

The Lies ...and the Eyes ...of Ukraine. Reporting from Lviv

Part III

By [Brett Redmayne-Titley](#)

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Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

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“Do not allow me to forget you.” —Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Lviv, Western Ukraine.

The realities of *this* war, as I expected before arriving two weeks ago, have been slowly found on the faces, in the voices and deep in the penetrating eyes of those affected by it.

These are the innocents, mostly, those who have a tale to tell and parse no words in telling it.

The next ninety-six hours would reveal their personal horrors.

After a five hour trip packed together into a cargo van filled with food and medical aid supplies, we arrive in Lviv, Ukraine. Now, I sit alongside my five other passionate colleagues at a long wooden table that is covered modestly and set in preparation for our welcome. We dig in, eating what we all thankfully admit is the finest spaghetti sauce ever served. We are very hungry. Our hosts are glad we're here.

The meal is served in a huge white hall in front of the altar of an ancient Catholic church, dilapidated from age but still in use by our host, Roman, who is part of a worldwide Christian fellowship called *Praise Chapel*. I was invited by founder, John McGovern, who I had the great fortune of bumping into while doing refugee interviews at Warsaw's Central Station, the arrival point for many escaping this war, and where three huge all-white tents staffed by other aid workers provide meals, sundries and shelter to all coming in from Ukraine.

Here I look for interviews with refugees, but only a few speak English.

In conflict zones, being a neutral, fact-based reporter is not possible. In the eyes of those affected, objectivity is perceived as instead being on one end of the polarities of this war; East or West. As such, the most important lesson learned from my time in Lebanon and Turkey is to ask many, many questions, while at the same time keeping one's mouth securely shut.

And, to listen...*and watch closely!*

Many I meet, here in Lviv or while tramping the streets of Warsaw have experienced this war, but from its periphery west of the Dnieper River with Kyiv at its northern end near Belarus. This does not mean that they have not been affected or do not express strong emotions. But it is in the eyes of those interviewed who travel West that shows whether a person has indeed been *internally* afflicted by this war. The eyes being the mirrors of one's soul.

As I interviewed many, it is their eyes that I focus on to confirm their many offered truths. Each time I am reminded of what a hardened Hezbollah soldier told me in 2018 while standing on the war-torn Israel/ Lebanon border overlooking Israel's stolen Palestinian farmlands.

"When one sees his first dead man he remembers it forever. When a man sees a man a die, sees that man take his last breath and then become still, it stays forever... in his eyes!"

I have seen those eyes. In Lebanon. In Turkey. In airports on the gaunt, sallow faces of many khaki clothed GI's returning from war: Their "*thousand-mile stare,*" looking so intently at nothing, an unlit cigarette dangling unattended in the left hand, slumped forward in deep, deep thought, chin perched on the right as their only support.

In the four days to come, I will see those eyes three times more.

*

On the trip to Lviv, Ukraine, John McGovern's son-in-law Paul who is our driver and a senior member of *Praise Chapel* sits next to James who is riding shotgun. He is a youngish veteran who has seen war and lost a close friend in Afghanistan. James is here to begin a sponsored military extraction of persons unknown since I don't usually ask stupid questions.

Both Paul and James do indeed well understand the background and the reasons that provided little choice but for Russia to seek security from NATO expansion due to its national interests while also protecting the ravaged Eastern Ukrainians who are more Russian than Ukrainian in culture and language.

As James, put it, *"When the war started I thought Putin was a chess master. But,"* he continued, *"I have changed on that. Now he's losing."* He admits that this opinion is not very popular at the family dining table back home in Georgia and that it is based on US intelligence provided. But, on one point we all agree: We hate this war.

Despite western media [claiming that Zelensky's family remained in Kyiv, Ukraine](#) in support, this is not likely true. Putting two and two together from a conversation with my Christian dinner host just days before, it is quite likely that it was James and his team, now waiting for him in Lviv, that had completed the "extraction", of Zelensky's daughter from Kyiv to Lviv two weeks before. James did not mind admitting he was here this time for a similar mission.

While our comrades in the other seats listen, decorum and a budding friendship created by my love of intelligent discussion, prevent me from challenging Paul and James on some of the information and opinions they share. Finer men I have not met, but pieces were missing in our dialogue and I keep these to myself, all the while fearing that a slip of the tongue in the wrong direction would turn friendship into acrimony as was illustrated very sadly [in Part One, of this series.](#)

I have yet to find safe passage to Eastern Ukraine so I have offered to our hosts at our dinner table my limited medical skills and a strong back in getting supplies to the east. Due to the dangers, Eastwards stockpiles of medical aid and food are piling up in Lviv. The dangers are not particularly Russian.

Zelensky, desperate for troops after suffering massive losses [opened the jails of Western Ukraine to the criminals and next armed them](#) in the outlandish belief that despite brutal incarceration they would actually side with Ukraine and direct their weapons eastwards. He claimed this was limited to those prisoners with battle experience, but this was not true as this would have been a very small subset since, other than criminally razing the Donbas, a sanctioned crime, this is Ukraine's first recent war. Not surprisingly, many turned their weapons and their newfound freedom to the West instead for a renewed criminal opportunity. In war, medical supplies are often worth their weight in gold. So, relief supplies for the refugees have more than a Russian threat to contend with.

Despite so much media distortion to the contrary, Lviv, eighty kilometres from the Polish border, has only been affected by this war due to its proximity and use for the incoming military arms and foreign mercenaries stockpiled on the outskirts of the town. Lviv has been hit by the Russian rockets but these have been limited to purely military targets. There have been no civilian casualties as stated by the Mayor of Lviv in multiple Telegram posts censored by western media. But, when the rockets fall everyone knows it. They are huge explosions.

Three days before, I met with Michael, who is with another Christian group. He was in Lviv on the night of Biden's Warsaw speech of March 26 [when three Russian rockets destroyed a munitions industrial area and an oil and lubricant facility](#). Sources indicated that these were also used to store Western supplied munitions. *"It shook us out of bed"*, Mike said to me on the Sunday. This was not surprising since [Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov on March 13](#) *"warned the U.S. that pumping weapons from a number of countries it orchestrates isn't just a dangerous move, it's an action that makes those convoys legitimate targets."*

I also spoke to one aid worker in Lviv who was in the nearby village of Deliatyn in the Ivano-Frankivsk region 50km [from the Romanian border, on March 18, when Russia reportedly used for the first time a hypersonic missile that screamed in at Mach 5.5](#) with a direct hit on a deep underground bunker containing Ukrainian missiles and aircraft rockets donated by the west. Reportedly, over 200 incoming mercenaries were also housed there for initial training. The blast as seen on video was colossal. Said, Vincent, *"Our whole hotel shook and we were more than 20 kilometres away! Shit fell all over the floor like an earthquake. Thank God there was only one blast."*

All munitions and mercenaries and their drive to increase the horrors of war eastwards were vaporized, instantly. No civilians were hurt.

Despite these strikes, Lviv moves as normal. I see that the shops are open and people walk casually as the buses and trains pass by as usual. This indicates that the public here knows from these experiences that Russia has not been trying to victimize the innocent population of Lviv, instead using precision advanced munitions for purely military targets only.

After our dinner, we are also welcomed by Antone, who, he says, has just got back from the East in Odessa. Mosha, Ukrainian and our sole woman companion on this trip translates as Antone provides us with his tales of derring-do fighting Russians. He is verbose and affable all the time as he tells us of escaping the Russians repeatedly after attacking them with rifle fire and a donated RPG.

This is the man who may have my life in his hands if I help take supplies East.

So, I pay very close attention. As to being a reporter, my colleagues have been sworn to secrecy for my protection. They keep this promise. So, as Antone continues his story I occasionally ask Mosha to translate a strategically benign question or more to him.

Listening In the wings is a short, stout, stubble-faced man quietly standing, saying nothing. As the story continues, I often look at him closely before returning my attention to Antone. There is something seemingly wrong with his ongoing tale.

But it is when this man sees me looking his way and looks back into my eyes, blank-faced, that I know, what is wrong. It is the storyteller.

The silent man now turns and leaves. Without a goodbye, he is gone, but he looks at me one last time and for the first time on this trip, I see the most unmistakable affliction of war. *Those eyes.*

As Antone wraps up his tale, I ask a few more questions, no longer probing his testimony but the face of this man himself, smiling and talking so quickly. No, I will not be putting my life at risk with him. No. He has not seen war.

Unlike the man who said nothing, I do not see... *those eyes*.

*

With our business now finished in Lviv, we aid workers hunker down in the van to begin our long return journey to Warsaw. One seat is now vacant.

Suddenly, news of a new rocket strike in Lviv comes over Mosha's phone...

It begins to snow. Strange for this being late spring in early April... a seemingly very dark natural comment levied upon us all about this *God damn war!*

*

Over the past two weeks, I have heard very much. However, I am in Western Ukraine a very different reality than the east where real war there rages town by town, hour by hour. Warsaw is plastered everywhere with Ukrainian bright yellow and pale blue flags all fervently supporting war in Ukraine. Vendors sell them on many street corners like they were fruit and their colours adorn the billboards, shops, buses, lamp posts, and subways as the radio and TV stations every ten minutes scream infomercials in support of Ukraine as part of this collective support for war.

Here in Warsaw, most refugees, with the exception of those from Kyiv, have fled due to this inspired fear, not direct conflict. Many admit this freely. Yes, they have family there and have heard much, but most are predisposed to their own opinions derived years before the war began: Anti Russia. This sentiment is not the case in the East. As I watch the evening news, my hotel night clerk translates rapidly this purely western narrative. As a counter, regularly, my translator and friend, Andrew, who is Ukrainian texts me at odd hours with info from the east and it quickly becomes clear that the media in both Poland and Ukraine have intentionally made the reality of war muddy.

Zelensky has banned all media coverage in Ukraine, save one, and alternative views favouring peace are, as I would find out are a death sentence. War is the only sanctioned opinion allowed. Peace will get you arrested or shot.

This was shown yesterday April 14 when both [Viktor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian politician who was elected as People's Deputy of Ukraine](#) on 29 August 2019 and [Major General Valery Shaytanov from Ukraine's Security Service \(SBU\)](#), were arrested on very specious charges of "*treason.*" The full breadth of Western media joined in, falsely accusing both men of being "*Putin's ally.*"

This is utter rubbish. I confirmed this with a recent US inside contact here in Ukraine (see: upcoming Part Four) in a call this morning and who knows both men well.

Their true crime is making the mistake of suggesting that Ukraine settle this war and accept peace.

Both men know the truth: The Ukrainian army is taking staggering loses in men, materiel, and the ability to resupply both. Zelensky's on going *purge of peace* and "*anti-heroes*" was preceded two weeks ago by his firing of both [Naumov Andriy Olehovych, former chief of the Main Department of Internal Security of the Security Service of Ukraine](#), and [Kryvoruchko Serhiy Oleksandrovych](#), former chief of the Office of the Security Service of

Ukraine in the Kherson region. Both of these men, too, are guilty of merely suggesting the new Ukrainian capital crime of "Peace."

For Zelensky and Nato their personal treason is allowing this war to be fought right down to the very last Ukrainian.

*

I am frustrated. My goal of getting to the East where the true stories of the atrocities there will certainly be told by those refugees has met with my own realities. The Russian embassy here in Warsaw has now closed. The staff is burning everything before they leave. Presumably, my visa application to Russia is in one of the piles.

Despite my current proximity barely a day goes by that I don't receive videos and pictures of the horrors taking place in the Donbas and the East. My contact info is easily found and since the start of this series, I have received scores of Instagram, Telegram, Tick Toc or Whatsapp messages asking that I share these images with the reader.

But I refuse to look at any of them. Videos and pictures can be doctored and used to sway a reporter's work in the wrong direction away from objective reporting. This war is now a media-inspired shit show and I will not be a part of it. So, I file these many solicitations away, never looking at a one, for I already know what they contain, horror. I do not need to look... or listen.

Except once.

At my first hotel, I meet Lee. English being rather rare, he has stopped me, asking for information. In turn, I parry him for the same.

Lee admits to being a US mercenary- former Airborne- paid, like James, to extract persons unknown from an area near Kyiv. He readily admits to knowing of the Nazi philosophy attached to many in the Ukrainian military but is being paid well for his service not to care. He seems to lack quality US intel since his questions are mostly about the roads and military beyond Kyiv and I cannot answer beyond Lviv.

He seems out of his league here. Interestingly, he asks if I have contacts for protective gear like flack jackets and helmets. I warn him of the dangers, not of the Russians who are mostly east of his target, but of the Ukrainians. Days before, Andrew my translator, had sent me three of the many videos I have received, telling me, "*The man being tortured is speaking Russian. His killers are speaking Ukrainian,*" in his effort to educate me.

But, again, I refuse to access these videos.

But Lee seems a good kid, but too full of US-inspired bravado to heed my warning. To help I tell him of Andrew's videos, though I haven't viewed them. He doesn't believe me and asks me to show him. I scroll to the right spot on Whatsapp and hand him my phone and he eagerly taps the first, second and then third video to life.

Screams, the likes of which could not be faked, shriek from my phone and I close my eyes hard shut in a desperate and failed attempt not to hear.

He hands me back my phone. "Yeah", he says, "*That's pretty bad.*"

*

“Please, tell my story.”

As I put my boots on the ground one more time, still stuck in Warsaw I remember the guardian angel that has steered me well during my times reporting in foreign lands. Sitting and stewing in a dank hotel room does not provide the story... nor luck.

So, I return to Central Station, Warsaw. While doing a bit of photo editing and sitting on one of the very nearby concrete benches on the grounds in front of the massive soviet Palace of Culture and Science building, my glance comes up from my screen. Directly in front of me is an old man stooped and holding a cane. He is moving directly at me. He appears quite frail and he is now just a few yards away, so close I am afraid he is blind. But he stops, now close enough to speak. *“You are a journalist,”* he says in perfect, but heavily accented English, not as a question, but strangely as a statement. I nod, not sure how far English will take me. *“Will you help me,”* he offers and I assume he means a donation and reach for my red day pack. *“No, no, no...”* he responds, *“I have things to tell you.”*

I get to my feet and offer him my arm which he takes lightly in both hands as I help steer his half-bent body next to me onto the concrete bench. More than an hour later, as the snow flurries again cry in response from the grey gloom above, I bid him goodbye. What he has told me has brought a tear to my eyes, prayers to my lips and hatred to my heart.

Abram is from Markivka and has traversed the war zone of the east to meet his daughter and two granddaughters who were already here the past two weeks from just south of Kyiv. It turned out I had spoken to his daughter Taisaya earlier that morning at Central Station because she also spoke enough English. I had apparently left much too quickly since her two little girls had said they were waiting for their granddad to arrive, but trains here no longer follow a scripted schedule. The girls were full of happy smiles, waiting. I had told their Mum that I wanted testimonies from the east, but she could not help. I had forgotten their names but remembered the encounter well.

Over that next hour, as I scribbled furiously, Abram told me of being trapped in Markivka as the war began, not by the Russians but by the Ukrainian Army (AFU), what he repeatedly called the *“Banderists.”* Those following this series know what that means: Nazis.

Abram is a Russian Jew and proudly admits to serving in the Red Army, particularly in Afghanistan. *“We did many wrong things there,”* he began, *“but these Banderists they hate, their hearts, full of hate. Always hate. Many years, only hate!”* Stupidly I offered the leading question, *“why?”* Abram, who had been looking down while delivering his thoughts straightened in a start, now looking me in the eyes like a father scolding a child, *“Because we are Russian!”*

Abram talked, then, about the times well before the 2014 Maidan Square Orange revolution, a time when Ukraine was certainly divided into ethnic regions, but when the Donbas, Donetsk, Luhansk and eastern Ukraine, although attracting a much larger percentage of Jews and ethnic Russians was just that, a region of Ukraine. East worked well with west. He spoke of small cases of anti-Semitism and anti-Russian sentiment but as he put it, *“When we were Soviet, we were all friends.”*

According to Abram that all changed quickly in 2014, *“We became dogs!”* he spat. *“But you*

kick a dog once, he runs. You kick a dog again and he looks you in the eyes, asking why" But, he slowed for emphasis, *"You kick a dog three times... and he bites."* He talked about the immediate attacks by the AFU after the [west overturned the election of Viktor Yanukovich](#) who was himself from Donetsk in Eastern Ukraine. Continuing he said,

"What we want then is independence. Already we were. Not to join Russia. That we wanted this is a lie. They made war from the west on us of the East. Because we speak Russian? We love Russia? Not only, this..."

and here he again glanced up from his thoughts and for emphasis,

"Because the Banderists hate Russia. Because you... I'm sorry.. your country... hates Russia. And we are Russian in our hearts! We do not hate America. We love Ukraine! But you... I'm sorry again... your country, it hates Russia!"

His anger was understood. Abram's wife had been killed in the indiscriminate artillery shelling by the AFU when a round in the early morning hit the shop where she worked as a clerk and when she was opening for the day. He asked me if I knew what terror was, but answered his own question, *"It is to never know, any time when death will come."* He said the Banderists would go days, weeks, months without firing a shot at his village and then suddenly open fire from many miles away and at no target in particular. *"For many years we could not know when who would be the next to die. And..."* he added, *"for seven years we beg Putin for help."*

It was three weeks before he finally left Marikiva but that was when the Russian army had forced the AFU out. According to Abram the AFU held them in the basement the whole time; a horror of its own. Little food, no toilet- buckets- far too many seeking refuge there after the AFU had commandeered his building for their safety, using it for the vantage points and firing opportunities provided by the tall buildings. When the AFU was forced out by the Russians they fired at it with RPGs while he and the more than forty in the basement screamed in terror.

He had escaped Markivka and moved west via Belarus, but his younger brother was killed as he tried to use the humanitarian corridor created not by the AFU but by the Russians. He was supposed to meet his brother Leonid in Proslan on the way to the Belarus border. He didn't make it. It was a neighbour friend who told him.

Abram told of seeing from his windows AFU soldiers digging mines into the roads to stop people from leaving his town. *"Only we walk on concrete. No mines under concrete,"* he said. *"But you walk on concrete and they shoot you."* His brother died when he and two family men, two women and their children stepped through a tripwire planted by the AFU as they walked through the roadside brush off the road to Proslan. A neighbour friend and others were with another group far enough behind to live. It was the Russian army that responded, not the AFU. The men, leading, died instantly. The others died at the scene.

Breaking the horrible news in Proslan his brother's neighbour had brought to him his brother's watch. Abram, as he reached into his pocket, his face and his hands were trembling. I knew what was coming. Shaking, he held out an old, worn but lovely golden wind up watch, the gold wrist band mostly gone, the lens fractured in uneven quadrants, but I could still make out the exact time of this horror: 5:39. Am. Pm. It just didn't matter...anymore.

"This is what is left of my brother..."

*

His daughter Taisaya and granddaughters, Kristina and Alina, surprise me. They have been waiting out of sight throughout Abram's time with me and now walk up to help their Grandfather home. I do not know if they have heard of this horror. I hug them all for no, or only one, good reason.

As I help him to his feet, placing Abram's cane back in his hand and being sure he is steadily balanced, he struggles to straighten himself fully to properly offer his hand. I was surprised that he is almost my height. I offer my hand in return, and he takes it in his, a gentle touch, now looking at me intently as if to test my mettle for one last time.

Abram is smiling now. *"My daughter said you are a journalist. Go to the east as you want. You will know what I said is so."* he says as an ending. *"Then, please... tell my story."*

"Thank you..." he adds before turning forever away. But just before he did, I saw his face clearly, and I knew his story was true.

I saw, once more...*those eyes.*

*

I will view them now. Those videos. The pictures. I feel an obligation. To Abram, to Leonid, to my Christian friends in Lviv, to Andrew and every refugee I have interviewed and those I have not, *alive or dead.*

Sitting on my hotels bed, pillows piled behind me, I draw these images and videos up on my laptop and access the files on my phone I steel myself with a six-pack close at hand. I have my translator app at hand only to know what language of this war is being spoken. As I ready myself I close my eyes long and hard once again remembering Lee, the mercenary's, final comment because I know it's going to be *"pretty bad."*

It is.

The dead, the wounded writhing, their screams rising until silent, their words testimonies I don't understand, but yet I do, the views of the barbarian AFU planting mines, shooting at civilian targets, at the occupants of the buildings, or just the buildings, the bloodied faces screaming for vengeance into the camera, the artillery strikes into buildings as white flags wave, the slit throats, the tears, the children clutching dead mothers, mothers holding dead sons, husbands, brothers for the final time or breath, the blood, so, so much blood, and all the time too, too, too much horror. There must be a better singular word to use, but I am speechless. It is simply, purely...*Horror!*

Each time I move to the next file, I force myself to do so, swilling beer to dull my outrage that only increases with every pull on the bottle and new atrocity. I will honour them all, must finish what I started.

More than two hours later I am spent. I am done. I am drunk. I have now seen with my own eyes...

I trip over bottles as I head for my bathroom. I must wash this all from my face. Wash it from my mind.

From the sink I splash cold, cold water over my whole head, desperate for relief. Grasping for a white towel at hand I look into the mirror, but my eyes will not focus. All I see is a kaleidoscope of those images swirling, blending all in a cacophony tinged with red that will *not* go away.

As the towel pulls down from my face, focus slowly comes back to view. In the mirror, I look deeply into my own ashen face, drawn, tired, weary from my two weeks, until this moment improperly afflicted by this God damn war.

And then I see them, staring back at me with pinpoint accuracy, my testimony to the brutal truth of this war. There, in the mirror, staring back at me, I see...

Those Eyes!

*

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Dedication: To Matias R., Michel C., Ron U., Jeff B., Jan O., and SF. Thanks for keeping me going! Peace...

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