Abstract: An Essay focuses on the experiences of Holocaust scholar Marta Havryshko during the first days of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. The author reflects on the future and challenges of Holocaust research and education in times of war.

Keywords: Russian invasion of Ukraine, Holocaust research and education in times of war, Ukraine

Most of my family and friends learned about Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the early morning hours of February 24, 2022: some woke up to the sound of explosions, some received phone calls from their relatives, others read about it in the news. I have been watching the tragedy unfold from the very beginning.

On the night before February 24, I could not sleep at all. I read Ukrainian and Western media with dire predictions. I exchanged opinions about a possible Russian attack with my Western colleagues. To distract myself from the dark thoughts, I tried to think about work. About the projects I planned to implement within the newly created Babyn Yar Institute for Holocaust Studies at the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center. I dreamed about how our institute would organize meetings between young Ukrainian and Israeli researchers. I planned publishing projects, conferences, seminars, and book presentations. In addition, that night I started preparing my own presentation for Holocaust teachers and educators that was to take place the following Sunday at Yad Vashem.

At 4:30 a.m. I saw that Vladimir Putin had started his address. Who would give an address late at night? What was it for? For what purpose? “There could be only one purpose – a great war against Ukraine”, I thought. From the very beginning of Putin’s aggressive speech, I could not contain my emotions. I cried not only for my unrealized academic plans and projects. I was crying because, as a researcher of war and the Holocaust, I know the price of war, I understand the suffering it brings to
innocent people, the dramatic and lasting consequences it has, and how it makes ordinary people commit extraordinary evil.

Black thoughts swarmed in my head. I remembered dozens of stories of women from the Second World War that I had heard directly from them, or read in interviews with them or in their diaries and memoirs. I remembered the story of Regina Brudinger, a young Jewish girl whose studies at a teacher training school in Lviv had been interrupted by German bombs in the early morning of June 22, 1941. I admired her courage and bravery, because by the dawn she had volunteered at a military hospital and had been working as a nurse throughout the war. I also remembered another woman, Kazymyra Poray, who had saved her husband and mother-in-law in the first days of the war and during the Lviv pogrom of 1941. She tried to get food for them and protect them from the angry mob that craved the blood of their Jewish neighbors.

I thought about other women and their relatives who, in the first days of the German attack on the Soviet Union, tried to comprehend what was happening, guess the future, and make decisions that became fateful. “Should we flee or stay?” many of them thought. “If we flee, where can we go and with whom?” These were the questions that loomed over me in the first days of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Fear for my 9-year-old son, Danylo, forced my imagination to draw macabre pictures of his possible sufferings in the war, much like the ones experienced by children in Ukraine during the Nazi occupation. I wanted to protect my son from the horrors of war, and in early March I decided to leave my home and my family.

After a long and exhausting journey, my son and I ended up in Switzerland. Thanks to the generous support of the URIS Program at Basel University, I could resume my research on the sexual violence against Jewish women and men during the Holocaust in Ukraine. Unlike many Ukrainian researchers, I do not have to worry about my safety and the safety of my child, about living under occupation, about being kidnapped and tortured in detention. I can travel freely and participate in conferences, seminars, and roundtables. I can speak and write freely. To be able to work during a terrible war in your country is a great luxury and privilege for Ukrainian researchers. I decided to use this privilege to raise awareness of Ukraine’s past, in particular its history during the Second World War and the Holocaust, among Western audiences. It seemed to me necessary to deconstruct the myths of Putin’s propaganda about Ukraine’s past and its relations with the Third Reich during the war. I felt it was important to emphasize that Ukraine was trying to deal with its difficult past, including the controversial legacy of local collaboration with the Nazis in the Holocaust and the Ukrainian nationalist movement responsible for ethnic violence against Poles, Jews, and others.

The war also forced me to adjust the content of my teaching course “Gender, War, and Violence in Contemporary Ukraine (20th–21st Centuries)” at the University
of Basel, which was planned long before Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine. In all my seminars on the Holocaust as part of the course, I could not help but draw certain parallels with contemporary Ukraine at war. In particular, when I talked about the Babyn Yar tragedy of September 1941, I told my students that Babyn Yar was the target of a Russian missile attack in March 2022. I also told them about how the construction of an important and much-needed memorial museum at the site had been stopped by the Russian aggression. I spoke about how the content and activities of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center itself had changed because of the new challenges of Russia’s genocidal war against Ukraine; and how our center was trying to comprehend the nature, causes, and consequences of this new round of extreme violence in Ukraine.

As I talked to my students about the role of gender in the Holocaust, I drew parallels between the cases of girls and women’s public rape in front of their parents, which had taken place, for example, during the anti-Jewish pogroms in July 1941 in Galicia, and are taking place now, in the territories temporarily occupied by the Russians. I recalled how Jewish women and girls were sexually humiliated in prisons, ghettos, camps, and hiding places, and how the Russian military is now using sexual violence as a method of torture in prisons, torture chambers, and other places of detention. I talked about how the pain of the raped Jewish women and girls was ignored, invisible, and silenced after the war. I thought about how their traumatic experience of the Holocaust teaches us today not to ignore the problem of sexual violence, to develop a survivor-centered approach, and to demand justice for victims and their loved ones.

I dream of returning to Ukraine and implementing everything I had planned before the full-scale invasion. Moreover, I want to develop new Holocaust research and education programs that would take into account the new Ukrainian reality created by the brutal Russian invasion. I want Ukrainian youth to understand the significance of the Holocaust for the democratic development of their country: I realize that the Holocaust is not only about the distant past. The story of the Holocaust is about the role ethnic stereotypes and pseudo-scientific theories playing in favor of extreme violence, about hate speech as an instrument of aggression, about humanity at inhuman times, about decisions without much choice, about dignity under pressure, about respect for otherness, and about the need not to be silent bystanders in times of injustice against your neighbors.