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Inside Zelensky's World

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky photographed in Kyiv on April 19

Alexander Chekmenev for TIME

BY **SIMON SHUSTER/KYIV**
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The nights are the hardest, when he lies there on his cot, the whine of the air-raid sirens in his ears and his phone still buzzing beside him. Its screen makes his face look like a ghost in the dark, his eyes scanning messages he didn't have a chance to read during the day. Some from his wife and kids, many from his advisers, a few from his troops, surrounded in their bunkers, asking him again and again for more weapons to break the Russian siege.

Inside his own bunker, the President has a habit of staring at his daily agenda even when the day is over. He lies awake and wonders whether he missed something, forgot someone. "It's pointless," Volodymyr Zelensky told me at the presidential compound in Kyiv, just outside the office where he sometimes sleeps. "It's the same agenda. I see it's over for today. But I look at it several times and sense that something is wrong." It's not anxiety that keeps his eyes from closing. "It's my conscience bothering me."

The same thought keeps turning over in his head: "I've let myself sleep, but now what? Something is happening right now." Somewhere in Ukraine the bombs are still falling. Civilians are still trapped in basements or under the rubble. The Russians are still committing crimes of war, rape, and torture. Their bombs are leveling entire towns. The city of Mariupol and its last defenders are besieged. A critical battle has started in the east. Amid all this, Zelensky, the comedian turned President, still needs to keep the world engaged, and to convince foreign leaders that his country needs their help right now, at any cost.

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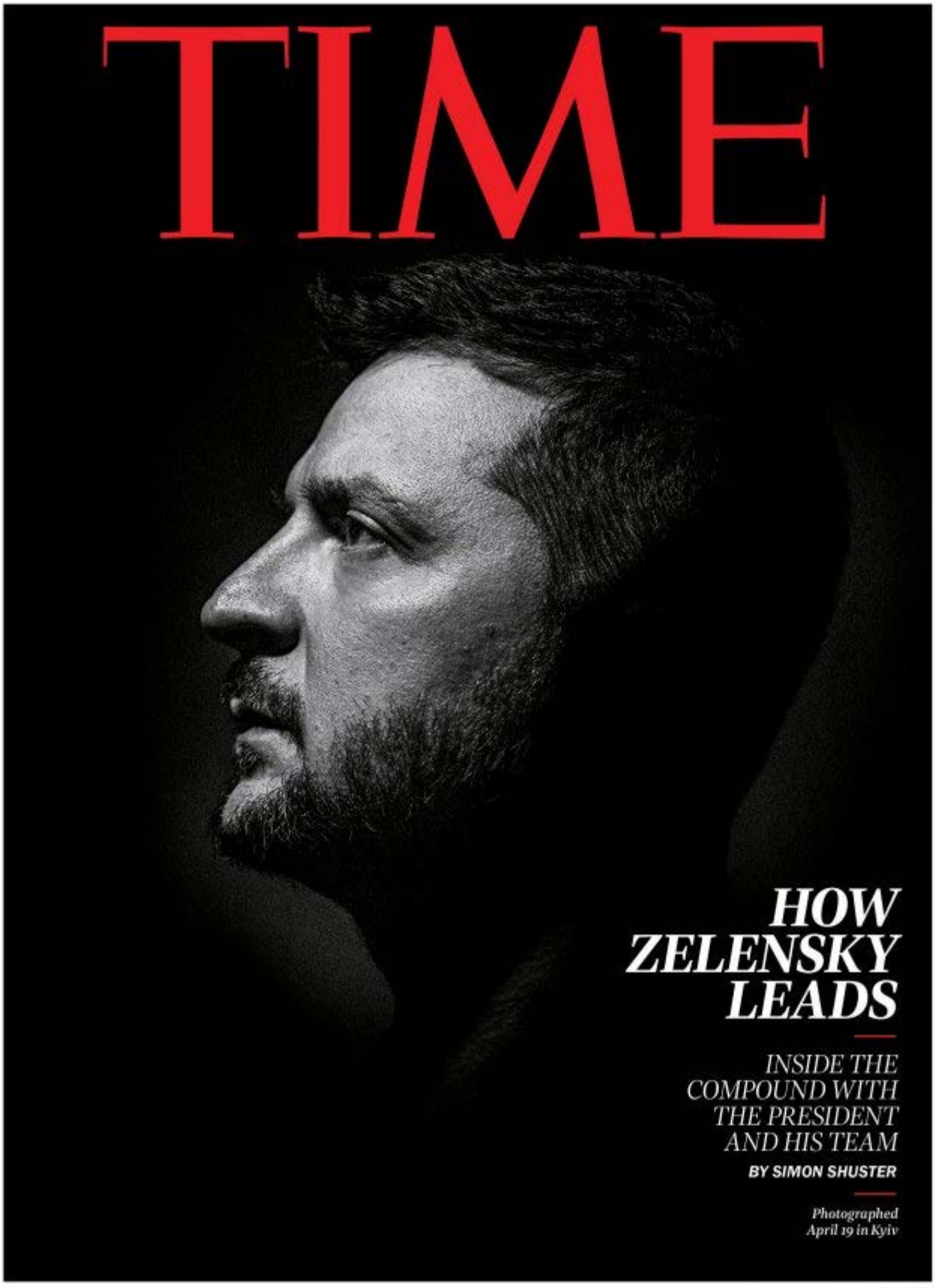

HOW ZELENSKY LEADS

INSIDE THE COMPOUND WITH THE PRESIDENT AND HIS TEAM

BY SIMON SHUSTER

Photographed April 19 in Kyiv

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Photograph by Alexander Chekmenev for TIME

Outside Ukraine, Zelensky told me, “People see this war on Instagram, on social media. When they get sick of it, they will scroll away.” It’s human nature. Horrors have a way of making us close our eyes. “It’s a lot of blood,” he explains. “It’s a lot of emotion.” Zelensky senses the world’s attention flagging, and it troubles him nearly as much as the Russian bombs. Most nights, when he scans his agenda, his list of tasks has less to do with the war itself than with the way it is perceived. His mission is to make the free world experience this war the way Ukraine does: as a matter of its own survival.

He seems to be pulling it off. The U.S. and Europe have rushed to his aid, providing more weapons to Ukraine than they have given any other country since World War II. Thousands of journalists have come to Kyiv, filling the inboxes of his staff with interview requests.

My request was not just for a chance to question the President. It was to see the war the way he and his team have experienced it. Over two weeks in April, they allowed me to do that in the presidential compound on Bankova Street, to observe their routines and hang around the offices where they now live and work. Zelensky and his staff made the place feel almost normal. We cracked jokes, drank coffee, waited for meetings to start or end. Only the soldiers, our ever present chaperones, embodied the war as they took us around, shining flashlights down dark corridors, past the rooms where they slept on the floor.

Read More: *TIME’s Interview with Volodymyr Zelensky*

The experience illustrated how much Zelensky has changed since we first met three years ago, backstage at his comedy show in Kyiv, when he was still an actor running for President. His sense of humor is still intact. “It’s a means of survival,” he says. But two months of war have made him harder, quicker to anger, and a lot more comfortable with risk. Russian troops came within minutes of finding him and his family in the first hours of the war, their gunfire once audible inside his office walls. Images of dead civilians haunt him. So do the daily appeals from his troops, hundreds of whom are trapped belowground, running out of food, water, and ammunition.

This account of Zelensky at war is based on interviews with him and nearly a dozen of his aides. Most of them were thrown into this experience with no real preparation. Many of them, like Zelensky himself, come from the worlds of acting and show business. Others were known in Ukraine as bloggers and journalists before the war.

On the day we last met—the 55th of the invasion—Zelensky announced the start of a battle that could end the war. Russian forces had regrouped after sustaining heavy losses around Kyiv, and they had begun a fresh assault in the east. There, Zelensky says, the armies of one side or the other will likely be destroyed. “This will be a full-scale battle, bigger than any we have seen on the territory of Ukraine,” Zelensky told me on April 19. “If we hold out,” he says, “it will be a decisive moment for us. The tipping point.”

In the first weeks of the invasion, when the Russian artillery was within striking distance of Kyiv, Zelensky seldom waited for sunrise before calling his top general for a status report. Their first call usually took place around 5 a.m., before the light began peeking through the sandbags in the windows of the compound. Later they moved the conversation back by a couple of hours, enough time for Zelensky to have breakfast—invariably eggs— and to make his way to the presidential chambers.

This set of rooms changed little after the invasion. It remained a cocoon of gold leaf and palatial furniture that Zelensky’s staff find oppressive. (“At least if the place gets bombed,” one of them joked, “we won’t have to look at this stuff anymore.”) But the streets around the compound became a maze of checkpoints and barricades. Civilian cars cannot get close, and soldiers ask pedestrians for secret passwords that change daily, often nonsense phrases, like coffee cup suitor, that would be hard for a Russian to pronounce.

Beyond the checkpoints is the government district, known as the Triangle, which Russian forces tried to seize at the start of the invasion. When those first hours came up in our interview, Zelensky warned me the memories exist “in a fragmented way,” a disjointed set of images and sounds. Among the most vivid took place before sunrise on Feb. 24, when he and his wife Olena Zelenska went to tell their children the bombing had started, and to prepare them to flee their home. Their daughter is 17 and their son is 9, both old enough to understand they were in danger. “We woke

them up," Zelensky told me, his eyes turning inward. "It was loud. There were explosions over there."

It soon became clear the presidential offices were not the safest place to be. The military informed Zelensky that Russian strike teams had parachuted into Kyiv to kill or capture him and his family. "Before that night, we had only ever seen such things in the movies," says Andriy Yermak, the President's chief of staff.

As Ukrainian troops fought the Russians back in the streets, the presidential guard tried to seal the compound with whatever they could find. A gate at the rear entrance was blocked with a pile of police barricades and plywood boards, resembling a mound of junkyard scrap more than a fortification.

Friends and allies rushed to Zelensky's side, sometimes in violation of security protocols. Several brought their families to the compound. If the President were to be killed, the chain of succession in Ukraine calls for the Speaker of parliament to take command. But Ruslan Stefanchuk, who holds that post, drove straight to Bankova Street on the morning of the invasion rather than taking shelter at a distance.

Stefanchuk was among the first to see the President in his office that day. "It wasn't fear on his face," he told me. "It was a question: How could this be?" For months Zelensky had downplayed warnings from Washington that Russia was about to invade. Now he registered the fact that an all-out war had broken out, but could not yet grasp the totality of what it meant. "Maybe these words sound vague or pompous," says Stefanchuk. "But we sensed the order of the world collapsing." Soon the Speaker rushed down the street to the parliament and presided over a vote to impose martial law across the country. Zelensky signed the decree that afternoon.

As night fell that first evening, gunfights broke out around the government quarter. Guards inside the compound shut the lights and brought bulletproof vests and assault rifles for Zelensky and about a dozen of his aides. Only a few of them knew how to handle the weapons. One was Oleksiy Arestovych, a veteran of Ukraine's military intelligence service. "It was an absolute madhouse," he told me. "Automatics for everyone." Russian troops, he says, made two attempts to storm the compound. Zelensky later told me that his wife and children were still there at the time.

Offers came in from American and British forces to evacuate the President and his team. The idea was to help them set up a government in exile, most likely in eastern Poland, that could continue to lead from afar. None of Zelensky's advisers recall him giving these offers any serious consideration. Speaking on a secure landline with the Americans, he responded with a zinger that made headlines around the world: "I need ammunition, not a ride."

"We thought that was brave," says a U.S. official briefed on the call. "But very risky." Zelensky's bodyguards felt the same. They also urged him to leave the compound right away. Its buildings are nestled in a densely populated neighborhood, surrounded by private homes that could serve as nests for enemy snipers. Some houses are close enough to throw a grenade through the window from across the street. "The place was wide open," says Arestovych. "We didn't even have concrete blocks to close the street."

Somewhere outside the capital, a secure bunker was waiting for the President, equipped to withstand a lengthy siege. Zelensky refused to go there. Instead, on the second night of the invasion, while Ukrainian forces were fighting the Russians in nearby streets, the President decided to walk outside into the courtyard and film a video message on his phone. "We're all here," Zelensky said after doing a roll call of the officials by his side. They were dressed in the army green T-shirts and jackets that would become their war-time uniforms. "Defending our independence, our country."

By then, Zelensky understood his role in this war. The eyes of his people and much of the world were fixed on him. "You understand that they're watching," he says. "You're a symbol. You need to act the way the head of state must act."

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When he posted the 40-second clip to Instagram on Feb. 25, the sense of unity it projected was a bit misleading. Zelensky had been alarmed by the number of officials and even military officers who had fled. He did not respond with threats or

ultimatums. If they needed some time to evacuate their families, he allowed it. Then he asked them to come back to their posts. Most of them did.

Other people volunteered to live in the bunkers of the presidential compound. Serhiy Leshchenko, a prominent journalist and lawmaker, arrived a few days after the invasion to help the team counter Russian disinformation. He had to sign a nondisclosure agreement, forbidding him from sharing any details about the bunker's design, location, or amenities. All its inhabitants are bound by this pledge of secrecy. They are not even allowed to talk about the food they eat down there.

Its isolation often forced Zelensky's team to experience the war through their screens, somewhat like the rest of us. Footage of battles and rocket attacks tended to appear on social media before the military could brief Zelensky on these events. It was typical for the President and his staff to gather around a phone or laptop in the bunker, cursing images of devastation or cheering a drone strike on a Russian tank.

"This was a favorite," Leshchenko told me, pulling up a clip of a Russian helicopter getting blown out of the sky. Memes and viral videos were a frequent source of levity, as were the war ballads that Ukrainians wrote, recorded and posted online. One of them went like this:

Look how our people, how all Ukraine United the world against the Russians Soon all the Russians, they'll be gone And we'll have peace in all the world.

Zelensky, with his chief of staff Andriy Yermak, center, speaks to journalists in Bucha on April 4

Metin Aktas—Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

It wasn't long before Zelensky insisted on going to see the action for himself. In early March, when the Russians were still shelling Kyiv and trying to encircle the capital, the President drove out of his compound in secret, accompanied by two of his friends and a small team of bodyguards. "We made the decision to go on the fly," says Yermak, the chief of staff. There were no cameras with them. Some of Zelensky's closest aides only learned about the trip nearly two months later, when he brought it up during our interview.

Heading north from Bankova Street, the group went to a collapsed bridge that marked the front line at the edge of the city. It was the first time Zelensky had seen the effects of the fighting up close. He marveled at the size of a crater left by an explosion in the road. When they stopped to talk to Ukrainian troops at a checkpoint, Zelensky's bodyguards, he says, "were losing their minds." The President had no pressing reason to be that close to the Russian positions. He says he just wanted to have a look, and to talk to the people on the front lines.

A few days later, Zelensky went on a ride that aides refer to as “the borscht trip.” At a checkpoint near the edge of the city, the President met a man who would bring a fresh pot of borscht for the troops every day. They stood there, within range of enemy snipers and artillery, and had a bowl of soup with bread, talking about the Soviet Union and what the Russians had become since its collapse. “He told me how much he hated the Russians,” Zelensky recalls. Then the cook went to the trunk of his car and pulled out some medals he had earned while serving in the Soviet military. The conversation left a deep impression on Zelensky. “It felt right,” says Yermak. “Just talking to the people we work for.”

Such outings were rare. Though he received frequent updates from his generals and gave them broad instructions, Zelensky did not pretend to be a tactical savant. His Defense Minister was seldom by his side. Nor were any of Ukraine’s top military commanders. “He lets them do the fighting,” says Arestovych, his adviser on military affairs.

His days were a succession of statements, meetings, and interviews, usually conducted through the screen of a laptop or a phone. Courtesy calls took up time, like one Zoom session with the actors Mila Kunis and Ashton Kutcher, who had raised money for Ukraine through a GoFundMe campaign. Ahead of his nightly address to the nation, Zelensky would set out themes in conversation with his staff. “Very often people ask who is Zelensky’s speechwriter,” says Dasha Zarivna, a communications adviser. “The main one is him,” she says. “He works on every line.”

Through March and early April, Zelensky averaged about one speech per day, addressing venues as diverse as the parliament of South Korea, the World Bank, and the Grammy Awards. Each one was crafted with his audience in mind. When he spoke to the U.S. Congress, he referenced Pearl Harbor and 9/11. The German parliament heard him invoke the history of the Holocaust and the Berlin Wall.

The constant rush of urgent tasks and small emergencies had a numbing effect on the team, distending the passage of time in ways that one adviser describes as hallucinogenic. Days would feel like hours, and hours like days. The fear became acute only in the moments before sleep. “That’s when reality catches up with you,” says Leshchenko. “That’s when you lay there and think about the bombs.”

In early April, the team began emerging much more often from the bunker. The Ukrainian forces had driven the enemy back from the suburbs of Kyiv, and the Russians were moving their forces to the battle for the east. On the 40th day of the invasion, Zelensky made another trip outside the compound, this time with cameras in tow. He rode that morning in a convoy of armored vehicles to Bucha, a well-to-do commuter town where Russian troops had slaughtered hundreds of civilians.

The victim of a mortar attack in Bucha lies in her kitchen on April 6

Maxim Dondyuk—Der Spiegel

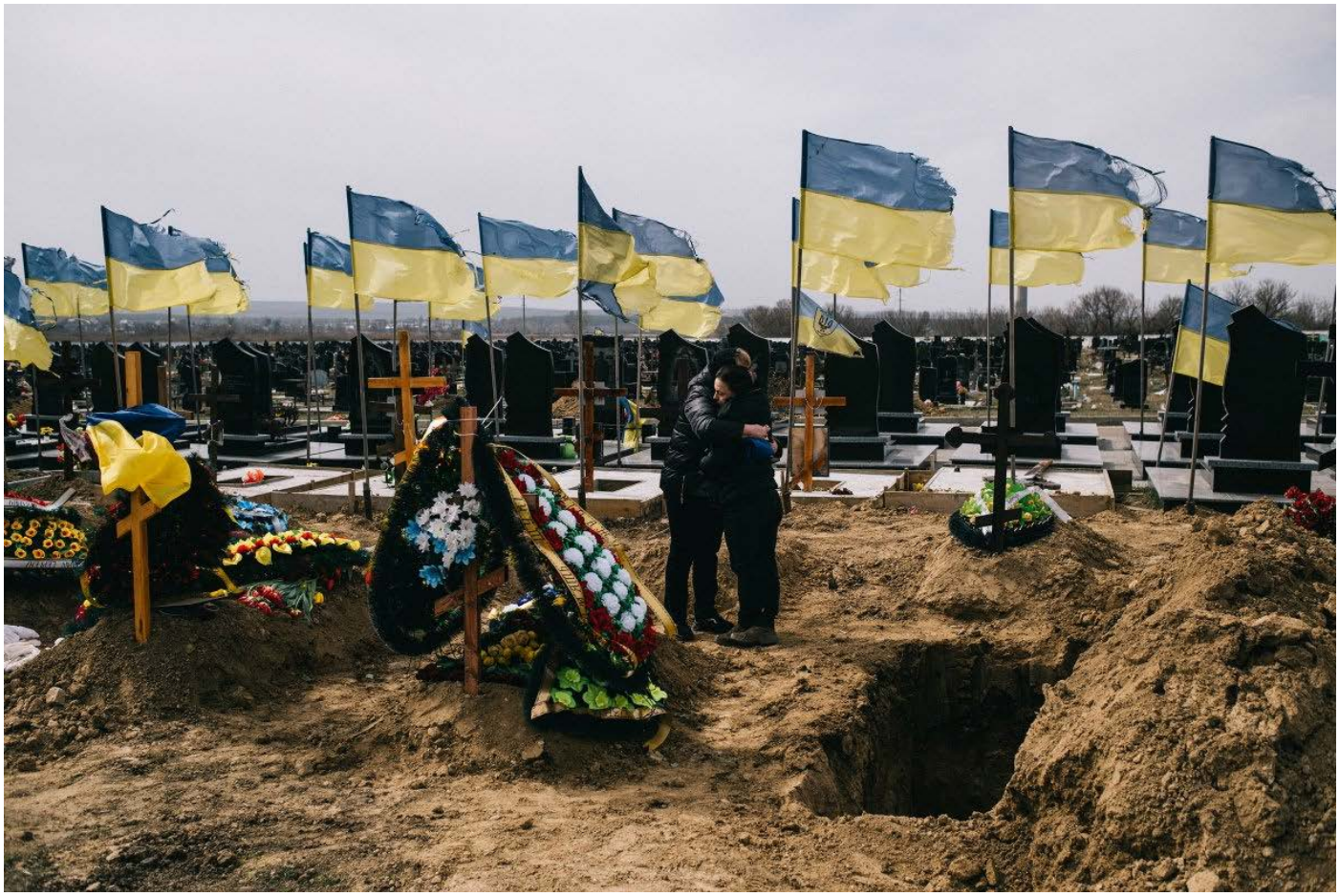
Their bodies were left scattered around town, Zelensky said, “found in barrels, basements, strangled, tortured.” Nearly all had fatal gunshot wounds. Some had been lying in the streets for days. As Zelensky and his team saw the atrocities up close, their horror quickly turned to rage. “We wanted to call off all peace talks,” says David Arakhamia, whom Zelensky had chosen to lead negotiations with the Russians. “I could barely even look them in the face.”

On April 8, while investigators were still exhuming mass graves in Bucha, Russian missiles struck a train station in Kramatorsk, in eastern Ukraine. Thousands of women, children, and elderly people had gathered with their luggage and their pets,

hoping to catch evacuation trains. The missiles killed at least 50 and injured more than a hundred others. Several children lost limbs.

Zelensky learned about the attack through a series of photos taken at the scene and forwarded to him that morning. One lingers in his mind. It showed a woman who had been beheaded by the explosion. “She was wearing these bright, memorable clothes,” he says. He could not shake the image that afternoon, when he walked into one of the most important meetings of his career. Ursula von der Leyen, the top official in the E.U., had traveled to Kyiv by train to offer Ukraine a fast track to membership. The country had been waiting for this opportunity for decades. But when the moment finally came, the President could not stop thinking about that headless woman on the ground.

As he took the podium next to von der Leyen, his face was a shade of green and his usual gift for oratory failed him. He could not even muster the presence of mind to mention the missile attack in his remarks. “It was one of those times when your arms and legs are doing one thing, but your head does not listen,” he later told me. “Because your head is there at the station, and you need to be present here.”



In the village of Mala Rohan, mourners attend the funeral of Artur Shchukin, who died March 25

The visit was the first in a parade of European leaders who began coming to Kyiv in April. Smartphones were not allowed inside the compound during these visits. A large cluster of phone signals, all transmitting from one place, could allow an enemy surveillance drone to pinpoint the location of the gathering. “And then: kaboom,” one guard explained, tracing the arc of a rocket with his hand.

Zelensky and his team still spent most nights and held some meetings in bunkers underneath the compound. But the Russian retreat allowed them to work in their usual rooms, which looked a lot like they did before the war. One obvious difference was the darkness. Many of the windows were covered with sandbags. Lights were switched off to make it harder for enemy snipers. Other precautions made no apparent sense. Guards had ripped the lights out of an elevator leading up to the executive offices. A tangle of wires protruded from the holes where they had been, and Zelensky’s aides rode up and down in the dark. Nobody remembered why.

On days when I came to the compound alone, the mood was more relaxed. Custodians dusted the cabinets and put fresh lining in wastebaskets. The first time it surprised me to find the metal detector and X-ray machine unplugged at the entrance while a janitor worked around them with a mop. Later it felt normal for a tired guard to glance in my bag and let me through.

Upstairs the war began to feel far away. Mykhailo Podolyak, one of a quartet of the President’s closest advisers, declined to barricade the windows in his office. He didn’t even close the drapes. When he invited me to meet him one day in April, the room was easy to find, because his nameplate was still on the door. “We go downstairs when we hear the air-raid sirens,” he explained with a shrug, referring to the bunker. “But this is my office. I like it here.”

Such faith in Kyiv’s air defenses seems like a coping mechanism, the offspring of defiance and denial. There is no way to stop the type of hyper-sonic missiles that Russia has deployed against Ukraine. The Kinzhal—the name means dagger in Russian—can travel at more than five times the speed of sound while zigzagging to avoid interceptors. It can also carry one of Russia’s nuclear warheads. But Podolyak sees no point in dwelling on this information. “The strike is coming,” he told me.

“They’ll hit us here, and it’ll all be ruins.” There was no fear in his voice as he said this. “What can we do?” he asked. “We’ve got to keep working.”

—*With reporting by* Nik Poli/ Washington *and* Simmone Shah/ New York