



by Lord
Ashcroft

A YEAR ago, the southern Ukrainian city of Odesa had streets full of festive lights, towering Christmas trees in its main squares and a bustling population of nearly a million people. Not for nothing was it known as 'the pearl of the Black Sea'.

Christmas 2022, ten months after the Russian invasion, is very different. Every evening, Odesa descends into near-total darkness because its electricity supply has been taken out by Russian missiles.

On my arrival in the city five days ago, our car's headlights pierced the moonless night and caught glimpses of ghostly figures waiting by bus stops. The silence is equally eerie and by 11pm the city, with its depleted population, goes to sleep: the strict curfew lasts until 5am.

Yet after Ukraine's recent successes on the battlefield - notably, recapturing large areas of the Kherson and Kharkiv regions - its people are more upbeat than at any time since the Russian invasion of February 24.

I travelled to this war-torn

**'Don't worry,
Daddy, that's
us/iring'**

country in Eastern Europe for two main reasons. First, to try to gain a greater understanding of how the nation is coping after almost a year of all-out war; and second, to show my support for Ukraine's people, who have won my admiration for the way they deal with a terrifying ordeal on a daily basis.

Make no mistake: the determination of Ukrainian men and women to defend their homeland is unwavering. They are fighting for their lives and their freedom.

Within an hour of my arrival in Odesa from the Moldovan border, I was at the humanitarian centre that was set up to help residents of all ages with their own needs and those of frontline soldiers.

Here, I watched Natalia Pinchenkova, 49, and eight other women making camouflage nets - different colours for autumn, winter, spring and summer - for the troops. 'We must assist our soldiers,' she said.

Polina Kolupaylo, 80, presented me with one of the cushions that she and other volunteers are making for frontline fighters and refugees. And I helped Ludmilla Nasarzewsky, 37, as she made candles from recycled rubbish mixed with paraffin to provide troops with heat and light in the trenches during the dark winter nights. 'We want to help our heroes,' she told me.

In a room on the second floor, children of primary-school age were making Christmas decorations in a makeshift classroom. For two years, their studies were disrupted by Covid - and now a year of war has done the same.

Everyone is tired of war but no

As he returns from visiting the war-torn nation, a stirring message from senior Tory LORDASHCROFT.



Defiant: A man injured by a missile attack on Kherson on Christmas Eve

Picture: DIMITAR DILKOFF/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Ukrainians will never waver in defence of their homeland. They are fighting for their lives - and their freedom

one is prepared to accept anything less than every Russian soldier being removed from Ukrainian soil - even from Crimea, which was forcibly annexed in 2014.

Oleksii Goncharenko, a Ukrainian MP from Odesa, who is married with two sons aged 16 and four, said: 'I want a total victory against Russia so we never have to go through this again.'

He said the past ten months had taken their toll on everyone, including children. 'My four-year-old son knows the difference between the sound of incoming and outgoing fire. He says: "Don't worry, Daddy, that's us firing. We are safe." No child should have to learn such things.'

Some eight million people, mainly women and children, from a popu-

lation of around 44 million have left their homeland. But all men aged between 18 and 60 must remain to help with the war effort, including many civilians being trained as frontline soldiers.

On my second day in Ukraine, I went to Odesa's port, which came to a standstill for five months after the invasion. Now dock workers are busy loading wheat, barley, soya beans and other supplies on to giant cargo ships.

Under an agreement in July between Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and the UN, 174 vessels have shipped 3.8million metric tonnes of food from Odesa through a narrow sea corridor to countries all over the world. Two other ports are also allowed to export food.

Later the same day, I travelled to

Mykolaiv, the southern port once famous for shipbuilding. In the early days of the war, it was almost completely surrounded by advancing Russian troops but ferocious fighting eventually forced the enemy to retreat.

Before nearby Kherson was recaptured by the Ukrainians last month, Mykolaiv was attacked by missiles and mortars almost every day. This killed 156 civilians and seriously injured nearly 300 more. Half the city's population of 500,000 fled, as did most of its large businesses.

Since the Russians were pushed back some 35 miles from Mykolaiv, the city has been hit just twice. However, its electricity and water supplies have been badly affected, meaning that residents, mainly the

elderly, have to queue to collect drinking supplies from 1,000-litre tanks carried on lorries.

Yet even in Mykolaiv, the mood was upbeat. Alexander Senkevich, 41, the city's mayor, told me: 'Russia's mistake was they came here expecting to be welcomed with flowers and flags [by fellow Russian-speakers in the south]. But instead we welcomed them with guns and [their] death.'

He added: 'Slowly life will return to normal and our residents and our businesses will return. By next spring, the Russians will have removed Vladimir Putin.'

Ukraine says it has killed 100,000 Russian troops since the start of the war and claims morale among the poorly equipped invaders is low. 'Half the Russians' tanks move but can't fire and the other half fire but can't move,' I was told jokingly.

Ukraine's death toll is not revealed. It is high but, military sources insist, less than half that of its enemy's.

Ukraine's military predict Russia will try to advance in the new year, after getting the go-ahead to increase its army from 1.15 million combat troops to 1.5 million. The signs are that Putin is preparing for a long conflict.

As Ukraine's charismatic President, Volodymyr Zelensky, arrived in the U.S. last week to receive a pledge for a further \$45 billion (£40 billion) in U.S. aid, one military source told me: 'We can and will finish the war if we are given the capability [in weapons] by the West to do so.'

On Friday, under the protection of an elite Ukrainian Special Forces team, I and Tory MPs Bob Seely and Chris Green were taken to the front line - the recaptured city of Kherson.

We entered the city but were

**'We welcomed
them with gum,
not flowers'**

prevented from going into the centre as more than 60 shells were fired on now sparsely populated civilian areas. Throughout the day, a separate mortar battle raged on the outskirts of the city with the enemy forces just two miles away.

On the way to Kherson, we saw the scale of devastation the war has inflicted on civilians. The villages of Luch and Posad Pokrovsk, both near Kherson, were largely destroyed by last month's bloody battles.

A handful of villagers are finally starting to return, however, and one resident even managed to decorate a Christmas tree outside their badly damaged home. Perhaps a poignant image of hope for the country's future?

During my visit, I met Major-General Andriy Kovalchuk, head of Operational Southern Command and the man who has been credited with much of Ukraine's battlefield success.

I told him: 'My admiration for your troops has no bounds. For the past year, the British Army has been training Ukraine's troops. After you win the war, the Ukrainian Army will be training British troops.' He gave a wry smile - but I believe my prediction will come true.

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