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Lynsey Addario

Pulitzer Prize-winning war photojournalist Lynsey Addario joins from Kyiv to discuss shooting a defining image that exposed Putin's war crimes in Ukraine, finding humanity amid horror on the ground, and her drive to document conflict zones.

GUEST Lynsey Addario

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HIDE

The eyes of the world...from the war zone.
This week on 'Firing Line.'
♪♪♪ [Explosion] When this explosion rocked a suburb of Kyiv, a war photo journalist was there and captured a defining image from Russia's war on Ukraine, exposing for the world Vladimir Putin's war crimes.
Lynsey Addario has been on the front lines of conflict and crisis for the last two decades documenting the Arab Spring, life under the Taliban, genocide in Darfur.
Kidnapped twice...
And they had bound my hands so tight they were starting to go numb.

...risking her own life and watching colleagues lose theirs on the job...
It's not really a job to me.
It is my life.
It's sort of a religion of sorts.

...now the Pulitzer Prize winner has turned her lens on Ukraine, finding moments of humanity and lives forever changed.
What does Lynsey Addario say now?

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Lynsey Addario, welcome to 'Firing Line.'

Thank you for having me.

You are a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist who has covered conflict and war for more than 20 years.
I have followed your career closely for at least the last 10 since we first met.
You have been kidnapped twice.
You've narrowly escaped death time and again on assignment.
And you are joining me from Ukraine, where you have been covering the Russian invasion since mid-February at its inception.
What is the feeling in Kyiv, the capitol of Ukraine right now, Lynsey?

I mean, it's definitely more and more tense every day.
There are explosions pretty much day and night.
The fighting has gotten closer and closer to within the bounds of Kyiv.
Residential buildings are being hit every day.
There were a few rounds that landed close to the hotel today.
So, I think the overall feeling is sort of stress and imminent — sort of a sense that this will get worse by the day.

How does this conflict compare to other war zones you've been in?

I think the difference here is that the Russians clearly — the war is not going the way they planned, and so they're basically just lobbing artillery toward the city center and around the city of Kyiv.
That's happening across the country.
They're killing civilians intentionally, targeting civilians, targeting evacuation routes.
I mean, this is one of the worst, most blatant examples I have seen of that.

I'd like to talk about what happened on March 6th in Irpin, when you were in position to document a civilian evacuation route and you came under mortar attack by the Russians.
Your experience during the blast was captured on video.

[Speaking in Ukrainian] [Explosion] [Debris clattering]
[Indistinct]
[No audio] [Dog barking in distance]
Come on!
[Dog barking in distance]
[Speaking in Ukrainian]
Alright.

Stay there!

Alright!

You then went and photographed what has

become the defining image of this war to date.
It appeared on the front page of It was shared around the world, and your Instagram post with that photograph has received more than 50,000 reactions.
I want our viewers to beware that this is a very difficult image to look at that we're going to put on the screen, and I'd like you, Lynsey, to describe what we're seeing.

So, that morning, I was going out to cover the toll that war takes on civilians.
And I went to this area of Irpin.
It's at a bridge that sort of connects Irpin with the suburbs of Kyiv.
And I'd seen images coming out from the previous few days of civilians coming, the elderly being carried, the ill, babies, children — just these incredibly apocalyptic scenes of people fleeing for their lives.
And I wanted to cover that, but it was fairly dangerous.
So I went very early in the morning with my team.
I was with Andriy Dubchak, who is a videographer and is working with me as a translator as well, and Steve, our security guy.
And the scene was pretty tense.
There was small-arms fire in the background, artillery in the area, but not necessarily directed at this position.

And within minutes, a mortar round came in and landed about probably 200 to 300 meters from where we were.
And the Ukrainian military fired back from a position that was off in the distance — about the same distance, about 300 meters.
So I assumed that they were aiming for that Ukrainian military position.
And every time the Russians would fire, they would get closer and closer to the position of the civilian evacuation route.
I was looking through my camera and looking at these children being sort of pulled by their parents along this route as rounds were coming closer, and I was getting furious, and I was thinking, 'Can this really be happening?
Like, who — who would be capable of actually targeting children and women, you know?'
And then suddenly a round landed probably 20 to 30 feet from where we were standing and directly between myself and the mother and two children and volunteer who was escorting them.
And then our security guy ran across the street, and he started screaming for a medic along with another Ukrainian soldier.
And finally he sa– You know, he said, 'Stay where you are,' and we of course listened to him.
And then he said, 'Okay, come.'

So we ran across the street, and as I was running, I was trying to process what I was seeing.
And I saw these four bodies just lying down.
And I couldn't figure out if they were alive or dead.
And so I took a few photographs, because I remember saying to myself, 'This is so horrible, but I have to photograph because I know what I just witnessed.
I just witnessed civilians being targeted.'
And so I took a few photos, and it was still very tense.
I mean, there were still incoming rounds.
And then I worked my way toward the front, which was ultimately the picture that was published in where the faces of the victims were visible, and I remember taking the photo and thinking to myself, 'Is this disrespectful?
I have to take this photo.
We don't have to use it, but I know that this is important to document.'

Did you know you had captured something extraordinary?

I did not.
I — I knew that I had experienced something...you know, pretty overwhelming, and I knew that I had captured a moment that is so important to document — an

intentional targeting of civilians.
But I still didn't even know if the photo was in focus.
You know, I was so nervous and so — I had just sort of narrowly escaped death.
So, I knew I had something, but I just — I wasn't even sure and I wasn't sure that would even publish it, of course, because it was graphic and it was a family.

You've said that you were surprised by the editor's decision to publish the photo and even harbored reservations yourself because you didn't know anything about them or whether their loved ones would've wanted the photos published.
But since then, you have met with the father and husband of those victims — Serhiy Perebyinis.
What did he tell you?

That was a very emotional meeting.
I mean, it started with me sort of just saying, 'I'm so sorry.'
If you think of the trauma that he has gone through — he's lost his entire family with one strike.
He was out east taking care of his mother, who was ill with COVID and wasn't here to help his family flee to safety.
But, you know, the meeting was on my end very tearful.

He was very strong, and he talked a lot about what — what his wife was like and what his children were like, what their lives were like leading up to this attack.
Really just putting a human face on this picture and on this moment, because I think it's so important for that image that I took to not be the only image.
I think it was important for the public to realize this could've been any one of us.

The Kremlin has repeatedly denied targeting civilians.
Your photo flatly discredits those claims and was even used as an exhibit in a speech on the Senate floor by Dick Durbin.
Since you shot it, the world has seen a maternity hospital, residential apartment buildings, a theatre, and an art school targeted by Russian attacks.
Last week, President Biden even went so far as to call Putin a 'war criminal.'
Do you think the targeting of civilians and just the presence of social media has brought a new way of interacting with war to the public?

Absolutely.
I think social media has changed the immediacy with which we learn about things, has changed the amount of information we see.

I think the danger, of course, is that we have to be very careful about what we believe on social media and who we follow, but in this case, I think the fact that social media exists actually helped get that image published because we see so much now that even if I hadn't published it, if hadn't published it, someone would've published it.

Ultimately, the father told you he was comfortable with your choice to shoot their death and with the choice of the paper to publish those images.
What did he tell you?

I mean, it was such an extraordinary moment.
The interview was in Russian, and Andrew Kramer was speaking to him.
And I just said, 'I'm so sorry,' and Andrew asked him, 'If we had been able to reach you and if we had been able to ask your permission to publish that photo in real time, would you have given us permission?'
And he said, 'Yes, this is a war crime, and people need to see it.'

You've also captured a scene at the train station in Kyiv where three children and a stuffed teddy bear are peering a window of a train that is heading west with the children.
The UN now says 1.5 million children have fled Ukraine.

Why is it important for you to capture the faces of the innocent victims?

I don't know.
I mean, for me, it's just instinctual.
I think maybe because I'm a mother and I'm a sister and I'm a daughter and I think that for me, when I cover war, I always try to put a face on it, because I think it's what we as human beings can relate to.
When I see these moments, of course I think of my own children.
I think of what it would be like as a father or husband to have to put your wife and children on a train and not know if or when you'll ever see them again.
I mean, these are the moments that, for me, endure, you know?
These are the moments that are poignant.

Another image you shot shows five babies who were born to surrogate mothers, and now everything for these newborns is uncertain because their biological parents are stuck outside of the country.
You wrote on your Instagram that this story is particularly close to your heart because you had your now three-year-old son via surrogate.
What was it like to be in that basement shooting those images?

Well, it was like — Initially, it was like a little

utopia, I mean, because we had been out covering attacks and check points and the fortification of Kyiv.
And then there were — At that point, there were 19 babies down there being cared for by these angels of nannies who stayed behind to take care of the babies, because their parents couldn't come and collect them.
I think that, you know, it was this incredibly beautiful scene, because there were all these newborns.
And of course, they don't know what's going on around them.
And so, yeah, for me, we had a surrogate for our son, Alfred, who is almost three.
He'll be three next month.
And, you know, I can't imagine how hard it is for the parents overseas who can't come here, how hard it is for the surrogate mothers here.
And so I think for everyone in this equation, it's really, really difficult, and people are making really great sacrifices.

Early on back in mid-February, there was a sense of disbelief that Russia would actually invade.
Many Ukrainians didn't believe that Russia would really invade, and frankly there were a lot of American policymakers on the side lines arguing that Russia wouldn't really go

through with it.
How have you seen the mood of the country change in your month there?

I mean, it's extraordinary.
When I came here, no one believed — I mean, Kyiv was the most bustling city.
The cafes, the ballet.
People were out on the streets.
I mean, it was really this — this energetic, vibrant city.
And in a month, it's turned into martial law.
I mean, it's turned into check points every hundred meters.
There are explosions all over.
I mean, it's basically a different place.
It's a different city.
It's a different country.
But when it did happen, the speed with which they mobilized and the speed with which they united and they decided 'there is no way we will live under Russian control' — that was just uniform.
There was like — You know, I've — people came out en masse to volunteer as fighters, to give blood, to do whatever it took.
And I think that's something that's very unique.
I have not seen that in many places.

What is your observation about Ukrainian resolve?

I mean, it's unrelenting, you know?
Ukrainians are really unified.
They're very tough.
They're very resilient.
And there's no way they will live under Putin.

You write in your memoir, 'It's What I do: A Photographer's Life of Love and War,' about being drawn towards photojournalism in places of conflict, and you detail the first bombing that you witnessed in 2003 in Iraq when a cameraman who you were shooting near was killed.
You write... Now, since then, several friends and colleagues of yours have died, and at least four journalists have already been killed in the current war in Ukraine.
Does death change how you approach the job?

Yes, I think now because I'm a mother, it does more so than before I became a mother.
You know, we all like to think it won't happen to us, that we will be a little more careful.
But the fact is a lot of this is luck.
You know, I think we did a very similar trip to the Fox News journalists the day before, and we were lucky, you know?
And — And — But that's not to say it was safer the day before.
It's so hard.

You make these calculations, and you think that you're making — you're taking calculated risks.
And often, we are, but sometimes things are not predictable.
So, I think there is a degree of sort of fate that goes into this job for me.
Nothing is — Nothing is certain.

Renown Ukrainian photojournalist Max Levin has disappeared on the front line near Kyiv.
You're connected with so many journalists on the ground.
What are you hearing from those who know him?

That they're nervous.
That they're — You know, when Max went missing, his friends — a few people knew and they didn't say anything because I think, you know, there's always that question when a journalist goes missing do you go public with it or not.
The same happened for us in Libya.
They still think he's alive.
No one knows.
And I think we've seen now that Russians are kidnapping journalists, that they're taking journalists.
They're taking civilians and bringing them forcibly to Russia.
So I think people are really assuming the

worst, because there are no rules for Putin, you know?
He really is not respecting any semblance of international law.

You just referenced your time in Libya.
You've been kidnapped twice — first in Iraq in 2004, and seven years later, you and three other journalists were kidnapped by pro-government forces in Libya.
Your driver was killed and the four of you were held for six days.
Before was able to secure your release, you were beaten, you were threatened, touched inappropriately, and feared you would be raped.
You have said, though, that the hardest part of it was what you put your family through.
How do you pick up your camera and get yourself back in the field after an ordeal like that?

I mean, my philosophy has always been to sort of get back as fast as possible, because I think this is my life and it's important for me to be in touch with sort of where I'm at emotionally and make sure I respect that, that I give myself the space I need to process things but also to not stay away so long that I'm too scared to go back.
So, I think with Libya, when we were released, we were very lucky to survive.

Our driver was not so lucky, and that's something that we have to live with, of course, for the rest of our lives.
I think after Libya I took a little time.
I went home. I saw my family.
I was in New York.
But that's when I found out that Tim Hetherington and Chris Hondros were killed in Misrata, and they were both friends.
And I think that actually, ironically, their deaths sort of sent me reeling more than my own experience had with the kidnapping.
For some reason, I had survivor's guilt.
When they died, it took me a lot longer to kind of get back on track.
And eventually I did... Eventually, I ended up getting pregnant actually about a month after getting out of Libya.
And then there was a whole new layer of feelings, because for me as a female war photographer, I had very few role models of women who were mothers who did the same job I do.
And now I think the important thing for me is to really just listen to my instinct and to listen to where I'm at and what I need emotionally.

You referenced your son, Lukas.
You also have your three-year-old.
What do you say to your children when you leave?

Well, it was a lot easier before Lukas was able to understand sort of what I do for a living. But now Lukas asks all the questions that it's very hard for me to answer, you know? Why do you have to go so long? Will it be dangerous? Are you risking your life? I don't want to lie to him, but I also have to be careful about how much he knows, because it's very hard on him.

You write extensively about your experience as a female war journalist. And you have talked about how, at times, you have been held back by your gender. While you were reporting a story for which you ultimately won the Pulitzer Prize in 2009, you had to pose as your reporting partner's wife in order to gain access to a Taliban commander. But there are other times when your gender has advantaged you, like when you went inside a secret girls' school in Afghanistan. What is your message for any young woman who is trying to break into your field?

I mean, I would say, like, use your gender to your advantage, you know? For me, that's always been my philosophy. I've never let my gender stop me. I work a lot in the Muslim world. I work a lot in societies that are sort of

segregated by gender because of strict religious or traditional rules.
And I — you know, I feel pretty lucky to be able to go into homes, to see women living at home along with men.
And I think that for me it's really important to recognize that it can be an advantage.
And it's shocking to me that 20 years in, I'm still in a situation where I go to raise my camera, and there are about 25 men standing in front of me or around me and jostling and pushing me out of the way because I'm 5' tall.
You know, it's amazing to me that that hasn't really changed.

In 1999, the author and journalist Tom Wolfe, who was the creator of new journalism and brought literary techniques to non-fiction, appeared on the original version of 'Firing Line' with William F. Buckley Jr.
They had a conversation, Lynsey, about what it takes to be a journalist.
Take a look.

I've worked for 10 years on newspapers always as a general assignment reporter, which is the lowest but also the best rung in the newspaper business.
You're sent out to cover a police story one day and to do a feature story on a man who has a 103-year-old turtle the next day.

You see all these sides of life.
And by and by, you learn that reporting is not a skill.

It's not a skill?

It's not a skill.
It's an attitude.
And the attitude is I have the right to get information from you to which I'm not entitled.

Do you think Tom Wolfe is right?

Um, I think it depends on your approach.
I mean, I think ultimately for someone like me, I don't feel like I have the right to that information, but I feel like I genuinely care and I genuinely want to know, and I want the world to know, particularly if there are injustices going on or if there's a humanitarian crisis or an unjust war happening.
You know, I feel like the only way to tell that story is through the people.
And so, therefore, yes, I will ask you the most personal things.
I will ask if I can go into your — your delivery room while you're giving birth.
They can always say no, and I won't — you know, I won't push it.
The job of a reporter is... It's not really a job to me.

It is my life.
It is what I believe in.
It's sort of a religion of sorts for me, and I think that it's important to get that information and to disseminate it and to share it with the world.

You're rotating out of Ukraine later this week, going home.
As someone who has been in the middle of this conflict for a month, even before the combat began, is there anything, in your estimation, that the Western press is missing based on your experience on the ground?

Yeah, I mean, I guess it's the — There are a lot of us concentrated here in Kyiv, and I think the more the security situation is in demise, the worse the access.
The thing that is also missing is kind of what's happening outside of the capitol, what's happening in all these places.
I mean, we saw the incredible reports from the Associated Press in Mariupol'. [Siren wailing faintly in distance] And I think...
Sorry. The siren's going off.
We saw the incredible reports in Mariupol', but that's happening in many places across — across the country I imagine in smaller villages.
And I think that that's also important to tell those stories if we can get access.

What is your sense from Ukrainians about their feelings towards the West?

I think they're grateful for the military support, for the emotional outpouring. They're grateful for people opening their doors.
It's really bolstered their confidence and their drive to continue fighting.

Is there a sense that the West can or should do more?

I mean, at what point do we actually step in? I mean, how many civilians have to be slaughtered for us to actually act?
I mean, I think sanctions are clearly...not working.
They're working maybe to a degree, but I mean, you know, we're really witnessing — over three million people have fled this country, and civilians are literally — they're being targeted daily.
So, to watch this kind of unfold before our eyes is — is pretty surreal.
I don't know at what point we actually say, 'Okay, enough is enough.'

Well, Lynsey Addario, thank you for your time.
Thank you for joining me from Kyiv, and please get home safely.

Thank you.