

The Shelling of Donbass Civilians: Two French Journalists Under Ukrainian Artillery Fire for Five Hours

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Yesterday 4 June, Christelle and I were waiting for confirmation of a mission to the front line, with the intention of going to the scene of the shelling of civilians by Ukrainian artillery.

This kind of mission aims to show the general public that civilians are priority targets of the Ukrainian army and the Kiev regime. Not long ago, almost without hiding, the Ukrainian president announced that Donbass would be razed to the ground and that after the war the region would be a real desert, meaning that they would have killed most of the Russian population of Eastern Ukraine before the Maidan.

At around 10.00 am, the Korpus, the press organisation of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Donetsk, announced a first bombardment in the always very targeted district of Petrovski, in the west of the city. The Ukrainian artillery had opened fire on the active Chelyuskintsev mine, so we jumped into our car, accompanied by a fixer and Korpus soldier, whom we like very much, as a person and a professional: Kostia.

A great arrival. What we didn’t know was that this first bombardment, which took place at around 8.30 a.m., continued in this civilian area.

What was targeted here was the mine and its infrastructure, while many miners were at work in the depths of the galleries. As soon as we parked, the first shell fell not far from us with a tremendous crash. On Kostia’s orders, we immediately evacuated the vehicle, a Renault Kangoo, but immediately a second shell hit our area. Leaping behind Kostia’s footsteps, we took refuge next to a building that looked solid, but we did not stay on the ground for long, the danger was too great. In a few steps we had the presence of mind to enter the building where we discovered about fifteen people.

It was in fact a food and bazaar shop, called Soyuz, run by a woman of unflinching courage

called Raissa. A few saleswomen, a grandfather who had come to buy water with his 14-year-old grandson, other retired men, two mobilized soldiers on rest, other women who had also come to do some shopping, not to mention a 45-year-old man who was a former soldier in the Donbass militia, these were the people we met in this circumstance. Mixing with them, we soon found places to sit, protected by the thick walls of this solid building. Built during the Soviet Union, with thick walls, a very large cellar and a structure supported by large steel beams, we were now in relative safety.

Five hours of heavy shelling. We couldn't imagine that we would be here for five hours, four of which were spent under heavy shelling from the unleashed Ukrainian artillery. 122 mm shells, multiple Grad rocket launchers, Ouragan missiles loaded with submunitions and even 152 mm shells, the infernal dance of Ukrainian shells was just beginning. The nervousness was palpable in two men, who were almost distilling panic to those around us, constantly asking us not to film them, getting up, pacing the shop, going outside to pick up debris from previous shells, the situation was critical.

Following the example of Christelle and Kostia, as well as myself, the group seemed to have calmed down, I was sitting next to a young 21 year old soldier, on leave, simply wearing a military cap and a tank top. Regularly, he would point out the start of the shooting, which would then come at us a few seconds later. To the right, to the left, much further away, or very close, shells and rockets kept falling everywhere. After a few long minutes of this treatment, an elderly man lost his patience and went outside under fire, to go home, immediately overpowered by the other men.

It was time, for the shells kept coming. Our retreat looked more and more precarious, with rubble falling from the ceiling onto our heads. It was clear that we were being targeted and we knew that the car we had left outside would be in pieces by the time we got out of this hellhole. A lesser evil, especially as we had not suffered any casualties up to that point. Then a 122 shell hit five meters from where I was sitting, shattering not only the wrought iron door of the main entrance but also the second wooden door of the entrance hatch. Covered in rubble, an elderly man hit in the eyes by the flying stones and plaster shouting amidst the shards of voices, an authoritative female voice said: "Go down to the cellar! To the left, to the left! We had just met the courageous and admirable owner of the place, Raissa.

A grandfather dies in our arms. In single file, with our ears ringing from the impact, we made our way towards the friendly voice. Under our steps crunched many pieces of glass, shop windows and rubble, as we all managed to descend into the bowels of the building. It was a very solid and large cellar, running under the whole building, which also had a second floor. Groping around, some with the light of their phones, others with torches, we found several women and a child. His name was Roman, while a woman started to cry.

Christelle immediately took care of her, she was a shop assistant, whose two children were not far from there at their grandparents'. They, too, had to suffer from the bombing. She said she was not afraid for herself, but for them, it was two girls, 14 and 8 years old. Other civilians were here, a couple in their late sixties, other shop assistants and several elderly grandfathers. In spite of our calmness, and in particular the very reassuring presence of Kostia, the feverishness and a small wind of panic were palpable among these people.

Everything finally seemed to stabilize, especially thanks to Raissa, a woman mistress, who

encouraged these people with a strong voice. She was busy with a large multi-flashlight, bringing water and cups, offering food. We noticed that one of the grandfathers had been hit on the hand and forehead by stone chips and was bleeding. Kostia, who had a first aid kit, assisted by Christelle and Raissa, treated his wounds. Two men, however, could not get used to this cellar, while shells continued to fall here and there, sometimes hitting the building. The 45-year-old former militiaman might have been claustrophobic, he offered vodka which was upstairs, we flatly refused. When a grandfather, without us paying any attention, sneaked up the stairs to the upper floor.

Kostia understood the danger and went upstairs, but another shell was already exploding in the courtyard. This time it was a tragedy. Grabbing his first aid kit, he leapt to his aid, calling the men to the rescue. There were three of us around the old man. He was lying on his back in the middle of the shop. Cane and glasses lay next to him, he was hit very badly, especially in the left lung. The man was trying to catch his breath, we leaned his head on a paltry bottle. Soon the blood was pouring out, his right side was also riddled with shrapnel, he had several broken ribs. We tried to wash his gaping wound, hiding behind two glass refrigerators, illusory protections. We should have carried him to the cellar, but the shells kept falling. At the slightest attempt, we would be mown down and there were only two of us with bulletproof vests and helmets. He died in our arms, and we were powerless to do anything but acknowledge his death.

The relentlessness of the Ukrainian artillery. We all went down into the cellar, the old man covered by a cloth, we could do nothing more for him, we had to take care of the living. As we went down first, our other companions in distress looked at us, worried.

I didn't dare announce the death of the grandfather, which I finally reported in a whisper. The audience was stunned, as young Roman had just lost his grandfather. We did not know the family relationship he had with the deceased. I spent a lot of time talking to him afterwards. To keep his spirits up, I asked him what he liked, who his family was, what he did at school, his hopes and dreams. He told me he liked to play Minecraft and walk his young dog in the surrounding countryside, or spend time at his grandparents' house, which just happened to be very close to the place.

I showed him pictures of my own life, talked about my childhood and the discussion spread to other people. Confidence grew, then calm, as shells fell again and again all around. We already knew that we no longer had a car, which had been blown to bits by Ukrainian fire, and following the example of Raissa, whose shop was ravaged by shrapnel as the hours passed, we prayed that there would be no more victims. Material goods were nothing. Christelle told of her six-year commitment, her experiences at the front, what we were doing. They quickly understood that we could not stand Macron's irresponsible policy, not to mention Zelensky.

The minutes went by like that, very long, the women jumping at each impact, but the saleswoman and mother of the family then found the strength to joke with the militiaman who replied: "I will never again go to buy bread in the early morning, I swear it! Everyone laughed, as after four hours, the boy's family arrived at our shelter breathless, looking for young Roman.

The reunion was both terrible and joyful, everyone was crying and laughing, but they had taken a huge risk in coming here. When they arrived, they saw the grandfather's corpse, the shock was enormous, although they already knew the situation, thanks to the young boy's

telephone and to Raissa who had contacted the family to warn them of the events and of Roman's location. They decided to evacuate the place immediately, their car was waiting outside.

Everyone ran up and into the car, this time luck was with them and they were able to get away at full speed. After four hours of bombardment, which some in the cellar had been enduring for seven hours, the shells began to thin out. However, salvos were still falling, about every 10 minutes. It was necessary to be firm to prevent several of them from getting out of the rubble too quickly, others were already talking about spending the night here.

Open fire on the rescue. At last the firing ceased, but we waited a good hour longer, and then we were able to get out. People ran out of the ruined shop.

Outside our car no longer existed, a shell had fallen very close, it had been destroyed, a huge puddle of drain oil had formed around it. We found an intact camera tripod, glasses and a scarf, all that was left in the scrap heap.

When we came out, the landscape appeared cataclysmic: electric cables chopped up and lying on the ground, branches, debris of all kinds, Grad rockets embedded in the ground, shell holes, burnt-out cars...

The infrastructure and buildings of the mine were in ruins, the fire having caught and ravaged everything. In the courtyard, the miners were coming out in turn. Almost all the cars were destroyed. One lucky miner left with a motorbike, whose tyres were punctured. Cars were popping up everywhere, people were leaving, others were coming to pick up their friends or relatives, an ambulance was rushing by.

The ground was covered with large shrapnel, smoke was coming out of the ruins of the mine. All around was a residential area. Over there was a dovecote and cages that had been destroyed in a courtyard, a large shell hole standing in the middle of the courtyard.

Elsewhere there was Hurricane missile debris, pulverised roofs and more or less dazed people coming out of their houses. Without a car, we waited for a Korpus vehicle to evacuate us, and we took the opportunity to film and photograph.

We were not at ease, we knew that the Ukrainians did not hesitate to open fire on the rescue team. As the rescue vehicle approached the area, suddenly the shooting started again. A first shell and then a second hit the mine, we were very close and in the open.

We were very close and in the open. We ran out of breath to reach the vehicle and jumped into it, which started up with a bang. We were saved. Half an hour later we reached the Korpus, already the news had gone round that we had come under Ukrainian artillery fire.

We were very lucky today. Our reflexes, especially those of Kostia, had saved our lives, we couldn't help but think that we had good guardian angels too! It was the mine that was targeted by the fire and the surroundings of this civilian area.

This bombardment was designed to destroy and kill.

The debauchery of ammunition on civilian and non-military targets left us pensive... We felt angry, once again, what were the objectives of the Ukraine in this bombing and this destruction?

The Russians do not have fun shooting at areas not occupied by enemies or military equipment. The general impression left by this hot day was that the Ukrainians were reduced to impotence and to expedients of revenge.

Reduced to muddled strategies, punctuated by bloody failures such as the offensives near Kharkov or Kherson, suicide attacks, useless bombing of civilians and infrastructure in the Donbass, it was indeed despair and hatred that prevailed and still prevail in the Ukrainian staffs. They are reduced, before withdrawing sooner or later, to destroying and killing, again and again, in a madness that has already lasted eight years.

Eight years of absurd killing and destruction, in the name of what?

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