



by Lord Ashcroft

BEFORE the war in Ukraine started, Nina Yevtushenko's biggest decisions were about which modelling assignments to accept and which beauty competitions to enter.

Today, life could hardly be more different after she started a humanitarian aid group that operates in and around the frontline to provide food, clothing, blankets and basic goods for those in need. Almost on a daily basis, Nina risks her life dodging Russian missiles, rockets, drones, artillery and mortar fire.

As she talks with passion about her war role, there's no doubt that she gets infinitely more job satisfaction from her life-saving work than from her globe-trotting modelling assignments.

'As sad as it sounds, during the war I found my calling,' says the 26-year-old. 'Every day I look for a thousand options where to find support and humanitarian aid because it helps Ukrainians survive this Hell. And every day I thank my foreign friends for their help and repeat how important it is for it not to stop.'

Nina's life was turned upside down in February last year. Though Russian troops had been massing on Ukraine's border for weeks, she did not think they would invade.

Then, four days after her 25th birthday, while with her sister and nephew in western Ukraine, her family called at Sam on February 24 to say war had started and shots were being fired in her home city of Zaporizhzhia.

Split up from her loved ones, Nina recalls: 'My sister and I were very scared. We were alone and had no idea what to do.'

INITALLY, they went to stay with friends, but three weeks later travelled to Slovakia where they stayed for several weeks and collected money to send to help volunteers in Ukraine. But she says she wanted to be more useful and decided to return because most of her family were under Russian occupation in the Zaporizhzhia region.

She contacted a friend, Kate Shkoliar, who was a volunteer aid worker, and asked her to start a charitable foundation together. Within a week of Nina's return to Ukraine, they had launched a fund which they called the Mriya Foundation ('mriya' means dream in Ukrainian).

For the past 19 months, the not-for-profit organisation has helped many thousands of Ukrainians, many of whom are living on or close to the frontline.

Nina tells me how they help displaced people, families with babies, the disabled, elderly, large families and the military. They also shelter animals, transporting pet food to areas where there are many abandoned dogs.

The foundation takes on challenges that other aid groups cannot – or won't – undertake.

Nina explains: 'If someone turns to us for help, it means it is 100 per cent needed. We'll do everything in our power to deliver it. I want people to know they are not alone.'

Inevitably, Nina and her team have come under fire.

Their most dangerous moments

were in November last year after Ukrainian forces had regained land from Russia in the east and south-east of their country. She says they were the first aid group to reach areas around Kharkiv and Kherson after Russian troops had left.

Nina and her team, led by her friend Kate, took three trucks of aid to Kherson when, suddenly, the Russians started shelling and shooting indiscriminately. She says: 'It was chaos, but we had a queue of 4,000 people wanting help. It was very scary but everyone stayed to help.'

In the Kharkiv region, they took a truck of humanitarian aid including 2,000 food boxes and 4,000 blankets. 'When the moment came to distribute them all, a [Russian]

rocket flew over us,' Nina recalls. On another occasion, she and a friend were bombed as they tried to deliver pet food to within two miles of the frontline.

When, in June, Russian troops blew up the Kakhovka dam, killing 58 people and destroying the lives of some 40,000 in the Dniipro river area, Nina's team were at the centre of rescue efforts. Despite the huge dangers, with the river banks having been mined by Russians and explosive devices floating in the water, the volunteers used small boats to help those in need.

Nina tells me: 'Kate arrived there soon after the explosion and she brought food and other aid to the flooded areas.'

Two days later, Nina arrived at

5 THINGS WE LEARNED THIS WEEK

By Jon Connell of daily online newsletter THE KNOWLEDGE NEWS MADE MANAGEABLE

1 The British Army helped popularise beards in the Victorian era. During the Crimean War in the mid-1850s, says The Economist, soldiers were permitted facial hair on account of the extreme cold weather. The conflict was 'the first to be extensively photographed', and as images of whiskered soldiers were transmitted back to Britain, full beards 'became associated with martial virtues'. This morphed into a requirement, until 1916, for soldiers to sport a tache.

2 In 1981, the modest Cross Hands Hotel in Chipping Sodbury had an unlikely guest: Queen Elizabeth II. Caught in a freak blizzard during her travels, the monarch was sneaked into the £65-a-night Gloucestershire B&B through a back door to avoid people making a fuss.

3 Coffee hasn't always been something to sip. The earliest mention of coffee dates to the Abbasid Empire – which dominated the Middle East and North Africa in the 9th Century. But bunk, as it was called, wasn't a beverage – people used the beans to make 'aromatic compounds' to mask the smell of sweat and food. It only became a drink in the 15th Century.

4 The world's deadliest animals aren't the charismatic predators you

might expect – mosquitos are the biggest killers of humans, knocking off about a million of us a year. They are followed by humans themselves – thanks to an estimated 475,000 homicides – and snakes (a comparatively lower 100,000). And with 700 human scalps a year, tapeworms outperform hippos (500), lions (250) and sharks (five).

5 The latest Miss France, Eve Gilles (pictured above), was the first woman with a pixie cut to reach the final in the pageant's 103-year history. The 20-year-old maths student from Quaedypre, near Dunkirk, finished third in the public vote, but was the pick of the seven-woman judging panel – prompting complaints on social media that the contest had gone 'woke'. 'We're used to seeing beautiful Misses with long hair, but I chose an androgynous look with short hair,' Gilles said after her victory.

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FLASHPOINT: The moment the Kakhovka Dam is blown up on June 6



AFTERMATH: A day later, Nina's team brought aid to the deluged residents of Kherson

NINA, BEAUTY QUEEN HEROINE OF THE DNIIPRO DAM OUTRAGE

How ex-model dodged floating Russian mines to rescue victims of the horrendous flooding that followed one of Putin's most egregious war crimes

one of the worst affected villages with the Scottish-based aid organisation Siobhan's Trust. 'We prepared pizza and also took food to areas where the floodwater had receded but there was still no electricity. I also helped distribute food boxes for an entire village.'

'The scenes we witnessed were desperate: many houses were almost entirely under water.'

Unsurprisingly, Nina and her team of volunteers have witnessed some heart-breaking scenes over the past 19 months, none more so than in her home city in March. They got there within hours of a Russian rocket hitting a five-storey building.

'On the second day, we found a family who had been killed by the missile. A little girl of eight months old, her mum, her dad and their cat were all dead, lying on their bed. It was very traumatic because, for two days, everyone had hoped they would be found alive.'

The people of Ukraine have endured terrible suffering. Before the war, the country's population stood at almost 44million. But over the past 22 months, an estimated



ACTION WOMAN: Nina Yevtushenko stands with Siobhan's Trust worker Tom Hughes (centre) and volunteer James Hackney as she delivers aid. Left: The 26-year-old represents Ukraine at a worldwide pageant

70,000 have been killed and a further 120,000 injured. The invasion has displaced more than eight million Ukrainians and even more were forced to become refugees.

Having visited Ukraine five times since the war started, my respect for the bravery and resilience of its people has no bounds.

Also, with the war now in a difficult phase, said by some to have reached something of a stalemate, I am more convinced than ever that the rest of the world must not let the terrible events in the Middle East distract from our determination to help Ukraine. Humanitarian support is no less important than

military support, especially as winter begins to bite, bringing temperatures as low as -20C.

Since Nina launched her foundation, it has attracted private backers, and the help it has provided in food, medical equipment and other supplies is immeasurable.

She says: 'I am proud of the work

we have done, with such a small budget. Our donors know their money is going to good causes.'

Fortunately, none of Nina's immediate family have been killed or injured. Early in the war, they smuggled her closest relatives – her mother, younger brother and grandfather – to safety.

However, their home town is still under occupation so they cannot return.

Nina got married just after the war began and her husband, Viktor, works for the Ukrainian military as part of the country's security service. Because of their different and demanding roles, they spend much time apart.

Nina and Kate are looking for new charitable partners to maximise their effectiveness. At first, the pair did everything themselves, but now have a small staff and 20 regular volunteers.

Nina, who is nearly 5ft 8in tall, became a model in her third year as a maths student at university in Zaporizhzhia. She won a local beauty contest and then represented her city in a national competition, which she won, and then starred for Ukraine in a worldwide

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contest. She has since worked as a fashion model.

Nina hopes the war will end soon – but fears it could last a long time. Like many Ukrainians, she is desperate for the West, notably the US and the UK, to continue their support with military weapons and humanitarian aid.

One thing is certain: Nina's work to assist those in need will continue, even increase. 'I want to help Ukrainians live through this horror,' she says.

Mriya has opened a warehouse close to the frontline, where equipment is stored before it is distributed. There are plans to expand the operation, too.

Nina adds: 'I want to help children, who have been studying only online for nearly two years, to raise their level of knowledge.'

She and Kate are also thinking about opening a rehabilitation centre for injured soldiers.

'In some ways, we don't want to wait until the end of the war. We must live for the present and try to be 100 per cent useful. We have learned to live every second as if it was our last.'

But Nina's long-term hope is that Ukraine will be a safe place again. 'One day, I want to have a big family. Everything we do now is so that, in the future, we can live, develop and enjoy life in a free country without war.'

Anyone wanting to find out more about the Mriya foundation, or to donate to the work of Nina and her team, should visit their Instagram and/or Facebook pages @mriya_charity.

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