



Capturing the Civilian Cost of Conflict: Acclaimed War Photographer Lynsey Addario Turns Her Unsparring Lens on Russia's Brutality in Ukraine

by Chitra Ragavan · 12 Oct 2022 · 16 min read

Lynsey Addario has spent more than two decades documenting the atrocities of war around the world at great personal risk to her own life and limb. But she says there's no place she'd rather be, including now, here, in Ukraine.

A Viral Insights Column On Super-Survivors

It was an image that shook the world and brought home both the cruelty of Russia's war

on Ukraine and the terrifying occupational hazard of war for photographers and journalists.

On March 7, 2022, less than a month into Russia’s full-on invasion, the New York Times ran a front-page photograph by Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer [Lynsey Addario](#)—the bodies of four civilians, splayed on the ground, their suitcases strewn about, the victims of a mortar strike in the village of Irpin.



Ukrainian soldiers try to save a man traveling with a woman, her teenage son, and her daughter—he was the only one at that moment who still had a pulse—moments after being hit by a mortar while trying to flee the village of Irpen to safety in Kyiv while being shelled by Russians. They are hit as Ukrainian soldiers try to hold back Russian forces from entering Kyiv, Ukraine, March 6, 2022. The capital city of Kyiv is extremely tense as Ukrainian men and women prepare for battle as Russian troops have entered Kyiv. (Credit: Lynsey Addario for The New York Times)

Addario arrived in Ukraine in mid-February, 2022 as the war started, covering the constant missile barrage on Kyiv and the thousands of civilians fleeing from the war. “But I felt like I was really missing a powerful shot of the civilian toll of the war,” she tells me.

Addario had been watching and reading the reporting from the civilian evacuation route over the Irpin bridge into Kyiv from her colleagues, including her dear friend CNN’s Clarissa Ward. “And I didn’t go the first few days because I wasn’t sure about the safety,” she said. “I have had many close calls in my career and I try to be cautious when I can.”

But Addario, in consultation with her security advisor and fellow journalist and videographer [Andriy Dubchak](#), founder of [Donbas Frontliner](#), finally decided to go to the Irpin village to document the civilian evacuation. It was around seven or eight in the morning Addario recalls. The air was tense. Addario and Dubchak, who had been warned of the risk of artillery fire, began cautiously documenting the Ukrainian Territorial Defense forces as they helped the evacuees, many elderly, with their suitcases and pets across the broken bridge.

That’s when Addario took the iconic shot of the family that never made it to the bridge.

The victims were a mother, her two children, and a church volunteer who was trying to usher them to safety while trying to flee over the Irpin bridge into Kyiv. Addario saw the tragedy unfold. “It looked like they had kind of just fallen over from a standing position, and they were all splayed out almost in a rhythmic way, weirdly,” Addario recalls. “And I couldn’t tell if they were dead or alive.”

Addario’s instincts kicked in and she started immediately started photographing them. “I had to remind myself, sort of snap myself out of the moment and say, okay, I just witnessed the deliberate targeting of civilians. I have to take pictures.”

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It was remarkable that Addario had the composure to even take the shot given just how close she and Dubchak came to being felled by artillery fire themselves. They were ducking for cover behind a cement block when the successive rounds of Russian shelling began, each round coming closer and closer, deliberately targeting the civilian evacuation route. The third round came in at about 20 feet, says Addario, equidistant between her position and where the family and church volunteer were killed. “It was terrifying, of course, because the round came so close that I was sprayed with gravel,” Addario tells me.

Addario, who arrived in Ukraine shortly before Russia’s invasion began and has been tirelessly [covering the war](#), practically without pause, says she was in such shock that she convinced herself in the car back to the hotel that maybe the mortar fire wasn’t all that close. Until she saw [this video](#) (caution: graphic video, audio, and photos) that Dubchak had recorded and posted on Facebook. “I didn’t know if I had actually been hit with shrapnel. So you can hear me asking Andriy, ‘Am I bleeding, am I bleeding?’”

That image won Addario and The New York Times a prestigious George Polk Photojournalism award this week. The award citation said that the seasoned combat journalist "dove for cover as the shell landed and then took the gruesome photo on instinct. Despite qualms over its intrusive nature, she argued for its publication, a view the husband and father of the slain woman and children affirmed after she sought him out.”

In the year since Russia launched its full-fledged assault on Ukraine, Addario has kept the plight of civilians front and center in her lens, capturing their desperation, courage, and resilience with her unique perspective that comes from an unrelenting moral compass, piercing eye, and sympathetic heart.



NYTUKRAINE Ukrainian civilians and soldiers rejoice over the liberation of the city of Kherson after Russia formally announced it had retreated from the city of Kherson in southern Ukraine, November 12, 2022. Abandoned bases and scars of shelling and fighting littered the area as this pullback would be the third major retreat after Kyiv and Kharkiv in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. (Credit: Lynsey Addario for The New York Times)

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Her devastating images and those of her colleagues have played a central role in rallying the world in unity for Ukraine, opposing Russian President Vladimir Putin’s invasion, and keeping the heat on the US and world leaders to help Ukraine fight back. This unity was symbolized by President Joseph Biden’s [surprise trip](#) to Kyiv early Monday to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the Russian invasion.

Addario's clarity of vision captures the pain, trauma, and loss behind the factual bullet points in a February 10, 2023 Situation Report from the [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (UNOCHA). The report said that "the number of people in need of humanitarian aid and protection increased from approximately 3 million at the start of 2022 to nearly 18 million a few months later," adding that 16 million people received "critical" humanitarian assistance, despite "immense challenges" inherent.

Citing the UK's Defense Ministry, the [Wall Street Journal's](#) Matthew Luxmore reported on February 17, 2023, that Russia's death toll from the war could be as much as 60,000 and as many as 200,000 casualties (including those killed or wounded in action). Luxmore cited Western estimates that Ukrainian troop casualties could number half of the Russians—100,000 casualties with nearly 9,000 soldiers killed in the war.

Last week, Vice President Kamala Harris told the Munich Security Conference that the US has determined that Russia has not only [committed war crimes](#) but is also [committing crimes against humanity](#), with a "widespread and systematic attack" against Ukrainian civilians which she described as "barbaric and inhumane," and included "—gruesome acts of murder, torture, rape, and deportation. Execution-style killings, beatings, and electrocution." Harris [declared](#) that Putin will be prosecuted for his actions.

That the Russians have deliberately targeted civilians, including the elderly, women, and children, was made abundantly clear that day in Irpin as enemy artillery pummeled the concrete block Addario and Dubchak were using for cover as they struggled to get their bearings after the deafening explosion, dust filling the air, obscuring their vision.



Ukrainians clean up debris after a residential building was hit by missiles in south Kyiv, Ukraine, February 25, 2022. Russian troops have entered Kyiv and Ukrainians brace for a battle for their capital. (Credit: Lynsey Addario for The New York Times)

After their security advisor kicked into high gear and secured the path for their safe exit, they ran across the street and saw the bodies for the first time. Addario immediately started photographing, knowing it could become a potential war crime scene yet not knowing if the graphic photos would ever get published given the punch-in-the-gut nature of these types of tragic images.

“It’s just extraordinary that this is still going on,” says Addario. “We have a situation where Russia has invaded a sovereign country in Europe and civilians are being killed.”

Addario gives credit to President Zelensky, whom she’s only had the chance to photograph once, for showing the world what it takes to fight for democracy. “We need to understand that they’re fighting for their lives, they’re fighting for their freedom,

they're fighting for their voice," Addario says, "and he has shown the world what that means."



Ukrainian families arrive in Zaporizhzhia after fleeing from the Russian-occupied city of Mariupol in Eastern Ukraine, April 21, 2022. (Credit: Lynsey Addario for The New York Times)

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Addario is no stranger to war and the lethal danger it poses to those who document it. In her more than two-decade career as one of the most accomplished war photographers in the world, she has covered every major conflict since the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

“I’ve had lots of close calls, mostly with bullets. I’ve heard the whiz of bullets very close by,” Addario tells me. “I spent two weeks on the front line in Libya, and there the Libyan

military was using all sorts of different weapons on the positions of the rebels who we, as journalists, were with as they moved forward.”

In fact, as Addario and three fellow journalists were covering the Arab Spring uprising in Libya in March 2011, they were surrounded at a hostile checkpoint and taken hostage by Col. Muammar Gaddafi’s troops. Addario and her team were tied up, blindfolded, repeatedly beaten, and threatened with execution before being released nearly a week later.



New York Times photographer Lynsey Addario stands near the frontline during a pause in the fighting March 11, 2011 in Ras Lanuf, Libya. It was taken shortly before she was taken captive on March 15 for four days. (Photo Courtesy: John Moore/Getty Images.)

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A month later, Addario learned that two of her journalist friends had been killed in Libya,

leading to an existential crisis about the career path she had chosen.

Libya was her second kidnapping in her more than two-decade career. The first time was in Iraq in April 2004, when Addario and a colleague were looking for a US helicopter with troops that had gone down outside of Fallujah and ended up driving into a village of insurgents. They were only held for a day before being released but as Addario says dryly, “Obviously, a day with many, many guns held to my head was not a very good day. But compared to Libya, it was not so bad.”

Addario’s soul-searching after her kidnappings led to her 2015 bestselling memoir, [It’s What I Do](#), in which she chronicled her personal and professional life as a photojournalist coming of age in the post-9/11 world and recounted the incredible risks of documenting the inhumanity of war while always keeping the plight of civilians front and center in her lens. In 2018, she released her first solo collection of photography, [Of Love and War](#), published by Penguin Press.



NYTUKRAINE: A fire burns at the Kherson Oil Refinery after Russian strikes earlier this evening in Kherson City, in southern Ukraine, November 19, 2022. When Russian troops retreated from the city of Kherson, they destroyed the infrastructure providing water, electricity, and communications. Ukrainians across Kherson are grappling with life under occupation and having lived in fear. (Credit: Lynsey Addario for The New York Times)

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This was my third interview with London-based Addario that I’ve conducted for my [two podcasts](#), *When It Mattered* and *Techtopia*, and our first in-person conversation when she made a brief stop in Washington DC last November to receive the prestigious [Courage in Journalism Awards](#) from the International Women’s Media Foundation.

It’s just one of the many accolades Addario has received for her coverage of conflicts, humanitarian crises, and women’s issues, including her poignant coverage of the

oppression and plight of women under the Taliban in Afghanistan. A 2009 [MacArthur Fellow](#), Addario has been crisscrossing the globe on assignments for the New York Times, National Geographic, and TIME for more than two decades, traveling to violent hotspots including Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, Darfur, South Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, and Syria.

What's remarkable about Addario is her humility in her craft. "I always think I am the worst war photographer," she says, "because I'm not that brave. I'm always concerned with trying to stay alive."

In 2015, American Photo magazine named Addario as one of the five most influential photographers of the past 25 years, saying she changed the way we see the world's conflicts. Her coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which Addario has covered from the very beginning all the way to its first anniversary on February 24 this year, is certainly an example of her power-packed visual forcefield.

In image after bloody image, Addario has laid out how the Russians have brutally targeted civilians, including the elderly, women, and children, as was evident in Irpin that day.



NYTUKRAINE: Drone operator, Oleksandr Kovalenko, shares drone footage of an attack against a Russian position with other Ukrainian and foreign soldiers with the Carpathian Sich Battalion as they shelter in the basement of a building while heavy artillery is fired at their position in a village roughly one mile from Russian positions on the road from Izyum and Barinkove, in the Kharkiv region, Ukraine, May 11, 2022. Fighting has intensified in Eastern Ukraine as Russian forces continue to try to take ground.

(Credit: Lynsey Addario for The New York Times)

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She said that when she saw her colleague Dubchak’s video of their close call in Irpin, it shook her to the core. “And then, I just started crying and thinking, ‘Oh my God, I can’t believe it,’” she recalls, “And then my first instinct, of course, was, ‘I hope my mother doesn’t see it.’ And then I thought, ‘I hope my husband doesn’t see this.’”

Addario says it’s due to years of experience that she was able to capture the tragedy

that unfolded before her eyes. “Because in a lot of the other close calls I’ve had, I’m so busy looking for a place to dig myself into the ground and hide and get cover that a lot of times, I forget to shoot,” she admits. “And so this was a case where I think twenty-plus years of experience covering war allowed me to be able to collect myself and actually photograph.”

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Lynsey Addario (Photo Credit: Sam Taylor Johnson)

As the war drags on, Addario says it has become a challenge to figure out how to tell the story in a way that goes beyond the daily news coverage, to continue to convey the tragedy that has befallen the Ukrainian people. “I’m trying to put a finger on the pulse of what the story is that needs to be told,” she says. “Because I’m not just a photographer, I am a journalist.”

I asked Addario if she ever wants to walk away from her job, one which routinely requires her to run toward danger instead of away from it, a career that she admits doesn’t have a lot of longevity attached to it, given the risk of burnout, injury, and death.

She responds without hesitation. “There is not a moment in the day where I think I could ever walk away from this,” Addario says. “I am as passionate now about this work and doing these stories and telling these stories as I was the day I started.”

Because, it’s what she does.

Listen to my interviews with Lynsey Addario on my leadership podcast, When It Mattered, and my technology podcast, Tectopia at the links below:

[Tectopia: Documenting the Tragic Human Toll of Russia's War on Ukraine](#)

[Tectopia: A War Photographer Reflects on the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan](#)

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