



# BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

**FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS  
OF GENOCIDE STUDIES, LESSONS  
PLAY OUT IN UKRAINE.**

**BY DANIEL KOOL**





## THE COLLEGE ISSUE

**I****N JANUARY 2022**, Russia began withdrawing diplomats from Ukrainian embassies and stationing more and more troops along its border with Ukraine. Allison Newey, a senior at Keene State College in New Hampshire, was studying abroad at Freie Universität Berlin when Russian troops invaded Ukraine on February 24.

That morning, Newey woke up in her apartment on the outskirts of Berlin to a barrage of text messages from family back in the United States, checking in on her. The invasion had begun overnight, so family in New Hampshire heard about it before going to bed, while Newey was already asleep.

In the weeks leading up to the invasion, Newey, who majors in Holocaust and genocide studies, discussed the political implications of Russian aggression in class — but it all “felt very theoretical.” Now being in Germany, although she wasn’t near the front

On September 2, 2022, funeral workers carry a coffin with the body of an unidentified civilian, killed by Russian soldiers in the Bucha massacre.

lines, “made it feel a lot more real,” Newey recalls. “I would take the train every day to class, and we would see refugees at the train station.”

The weekend after the invasion, she attended a protest at the Reichstag, where the lower house of the German Parliament is located, but that didn’t feel like enough. Then someone — a friend, a professor, she can’t recall — mentioned a network of college students helping Ukrainian refugees navigate Berlin’s train stations. Although she spoke little German and no Ukrainian or Russian, Newey felt compelled to help in whatever way she could. Twice a week, she assisted translators on railway platforms, handed out supplies, and walked families to their train, carrying bags and offering whatever kindness she could. It was all she could do from afar. Her classroom wasn’t in the war zone, but she would share the anguish she witnessed on the station platforms in Berlin with her classmates and faculty back home. There was so much more to be done.

**ALSO, IN JANUARY 2022**, a group of Holocaust scholars in Ukraine was moving forward with plans to build a memorial to the 100,000 civilians — mostly Jews — estimated to have been killed during World War II at Babyn Yar, a ravine just outside Kyiv. Over

two days in 1941, Nazi officers ordered more than 30,000 Jews into the ravine, where they were forced to strip before being slaughtered by firing squads. The ravine served as a killing site until Soviet forces retook Kyiv in 1943.

Marta Havryshko, director of one of the research institutes at the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, hoped to draw in and educate Western students and researchers, highlighting atrocities that had taken place eight decades earlier.

Havryshko was well aware of the gradual buildup of Russian troops. She hadn’t been too worried the month before the invasion, she told me over Zoom earlier this month from her temporary home in Basel, Switzerland. Ukrainians, she said, had long lived under the threat of Russian aggression — it had become a way of life, something “we’d make jokes about.”

Then the tanks rolled into the outskirts of Kyiv. Days later, a barrage of Russian missiles struck Babyn Yar, drawing condemnation from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and others.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Havryshko says, speaking quickly and gesturing with her hands. “All those stories of survival, of decision making, of family separation, of hunger, of suffering, of betrayal, of cruelty came to my mind.”

No one knew how deep into Ukrainian territory Russian invaders would travel. Havryshko — whose writing on sexual violence during World War II had already been banned in Russia, declared “extremist literature,” she says — was worried that her reputation would leave her blacklisted, unable to escape. She had to act quickly.

She and her then-9-year-old son made their way to the Polish border as fast as they could, and were later joined by her teenage nephew. What followed was a “rescue operation” coordinated by her professional network of genocide scholars across Europe — a bed in Warsaw, a stop in Hamburg. They needed to make it to Switzerland, where her fellowship at the University of Basel, slated to begin last August, was moved earlier to offer her refuge.

The trio arrived safely in Switzerland in early April. Left behind were Havryshko’s husband, who had stayed to take care of their parents, and her sisters, still in Kyiv with their children — her two sisters had each given birth just six days after the Russians invaded.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EMILIO MORENATTI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Meanwhile, more than 4,500 miles away in Worcester, Mary Jane Rein, executive director of Clark University's Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, e-mailed with colleagues about filling a recently-vacated professorship. They had long wanted an expert on Eastern Europe, Rein says. "This idea arose: What if we brought someone from Ukraine to the center?" she told me by phone. "Marta's name came up in more than one way. . . . She just seemed like a perfect fit for us."

In 1996, Clark established the country's first endowed professorship on Holocaust history, created a second the following year, and welcomed its first doctoral candidates in 1998. In 2002, a professorship on the Armenian genocide followed. Among its alumni are Tibi Galis, the executive director of the Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities, and Sarah Cushman, director of the Holocaust Educational Foundation of Northwestern University.

In the decades since the Strassler Center's founding, Rein says, Clark has drawn scholars from across the globe, including students from Armenia and other sites of atrocities, such as Bangladesh, where as many as 3 million people were killed in a 1971 genocide. "They come to us because they can't study it at home," she says.

Thomas Kühne, director of the Strassler Center, was among those pushing for Havryshko's hire. Like her, he studies genocide through a gender lens, analyzing masculinity in Nazi Germany.

The academic field of genocide studies, only a few decades old, remains relatively fluid, Kühne says. Clashes over what qualifies as a genocide, versus an atrocity or war crime, persist between older and younger generations of scholars and between academics and lawyers or government officials. "There has long been a debate about the concept of genocide," Kühne says, about how wide the definition of genocide should stretch: whether it should only be used in cases of mass killings or if it should encompass attempts to erase a people's culture and identity. "There is, of course, a political dimension. If you call a certain event 'genocide,' then it gets a certain weight, a certain priority."

The classification of "genocide" brings unique attention and responsibility from international nongovernment organizations and may spur a higher chance of intervention by foreign governments.

During his nearly 20-year term at Clark, Kühne says, he's watched the department's definition of genocide expand to include cultural erasure, dehumanization, and other non-physical forms of violence that can become the mechanisms behind the slaughter typically associated with genocide. According to Kühne, the school's approach to genocide studies emphasizes the de-

struction — physical and spiritual — of peoples who identify themselves as a nation, such as the Tutsis in Rwanda, even if perpetrators refuse to acknowledge their legitimacy. "That's very important," Kühne says. "What matters is how the victims define themselves."

For Kühne's students, theoretical and comparative discussions can only go so far. Most are interested not only in classifying genocide, but preventing it. The practicality of prevention came up with each of the more than a half-dozen educators I spoke to.

Boston University's Holocaust, genocide, and human rights studies major, the newest established in New England, was launched last September (a minor was offered in 2018), roughly half a year after the invasion of Ukraine began and a few months after human rights watchdogs started classifying the war as a genocide. Nancy Harowitz, director of BU's Elie Wiesel Center for Jewish Studies, which houses the program, noted

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that, unlike other colleges, BU's major and minor explicitly highlight human rights.

"Human rights is really a core issue when you look at genocide studies," Harowitz says. She calls a human rights-centered approach "the way to understand how to maintain our humanity, how to prevent genocide."

Like others, BU's program is rooted in history, but where students end up depends heavily on the courses they choose to take, which can include political science, history, law, anthropology, literature, and film. Professor Timothy Longman, the program's assistant director, often incorporates literature into his seminars, because it reinforces the human element of atrocities, and helps stave off cynicism. Longman researches the Rwandan genocide. He witnessed its beginning and helped document it through his position with the Rwandan office of Human Rights Watch. "It can be easy to get numbed by the numbers," he says. "Each statistic is a person who had a family and a life, who's been tortured, or killed, or taken away."

But after decades of study with no apparent slowing of genocidal momentum, some, like

Clark University's Rein, find it hard to stay hopeful about their work. Since the 1990s, at least 1.2 million people have been killed — and hundreds of thousands more detained or enslaved — by genocides of varying scope in Rwanda, Sudan, Bosnia, Iraq, and China.

"We felt at one time that education would lead to a better future," Rein says. When she joined the Strassler Center in 2004, there was still hope that the fall of the Soviet Union could lead to a more unified Europe and a decline in global authoritarianism. Today, with the "rise of Trumpism and nationalism around the globe," she says, donors have asked her if education has really made a difference. "It's deeply frustrating," Rein says, pausing for a moment. "But I think we have an obligation to continue the work."

**O**PTIMISM IS EASIER for some younger scholars, like Allison Newey of Keene State, to maintain. Last November, she watched one of her professors in New Hampshire,

James Waller, lead a virtual workshop teaching Ukrainians how to document atrocities and war crimes in real time. The program nearly had to be canceled at the last minute, as bombs rained down overnight just a few miles from the Kyiv hotel where some attendees were being hosted.

Elisa von Joeden-Forgey, endowed chair of Keene's Holocaust and genocide studies department, says she and her colleagues make a point to send students into the real world, emphasizing overseas studies and government internships near historic sites of genocide. "You never know who's going to be in the position to sound the alarm," she tells me on a November call. "We are attempting to transform genocide prevention and education into a kind of professional degree."

Havryshko, who hopes to be settled soon, has received many job offers from different universities and research centers in the West, including from Clark University, which she calls "one of the best places to develop Holocaust education and studies from different perspectives." She praised the Worcester college's broad and collaborative approach and willingness to trust its faculty.

"You shouldn't [have to] explain the value of your work, you shouldn't justify your topic," Havryshko tells me, this time on a Zoom call from Paris, where she would be attending a memorial service at Mémorial de la Shoah in honor of International Women's Day. "We should remember that 'never again' means to take action nowadays." ■

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