

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

“Sarah Ashton-Cirillo”

Guests:

Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, Ukraine War Correspondent

Host:

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Cooperation in Europe**

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TIERSKY: Hello and welcome back to Helsinki on the Hill, a series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human rights and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond. I'm your host, Alex Tiersky.

Listeners, as you know, we here at the podcast really try to use this medium to go beyond what you're reading on the front pages of newspapers on the issues that are central to the Helsinki Commission's mandate. And as you also know, since February no issue has been of higher priority to us here than addressing Russia's brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Today's episode is very much in the spirit of our continuing efforts to bring you a variety of voices who are in different ways in the thick of this fight. And today we bring you one unique and, frankly, pretty incredible voice who has been heard loud and clear around the world since the earliest days of the conflict. I couldn't be more thrilled to welcome to the podcast American war correspondent and now member of the Ukrainian armed forces Sarah Ashton-Cirillo.

Sarah, thank you so much for joining us. Welcome.

ASHTON-CIRILLO: Alex, it's an absolute pleasure to be speaking to you. And before we continue, let me give my thanks to Senator Cardin, your chairperson, Representative Cohen, all members of the Helsinki Commission and every member of the United States government, elected and appointed, who have been supporting Ukraine's efforts to fight for liberty and freedom on behalf of all people across the globe during these last eight months.

TIERSKY: Sarah, thank you so much for opening with that. We're going to very much delve into your thoughts on this conflict.

But I'd like, first of all, for – as we typically do in this podcast, I'd like our listeners to get a sense of who you are. And why don't you start with telling us where you're calling from.

ASHTON-CIRILLO: I am calling from Kyiv Oblast, which is the equivalent of a region or, to really drill it down, to a state. So I'm in an area around the country's capital of Kyiv and I'm here for advanced combat medic training before getting deployed to the front.

TIERSKY: Thanks for that.

I wanted to maybe give our listeners my version of an introduction. And I think the best way I could think of doing this is, actually, you're so prolific on Twitter, and if I could give my listeners a little bit of a sense of your Twitter profile they would see two basic headlines. First, a banner, that reads "transgender war correspondent resigns to join Ukrainian armed forces." And then your current status, which you just alluded to, "serving the Crimean Tatar battalion of the Ukrainian armed forces as a combat medic." There is so much to unpack here.

But I want to start with the war correspondent piece. Maybe we can – we can start there, which is presumably what brought you to Ukraine in the first place. Can you tell us how you got involved in covering this war?

ASHTON-CIRILLO: Absolutely. It was not as a war correspondent originally. I had covered the 2015 what I would call the Syrian refugee crisis, even though many nations were involved. And I put out a book, and the book was not up to the standards of what I could have done, and that's really because the book was written pre-transition and, as you mentioned, I am transgender. And so for six-and-a-half years I had wanted a chance to cover the refugee crisis in a more full sense. And when the war began, the full-scale invasion took place and the humanitarian crisis was – found its way to Ukraine. I decided to fly over here for a couple of weeks, cover the refugee crisis here, and the original project was going to be a compare and contrast to the five weeks I spent with the refugees in 2015 going between Turkey and the English Channel. And that's what led me over here.

So it was not as a war correspondent. It was just as a writer covering the refugee crisis.

TIERSKY: Having read a little bit of your backstory, I recall kind of a moment where you were in Poland, which is I think where you were planning on doing a lot of this coverage. Obviously, our listeners will know that Poland has welcomed millions of Ukrainian refugees and that's really where a lot of the – a lot of the action was in terms of the refugee flows. Is that indeed where you started your time looking at this issue?

ASHTON-CIRILLO: I managed to be in Poland for about 13 hours.

TIERSKY: (Laughs.)

ASHTON-CIRILLO: And I had landed in Germany, jumped on a train straightaway from Germany to Przemyśl in Poland, which is on the border with Ukraine. I arrived about 10 p.m., started filming. And the next day – and again, the transgender status that I happen to carry with me played a part in this – I really wasn't sure if Ukraine would welcome me into the country during war as a trans person. And so I was with a couple of other people and they said: Sarah, listen – and people I had just met. I had just met them the night before. And they said: Sarah, we're heading over to Ukraine. If you don't come with us now, you're never going to Ukraine. Like, you're not going to have the – if you don't have the courage to come with us as a group, you're not getting on the train alone into a warzone.

TIERSKY: Yeah.

ASHTON-CIRILLO: And 30 minutes before the train was to depart, I decided to go with them. And, well, Ukraine welcomed me because they're extremely tolerant. They truly believe in the rights and freedoms of all people.

And once I was in the country, I basically said: What now? And I applied for my journalism credentialing through the armed forces of Ukraine.

TIERSKY: Sarah, you are very well known and I think respected for your reporting, but also for the choices of where you are reporting from. Can you talk a little bit about where you essentially based yourself as a reporter and what that represented?

ASHTON-CIRILLO: The question you just asked, really, is the key to my time in Ukraine. There's the three really main cities in Ukraine. We have Lviv in the west; we have Kyiv, of course, the capital; and then we have Kharkiv, which is in the far northeastern corner, abutting Russia, and it's the second-largest city in Ukraine. And so many people were heading to Kyiv. I was in talks to go to Kyiv. And I never made it to Kyiv. After five days in Lviv, I received my credentials from the armed forces and I was in a small – smallish town, Ivano-Frankivsk, and I met a couple of guys who were affiliated with the Ukrainian government. And they said: Do you want to cover the war? And I said: Of course I want to cover the war. They said, OK, well, we're from Kharkiv and we're going back there, and the Russians might be in the city, and most journalists have left. So if you want to come with and cover the war, you have an hour to decide; we'll drive you there.

TIERSKY: (Laughs.)

ASHTON-CIRILLO: And I went with these strange men who were security service members of the Ukrainian armed forces and security services, and I never left Kharkiv for close to seven months. I think I left Kharkiv for 10 days out of those seven months.

And in Kharkiv, I lived through war. The first story I covered was the destruction of the regional administration building –

TIERSKY: Yeah.

ASHTON-CIRILLO: – where 60 people died. I became a representative for a territorial district called Zolochiv, where we had over 80 civilians die in an area of about 15,000. And my life and the city of Kharkiv became intertwined, and I at some point realized it was my hometown. It became the city I lived in. It was where my life was situated. And once I accepted that and once I realized that, then covering the war took on a different tone and a different context compared to most other journalists. I knew I wasn't leaving. Once you realize that, you cover it in a different way because it becomes personal. And people would say to me: Sarah, this is not your war. But when you're waking up and you're understanding that for 70, 80, 90, a hundred days in a row you were hit by rockets; that you go out to lunch and you know that mortars have just come down; you're standing over the intestines of somebody who was riding a bicycle down the street that was just a few hundred meters away from where you were, you know, 30 minutes before; all of that comes into play with the way you cover any story, but specifically something such as the largest land war in Europe since World War II.

TIERSKY: Sarah, you've – I guess I'd say I'm most familiar with some really arresting images and videos that you've pushed out on social media, and Twitter in particular. I can recall your harkening back to your time watching white phosphorus attacks on Kharkiv. But obviously it's a city that has suffered a tremendous amount in this conflict. Can you say a little more about how your experience there – I mean, you really alluded to how your understanding your experience of the war, being based there, has been so different than, for instance, and international correspondent who was in Kyiv, relatively much safer place, or Lviv, which almost can seem, I think, according to Ukrainian people I know, as almost a different universe.

ASHTON-CIRILLO: I did a lot of work with international correspondents, some of the best in the world. Some known, some not so known, but truly all of them heroes by coming to Kharkiv. I worked with the Kharkiv media hub. I did a lot of different work with government-adjacent and government-affiliated organizations in Kharkiv. And one of them was the Kharkiv media hub. And so I watched the journalists coming through. And, again, to use the term compare and contrast, we would talk about work, and I would show them around. And I was almost acting as a local producer for them, taking them to the front lines.

I remember one group I took within about 900 meters of the Russian border. And no one, no one who's non-Ukrainian has spent more time at the Russian border during this conflict than I have. And that was in order to show other journalists and to show humanitarian groups what was really happening. And so as we're standing there, 900 meters away from Russia, and I didn't have my vest on and I didn't have my helmet on. I begged this one group not to wear anything that said "press," I said, because they'll shoot at us. We're targets. It's better for us to try to blend in with the civilians.

And to see their faces in that moment, to understand how different reporting was when you are in the mouth of the beast – and make no mistake; the border with Russia truly is the mouth of the beast – then you had this understanding that you stepped away from journalism in some way and took on this role of active participant. You were no longer an observer. I'd stopped being an observer at some point – probably at the end of April – and became a participant. And that led directly to my enlistment two weeks ago today.

TIERSKY: Sarah, I want to come back to your enlistment, but I want to follow up this point that you just made about the press as targets, because I think that's a really – that's a really important point that you make. Why do you think the press has been targeted by the Russian forces? But then I'd also like to talk to you about your own personal experience, because I know you've personally been a target as well. Tell us about those two elements, if you could.

ASHTON-CIRILLO: Russia hates the truth. And the press, either from the United States or many of the allied nations, are bearers of truth. And that's why, as we look at free press, as we look at, as I talk about, freedom and liberty, we have to look at the fourth estate and what journalism means, be it print journalism, be it broadcast journalism. And so that's abhorrent to the Russian philosophy of keeping people shrouded in darkness, keeping people shrouded in manipulative lies and disinformation.

And if you shoot a journalist, and we've had over 30 journalists die since the conflict began, and more injured, they're not going to have the team backing them that somebody in the military does. They're not going to have the outrage necessarily that if you attack somebody in a village, although hundreds and hundreds of civilians have been killed just in Kharkiv. And so they were, in some sense, a soft target and, in some ways, a target of convenience, due to the fact that if we kill a journalist, we get our message across and we potentially take out other journalists whose editors or publishers are pulling them out of the field.

TIERSKY: And, Sarah, I alluded to the fact that you personally have been the subject of Russian threats, Russian harassment. Do you attribute that to this hostility to journalists, writ large? Or is there something else there?

ASHTON-CIRILLO: Russia always needs to demonize someone in order to try to come across in the eyes of their citizens as doing the right thing. And so I personally – Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, as a journalist at that point, represented everything that was against the Russian propaganda machine. I was from the United States, transgender, I'm a journalist, I'm living 25 miles from Russia. And I'm public in my – in my coverage of their evils, and their terrorism, and their war crimes.

And so when a presumed Russian agent or propagandist went missing, the Russians jumped on this at the very highest levels. Maria Zakharova, who's the notorious spokeswoman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, put out a statement stating that I was everything that was wrong with the West. And I was the epitome of what people found in queers and Western journalists. And all I did was run around Kharkiv taking pictures with gangsters. And I was nothing more than a transgender from Las Vegas.

And this was pushed out on – the links to this statement was pushed out in the Russian embassy's site in the United States, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs site on Telegram, which is widely read social media site in Eastern Europe and Russia. And ultimately got picked up by the Twitterverse, where a deluge of hate rained down upon me. Rape threats, death threats. And actually, I'm currently suing Twitter right now for not enforcing their terms of service. We filed a lawsuit against them because the amount of death threats that came in against me that should have violated their terms of service.

And ultimately, that was the turning point for me. After Zakharova attacked me, it was one of the few times that I really cried. And I said I thought about going home. And that was April 21st, 2022. And the people I was with, it was one of the same security officers that had brought me to Kharkiv – said: What are you crying for? You've been under shelling. You've watched mortar attacks. We've taken you around some of the most horrific bombings of this war. What's wrong? I said, well, the Russians are making fun of me. They're saying terrible things. They're saying I created, you know, this alliance between trans people and – I'm not going to say the word – but this terrible alliance that I'm leading.

The eyes of all of these guys in the room, these tough guys who had been fighting since 2014, lit up. This is the most amazing thing. You know, you've gotten under their skin. And the very next day, they trotted me out, in a sense, to become even more public and more visible. And they wanted me to just push it and push it. And I'm so glad I trusted them because ultimately only by shining a light on the evil lies of the Russian Federation are we able to expose them for truly being the cowardly, weak, terrorists and war criminals that they are.

TIERSKY: Sarah, I want to stay with this theme of the truth that you have seen and brought to the world. I think our listeners maybe who aren't very familiar with your reporting would love to hear – need to hear, I think, some of what you saw. I know better than to ask you

to kind of summarize months' worth of just extraordinary reporting, but could you give them a sense of the truth of what you experienced and reported on during your time in Kharkiv?

ASHTON-CIRILLO: Couple of stories stick out. One was with the International Red Cross. In my position as the outreach coordinator for the Zolochiv territorial district, an area that had been hard hit, only seven miles from Russia, it's located. I coordinated with an International Committee for Red Cross to deliver in July to the town of Zolochiv. We went up there. They did a very large delivery. As soon as the last box came out, the Grad rockets started to be fired at us.

And what the world needed to understand from that moment was that by bringing humanitarian aid to hard-hit areas, the Russians punished us.

That afternoon on what should have been a great day, were food was being delivered by the ICRC, ten Grad rockets hit our village. A woman lost her leg. I'm huddled with the mayor in a shelter, one of the few times we went into the shelter. And so that was one time that stuck out. The terrorism, the blatant act of thumbing their nose at even what had been a respected organization. The Russians would stop at nothing.

And then, I've talked about this story several times, I've covered death. I've seen so much death. So much senseless death. I've seen the death of many civilians. I've seen dead Russians. But on this particular day, a woman had been on a bicycle. Forty-two years old. Mother. And when I got to the scene, shortly after the attack, her head was in one area – her head was in one area, her limbs were in another area, the bicycle was in a third area, and her intestines were in front of me.

And you understand in that moment, how are we different from the Russians? How are those of us fighting on the side of what is good and right and fair and just different than the Russians? And that's the understanding that in that moment I had to humanize a person whose remains in front of me were their intestine. Whereas the Russians were just indiscriminately firing mortars to the point that it hit a woman going down the street on a bicycle.

And those two moments stick out. When you talked about the white phosphorous/thermite that came down. I had made the choice to live in, you know, certain areas of Kharkiv. One area called North Saltivka, which was the hardest hit of the war. So for me, I almost became numb to certain experiences. But those two experiences I've just mentioned will forever stay with me.

TIERSKY: Sarah, you've said that through your experience of these types of moments you ceased being an observer and you became a participant. And I'd like to spend some time talking about becoming a participant because, of course, even just looking at your continued communication that you're doing from Ukraine via social media, it's always accompanied by, whether it's very positive messages about supporting Ukraine or sometimes some rather unsavory phrases about the Russian leadership that I won't repeat here. Tell me about becoming – that moment you decided: I came here for – to research a book on refugees. I've become a war correspondent. I have lived this war. And now I'm a participant. And there is one side that

is right. There is one side that is wrong. And not only that, but the war is mine and I need to enlist. So talk to us about that moment, please.

ASHTON-CIRILLO: Several steps. The first, when did I decide to be on one side? That was a week after I got here. It was March 11th, I believe, somebody goes into my Twitter timeline or something. And I wrote that if you read – and I'll paraphrase myself – if you read my reporting and it seems like it's one sided that's because it is. I'm only reporting the truth, and the truth is only coming from the Ukrainian side.

I knew that because I spent months in the Baltics writing a novel in 2017. And spending time in Latvia, spending time in Estonia made me understand just how evil Russia was during the 1930s, during the 1940s, when they were committing filtration, when they were engaging in genocide. And what they were doing when I would encounter them – and this is pre-transition. So I should have been getting some respect just out of the whole gender situation. The Russians treated no one with any respect.

And for me, I was very neutral about Ukraine before I arrived. But I absolutely had a deep-held disdain for Russia, almost to a point of hatred, not to mention what they had already begun to engage in with the LGBT community. And so once Ukraine let me into the country, and now that I'm seeing, one week into being in Ukraine, I've not had any issues. They gave me a press pass and they let me into their country, OK. Great. And so I told my audience: It's going to be focused on true reporting.

Then the next part was when did I start to really kind of get a mouth on me? (Laughter.) I got a mouth on me when I understood that you couldn't deal with the Russians in a rational way. You had to be irrational to break through the noise and to break through their lies. And once I accepted that, and once I accepted the fact that I was no longer a long-form, serious investigative analytical journalist from Nevada, who had been an analyst my entire life, and that I was this bomb-throwing commentator living on the Russian border – once I got past the notion that I began to inhabit a different role in the media sphere, it became easy.

Become bombastic, throw out some terms, allow myself not to be affected by their troll farms and their bot factories, and then all of a sudden you have a recipe where your message is getting out because the Russians are so stupid they're amplifying the message that's against them.

TIERSKY: Sarah, I want to come back to the – your decision to enlist, specifically, because that really is – you know, you've talked about going from being a war correspondent to being a kind of rhetorical bomb thrower. But when you enlist in the armed forces it's something else altogether, particularly as an American citizen.

Tell us about that decision and tell us about what that looks like for you as an American citizen, as a trans woman. What does enlisting look like for you?

ASHTON-CIRILLO: I first approached the Ukrainian government about enlisting in the army in early July when I had begun to see things like thermite come down right outside of my

apartment, when I was spending so much time at the border, and when I understood that I was not being affected by the war in the same way many others were being affected by the war, many – when I say many, probably five or six times rockets have come within a hundred meters of me, 150 meters of me, twice when I was doing live broadcasts rockets hit – and for whatever reason, whether it's some sort of PTSD that had set in already, it was just not affecting me probably the way it would have affected most others.

And so I said to myself, wow, let me take advantage of the fact that I'm not bothered by being in a war zone. Let me take advantage of the fact that I've now spent four, five months here and maybe I'll do some press work for them or who knows what.

So I approached them, and I don't think they took me seriously about wanting to be in the military. It came up again in the middle of August and at that point they were understanding how serious I was and some of the army representatives were very serious as well.

I had an interview scheduled, and a couple of days later I got word that the counter offensive was going to happen. So the counter offensive to retake Kharkiv Oblast and to push the Russians out – I had advance notice of that and, of course, my interview was postponed because we had victories to win on the battlefield.

Then throughout the month of September we continued in talks. I was covering the liberation of Kharkiv. I went down to the Donbas. I was in a city called Bakhmut, basically, pushing back on Russian propaganda that they had won control of the city.

And while I was there I received a call and I said – it said, OK, Sarah, you're serious about wanting to join. Would you be willing to go to the front?

And I paused, and I said, let me sleep on it, and I woke up the next day and I said, yeah, I want to fight in this war. I don't care my positioning.

They said, come to Kyiv. I had never been to Kyiv. I had never left Kharkiv to go to Kyiv. I had never been in the capital. First time I come to the capital it was to, possibly, enlist. While I was there preparing to enlist the rocket attacks struck Kyiv.

TIERSKY: Yeah.

ASHTON-CIRILLO: I cover the story. It becomes a big deal the way I covered the story. President Zelensky puts it on Instagram. My coverage – it was on every television station here, and two days later after what some would argue was the height of my journalism because of my coverage of this particular deadly rocket strike that caught the attention of people around the world, I enlisted in the Ukrainian army as a combat medic.

And a lot of people who knew me, or know me, asked the question, are you really a combat medic, Sarah, or is this just, you know, a nice title they're giving you so you can just sit on Twitter all day doing your thing? (Laughter.)

You know, this is real, and I joined a unit that was very close to my heart. I was given an option to interview with a couple of local commanders of different units, and the Crimean Tatar unit was being reformed. And I go in and I meet with our great commander, and I was accompanied by somebody from the armed forces of Ukraine's General Staff and we go in, and we're talking about being trans among what is a unit that has a significant Muslim population in it.

TIERSKY: Right.

ASHTON-CIRILLO: We all agreed this is Ukraine. We don't look at gender. We don't look at religion. We're not an ethnic state. We're not a state based off of religion.

We are a nation. We're fighting. And when I say we, I'm proud to be a United States citizen but I'm also serving in the armed forces of Ukraine. So I'm serving in a state that is focused on freedom and liberty and focused on what a person can do to help bring about that freedom and liberty.

So the commander said, go outside right now. Take a medic test. I want to see if you actually can possibly do this.

I went out with the chief sergeant. They ran me through some exercises. Came back. Sergeant recommended me to the commander, and the next day I was taking my physical and I deployed with them.

We deployed as a unit maybe about five days ago. But I'm back in this area for my combat medic training – the advanced courses. And then go to the front.

TIERSKY: Sarah, I do want to give you a chance to talk about this particular unit, the Crimean Tatars, and what they represent. Crimea, obviously, has been illegally occupied by the Russians since 2014 and the Tatars are – well, why don't I let you talk about the Crimean Tatar unit, please?

ASHTON-CIRILLO: So, the Crimean Tatars have been persecuted under genocidal actions by the Russians for hundreds of years. In 1944, the genocide reached this apex where they got removed from Crimea. They were murdered in cold blood. Very similar story to what Russians have done throughout other areas.

But the Crimean Tatars never gave up. And so at the end of the Soviet times they got some brief recognition and then they were part of Ukraine, proudly.

In 2014 when Russia came in this unit I'm with put up a fierce resistance as a volunteer battalion fighting on behalf of the Ukrainian armed forces.

Later on, they disbanded. Our commander was sentenced by a Russian kangaroo court in Crimea to an almost 20-year jail term for sabotage, although he's not there because no one recognizes such ridiculous court sentences and prosecution.

And my particular battalion was named by the Russian Federation as a terrorist organization. But we work under the guidance and as part of the Ukrainian army. We were reformed, and the ultimate goal is the same goal that everyone from President Zelensky to the average person working in Lviv has across the country and that is that this war ends in total victory with the liberation of Crimea and a return to the 1991 borders, and this can happen sooner rather than later if the United States and the great allies around the world are able to continue to provide us with the weapons that are needed to end this war as soon as possible, and it will end with Crimea back in the hands of Ukraine.

TIERSKY: Sarah, I'm struck by the incredible confluence of your experience and who you are, who you've become, with the mission of this unit that you are now joining for deployment to the front. It's really extraordinary.

We're nearing the end of our time together. But I want to thank you so much for sharing your experience with us. I wanted to give you the opportunity to offer any additional thoughts about what you want our listeners to know about Ukraine, about your experience there, and about this war.

ASHTON-CIRILLO: I would like to invite anyone who's listening, be it an elected official, be it somebody from a think tank, or be it a volunteer who wants to come and see what's happening, come say hello to Ukraine. Come say hello to Kharkiv. Come say hello to Kyiv, and have them understand and visit and see why this great country in the middle of Europe has been leading the fight for freedom and liberty.

And whoever wants to visit, see how great Ukraine is and where the tax dollars that the United States people are spending are going.

No investment has been greater with a better return on investment than the tax dollars that are being sent from the United States to Ukraine – and all of us here are grateful for it – in order to fight at the forefront of freedom and liberty, and that's what I want people to understand.

This war is not a regional conflict. This war is the war to stop further world wars in the 21st century, and we're doing it thanks to an incredible alliance between the United States, Ukraine, the Baltic nations, and so many other countries, including Canada and England, and we look forward to ending Putin's reign of terror and his blatant war crimes sooner rather than later.

Get us the weapons, get them to us now, and then come and say hello, Kharkiv, hello, Ukraine.

TIERSKY: Sarah, those are extraordinary words to end on and, of course, you mentioned the ingredients of Ukraine's success without mentioning your own contributions and those of other volunteers such as yourself.

We're so grateful for your extraordinary service and for your contributions to bring you the realities of this war to the outside world and to this podcast as well.

Listeners, you can find Sarah Ashton-Cirillo at her Twitter handle, @SarahAshtonLV. She's an extremely strongly recommended follow for me. Also, be sure to check out her profiles in Forbes and the Washington Examiner.

Sarah, thank you. Best of luck to you as you finalize your training and as you deploy to the front.

ASHTON-CIRILLO: Alex, it's been a true pleasure, and thank you for everything that you're doing with the Helsinki Commission and that everyone's doing in the United States on behalf of freedom and liberty.

TIERSKY: Well, with that, listeners, we've come to the end of another episode of Helsinki on the Hill. Thanks again for joining us. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky, signing off.

(END)