

**TESTIMONY OF MARK SERGEEV
UKRAINIAN PASTOR AND WITNESS TO WAR CRIMES
BEFORE THE US HELSINKI COMMISSION
JULY 24, 2024**

It is a great honor for me to speak to the Helsinki Commission. The work of the Commission is well known in Ukraine and I am grateful for the work the Commission does on behalf of Ukrainians fighting for their freedom.

Last week I was on the frontline in Chasiv Yar in my role as a chaplain for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. These battles are horrible, and the men and women fighting for Ukraine need spiritual guidance and emotional care, and I am proud to guide them and care for them.

Every Ukrainian soldier at the front is thankful for American weapons. They fire Javelins all day and fall asleep to the sound of HIMARS firing at Russian positions. The soldiers sleep well.

The same Iranian drones that the Russians use to attack Kyiv also attack Israel. And it is American technology that keeps us both safe.

My journey from the Ukrainian front to speak to you today began four generations ago. My great-grandparents were evangelical Christians who were killed by Stalin for being Christians. My grandparents and parents hid their faith from the Soviet authorities in fear for their lives.

I was born into a free Ukraine where we could worship as we please. I grew up in Melitopol, a small city on the Azov sea known as the gates to Crimea. My father was the senior pastor at Melitopol Christian Church, the largest in our city. I was the youth pastor and worship leader. American visitors often compared us to Joel Osteen's Lakewood

Church in Houston. We ministered to 1500 people every week. Four hundred children attended Sunday school. We were the spiritual home to hundreds of Ukrainian families.

Before the war, we all aspired to the Ukrainian dream which is not so different from the American dream. Every year our country got better as we threw off the corrupt Russian influences through peaceful means.

But Putin doesn't respond to peaceful means.

On February 24, 2022 Russian tanks rolled into my city. I watched them from the window of our church.

Two weeks later the Russians came to my home.

Soldiers pulled me out of my house in my underwear and threw me face first on the ground. My nine year old son woke up to a Russian AK-47 in his face.

Russians are making a weapon out of religion, and they tried to make my father use his role as a spiritual leader in our community to praise their invasion of our city. They told him he had 72 hours to record a video saying that now we are all Russians and part of Russia. They wanted him to give them a list of business people in Melitopol who supported our church.

They told him that every day he waited, they would cut one of his fingers.

Through the fog of war and a miracle of God, they did not come back with their knives.

But they took our church from us. A forty foot cross clearly showed us to be a Protestant church. The Russians cut down the cross and replaced it with a Russian flag. Our massive auditorium, once used to praise God, is now used for Russian military concerts and to celebrate Russian holidays.

We were lucky to escape. Our journey to freedom involved a 35 mile drive through a dozen Russian checkpoints that took all day.

Before the war, we had 40 Evangelical churches in Melitopol. Today there are none. This is a common story across occupied Ukraine. The only churches left are those who are loyal to Moscow rather than God.

My parents lived through the Soviet Union. They say the conditions today in Russian occupied Ukraine are worse for believers than they were in Soviet times.

I encourage the Commission to go to RussiaTorturesChristians.org where they can see video of our church before the war, security camera video of the Russians breaking into our church in the dead of night and Russian TV footage of the Melitopol Christian Church being used for Russian patriotic ceremonies.

I will close with the story of my friend Lena. After the Russians shut down all the churches in our city, believers began to worship underground in small groups, much like the early Christian church.

Lena was a small group leader and a rock of stability in our shattered church community.

Two months ago, the Russian security services came to her home and arrested her for her faith, for tending to the spiritual needs of believers, for being an evangelical Christian.

Lena is still in a Russian prison in occupied Donetsk region.

Last night I was fortunate to have a conversation with an American Christian leader. He told me of his concerns about the Ukrainian government persecuting Christians.

Fortunately, I was able to help him understand the truth, that he was hearing Russian propaganda and the real truth is that Russia is torturing, oppressing and sometimes murdering Ukrainian Christians in my city and across occupied Ukraine simply for being Christians.

I am only one voice. And the voices against mine are powerful. I am grateful to the Commission for giving my voice power and helping Americans and the world know the truth of Russia's horrible oppression of Ukrainian believers.