Military Mental Health in the Ukraine-Russia War. Interview with Capt. Oleh Hukovskyy, MD[1]

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ET: Oleh, we have been meeting since the beginning of this war and even before you were in the military. So let's begin this conversation between good, trusted friends and colleagues. Please start by sharing your personal history. We met when you were "only a psychiatrist" and not yet a military mental health officer. You wanted to serve in the Ukrainian military, not only to protect your country, but you also wanted both military and warrior experiences. Start there. Please share your evolution from a civilian psychiatrist. What were you seeking in becoming a warrior and having your "close encounter with war"?

OH: My evolution depends on which period of my life we focus on. Since my early childhood, I liked movies about Native Americans and all stories against oppression. I can find some roots of my decision and willingness there. Also, I was a weak boy. In power games and fights, I was always the loser. In my late school years, I started martial arts training and got a sense of brotherhood. I was the youngest boy in my section. This was an important initiation step because there was always, and probably still is, a place inside me where I'm fearful and afraid of this world, violence and other people. I experienced that throughout my childhood.

My father is still alive, and now we're not in the same roles and positions as in childhood, but he was a cruel dad, and I feared him very much. So, the impulse to fight against a superpower was always hidden in me, especially regarding injustice.

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My story regarding this war started in 2013 when the war in Ukraine broke out. It was not so visible at first. People thought, "Okay. It does not matter if Crimea belongs to Russia; it was always Russian." Though not true, that was the narrative. Until 2022, we lost 10,000 soldiers, more than the US lost in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I started working with veterans and active-duty soldiers, and in 2015 I quit my job to join the project on post-traumatic growth body-dynamic training using a peer-to-peer approach. I was a trainer, which was very productive for about two years between 2015 and 2016. Even quitting my job was a huge step because the head of the hospital is a relative of mine and perceived this decision as a betrayal of the whole family. And because I come from a family of doctors, it is unusual to quit a job in a public hospital, it's no easy decision in any country. Still, I had a strong belief that I could be more useful for veterans. I want to be close to those who protect our freedom. I discovered an important role as a trainer and put into practice what I did in my school years and martial arts – fulfilling that longing for having my brothers in arms around me.

Before the full invasion, I was involved in military resistance movement, preparing for some insurgent scenarios for Ukraine. Some friends and I were invited to join special operations forces. We participated in different trainings, working with ammunition, tactics, and tactical medicine. I expected to serve in this special operation unit because I am a medical professional, unofficially supporting psychological training for several months and training in tactical medicine. For half a year, I looked for other units to join before I got more education about being a military psychologist. I'm the chief of a mobile stress control group in a brigade; we consult, diagnose, and offer different types of recovery, rehabilitation etc. My goal is to become an influencer for policy in military mental health.

ET: Before we leave your history of attraction to the warrior experience, here is an interesting way to think about this: an American military chaplain who was deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan was writing about his experiences. People always ask, "Were you traumatised? I'm so sorry you went to war; you're probably psychologically wounded yourself…" He answered, "Don't ask me how

war has made me less than I am. The experience of going to war and serving with our people made me more." So, I ask with that in mind: what were you looking for personally from the military experience throughout your life? Also, with your devotion to protecting your country against the invasion of superpowers, how would you answer that question, has your military experience made you more, less, or some of each? Who are you now, and how did you change as a result of this service?

OH: Definitely, my military experience changed parts of my personality. Probably, some parts are more, some less, especially those I'm not using much, like contact with civilians and even some of my relatives. I try to keep my connections, but sometimes it can be boring, listening to their everyday problems, especially if they don't have this proactive position. I want to make a stand for my country, and they don't understand. Of all my relatives, I am the only man who's serving. In a way, I even think some are ashamed because my family is not a warrior family, and I had to serve in the place of all the men of the family.

I observe myself: I'm more direct in my communication, stricter, and I sound older than my age. I am very impatient with people who make promises they don't keep. I feel a kind of disgust for this type of behaviour. I've become more radical in this, for sure. I worry a lot for my son. This is a clear and concrete price I'm paying to serve my country – losing time to spend with my son.

After being in lots of hot spots, we moved to a beautiful area, and the Brigade is now locked in the forest: there are checkpoints, and the troops are not allowed to go and visit their families, not even for a few days, or to go out freely. Often, while I'm working with soldiers, they express their anger because I'm perceived as a man from the chain of command. When we try to process this anger, I feel powerless and shameful. It's like a moral injury.

ET: We've shared that you've been dealing with anger, low morale, and sometimes violent acting out among some of your troops. We'd like to hear more about how you deal with that. In a related way, I have experienced in our conversations over these two years that, in some ways, some of your own inner feelings and values have been changing as a result of the war. From your testimonials and what I've

heard from other Ukrainian troops and some of the news reports, it seems that with the war's endlessness and brutality and so many atrocities, you and other Ukrainian troops have gotten more angry, frustrated and hateful toward the Russians. In the beginning, you were working to try to not treat the Russians as bad as they had been treating Ukrainians. I think this has been changing as the war has gone on, and there have been more atrocities. So, speak about the emotional dimensions of service. With the war stretched on and on, and with many atrocities and actions against civilians and infrastructure and not just the military, how has that impacted you and other troops? How have you changed?

OH: I don't feel or have uncontrolled hatred. The Russians are enemies. We want clear boundaries and are not looking for connection or communication. It's forbidden and not needed. It's very clear to us – there is your land, your people, and there are enemies. For many soldiers, especially those on the frontlines, there are no abstract matters. They see Russians as targets, and the Russian soldiers see us as targets. We just try to kill each other to survive because they have a bigger army and more drones and gain on the frontline while we move backwards. For the soldiers, it's a simple choice. For civilians, I cannot say. I've heard of civilians who continue to listen to Russian music or speak the Russian language, and even in the military, many have a Soviet-oriented style.

There are all kinds of Russians. There are some whom we respect. We have a battalion of Russian volunteers fighting against their totalitarian army on our side. These are trustworthy people. Some artists make a stand against propaganda, war, and Putin. Many others just left Russia. These are trustworthy people, but most ordinary people in Russia have a slavery-like mentality because of Moscow's imperialism.

GC: It took a while before many people realised that the Ukrainians are not the same people as the Russians in history, culture, language, and so on. It's important to draw people's attention to this basic and profound difference because the war also implies narratives. So, it is critical to understand the history of countries if we want to understand why a war like the one you are fighting broke out and what the consequences are. It impacts people and their moral reactions. It can be a

source of moral injury, for example for those who have their families split between two different traditions, histories, and populations. Have you come across many Ukrainian soldiers who have relatives who are Russian or live in Russia?

OH: I have relatives in Ukraine, sisters and brothers from my grandmother, who took pro-Russian positions at the beginning, and I have not communicated with them for years. Several decades ago they started speaking Russian language and took this identity while living in Crimea. And then they adapt. Many people adapt – it's easier just to live. We have a lot of examples in the eastern parts, close to the frontlines: some people have pro-Ukrainian positions even if they speak Russian, but some people we call "waiters" are waiting to be liberated by Russia. But Russian missiles don't distinguish between pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian, they just destroy.

GC: It's quite a risky game!

OH: So, unfortunately, we have this split identity, especially in the eastern regions because we are on the border. For centuries we've been frontier. Look, for example, at what happened in this region during the First World War. But if we're talking about identity we are compared to Russians because we share one Church and language… so we have this split identity. When we start protecting our identity the Russians call us Nazis. But who is a Nazi if we're talking about war crimes? So, they're projecting a lot.

In periods of crisis, in some parts of society, people grow stronger. But we have lost a lot of amazing people. We heard the news of a guy killed on the frontline, a twenty-one-year-old man, the youngest soldier in his unit. When the Russians took Mariupol, our soldiers were hiding in this plant, and he was the youngest defender killed just two days ago. Every day we hear stories like that and have the feeling our tribe is dying. My friends and I share these feelings – we can rebuild the country, but who will do it after the war if the best people are dying? And then we think about how the Russians use ethnic minorities… people from Siberia suffered so many losses, not so much in Moscow. Thus, they are committing genocide on their people, their Siberian small people. And often we hear these stories – this guy was a rapist, this other guy a convicted killer – and they died in

our war. So, we are losing our best people while they are cleaning their genetic font. These losses are not comparable. Not number-wise but quality-wise they're unequal, for we're losing the best people.

GC: This is horrible, it's the first time I hear things like this. I suppose it's not the kind of news that goes around. I wonder how deep the scar can be in a country like Ukraine. How difficult can it be to fix this damage and mend this wound?

OH: Very difficult, this is one of the biggest topics. What I'm hearing from soldiers, is a huge question: many divorces happened. Very much depends on physical distance. Compared to many soldiers I'm fortunate to see my family and especially my son. I don't say I'm satisfied with this frequency, but I had many chances for short visits, and I hurt my spine in a car accident, so I spent two months at home. You can be demobilised only if you're badly wounded. There is black humour: you can be demobilised in two ways – by being killed or escaping. This is the cruel truth but we are still in danger of being fully occupied and destroyed as a country.

ET: We received the news that you Ukrainians recently reduced the draft age from 27 to 25. So, what would you say about older people and younger people in service, and about women in service? I heard that recently a young woman medic was killed in your unit, and she was only about twenty. Tell us about older troops and younger troops and how they're doing, what their special needs are, and in general how Ukrainian people are looking at this significant loss of the more service-ready adult population.

OH: Young people say they're losing the best years of their lives and they compare themselves with – I call this a moral injury – the life of the "golden youth" they see on Tik-Tok, Instagram, and other media, where people live and enjoy their lives, while they and their friends are in the trenches. Today I was talking to my friend, who is 23 and an orphan. About one month ago he got diabetes because of stress. And now he's crossing his fingers and says, "Now I have diabetes maybe I have a chance to quit the army". That's not what young people should think about. I hugely respect him because he was courageous enough to join the army. You hear amazing stories about how people live their lives, and what values they have. And

camaraderie is important, so they stay in service. Younger or older doesn't matter; all people say, "only because of my camaraderie I don't quit the army, because I have been fighting for two years and would be perceived as a deserter." They don't want to ruin their reputation. They create strong bonds, and even though they suffer many people continue to fight because of these bonds. Older people cannot take all these physical challenges – running with ammunition, and wearing the bullet-proof vest, which is very heavy to carry. 90% of people probably suffer from back and spine troubles because they are constantly lifting heavy weights, knee problems and several concussions. People are just sick, and it's difficult to distinguish psychological stress. It's body-mind – they're physically, physiologically and psychologically overwhelmed. It's too long, too heavy.

ET: Is there a perception at all that this is a civil war?

OH: Not at all. Now we have one-fifth of our territory occupied by the Russians, and they use the men from the occupied territories to fight against us. This is why Europe must support us: they may face the same destiny. If the whole Ukrainian territory is seized the Russians can push against Europe. They have a cruel and psychopathic attitude toward people they use as cannon fodder. They occupy territories and then force men to fight their own citizens. While it was more popular to talk of civil war in 2014, now with the full invasion Russia has shown its true colours. We are fighting against Russia, these are the enemy: they are using our people, but they are using other people, they are perpetrators. So no, we don't have this idea of a civil war. But this is what Russia used in their propaganda before the full invasion. They sent professional soldiers without markings to Crimea and said, "we're not here". They said, "it's the crazy Ukrainians who are fighting a civil war."

GC: Before the full invasion started, there was a war in the Donbas and the Crimean Peninsula. I remember, though, it was not called as such, we didn't hear this word. It's as if a broad part of society is completely detached from what is happening and we live in a bubble.

OH: On May 9, we had Remembrance Day. Russia celebrates it as Victory Day, but we changed it to the European way. After the Second World War, you in Western

Europe had the longest period of peace in all history. You had Franco's totalitarianism, and Italy and Germany had different recovery periods; despite the splitting of Berlin and Germany into two parts, there was no active war except in the Balkans until the 1990s. And people get used to living in peace! But we experienced in Ukraine, especially in the first stage of the war, when Russia attacked near Kyiv, occupation, brutal killing, and torture. And people said after the occupation that the Russians were behaving like savages. They did not expect our level of civilized comfort in Ukraine and told us, "How dare you have such a quality of life!" They even stole our toilet seats. They stole ordinary things from washing machines to underwear and showed cruelty out of envy. Compared with other European countries, we are poor. We can have small but beautiful houses with flowers, and we keep them in order. The Russians just behaved like wild men. And in the Second World War – it was the Red Army then – they behaved in the same way in Germany, raping and stealing. In all wars, the Russians show cruelty out of hunger.

GC: Your testimony reaches beyond what I could imagine about the situation. I understand that the availability of information is limited and that many people in Western countries have no idea of these things you are saying. We don't want to look at it, we don't want to hear about it.

OH: That's why journalists should highlight some topics, not to cause emotional pain in the Europeans but to keep them aware and keep them pushing their governments to support our troops. We are a buffer of protection for Europe: the Russians will easily fight with the Balkans or Poland, so it is cheaper to uphold us now and then have a stronger partner.

ET: To what extent do you in Ukraine see yourselves as not only trying to preserve your country but also protecting all of Europe and the West? You're on the border, many of us believe that if you fall Russia will continue, and I'm on the other side of the world. In the United States, there's much less concern and awareness of this. When the United States sent troops overseas, ever since the Second World War, only a minority of people served, and most Americans tried to stay ignorant. And now we have one ruling political party that doesn't want to support Ukraine at all.

So, to what extent is Ukraine conscious of being a protector of all of Europe and your own country?

OH: We don't feel we're in this role of heroes or guardians of Europe, but we are looking at the facts: sometimes the Russians cross the borders, and they threaten to use nuclear weapons, and radiation doesn't stop on the borders. They took our nuclear station and created this threat for all of Europe and the whole world. We perceive Russia as a cancer – that's Moscow's empire. And empires tend to expand, not to stay within their borders. What do you say on Remembrance Day? "Never again." Do you know what the Russians say? "We can repeat." They are not talking about Ukraine. When they have occupied Ukraine, what do you think – having a powerful army, people and resources – will they stop? They want to go forward because they are not afraid of sanctions or NATO. With the Budapest Treaty, we were betrayed by the US, Britain and Russia because we were robbed of our nuclear weapons that were sent to Russia in the 1990s after the Soviet Union broke down. They said, in that Budapest Memorandum, "We will protect you." We are fighting those who said, "We'll protect you" and then attacked us.

GC: Europe is trying to avoid the defeat of Ukraine. Politicians say, "We must do anything to avoid that Russia prevails". Do people in Ukraine feel that they are being used by European countries just to stop Russia from expanding westwards?

OH: No, I don't think we feel like that. For our part, we are grateful for all the support we get and the soldiers on the frontline are glad for every shell and bullet they can have, for they raise our chances of survival. So, it's simple on the frontline: the more weapons you get, the more chances you have to survive. So, we are grateful and from every international platform we ask for more because we need more. It's simple maths, there's nothing to do with your intentions or feelings. We cannot focus on that. We have simple mathematics on the battlefield: who has more weapons has more chances to win and survive. We were not supported for several months, and that generated a very complicated situation on the battlefield. And it may happen again soon. It's a bloody mess. So, we are grateful for any support. Just keep going, continue! It raises our morale. Our folks are rising when we hear some country has started sending missiles, jets, or money, or training our soldiers.

When we hear these stories of international bonds, we know that we are not alone and it's hugely important for the soldiers to know that they've been taken care of as much as possible.

ET: As a mental health officer, can you share your perspective on the degree of psychological trauma you have to work with and what works or doesn't work, what you're able to do for the mental health of your people?

OH: I appreciate a lot what the US and NATO have created regarding mental health standards. For example, in Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, there is Battle Mind debriefing. I see that even if the war has a different scale, there are methodologies that work. We need to improve our communication skills because our army consists mostly of conscripted civilians and often higher officers with a Soviet-style: they know how to obey and give orders, but they do not know how to communicate with the personnel. Practices like after-action review and briefing are not yet established in our culture. Even before, talking of levels of support, even before going to mental health professionals there are lower layers: self-support, buddy care, good leadership, then mental health professionals come. That works well. We must deal with not only psychologically exhausted or traumatised, but chronically traumatised people. It is not PTSD, it's called – and there is even a scale for it – continuous traumatic stress. We don't have recovery periods to create PTSD. We're constantly coming from acute stress to further acute stress. We have these short periods my teacher Ditte Marcher calls "intermezzos" but not months to develop PTSD. There are symptoms like aggression, a lot of nightmares, and moral injury. The biggest moral injury I can tell about is this – we have a lot of POWs and MIAs – missing in action. A big moral injury is when we are fighting, and many people are killed, for example, when bombs destroy buildings, and it is not possible to recover the bodies. Their comrades live with unresolved grief, and they usually avoid talking with killed comrades' relatives because it's too overwhelming. Another moral injury, a very specific one to the Ukrainian war, stems from this war of drones: you, in a way, see your enemy and your enemy sees you. Drones can see the bodies lying on the field, but because of intense fighting, you cannot collect those bodies, so you see your comrades lying

on the ground. You feel powerlessness, so imagine what people feel about that. Every day, cases of traumatic stress happen because of the deaths. And then, in Ukraine, we can say we have a bad tradition – Brigades don't talk much with relatives. Usually, regional recruitment centres do the liaison, but relatives cannot get social support if they don't have the body. Even if you saw someone die, you cannot prove it. So, he becomes MIA, not KIA. And if someone is MIA, the family does not get any financial support from the state. You can imagine how many systemic social problems this can create. After all that, you can come to mental health professionals. And often mental health professionals are facing social problems and cannot help with that. When I come to my troops, they are angry and start shouting at me, "Why don't we have vacations?" I cannot help with that; I just stay with them and contain our common powerlessness.

GC: This reminds me of the conditions of soldiers in the trenches of the Great War when they could not go home for many months and had to live among the bodies of their comrades, unable to take them back behind the lines.

OH: Our war is a combination of the First World War and Star Wars. We have trenches and massive deaths, and then you have drones and satellite connections, so it's like war online. At the same time, the conditions are very similar to those in a position war.

GC: I am afraid that we only see one side of this war. When we see images from the news, the effects of bombings on the cities, we do not fully understand what it means to be on the frontline. At the beginning of the war, sanctions were enforced against the oligarchs and everybody thought it would be a good solution. It did not work.

OH: They gained! Russia has become richer than it was before. The Western world has developed a good military culture, you have very advanced weapons, and you deploy them for short periods usually against underdeveloped countries like Iraq. You never faced equally developed or even more powerful armies, because you always gain control of the air. Our situation is the opposite. Missile attacks are the worst threat to the whole of Ukraine. Every night, jets or drones can destroy every part of Ukraine. And since we are facing such a brutal enemy, we can make a good

military partner for the European countries because we can share our experience. Many countries have programs for Ukrainian soldiers. So, we have the chance to learn from each other. We have the experience but not always good soldiers because most of those are civilians. The army had 200,000 soldiers but rose to one million and is constantly renewed because of the losses. You can imagine that several million men came through the army. So, we have a short time to prepare them, but people get much experience. This was my main message when I was visiting America: you have the resources and the methodology, but we have the experience. Let's learn from each other. One of my wishes is to do research in the Army on important issues like chronic stress, moral injury etc. because we need to create better policies to support our people and need data and research for that.

GC: We can learn much from you and what you're going through if we have the opportunity and the willingness to listen to your stories.

OH: I'm not like a "military-military", I'm more of a healer, a warrior-monk, so I want to inspire people. I am witnessing the rise of new heroes, and all societies need good role models. People who serve their country and community – these kinds of stories are very important. Thank God I did not lose close friends, but I lost friends. Two weeks ago, I lost one, he had just married two months before. He was an amazing guy and one of his abilities was to be a video operator. He made a movie called "Generation's Heritage" about the connection between our war and what happened during the Second World War, concerning the mystical bonds. He made this movie and now has lost his life because of a bomb. Societies often say "Our armed forces are heroes" but soldiers don't like it because we call heroes those who die. When you're out there, you want to live and be respected for that. But we can share stories and their eternal relevance in all societies. Two days ago, I talked to a friend, a retired colonel and chair of the NGO Military Leadership, who asked: "Can you find any comrades, who can share their stories about their leadership, especially original and unusual leadership?" He collected stories about fallen soldiers because this is also a way to make them immortal if their stories are shared not only as narratives but also as examples. So, my friend is collecting them.

ET: This was a very important conversation. The things you shared will help people to better understand the suffering and the situation in Ukraine.