

# BOMBED OUT AND OCCUPIED: RUSSIA'S INVASION OF IZYUM



## Introduction

The Ukrainian city of Izyum, about 75 miles south of Kharkiv and north of Donetsk, was once famous for its annual strawberry festival. It now might be best known as a place of ferocious battles and mass graves.

Izyum is in the Kharkiv oblast, where Ukraine borders Russia. Its importance as a railway hub made it a key focus for the invading army.

Within days of Russian's full-scale invasion of Ukraine at the end of February 2022, the city came under intense attack. It took a month for Russian forces to take control of Izyum on April 1, 2022. On September 11, after the city was occupied for six months, Izyum was retaken in a major Ukrainian military success.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Townsend, Mark, Lorenzo Tondo, and Isobel Koshiw. "Ukrainian Counter-Offensive in North-East Inflicts a Defeat on Moscow." *The Observer*, September 10, 2022, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/10/ukrainian-forces-kupiansk-advances-north-east-russia-izyum>.



Both battles for Izyum left many dead and much of the city in ruins. More than 80 per cent of residential buildings are estimated to have been destroyed.<sup>2</sup> Local officials say that at least 1,000 people were killed during the battles and occupation.<sup>3</sup>

As international media focuses on major cities, how people lived in hamlets and villages under intense bombardments, and under months of Russian occupation, is underreported. In May 2023, Human Rights First released a report on how the village of Tsyркuny, north of Kharkiv, survived Russian occupation.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Hernandez, Marco, Marc Santora, and Josh Holder. "Russia-Ukraine War: Ukrainian Forces Take Key City, Igniting New Phase in War - The New York Times." *New York Times*, September 10, 2022.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/09/10/world/ukraine-russia-war>.

<sup>3</sup> Kyiv Post. "Over 1,000 Civilians Killed During Russian Occupation of Izyum." *Kyiv Post*, September 13, 2022.  
<https://www.kyivpost.com/post/1291>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/how-the-ukrainian-village-of-tsyркuny-survived-russian-occupation/>



## Human Rights First's history in the area

Human Rights First has reported from the city of Kharkiv and its surrounds since 2017, when we documented attacks on local human rights defenders who had exposed corruption in the mayor's office and reported on the situation of prisoners of war.<sup>5</sup>

We were in the city of Kharkiv in early May 2022, when surrounding towns and suburbs were under Russian occupation and the city was under almost constant bombardment.<sup>6</sup> Over the last year, we have [regularly reported from the battered city](#), documenting how local activists and the wider public have resisted Russian aggression.<sup>7</sup>

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For this report, which details experiences of locals in Izyum and several small communities south of the city, Human Rights First worked with local media outlet Gwara Media in June 2023.<sup>9</sup>

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## Izyum City

On the outskirts of the city, on the edge of a forest of wild pines, is a cemetery. Russian tanks hid there during the occupation, as the trees offered them some cover.

The cemetery is now also the site of mass graves, with an estimated 447 people buried in the soft, sandy earth. Summer songbirds break the silence across several acres of desolation

<sup>5</sup> <https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Democracy-in-Danger.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/underground-in-a-ukrainian-city-at-war-how-kharkivs-metro-system-offers-shelter/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/as-winter-bites-russian-missiles-threaten-ukraines-power-supply/>; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/coping-in-the-kharkiv-cold/>; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/ukraines-media-gwara-fights-for-truth-in-kharkiv/>; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/how-lgbt-groups-in-kharkiv-help-the-city-fight-back/>; <https://gwaramedia.com/en/foreigners-in-kharkiv-brian-dooley-when-i-am-asked-about-some-hopeful-signs-for-ukraine-kharkiv-is-always-one-of-them/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/how-the-ukrainian-village-of-tsyркuny-survived-russian-occupation/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://gwaramedia.com/>



covered by hundreds of wooden crosses. Some of the crosses are marked with just numbers, others with names. Some people are buried alone, others in families.



Mass graves in the cemetery  
outside the city of Izyum.

Some people interred in the cemetery were shot dead, others were killed by shrapnel wounds, mines, or because fighting in the city prevented them from getting the medicine they needed to stay alive.

One grave has six crosses, all from the same family, with their dates of births and the same date of death – 09.03.2022 – carefully handwritten in white paint on black plaques. This family was sheltering in the basement of 2 Pershotravneva Street, a five-story, 40-apartment building in Izyum, when a Russian bomb – believed to be a FAB 500 – dropped onto the building.





Grave markers for an entire family killed in the basement of 2 Pershotravneva Street in Izyum.

Eight members of this family were killed in the attack: 49-year-old husband and wife Alexander and Tatiana Zhykharieva, his 69-year-old mother-in-law Lyudmila Sokol, their 13-year-old daughter Maria Zhykharieva, their 31-year-old daughter Olena Stolpakova and her 33-year-old husband Dmytro Stolpakov, and the two Stolpakova children, 5-year-old Olesya and 8-year-old Alexandra. The bodies of Tatiana and Maria were so mutilated they were initially buried in graves with only numbers.<sup>10</sup>

Locals estimate more than 50 people were killed in that basement. Most of these fatalities were residents of the apartment block, but others sheltered there from the street.

A month after the attack, Russian forces controlling the city allowed local residents to retrieve bodies; some were only identifiable by their jewelry or by data on the phones in their pockets. DNA testing of many victims is still under way.

There is still a small playground outside Pershotravneva Street, but now no one lives there. The building was smashed in half by the bomb. The front wall is torn from the building, it

<sup>10</sup> <https://gwaramedia.com/en/izyum-says-goodbye-to-the-family-that-perished-due-to-russian-air-strike-on-their-home/>



looks like a dolls' house with its facade pulled open to show clothes still hanging in wardrobes and books piled on shelves. Scattered in the ruins is the evidence of everyday civilian lives—sneakers, children's toys, hair curlers, a stroller, jeans, and jackets. At the bottom of the crater made by the bomb is the entrance to the basement where so many died.



The bombed-out remains of a 40-apartment building at 2 Pershotravneva Street in Izyum.

Also in the rubble is a Russian newspaper from 2022, presumably left behind by occupying troops. Its back page shows pictures of kids from Ukraine being taken to holiday camps in Russia. The deportation of children from Ukraine to Russia is the issue for which Russian



President Vladimir Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, Commissioner for Children's Rights in Russia, were indicted by the International Criminal Court.<sup>11</sup>

When Ukrainian forces once again claimed the city in September 2022, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy was among many who called for those responsible for killing the people buried in mass graves to be brought to account.<sup>12</sup>

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## Outside the city

The fighting has devastated dozens of villages and hamlets in the lush flatlands south of Izyum. The area was a colossal battlefield, and little is left intact. Homes, village schools, and shops are bombed out. At most, one in a hundred buildings still has a roof.

Burnt-out tanks and other military vehicles are strewn across the fields for mile after mile around the road to Bakhmut. Only military vehicles are on these roads now, and the network of capillary lanes connecting the villages is cratered from shelling and ripped up by the weight of tanks. In some places these narrow roads are barely passable.

Mines are everywhere. A January 2023 report by Human Rights Watch documented the Russian use of anti-personnel mines in the Izyum area and elsewhere, in contravention of the Geneva Conventions. It also detailed the Ukrainian military's use of landmines around the city.<sup>13</sup>

In March 2023, one doctor reported treating an average of one person with landmine injuries every week. Many have lost feet or lower legs after stepping on mines.<sup>14</sup> On one of the days in late June when Human Rights First visited villages around Izyum, several local residents reported that two Ukrainian soldiers had been injured by landmines that morning.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>

<sup>12</sup> Stepanenko, Vasilisa. "Ukrainian President: Mass Grave Found near Recaptured City." *AP NEWS*, September 16, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-zelensky-kyiv-uzbekistan-7d08fe990651bf86e43aba642b2259ac>.

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Ukraine: Banned Landmines Harm Civilians." *Human Rights Watch*, January 31, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/31/ukraine-banned-landmines-harm-civilians>.

<sup>14</sup> Kullab, Samya. "In Liberated Ukraine City, Civilians Still Pay Price of War." *AP NEWS*, March 6, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-izium-land-mines-kharkiv-aec1fb4de0914cc01eb6db12e33d4a9c>.





Those who live in the villages are careful not to venture off footpaths. Experts estimate it could take decades to clean all the mines.<sup>15</sup>

Although the front line has been pushed further to the south, fighting can still be heard from these villages. Some communities, such as Sulyhivka, appear totally deserted. In other places a few people still remain, having stayed through the battles and occupation.

These people described their lives and problems since Ukrainian forces retook the territory. Some were tearful as they spoke about relatives and friends killed during the shelling and occupation.

In Donetsk village, Kostia, a man in his 40s, stands outside his and tells us he stayed throughout the whole occupation: "We used to have a population of around 150 but now it's less than half of that. Some were killed, many left."



Kostia stands in front of his house in Donetsk; on the fence is a warning that people live there.

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Ukraine: Banned Landmines Harm Civilians." *Human Rights Watch*, January 31, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/31/ukraine-banned-landmines-harm-civilians>.



Many locals here and elsewhere painted “People Are Here” on the gates to their homes to avoid being targeted by Russian invaders. A Russian military vehicle nonetheless tried to break down Kostia’s gate although it was clearly marked in white paint as a civilian home.

He said his neighbor was one of seven people killed by Russian soldiers during the occupation. He reported that another neighbor was held captive in a pit with other locals by the Russians.

A middle-aged man named Victor lives next to the pit, a hole in the earth measuring around five yards by five yards by six yards deep. Those who were held there are reluctant to talk about what happened to them.



Victor lives next to the pit where Russians held local residents hostage during their occupation.

“About 200 Russian troops were in the village — any house you see up and down this road had Russians in it,” Victor said. The lane outside his house is strewn with discarded Russian uniforms, food packets, long munition boxes, a burnt-out military vehicle, and other equipment hurriedly discarded by the retreating troops.

A few roads away, Lilia farms a few acres of land around her house and keeps bees. She says she also stayed in Donetsk through the occupation because Russian soldiers wouldn’t let her leave. “They told me they were there to liberate me from Nazis and fascists. The

shelling was terrifying – my brother and others in my family were killed in the attacks on the village, friends too," she said.



Lilia remained in her home in Donetsk  
Because Russian troops wouldn't let her leave.

She also painted the "People Are Here" message on her gates and says that Russian tanks too big for the narrow roads knocked down the utility poles on the sides of the lanes, cutting power supplies that have yet to be restored.





Russian troops occupying the area are reported to have burned locals' cars.

A mile further south, in the community of Topolske, an older couple says they have been without electricity since they were caught for months between heavy shelling by both Ukrainian and Russian forces. They report the retreating Russian troops burned out the locals' cars.

Camouflaged foxholes dug by Russian troops dot either side of the road to the village of Mala Komyshuvakha. Much of the village's church is destroyed, and next to it is a huge trench dug to hide tanks.





Much of the church has been destroyed in Mala Komyshuvakha.

One man in Mala Komyshuvakha showed scars on his back he said were from being shot by Russian soldiers when he fled the village in a car with his family on April 3, 2022.

His wife said that when they left, their house was taken over by Russian troops. She showed us piles of wooden munitions boxes abandoned next to their home. Some of the boxes have Russian Ministry of Defense documents taped to them detailing contract numbers, delivery addresses, and for which troops they were destined.





Munitions boxes abandoned by Russian soldiers.

Dovhenke is about ten miles south of Izyum, on the border with Donetsk Oblast. Before the invasion, it was one of the larger villages in the area with a population of around 780.

Iryna is a middle-aged woman born and raised in the village, as were her parents before her. She refuses to leave her bombed-out home.

“My son Roman was killed by the shelling but it was too dangerous to retrieve his body for another month after that,” reported Iryna. She showed us his grave behind her house, marked with his name and date of death, April 16, 2022. He was 38 years old.





Iryna in front of the bombed-out home behind which she has buried her son Roman.

About 100 yards down the road lives Lyuda and her family. They fled in the worst of the shelling but have since returned. "We cope without electricity. We have a solar panel on the roof. We grow onions, cabbages, potatoes, and other vegetables around the house. When the Russians left the fields were covered in mines, so I de-mined the land around us with my husband, by hand."

She says it took them a month of extremely dangerous, delicate, and exhausting work to de-mine the land. She showed us a pile of parachute bombs and various other mines she and her husband pulled from the earth. They found 40 bomb craters in her fields and one rocket still embedded there; they grow their crops around it.





Lyuda displays one of the mines she removed from the fields around her home where she grows food.

"We wanted to help ourselves," she said. "We see that those giving humanitarian aid are busy, and there are so many people worse off than us. We can reclaim the land, plant vegetables, and sell them. But the people we lost, the family, the friends, they can't come back."







Lyuda and her family work around an unexploded rocket when planting crops.

There is some humanitarian aid available, but there is no civil society in these communities to coordinate the help that's needed. One problem is that villages must have populations of 500 to be big enough to have mayors, the administrators who would advocate for them. Most places here are almost deserted, so cannot be represented as they used to be.

These communities aren't entirely forgotten, but they don't get attention like bigger cities, where it's easier for locals to organize and advocate for repairs. Those who live in these communities are coping despite the mines and the torn-up roads, and without electricity or roofs on their houses.

Lyuda says the noise of battles, raging to the south, is a constant reminder of what could happen again. "We hear the fighting all the time, this morning there were terrible sounds, and we fear one day we will have to flee again," she said.



## Mission

Human Rights First works to create a just world in which every person's intrinsic human rights are respected and protected, to build societies that value and invest in all their people. To reach that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and building institutions that ensure universal rights.

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: 2 Pershotravneva Street in Izyum, a five-story, 40-apartment building before a Russian bomb destroyed it and killed many residents.

