

HOW THE UKRAINIAN VILLAGE OF TSYRKUNY SURVIVED RUSSIAN OCCUPATION



May, 2023

Introduction

Within minutes of Russian troops crossing the border into Ukraine at the start of the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, they were in the small village of Tsyркuny. Russian soldiers, tanks and other military vehicles poured into the village that sits about 15 miles south of the Russian border and 10 miles north of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city. The Russians had to take Tsyркuny by force on their way to their key military objective of Kharkiv.

When they reached Kharkiv the Russians encountered ferocious local resistance on the streets that lasted for several months, and they ultimately failed to conquer the city.

Some of the fiercest fighting of the war during the last year happened in and around Kharkiv. International human rights groups reported Russian forces' use of internationally-banned cluster munitions in residential areas, and Ukrainian authorities say that over 600 civilians were killed during the attacks.¹

The 2022 battle for Kharkiv proved militarily and psychologically momentous as Ukraine's forces managed to hold off and eventually defeated some of Russia's most elite fighting units. Some military analysts called it Ukraine's Battle of Saratoga, comparing it to America's spectacular defeat of British forces in 1777.²

But while the fight for Kharkiv was raging, Tsyркuny was occupied by Russian soldiers for over two months until early May, when they were driven out by Ukrainian forces.

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the village was known as a largely prosperous village on the commuter belt around Kharkiv, with four meat processing plants and a couple of academically impressive schools.

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/amnesty-says-russia-guilty-war-crimes-kharkiv-shelling-2022-06-13/>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/04/ukraine-cluster-munitions-launched-kharkiv-neighborhoods>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2022/06/anyone-can-die-at-any-time-kharkiv/>

² <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/17/ukraine-russia-war-kharkiv-battle-saratoga-turning-point/>



Human Rights First's history in the area

Human Rights First has reported from Kharkiv since 2017, when we documented attacks on local human rights defenders who had exposed corruption in the mayor's office, and the situation of prisoners of war.

We returned in the first days of May 2022 when the city was under almost constant bombardment and Tsyrkuny and other surrounding towns and suburbs were under Russian occupation. Over the last year, we have regularly reported from the battered city, documenting how local activists and the wider public have resisted Russian aggression.

This short report on some of what happened in the village Tsyrkuny under two months of Russian occupation followed by four months of intense shelling is presented not because it is unusual, but because it is typical of what has happened to many villages and towns in Ukraine along the eastern front with Russia.

Widespread Civilian Casualties

Local media in Kharkiv reports that from the beginning of the full-scale invasion until February 15, 2023, 924 civilians (74 children) were killed and 2041 injured (160 children) in the Kharkiv region. Kharkiv Oblast remains one of the regions most contaminated by mines and other explosive devices. "Since the beginning of the war until February 15, 2023, at least 178 people have been injured by mines in the region, 52 of them killed," according to independent media outlet Gwara Media.³

Specific casualty figures for Tsyrkuny are unknown. Many people fled; some are missing. An estimated 5,000 people lived in the village before the 2022 Russian invasion, and another 5,000 in the surrounding community. Now around 4,000 remain in the village and the wider area.⁴

Across Ukraine between February 24, 2022, and May 7, 2023 the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recorded 23,606 civilian casualties: 8,791 killed and 14,815 injured. The UN says the real numbers are likely to be much higher "as the receipt of information from some locations where intense hostilities have been going on has been delayed and many reports are still pending corroboration."⁵

3 <https://gwaramedia.com/en/un-report-kharkiv-oblast-recorded-the-most-casualties-from-mines/>

4 <https://gwaramedia.com/en/chaotic-shelling-volunteer-help-and-new-routes-to-kharkiv-life-in-liberated-tsyrykuny-in-ukraine/>

5 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/05/ukraine-civilian-casualty-update-8-may-2023>



Life Under Occupation

Senior Human Rights First representatives visited Tsyркuny in March 2023 and twice in May 2023, and heard from a range of local people about how the village survived under occupation. They told us that Russian troops first came into Tsyркuny around 4:30am on February 24, 2022, and began taking people from their homes. Russian soldiers took over the local school to use as their headquarters, and it was impossible to move around during the occupation.

Villages like Tsyркuny are close to the Russian border, which meant occupying troops could be easily resupplied by road from inside the Russian Federation. The Russian occupation lasted until 7 May, but the Russian line was not pushed back far, and the village was intensely shelled until September 10, when the front line was pushed much further back toward Russia.



A sign on a home reads, “People.”

During the occupation and shelling, home-made signs were plaintively taped to the front doors of homes saying, “People Live Here,” appeals to soldiers to avoid targeting the houses where families live. Some locals painted huge letters in white on metal gates outside their houses simply saying “People.” The signs did not work. When Human Rights First visited, all the houses we saw with appeals were damaged or almost completely destroyed by shelling.





A sign on another home says, “People live here.”

Living in terror

Locals told us of living in terror from late February until early May 2022. No shops were open, and it was extremely dangerous to venture outside. People survived on the humanitarian aid provided by the occupying forces: Russian soldiers went door to door during the occupation distributing bread, cheese, pasta, and other basics.



Much of Volodymyr Klymenko’s house was destroyed by shelling.



Volodymyr Klymenko told Human Rights First that he stayed in his basement in the village throughout the occupation and shelling, and he wasn't offered the option of evacuation. He said that within hours of Russian troops taking over the village they had set up a six-vehicle mobile missile base next to his house from where they shelled Kharkiv. On that same day, a Russian helicopter fired the missiles that destroyed the village's small shopping mall.



Tsyркuny's shopping mall was completely destroyed in a Russian attack.

Klymenko said, "The worst part was the constant shelling, the shrapnel, the danger, the houses destroyed. There was shelling every day from 5 am." He told Human Rights First that much of his house and roof was destroyed by two large missile attacks. It has still not been repaired.

Ukrainian NGO ZMINA reported that during the worst of the shelling about 100 people sheltered at St. Nicholas Church near the entrance to the village. On the morning of March 13, 2022, buses organized by the occupying forces pulled up outside the church to evacuate people. Reports say about 2,000 people were moved to Russia.⁶

Nadia Petrivna is originally from western Ukraine but has lived in Tsyркuny for 15 years. She refused offers of evacuation and stayed in the village throughout the occupation and shelling. She now sells milk by the side of the road, opposite Tsyркuny's former shopping mall destroyed in the invasion. She told Human Rights First that in the first hours of the invasion, many Russian troops came along the road where she lives, 1 May Street. In the

⁶ https://zmina.info/articles/proyduyt%CA%B9-fil%CA%B9tratsiyu-i-vsikh-vidpustyat%CA%B9-u-berezni-v-tsyркunakh-pid-kharkovom-okupanty-vykraly-9-cholovikiv-yikhnya-dolya-dosi-ne-vidoma/?fbclid=IwAR0Q_WcFda8kVgY1w3j_cA0o3lyVBmx9nyYV5lwsd-VtmaaHf1AguBT_uhE

following days Russian soldiers roamed her neighborhood looking to loot cars and bicycles, but that her grandson's bike was too broken for them to steal.

Despite the danger, she continued to milk her two cows throughout the invasion whenever she could. She had a narrow escape when a missile landed next to her while she was digging potatoes, but because the ground was soft it didn't explode. Another missile destroyed her roof, which has still not been repaired.

She said she refused the Russians' offers of evacuation because she didn't want to leave her animals. "It's impossible to live on the pension, but by selling milk I can at least afford to buy bread," she said.



Mykola Sikalenko, Head of the Tsyркunу Community, told Human Rights First he was abducted by Russian soldiers.

Local official Mykola Sikalenko was the Head of the Tsyркunу Community when Russian soldiers took over the village in February 2022. He told Human Rights First he was born and brought up in Tsyркunу, as were his parents.

He said around noon on Thursday, March 3, 2022, Russian soldiers came to his home, took him to a nearby village, and asked him to collaborate with them. They returned him to his home to think over their offer for a couple of days. He said those soldiers never came back because they were killed by Ukrainian shells.

He reported that on March 21, 2022, Russians returned to his house, and four men in balaclavas with automatic weapons took him away. He was detained for six days, the first five of which he was hooded. He was handcuffed, constantly shivering from the cold, and given food only once during that time – a bowl of porridge shared with other detainees. They were not given spoons or other utensils to eat with and were forced to scoop up the food with sticks.



"I was moved around regularly from place to place during that week, and sometimes held in a basement with others, but because I was hooded, I don't know exactly where that was, although I was driven some distance so it could be somewhere close to the Russian border," Sikalenko said.

He said he was not questioned for the first five days, when they were "softening him up" by refusing to feed him. When Sikalenko was being moved from place to place his captors threatened to kill him, and fired guns close to his head. "Once they took off my handcuffs and said I won't be needing them anymore," he said. "I thought I was going to be killed, and just hoped they would shoot me in the head and not the stomach."

Sikalenko recounted that on the last day of his captivity his hood was removed, and his interrogator again asked him to collaborate. He refused, and he and two other men were released. Upon returning home, he found that Russian soldiers had looted his house, taking his car and other possessions.

He reported to Human Rights First that seven military veterans – not active soldiers – were taken from the village. While one has been returned in a prisoner swap with the Russians, the fate of the other six is unknown.

The Aftermath

Missiles remain scattered and embedded throughout the village of Tsyrkuny. They are in grassy areas, streets, and parking lots. The walls and roads are pockmarked by shrapnel. The town's sign is riddled with bullets. The community center has a huge rocket embedded in its floor.



The town's sign is riddled with shrapnel.



A local medical clinic was destroyed by departing Russian troops, and numerous homes in the village were devastated by shelling.



A home destroyed in a Russian attack.

The schools, once proud examples of the village's achievements, are destroyed. Locals said the one used by the Russian military as headquarters was looted by Russian soldiers who burned its books for warmth.

Human Rights First representatives visited a schoolroom basement locals said had been used as a torture chamber during the Russian occupation. For now, the village schooling is done online.





Some residents of Tsyркuny say this school basement was used for torture.

Abandoned Russian military vehicles and equipment are scattered everywhere. Some of the burnt-out Russian vehicles have been brought to the community playground. Several are mocked up with washing machines, carpets, and TVs on top of them, referencing reports that fleeing Russian troops carried looted household goods on their tanks.

“Probably, it’s easier to say what wasn’t affected. Almost all social institutions were destroyed or damaged: schools, kindergartens, hospitals, dispensaries, and administrative buildings. In general, about 80 percent of housing in the Tsyркuny community was destroyed,” Olena Havryliuk, head of the Department of Land Relations and Architecture, and acting head of the village council, told local media.⁷

The village is still not safe. On the night of May 17, 2023, the shelling resumed, and the village was hit by a Russian S300 missile. The following morning there was another attack, and a missile killed a man in the village and injured two other people. The town has subsequently been attacked again by missiles and attacks continue. Kharkiv is still regularly bombarded by missiles from Russia.

⁷ <https://gwaramedia.com/en/chaotic-shelling-volunteer-help-and-new-routes-to-kharkiv-life-in-liberated-tsyркuny-in-ukraine/>





The town's civic center, riddled with bullets.

Much of the area has been booby-trapped. The forests and fields around Tsyркuny are littered with mines. In a warning to people not to go inside, a house in the village used and vacated by Russian soldiers has a sign painted in big letters saying "MINES."

Agriculture is virtually impossible because so many of the fields are covered in mines. Once famous for producing high quality sausages, Tsyркuny's industry is now largely ruined, and its economy has a long road to recovery.





Outside a house, the word “mines” warns of potential booby traps inside.

Rebuilding a village

A couple of shops and a pharmacy have started working again, and the village is coming back to life. Local media reported that the village’s electricity supply was largely restored by early May 2023, and there is some internet connectivity.

There are also various shelters set up by international donors that provide electricity and heat to locals, though most prefer to stay in their damaged homes and make the best of things. Ukraine’s Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal visited the village on May 12, 2023, and earmarked Tsyркunу as priority for repair and reconstruction.

According to the Ukrainian government, the rebuilding of Tsyркunу will be a pilot project for Ukraine’s “build back better” approach to destroyed communities: “to comprehensively rebuild the village according to modern standards. This should become a model for further restoration and transformation of the entire country.”

Sikalenko’s title is now Head of Tsyркunу Village Military Administration, and he’s realistic about the challenges ahead. “De-mining is a huge job and will take a very long time,” he said. “There are still grad missiles all over the village.”



Mission

Human Rights First is an independent advocacy and action organization that challenges America to live up to its ideals. We believe American leadership is essential in the struggle for human rights, so we press the U.S. government and private companies to respect human rights and the rule of law. When they don't, we step in to demand reform, accountability, and justice. Around the world, we work where we can best harness American influence to secure core freedoms.

We know that it is not enough to expose and protest injustice, so we create the political environment and policy solutions necessary to ensure consistent respect for human rights. Whether we are protecting refugees, combating torture, or defending persecuted minorities, we focus not on making a point, but on making a difference. For over 40 years, we've built bipartisan coalitions and teamed up with frontline activists and lawyers to tackle issues that demand American leadership.

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

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On the cover: Nadia Petrivna sells milk from her cows opposite Tsyркun'y's destroyed shopping mall.

