

Being a Man in Ukraine

In Ukraine, many, if not most men between the ages of 25 and 60 are “mobilized” - meaning they are serving within the military in some capacity. There are some exemptions: for incapacitating disability, having 3 or more small children, being a single parent, or having to caretake a seriously ill family member. Otherwise, the men are serving. Many women volunteer to serve as well and actually comprise a notable portion of the military leadership. As well, women married to men can serve together as a team. There is not a draft in place for women, however women with medical degrees are required to register for conscription.



In Ukraine, men enlist or they are drafted, and they go to the Front, or somewhere close to the Front, and there is no time limit for serving a term. Many have already been there for going on 5 years, only returning home for brief visits. And some have been at the Front for longer ... considering the Russian occupation started in 2014.

It's true that not all men end up in the military. Some are in jobs considered critical for the infrastructure, some students and academics can get deferment, some higher-level civil service workers or those holding public office can get deferment as well. But for everyone, conscription starts at age 17, meaning you turn in your information to register with the military.

Youth are eligible to get passports but in some cases the application can be denied for lack of military service. But generally, you can travel freely across borders until age 23. Leaving Ukraine is strictly restricted for men ages 25 - 60 (basically they

cannot leave). And if even with correct permissions for crossing a border out of Ukraine... it can be risky to open yourself to authorities. Ukrainian men overseas must also have registered and be following mobilization laws. And new arrivals to the EU, for example, are not offered legal status unless they can prove that they are exempt from military service and that they crossed the border legally.

Despite the harshness of a draft, and one where your service will likely expose you to danger - the Ukrainians really believe in this war. There is a general attitude that winning this war is imperative, and there is very high support for fighting and winning and not surrendering. Men take pride wearing their uniforms around town. Most of the Defenders have enlisted voluntarily. People are in survival mode, so it would be hard to say that morale is high - but the determination for them to keep their country independent, and a free democracy is with conviction.

Disability is common here, - just seeing the number of people dealing with 'something' is an eye opener. And, the people that are suffering the most I don't see. They are the ones convalescing behind closed doors, and undoubtedly there are many. The ones I do see on the street mostly handle it pretty tough, like strapping their crutches on a scooter to zip around town. In Vinnytsia, the percentage of disabled people is higher than in some parts of the country because people come here for medical care. The city already had expanded medical facilities in place, but since the full-scale invasion it has focused on further developing rehabilitation resources.

There are many types of war related injuries, and only the most disabling of them will qualify you for Veteran status. If you are injured you will typically receive the best care possible, with dignity and respect for your military service. However, resources are limited, especially in the rural areas. Based on your incapacity, you will be placed on temporary or permanent disability. Typically, injured Defenders will simply work in military areas that can accommodate their limitations. Some of them that qualify to be exempt from service and receive Veteran's benefits, will still choose to serve. Returning to civilian life can be hard.

There has also been the case now of "forced mobilizations". Men are required to carry papers detailing their mobilization status. They can be stopped on the street and be required to show their papers. If they don't have all this in order exempting them from service, they can be shoved into a van and taken away. This is real and serious stuff. A friend's stepmother described to me that her son was forcibly "mobilized". Whisked away in a van, with the clothes on his back, leaving behind his apartment, his cat, and a disabled grandmother. She says that he did have exemption papers because of his grandmother, but that they may not have been

current or properly validated, - that he wasn't the most functional of chaps. Anyways, he has been gone for a year so far.



I am curious to watch younger boys looking at this memorial wall for the fallen heroes. Wondering what they think of their future growing up with this view of the world. Knowing that in a short time their number will be called to go and fight and maybe die. How does that affect every way they move forward with their youth?

It must be remembered - that this war is not a war of choice for Ukrainians. They are defending their homeland. The steadfast hope for the land of Ukraine to be for Ukrainians has survived centuries of invasions. They have preserved their language, their art forms, their own patriotic folk songs, their foods... sometimes with great risk. For Ukrainians, Independence, finally realized for the past 35 years, has only reinforced this value. And they have chosen Democracy, and the free will of their people.

They are fighting against fascism for all of Europe also, and for the rest of the world. Ukraine is keeping Putin from further occupying more territory and keeping Eastern Europe from falling like dominoes. It lies on our shoulders - on the US, and Europe and the rest of the free world to step in. Putin just can't continue to senselessly bring in more men to die - just to destroy Ukraine.

The awe from the world about how amazing the Ukrainian people are - is well deserved. And Ukraine will fight to their death... but there are only so many men and women left to fight.

INVINCIBILITY НЕЗЛАМНОСТІ



In Ukraine you see, this word a lot: "invincibility".

Here it is again - carved into a missile shell casing, that had been offered as a gift, and placed humbly by the sink at the Rehabilitation Hospital.

I have had to parse out what this word means... how it is different from 'losing', or 'defeat' for example. In America, I had only thought of this word's meaning one way - that you had 'won' every time.

Yet, in Ukraine, it is hard to think of what 'winning' means. The losses from this war are so apparent. The obvious victims of war - managing the streets, and the buses, with crutches and wheelchairs... people with shrapnel scars and burns that you try not to look at... the mostly women patching the fabric of society together at the shops, raising the

children, staffing the offices - as the men are at war.

You don't see the missing dead, but you see the empty table at every restaurant reserved for the "fallen". You see the repeated funeral processions along the main boulevard. You are told that the cemeteries need new land to expand into. You hear from every family that there are empty chairs at the dinner tables.

In Ukraine, "invincibility" doesn't mean that you are not vulnerable. It doesn't mean that you don't have losses everywhere. It doesn't mean that Russia may not continue to try to occupy the whole country ... "Invincibility" here means that you will die before accepting defeat. It means that Ukraine will never be Russia - no matter what it costs the people.

It is also inevitable, in truth, that Ukraine... despite how often they are praised as "resilient", as "courageous", "so amazing" ... that they are literally running out of young men to fight; that civilians are left with no heat or power through the cold winters; that children are challenged to study while attending schools

underground... And that everybody holds the untold reverberations of this trauma, and will, throughout the generations to come.

And yet, Ukrainians still embrace this word "invincibility", НЕЗЛАМНОСТІ. Russia may come for more territory, and leave genocide and ecocide in their wake, but Ukraine will never stop being Ukraine.

Ukrainians will never accept defeat, and for that they will always be invincible.

It is up to us, in the countries that still have democracies, that will decide how much destruction we will tolerate. How many countries will we let fall like dominoes under Putin? ... when will it be that we finally also step in?

As for Ukraine, they have already stepped in with everything, literally everything.

Because they know that accepting defeat is worse than their own death. They may perish, but they can say "Україна ніколи не вмере", "Ukraine will never die".



a flag on the wall in the rehabilitation center (we are invincible)

What has already died in us, in America, that we have already succumbed to, that keeps us from showing up for Ukraine? What can we be reminded of? What that we can recover again, and step in for our Ally? I want to be a good American to my friend Ukraine, and I want my pride back as an American. I want to believe in something so much that I also will be invincible.