

Rarely Do They Flinch

By Katie Vosgien

Early March, 2022. It's a quiet mid-afternoon in the Donetsk oblast, broken by the trills of spring songbirds and the coos of doves and pigeons. Conversation, obscured, rises and falls. An occasional roll of laughter echoes down dirt village roads. Then there's the crescendo of wailing air raid sirens, and regularly scheduled shelling starts up again. Dogs begin their chorus of alarm, almost all in unison. Despite the clamor, civilians stroll by the webcam, presumably to a village market out of view by the hundreds, sometimes thousands, of YouTube viewers. They'll return in half an hour or so carrying grocery bags. Rounds sail over and around them, close enough to shake the cam and startle viewers. Rarely do the webcam inhabitants flinch.

Birds nearby scatter as one of the Russian separatist soldiers shuffles around somewhere behind the live-stream cam and loads a howitzer—*creek, slam, boom*. It takes all of thirty seconds to load and then launch the round toward a target out in the distance. Although late at night for U.S. viewers, it's daytime in Eastern Ukraine, so it's impossible to tell where the round lands, but it's close. The outgoing impact is heard only seconds after launch.

Every so often, frantic new subscribers comment "*World War 3 has begun!!!!*" as they listen to the volley of outcoming and incoming artillery, each about three minutes between. Stream regulars, who've been around since the illegal annexation of Crimea in

2014, calmly reply that this has been going on consistently for years. For nearly a decade, the hotly-contested Donbas region—comprised of several strategically important Eastern Ukrainian cities, including Donetsk—has been of civil strife and conflict. Its rhythms, by then, were well-established.

When the day is quiet, it is too quiet. Regular viewers know that's when a rarer, and more deadly, nighttime assault is in the works. Hours later, viewers the world over watch as intermittent flashes light up the dark Ukrainian sky, illuminating rows of abandoned Soviet-era homes. That is when the sudden *rat-tat-tat* of assault rifles reverberates in the darkness. Sometimes—although it's become rare now, with the influx of quieter and significantly cheaper Iranian *kamikaze* drones—the roar of MiGs can be heard overhead. Sharp whistles pierce the sky and are followed by crashes even louder, and more frightening, than the daytime artillery shells.

The Donbas problem was a well-oiled machine. Concerns over Russian imperialism were discussed briefly in the rest of the world, then brushed aside as an *Eastern European problem*. The wide-scale invasion of Ukraine and the failed siege of its capital city in 2022 brought more unpredictable spasms of violence, newer and deadlier technologies, and the importation of advanced weapons and training.

The new Ukrainian counteroffensive ushered in direct and deadly attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. Their injuries and deaths are no longer concealed as unfortunate accidents or inevitable war casualties. Bakhmut in shambles, Kherson submerged and drowned, and in the Zaporzhia nuclear power plant an existential crisis

looms. Public air raid maps light up all across Ukraine for days at a time. In dark skies, the white flashes of Air Defense systems draw cheers from the webcam crowds, though large pieces of broken-up missiles often fall on apartment buildings, schools, and hospitals.

As of this writing, six months are left to the current year of 2023. Many of the webcams, understandably, have been pulled by both Russian and Ukrainian hosts. Those that are left intact today—notably: Kherson, Odesa, Donetsk, Zaporzhia, Dnipro, and the outskirts of Kyiv—provide a glimpse of war in real-time, an odd pastime.