

UKRANIAN VETERANS' WAR WITHIN

Text by Jack Losh

HRUNIVKA, Ukraine – As gunfire crackled across the sweltering fields, Max Stodola looked on with blank dread: “It happened so fast – there was nothing I could do. I just thought, ‘See ya, guys, nice knowing you.’”

It was August 2014. The volunteer medic was planning to resume his university studies in a few days – just enough time to join Kiev’s push on Ilovaisk, a key railway junction held by Moscow-backed forces. As he approached the besieged town, a rocket-propelled grenade landed a few metres ahead. It skidded away and detonated near his friend, whose leg was sprayed with shrapnel.

In the coming weeks, Ukraine’s soldiers – encircled by Russian armour and infantry – went on to suffer a heavy defeat. By then, Stodola had returned to university in Odessa. There, he received news that another friend had died throwing himself onto a grenade to save his fellow soldiers.

Stodola, then 24, had already endured an earlier artillery strike near Donetsk, where he had treated two dozen casualties. He continued to volunteer on and off for another 16 months. Before he left for the war, the scruffy trainee dentist from Odessa was known as a joker – motor-mouthed but good-natured. When he returned, something had changed. He was angry and aggressive – “Just give me the tiniest excuse and I’d explode.” Nightmares stalked his sleep. Simple activities like grocery shopping put him on edge.

At home, Stodola was sluggish but struggled to switch off. He went to see a psychologist but stormed out halfway through the session. Worst of all, society appeared to have abandoned him. “It felt as if I was here, but not here. I was like a tree on the roadside, with cars just passing by.”

Nine months after he left the front lines for the last time, Stodola wakes at dawn and joins a group of men and women trooping silently down a muddy track. Forest dew catches the sunlight as they trek into the undergrowth past trenches that scar the earth. Some are dressed in khaki camouflage. They cross an empty road and enter a field bordered by dense woodland. There is no cover, but they’re not here to fight. The group forms a circle. With closed eyes, each combat-hardened veteran inhales slowly and – arms raised skyward like a meditating yogi – begins a new day of therapy.

Since the outbreak of war in 2014, tens of thousands of soldiers have left eastern Ukraine’s conflict zone to resume their civilian lives. Coming home is seldom easy. Trauma follows them off the battlefield. Yet, in Ukraine, mental health issues are taboo, and the state offers minimal support.

Even as hostilities continue in the east, Ukraine faces a major crisis away from the front lines: soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an affliction that can trigger abuse and addiction, anxiety and alienation. That’s why Ivona Kostyna helps run Po-bratymy – “Brothers in Arms” – a grassroots organization that helps veterans overcome trauma, build resilience and support their peers.

The 20-year-old and her team of psychologists offer a lifeline to former servicemen abandoned by a state crippled by corruption, providing intense psychotherapy sessions, sometimes deep in the backcountry. Struggling against social stigma and dwindling funds, groups like Kostyna's are at the vanguard of a nation's attempts to heal itself.

Before the morning rush hour, a minibus drives around Kiev to collect a group of veterans before heading east to the sanctuary. The long drive takes them down bumpy highways and past wheat fields toward Ukraine's northeastern frontier with Russia. Kostyna sits up front. She has a discerning look and speaks impeccable English, a result of having studied at international schools in Abuja and Tripoli, where her father worked as a Ukrainian diplomat.

Close to four years ago in Kiev's Maidan Square, Kostyna stood among tens of thousands of demonstrators to protest then President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to align with Russia over Europe. As clashes intensified, a sniper shot her friend. The death devastated Kostyna. She left home and hitchhiked to Lviv, more than 500 kilometres away, where she took a waitressing job. "I downgraded all the plans I had for life," she recalls.

Russian forces invaded Crimea and fomented rebellion in the Donbas region. But, in her newly adopted city, Kostyna felt removed from the violence. Several months later, in June 2014, friends on the front started sending messages that shook her awake. They were lacking supplies, they said, and needed help.

"Everyone has their time to do something and realize their potential," she says. "I'd become satisfied with doing nothing. I was judging others for not doing enough. In reality, I was judging myself." So, Kostyna – just 17 at the time – began helping the war effort, risking her life repeatedly to deliver food and clothes to understocked troops battling Russian-backed separatists.

As she spent more time with the soldiers, they opened up to her about their problems – divorce, substance abuse, suicides. Overstretched and under fire, the Ukrainian army was failing to deal with the psychological toll on its soldiers. Kostyna felt compelled to act, and teamed up with psychologists whom she knew through mutual contacts to devise a program to smooth the transition to civilian life.

The veterans gaze out at the wooded, rolling landscape as the minibus finally pulls up at its destination – Hrunivska Sich. Hidden behind a tall palisade in a forest clearing, the collection of tumbledown cottages is modelled on the fortified communities of Ukrainian Cossacks. Knotted trees hang heavy with apples and footpaths wind into the dark woods, where old trenches from World War II lie among the pines.

The rustic retreat is owned by Volodymyr Vakula, a boisterous Ukrainian in his early 40s. "The aim of this place is to gather people who think differently, who are the seeds of our nation, who seek to recreate the traditions of our ancestors," says Vakula, a former welder whose forebears were deported to Siberia in the late 20s by Joseph Stalin. "These soldiers are modern-day Cossack warriors. That's why they feel welcome here."

The group takes a bracing swim in the nearby River Psol, followed by a lunch of beef-and-buck-wheat stew, before they gather for the first therapy session. One man wears a T-shirt that reads: "Shit happens. That's why we invented combat medicine."

They sit in a circle around Artem Denysov, a soft-spoken military psychologist who smuggled body armour from Poland to Ukraine's broken army at the start of the war, and later co-founded Pobratymy.

"Veterans chatting one-to-one isn't always good," says Denysov, 30. "You drag each other down and down till you're in shit. We encourage a two-plus-one format. Someone is an anchor and keeps the others from going under."

Officials say around 500 Ukrainian veterans have committed suicide, with an estimated one-third of ex-servicemen suffering from PTSD. Some believe the suicide rate is actually much higher. A lack of reliable figures likely masks the extent of the crisis, Denysov says, citing muddled bureaucracy, poor communication between government ministries and a fear among servicemen to admit they need therapy. Soldiers, psychologists and rights groups criticize Ukraine's ministry of defence for failing to provide sufficient mental health support. A spokesman says psychologists are on hand in the war zone, but the reality is few seek help.

Pavlo Tikhonovski, a blond, fresh-faced veteran, joins the afternoon session. The 27-year-old enrolled with Pobratymy after serving in the east and successfully finished the four stages of the programme last year. But the journey was hard. In February 2015, the volunteer fighter took part in the bloody advance on the strategic village of Shyrokyne. A mortar round landed near him, killing a fellow fighter. Shrapnel shattered Tikhonovski's foot, tore into his back and pierced his intestines.

There were invisible wounds, too. For months, he lay in hospital, overwhelmed by depression and a sense of helplessness. "I was worried I'd never have a normal life again. I was traumatized but no one in the hospital knew what to say."

Next to him sits Andriy Ilchenko – a portly, ebullient chain-smoker in his late thirties who enlisted with the Ukrainian army in early 2015. The first weeks after he returned home, in April 2016, were tough, says the married father-of-two. "I was in a reptile state of mind, living only from action to reaction. I slept nonstop. Physically, I was at home but, mentally, I was still at war."

Ukraine has a troubled relationship with the past. Official readings of history tend to be naive and simplistic, brushing Nazi collaboration under the carpet, for example. The country is marked by widespread resistance to acknowledging scars left by wartime persecution and to dealing with mental health problems more generally.

A macho culture promotes this shame, as does the legacy of the USSR. Soviet dissidents were imprisoned in psychiatric facilities, thus linking mental health problems with transgression. Common perceptions of soldiers are similarly confused. "Those fighting in the east are celebrated as heroes," says Kostyura. "When they come home, they're outcasts. People just presume they're dangerous alcoholics."

Kostyna compares trauma to a broken arm. "If you don't see a doctor, it'll keep hurting and prevent you from moving forward. If you do see one, they can fix it and put you in the right direction. Occasionally it'll hurt but, in the end, the bone will be stronger than ever." Left untreated, trauma poisons soldiers' attempts to reconnect with their lives.

“War split my life in half,” Ihor Kholodylo, a 52-year-old medic who joined Pobratymy after enduring intense artillery attacks, tells me during a break for tea and cookies.

“Whenever soldiers came back from leave, they should have been relaxed and full of energy. Instead, they were saying, ‘Home was awful, I was constantly arguing with my family and friends.’ We had to do something.”

Kholodylo – an energetic, natural-born leader – is a peer-to-peer co-trainer at Pobratymy. The organization follows a four-stage programme – developed by the Danish psychotherapist and human rights activist Ditte Marcher – that goes beyond combat experiences, addressing an individual’s full history from childhood onward. “You don’t need to go to war to get trauma,” says Kholodylo.

The program tackles misconceptions surrounding mental health, looks at the psychological impact of armed conflict, teaches veterans to create support networks and safe havens, tackles their respective traumas and coaches peer-to-peer support.

Fifty-six veterans have graduated from the full programme, which typically lasts between four to six months. The organization’s volunteers also go on lecture tours – extending its reach into the thousands.

One evening, Ilchenko stands at the barbecue as pork shashlik sizzles over fat-spattered coals. Deep, the therapy dog – a golden retriever named after English rock band Deep Purple – sniffs around, while the veterans and psychologists sip on cherry kompot juice and sugary, black tea. (Alcohol is prohibited here.)

Having made strides in his recovery, Ilchenko now runs a radio call-in show for veterans. “Russian soldiers broke the tradition of our ancestors. Our grandfathers rode all the way together to Berlin. They drank water together in Afghanistan. I never expected them to enter my home with a gun.”

Amid the sense of camaraderie around the fire, Max Stodola, a newcomer to the group, says he already feels empowered by the shared process of collective healing. The volunteer medic struggled with a sense of isolation after returning to society.

But the sting has softened. Nightmares that haunted him for days have stopped. He sees clear waymarks toward reclaiming his life. “I’m only at the beginning but I’ve become more patient, with others and myself,” he says.

When we catch up a few months later, he is transformed – giving public talks and being deeply involved with supporting veterans and their families. “Something inside me changed after the first session,” he says. “I now know I don’t have to be angry. I don’t have to resent people who are safe, who are alive. I have a feeling that much more is about to change.”

