

The New York Times

Ukraine Ablaze

MAURICIO LIMA, SERGEY PONOMAREV
AND URIEL SINAI

NOMINATION FOR THE 2015 PULITZER PRIZE
CATEGORY 13: BREAKING NEWS PHOTOGRAPHY



Photographs often show death, but only rarely do they save a life. Slapped, kicked, spat on and denounced as a Ukrainian spy by pro-Russian rebels, Irina Dovgan was praying for death when Mauricio Lima of The New York Times took a picture of her public humiliation at a Donetsk traffic circle last August.

Three days later, Dovgan, a beauty salon manager, was alive and free. She was released from her torment by a rebel commander who, confronted with Lima's photograph and by pleas for her release from New York Times reporters and others appalled at her treatment, was shamed into a rare act of mercy. Her captors had threatened her with gang rape and repeatedly fired a gun next to her head.

That a news photograph could help end such an ordeal — Dovgan was openly begging her captors just to kill her — is a testament to the arresting and sometimes shocking intimacy that Lima and his colleagues, Sergey Ponomarev and Uriel Sinai of The New York Times, brought to their coverage of Ukraine's violent tumult.

Initially a domestic political struggle confined to a few hundred yards in the center of Kiev, Ukraine's convulsions in 2014 ballooned into a sprawling drama of vast geographical and geopolitical dimensions.

Lima and Ponomarev captured not only the grand scale of Ukraine's turmoil but also its personal agonies and emotions, blending grace and horror. They shot the flaming barricades in Kiev's Independence Square and Ukrainian military bases besieged by Russian troops in Crimea. They caught the menace of the Donetsk traffic circle where Dovgan endured abuse and the serenity of empty fields in rebel-held territory strewn with the wreckage of the Malaysian airliner.

Sinai, in what could easily have been just another shot of a news conference, homed in on the madcap and also menacing underbelly of the separatists' cause. His photo of the rebel leader Pavel Gubaryev as he struggled to present himself as a serious leader, surrounded by his raucous followers following their seizure of the local parliament chambers in Donetsk, is an emblem for the chaos in the region.

As in any conflict zone, photographers necessarily put themselves in danger. But the risks were particularly acute in Ukraine. In that chaotic and sprawling confrontation, combatants on all sides were frequently drunk, and they viewed journalists with suspicion and hostility. Ponomarev, a Russian national, was beaten by Ukrainian troops while trying to enter territory held by pro-Russian rebels. Lima, a Brazilian, was grabbed by pro-Russian fighters at a funeral and driven for miles to face interrogation by a rebel commander.

Ukraine was a bewildering bundle of narratives. It was a tumultuous anti-government revolt, but also a Russian land grab that set all of Europe on edge. It became a fratricidal armed struggle that has killed more than 4,000 people and turned Ukraine's industrial heartland into a desolate zone of war, hunger and misery. Through their images, The New York Times's photographers imposed an order on all the chaos, taking us deep into the lives (and deaths) of people on both sides.

They demonstrated not only craftsmanship but also immense perseverance. Ponomarev arrived in Kiev as soon as anti-government protests began at the end of 2013. He spent months in Independence Square,

eating lard-clotted soup with protesters, mastering their maze of barricades and hidden passageways and sleeping fitfully, either in a tent or in a rented room with the din of protest just outside its window.

When riot police, backed by armored personnel carriers, lunged toward the protest encampment in mid-February, Ponomarev accompanied helmeted protesters as they made a desperate stand against an advancing phalanx of police officers. His shot of a young man holding a homemade wooden shield amid the fire and smoke put the viewer at the heart of the protest's dogged but seemingly doomed struggle for survival.

Two days later, he joined protesters rushing toward police lines on Institutska Street, and then hid behind a tree as a blaze of gunfire halted the attempted breakout. His photograph of three women sheltering from snipers behind a flimsy barricade of rubber tires and garbage caught the terror that gripped Kiev in the worst day of violence since World War II, and that was one trigger for the ouster of President Viktor F. Yanukovich.

Lima spent six months in Ukraine, much of it in Donetsk, traveling around the eastern region as it slipped into chaos. The tragedy visited on this modern and placid land is driven home by his photo of a mother weeping next to the body of her daughter, cut down by an artillery shell. She was found sprawled, as though crucified, on a bloodstained sidewalk next to a pile of bread loaves. Lima had taken shelter from the shelling in a nearby basement, huddling with scores of terrified residents and their dogs.

Not everything was tragic. After her release, Irina Dovgan, the beauty salon manager held captive as a spy, found Lima at his Donetsk hotel and thanked him for "taking a picture that saved my life."

For photographs that captured the breadth and intimate detail of Ukraine's torment, we are proud to nominate Mauricio Lima, Sergey Ponomarev and Uriel Sinai for the Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News Photography.