

The image of the military of the Russian occupation army among the residents of the city of Kherson through the prism of oral history

Oleksandr Cheremisin (ORCID 0000-0003-0173-0489)

Kherson State University (Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine)

Halyna Mykhailenko (ORCID 0000-0002-1160-8754)

Kherson State University (Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine)

The article is dedicated to highlighting the image of the military of the Russian occupation army that was formed among the residents of the city of Kherson during the 2022 occupation period. The methodological basis of the research became oral history. This made it possible to focus on the life stories of narrators with different experiences and levels of life stability. What was experienced by the residents of the temporarily occupied city turned out to be an unexpected event for everyone and had an impact on their further lives. The authors relied on fresh memories, as their advantage lies in the important potential for reconstructing events, the image of the occupiers, and studying the experience. By recording the narratives of witnesses of contemporary events, we are dealing with factual and documentarily valuable interviews, which constitute the source base and will not be preserved in archives, while simultaneously providing researchers with answers to atypical questions. The article reveals the image of the Russian occupation army's military in many dimensions: the rules of life that the Russian military introduced in the occupied city; how local residents went through checks at checkpoints; observations of the military, how they behaved with civilians; how communication with the occupiers took place, with what difficulties they had to face during departure; how the Russian military conducted searches, detentions, arrests, and interrogations; how they abused civilians, keeping them in basements. The plots that the authors focus on could not be captured by photo and video cameras, and therefore the only way to learn about them is through documented interviews with eyewitnesses of these events. In the conclusions, it is emphasized that the Russian occupiers were remembered by local residents as wild, uncivilized tribes from the east, who were aggressive towards the peaceful civilian population. They tried with all their might to build a "ruskiy mir" in Kherson and to show in their media that Kherson residents were happy with this situation. However, this was completely contrary to reality, as the population of Kherson was extremely negative about this alien element that destroyed the city's natural development. The image of the occupiers was exceptionally negative, as they destroyed the existing communication systems and infrastructure, mocked the civilian population, shot at and dispersed peaceful protest rallies, and banned freedom of speech, etc. The unique experience of the struggle of the self-organized civilian population is highlighted, as it conveys the essence of the resistance to Russian military aggression. In general, the article reveals numerous details of people's unique experiences under occupation: the atmosphere of occupation, the crimes of Russian troops, the torture of the civilian population, and the defense of their rights and freedoms by the Kherson residents, including the right to a Ukrainian future.

KEYWORDS

*Ukraine,
the South of Ukraine,
Kherson,
civil resistance,
population's
self-organisation,
freedom,
occupiers,
oral history.*

Introduction

The relevance of the examined problem is based on the profound reconsideration of the statuses of the South of Ukraine and Kherson, intensified under conditions of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukrainian territories. The events of the past three years have led to fundamental transformations in

the perception of Ukraine's modern history. It is important to understand the course of the ongoing full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war using the example of the occupation of Kherson in 2022 and demonstrate the dominant role of Ukrainian and European factors in developing the territory of the South of Ukraine and Kherson in particular.



al.cheremisin@gmail.com
irida55@ukr.net

© The Author(s). Published by Borys Grinchenko
Kyiv Metropolitan University



Few studies on the events of the Kherson occupation in 2022 have been published recently. We can highlight the research of Kherson scientist S. Vodotyka (2022), who tried to show in his study how life in Kherson changed in the first weeks after the city's occupation.

In his article, S. Kostyuchkov (2023) considered the model of Kherson region's political branding. He identified the specificity of the formation of a territory's political branding by the media under conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war using the example of Kherson region, namely the city of Kherson and the village of Chornobaivka.

It is notable that a series of popular science books were written about the occupation of Kherson in 2022. Still, they mainly contain fictional images, which focus not on facts but on the emotional perception of the shelling and the seizure of the city by the occupiers. An example of this is the book "Kherson Essays" whose authors shared their reflections on the city's occupation, described their experiences, and expressed emotions.

The scientific consideration of the period of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is just beginning. It should be highlighted that the previous studies focused on the city residents' everyday practices, and their authors did not use oral history to analyse and conduct thorough research into the specificity of the Kherson model of occupation.

The study aims to analyse the documented oral history evidence to reveal the full-fledged image of the Russian occupation army in Kherson between March 1, 2022, and November 11, 2022. The value and significance of this evidence is related to the fact that Kherson residents could see the true essence of "the Russian world".

The main task of the research is to reveal the full-fledged image of the Russian occupation army and consider the processes that occurred during the temporary occupation of the city.

Research methods

The research methodology is based on the method of **oral history**. It allowed us to document the evidence of Kherson residents of different ages and social backgrounds who directly communicated and interacted with the Russian military stationed in Kherson in 2022.

Studies based on oral history are not new in the history of Ukraine. They were widely used in the works on the history of the Holodomor of 1932–1933 and in the studies on the events of World War II. This method was also applied to collect testimonies about the Holocaust, the Afghanistan war, etc. For instance, T. Tkhorzhevska (2022) studied the oral history of Odessa urbanisation in 1950–1980 and underscored the discourse of the "alien" factor in the processes of Odessa urbanisation. H. Hrinchenko (2012) determined the paradigmatic value of understanding the relationships between thinking, memories, and experiences for oral history and characterised an oral history interview as a social fact. L. Ballard (2007) focused on developing the methodology of oral history. A. Boiko (2015) studied the oral history of the Steppe Ukraine. W. Noll (1999) used oral history to study the civil society transformations in the peasant culture between the 1920s and 1930s.

The main focus of this study is on the factor of a recently experienced event in times of crisis, which left a significant mark on the memory, and we can argue that memories were preserved in full. H. Bondar (2021) underscored that the experiences of the participants of the Revolution of Dignity, ATO/OJF veterans, and other people define oral history as an instrument of returning the people who made

and lived the history to its central parts, allowing them to speak with a full voice. Interviews make it possible to see the modern history from the inside: to reveal the experience which cannot be gained without changes, which is important regardless of its consequences, profound internal changes, and traumas. It is notable that the event participants not just evaluate its significance but are documentary sources of what happened. The stories of people staying in Kherson during the occupation are very important since neither photos nor videos can reveal the depth of those events and instil ethical and psychological content into history. Therefore, the voices of those who survived the occupation are very important for interpreting modern Ukrainian history.

Oral history opens up a significant number of perspectives for researchers. This war can be legitimately called the most documented war in history. Still, it is oral history narratives that allow for immersing oneself in the atmosphere of a particular reality and demonstrating the fundamental changes in people's lives against the backdrop of global historical transformations. The full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war opened a new period in Ukraine's history, in the centre of which was a large number of people who had to search for answers to many questions and form their strategies of life/survival in different ways. Therefore, it is reasonable to collect and analyse the oral history testimonies of the eyewitnesses of the events of the Kherson occupation.

Similar practices of collecting evidence took place after certain historical events ended. Uniqueness of our research consists in the fact that documentation of the experiences of the full-scale war took place at the stage of the ongoing historical event: the occupation period for Kherson residents is over, but the Russian-Ukrainian war is still in progress.

The research was carried out as part of the initiative topic of the Department of History, Archeology, and Teaching Methods of Kherson State University, "Kherson Occupation and Liberation: the Antonivskyi Bridge, the Buzkovyi Park, and the Heroism of Civil Resistance" from May 2023 to March 2024. The authors interviewed 137 respondents (63 males and 74 females) of different ages and social and professional backgrounds.

The respondents can be divided into three age groups: 1. Born in the 1950s–1960s, 2. Born in the 1970s–1980s, 3. Born after 1991. They lived in different districts of Kherson and nearby villages (Antonivka, Chornobaivka, Kyselivka, Stanislav, and Bilozerkha).

The respondents were representatives of different professions: civil servants, private entrepreneurs, secondary school teachers, kindergarten teachers, university teachers, unemployed, homemakers, retired military personnel, sports school coaches, pensioners, employees of social and psychological services, volunteers, journalists, employees of the pension fund in Kherson region, students, workers of the Kherson Academic Theatre, libraries, accountants, priests, and employees of advertising companies.

The vast majority of respondents agreed to share their memories under their real surnames, and only three respondents expressed a desire to use pseudonyms. Given the above facts, we can conclude that the level of representation of the respondents is quite high. All of them experienced personal communication with the Russian military. Many respondents remembered the dialogues they had during the temporary occupation of the city and were able to reproduce them verbatim.

Some of the transcripts have already been published in two collections of documented oral history evidences, "Chronicle of Kherson Civil Resistance in the Dimensions of Russia's Full-Scale Aggression against Ukraine in 2022" (compiled by Doctor of History, Professor O. V. Cheremisin).

Results and Discussion

The image of Russian occupation forces in Kherson residents' minds

All the respondents were asked the only question: "What image of the Russian military did you have in your mind?"

One hundred per cent of respondents answered that they had a negative image of the Russian occupation forces in 2022.

The respondents communicated with Russian occupiers in Russian since using Ukrainian was dangerous because the Russian military did not understand this language, which made them angry and could have tragic consequences.

The newcomers with weapons from Russia seemed to the local population violent people who often failed to control themselves. The armed Russian military's attitudes towards others' property or lives were demonstratively disrespectful and aggressive, hence their presence caused anxiety and uncertainty in the local residents, and the people were scared. However, it resulted in a stronger sense of the Ukrainian national identity, patriotism, and the desire to fight back against the enemies.

The new forms of social interaction triggered the process of creating informal institutions acting as a voluntary organisation – the municipal guard whose task was to maintain law and order in the city because there were no Ukrainian law enforcement agencies after the seizure of Kherson.

This voluntary organisation played an important role in maintaining law and order at pro-Ukrainian rallies that became a significant factor of self-organisation and resistance to the armed aggression in Kherson at the initial stage of the occupation. The city residents spontaneously gathered at rallies to demonstrate their protest against the invaders.

The factor of the presence of the "alien" immediately became apparent to the local residents, and that led to the formation of a new level of local and national identification, in which new levels of social interaction were formed and nurtured. The pro-Ukrainian rallies in March 2022 were one of the most important interactions of this type. They became a significant foundation for spontaneous resistance to the occupiers and influenced the fact that Kherson was awarded the title of "Hero City" by the Decree of President of Ukraine V. Zelenskyi (2022).

The factor of the "alien" was so rejected by the local population that the phrase "Kherson is Ukraine" became the main slogan. Thus, the identity of most residents consolidated around Ukraine, which was considered a modern civilised country.

The fundamental differences were identified in the concepts which are typical for the local population: freedom of speech and self-organisation. People from Russia could

not understand how rallies were organised to protest against their actions. They thought it was necessary to look for those who organised the process (they were not found), apparently not understanding that such rallies can manifest a common idea and people can gather spontaneously. Self-organisation became a part of Kherson residents' everyday life under occupation: searching for food products for family, helping those in need, informing about Russians' movement in the city and their checkpoints, and gathering for protests.

Civilisational differences, for instance, in the development of the information society, were also evident. Many Russians did not understand what wi-fi was or thought that the Internet was in the wires, hence they cut them off and sent them to Russia, being completely confident that their relatives would be able to use the Internet there. In contrast, digital resources, which helped us survive the occupation, were commonplace in Kherson.

Many Kherson residents spoke about the dominant mental state of fear. It largely prompted people to take different actions: avoid direct contact with the occupiers, delete information from gadgets, not look out of windows, etc. However, despite this, people had to go on living, searching for food and water for themselves and pets, standing in long queues, especially in the first months of the occupation. Therefore, a general occupation atmosphere of hatred, rejection, and disobedience dominated, and psychosis developed in many people. Various survival strategies were developed in it.

The unlimited desire to rob is another feature that qualitatively distinguished the occupiers from the local population. Halyna Berehova¹ noted:

Generally, they were going from one house to another and searching for partisans. They wanted to see what people had at home and what could be robbed. They took everything they saw, everything they could take from the house. One older woman had several hundred hryvnias in a bundle, which she had saved for her funeral, and they took even that small amount of money. Thus, they took absolutely everything. It is clear that they liked vehicles and grabbed everything they could – cars or boats. They did not just take everything they could, they crashed and broke things. They smashed and destroyed everything. They had some abnormal psyche. Damage everything, devastate everything. And these are inhuman impulses. They had pathological anger and hatred. Or whatever was driving them.

The respondents generally did not have a single image of the occupiers but differentiated between them. The Russian military were divided into Russians, Chechens, Buryats, Yakuts, LPR/DPR soldiers and others in Kherson residents' perception. They mainly differentiated between the occupiers by ethnicity. At the same time, hierarchical relationships were observed within the Russian army. For instance, the Russian military were the so-called elite, they took care of themselves, bathed, and shaved. Chechens and Buryats constantly argued, could not divide the things which they had robbed, and tried to prove to each other who of them was more Russian. Yakuts did their utmost to prove to the local population that they were Russians, but they failed to confirm it. The military from LPR/DPR could speak Ukrainian and try to prove to the local residents that they were not alien, but the respondents remembered them as the most undisciplined, smelly soldiers who were confident that Kherson

¹ Berehova Halyna Dmytrivna, born in 1960, in the village of Horkoho, Beryslav district, Kherson region. O. Cheremisin conducted the interview on May 15, 2023. O. Cheremisin deciphered the audio recording and created the transcript.

residents were guilty of bombing Donbas for eight years and had the right to take revenge for the hostilities in 2014–2022.

The respondents used different names for the Russian military. They called Russians “orky”, “katsapy”, “ruskiie”, “moskali”, and “occupiers”.

Describing the image of the occupiers, the respondents emphasised that they were people who lived in a different reality and a separate world. In particular, they were sure that they came to liberate Ukrainians and bring civilisation with them, though their looks were careless and clumsy, and their uniforms did not fit them. They were surprised by the availability of wired Internet in the settlements and the great number of gadgets possessed by Kherson residents. Even asphalt in villages and light in garages evoked genuine surprise in them.

Kherson residents tried not to approach or communicate with the occupiers avoiding the Russian military. As a result, the Russian military often initiated communication, which was burdensome for Kherson residents. There were cases when the occupiers dressed in civilian clothes and began to talk to the locals. Still, Kherson residents quickly recognised the aliens and behaved restrainedly, not to say too much. Language was a common means for recognizing the Russian military. The respondents noted that Russians spoke “a Katsap dialect”, which could not be confused with anything else at a phonetic level, and it was different from the Russian language used by the locals in their everyday life. Moreover, the smell was one of the elements differentiating “friends from foes”, and many respondents highlighted that the Russian military (especially Buryats) smelt awful, which identified the occupiers.

The respondents and the Russian military mainly communicated at checkpoints, in shops, and when the locals left the occupied territories. The peculiarities of this communication formed the general image of the occupation forces.

The occupiers spoke little at the checkpoints, mainly checking documents and telephones, verifying surnames against their lists. They spoke rudely and did not initiate discussions. When the locals left the territories occupied by Russians for the areas controlled by Ukraine, the Russian military often demanded money, alcohol, and food from the locals at the checkpoints in addition to checking their documents and telephones. There were cases when the occupiers offered civil Kherson residents to buy weapons when the locals were leaving. For instance, Oleksii Biletskyi², who communicated with the occupiers at one of the checkpoints in spring 2022, recalled:

In terms of morality, the checkpoint was quite illustrative. My acquaintances who passed through it spoke about their demonstrative emotionality, and they offered everyone to hold a grenade or buy ammunition. They were a kind of jokers. They were sort of courting my mother, let's say, they were starting a dialogue: “We want to sell a grenade to you”. And mum replied: “But I don't know how to use it”. And the soldier retorted: “Listen, I'll teach you. Listen, beautiful, have a look here” (with a Caucasian accent). They tried to communicate in this way almost with every car. They said to me: “Brother, listen, put on the handbrake, so you don't roll away” (with a Caucasian accent).

The occupiers largely evoked negative emotions in the respondents: fear, rage, hatred, sometimes pity, and often confusion. Many Kherson residents did not know how to

talk to them properly since it was difficult to predict their further actions. For instance, the priest of one of Kherson Orthodox Churches Oleh Horokhovskiy³ shared his experience of communication with the occupiers:

They freely entered the church, it was after Easter. They could freely enter and search, but the church was functioning. The commandant came, and he kept trying to enter, but I didn't let him in. He said: “I'm a Muslim. Let's go to the church and have a chat”. I replied: “Let's talk in the yard”. “Why?” “You are armed”. He gave me the weapon. I said: “You've got a knife”. He retorted: “This is a table knife”. I said: “I don't know if there is blood on it or not”. That was all. The most serious thing was: “Speak Russian”. I said: “I can't, I don't know how to speak it”. He picked on me because of my birth date since it was zero-two, and he asked: “What is zero-two?” I retorted: “What is it? Zero-two is zero-two”, and I forgot what was the Russian for it.

Oleh Horokhovskiy was destined to communicate with the occupiers not only in the church, which was brazenly visited by the armed Russian military. He was also one of the witnesses of the battles for the Antonivskiy Bridge, and it was he who received the occupiers' consent to take the bodies of the dead and communicate with the occupation forces. He recalled this episode of his life in the following way:

It was on March 8. It seems there was a call, and we were at a church service, then Ihor Savchenko, the cemetery director, came. He said that we had to go because we were allowed to gather the bodies of our soldiers. They said they were lying around and stinking. He asked me: “Can you go?” Father Valentyn, the rector of our church, was serving a liturgy and asked me if I could go. I agreed. At that time, there was a checkpoint near the Antonivskiy Bridge, about 150–200 meters away, with machine gun nests. Cars were stopped, checked, and searched. I put on a cross as a priest and we drove up there, stopping about 50 meters away from that checkpoint. I got out. I put my hands in the air, asking them in this way if we could approach them. They waved their hands to show that we could. They were wearing balaclavas, just looking around. I came up and asked them: “Can we go to collect the bodies of our soldiers?” They were calling each other using some numbers. I remember one of them said: “Six, six, come here”. He came and asked: “What's the matter?” I said: “Can we go nearer to the bridge and go up to the top?” He replied: “Yes, you can go”. I said: “Please, warn them there not to shoot us”. He answered: “They will be warned”. They spoke Russian, and I spoke Ukrainian. It took them a long time to understand Ukrainian. They did not understand it at.

While we were approaching the bridge, the petrol station on the right bank, and the bypass road to Mykolaiv, we were driving slowly and sticking our hands out of the windows so that they could see them. When we were driving, we saw our smashed APCs on the right, IFVs everywhere, cars burnt, and our equipment standing there. In those first minutes, we felt confused, and it was not easy. Then we approached, and Sashko, a Gypsy, was driving a funeral car, and I said: “Where are you going?” and six green anti-tank mines were lying on the road. And he asked: “What's that?” I shouted: “Pull over!” He braked: “What's the matter?” I said: “Mines!” He replied: “I didn't know they were mines”. We almost hit the mines. They were laid out across the road. When we stopped and looked up, we saw that on the other side of the road, about twenty people were looking at us with guns pointed at us and shouting to stop. We did not hear or see them. I got out and raised my hands. They still had me at gunpoint, and I shouted to them: “Can I come to you?” They waved at me allowing me to approach. I was cautiously approaching them. There were our tanks, they were not broken, just ran out of fuel. I approached them, but they did not allow me to get close. They kept me at a distance of about fifteen meters. They

² Biletskyi Oleksii Serhiiovych, born in 1989, in the city of Kherson, Kherson region. O. Cheremisin conducted the interview on March 15, 2024. O. Cheremisin deciphered the audio recording and created the transcript.

³ Horokhovskiy Oleh Ivanovych, born in 1979, in the city of Kherson, Kherson region. H. Mykhailenko conducted the interview on March 15, 2024. H. Mykhailenko deciphered the audio recording and created the transcript.

asked me: "What are you doing here?" I said: "Those from the checkpoint were supposed to call and tell you that we were going to collect the bodies". He replied: "Our radio is dead". I turned my head and saw the soldiers standing on the road edge and holding us at gunpoint. It is good that they saw that I was a priest. And a weird bearded man ran from the other side, he was not a Russian. I identified him as a chicha. He asked: "Why have you come?" I did not speak Russian with them, only Ukrainian. I was told to speak Russian many times, but I cannot. Honestly, I cannot. I said: "We have come to collect the bodies". He asked: "Do you take Nazis?" I replied: "Who are the Nazis?" I did not understand at first. He said: "Let's go and see". We came to the road's edge and saw three men lying there. One did not have legs because they were blown off, and another did not have an arm. They threw them on top of each other into the water channels. I asked: "I that all?" He replied: "No, there are many more lying there". I said: "Let's take them from top to bottom". We must have travelled 800 meters and saw that there were many bodies lying here and there. People had grown tomatoes there, and there were greenhouses. Kherson residents know it, and we started collecting from those greenhouses. We collected nine bodies. I asked Russians if they were not mined, so as not to get blown up. They replied: "No, everything is clear, we have checked them". On that first day, we collected our guys' bodies, they appeared to be from our territorial defence, not "Nazis" as that "chicha" said. We returned, and Ihor Savchenko, the cemetery director, got in the hearse. We went to the cemetery and took them to the morgue on Starostina Street. Their DNA was taken, and then they were buried. It was a first and challenging moment when we saw what that war did to the human body, equipment, etc.

Then, on March 10, I received another phone call and was told that a car had burnt on the bridge, and another body was lying there, and I had to come and take it away. We went there, but more calmly than before. However, we were still scared because there were people with guns looking at us and we did not know what was in their heads. We went to the bridge, and I even managed to take pictures of the bodies we were taking away. First I

took pictures, and then we loaded the bodies, but nobody accompanied us. On March 8, we were accompanied by "chicha" who had taken someone's moped, was riding it, and showing us around. We went to the left bank, and a guy was lying there without arms and legs, half of his head was missing. He was our soldier because he had Ukrainian chevrons. We took his body, put it in the hearse, and covered him with an oilcloth. At first, we thought to put the body into a bag, but we had no bags, so we had to roll up the oilcloth and put the bodies on top of each other. We had to do that. We travelled further. We will probably never forget that we saw a big greasy stain with pieces of clothes. It was on the Antonivskyi Bridge. We stopped and realised that it was a man crushed by tank tracks. It was just a big greasy stain about three metres by three metres. We had nothing. We did not have a shovel or anything to take this mess away. The only thing I saw was a centimetre-by-centimetre piece of a chevron with Ukraine's flag on it, the one which is usually on a soldier's sleeve. We were standing. What could we take? I said: "Let's go to the Nairi" (author's note – a café on the left bank of the Dnipro River, at the exit from the Antonivskyi Bridge). We went to the left bank, and there were many of them. We stopped. There were machine gunners holding us at gunpoint. One of them asked: "What are you doing here?" I replied: "We are collecting bodies". He said: "Well, collect them". I replied: "Ok". He said: "Go to the greenhouses, your APC is there, and a guy is lying near it". We went there again. Indeed, a guy was lying there. I took a picture of him and saw some lumps in the field. While driving along the bypass road, we saw our guys lying there. One of them had no pelvis. We tried to take one guy away, dragging him, and his intestines were unwinding on the grass. We had to pull those intestines. Then we took another guy. Then we saw a broken civilian car a little further away. We approached that car. There was a shot woman in it. It was a Mercedes car. It was ours, from Kherson, because it had Kherson number plate. About twenty metres away, there was a man without legs, half of his spine was torn out. Animals had already started to eat him.



Foto 1.



Foto 2.



Foto 3.



Foto 4.

Photos 1, 2, 3, and 4 were provided by Oleh Horokhovskiy. The bodies were found near the Antonivskiy Bridge in Kherson, killed by Russian forces.

Then, there were tanks in the gardens, one tank started up. We were so afraid that they would make one shot and we would be gone. But it made some noise and stopped. We drove about 150–200 metres further, there was a bend in the road between the gardens to get back. We came to that bend and saw Z-KAMAZes driving at a high speed. What could we do? I got out of the car, stood in front of the hearse, and raised my hands up, holding a cross. They drove at a terrible speed and carried the wounded, with machine gunners sitting on the top. Some did not aim at but just crossed themselves seeing the priest, and at that time, everything was roaring near Mykolaiv.

They all passed. There were about ten KAMAZes, they drove away, and we turned around. We were going, and I said: "Wait, have look". I was sitting near the window and saw what was happening along the road, some things were lying there. We stopped and approached those things, and there was a girl born in 1992, it seems because she had everything on her. She had been killed and was lying in the ditch with a shopping trolley, the so-called "kravchuchka", probably, she was running to escape, but she failed. When we started to pick her up, we saw that half of her stomach was missing. We loaded everything, came down, and then a guy stopped us: "What are you carrying?" I got out and said: "Let's go and see". I opened the car and showed a heap of dead people. It took him aback: "Take them. That's all". Then I opened the hearse at the checkpoint, and they replied without questions: "Go".

In total, we collected up to twenty bodies, including civilians and soldiers. I could not take pictures on the first day because it could be life-threatening. That was all.

After that, the routine began. When a Z-vehicle was coming, we hid. If we did not hide, we were scared. If a dog started barking, we had to go out. Funerals and worship services were held at least twice a day, with up to 5-7 people. It was every time, every time. This is how it happened.

Moreover, five respondents were arrested and interrogated, and two more respondents were tortured in basements – one was there for 47 days, and the other was for 70 days. These respondents were intimidated and, in addition to physical pressure (they were often beaten with hands and feet and tortured with electric shock), psychological pressure was applied, for instance, they were repeatedly told that they would stay in a Russian prison for 15 years. These respondents were told by FSB officers that there was no freedom of speech, and that people had no right to do anything that the occupation forces did not like. The respondents described the psychological pressure as something very severe that caused depression, and they told us openly in the interviews that they had already said goodbye to their lives.

One of the respondents, Oleh Akimchenkov, described his detention by Russian forces in the following way: "They brought me in. I was hung on a grid. I hung on that grid for about ten hours. How was it? They hooked my arms. I stretched my arms along the grid. I was told to stand on my toes to touch the ground a bit, and then I was strapped to the grid. That's how I was hanging. I had a bag on my head. It was there all the time. Sometimes I was hit from behind. I did not see who hit me. I was unstrapped in the evening. They took me to a cell. That's all. Then they brought me for interrogation. That's all. There were no tortures anymore. They did not feed me, of course. They took me to the toilet every three or four days. That's how it was".

As we can see, the Russian military kept the arrested in awful, unsanitary conditions, almost without food, conducting constant interrogations, tortures, and beatings.

Oleh Akimchenkov's¹ impressions of Russian occupiers were highly negative:

Scum. Just scum. But it depends. Those policemen who guarded us in Oleshky were our Ukrainian guys working in that police station and collaborators. But they treated us normally, because FSB officers brought us. They did not have any influence on us. We were not criminals. We were like political prisoners. How was it? Their attitude was normal. It was sort of normal. Even. We were not beaten and tortured, and we were not forced to do anything. We just sat and sat there. And those FSB officers – they were convinced that we were the Nazis, that they came to liberate us. Well, as for me, they were scum. Well, they followed orders. Although the statutes of all countries say that if an order is criminal, it must not be followed. There were clever guys. They were FSB officers and clever guys. There were not only fools there. But they could also be cheated and deceived.

Another Kherson resident, Hryhorii Arutunian², experienced the brutality of arrests and interrogations. He described this episode of his life in the following way:

I was arrested at the beginning of March 2022 and informed that I was on some lists. I was arrested not by my surname but by my car number. It was my car number that was on their lists. They handcuffed me and took me to the house where the FSB officers were sitting. They took my telephone, checked everything in it, and looked at my messages. They asked me for my entire biography: where and when I was born, who I was married to, and where I worked. They asked me about all my relatives. Then they started asking me about messages in my phone, and there was my correspondence with a relative about the events in Kherson on March 1, 2022. My relative asked me in her messages: "How are things with you? What is going on?" I answered that Russian soldiers were driving around the city and shooting at houses. And the Russians told me that I was lying and nobody was shooting anywhere. I said that they must have been out of town that day and they arrived later, I worked as a taxi driver, was driving around the city and saw everything with my own eyes: Russian tanks were driving around and shooting at houses. I said: "As a taxi driver, I can tell you the addresses of the houses they shot at. I am not lying; I am telling you everything as it happened". Then they took my footprints and photographed me. Then they checked my wallet and asked me with a surprise: "Why do you keep money here?" I told them that it was just in case there was a breakdown in my car and I had to repair it or call a tow truck. They ordered: "Hand over your weapons". I replied that I had no weapons and had never possessed any. They probably thought that I was in the territorial defence, but I did not participate in it. They listened to me and said that I could go. They did not take anything, gave everything back, and told me that they would watch me. When I went out, my heart was pounding, and my hands were shaking because I was very scared. The atmosphere was very oppressive, everything they did was based on intimidation. There was a moment when I decided to joke with them, and a soldier with a machine gun told me: "Why are you laughing? Now, we'll make it fun for you, and you won't have any fun at all". After that, I understood everything, just sat silently and answered questions. I was neither beaten nor tortured, but I was scared, very scared. And came I out, my hair got even greyer.

The occupiers tried to instil fear in the city's residents and stop manifestations of disagreement and disobedience in this way. The occupiers mainly behaved extremely aggressively with the arrested and did not apply any international conventions, and hardly knew about their existence, but they distinguished between political and criminal detainees.

Those respondents who had been interrogated by the Russian military described interrogations as a game of good and bad policemen – one exerted psychological pressure, the other seemed to protect. The essence of interrogations was to find as much information as possible and make a detainee collaborate with them. If the respondents refused, they were accused of collaborating with the SSU. During the interrogations, the respondents noticed that the Russian military worked according to the same scheme: they said that it was Ukrainians who had infected them with the coronavirus, that they wanted to restore the USSR, which would be better than the previous one and that Ukrainians and Russians would be brotherly peoples. They scared them that Ukrainian children could become Nazis. The Russian military also asked the respondents about the prohibition on celebrating May 9 and reading books in Russian.

In general, the respondents thought that the occupiers were people from the past. They spoke using common standard phrases, forgotten by the local population, and idioms about the brotherhood between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples. But brothers do not come with weapons, hiding behind masks and killing.

The fact that the Russian military covered their faces with masks left a negative impression since the respondents perceived the occupiers to be terrorists, as Ivan Mrynskyi³ said in his interview.

"Life in the occupation for me was like being a hostage of terrorists" – this is how Anna Stelmakh assessed her stay in the occupied city. She was not able to leave Kherson since the occupiers found pro-Ukrainian information in her telephone during filtration checks and charged her with Article 27 "threat to the Russian Federation" and promised to come and "re-educate"⁴ her.

Other respondents testified that the occupiers seldom behaved in a friendly manner with the local population and were often wary, aggressive, and distrustful when communicating with the detainees.

Chechens stood out among the Russian military. The respondents did not see them often. At times, they wore military uniforms, and other times, they were dressed in civilian or sports clothes. Overall, the testimonies indicate that Chechens were supplied with the necessities reasonably well, possibly to prevent them from looting.

The respondents also noticed frequent visits of the Russian military aimed at searching. They mainly searched for enforcement officers, volunteers, pro-Ukrainian people or members of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. For instance, one respondent, Iryna Zarivniak⁵, witnessed the occupiers searching an apartment in the block of flats where she

¹ Akimchenkov Oleh Volodymyrovych, born in 1966, the city of Kherson, Kherson region. O. Cheremisin conducted the interview on July 18, 2023. O. Cheremisin deciphered the audio recording and created the script.

² Arutunian Hryhorii Norikovich, born in 1963, the city of Kherson, Kherson city. O. Cheremisin conducted the interview on June 12, 2023. O. Cheremisin deciphered the audio recording and created the script.

³ Mrynskyi Ivan Mykolaiovych, born in 1976, the city of Kherson, Kherson region. O. Cheremisin conducted the interview on June

28, 2023. O. Cheremisin deciphered the audio recording and created the transcript.

⁴ Stelmakh Anna Kostiantynivna, born in 1986, the city of Kherson, Kherson region. H. Mykhailenko conducted the interview on August 1, 2023. H. Mykhailenko deciphered the audio recording and created the transcript.

⁵ Zarivniak Iryna Sviatoslavivna, born in 1970, the city of Kherson, Kherson region. O. Cheremisin conducted the interview on June 20, 2023. O. Cheremisin deciphered the audio recording and created the transcript.

lived. She said that they came in an armed personnel carrier, broke down the door to the apartment, searched everything, and then left having found anybody and anything. They left without apologising, though an older lady with a disability lived there, and the door was not restored.

They also managed to frighten a 16-year-old daughter of the respondent during the passport check by failing to understand what an ID card is and how to use it. After this incident, the girl was afraid to go outside until the end of the occupation.

Similar facts of searches were also mentioned by other respondents – Pavliuk Serhii⁶ and Sachko Daria. They said that during the searches, all belongings were rifled through and scattered⁷.

There is also a group of respondents who said that the occupiers came to their homes with propaganda. During such meetings, the Russian military told them how the Ukrainian Armed Forces were shelling civilian settlements. Naturally, the respondents did not believe in such stories of the occupiers since they had seen with their own eyes how the Russian military shelled civilians, arrested them, put black bags on their heads and took them away in an unknown direction.

Kherson residents witnessed many facts of terror of the civilian population by the Russian military. They forbade the city's residents to use the Ukrainian language, Ukrainian banking, communications etc., and the violators were severely punished. The "Ural" vehicle symbolised Russian terror: most people understood that if such a vehicle came to a particular address, people living there might not be seen later. People did their utmost not to meet with the occupiers or to avoid inspections. For instance, women hid telephones in their underwear.

Many respondents witnessed the Russian military's looting. They went to the homes of people, especially those who had left, in groups and looted them. It was so immoral that some respondents felt disgusted recalling it. The looting procedure was not very complicated: they usually came to a house, broke or smashed the door and windows and took the most valuable things: household appliances, video equipment, mobile phones, washing machines, toilets, and microwaves. One of the respondents said that the occupiers had stolen a multi-cooker and could not understand how it worked, hence they just smashed it.

Instead, the occupiers tried to behave more or less decently in public places. For instance, they praised the local products in shops and said they were better than Russian-made products. If they had to choose whether to buy the local or Russian products, they always choose Ukrainian products. In shops and markets, they paid exclusively in hryvnias though they forbade the local population to use the Ukrainian currency.

The image of the occupiers was impacted by their pseudo-referendum in Kherson at the end of September 2022 on the accession of the occupied territories of Kherson region to Russia. The respondents emphasised that the occupiers were more polite before the pseudo-referendum, asking the local population if everything was okay, if they needed help, and if anyone offended them. At the same time, during the pseudo-referendum itself, they were walking along the streets with firearms and threatened to kill people if they did not participate in it. At that time, most

Kherson residents hid in their homes and did not go outside to avoid accidental meetings with the occupiers. The local population declared a boycott of the Russian referendum, refusing to participate. Kherson residents' homes became shelters for them since in those days. The Russian occupiers, trying to create an illusion of democratic expression of the will, did not use force or break into homes [Cheremisin, The Chronicle of Civil Resistance, 2023].

After the occupiers announced the results of the pseudo-referendum with 86% of the vote, Kherson residents had a logical question: "Where did they get these results?" since they saw with their eyes that most city's residents did not support the occupation forces and the polling stations were empty. This gives grounds to conclude that the referendum was fake, and its results were falsified.

The last factor influencing the occupiers' image among the local residents was the process of evacuation from Kherson. Most respondents noticed that the presence of the Russian military had become unbearable by October 2022. Kherson appeared to be an uncomfortable place for them and it was not easy for them to stay calm. As soon the occupiers were distracted, they were shot by partisans, as soon as they settled anywhere, the Armed Forces of Ukraine used artillery strikes against their concentrations, and the local population, through special resources, willingly shared the information about their locations. And by autumn, one could see the occupiers praying for an order to retreat from the city.

Their evacuation started in the second half of October. It was accompanied by the occupiers' looting archives and museums and even removing the city monuments. In addition, for Kherson residents, it was the time when the occupiers destroyed the Antonivskyi Bridge before they retreated to the left bank. This bridge connected the right and left banks of Kherson region and the entire city infrastructure – Kherson residents were left without electricity and water supply. By some miracle, only gas supply was available, allowing many city's residents to survive until the infrastructure objects were restored.

Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that the occupation period demonstrated numerous differences between the local population and Russians in their worldviews, attitudes towards the possibility of free expression of their thoughts, the ability to organise themselves and arrange everyday life. All of this contributed to the rapid formation of the "alien's image" regarding Russians. Nobody of Kherson residents greeted the armed aliens with flowers, in contrast, the residents loudly declared their protest and rejection of the order imposed by military force in their city. The alienation of Russians was evident in everything: the manner of speaking, the cultural sphere, the levels of civilisational development, basic and fundamental values, etc. In Kherson's social-cultural dimension, the aliens stood out for their great cruelty, unmotivated and illogical behaviour, the desire for destructive forms of social behaviour. New manifestations were evident in the development of civil society in Kherson: voluntary associations of civilians aimed at maintaining law and order in the absence of Ukrainian enforcement agencies; spontaneous self-organised pro-Ukrainian rallies; the voluntary patriotic movement "yellow

⁶ Pavliuk Serhii Mykolaiovych, born in 1978, the city of Kherson, Kherson region. O. Cheremisin conducted the interview on July 22, 2023. O. Cheremisin deciphered the audio recording and created the transcript.

⁷ Sachko Daria Viktorivna, born in 1989, the city of Kherson, Kherson region. O. Cheremisin conducted the interview on May 31, 2023. O. Cheremisin deciphered the audio recording and created the transcript.

ribbon”: the associations of civilians for self-defence and property protection.

In general, Kherson residents had a distinctively negative image of the occupiers: they were seen as wild, uncivilised, backward “people from the past” who stopped the civilisation development of the city of Kherson and threw it many years back, destroyed communications and infrastructure, prohibited the freedom of speech and faith, etc. Consequently, such practices caused the formation of an exclusively negative image of Russians among Kherson residents.

The city residents identified the “alien” Russian element as the one characteristic of savages and barbarians who destroyed everything civilised and modern in their path. The difference was so apparent that most eyewitnesses mentioned it. Based on our observations, Russians were really admired by our lifestyles, even at the ordinary household level. They were surprised by the access to electricity in garages, many household and mobile appliances, the lack of wells for water supply, and the availability of piping systems and asphalt roads between villages (especially – in villages!). At the same time, the residents of the occupied city emphasised a high level of the Russian military’s cruelty. The occupiers mainly evoked negative feelings in the respondents: fear, anger, hatred, sometimes – pity, often – confusion. Many respondents just did not know how to talk to them properly, and it was difficult to predict their further actions. Most memories refer to the Russian military in Kherson as looters, thieves, abusers, torturers, and killers.

Acknowledgement

The authors are very grateful to Kherson residents who, despite the painful memories of the terrible times of the occupation, agreed to be interviewed and help us bring the crimes of the Russian occupiers to the world community.

REFERENCES

- Ballard, Leslie (2007). *History of Oral history. Foundations and Metodology*. Lanham, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UA: AltaMira Press.
- Boiko, A. (2015). *Oral History of Steppe Ukraine*. Vol. 11. Zaporizhzhia: AA Tandem. (in Ukrainian)
- Bondar, H. (2021). Today, History is Being Made in Ukraine. Oral History and the Experiences of Unfinished Revolutions and War: Reflections on the Controversial and (Un)Obvious, in *Listening, Hearing, Understanding: Oral History of Ukraine in the 20th-21st Centuries*. Kyiv, ART BOOK LLC. (in Ukrainian)
- Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 111/2022 "On the Establishment of the Honorary Distinction 'City – Hero of Ukraine'. Retrieved from <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/1112022-41577> (in Ukrainian)
- Hrinchenko, H. (2012). *Oral History of Forced Labor: Method, Contexts, Texts*. Kharkiv, NTMT. (in Ukrainian)
- Kostyuchkov, Serhii (2023). *The Formation of a Political Brand of a Territory Through Mass Media in the Context of the Russo-Ukrainian War (The Case of Kherson Region)*. *Current Issues of Politics*, 71, 101–107. <https://doi.org/10.32782/app.v71.2023.14> (in Ukrainian)
- Mykhailenko, H., Cheremisin, O. (2024). *Kherson 2022: With Ukraine in Our Hearts*. Sumy, University Book. (in Ukrainian)
- Noll, V. (1999). *The Transformation of Civil Society. Oral History of Peasant Culture in the 1920s-1930s*. Kyiv, Rodovid, Center for Oral History and Culture Studies.
- Tkhorzhevskaya T. (2022). Odesa Through the Eyes of "Those Who Came": Oral History of Urbanization in the 1950s–1980s. Odesa, Polygraph. (in Ukrainian)
- Vodotyka, Serhii (2022). The City That Wasn't Afraid: Kherson in the First Months of Russian Occupation. *Modern Ukraine: International Intellectual Journal* https://uamoderna.com/md/xerson-u-pershi-misyaczii-rozijskoi-okupaczii?fbclid=IwAR3OkpuqVOluy7BoH_-7zqkkRq0r86wRgdg9NZBnrxEjzegW9ND9hVsSIng (in Ukrainian)

Образ військових російської окупаційної армії у мешканців міста Херсон крізь призму усної історії

Олександр Черемісін (ORCID 0000-0003-0173-0489)

Херсонський державний університет (м. Івано-Франківськ, Україна)

Галина Михайленко (ORCID 0000-0002-1160-8754)

Херсонський державний університет (м. Івано-Франківськ, Україна)

Стаття присвячена висвітленню образу військових російської окупаційної армії, що сформувався у мешканців міста Херсон протягом окупаційного періоду 2022 року. Методологічною основою дослідження стала усна історія. Це дало змогу зосередити увагу на життєписах оповідачів із різним досвідом та рівнем усталеності життя. Те, що переживалося мешканцями тимчасово окупованого міста, виявилось для всіх несподіваною подією та справило вплив на подальше життя. Автори спиралися на свіжі спогади, оскільки їхня перевага полягає у важливому потенціалі реконструкції подій, образу окупантів та вивчення досвіду. Записуючи оповіді свідків сучасних подій, маємо справу з фактографічними і документально вартісними інтерв'ю, які становлять джерельну базу та які не будуть збереженими в архівах, водночас – дадуть дослідникам відповіді на нетипові питання. У статті розкривається образ військових російської окупаційної армії в багатьох вимірах: правила життя в окупованому місті; перевірка місцевих мешканців на блокпостах, труднощі під час виїзду; поведіння та спілкування російських окупантів з мирними жителями; репресивні та каральні заходи окупаційної влади щодо цивільного населення. Сюжети, на яких

акцентують увагу автори, не могли потрапити в об'єктиви фото і відеокамер, а тому єдина можливість про них дізнатись – це документовані інтерв'ю із самовидцями цих подій. У висновках наголошується, що російські окупанти запам'ятались місцевим мешканцям як дикі, нецивілізовані племена сходу, які агресивно відносились до мирного цивільного населення. Вони всіми силами намагались побудувати «руській мир» в Херсоні і показати в своїх медіа, що херсонці раді такому становищу. Проте це цілком суперечило реальності, оскільки населення Херсона вкрай негативно ставилося до чужинського елемента, що зруйнував природний розвиток міста. Образ окупантів склався винятково негативний, адже вони зруйнували існуючі системи зв'язку та інфраструктуру, знущалися над цивільним населенням, розстрілювали та розганяли акції мирного протесту, забороняли свободу слова тощо. Ви-світлено унікальний досвід боротьби самоорганізованого цивільного населення, який передає суть спротиву російській військовій агресії. Загалом, стаття розкриває численні подробиці унікального досвіду людей в умовах окупації: атмосферу окупації, злочини російських військ, катування цивільного населення, а також відстоювання херсонцями своїх прав і свобод, включно з правом на українське майбутнє.

Ключові слова: Україна, Південь України, Херсон, цивільний спротив, самоорганізація населення, свобода, окупанти, усна історія.

Received (Надійшла до редакції): 01.05.2025,

Accepted (Прийнята до друку): 20.06.2025

Available online (Опубліковано онлайн) 30.06.2025