COVERING THE UKRAINE CRISIS

A VIEW FROM BOTH SIDES

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

On the Ground with the Harriman Institute's 2015 Paul Klebnikov Russian Civil Society Fellow

Russian photojournalist Maria Turchenkova, a petite, soft-spoken twenty-seven-year-old with a mane of carelessly arranged red hair, sits at the front of the room in Columbia's Faculty House and looks quietly at the table. She is about to participate on a panel about ethics and approaches to conflict journalism, and when it is her turn to speak, she glances at the audience then loads something onto her laptop, projecting photographs on a screen behind her. Though she appears confident while describing her recent experiences covering the Ukraine conflict, she stops suddenly, covers her mouth, and pauses for breath. "Sorry," she says, smiling shyly at the audience. "I'm a little bit nervous because I'm not used to public events."

Though she may get anxious before a crowd, Turchenkova, the Harriman Institute's 2015 Paul Klebnikov Russian Civil Society Fellow, has no qualms about confronting physical danger. "The People's Republic of Chaos: Donbass, Eastern Ukraine," a series of photographs she exhibited during her six-week residency at Columbia, includes close-ups of masked separatists, corpses, coffins, and burning structures. One print, depicting a group of Ukrainian soldiers crouching in front of a flaming building in Strelkov, is particularly eerie. Right before Turchenkova snapped her camera, she had yelled for her colleague, *Le Monde* correspondent Benoît Vitkine, to get out of her shot. Seconds after he moved away, a landmine exploded in that very spot.

Clashes with riot police in Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in late January 2014. All photos © Maria Turchenkova

Pro-Russian gunmen at the crash site of the MH17 Malaysian Airlines passenger plane near the village of Hrabove in Eastern Ukraine
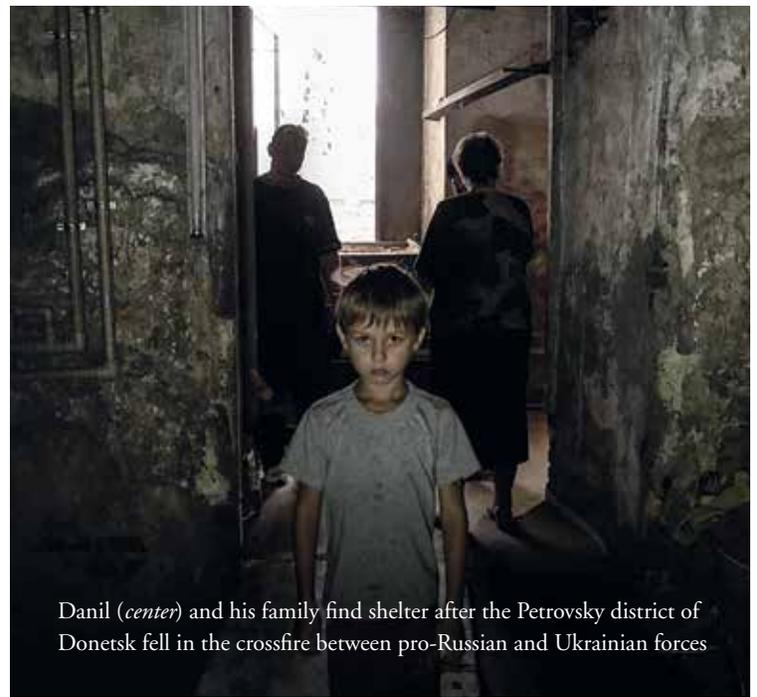
Danil (*center*) and his family find shelter after the Petrovsky district of Donetsk fell in the crossfire between pro-Russian and Ukrainian forces

But even in the most intense moments, Turchenkova never fears for her own safety. "I'm scared for other people, but I have developed some sort of immunity about myself," she says, after the panel, leaning back in her chair on the patio of an outdoor campus café and pulling intently on a cigarette.

Turchenkova did not always want to be a conflict journalist. She studied economics and translation at the Moscow State Linguistic University with hopes of opening a restaurant chain. By her second year of school, in 2005, she'd lost her passion for it and got a job as a radio journalist. Four years later, she enrolled in the Rochenko Multimedia and Art School and began her career as a freelance photographer, which she felt would bring her close to "the epicenter" of a story. Turchenkova photographed important events—Obama's meeting with opposition leaders during his first visit to Moscow, the protests on Bolotnaya Square, Pussy Riot's iconic Cathedral of Christ the Savior performance—but she wanted to use her camera to reveal something deeper.

For months she followed news about Dagestan, which had been engulfed in guerrilla warfare with Islamic insurgents since the Chechen War ended in 2009. She was baffled that the topic was seldom discussed in the mainstream media; Russian newspapers never published more than a few sentences about terrorist operations or the killing of suspected insurgents. Who were these people? And why were they killed? Were they proven terrorists? What happened to their relatives? In 2011, she set out for Dagestan. "There were no plans, editors, or budgets," she wrote in the online photo magazine *Bird in Flight*. "I just took my backpack and went as far as possible into rural areas." Her family was terrified—her mother frequently called crying

and begging her to return—but Turchenkova continued traveling in and out of the republic for two years.

In 2013, her photographs from these trips were published in *Time* magazine, as a series titled "The Hidden War in the Caucasus." The experience was transformative. It taught her how to seek out and communicate stories with her camera, and it also sparked her interest in the Middle East, where many Dagestanis and Chechens had started fighting with the Islamic State. She planned to move to the region at the end of 2013, but Euromaidan erupted, and she decided to follow the developments in Ukraine instead (she moved to Beirut after her Harriman residency last spring).

After covering Maidan and photographing Crimean citizens for *Le Monde* in the weeks leading up to the February 2014 secession referendum, she went to Donbass, a coal-rich, predominantly Russian-speaking area in southeastern Ukraine, to follow the clashes between the pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian self-defense militias.

Donbass, an unofficially demarcated province encompassing Donetsk and Luhansk, is comprised primarily of coal miners and factory workers. It was the second most populous area in Ukraine until people fled because of the war, and, though the majority of its residents are Russian-speaking, its ethnic makeup is predominantly Ukrainian. Former president Viktor Yanukovych grew up there, along with some of the country's most nefarious oligarchs, who ran the region as they pleased.

Though Donbass operated by its own rules, there had been little discussion of separatism until the revolution in Kyiv. But as the protests intensified, the people in Maidan, who were angry at the corruption perpetuated by Yanukovych and his

cronies, lashed out at the southeasterners, calling them "trashy and uneducated," says Turchenkova. Meanwhile, propaganda intensified from both sides, with "news of tanks and swastikas from the pro-Russian side and of Chechen fighters from Kyiv."

She vowed to travel regularly between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian areas, because the only way to understand what was happening was to "cover the conflict from both sides."

In April 2014, a group of armed, masked militias announced the creation of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). Turchenkova watched neighbors who had lived together for years turn against each other. Even families were disintegrating—fathers and sons taking up arms on opposing sides of the war.

As the troops marched into the city of Donetsk, people in the outskirts moved into hiding, confining themselves to damp basements and defunct World War II bomb shelters. But the city center maintained an eerie peacefulness. "Cafés stayed open, markets," says Turchenkova. "They were planting roses, mowing the lawns, and getting rid of dried leaves."

Moving from place to place in search of the complete story, Turchenkova, who blames media propaganda for perpetuating the conflict, felt like Alice chasing the White Rabbit around Wonderland. Her big breakthrough came in May 2014. For weeks international media had speculated about whether or not Russian soldiers were fighting with Ukrainian separatists, with DPR's de facto authorities vehemently denying the rumors. One evening, following a big shootout at the Donetsk airport, a senior official in the de facto government approached Turchenkova and her colleagues and told them that two truckloads of corpses would be repatriated to Russia the following day.

"We were absolutely shocked," says Turchenkova. The official not only confirmed the speculations, but also asked the journalists to accompany the trucks with the Russian cadavers to the border—they needed the journalists in order to ward off potential provocation from Ukrainian soldiers. The next day Turchenkova stood among a sea of reporters in front of a morgue in Donetsk, looking at a heap of coffins said to contain the bodies of Russian soldiers. There were nearly 100 correspondents in front of the morgue, but most of them snapped photos of the coffins being loaded into the trucks, and, as the trucks pulled away, returned to the center of Donetsk. Turchenkova and three colleagues decided to follow the trucks. "I had to know, was it really true that Russian citizens were in there? How would
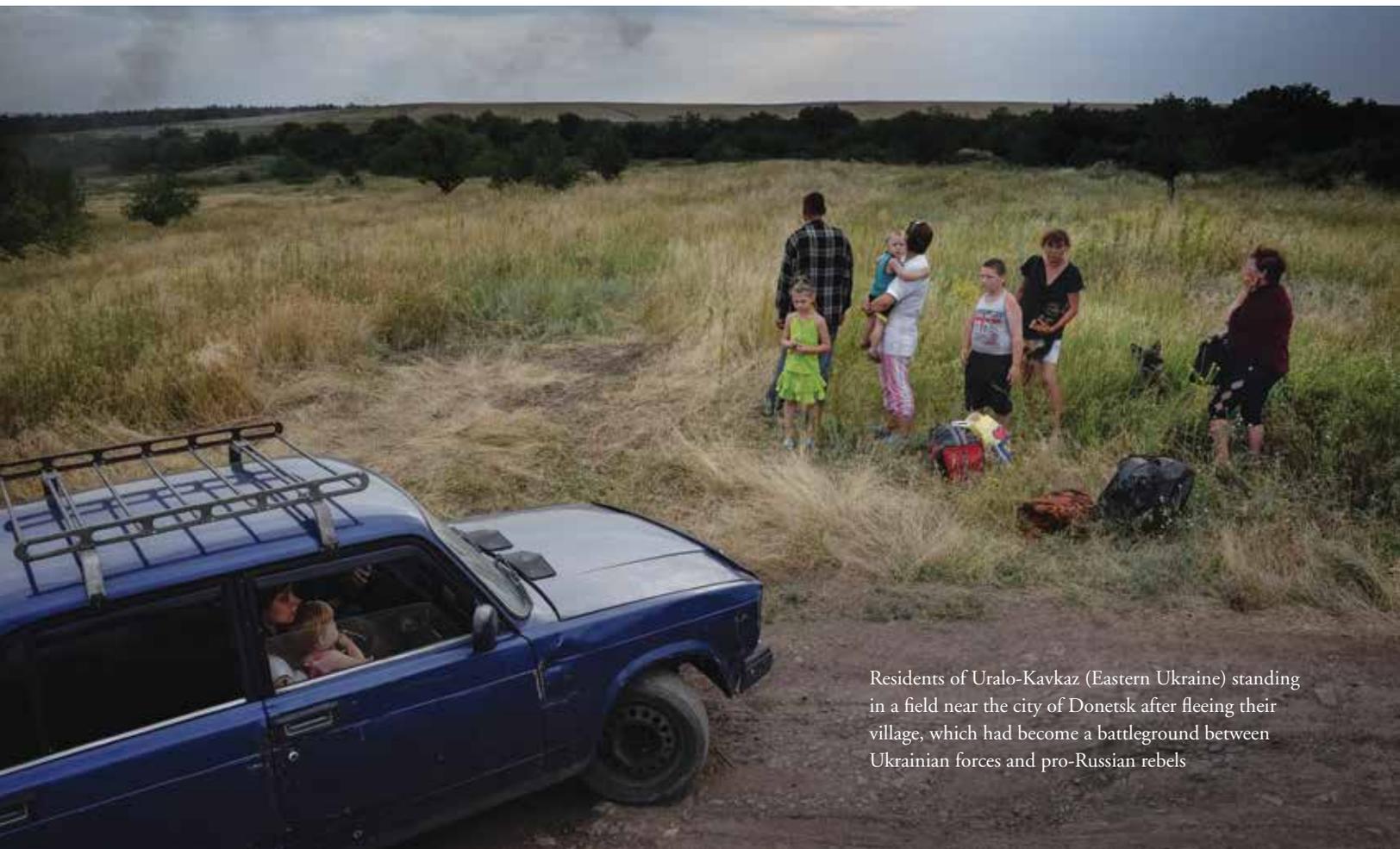
Residents of Uralo-Kavkaz (Eastern Ukraine) standing in a field near the city of Donetsk after fleeing their village, which had become a battleground between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian rebels

they be repatriated?" says Turchenkova. Instead of going to the border, the trucks pulled up to an ice-cream factory. The journalists watched as pro-separatist volunteers emerged from the factory's refrigerators with corpses and body parts, which they deposited into black plastic bags and packed into what the journalists realized had been empty coffins—the morgue was full and they'd moved the bodies to the factory's refrigerators.

After the bodies were loaded, she and her colleagues followed them to the border. When they got there, they faced the rifles of confounded Ukrainian soldiers. But the soldiers, after seeing official notices from the hospital in Donetsk, allowed the bodies through. Turchenkova returned to Donetsk and wrote an article, which she published on Ekho Moskvy's blog. The story became one of the biggest on the war published in Russia, the first to definitively prove that Russian citizens were fighting with Ukrainian separatists.

Turchenkova stayed in Ukraine until February 2015. Each morning she checked the social networks for news from fellow journalists in the field, called her driver, and followed the action. On both sides of the conflict she was confronted with similar images: "destruction, funerals, more destruction."

She took the trip between Donbass and Ukraine often, but she usually traveled roads embedded in conflict zones. The first time she went on a road designated by media and authorities as a humanitarian corridor safe for civilians, she encountered separatists on one side and Ukrainian soldiers on the other, shooting each other while traveling civilians were caught in the crossfire. "When you travel through combat zones, you do so at your own risk. But when you choose officially sanctioned safe routes and end up in a combat zone, that's terrifying."

Turchenkova laments that Western media is too preoccupied with geopolitical questions to worry about the people caught in the middle. "There are so many other problems," she says during her exhibit opening at Columbia. "My story is dedicated to the people. How they live in basements, how no one can agree on humanitarian corridors." □

Top to bottom: Ukrainian soldiers crouching in front of a flaming building in Strelkov (where a landmine exploded just moments after *Le Monde* journalist Benoît Vitkine stepped out of the shot); pro-Russian activist in Crimea; a mass grave on the outskirts of Luhansk, where both identified and unidentified civilians killed by mortar fire or shelling were buried

Sloviansk, May 11, 2014, the day before pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk declared independence