

Review: Serving God Under Siege

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Serving God Under Siege: How War Transformed a Ukrainian Community

By Valentyn Syniy (William B. Eerdmans)

Valentyn Syniy and his family, his colleagues—everyone he knew in Kherson, Ukraine, had plans. Some of their plans were about what to do if the Russians invaded. Many of their plans were for better days.

On Feb. 24, 2022, better days were set aside.

Tavrisky Christian Institute, where Syniy is president, was readying to celebrate its 25th anniversary later in 2022. Instead, Russian occupying forces commandeered the school on the west bank of the Dnipro River, looting everything from it, destroying the institute's extensive library and severely damaging buildings.

Fortunately, Syniy and others had made plans for such an occasion. Their plans enabled them to relocate themselves and the institute to Ivano-Frankivsk in western Ukraine.

Serving God Under Siege tells the story of their evacuation, relocation and months of learning to live in a new place where everything seemed different—the food, the culture, the customs—even among fellow Christians. Eerdmans has scheduled *Serving God Under Siege* for release Oct. 9.



War consumes ... everything, and Syniy portrays war's consumption with haunting clarity. War consumes patience, reflective thinking, confidence, time, resources. But it also magnifies values and the importance of friendships and partnerships, especially those broad relationships developed over years. Syniy expresses gratitude to the many who lightened the burdens carried by Ukrainian refugees inside and outside Ukraine.

He relays the heartbreak and horror of war with a skillful balance of honesty and propriety. He ranges through the full spectrum of human emotion brought on by war, enabling the engaged reader to feel some of the trauma and tragedy, such as when families and friends go their separate ways, not because they want to, but because an invading army forces decisions.

The trauma isn't just carried in a person's thoughts and feelings. It's also carried in their voices and bodies, in their posture and the way they walk, even down a safe street in western Ukraine, as though trying to make themselves as small a target as possible.

Remarkably, Syniy and his compatriots kept working amid the turmoil of

war. They turned their attention to gathering and delivering humanitarian aid, to strengthening partnerships, and to continuing theological education and pastoral ministry—these latter two out of necessity. They made the best lives they could in new places, in part by celebrating life events that happened there, even in the earliest months of the war.

War memoirs often are written after the truce or surrender. Though Syniy wrote after the Ukrainian forces pushed Russian occupiers out of Kherson, there has been no truce or surrender in this war. The war still is raging, giving Syniy's account the sense of reading unfolding action, because the story he tells hasn't ended yet outside the book.

Serving God Under Siege has much to teach those who want to learn about Ukrainian culture, the psychology of war, putting one's theology and faith into practice, the effects of humanitarian aid and what it means to be a refugee.

*Eric Black, executive director/publisher/editor
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