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ORIGINAL PAPER

Emotions, Religious Faith, and Coping Strategies of Ukrainians at the Beginning of the 2022 Russo–Ukraine War: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract
In the early part of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the conflict-affected process indicated a complex array of emotions and that people sought religious faith as a coping strategy. We explore emotions and coping with a qualitative study of 22 Ukrainians at the start of the Russian invasion of February 2022. Ukrainians experienced a range of shifting emotions, including fear and hatred, but also positive emotions such as hope and pride. Some felt loneliness, but this was mitigated through various coping strategies (e.g., volunteering, seeking social support, and religious faith). Whereas some found comfort through religious faith, the war presented dilemmas that tested their faith and morality, leading to temporary feelings of shame. This study provides needed nuance in how emotions and various coping mechanisms, including religious faith, evolve during the early stages of war.

Keywords Ukraine · War · Emotions · Coping strategies · Religious faith

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 inflicted emotional trauma on millions of Ukrainians. Whereas the literature on war, emotions, and coping strategies focus on post-conflict situations (e.g., Miller & Rasmussen, 2010, Ainamani et al., 2020; Matos et al., 2022), the long-term impact of war on mental health (Steel et al., 2002; Kraaij & Garnefski, 2006), and the impact of war on children's mental health (Ben-Zur & Almog, 2013; Kostruba and Fishchuk, 2022), there are few studies of these emotional states and behaviors of conflict-affected adults living in, or have recently become refugees from, a war zone in the early part of the war (Kurapov

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et al., 2022). Some recent studies of adult Ukrainians at the outset of the Russo-Ukraine war have shed light on how people feel; these survey-based studies are foundational because they have pointed to the correlates of anxiety and depression in its early stages (Kurapov et al., 2023; Piskunowicz et al., 2023; Rzońca et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2023).

Whereas fixed-choice surveys reveal useful insights, qualitative studies via in-depth interviews provide a deeper and broader understanding of emotions and coping strategies. The personal narratives in a qualitative study often reveal, in detail, how individuals make sense of the chaos and devastation around them. These details are essential for understanding the emotions and coping strategies such as religious faith (Lisman et al., 2017; Fadilpašić et al., 2017; Krägeloh et al., 2010). Thus far, there are few studies of how adult Ukrainians express religious faith as a coping strategy to contend with the Russian invasion.

In this paper, we ask: *How did Ukrainians at the start of the war express their emotions, and how did they cope with them?* The lead author, who is a refugee from the war, conducted a qualitative study of 22 interviews with adult Ukrainians, most of whom were in Ukraine and some of whom were refugees abroad, at the early stages of the war in 2022. Interviews at the war's beginning captures an important temporal snapshot into the initial shock and short-term adaptations in a moment of extreme crisis. Due to the sample methods, many of this study had mentioned, without prompting, the issue of religious faith as a coping strategy. As such, this study provides an opportunity to go in-depth on the interplay of emotions, religious faith, and coping when war begins.

Theory

Emotions and War: Fear, Hatred, and Loneliness

Living in a war zone or being a refugee from one can, due to the trauma and extreme life disruption, lead to a series of negative emotions, including fear, hatred, and loneliness. War's violence, destruction, and mortal danger often lead to intense anxiety in adults (Ainamani et al., 2020; Matos et al., 2022). Adults who have experienced war may develop a distrust of others, which can exacerbate feelings of fear and isolation (Kurapov et al., 2022). Furthermore, exposure to war can lead to feelings of hatred toward individuals or groups who are perceived as responsible for the conflict, and this can lead to a desire for revenge or violence (Hall et al., 2021).

Displacement within or between countries can disrupt social networks and support systems, making it difficult for people to maintain their relationships and support systems. Specifically, war disrupts social and economic networks essential for individual and family well-being, leading to a sense of increased vulnerability (Singh, 2021). This isolation can exacerbate feelings of fear and hatred, and can lead to hopelessness and despair.

Emotions are mixed and temporal. People feel more than one emotion, or as one scholar eloquently put it, "Emotions run in groups and their shapes are nebulous" (Flam, 2015: 5). As such, negative emotions may alternate with positive ones, i.e.,

fear and hatred may alternate with hope and pride (Plecka & Szpak, 2023). Emotions may change over time as situations in the war change. For example, studies show that civilians exposed to rocket attacks experience higher negative emotions and lower positive emotions during immediate threat, with these emotions gradually normalizing over time (Lapid Pickman et al., 2021).

Emotions and Coping Strategies

Coping strategies, which can be adaptive or maladaptive, depending on one's situation and emotional state (Morales-Rodríguez & Pérez-Mármol, 2019), are methods to manage or alleviate negative emotions and stressors. Whereas living in a war zone can result in profound and long-lasting trauma (Ringdal et al., 2007; Kraai and Garnefski, 2006), coping strategies may vary based on the individual and the specific circumstances of the conflict (Mikulincer et al., 1993; Renner et al., 2020). First and foremost, individuals may prioritize safety, such as seeking out shelter and following guidelines established by local authorities. Volunteering and social support—connecting with family members, friends, or others who are going through similar experiences and share resources—can provide a feeling of belonging that helps to alleviate isolation and loneliness (Weinberg et al., 2017).

Fear, hatred, and loneliness are all powerful emotions that can significantly influence an individual's coping strategies (Gloria & Steinhardt, 2016; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). When individuals experience fear, they may avoid situations or people that they perceive as threatening (Cameron et al., 2015; Moore & March, 2020). However, in a time of war, it may be that the victims of war seek out human contact, especially with friends and family. Loneliness may lead to emotion-focused coping strategies, such as engaging in activities that distract from feelings of loneliness, or seeking out temporary social connections (Deckx et al., 2018).

Religion as a Coping Strategy

During war, finding a sense of purpose and meaning is important. Some volunteer in local efforts to make a positive impact on others, and engage in other activities to gain a measure of control and agency in the midst of chaos (Karhina et al., 2017; see also Thoits, 2012; Lisman et al., 2017).

As such, religion is a coping strategy that can provide meaning, purpose, and community to help the conflict-affected make sense of their experiences and find some comfort and support during extremely difficult times (Bakibinga and Mittelmark, 2014; Seybold & Hill, 2001; Fadilpašić et al., 2017). In stressful periods, religious belief and activity can provide a feeling of security, and thus is a way to process the suffering and loss. Religion can provide individuals with practical, community, emotional, and social support. And, intangibly, religion can provide individuals with hope for the future, and as a way to maintain that hope.

While religiosity can provide comfort and support during difficult times, it can also lead to distress in some cases, as people grapple with how war tests their basic emotions and moral compass (Du & Chi, 2016; Hodgson et al., 2021; Lisman et al.,

2017; Pargament, 2002). Religion can provide individuals with a feeling of control and agency during times of crisis, but a conflict within oneself can lead to frustration and distress. War sets the ground for "moral injury," a trauma caused by the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual impact of grievous moral transgressions or violations of deeply held moral beliefs and ethical standards (Hodgson et al., 2021). Although usually applied to veterans of war, some argue that the term could also be applied to witnesses and receivers of war news about conflict in their own country (Koenig and Zaben, 2021); this may apply to civilians in Ukraine.

In summary, war trauma triggers emotions like fear, hatred, and loneliness, and in response individuals will seek out and implement coping strategies. Fear and hatred can lead to isolation; while, loneliness may result in avoidance of social interactions and reliance on maladaptive coping strategies. Adaptive coping strategies such as seeking social support, finding purpose, and religion can help alleviate these emotional burdens.

Data and Methods

Russia's mass military invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022 and we investigate the emotions and coping strategies of Ukrainians at the outset of that phase of the war. The sample consisted of 22 Ukrainian women and men, with most (16) interviews conducted in April 2022, and the rest in May 2022. There were 31 interviews conducted, but responses for nine were not recorded electronically; because exact quotes are important for our analyses, we focus on the 22 for which we have a verbatim transcript.

Interviews were conducted via various platforms, such as phone, Viber, and Facebook Messenger in Ukrainian by the lead author, a native speaker, and herself a displaced person (DP) from Ukraine. Interviewees were found through, primarily, personal contacts, as well as social media (Facebook) and traditional snowball sampling. The lead author gained informed consent to recording and use of the materials (Swain & Spire, 2020). The interviewees were aware that the interviewer is a displaced person from Ukraine and living in Poland at the time of the interviews.

Most respondents (15) were living in Ukraine, located in the West and Central regions. Of the 15 living in Ukraine, three were internally displaced persons (IDPs) as of the February 2022 Russian invasion. Seven of the interviewees were displaced by the war to live in Germany, Poland, Austria, and the Czech Republic. In total, ten of the 22 conflict-affected interviewees were refugees, either as IDPs or DPs.

As for sociodemographic characteristics, there are 18 women and 4 men; the youngest was 20 and the oldest was 70, and the median age was 42. They are white-collar workers: teachers, academics, or worked an assortment of other jobs (e.g., social media manager, musician, journalist, translator, priest). A few are students. Because of the personal ties that began the snowball sampling, many are religious: half identified as Ukrainian Orthodox and half as Roman Catholic. For an anonymized list of participants and demographics, see Appendix A.

To each respondent, respondents were asked similar questions as in a semi-structured interview, from assessing their general state ("What is the most difficult

thing for you in this situation?") to specific questions about emotions (e.g., "What emotions and states do you experience most often?"), coping strategies ("What and who helps you to experience difficulties related to the war?") and change ("Have you noticed a change in yourself?"). See the Appendix for a general order of questions. In this interview, the lead author explicitly asked about specific emotions of fear, hatred, and loneliness, and coping strategies. Interviews lasted between 10 and 30 min. For the list of questions, see Appendix B.

The interview style is mixed. Whereas most questions were asked consistently, as in a semi-structured interview, some were more conversational in tone, e.g.:

> *Interviewer*: Do you feel hatred?
> *Respondent (ID 13)*: I think not.
> *Interviewer*: And what about positive feelings?
> *Respondent (ID 13)*: There are positive ones, but I am thinking how to formulate them. I feel joy, of course, when there is a victory for our army or when I see God's miracle, for every projectile that did not explode or did not fly there, joy is felt. I feel I don't know if it is an emotion - gratitude, but also love for people and for one's land.

The conversational style is akin to informal interviews. Unlike formal interviews, informal conversations do not involve a rigid structure or pre-determined agenda, allowing participants to speak more freely and naturally. This is appropriate in settings when other forms of interview data collection—recorded or otherwise—would be less feasible (Swain & King, 2022). A conversational style is a akin to an informal interview, as it allows for a more relaxed interaction. Informal interviews, or a conversational tone, often lead to richer, more authentic data, as people are less constrained by the performativity associated with formal interviews. In this case, the interviews were a mix of formal and informal, adjusted to the tenor of the interaction. As the interviewees are a vulnerable population, the mix of a formal and informal style, conducted by an interviewer who is also in a vulnerable situation, likely conveyed a sense of respect and ease. Whereas respondents expressed other emotions than fear, hatred, and loneliness, the focus of the interview was clearly on these emotional states.

The lead author and interviewer's position as a refugee and a member of the studied population is significant (Axyonovka and Lozka, 2023). This fact is taken into account when conducting the research and analyzing the data. The self-reflexive approach allowed the researcher to draw on their personal experiences in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the emotions and coping strategies.

Results

Many Emotions

Many felt more than one emotion, and these emotions cycled, or changed, over time. As a teacher in her 40 s said, "Emotions are different. I feel different stages of emotions. Shock, stress, there were periods of hysteria, I cried every day. Then

she couldn't cry at all. Then, on the contrary, there were not even any emotions. Apathy, dullness, rejection." (ID 11) We focus on three negative emotions: fear, hatred, and loneliness.

Fear

When asked directly about prominent fears, a common response was about relatives and children. "Fear for children and grandchildren. …That they have to live, that they have to endure all this. They should not face bombs and see war." (ID 5).

In the first months of the war, some feared uncertainty: "The fear was that they could come and commit all these atrocities, such as were in Irpin, Buchi. Uncertainty was frightening. You don't know what will happen tomorrow." (ID 6) For IDPs, moving from one region to the next caused a major disruption to routines, which adds to the uncertainty. An IDP, and social media manager in her 20 s said, "The hardest part, perhaps, was leaving some of my usual life, my home. Although I knew that I was going somewhere temporarily, but still. This fact was very difficult, to leave my relatives, my father stayed behind. And later he was taken to serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine." (ID 13).

For many, there was not just one fear, but many. In expressing fear for their loved ones, some also feared for their country. "Fear of losing Kyiv, Ukraine as a free country." (ID 11) Other fears include the use of chemical or nuclear weapons that the Russians will invade their region next and, relatedly, fear of Russian occupation, and the loss of their home. One said, "What I don't want the most is to live under occupation, or to be forced to leave somewhere, because we know what life under occupation will be like." (ID 13).

Fear—the feeling of it, and what they were afraid of—changed over time. For some, fear was transitory. "I was very afraid of something, that my loved ones would die…" said a man in his 30 s (ID 10). For him, it was a feeling of powerlessness, but then, "I overcame that fear. And now that the information about these deaths has begun to arrive, I have no fear. On the contrary, I have a feeling that I need to act, I need to help, support." For this man, it was the idea to act that helped him to overcome his fear.

And for others, the fear grew as the time went on, as a DP in her late 20 s (ID 14) said:

> "When the war started, in the first days I had no fear, it seemed to me that it would last no more than a week, and we would be able to drive them out and that would be the end of it. It seemed to me that I was eager to see that no one met with bread, hugs, kisses. And they will go. But it turned out that this was not a military operation, but a real war. I took it easy until our city was shelled. It so happened that the house of my friends was completely shot through and turned into a kind of sieve. And I remember these tears, these emotions. Of course, then I was moved by this situation. That's how this kind of fear begins."

In this quote, a DP details her emotional journey at the start of the war, transitioning from an initial lack of fear to personal trauma. She realized that this was a "real war" after their city was shelled and friends' homes were destroyed. Perhaps their initial denial served as a coping strategy, but it was short-lived. The shift from abstract understanding to lived experience reflects how war transforms from what appears to be a distant conflict to an intense personal crisis.

In sum, fear was a prevalent emotion among Ukrainians at the outset of the war, often centered on the safety of relatives and children, but not only. Uncertainty fueled fear, with some dreading the possibility of atrocities like those that they had heard about in other parts of Ukraine. Fear evolved over time—some initially felt powerless but overcame it by taking action; while, others' fear grew as the war progressed and the reality of the conflict set in. For displaced persons (DPs and IDPs), the act of leaving behind familiar routines and loved ones was another source of fear, particularly for those forced to relocate; while, their family members remained in danger. Beyond personal fears, some were deeply concerned about the future of Ukraine itself.

Hatred

Not all of the conflict-affected expressed that they feel hatred. Some specified the conditions in which they feel hatred, for example, "Yes, especially when the alarm is announced." (ID 24).

Others considered hatred as a natural reaction to the situation: "Like every person, I look at the negative; that's why there is anger and hatred."

For some, hatred is an emotion that they try to resist. As an example, a social media manager in her 30 s relayed a story she read of a man murdered in Bucha. Whereas before, she did not allow herself to feel hatred, the story was so intense for her that she changed her mind (ID 2):

> "When I read this and the [Facebook] post, I finally broke down, and I realized that I do feel hatred. I allowed myself to feel it, because I understand that, after all these stories, there are some rapes and somehow I don't know. Well, finally, something seemed to break for me, and I realized that I couldn't do anything else. What should I say, that what I feel is hate, and that's okay. Don't judge yourself for it."

Hatred was not necessarily toward Russians in general. An IDP in her 40 s said, "But it seems to me that hatred of Russians is too abstract. Rather, I feel hatred for the soldiers who did this to Ukraine and for Putin." (ID 16) And for others, hatred was a temporary emotion that they wanted to get rid of (ID 15):

> *Interviewer*: And do you feel hatred for Russians?
> *Respondent (IDP in her 40s)*: No, I don't feel it. Only to those who commit such atrocities here, and not to all others. I had a period of hatred, but now I think it is over.
> *Interviewer*: Maybe it was the period when you were in Ukraine?

> *Respondent (IDP in her 40s)*: … I no longer want to spend my strength and energy on negativity, I want to direct it to the positive.

Hatred may be, in some way, a “natural” emotion to feel given the extreme situation, but nevertheless some feel shame for feeling it. When asked if she felt hatred, a professor in her 50 s (ID 21) said:

> “I can’t even tell. I catch myself rejoicing when their plane is shot down, when enemy soldiers are being killed. And I’m just scared that I’m happy about it. It is natural for a person not to be happy about this. And then there is hatred for enemies, then it even brings joy. It even worries me.”

In the interviews, hatred emerged as a complex and multifaceted emotion, experienced in various ways by those affected by the war. Some respondents expressed hatred directly and without hesitation. But not all accepted and lived with the feeling of hatred; some individuals grappled with it. The object of hatred was not necessarily at all Russians, but at “occupiers” and soldiers. Many respondents wrestled with the tension between recognizing hatred as a natural emotional response and trying to maintain their own moral compass, and reject hatred, amid the brutality of war.

Loneliness

When asked if they felt lonely, many said no. They found the camaraderie during war, and the feeling of care and solidarity with others kept loneliness at bay. A woman in her 20 s said that she was not lonely “due to the fact that friends and acquaintances constantly write something, ask almost every day "How are you?, Where are you? How are the parents?” (ID 2) A DP in her late 30 s said, “Loneliness, no. Because at the moment I am with my children, my sister is with my children, my cousin is with me. We live together. Then we already met many people who help and support us in many ways.” (ID 22).

Some were lonely, but only temporarily. A teacher in her 50 s (ID 5) said,

> “Probably only in the first days. I can’t say that it’s loneliness, but somehow there was no desire to communicate with anyone, I didn’t want anything, you don’t know how people feel. Yes, we stayed at home, did not go to work. It was Thursday, Friday. On Monday we were told not to go out. That’s how lonely they were then. Then I was not at home alone, my son came, but they were so abandoned. There was such a feeling. But when they started gathering, weaving nets, and bringing food, that feeling passed.”

The teacher’s experience illustrates a shift from isolation to communal solidarity. Initially, she describes a reluctance to engage, and government directives to stay home deepened the feeling of disconnection. The solitude was temporary. When her son arrived and communal activities like weaving nets and sharing food began, these actions fostered a sense of purpose and belonging. Connected to coping strategies (see below), this shift shows how collective action can help people manage the emotional toll of crisis.

Comparison with one's own situation to those living in the proximity of the frontline may impact the feeling of loneliness. A music teacher in her 40 s who is a refugee in Austria (ID 8) said:

> "I'm already used to the fact that there is no time to feel sorry for myself, everything is in comparison. Why are you lonely, because you are completely sorry for yourself? Open the news, see how people live in basements and you realize that you are not alone. You live in normal conditions. The child goes to school, nothing explodes over you."

She compares her situation to that of people still living near the frontline, who, she imagines, face much harsher conditions. She recognizes that she and her child are relatively safe, and as a result she feels less lonely. This comparison helped her to reframe her emotions, shifting from self-pity to a broader perspective of shared suffering, and thus a means to escape loneliness.

Some had felt lonely, and there were a number of reasons to be. A refugee in her late 30 s felt loneliness because her husband had to stay behind in Ukraine, due to the new military draft policy. She said, "The difficulty is that the man stayed at home [back in Ukraine], and when you live with a person all the time, you already consider us as one. And here he was separated and thrown thousands of kilometers away; that's how this loneliness feels." (ID 22) Meanwhile, a 40 year old teacher living in Ukraine (ID 11) said that she feels lonely because she perceived the others around her were not feeling the depth of emotions that she feels:

> "My relatives do not always agree with me. They say I'm very nervous. It is necessary to have a more positive attitude toward everything, and I have nothing to share my psychological experiences with. They are all men. I am one woman. They do not understand that women perceive everything differently. They tell me that I'm the only one like that, and I tell them that no, I know a lot like me. Men, they are, perhaps, internally, more stable, they do not show. Especially when at the beginning we had alarms and bombings, I was very nervous, I was shaking. We've heard it all. They tell me: 'Mom, calmly pick up a book and read, do something,' but I can't. Then I felt lonely psychologically."

This quote highlights the loneliness that can arise from feeling emotionally disconnected from others who live in the same physical space. Despite being surrounded by family, she feels isolated because her relatives, particularly the men, do not share—or, perhaps, do not understand—the depth of her emotional experiences. She reports that her feelings are dismissed as nervousness, and she perceives a gender-based difference in emotional expression, where she sees men as more "stable" and less outwardly emotional. This emotional disconnect leaves her feeling unsupported, as she has no one to relate to or share her psychological burden with. As such, it shows that loneliness can stem not from physical isolation but from a lack of emotional understanding and empathy.

In sum, loneliness was not a dominant theme in the interviews, as many respondents described feeling a sense of camaraderie and solidarity during the

war. Frequent communication from friends, family, and acquaintances helped stave off loneliness, as people checked in regularly, asking about each other's well-being. Loneliness may be temporary, particularly in the early days of the conflict when they were more isolated, but this feeling dissipated once they engaged in communal activities like volunteering. The feeling of being emotionally disconnected, particularly when their inner turmoil was not shared by those around them, can cause loneliness.

Positive Emotions Amidst War: Gratitude, Hope, and Pride

Though not prevalent, some expressed positive emotions that are not often discussed in the literature on war and emotions: gratitude, hope and pride. Gratitude is felt toward the kindness and support offered by others, especially by those outside of Ukraine, and reflects the emotional relief that may come from human solidarity in difficult times, manifesting, perhaps, in sentiment toward the nation (e.g., "I don't know if it is an emotion—gratitude, but also love for people and for one's land"[ID 13]). Another is hope (e.g., "I feel protection, support and hope" [ID 15]) for eventual victory or simply the war's end. Pride emerges from witnessing the resilience, unity, and courage of fellow Ukrainians (e.g., "Of course, pride for Ukraine and at the same time sorrow that this is pride, courage, our courage" [ID 5]). This feeling of pride in enduring hardship and standing firm in the face of adversity could foster resistance to the negative emotions of fear and despair. Together, these positive emotions could help, in some way, to maintain purpose and connection, and reinforce the ability to cope.

Some expressed a mix of negative and positive emotions, and these emotions changed over time. When asked what emotions they feel, a community organizer in her 30 s (ID 24) said, "Emotions are so cyclical. Uncertainty can be replaced by joy from a small victory, then by faith, hope, and then sadness." A refugee in her 40 s (ID 12) felt a mix of despair, gratitude, and pride: "Some despair. Tears often come to my eyes. Even hard to explain. Sometimes there are tears of gratitude when we see how well we are treated by people who do not accept. There are tears of despair, because it is hard to believe in you that people and children are really dying. Sometimes these are tears of pride. When you see how steadily Ukrainians endure all this in reality."

A man in his 30 s (ID 10), who had earlier expressed that he overcame his fear, spoke more about the mix of positive emotions, and in religious terms:

> "This is such a range -- that is, there are emotions, very great love, someone to support. There are emotions of certain evil, anger. I'm trying to somehow build this anger and direct it somewhere. This is also present; there is a feeling of such a great desire to do something and the understanding that you cannot do anything. There is a feeling of such joy, as it may sound paradoxical, for what I have seen people love so much. Such is God's great space. Otherwise, I can't explain it there, how a person who is in danger of death, there is mourning, you know, and so on. That is, this also gives me some very inner comfort and joy."

This quote reflects the complex emotional landscape during the early stages of the war, blending fear, anger, love, and spiritual reflection. He describes an internal struggle to channel anger constructively while simultaneously experiencing profound love and a paradoxical sense of joy amid the tragedy. His religious faith shapes this perspective, framing the resilience and love he witnesses in others as a manifestation of "God's great space." Despite the chaos and danger surrounding him, he finds solace in religious faith, which provided him with both inner comfort and a sense of purpose. His emotions illustrate the multifaceted emotions individuals employ during crisis.

Coping Strategies

Volunteering

There are various coping strategies used by Ukrainians to navigate the emotional challenges brought on by the war. Volunteering was one such coping strategy, offering individuals a measure of control and purpose amidst the chaos. By solving specific problems through volunteer efforts, people can focus their energy on productive activities, helping them regain agency. A response by a social media manager in her 30 s (ID 2) is illustrative: "I know that the first day of the war it was just reading the news and that was it. It was terribly tiring and somehow tiring. And then, when the volunteer activity began, you are absolutely determined to solve specific problems. You have less time to read the news and that also helps a lot actually." Similarly, a teacher in her 40's (ID 11) said, "And at first, when, of course, there was nothing to do, all the people sat without work. We did volunteer work. Men and children helped unload the cargo, and we all cleaned up. We all did something as a group so that it wouldn't be sad."

Seeking, and Finding, Social Support

Social support from being a volunteer, or from connecting to family and friends, is another crucial strategy that alleviates negative feelings and provides comfort. The outpouring of contact between people within one's network provided a feeling of support, as people felt closer based on a shared traumatic experience. For refugees, many felt the support of others who reached out to help ("Our main manager from [Western Europe] constantly wrote to me every day, supported me, offered help to leave, find transport" [ID 23]). For those living in Ukraine, bonds strengthened and attentiveness heightened. An academic in her late 40 s (ID 25) said,

> "I think I felt supported. Somehow we became more attentive, as it all began, from the first day. In our family, in the relationship with my husband, as with my parents, that they are somewhere far away. We became more attentive to each other. We called each other many times a day. It seems to me that people have become more attentive to each other, and relatives who could not call for a day or two, called several times a day.

For the academic, the crisis acted as a catalyst for increased communication, with family members calling each other multiple times a day to check in, share reassurances, and maintain connection. Through collective care, even this extreme adversity can, temporarily, strengthen relationships.

Some found that close physical support was important. For a social media manager in her 30 s (ID 2), what helped was "the presence of a close loved one nearby. It seems that there have been so many hugs in my life, as during the war period, probably there has never been such a frequency of hugs before. You feel that somehow everything is already difficult, difficult. Just came up, hugged you and it becomes much easier."

Support is not passive; providing support, such as volunteering, but also reaching out to others, provides a measure of comfort. A man in his 30 s (ID 10) said, "… I feel supported when I support someone. I have such an effect. When I feel needed. Feedback is what keeps me going."

In sum, seeking and finding social support, whether through volunteering or family and friends, played a crucial role in alleviating isolation and providing emotional comfort during the war. People felt closer due to shared experiences of trauma, and both receiving and providing support, whether through calls, physical presence, or volunteering, helped individuals cope.

Religious Faith

Some find purpose and meaning through religious faith. Religion can offer emotional comfort, hope, and a way to make sense of their suffering. In this sample, even though the lead author had not asked specifically about it, half mentioned religious faith as a coping strategy. For example, an academic in her late 40 s (ID 24) said about how she finds support, "First, faith in God, faith in victory, faith in a better future for my child." A student in her 20 s (ID 26) said, "Faith in God. I give everything to God." The presence of God in their lives, or at least the fear of God's absence, was also important: "Well, it's lonely here, there are people all around. I am always with God. It's when God turns away, then it will be lonely." (ID 15) Prayer (e.g., "If it were not for prayer, it would be very difficult for me to accept it at all" [ID 6]), helps some cope with the overwhelming nature of the war.

Tests of Faith

Whereas religion can be a comfort, it can also present a situation of "moral injury," and thus a test of faith. Some were heartened that they passed this test. A social media manager in her 20 s (ID 13) said,

> "Spiritually, I felt changes, my faith strengthened, I had such a moment of truth. When trials come you understand whether you are a believer or not. If you are a believer, accordingly you have all these fears, the negativity does not seem so large-scale to you. You still know that God holds his hand over all of us, He also rules over evil. In the end, only He will win. And it was such a

> moment that, on the contrary, faith was strengthened. I felt the courage to want to live."

For this young woman, a profound spiritual transformation occurred; a "moment of truth" where her faith was put to the test and ultimately strengthened. In the face of intense fear and adversity, their belief provided a lens through which the negativity appeared less overwhelming. She felt assured that a higher power watches over and has control over both good and evil, and this strengthened her faith and instilled in her a sense of hope. For her, religious faith fostered not only comfort but also a renewed courage and determination to continue living with purpose.

For others, the "moral injury" that war inflicts is difficult to heal. A teacher and IDP in her late 40 s (ID 4) felt a tension between their religious beliefs and the changes they underwent as the war progressed.

> Mom prayed a lot, went to the service every day. My son kept calm, said: "Mom, everything will be fine, we will win, don't you believe?" What I noticed in myself, I am a pacifist by nature. This is how I taught my child that everything must be solved peacefully, amicably, in communication. And then, when I heard from my son: "Mom, those bastards, he says, were gutted there and there." I said a phrase that surprised me. I said: "Thank God!" That is, I thanked God for the fact that so many people were killed and I became wild. And then I thought, is it me? Is it not me? Of course, then I just thought, analyzed and think that it is natural, that hatred is a natural feeling. There is nothing wrong with that. I think it's like righteous anger. I do not justify myself. We cannot but defend ourselves… There were a lot of discoveries during this time. You yourself know that people are tested at such times."

In this situation, she found herself pleased with the deaths of enemy soldiers, which shocked her and led to a period of self-reflection. She grappled with this newfound acceptance of hatred, eventually rationalizing it as "righteous anger"—a natural and justifiable response to the atrocities committed during the conflict. This shift illustrates the emotional toll war takes, leading to a reevaluation of long-held beliefs. For her, religion was a framework for understanding the war, but it also had to accommodate feelings such as hatred and anger that she had not previously associated with her faith. Her experience shows how religious faith can both guide and conflict with emotional responses in times of extreme crisis, serving as both a source of comfort and a lens for moral self-examination.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size has 22 respondents, which is slightly less than other studies of its type. The use of snowball sampling and personal contacts introduced some selection bias; given that this is a qualitative work, it is not possible to generalize of the findings to the broader population of Ukrainians affected by the war. The sociodemographic profile of the participants, predominantly white-collar workers and religious individuals, may not fully capture the experiences

of the population. Finally, the conversational interview style, while facilitating rich and authentic data, may have introduced variability in responses due to differing levels of formality or rapport with the interviewer.

Conclusion

This article examined the emotions and coping strategies of Ukrainians in the early stages of the 2022 Russian invasion. Through a qualitative study, based on interviews with 22 Ukrainians, this research provides insights into the immediate feelings and adaptations to an extreme event.

Table 1 summarizes the findings. As for emotions, we found that fear and hatred were experienced in unique and shifting ways. Fear often centered around the safety of loved ones, especially children, and evolved over time from feelings of helplessness to the motivation to act. Hatred was expressed toward specific actors, such as Russian soldiers or Putin, but many grappled with the morality of this emotion, sometimes feeling shame or discomfort. These feelings had implications for their religious faith, as some were conflicted between what they should feel, morally, and what they actually felt. Loneliness, though less common, emerged in moments of isolation or emotional disconnection, particularly when respondents perceived that others did not share the depth of their emotions.

Emotions cycled and transitioned. Whereas the violence, destruction, and death can lead to negative emotions of hatred, fear, loneliness, and anxiety, it can also have positive feelings of gratitude, pride and hope.

Coping strategies varied. Many found relief in social support, volunteering, and religious faith. Volunteering provided a sense of purpose and control, while social support—both physical and emotional—helped alleviate isolation and fostered solidarity. Whereas some theory suggests that loneliness may result in avoidance of social interactions, this was largely not the experience of these Ukrainians in the early part of the war.

Religious faith played a significant role as a coping mechanism, providing comfort, hope, and a way to understand collective suffering. For some, their faith strengthened during the war. For others, their faith was tested, especially when emotions like hatred conflicted with their morality, leading to moments of self-reflection. As others found, the severe stress of war can impact how one perceives religious faith and spirituality (Niewiadomska et al., 2022). Witnessing and receiving news of the horrors of war caused some to feel shame, and is akin to "moral injury" (Hodgson et al., 2021; Koenig and Zaben, 2021).

Perhaps how Ukrainians accessed religion—whether by attending religious services, or via televised or digital platforms—impacted their emotions and coping strategies. Whereas our data does not consistently capture how people accessed religion, a recent study of the Russo-Ukraine war found that those who had higher levels of media religiosity tended to engage less with negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, and sadness, when describing their war experiences (Kostruba and Fishchuk, 2022).

Table 1 Key findings on emotions and coping strategies of Ukrainians at the beginning of the Russo-Ukraine War, 2022

Theme	Key findings	Example quotes
Emotions		
Mixed emotions	Emotions cycled and coexisted; individuals experienced both despair and moments of gratitude or pride	“Emotions are so cyclical. Uncertainty can be replaced by joy from a small victory, then by faith, hope, and then sadness”
Fear	About loved ones’ safety, uncertainty, and future of Ukraine. Evolved over time; some overcame fear by taking action	“Fear of losing Kyiv, Ukraine as a free country.” and “I overcame that fear… I need to act, I need to help, support”
Hatred	Often toward specific actors like soldiers or leaders; some grappled with morality of hatred, with some experiencing shame or discomfort	“Sometimes there is hatred afterward reading the news. I understand that in hatred I turn into an enemy.”
Loneliness	Mitigated by camaraderie and social connections. In some cases, emotional disconnect from household members coincided with loneliness	“Loneliness, no. Because… I am with my children, my sister is with my children… We live together”
Positive emotions	Gratitude, hope, and pride emerged amidst the hardship, coinciding with negative emotions	“There are tears of gratitude when we see how well we are treated.” and “Pride for Ukraine and at the same time sorrow that this is pride”
Coping strategies		
Volunteering	Provided purpose, control, and distraction from negative emotions	“When the volunteer activity began… You have less time to read the news, and that also helps a lot”
Social support	Emotional and practical support from family, friends, and networks temporarily alleviated negative feelings	“We became more attentive to each other. We called each other many times a day”
Religious faith	Offered emotional comfort, hope, and a way to make sense of suffering. For some, faith strengthened; for others, war tested their faith	“Faith in God, faith in victory, faith in a better future for my child." and "It was such a moment that, on the contrary, faith was strengthened”

For full quotes and participant attribution, see Results section

Ukrainians at the outset of the Russo-Ukraine war of 2022 experienced a wide range of emotions and employed diverse coping strategies, from social support to volunteering and religious faith. These findings highlight the dynamic interplay of emotions and coping mechanisms during the early stages of a conflict, and how they adapt in moments of extreme crisis.

Appendix A Participant data

See Tables 2.

Table 2 Participant demographic characteristics ($N=22$)

ID number	Age	Location	Gender	Religion	Occupation
2	30 s	Ukraine	Woman	Orthodox	Social media manager
3	40 s	Ukraine	Woman	Roman Catholic	Musician
4	40 s	DP	Woman	Orthodox	Teacher
5	50 s	Ukraine	Woman	Orthodox	Teacher
6	40 s	Ukraine	Man	Roman Catholic	Unemployed
8	40 s	DP	Woman	Roman Catholic	Teacher
9	40 s	Ukraine	Man	Roman Catholic	Priest
10	30 s	Ukraine	Man	Roman Catholic	None given
11	40 s	Ukraine	Woman	Orthodox	Teacher
12	40 s	DP	Woman	Orthodox	None given
13	20 s	IDP	Woman	Roman Catholic	Social media manager
14	20 s	DP	Woman	Orthodox	Academic
15	40 s	DP	Woman	Orthodox	Academic
16	40 s	DP	Woman	Orthodox	Academic
17	40 s	Ukraine	Woman	Orthodox	Teacher
18	70 s	Ukraine	Man	Roman Catholic	Musician
21	50 s	IDP	Woman	Orthodox	Academic
22	30 s	DP	Woman	Roman Catholic	Homemaker
23	40 s	Ukraine	Woman	Roman Catholic	Accountant
24	30 s	DP	Woman	Roman Catholic	Community organizer
25	40 s	Ukraine	Woman	Roman Catholic	Academic
26	20 s	Ukraine	Woman	Orthodox	Student

DP, displaced person; IDP, internally displaced person

Appendix B Questionnaire

See Table 3.

Table 3 Order and wording of questions asked to respondents

Order	Questions
1	What is the most difficult thing for you in this situation?
2	What and who helps you to deal with difficulties related to the war?
3	What thoughts do you have?
4	Do you feel lonely?
5	What is your most prominent fear?
6	What emotions and states do you experience most often?
7	Do you feel hatred?
8	Do you feel that you have support?
9	Have you noticed a change in yourself?
10	Do you see the future of Ukraine, and your future in Ukraine?

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethical Approval This study was conducted within the ethical standards of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this qualitative study.

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