theologized within the framework of a religious worldview.

Conclusion

The testimonies of Ukrainian evangelicals regarding their firsthand experiences of Russia’s war on Ukraine demonstrate how evangelical theology and practices, when deeply embedded in the lives of individual believers, become foundations for resilience amidst the challenges of war. These narratives depict individuals transcending their routine existence, navigating a transitional state rife with trials and uncertainty. The crafting and sharing of these stories address a distinct need within the evangelical community for giving meaning to the personal experiences of war. These narratives, admittedly, resonate with the expectations of fellow believers at least to the extent that they reaffirm their core values.

The wartime experiences of Ukrainian evangelicals highlight the fragility of human nature and people’s collective unpreparedness for profound shocks. At the same time, the suddenness of war, coupled with a re-evaluation of potential threats and the origins of danger, led to a profound mental recalibration. The dismantling of the informants’ familiar lives, grievous losses, hunger, and ever-present fear were somewhat mitigated by their capacity to draw strength from their faith and from their religious communities. Originally intended for fellow believers, their testimonies seamlessly weave descriptions of events with the emotional and spiritual impact they had, all set within the context of religious faith and everyday evangelical theology. These accounts underscore the strength and adaptability of Ukrainian evangelicals, highlighting their ability to swiftly mobilize support through their established networks.

While many details within the testimonies vividly express the immediate emotions of their authors, a central theme emerges: finding meaning amidst the traumatic upheavals brought about by the war. Events

⁴⁷ *Svidchennya z Mariupolya [A testimony from Mariupol].*

such as loss of homes and property, facing hunger, fearing for one's life, enduring the pain of bereavements, and surviving tortures are usually understood by the believers as being part of a divine plan, overseen and controlled by God. Even though the war was unanticipated by evangelicals, their innate readiness to attribute the "locus of control"⁴⁸ to God's divine power sustained their psychological resilience.

⁴⁸ Pavlenko B.N., Wanner, "Osobiennosti psikhologii yevangel'skikh khristian-baptislov" ["Peculiarities of the psychology of Evangelical Christians- Baptists"], *Voprosy psikhologii* no.5 (2004): 72-86.