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ON THE GROUND: FIELD RESEARCH IN UKRAINE

“It was difficult to calm down soldiers during the massive air and artillery strikes... sometimes it was hard to explain that we need to keep this position, however hard it was. Mine and my friend's weight was very important at that time. We had to be an example for our soldiers. I was scared too. But I said to my soldiers that Russians are also flesh and blood... and your families are behind you, the enemy is cruel and has no mercy. I was convincing myself not to leave the position. Nobody left their positions. Neither my guys, nor those from other groups.” – A Ukrainian section commander's account of holding a trench position on the banks of the river Iprin, the frontline in the defence of Kyiv¹

IN July 2022 I co-authored [Battle studies: The need for primary source research](#), making the case for primary-source field research of conflicts, during conflicts. We argued that primary source field research, as soon after the battle is as reasonably practicable, and based on participant interviews and battlefield visits, is essential to close gaps in the understanding of the reality of modern combat. Remote observation and research, largely based on open sources, has become one of the predominant means of understanding contemporary conflict. While remote and open-

source research is important, we argue that it is insufficient for military learning. Field research provides necessary context for the detailed analysis of combat, complementary to other forms of evidence and research methods.

In late August 2022, with the support of the [Madison Policy Forum](#) and several research partners, I spent two weeks in Ukraine with a Ukrainian research partner conducting field research on the early-2022 defence of Kyiv. I interviewed Ukrainian officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers who fought in the battle for Kyiv and I walked the

battlefields. Our field research in Ukraine follows from our belief in the importance of this approach and its relevance to military practitioners in learning lessons from contemporary combat. This is planned to be the first of several research trips, all of which will be necessary to produce a credible history. We will publish a report on this first phase of research in the coming months.

This essay offers some initial reflections from this field research trip, focusing on the challenges and practicalities of conducting field research while a conflict is

¹Interview with *Ukrainian Soldier*, No. 11.

ongoing. I also offer some first insights and impressions of what field research can offer. What follows should be taken with the caveat that it is impressionistic, anecdotal, and personal. Our views will evolve and change as we accumulate both new evidence and field experience. The hope is that others thinking about field research in Ukraine and elsewhere may find something of value in these reflections.

OBJECTIVE

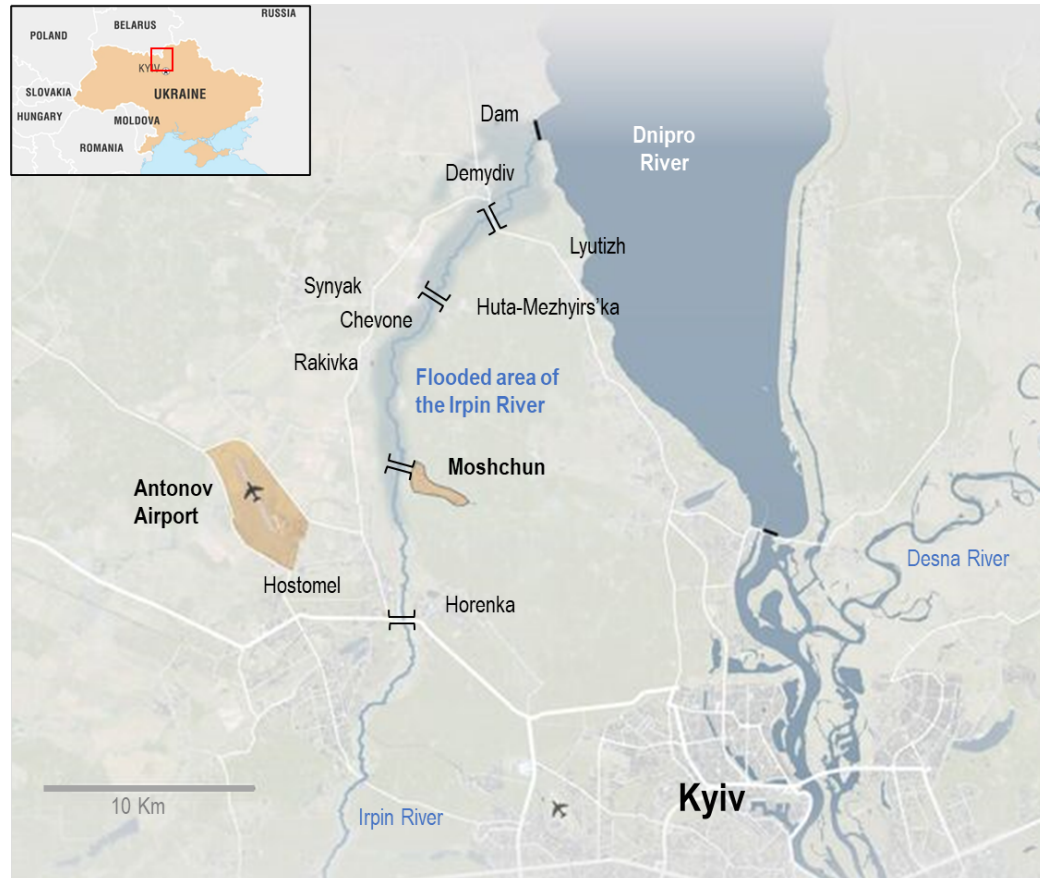
Our initial research focused on the village of Moschun, which is located on the banks of Irpin River, northwest of Kyiv. I visited there briefly in May 2022. My initial impressions and other open-source evidence suggested that Moshchun was one of the decisive battles in the 2022 defence of Kyiv. However, shortly after we arrived in August and conducted a first ground appreciation, we realised that Moshchun was part of a larger military story. We expanded our area of interest to include battles fought along the length of the river Irpin, from Lyutizh on the banks of the Dnipro, through the villages of Huta-Mezhyhirs'ka, Moschun, to Horenka (see map inset). This frontline was defended by the 2nd Battalion, 72nd Mechanised Brigade of the Ukrainian Army. Russian ground forces took up positions from Hostomel through Chervone and Demydiv along the T1002 road. The river Irpin became the dividing line between the two forces. The Russian army attempted multiple river crossings in March to break through Ukrainian defensive lines and reach the outskirts of Kyiv, but failed.

APPROACH AND METHOD

Our aim is to produce a military

²C. V. Wedgwood, cited in Douglas Warr, *Decline to Fall, The Making of British Macro-Economic Policy and the 1976 IMF Crisis*, (New York, 2008), pp. xi.

³Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*.



“THE DEFENCE OF KYIV IS ALL THE MORE REMARKABLE WHEN YOU RETELL IT NOT KNOWING WHETHER UKRAINE WOULD OR COULD WIN.”

history of the battles, useful to military professionals with insights for practitioners. The historical approach places value in chronology, rebuilding the narrative, placing actions and events in relations to each other, in time and in place. We are attempting to tell the story from the start, acknowledging the conditions of uncertainty in which military decisions were made. As the historian C.W. Wedgwood put it: “History is lived forwards but it is written in retrospect. We know the end before we consider the beginning and we can never wholly recapture what it was to know the beginning only.”²

We aim to recapture what it was for Ukrainian forces to know only the moment that they were in. Much contemporary analysis of the war is produced with hindsight woven through it. However, decisions in battle are made in every moment and

at every level under perpetual uncertainty with countless possible outcomes. Think back to where you were and what you thought on the 23rd February 2022. Recall what you thought on the morning of the 24th. We asked our interviewees to start their story from a time of their choosing before February. Their reflections are inevitably tinged with knowledge of what came, but their diary entries and messages exchanged with families and colleagues provided an insight into their assumptions, actions and decisions. The defence of Kyiv is all the more remarkable when you retell it not knowing whether Ukraine would or could win. “To begin at the beginning...” is the best way to tell a story.³

WORKING WITH UKRAINIAN PARTNERS

Central to our research efforts was our Ukrainian research partner and the support we had

from Ukrainians. Successful field research and interviews cannot be conducted without the consent and support of the communities involved in and affected by the battles in question. Local research partners are essential to successful engagement, participant recruitment, and negotiation; we could not have completed any of our field work without them. We are very grateful to our Ukrainian research partner without whom none of this would have been possible.

The ethics of conducting this type of research were the first considerations and an ongoing discussion amongst the team. As we engaged Ukrainians to establish our interviews and battlefield access, we took every opportunity to explain our work and to seek appropriate local consent. We took a trauma informed approach to our engagement with potential

interviewees.⁴ Our Ukrainian partner identified potential interviewees. Interviewees were fully informed about the project, our research questions, and the intended outputs of our work. If an interviewee declined, we accepted that without question. Interviews were conducted at a time and place of their choosing. We used a semi structured interview approach which in the first half allowed interviewees to tell their story, in the way they wanted. All interviews were anonymous and voluntary, and each interviewee was provided with a written and verbal informed consent declaration. They were free to withdraw consent at any time, and we checked with them as the interview progressed.

Our research was conducted with the permission and accreditation of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence. We were asked to abide by a [code of conduct](#) primarily meant for international media, but which was applicable to those doing research. With accreditation, we were free to work without an escort or minder. Accreditation was important to identify ourselves at checkpoints and to verify our work. Security was vigilant wherever we went, but once verified, we were generously facilitated. Operational security remained a continuing concern and where we were asked to abide by local restrictions, these were explained to us fully and requests were reasonable.

With the consent of both the Ukrainian government and our interviewees, we were free to work unobstructed and



Above, remnants on an attempted Russian river crossing and (left) discarded equipment found on the banks of River Irpin

without interference. In being forthcoming about our work and explaining our intent, we often found that people highlighted things we would otherwise have missed. In one village, a farmer, understanding what we were trying to do, guided us to an area where Russian forces had tried to cross the river by pontoon bridge (shown in the photographs above).

INTERVIEWEE OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

In our [original paper](#) we argued that “field research adds essential

context to historical narratives, and oral interviews place people back in the centre of the story, where they belong”. The stories shared with us reinforced the importance of people being at the centre of the story. As historians Perks and Thompson argue, oral history has a richness that can document aspects of historical experience that tend to be missing from other sources.⁵ They stress the uniqueness and importance of understanding the active human relationship between interviewer and interviewee in oral histories.⁶

“The narrator not only recalls the past, but also asserts his or her interpretation of that past, and in participatory oral histories projects the interviewee can be historian as well as the source.”⁷

That active human relationship is

both powerful and problematic from a research perspective. Even with the best of intentions human memory is powerful, fallible, vivid, creative, shifting, shaped by emotions and time. This is well understood in the social sciences, psychology and in history. These factors can be accounted for, and the personal narratives shared become one of many sources used. To borrow an analogy, oral history interviews are an engine, not a camera.⁸

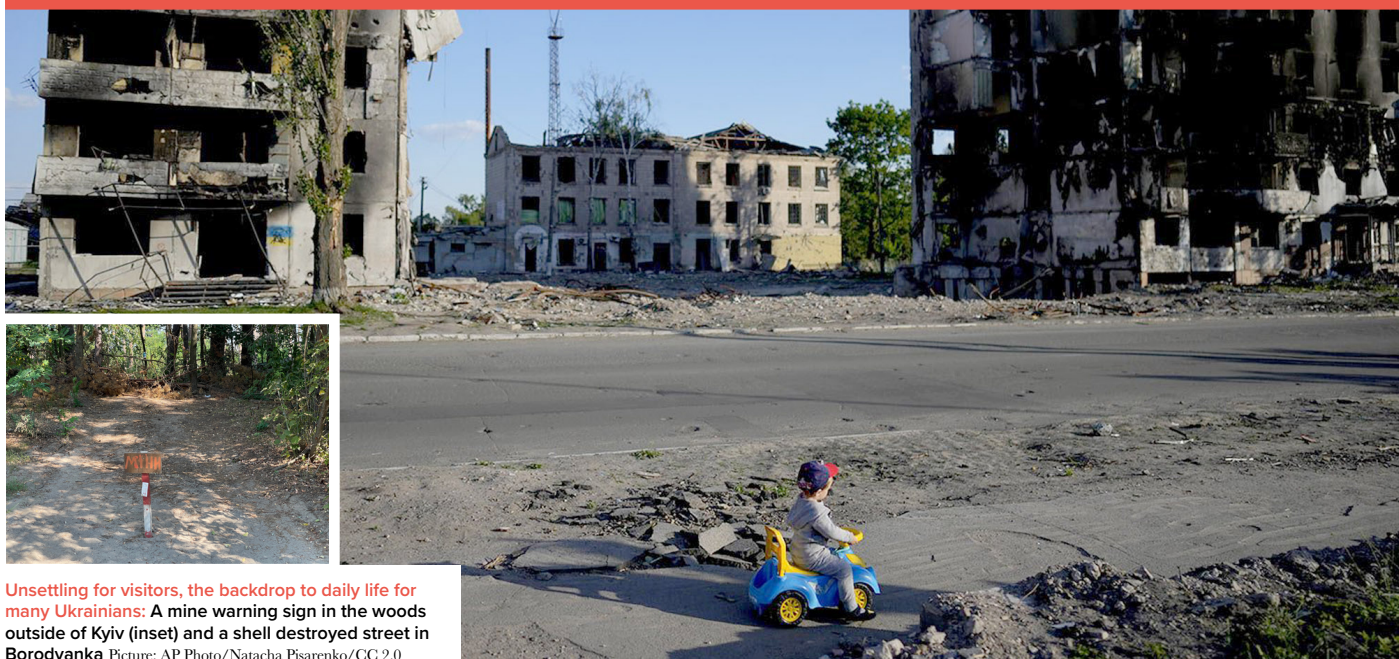
Some interviewees took us back to the areas in which they fought and guided us around, using the walking tour as both a chance to aid their recollection and to better explain what happened. We had an iPad with mapping apps available for interviewees so that, if they chose to, they were able to use it to aid recollection and relate their story to the map. The use of interactive maps enabled us to gather important geographic details from both interviews and from walking the ground, as well as the ability to integrate the two as we progressed.

With the exception of our Ukrainian research partner, our research team consists of former soldiers turned researchers. That had an unexpected and direct impact on our interviews. Many soldiers wanted to tell their story and wanted to share with an interviewer who had been a soldier, and who they felt could empathise and understand them. We were careful to recognise them for what they are: professional soldiers and combat veterans. The shared profession of arms enabled a discussion of decision making, tactics, the minutiae of weaponry and equipment, as well as the often-dark humour and acknowledgement of the tragedies of war. Many interviewees were keen that soldiers from other countries learned from their experience. There is a willing community

⁴There is a rich literature on the ethics and practice of interviewing in a trauma informed way. There are also several good guides, one of the most practical and usable is Jo Healey, (Ed.), *Trauma Reporting: A Journalist's Guide to Covering Sensitive Stories* (2020).

^{5,6,7}Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (Routledge, Abingdon, 2016), pp. 1.

⁸MacKenzie, Donald A, *An Engine, not a Camera. How Financial Models Shape Markets*, Cambridge, Mass., 2006.



Unsettling for visitors, the backdrop to daily life for many Ukrainians: A mine warning sign in the woods outside of Kyiv (inset) and a shell destroyed street in Borodyanka. Picture: AP Photo/Natasha Pisarenko/CC 2.0

“FOR UKRAINIANS, AIR-RAID SIRENS HAVE BEEN A DAILY PART OF LIFE. FOR THOSE OF US FROM OUTSIDE, IT THREW INTO SHARP FOCUS THE RISKS INHERENT IN DOING CONFLICT RESEARCH.”

of soldiers in Ukraine open to other militaries learning from them.

RISK VS REWARD

I arrived in Kyiv to the sound of air-raid sirens. My first three hours were spent in the basement of an apartment building sheltering with NGO workers and journalists. For Ukrainians, air-raid sirens have been a daily part of life. For those of us from outside, it threw into sharp focus the risks inherent in doing conflict research. Is it worth it? That is easier to judge in hindsight based on what is gathered, but the decision to go must be made in advance, with all the contingency that involves. How does one decide what is worthwhile to create historical knowledge?

Our assessment of the threats, risks and opportunities informed our approach and shaped our research approach and methods. We chose the battle for Kyiv in large part because the battle was concluded, and we could walk the battlefield in relative safety. This also decreased the risk of our research compromising ongoing operations. In planning we adhered to the principle

of keeping risks as low as reasonably practicable, given the context. It necessarily meant sacrificing research opportunities, sometimes minor, sometimes major. We decided not to travel to any locations close to current combat. This shaped what we could achieve on this initial trip. Ukrainian units and personnel who successfully defended Kyiv were moved immediately after to the frontlines in the south and east. For them there was no break; their war continues. This meant there were a significant number of potential interviewees fighting or based near the frontlines. We did not want to be a burden to the Ukrainian military or to individuals and, with the increased risk of moving east or south, we decided forward field research was not worth the risk. Those deployed elsewhere, who were freely willing, were interviewed remotely and online. We rebalanced our research to focus on collecting available interviews of those not at that time deployed and put greater emphasis on walking the battle spaces which we could access. Our intent in future is to steadily seek to interview those willing who we were unable to on this trip to gather a fuller account.

Whatever our view of the risks going in, it should be remembered how rapidly things can change in war. As I redrafted this paper, reports were coming in of drone strikes in central Kyiv. The most likely risk we faced in walking the battlespace was from mines, unexploded ordnance, and the explosive remnants of war. It is difficult to convey the scale and amount of such threats in the former battlefields. Even after six months of concerted demining and the removal of unexploded remains, Ukrainian towns, villages, houses, and fields are littered with the debris of war. In areas we walked, we sought the permission and advice of local people and the security forces. We erred on the side of caution, especially around the many areas where the Russians had dug in fixed defensive positions. As important as it was to gather and see, it was important to not let momentary curiosity lead to an unthinking moment. We did not want to be a burden to our hosts.

Before travelling I ensured I had in-date and recent hostile environment and first aid training. I had substantial experience working in Ukraine in frontline areas. I took personal protective

equipment including body armour, helmet, and first aid kit. We also ensured that our Ukrainian partner had the same provisions as ourselves, including insurance cover. Insurance turned out to be the single biggest cost. We had written and shared plans for contingencies and medical support, and overwatch and support from our team in the United States with regular, timed check-ins. We also had a risk assessment that informed our day-to-day work and framed team conversations on our activities.

ADAPTABILITY IS KEY IN UKRAINE AND OTHER CONFLICT ZONES

The reality of an ongoing war and non-embedded research means that much of the research programme must be arranged and negotiated on the go. Ukrainian military officials and civilians have more pressing issues than requests for interviews from researchers. A pre-set schedule was not possible to achieve, and all our arrangements were subject to last-minute changes and the contingencies of conflict. My professional background working in conflict zones and our Ukrainian research partner's background as a journalist gave us

the understanding and experience to navigate and negotiate access to people and ground.

VITAL GROUND

The demolition of the Kyiv dam and the flooding of the river Irpin, along the western side of Kyiv, made it impassable to Russian forces. Standing on the high ground on a warm August afternoon, looking down on the flood plain of the river Irpin, a soldier present for the fiercest fighting told us: “The 72nd Brigade and Irpin River saved Kyiv. But mostly the river. It’s a kind of miracle... the river turned into a sea.”⁹

Walking the battlefield restores the ground to its vital place in the combat narrative. Too often, it is absent, or an inconsistent, secondary character in combat narratives. Field research reintroduces the terrain and the environment as vital characters in the narrative. This involves walking the ground, trudging through the mud on the riverbank, wading through reeds and long grass, and stumbling over bricks and building debris to see where firefights occurred, to visualise objectives, and to see how terrain might limit or give advantage to one side or another. For example, it is almost impossible to appreciate the sometimes significant tactical impact of a gentle slope or even a small berm without seeing things from ground level perspective, and from the positions of the combatants.

Terrain matters at the individual, tactical, and operational levels of analysis. Being in it and enveloped by it enables one to reflect again on your ground appreciation. Integrating interviews and reconstructing events while standing in the

⁹ Interview with Ukrainian Soldier, No. 18, see also, Mundy, Vincent, ‘Ukraine’s “hero river” helped save Kyiv. But what now for its newly restored wetlands?’, *Guardian* (May 2022).



Spot the difference: A photo taken by a Ukrainian soldier using a commercial drone in February 2022 shows the banks of the river Irpin. The same location is captured below after a dam was blown, and the area flooded, by Ukrainian engineers.



Telling terrain: The view north from Huta, overlooking the Irpin River, in August 2022. Six months previously this vista would have been barren and bare.

terrain on which decisions were made is invaluable. It enabled us to conduct our own ground appreciation and therefore highlight areas overlooked. Just because a place has not generated much open-source content does not render it valueless. One soldier took us to a village which to date has been absent from the current public narrative and showed us the importance of it relative to other positions. There

we could appreciate the subtle importance of the ground, with just enough height enabling better views over the river. Without being there we too would likely have overlooked it.

One important detail, often lost in discussion about Ukrainians fighting on their home territory, is that in many cases, Ukrainian soldiers did not know the areas they were defending prior to the

Russian invasion. As one soldier told me, he’d lived in Kyiv all his life but had never been to the village of Moshchun nor Huta, just a few miles from his home.¹⁰ Instead Ukrainian soldiers learnt the ground quickly, because they needed to. Crucially, they had the support of local villagers who were key in the first few days and weeks. They showed soldiers back roads, cut throughs, the sort of minutiae of knowledge one only acquires by living somewhere. From interviews we understand that officers from the 72nd Brigade down to company level conducted a recce of the areas along the Irpin around two weeks before the invasion.¹¹ They agreed company areas of responsibility and identified positions down to section level. For the soldiers however, the first time most of them had seen these places was when they arrived by bus on the evening of the 24th February and began to dig trenches.

Ground exists within the context of the environment. Walking through the undergrowth and tree lines around the village of Huta-Mezhyhirs’ka, the soldier who had fought there remarked that it was good the Russians invaded in February as there was no foliage to hide in and get close to Ukrainian positions. If the fighting had been in the summer, Russian sabotage groups might have been able to get close to Ukrainian trenches and could have overrun them.¹² Visiting the battlefield six months after the fighting I was conscious that it had changed. Debris was still there but much of it had been removed, and the vegetation was lush and overgrown, giving me a different perspective and potentially obscuring some details.

Ground and environment are the physical context in which soldiers make decisions. One cannot

¹⁰ Interview with Ukrainian Soldier, No. 18.

¹¹ Interview with Ukrainian Soldier, No. 13.

¹² Interview with Ukrainian Soldier, No. 18.

understand the ‘why’ without it. Images on the screen, whether video or photo, are flattened, inescapably two dimensional, lacking an important dimension and texture. Images and videos are also isolated, lifted from a time and place, washed of much context. Taking photographs is essential to help capture and memorialise battles, but they are no substitute for walking the ground with combat participants. We did make use of open-source videos and photos by trying to relate them to the ground when walking the battlefield, trying to put them back into context.

THE NEED FOR AN INVESTIGATIVE MINDSET

Field research of conflict, during conflict, combining both interviews with participants and walking the battlefields, enables exploration and discovery in a way few other approaches can. Military expertise and experience is required to do this well. This is not a battlefield tour of Normandy, nor PhD field research. The researcher is in an active war zone, working in explosive remnants of war-contaminated areas and attempting to understand how a battle unfolded, working through a living, changing, evolving and dynamic environment. Military expertise enables a researcher to understand context and the importance of terrain, equipment, and tactical decision making. Preparatory research and interviews provide a wealth of details and begin to develop lines of enquiry. Evidence from the battlefields or from interviews, move the researcher towards or away from the story. Having an investigative mindset meant we discovered things that a more passive approach would not enable. In one instance we were able to uncover a firing position that was crucial to an early engagement based on interviews and working out firing angles. In doing so we moved towards some aspects of the accounts we had been given, and away

The author interviewing a Ukrainian soldier in Hostomel



“WE MUST CONDUCT FIELD RESEARCH NOW, DURING THIS CONFLICT. THERE ARE LESSONS TO BE LEARNED AND LITTLE TIME TO LOSE.”

from other aspects. This active and engaged approach enabled us to identify facts otherwise hidden or obscured from view, something impossible to do remotely. This is not journalism, nor is this conventional academia. It requires expertise and military understanding to tell a military story and to know what questions to ask.

EQUIPMENT

Smartphones have transformed the tools available to researchers for gathering and recording data in the field. There is considerable overlap with developments in mobile journalism and many of the smartphone tools and techniques developed for journalists have direct utility for field researchers. There is also an active mobile journalism community online which produces training videos, reviews and tutorials, enabling a researcher to learn how to make the best use of smartphone tools.¹³ There are a variety of phones and apps one can use. We used an iPhone 12 Pro. Audio recordings were made using the app Ferrite Recording Studio Pro, and a RODE VideoMic Me-L microphone with a windshield,

which plugged directly into the phone. The audio quality we were able to gather was impressive and the use of the smartphone was unobtrusive for interviewees. Filming was done using the FiLMic Pro app, and photography done using the iPhone camera. The apps do so much for you that the quality of what an amateur is able to capture is transformed. For mapping we used both Google Maps, Google Earth, and the app MAPS.ME. Importantly, we were able to securely back up all our data as we went, ensuring no loss due to accident or mishap. Supporting members of the research team, based outside of Ukraine, were able to review material as we progressed, and provide feedback and advice concurrently. We had a robust information security protocol for all of the material we were gathering, and the obligations we have to interviewees. While it would not be appropriate to discuss the measures here, information security was one of our top concerns.

THE REVELATIONS OF CONTEXT

The main benefit of field research is the context it provides.

Context is not just important; it is revelatory. Oral interviews, the ability to explore the ground, and to do so in an investigative way, creates context. Even with as little as 14 days of field research our understanding was not simply better informed, it was transformed. Our time in Ukraine was all too brief but it provided a good baseline for deeper research.

On our final day I asked my Ukrainian research partner for their reflections and about what had surprised them the most from our interviews and exploration. They had remained in Kyiv throughout the invasion, had lived it every day and had family and friends involved in and impacted by every aspect of the war. They had been with me for every interview and walked every battlefield. They told me: “I thought that I knew everything... not everything but most. We didn’t have any chance to win, but it was a real miracle [we] did. Having nothing, making mistakes, [some] having no weapons in the first days, first hours... Ukrainian soldiers stood up to a what seemed a stronger enemy. What impressed me, now, no one has any doubt we will win.”

Into this context, accounts from participants, and appreciation of the ground, we are now able to fold in the open-source evidence and remote observation. Field research is not enough by itself, but combined with other approaches, we believe it has an important contribution to make. The Chief of the General Staff has declared that this is the British Army’s “1937 moment”. If he is correct, then we must conduct field research now, during this conflict. There are lessons to be learned and little time to lose.

¹³The community is active on Twitter using the hashtag #MOJO and people such as Marc Blank-Settle (Twitter: @MarcSettle) and Glen Mulcahy (Twitter: @GlenBMulcahy) are worth following