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Oral history of unfinished war. Review of the book *Rozmovy z tymy, khto pytaie pro viinu*, Natalia Otrishchenko (ed.), Lviv 2024, pp. 179

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When a symposium for documentation initiatives was held in Lviv in June 2023 – almost a year and a half after the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine – under the title of *The Most Documented War,*[1] the title of the meeting was treated somewhat tongue-in-cheek by many participants. Back in 2023, there were still doubts about whether documentation should be gathered while the war was still going on, whether such conversations/recordings/interviews could be called 'oral history,' who was entitled or obliged to do it, and how it should be done. When a year later, we met in Lviv for the second edition of the symposium, the title *The Most Documented War. Ethics and Practice of International Cooperation*[2] was already taken for granted by the participants. Over the course of that year, we got accustomed to the fact, that even if the Russian war against Ukraine was not *the most* documented war in history, there are certainly not many conflicts that can compete with it in this regard. In Ukraine (and outside of it), the Ukrainian experience of Russian aggression is already being documented by virtually everyone: scholars, oral history practitioners, people from the cultural field and NGO sector, students, pupils and local administration, not to mention the all-important sphere of collecting evidence of Russian crimes by the representatives of law enforcement authorities. More than a hundred participants attended this year's (2024) symposium, while the database of documentation projects launched by the symposium's organiser, the Center for Urban History, now includes 89 projects,[3] and these are certainly not all initiatives dealing with documentation.

Natalia Otrishchenko, the originator and editor of the book I am going to write about, which premiered at this year's symposium, says that in addition to the massiveness of the process, transformations in the field of documentation are important. Recording the stories of the (recent) past is no longer the domain of professionals, whether academically trained or undergoing in-depth training at other institutions: basically anyone with the desire to do so and a smartphone in hand is documenting. Many of the documentarians interviewed in Otrishchenko's book state straightforwardly that nothing can prepare one for recording interviews about the experience of the still-ongoing war. The democratisation of the process, of course, has its consequences. The emerging stock of sources consists of material of varying quality and character, characterised by great dispersion and uncertainty regarding where, when, and how they will be stored and

1 https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/conferences/the-most-documented-war-2/ [accessed: 6.11.2024].
2 https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/conferences/ethics-and-internatioinal-collaborations-2/ [accessed: 6.11.2024].
3 https://mostdocumentedwar.org/en/ [accessed: 6.11.2024].

made available. Ethics and methodology remain problematic, and there are also security concerns for interviewees, those conducting the recordings, and the data itself during this time of ongoing conflict.

The book, edited by Natalia Otrishchenko, *Rozmovy z tymy, khto pytaie pro viinu* (Conversations with those who ask about the war), does not provide ready answers or dispel all doubts, but it is a unique record of the here and now of the Ukrainian war documentation process. These are fourteen conversations conducted by a sociologist, oral history practitioner and documentation project manager in one person with representatives of various documentation initiatives.

As an experienced researcher recording interviews, Otrishchenko operates with a certain standardised script, but adapts it to her very different interviewees. She usually starts with a question about motivation – what made the interviewees take up war documentation? Most of them say the same thing: they started documenting because they wanted to act. Anna Yatsenko, who together with Andrii Usach works at the NGO "Pisla tyshi" (After Silence), documenting individual dimension of the 20th century Ukrainian history,[4] says: "At the beginning of the war, we were in a standstill – we didn't know if we should continue working at all. But then some friends started coming to us, friends of friends, friends of friends of friends. They started telling their evacuation stories, what they had experienced, how they survived the first days of the war. And we thought that this experience was worth writing down" (p. 63).[5] Exactly the same were the beginnings of the project in which I myself have been taking part since March 2022, i.e. *Testimonies from the War*:[6] colleagues at the Lviv Centre for Urban History (including the book's editor), which served as a shelter for internally displaced people during the first weeks of the war, started recording because people were talking all the time.

Another motivation is the desire to find meaning in one's professional activities and the urge to feel needed. Albert Venger, a historian from Dnipro, mentions that his first reaction to the war was "[...] shock and a question: what use can we humanists actually be when there are rockets flying around and all this ammunition? And in this world of flying rockets, explosions, permanent losses, you start to wonder and think what use you can be as a historian, as an observer, as a participant" (p. 71). In the face of war, researchers have to reorient not only their thinking about their own and their country's security, but also their priorities and sense of purpose. What can you do for your invaded country if you are not marching to the front? What do you need to do to maintain a sense of purpose about your own work? Oksana Dovhopolova recording interviews in Odesa,

4 https://aftersilence.co/main-page/ [accessed: 6.11.2024].
5 All quotations from the reviewed book are translated by the author.
6 https://swiadectwawojny2022.org/, https://u-core.org/ [accessed: 6.11.2024].

puts it bluntly: "When the full-scale aggression started – if I had stopped working, I think I would have lost my mind. I had to occupy my head with something sensible" (p. 53).

But, apart from the motivations that prompted them to act there and then, the documentalists also speak of more long-termed reasons. They document not only to avoid the feeling of idleness, but also with a view to the future. Maria Buchelnytska from the Ukrainian War Archive (UWA)[7] recalls with bitterness that in the early days of the archive its staff hoped they were collecting evidence that would one day help to punish Russian war crimes. Today, she understands that what the UWA records is not evidence that can be used by prosecuting authorities; nevertheless, the documentation process is still ongoing. Albert Venger says that, as a historian of the Second World War, he realises how important it is in a researcher's work to have sources that were produced as soon as possible after the events to which they relate. He is echoed by Valentyna Shevchenko from the "Testimonies from the War" initiative, a First World War researcher: "It's very valuable – to record these stories before the official narratives are created and later disseminated by the mass media and other actors who create the politics of memory" (p. 147). In turn, Hanna Zaremba-Kosovych and Victoria Kharchenko, who document the plight of people with disabilities during the war for the "Fight for Right"[8] organisation, note that they were motivated by a desire to ensure that the story of Russian aggression against Ukraine, which will one day be written, is holistic, so that it does not lack stories about what evacuating by train means for a person in a wheelchair, or how someone who cannot hear audio announcements copes during a bombing attack.

Most projects we learn about from the book started very early. The first expedition to the de-occupied Chernihiv region, organised by anthropologist, Svitlana Makhovska, took place in May 2022. The first interviews with the internally displaced people in the Lviv Center for Urban History were recorded in March 2022. Oksana Dovhopolova in May 2022 started to record the accounts of Odesa residents – both those who stayed in the city, and those who arrived from, among others, occupied territories. She claims that in casual conversations just after the outbreak of the war, she noticed that people used many metaphors connected with the Second World War to describe their experiences. "I realised that in six months, a year, two years, these views will change completely and that they need to be preserved now" (p. 54). This does not mean that the documentalists had no doubts. Inga Kozlova, a sociologist who, together with Nadiia Ufimtseva, has been interviewing history teachers who used to work with the Ukrainian Center for

7 https://ukrainewararchive.org/eng/ [accessed: 6.11.2024].
8 https://ffr.org.ua/en/ [accessed: 6.11.2024].

Holocaust Studies[9] since autumn 2022, mentions: "We were apprehensive and unsure if people were ready to talk. It was wonderful to see that they were not only ready but also eager to talk. They needed to tell someone about what they had gone through" (p. 102).

However, there were some who waited – for the situation to stabilise, for the team to form, for a methodology to be developed, and ultimately for both those recording and those being recorded to feel ready to talk. Yulia Skubytska says openly that after the full-scale war broke out, the museum decided to suspend recording, because the team was uncertain about how to proceed under the new circumstances. Inga Kozlova recalls: "For the first four months from the beginning of the full-scale war I was like paralysed. I could not read, I could not write" (p. 96).

Otrishchenko talks to Ukrainians who document Ukrainian experience of the war, but it turns out in the process that the mandate for documentation is incremental for many researchers. Oleksandr Cheremisin documenting the Kherson occupation makes it clear that someone from outside – even a Ukrainian from another part of Ukraine, even a Kherson resident who left at the beginning of the occupation – would not have been able to complete such a project. He claims that people tell him what they have been through because he has been though the same, and this creates a unique situation of trust and understanding. I hear the same thing when Yulia Skubytska talks about her project "Those Who Stayed" at the ASN World Convention in New York in May 2024: a non-Kharkivian will not record good interviews with people who stayed in Kharkiv after 24 February 2022, and has no moral right to do so.

Otrishchenko's interlocutors use many methods, for which the common perspective is the human being and individual human experience at the centre. The most frequent is the classic narrative and biographical approach: documentarians create a space for telling a story about the experience. Tetiana Kovtunovych and Tetiana Pryvalko from the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory[10] start with a free-flowing story about life and then go on to thematic modules with questions. Some record more in-depth interviews, which have a strict structure. Oksana Dovhopolova, exploring the rootedness in Odesa of its new and old inhabitants, says: "we don't simply record a person's experience, we have our focus – we are interested in understanding how [as a result of the war] people's relationships with the past change" (p. 56). Many refrain from calling what they do 'oral history,' even if it is oral history that they had previously recorded. Andrii Usach from "Pisla tyshi" says explicitly that this is what makes their current recordings different from their previous recordings (with witnesses of the Second World War, among others). He calls the current interviews conversations, documentation of

9 https://holocaust.kiev.ua/en/home/about [accessed: 6.11.2024].
10 https://uinp.gov.ua/usna-istoriya/ato-usna-istoriya [accessed: 6.11.2024].

experience. Also, Albert Venger says he does not record oral history – he documents, records experience. Perhaps the sources he produced will be treated as oral history by historians 50 or 100 years from now – he himself cannot do this, nor does he intend to work with his interviews as a historian. They are sources for someone else.

Doubts about whether the stories of the war AD 2022 can be classified as oral history are, in my opinion, a reflection of the Central or Eastern European specificity of our field. In many countries, it is obvious that recorded oral history is not only non-biographical, but specifically concerning very recent events. In this context, it is worth to mention the American projects on Hurricane Katrina, or 9/11.[11] Meanwhile, we – in Poland but also in Ukraine – have become accustomed to recording elderly people, who indeed tell stories about war and occupation, but those are times that have long since passed. It is, in a way, obvious – for many years we have been recording to capture the stories of those who were passing away, to fill in the gaps, to hear the tales that could not be told before. Thus the trend to consider only such accounts as 'true' oral history. But this stage is inevitably coming to an end, as the witnesses from this generation are almost all gone. It seems, therefore, that this intensified activity of recording oral accounts related to the war in Ukraine (even if those involved refuse to call it oral history) may mark the beginning of a wholly new stage in the development of this field in our part of Europe.

Interestingly, many of the book's protagonists were already planning to record a second round of interviews at the time of book preparation (i.e. in the second half of 2023), and to return to the same interviewees. When I saw some of them at the second symposium for documentary initiatives in June 2024, some were already making the plan a reality: Svitlana Makhovska of Chernihiv, among others, had started to approach her previous interviewees. In our own project, the return interviews started in April 2024. While valuable, longitudinality is not very common in oral history; it is more frequently found in qualitative sociology, though there are a few projects of this type.[12] The trouble with Ukrainian documentarians is that interviewees are usually revisited after a stage (in their lives or in the researchers' work) is over. As Anna Yatsenko puts it, the idea for a second round of interviews came about when the researchers noticed that the later the interviews were recorded, the more standardised their narratives

11 Cf. https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/ccoh/digital/9-11.html [accessed: 6.11.2024]; M.M. Clark, *The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project: A First Report*, "The Journal of American History", no. 89(2), (2002), pp. 569–579; S. Sloan, *Oral History and Hurricane Katrina: Reflections on Shouts and Silences,* "The Oral History Review", no. 35 (2), (2008), pp. 176–186.

12 Cf. e.g. D. Laub, J. Bodenstab, *Dwadzieścia pięć lat później. Powrót do świadectw ocalałych z Holokaustu*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej", (2018), special issue, pp. 239–255.

became. How will people talk about their experience in one, two, three years? "We want to implement the second phase of the project once the story is over for people," Yatsenko says (p. 66). The problem is that when the documentation effort began in 2022, no one anticipated that the story would take this long. Natalia Otrishchenko adds that "the ending of a story – it's something that gives it meaning. And we're at a point now where that ending is not there" (p. 67). Paradoxically, this is why documentation and reflection on it are so important – to create meaning despite the lack of an ending.

A very important issue in Otrishchenko's conversations is the matter of what next. Of all the interviewees, only one person, Maria Shvab, exploring the experience of pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum in the times of war, claims that she cannot possibly make her recordings available to other researchers because of their personal nature. As her project is strictly a scholarly one, indeed it can hardly be called documentation. All the others unanimously declare that they do not record only for themselves. The question of 'what next' actually leads to many more questions. Whether and when to share? How? With whom? Under what conditions? Yulia Skubytska claims that, at least at this stage, it is primarily the people who collected the data who should be working with the material collected in her project. "If someone doesn't have experience of working [recording] in this field, some things they just won't understand," she says (p. 42). Her words echo a conviction that has been lingering in the field of oral history for years – no one will analyse an interview better than the person who recorded it. But in the situation of the war in Ukraine, yet another aspect emerges: not only will the person recording make fuller use of the material, but also, according to Skubytska, has more right to do so. This is in keeping with a broader discussion on the phenomenon of resoursification of the field, which is down to the fact that in the case of countries like Ukraine, sources for scientific research have for many decades been produced locally, often by local researchers and specialists, but the subsequent process of knowledge production – primarily the publication of scientific texts – takes place elsewhere and someone else benefits from it.[13] Another aspect of it is the potentially inappropriate and harmful use of the content of the accounts. Viktoria Nesterenko from War Childhood Museum[14] explains: "A researcher from, for example, London comes to us, opens the interviews and finds there a phrase that confirms the Russian propaganda. And this researcher, who does not know the situation at all, writes that here she has found evidence, testimony" (p. 112).

13 The concept of resoursification was introduced by British slavist Victoria Donovan: V. Donovan, *Against Academic 'Resourcification': Collaboration as Delinking from Extractivist 'Area Studies' Paradigms*, "Canadian Slavonic Papers", no. 65 (2), (2023), pp. 163–173.

14 https://warchildhood.org/children-affected-by-the-russian-ukrainian-war/ [accessed: 6.11.2024].

After the thrill of recording, there comes a moment of challenges and problems related to securing and potentially sharing the data. It is easier for those backed by institutions that already have archiving experience, databases, and sharing channels. In such a situation, the recordings of Russian aggression simply become a separate collection within an already existing archive. Those without their own archives wonder how much of the huge mass of documentation can actually be preserved. Historians, such as Artem Kharchenko from "Testimonies from the War" ask which parts of this massive amount of data will realistically gain the status of a historical source in the future. Oleksandr Cheremisin puts off the question of creating an archive for later, for the time being – as an individual researcher – he does not see the means and potential for this. He transcribes his recordings himself, and plans to gradually publish them with source commentary.

A single common archive for all accounts of Russian aggression is a dream of the staff of Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINM): "Let it be copies, but let them be kept in one place" (p. 133). Natalia Otrishchenko responds that the war stories being recorded now are part of Ukraine's digital heritage and should of course be stored in Ukraine, but institutions have a key role to play: "Because institutions are largely about stability and continuity of responsibility" (p. 133). While UINM declares its willingness to serve as the central archive, an attempt to take on this responsibility is meanwhile made by another initiative, Ukrainian War Archive – a project created by NGO Docudays.[15] Not only does UWA record coverage of the full-scale war, but it also, and above all, allows projects and individuals without their own archives to submit materials for archiving on its online platform. Even projects that can rely on the existing archiving structure do not, for the time being, make the entire recordings available. Furthermore, conversations with, for example, UINM representatives reveal that, for security reasons, the institution has restricted access to collections that were created and made available before 2022 – such as the thematic collection "Crimea. Occupation."

Although the entire recordings are not available, many projects share selected excerpts or otherwise attempt to present their material. Svitlana Osipchuk from War Childhood Museum says: "It is important to me that [the interviews] not only be preserved, but also work for the community. […] After 24 February 2022, I think even more that a person who has shared his or her story deserves to see the result of his or her contribution to documentation" (p. 106). The Ukrainian section of the Czech "Post Bellum,"[16] realising the project "How We Fight: Stories of Ukrainian Resistance," provides on its website excerpts of recorded interviews, not containing sensitive data, biographies of witnesses, photos, all also in English translation. She also published five selected interviews on the Zaxid.

15 https://docudays.org/eng [accessed: 6.11.2024].
16 https://www.facebook.com/postbellumua?locale=cs_CZ [accessed: 6.11.2024].

net website. Svitlana Makhovska publishes transcriptions of selected interviews with commentary in the "Ukrainian Historical Journal." Some researchers mention that whenever the material is shared with a wider audience, the interviewee is once again asked for permission for that particular method of sharing.

Interviews with people who document Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine also reveal a world of problems unknown in a situation of peace. In the devastated city of Kharkiv, as Yulia Skubytska says, there is nowhere to record, so her team arranges to meet at the interviewees' place of work, in a park, sometimes in a car. On trips outside the city, mines are a challenge; on each such trip, the researcher must be accompanied by someone local, familiar with the passability of the roads. Andrii Usach of Lviv recalls that in the first weeks of the war, the issue was the video recordings, which were supposed to be taken in urban spaces according to their project. However, there was still a martial law-related ban on photography and filming in public area. Inga Kozlova says she sometimes wonders how she manages to record anything at all: you have to plan your recordings for a time when there is no shahed flying at you, when there is no air alert, and on top of that when there is electricity. Tetiana Pryvalko adds that she always goes to the interviews with a list of contacts for emergency situations: to a psychologist, a doctor, social services, a support organisation.

In the conversations in this book, the focus is less on the content of the interviews themselves and more on the people involved – both those being recorded and those doing the recording. It addresses their comfort, safety, and emotions. This perspective is important, as these aspects are often overlooked when reflecting on research practices. Natalia Otrishchenko consistently asks each documentarian the question: And how do you take care of yourself in all this? How do you recharge your batteries? Some of her interviewees answer without thinking that they did not take care of themselves at all in the beginning. Hanna Zaremba-Kosovych recalls that in the spring of 2022 she was constantly on the move, recording, helping, and her head kept buzzing: "How can I rest when we are at war? It's reasonably safe in Lviv, do I even have the right to rest?" (p. 86). It soon became clear that such an approach was not feasible in the long run: after a few weeks, the researcher realised that she no longer had the strength either to record or to think about the interviews she was collecting. Such statements recur in many of the interviews in the book. Inga Kozlova mentions that following the interviews, she dreamt of Bucha. Therefore, over time, it becomes clear that those who talk about the war must take care of themselves as much as they take care of their interlocutors. To take care, as the protagonists say, of "elementary mental hygiene." Tetiana Kovtunovych from UINM: "There are times when you can't cope any more [...] then you have to take a break and recuperate as best you can. To rest, to talk to people, to switch to completely different activities. I, for instance, go to the cinema" (p. 131). The documentarians also say that if they were

to give any advice, they would advise that such projects be carried out as a team rather than alone. The members of the "Testimonies from the War" team, on the other hand, mention how important the weekly team meetings with a psychologist were for them.

Otrishchenko accurately observes that during the initial period of the full-scale war, the documentarians were operating in a state of immense agitation, driven by strong emotions. As she puts it, "the stories we heard can still get us" (p. 93). They do resonate with many. And yet there is still too little understanding of it out there. Maria Buchelnytska from Ukrainian War Archive says bitterly that no grant-maker has so far agreed to fund a supervision group for her team.

Putting the witness at the centre often leads to ethical dilemmas. What if we know that a witness has a unique story to tell but does not want to tell it? Albert Venger states that, as a historian, he should call such a witness five times a day and persuade him, but if the welfare of that witness is taken into account, he should be left alone (p. 73). Nadiia Ufimtseva says the worst-case scenario is when a project participant asks after the interview not to archive the transcript anywhere after all: "As a historian, I feel a deep sense of loss at the mere thought of having this material removed" (p. 100). However, all the researchers interviewed by Otrishchenko agree that it is up to the person being recorded to decide what happens to their recording – from start to finish. They can agree to different degrees of anonymisation and its different forms, can ask for their voice to be removed from the video, an embargo of any length on the entire recording or selected parts of it. At any time they may ask for their recording to be removed from the collection. As Yevheniia Nesterovych from "Post Bellum" says, "We wouldn't want people to take advantage of this opportunity, yet it is there" (p. 123). This all stems from the idea of the subjectivity of the interviewee and the principle of fully voluntary participation. The latter is, moreover, more problematic than it seems, if only in the case of children, recorded by the Museum of Wartime Childhood (both parent and child must agree to the recording). Apparently, an empathetic approach to the interlocutor raises a multitude of problems. But this is what documentation looks like in a time of ongoing war – it is deeply problematic.

The book edited by Natalia Otrishchenko is significant in this aspect that the hundreds and thousands of interviews recorded by her interviewees are not currently accessible to a wider audience and may not be for some time. Therefore, the book is de facto conversation about conversations whose content remains unknown, providing insight into a reality we are fortunate not to experience firsthand. Another important aspect, which the editor notes lightly, is that this book offers a voice from within, from the eye of the cyclone. The conservative Western academy has traditionally regarded researchers with distance as the most authoritative. This has also been true regarding the war in Ukraine, where the engaged voices of Ukrainian scholars emerging at the beginning of the conflict

were often dismissed as overly emotional, biased, and unreliable.[17] Meanwhile, in a time of ongoing conflict, any other approach is impossible, as Otrishchenko states. This is precisely the kind of approach that is needed, fitting into a broader discussion about who has the right to speak for whom, the relevance of the researcher's position, and the necessity of seeking alternative forms of expression beyond traditional academic texts – perhaps not just for times of war.[18]

While for the Polish reader this book provides insight into an extremely interesting period in the development of Ukrainian oral history, for Ukrainian documentarians, researchers, oralists, this book is more than that – it is proof that it is possible to rebuild one's professional identity under conditions of war with dignity and meaning. I have repeatedly heard from my Ukrainian colleagues that they record accounts of Russian aggression in order to prove that Ukrainians can be deprived of their sense of security and electricity, but not of their empowerment.

The book was published as an e-book. Soon it will be translated into English.

17 Cf. e.g. K. Iakovlenko, *Ukrainian Rage*, "e-flux Notes", May 11, 2022, https://www.e-flux.com/notes/468104/ukrainian-rage [accessed: 6.11.2024]; D. Tsymbalyuk, *Academia Must Recentre Embodied and Uncomfortable Knowledge*, "Nature Human Behavior", no. 6, (2022), pp. 758–759.

18 Cf. J. Buyskykh, *Beyond Epistemic Violence: Un-silencing Diverse Ukrainian Voices*, "Etnografia Polska", no. 67 (1–2), (2023), pp. 7–19; S. Dyak, M C. Fowler, *Views from Our Terraces*, "Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History", no. 25 (1) (2024), pp. 131–141.