

Mounting death toll in a land of depopulating villages and piling graves

(from Kyiv) “Before the war we were just teenagers. Today we are adults.” Anna is 26 years old. These few words encompass the impact the war has had on her and the young people of her generation. She graduated in International Relations and Economics from the University of Krakow and speaks perfect English. Her story is intertwined with the stories of many young people like her. Lives that took unexpected, forced turns from one day to the next because of the war. Many young men, countless numbers of them, have died on the front line. Her brother, too, used to work in Krakow. Two years ago, he was in Ukraine a few days before the Russian attack on Kyiv. He was skiing in the mountains with some friends. He has never come back since. He left Krakow and lost everything. His job, his friends, his home, even his personal belongings. He never left Ukraine. He was also placed under martial law. “This means that he can be called up into the army at any moment. It means living in uncertainty, not knowing what will happen to you next,” she explained. Anna describes the many young and older men who have been drafted to the front. “Perhaps there is no clear perception of this in Kyiv because it is a big city. But some of the villages have been completely emptied of men”.



Ukraine is reckoning with death two years after the start of the Russian aggression. Those who decided to sacrifice their lives for their country and never returned home. And they are many. The exact number of Ukrainian soldiers killed on the front line is unknown. It's a taboo. But there isn't a family without a dead relative, even in the closest circle of relatives. Social media are full of photos of young men killed in war. Sadly, the number of graves in the country is growing, as villages are depopulated of men called up to the army. Anna tells us the story of Dmitri. He was just 21 when he left for the front in September 2022. “He was a young man full of energy and health. Active, responsible in everything he did. A ray of sunshine.” He died just three months later. He was killed in Kramatorsk in December. “I went to his funeral. It was a very cold winter and Dmitri, like many of his comrades, lived in the dark and cold of the trenches. He had frostbite all over his body. The priest said in his sermon that Dmitri was surely in a better place now.” **“Nobody wanted this war, it is a nightmare that we have found ourselves in and we wished we could wake up from. Unfortunately, it is reality,” Anna adds.** “But if we leave things as they are now, if we decide to stop defending ourselves, not only would we be handing our defeat over to the Russians, they would be back in a few years to reclaim everything

and they would be stronger than before. What would all the people who lost sons, fathers, husbands in this war say? They would feel betrayed, worse still, they would feel that their loved ones had died in vain." Sadly, the war is dragging on. No one expected it to last so long, and the more time passes, the harder it gets. **There is a future ahead. Anna is sure of it. "I am sure that there will be a future," she says, "that one day the war will end. We know it will end, we just don't know when.** Then great opportunities will open up for rebuilding, for projects, for new technologies," she says. "I am not among those who decided to leave. I chose to remain. This is where I want to live now and in the future. When they entered Kyiv, everyone thought that our country would no longer exist. They were too many and they were too strong. But instead, we survived. It was a miracle, a sign that we must have a life and a voice in history." Anna knows that the future ahead will be far from simple. Even if the war ends, Ukraine will have to face its wounds. "We will finally find out how many soldiers died and how many were wounded and maimed. And that will come as a shock," she says. "But not hate. I have no feelings of hate," she replies. "They are the ones who will have to live with feelings of remorse for what they have done."

M. Chiara Biagioni