

# Ukraine – Field Review

Written by Nikolay Ivanov – IMD Eurasia

February 23–24, 2022

## February 23, 2022 - The day before the war started

We arrived in Kyiv around noon and were met at the airport by Oksana, a longtime employee of Bible League (BL) Ukraine, together with Andrei, who recently started working there.

After we checked in at the hotel, they took us to the office - a large house in a nice area on the city's outskirts, with a large yard and a big warehouse. Tanya, a refugee who from Crimea with her son, takes care of the building and lives there. She had prepared lunch for everyone.

After lunch, we spent 3-4 hours talking to Mikhail Prorokov (Misha) – the director of BL Ukraine. Of course, the topic of the current situation in Ukraine has been creeping into our conversation repeatedly. The pain of the local people is enormous. They do not show fear or despair but anxiety about the unknown and intense resentment towards Russia. They are outraged by what they say is false information that Russia is spreading. They are well aware that their military strength can't match that of Russia. Still, they will not surrender without a fight because of their solid national feeling and desire to defend themselves. People in Kyiv are preparing for war. Today, parliament voted to declare the country in a state of emergency and allowed people to own and carry weapons. In churches, along with prayers for peace, topics such as whether Christians should use weapons or whether Christian men should join the army are discussed. The Kyiv Theological Institute is preparing for evacuation, and the team of BL Ukraine has prepared its most essential documents in a metal box, which they are ready to take as soon as they have to hide. Rumors that Kyiv may be attacked are taken seriously, but life seems to continue as it has so far.

The threat from COVID-19 already seems distant and insignificant, but the economic crisis is intensifying. Gas, which is the primary source of heating in Ukraine, has risen in value from 8 Ukrainian hryvnias to 60 hryvnias. BL Ukraine continues its activities even in difficult times like this - the office is now heated by wood instead of gas, seminars are being held live and via zoom, they are developing a special program to work with the military, and organizing many groups to study the Bible with materials from Project Philip.

*“They do not show fear or despair but anxiety about the unknown”*



Scripture resources at the Bible League Ukraine offices

## February 24, 2022 – First day of war

That day started early in the morning. We were awakened by loud conversations at 5 a.m., banging on the stairs of carried luggage. Somewhere during this commotion, two consecutive loud bangs were heard. At first, we thought that someone had dropped something heavy, but then it seemed that the noise was coming from outside. Denny asked me if these were bombs, but I was convinced that the noise was coming from the hotel building. We tried to continue sleeping, but at 6:30 a.m., Misha woke us up with the news that the war had begun, that there were bombings of Kyiv, Odesa, and other cities in Ukraine. He asked us to get up, gather our luggage quickly and go to the BLU office. Andrei, picked us up from the hotel and told us how he hadn't slept all night because of the noise of flying fighters and explosions. He heard his neighbour go outside to see if his car was all right at 4 a.m. Andrei, also went out and spoke to his neighbour, who was not a believer, but at that moment, he began to explain to him how he repented before God and prayed for mercy.

Tanya and her little son Bogdan, who had a birthday today, and Misha were waiting for us in the office. Oksana had informed them early in the morning that she would not be coming to work and was leaving Kyiv with her daughter. Four hours later we found out that she still hadn't managed to get out of Kyiv.



Tanya and her son Bogdan

We sat down to breakfast, and Misha, who was constantly trying to calm us down, actually needed to calm down more than all of us. His blood pressure was up to 220, and he couldn't stop talking on the phone. He barely ate anything for breakfast. After breakfast, we read Psalms 91 and 17, encouraged each other, and prayed for God's guidance and protection. Misha told us that he was not worried for his life because it was in God's hands, but he was worried that if Russian soldiers came to Kyiv, he would not be able to show them God's love.

We were accommodated in one of the office rooms, and Misha continued with his endless phone calls. There was still an internet connection and telephone connection. It turned out that the BL office in Kyiv was a pretty good place for wartime like this. It was heated by wood, and they were well supplied, it had a generator for electricity and a separate water source. Misha has an electric car, and now that there were long queues for gas at gas stations, Misha had no worries.

Later, we realized that martial law had already been declared, and the airspace over Kyiv was closed, as were the airports. Getting around the country was extremely difficult, and all the exits of the big cities were congested. Both at the gas stations and in front of the grocery stores and pharmacies, there were huge lines, as people were stocking up on food and other necessities.

As Bulgarian citizens, we contacted the Bulgarian embassy, but they were not yet ready with an evacuation plan.

As I was writing this report, a new explosion was heard nearby. A military base was attacked, and six soldiers were killed. They had just warned all Kyiv residents to be ready for a bomb attack, and Misha began preparing the office's basement in case we have to hide here. We were grateful that our hosts remained so calm and mindful of us. The panic around was huge. Chaotic actions were taken, which

complicated the situation, but Misha gave us confidence and peace. At noon we even had a small party for little Bogdan's birthday.

In the afternoon, we managed to talk on Viber with our other partner in Ukraine - Vitaly from Cherkasy. The situation with him was also tense. During the night, military bases were bombed 14 km from his home. People from different parts of Ukraine have been calling him to shelter them in the ministry center he has built in his yard. He expected one of the local champions trained by him, Artyom, with his seven children and a pregnant wife, to arrive today from the town of Donskoy.



Tanya and Bogdan praying during the bombing

The day passed calmly, without any news from the Bulgarian Embassy. The evening came with the dreadful anticipation of new and heavier bombings on Kyiv. Before going to bed, we, Misha, Tanya, and little Bogdan, got together, read Psalm 62, and prayed. For the first time, fear for our lives seemed to creep into our hearts. The night passed much calmer than expected - there were no bombings in our part of Kyiv until 4:30 a.m., when two consecutive explosions were heard. We jumped off the couch where we slept, fully dressed, and went to our makeshift bomb shelter with the others. No more explosions followed. It turned out that Tanya hadn't been able to sleep all night, and little Bogdan was shaking with terror. After a few minutes, we came out of the basement, had a cup of tea, and went back to bed.

In the morning, we understood that Russian troops were surrounding Kyiv, intending to capture the city. It became more and more urgent for us to find a way to leave Kyiv. The Embassy remained silent, and we began to consider ways to leave the country on our own via Moldova or Romania. Thank God that we have close associates and friends ready to help us in both countries.

Finally, we decided to go to the Embassy in person. We gathered again to pray. Our hearts were torn with the desire to get out of Kyiv as quickly as possible and the grief of leaving behind so many people dear to us. I don't even remember how we spontaneously said that we wanted to take Tanya and little Bogdan with us to Bulgaria and take care of them. If we had not seen it with our own eyes, we would not have believed that a mother with a small child could decide to leave her country and go with strangers to an unknown land in less than 2 minutes. Everyone present encouraged her, and in another 5 minutes, she had packed her bags. Like in a dream, Denny and I, Tanya and Bogdan, took the subway to the Embassy.

Subway stations were full of people sitting on the floor on blankets, wrapped in warm clothes, asleep or staring at their phones. Many young people, well dressed but sad. As we rode, I watched the other people around me. Many traveled with large bags and suitcases, their faces were not tense, but from time to time, it seemed as if a cloud passed through their minds and their eyes watered or their foreheads furrowed. A young family was sitting next to us. The mother was holding a child in her arms, and the father was carrying a large backpack and pushing a stroller full of luggage. They looked at each other from time to time, and their eyes filled with tears.

The Embassy told us that the evacuation buses were traveling but had not even entered Ukraine yet. They were expected at 9 p.m., and the plan was to leave for Bulgaria the next day. They did not let us inside the Embassy and told us that it was terribly dangerous to wander the streets as we did. They told us there was a shootout in front of the Embassy that morning, and Russian tanks had already entered Kyiv. All this did not comfort us, and we almost immediately decided to leave Kyiv alone by car. Two soldiers guarding the Embassy accompanied us to the metro station, and we returned to the BL office. Misha's wife and youngest daughter (29 years old) were already there. When they found out that we were going to Moldova in Tanya's car, they hurried to prepare food and everything we needed for the trip.

We loaded the car with luggage and two cans of gasoline, ate quickly, and prayed again. While reading a Psalm, Misha, who had kept his composure until then, burst into tears for the first time. Exiting the office we passed by one of Misha's daughters-in-law, who came with her two children to hide with them in the office.

We managed to get out of Kyiv quite quickly and easily. We were immediately relieved, but there were a lot of traffic jams in front of us. For the first time, we had this experience of traveling and traveling, but at the same time, the GPS constantly showing 6 hours and 38 minutes to the final destination. The traffic jams were due to checkpoints with many military barricades. But the further we drove away from Kyiv, the better we felt. Evgeniy, the director of BL Moldova, was already waiting for us in Moldova.

Our journey to the border turned out to be much longer than expected. After 10 hours of driving on bad roads with heavy traffic and countless checkpoints, we reached the border town of Mohyliv-Podylskyy. There was an endless line in front of the next checkpoint. Every 2-3 hours, we moved by 20-30 meters. We spent the night in line in the car. Little Bogdan slept well, but the rest of us hardly had any sleep. At 10 a.m., after 11 hours of waiting, we passed the checkpoint, but only to find ourselves in another line at the border. It didn't seem very long, about a mile, but it hardly moved. After 4 hours of waiting, we had moved 80 meters forward. It turned out that the cars that were now first in line had waited 24 hours. The thought of sitting in a line for another 20 hours, after a sleepless night, without enough food, and a toilet, distressed Denny, so we started thinking about other options. We wanted to leave the car somewhere in the city and cross the border on foot, which was a much faster option. In the end, however, Evgeni from Moldova told us that there were significantly fewer cars at a nearby border checkpoint. We immediately headed there, and in about an hour, we reached a checkpoint which guarded a large bridge over the Dniester River. We were amazed by the very young soldiers who checked our documents, dressed in military clothes and fully armed. A delegation of at least 15 OSCE vehicles passed by us.

We had just crossed the bridge when the soldiers started shouting, running, and chasing a car in front of us. We were terrified. All the cars froze on the spot. Several military vehicles flew past us. We waited like that without knowing what was going on for about half an hour. Meanwhile, a young guy, probably oblivious of the seriousness of the situation, tried to make a video on his phone. One of the military men spotted him and ran to him with his pistol out. He took the boy's phone and held him for a while. A few minutes later, a man in the car in front of us plucked up the courage to ask the military men when they would let us go, but no one answered. Later, that same man told us that the commotion was because the soldiers spotted a car marking the bridge with special signs guiding the Russian missiles. Then the man told us his story. When Ukrainian forces shot down a drone on Friday morning, it crashed into the building across from his home and caused severe damage. Frightened to death, he and his wife ran away, and in his hurry, he forgot his documents. It turned out that they were already refused entry at one of the border crossings, and now they were going to the next. His eyes filled with tears as he told us about his mother and other relatives he had left in Kyiv.

Finally, the military let us continue on our way. However, we waited for about 4 hours before finally crossing the Ukrainian border and entering Moldova. There were far fewer cars at this border checkpoint than at the previous one. We witnessed young families with small children separating at the border and mothers with their children crossing the border on foot while their husbands stayed in Ukraine because they were forbidden to leave the country. Full mobilization has already been announced for all men between the ages of 16 and 60. In the car in front of us was a young woman who was very upset when she was told that she could not leave the country because she was a doctor and was also subject to mobilization. She was crying and explaining that she was a gynecologist, but this didn't help. We passed very quickly and easily through the border. When the soldier took our passports to check on us, he sighed with relief and said: "Thank God there is no Ukrainian man with you!"

Indescribable is the feeling that filled our hearts when we found ourselves in Moldova - not just relieved or safe, but free. Exhausted but also very happy, we set forth to Chisinau, where Evgeni was waiting for us. After 3 hours of driving (at 1:30 a.m.), we were already in the office of BL Moldova, accommodated in warm, cozy, and clean rooms with bathroom and hot water. In the morning, we had a wonderful breakfast prepared by Evgeni's wife, Lena. Although it was Sunday, a church day, Evgeni and his wife stayed with us in the office to spend some time with us before we left. So, we learned a lot more about the BL ministry in Moldova. We wish to go back there soon and visit all these places and church planters that Evgeni told us about.

We all had lunch together at a restaurant in the center of Chisinau. It turned out that there were refugees from Kyiv sitting at the table next to us, and two of them were Bessarabian Bulgarians. We exchanged phone numbers with them because they planned to come to Sofia soon. While talking to them, other Ukrainian refugees heard us and joined our conversation. After lunch, we immediately set off for Romania. By the grace of God, there were very few cars at the border, and we successfully found ourselves in Romania after about two hours of waiting. Crossing the border was easy.



Evgeni and Lena

We stopped at the first gas station. A man ran up to us and asked us in Russian if we needed help. He offered us water and food. Then we saw that he was standing on the side of the gas station with a bus loaded with water and food, offering help to all Ukrainians. Although we really wanted to drive all night and return to Sofia as soon as possible, we felt tired and realized the risk would be too great. At 10 p.m., we looked at the map of the first big city on our way, found on booking.com a hotel there, and booked two rooms. The hotel was very nice, and it turned out that the price was half for Ukrainian refugees. We had breakfast and set off again, hoping to get home that day.

At 3 p.m., we managed to cross the Romanian-Bulgarian border without any problems. On the way to Sofia, we sang and prayed to God with grateful hearts. He not only saved our lives and helped us escape unscathed but gave us the opportunity to take care of Tanya and her child, who had no hope of safety but us. She does not have a lot of money, all her relatives are in Russia, and she has never left Ukraine in her life. Now we want to help them get the status of temporary residents in Bulgaria, after which we will hire Tanya to work for BL Bulgaria, hoping that this horror will end soon and they will be able to return home.