

UDC 94(477.72)-028.16:[355.01:623.746-519]
DOI <https://doi.org/10.32999/ksu2786-5118/2026-55-7>

THE IMAGE OF DRONES AS A SYMBOL OF RUSSIA'S ONGOING TERROR IN KHERSON THROUGH THE LENS OF ORAL HISTORY

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The purpose of this article is to reconstruct the image of drones as one of the key symbols of Russia's ongoing terror against the civilian population of Kherson during the post-occupation period, based on oral history materials. The study aims to identify the characteristics of individual and collective perceptions of unmanned aerial vehicles in the minds of the city's residents, analyze their place within everyday wartime experience, and identify the main conceptual images through which the civilian population interprets the constant threat of aerial attacks by Russian forces. Particular attention is paid to the transformation of the perception of drones from a technical means of warfare to a symbol of total control, constant danger, technological exhaustion, and the destruction of familiar patterns of everyday life. **The study's methodology** draws on the principles of oral history, using semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary method for documenting the individual experiences of war eyewitnesses. The source base consists of interviews with residents of Kherson, recorded during the post-occupation period from December 2025 to June 2026. The analysis employed methods of oral history interpretation, historical-comparative, historical-anthropological, and historical-psychological methods, which enabled a comprehensive analysis of the empirical material, the identification of recurring semantic patterns, and the reconstruction of the collective image of drones in the everyday consciousness of the civilian population. **The article argues** that the image of the drone in the respondents' accounts goes far beyond its perception as a type of modern weaponry. Respondents attest to the formation of a complex, multi-layered system of perceptions, within which the drone emerges as a mechanism of constant aerial surveillance, a means of personalizing violence, an instrument of selective persecution of the civilian population, and a factor in the transformation of everyday practices. Central to the consciousness of most respondents is the image of the drone as a "hunter" carrying out the practice of so-called "human safaris"; however, the analysis revealed that this image is only one component of a much broader system of perceptions regarding Russian terror. Alongside this image, the drone emerges in respondents' narratives as a symbol of modern warfare, a source of fear and psychological pressure, an instrument of surveillance and control, a distinctive everyday sound signalling danger, and a marker of constant exhaustion and tension. **The conclusions** argue that the image of the drone in the collective memory of residents of post-occupation Kherson has become one of the most important symbols of modern Russian terror, embodying the experience of constant danger.

Keywords: oral history, Kherson, drone, terror, everyday life, war, historical memory.

ОБРАЗ ДРОНОВ ЯК СИМВОЛУ БЕЗПЕРЕРВНОГО РОСІЙСЬКОГО ТЕРОРУ ХЕРСОНА КРІЗЬ ПРИЗМУ УСНОЇ ІСТОРІЇ

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Метою статті є реконструкція образу дронів як одного з ключових символів безперервного російського терору цивільного населення Херсона у післявоєнний період на основі матеріалів усної історії. Дослідження спрямоване на виявлення особливостей індивідуальних і колективних уявлень про безпілотні літальні апарати у свідомості мешканців міста, аналіз їхнього місця у структурі повсякденного досвіду війни та визначення основних смислових образів, через які цивільне населення інтерпретує постійну загрозу російського повітряного насильства. Особлива увага приділена трансформації сприйняття дронів від технічного засобу ведення бойових дій до символу тотального контролю, постійної небезпеки, технологічного виснаження та руйнування звичних моделей повсякденного життя. Методологічну основу дослідження становлять принципи усної історії,



що базуються на використанні напівструктурованого глибинного інтерв'ю як основного способу фіксації індивідуального досвіду очевидців війни. Джерельну базу формують інтерв'ю з мешканцями Херсона, записані у післякупаційний період з грудня 2025 р. до червня 2026 р. У процесі аналізу застосовано методи усної історичної інтерпретації, історико-порівняльний, історико-антропологічний, історико-психологічний методи, що дозволили здійснити комплексний аналіз емпіричного матеріалу, простежити повторюваність окремих смислових конструкцій та реконструювати колективний образ дрона у повсякденній свідомості цивільного населення. У статті доводиться, що образ дрона у розповіді респондентів виходить далеко за межі його сприйняття як одного з видів сучасного озброєння. Респонденти засвідчують формування складної багаторівневої системи уявлень, у межах якої дрон постає як механізм постійного повітряного контролю, інструмент персоналізації насильства, засіб вибіркового переслідування цивільного населення, фактор трансформації повсякденних практик. Центральне місце у свідомості більшості опитаних посідає образ дрона як «мисливця», що реалізує практику так званого «сафарі на людей». Однак, проведений аналіз показав, що цей образ є лише одним із компонентів значно ширшої системи сприйняття російського терору. Поряд із ним виокремлюються образи дрона як символ сучасної війни, небезпеки, страху, персоналізованого мисливця, психологічного тиску, тригерний звук, визначальник повсякденності, «влади», інструменту виснаження, створення напруженості. У висновках обґрунтовується, що образ дрона у колективній пам'яті мешканців післякупаційного Херсона перетворився на один із найважливіших символів сучасного російського терору, який концентрує у собі досвід безперервної небезпеки.

Ключові слова: усна історія, Херсон, дрон, терор, повсякденність, війна, історична пам'ять.

1. Introduction

The relevance of this study stems from the need for a comprehensive understanding of the transformation of everyday life for Ukraine's civilian population in the context of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, which has shaped a new historical experience of living under a constant aerial threat – a phenomenon requiring academic research based on authentic oral history sources. Most contemporary studies focus on the military-technical, security, military-political or international legal aspects of the use of unmanned aerial vehicles. Their perception by the civilian population as a symbol of everyday Russian terror has not yet been the subject of an independent historical analysis. Oral history, in particular, makes it possible to reconstruct the mechanisms behind the formation of collective perceptions, the transformation of spatial and behavioural practices, changes in patterns of everyday life, and the process by which the drone acquires symbolic meaning in residents' minds. Kherson holds particular academic value: following its de-occupation, the city became a site of prolonged, systematic drone terror carried out by Russian forces against the civilian population.

In these circumstances, the image of the drone takes on a historical significance of its own, embodying notions of constant aerial surveillance, personalised violence, uncertainty, the erosion of private space and the transformation of everyday life. It is for this reason that the study of the image of the drone through the prism of oral history establishes a new field of historical research, whilst also creating a new body of sources for investigating the mechanisms of Russian terror against the civilian population and its reflection in historical memory.

The historiography of this field is still taking shape, but though it already includes several significant contributions. For example, the article by O. Muraviov, I. Dovbysh, R. Halagan, G. Bohdan and A. Momot presents a comprehensive analysis of current trends in the development of unmanned aerial vehicles from the perspective of the technical sciences. The authors focus primarily on the improvement of navigation

systems, the application of artificial intelligence, computer vision, multispectral scanning, LIDAR and swarm interaction algorithms, and on increasing the autonomy of unmanned platforms. Considerable attention is paid to promising areas of UAV application in the military sector, agriculture, cartography, territorial monitoring and other fields, whilst the main technological challenges associated with the creation of fully autonomous unmanned systems are also outlined. At the same time, the study reflects a trend characteristic of contemporary historiography, which tends to view drones primarily as objects of technical refinement and tools for performing specialised functions, whilst neglecting their social, anthropological and historical dimensions. The authors do not address the impact of the systematic use of unmanned aerial vehicles on the daily lives of civilians, which highlights one of the significant gaps in current research [Muraviov, Dovbysh, Halagan, Bohdan, Momot, 2023: 199–205].

The research by Yu. Ivanenko, O. Liashenko and T. Filimonchuk, which analyses methods of UAV control, plays an important role in the study of modern unmanned aerial vehicles. The authors have systematised the main approaches to the design of control systems for unmanned platforms, examined the architecture of their operation, the characteristics of autonomous, navigational and automatic control systems, and outlined the prospects for the development of intelligent flight control algorithms. Considerable attention is paid to mathematical models, the principles of designing on-board navigation systems, the use of satellite technologies, automatic decision-making tools and elements of artificial intelligence, which ensure the increasing autonomy of unmanned aerial vehicles. Overall, the research focuses entirely on the engineering and technical aspects of UAV operation, treating them as complex technical systems and objects of automatic control [Ivanenko, Liashenko, Filimonchuk, 2023: 26–30].

V. Samoulenko's article examines the specific features of deploying autonomous unmanned systems, equipped with optoelectronic navigation systems, for the performance of tasks by units of the National Guard

of Ukraine in modern combat conditions. The author focuses primarily on the technical aspects of enhancing UAV autonomy, the issue of their resilience to electronic warfare measures, the specifics of their operation in dense urban environments, and the prospects for using opto-electronic navigation as an alternative to satellite positioning systems. A significant part of the study is devoted to analysing the tactical advantages of autonomous unmanned systems for conducting reconnaissance, monitoring and providing intelligence support for military operations, as well as summarising the experience of their use in modern armed conflicts. At the same time, the work considers drones exclusively as a component of military-technical infrastructure and a tool for enhancing the effectiveness of combat operations, whilst disregarding their impact on the civilian population [Samoulenko, 2023: 83–91].

A significant contribution to the development of the theoretical foundations for research into unmanned aviation was made in an article by S. Mosov, V. Khyzhniak, A. Lytovchenko and D. Yadchenko, which focuses on the classification, functions and tasks of unmanned aviation in the field of civil protection in Ukraine. The authors carried out a comprehensive analysis of existing approaches to the classification of unmanned aerial vehicles, proposed adapting the current regulatory classification to the needs of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine, and systematised the main functions of UAVs in the field of civil protection, in particular monitoring, reconnaissance, search and rescue operations, firefighting, cargo transport, communication relay and the management of the consequences of emergencies. The scientific value of the study lies in its attempt to formulate a comprehensive concept for the use of unmanned aviation outside the military sphere and to substantiate the regulatory and methodological foundations for its operation within the civil protection system. At the same time, the authors consider UAVs exclusively as a technological tool for supporting the activities of rescue services [Mosov, Khyzhniak, Lytovchenko, Yadchenko, 2021: 54–68].

Studies focusing on the application of oral history methodology to document the Russian-Ukrainian war and preserve local historical memory occupy an important place in contemporary historiography. First and foremost, it is worth noting the work of H.M. Mykhailenko, which focuses on preserving the memory of Kherson's fallen soldiers as a factor in the formation of local identity. The researcher convincingly demonstrates that oral history serves as an effective tool for recording individual testimonies, reconstructing local historical experience and establishing a source base for preserving collective memory of the contemporary war. The author substantiates the significance of oral history interviews as a mechanism for documenting personal experiences, local practices of remembrance and the creation of long-term archives of testimonies, which enable future historical

reconstruction of events. Overall, it should be noted that the use of oral history in research into the contemporary history of Kherson has already become a distinct field of academic study, with the greatest intensity of such research focusing specifically on documenting the period of the city's occupation in 2022 [Mykhailenko, 2025: 39–52].

A distinct strand of contemporary historiography is represented by works devoted to the public perception of the Kherson region in the context of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war. In this context, the study by S.K. Kostyuchkov deserves attention; he analysed the process of shaping the territory's political brand through the mass media, using Kherson and Chornobaivka as examples. The author examines the mechanisms for constructing a contemporary symbolic image of the region in the information space, demonstrating how the events of the war, civil resistance and media representation are shaping the new political identity of the Kherson region and its perception within Ukrainian and international public discourse. This work is important for understanding the processes of symbolisation in modern warfare; however, the main focus is on the political-communicative and media dimensions of regional brand formation [Kostyuchkov, 2023: 101–107].

An analysis of the scholarly literature shows that contemporary historiography is characterised by intensive research into the technical characteristics of unmanned aerial vehicles, the improvement of their control systems, the expansion of their functional capabilities, the specifics of their combat use, regulatory frameworks, and their application in the fields of civil protection and infrastructure monitoring. At the same time, the vast majority of existing works treat the drone as a technological or military-applied tool, neglecting its historical-anthropological and socio-cultural dimensions. The processes by which the image of the drone is formed in the minds of the civilian population, the transformation of everyday practices under the influence of an immediate aerial threat, the mechanisms by which UAVs are symbolised as instruments of Russian terror, and their place within the structure of individual and collective memory remain under-researched. There is a lack of comprehensive historical studies, based on oral history materials, which would enable the reconstruction of how drone terror is perceived by direct eyewitnesses and analyse it as a distinct phenomenon of everyday experience in modern warfare. This gap in the scholarship defines the focus of the present study.

The aim of this article is to reconstruct the image of drones as one of the key symbols of Russia's ongoing terror against the civilian population of Kherson during the post-occupation period, based on oral history sources. The study aims to identify the characteristics of individual and collective perceptions of unmanned aerial vehicles in the minds of the city's

residents, analyse their place within the structure of everyday wartime experience, and identify the key conceptual images through which the civilian population interprets the constant threat of Russian aerial violence. Particular attention is paid to the transformation of the perception of drones from a technical means of warfare to a symbol of total control, constant danger, technological and psychological exhaustion, and the disruption of familiar patterns of everyday life.

The methodological basis of the study is oral history, which enables the documentation and interpretation of eyewitnesses' individual experiences of historical events.

Oral history has long occupied an important place within historical scholarship and has been successfully applied to the study of various historical periods and social transformations. It has become particularly widespread in the study of the 1932–1933 Holodomor, the events of the Second World War, the Holocaust, the war in Afghanistan, the Orange Revolution, the Revolution of Dignity, and the current Russian–Ukrainian war, primarily in the context of documenting the experiences of ATO/OOS veterans and the civilian population. Alongside its development, oral history has built a solid methodological framework. For example, H. Hrinchenko substantiated the crucial importance of the interconnection between memory, thought and individual experience in oral history research, treating the oral history interview as an independent social fact [Hrinchenko, 2012]. The fundamental theoretical and methodological foundations of oral history and the specific features of using interviews as a historical source were also developed in the works of L. Ballard [Ballard, 2007].

T. Tkhorzhevskaya made a significant contribution to the development of the Ukrainian school of oral history with her work on the urbanisation of Odesa in the 1950s–1980s, in which the author analysed the formation of the discourse of the ‘other’ within the processes of urban modernisation [Tkhorzhevskaya, 2022]. The theoretical work of earlier scholars convincingly demonstrates that oral history is one of the most effective tools for reconstructing historical memory, everyday experience and socio-cultural transformations, particularly in cases where official documentary sources do not allow for a full reconstruction of the individual dimension of historical events. This is why oral-history methodology is particularly well suited to researching the contemporary experiences of the civilian population of Kherson, who continue to live under conditions of unceasing Russian drone terror.

The research is based on the principles of voluntary participation by respondents, informed consent, confidentiality and the psychological safety of interviewees. The field research methodology involves the use of semi-structured interviews, combining the structure of a questionnaire with the opportunity for respondents to freely develop their own narratives

and provide as complete a reconstruction of their life experiences as possible. To this end, a questionnaire was developed, comprising nine thematic sections and containing 61 questions. The first section is devoted to recording the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and carrying out all necessary procedures for obtaining informed consent. Respondents were given the option of either using their real name or remaining anonymous. All confidential responses are marked ‘pseudonym’. The second section concerns the reconstruction of everyday life for the population of Kherson amidst constant artillery shelling and drone attacks. The third section focuses on documenting everyday practices developed in conditions of constant danger. The fourth section is devoted to the psychological aspects of experiencing war, the recording of emotional states, traumatic experiences and mechanisms of psychological adaptation. The fifth section covers an assessment of the activities of state authorities and local government. The sixth section focuses on researching the transformation of the city's social environment, practices of mutual aid and the role of voluntary work. The seventh section is reflective in nature and provides respondents with the opportunity to reflect independently on their experiences of the war. The eighth section has been specifically designed to document personal experiences of Russian drone attacks against the civilian population. The final, ninth section provides a space for free reflection on the respondent's future plans and those of Kherson.

At the time of writing, 37 in-depth oral history interviews, ranging in length from 30 minutes to 2.5 hours, had been conducted. The respondents included 21 women and 16 men aged between 18 and 74. The sample aimed for maximum social and geographical representativeness, which made it possible to include representatives of various age, occupational and social groups living in all administrative districts of Kherson. All interviews were recorded using digital recording equipment. The audio recordings were transcribed, organised and catalogued in an electronic archive, whilst preserving the respondents' own style of expression. Particular attention was paid to recording the empirical material as fully as possible, including detailed recollections, emotional reactions and reflective interpretations of their experiences. This approach reflects the unique value of the resulting body of sources, which documents the testimonies of people who continue to live under conditions of systematic drone terror. This is what gives the resulting oral history materials their exceptional value as a source for researching the everyday reality of the current Russian-Ukrainian war, the mechanisms by which the civilian population adapts to conditions of continuous violence, and the processes of forming a collective memory of the experiences endured.

The interviews were analysed using thematic coding, the identification of recurring semantic patterns,

a comparative analysis of individual narratives, and the reconstruction of key imagery characterising the civilian population's perception of drone terror.

2. The image of the drone as the primary symbol of ongoing Russian terror in the testimonies of Kherson residents

An analysis of oral history testimonies shows that, in the post-occupation period, the drone became one of the central and primary symbols of Russian terror against the city's civilian population. The unmanned aerial vehicle emerged as a cohesive symbol of the constant presence of war, personalised violence, total aerial control and a profound transformation of everyday life. Whilst in the respondents' accounts artillery shelling is predominantly perceived as an extremely destructive but phased form of violence, with distinct moments of "launch", "arrival", "explosion" and consequences, the drone is described primarily as a prolonged, mobile, unpredictable and psychologically personalised threat. According to I. Kravchenko, "*artillery is now a wave and a strike*", whereas "*drones are anticipation*"¹. These formulations highlight a fundamental difference between two forms of wartime experience: artillery is associated with the moment of physical impact, whilst a drone is associated with a protracted state of tense anticipation of a possible attack. This duration of waiting, the inability to pinpoint the exact moment of danger, and the sense that the attack might be directed at a specific individual make the image of drones particularly significant in the respondents' memories.

In the testimonies of Kherson residents, the drone threat was described in interviews with varying degrees of emotional intensity; however, the overall logic of perception remained the same: the drone has taken on the characteristics of an independent symbol of a terrorist-ridden everyday life. Some respondents use the term "*human safari*" to explain the image of the drone and drone-based terror. For example, according to V. Melikhova's account, "*it all started around 2025 – the safari. An active one*", and she goes on to clarify explicitly, "*it's a kind of safari, a hunt for people*". In this example, the image of the drone takes on its most radical meaning, when it is interpreted as an instrument for the targeted persecution of civilians. Overall, in some of the accounts, the drone emerges as a structural factor in a new reality, replacing the sensory, spatial, behavioural and psychological mechanisms of adaptation employed by civilians.

Part of this image is the notion of the drone as a hunter, drawing in part on the concept of a "*human safari*". It should be noted, however, that this model is present to varying degrees of explicitness. For example,

in V. Melikhova's narrative, this idea is formulated as clearly and conceptually as possible: "*safari*", "*hunting humans*". In T. Cherkashyna's work, this concept is not articulated as a "*safari*", yet the descriptive logic fully corresponds to this concept: "*the drone flies and ... it searches for a target. A car, a person, a group of people, a house or a courtyard where there is someone alive*". In O. Chupikova's account, the image of a "*safari*" takes on a theoretical framework, because, in addition to clearly articulating the term "*safari*", she also discusses the source of this image – the film by the American journalist Zarina Zabryski, "*Kherson. Human safari*": "I myself attended one of the premieres. Zarina Zabryski presented her film "*Kherson. Human safari*". We watched this film in the basement, and I know that, apart from the fact that this film was presented and screened, there are also some performances and events taking place there"².

To understand this, it is important to note that the term 'human safari' itself is not of local origin. It was introduced from outside by the director of a documentary film that was shown to the public; however, this metaphor has gained widespread recognition and has come to function as an established way of conceptualising Russian tactics involving the use of FPV drones against the civilian population. Therefore, in my view, "*human safari*" should be understood as one of the local linguistic representations of the broader concept of the "*hunter drone*", which dominates the majority of the interviewees' accounts. Whilst the image of the "*hunter drone*" manifests itself to a greater or lesser extent in all respondents, only 6 out of 37 respondents – that is, just 16 % – explicitly use the expression "*human safari*" to explain the concept.

It is noteworthy that none of the respondents who used the term "*safari*" explained its meaning or connotations in their accounts, as they assumed that their interlocutor understood exactly what was being referred to. This suggests that this category is gradually entering common usage in local discourse and is becoming one of the social markers used to describe Russian drone terror.

Equally telling is O. Chupikova's mention of watching a documentary in a cellar. The term "*cellar*" itself took on special significance during the occupation. Cellars were associated primarily with places of unlawful detention, torture, and physical and psychological violence against pro-Ukrainian residents, including educators. In the collective memory of the city's residents, the concept of the "*basement*" became one of the symbols of the terror of occupation, as noted by the Brazilian researcher Vicente Ferraro [Ferraro, Lotta, Honchar, 2026: 1-18]. Following de-occupation, the semantics of this space underwent

¹ Кравченко Іван, 1995 року народження, м. Херсон, Херсонська область. Інтерв'ю проводив О. Черемісін 13 грудня 2025 р. Дешифрував аудіозапис та створив транскрипт О. Черемісін.

² Чупикова Ольга Василівна, 1974 року народження, с. Антонівка, Херсонська область. Інтерв'ю проводив О. Черемісін 11 грудня 2025 р. Дешифрував аудіозапис та створив транскрипт О. Черемісін.

a significant transformation and reinterpretation. Amid systematic artillery shelling and, in particular, the widespread use of drones, the basement lost its significance as a place of repression and took on the meaning of a space of refuge, shelter and collective survival. Many respondents noted that people in Kherson are currently gathering mainly in basements. There, they wait out the shelling, continue their cultural life, and hold community events, film screenings, meetings, public discussions and so on.

Of particular interest are the accounts of O. Kirpukhin, which illustrate how the civilian population has developed a unique form of empirical technical expertise regarding the operational characteristics of Russian drones. The respondent notes: “*I now try to go out more in the evening. A friend of mine told me that if you want to avoid drones, you should go out at dusk, because the drones don't have time to switch from day to night mode*”¹.

Regardless of the extent to which this view fully corresponds to the technical specifications of specific drone models, its very existence is significant, as it indicates that, in the context of prolonged drone terror, the civilian population is beginning to accumulate and disseminate practical knowledge about the functioning of the enemy's weapons, transforming this into advice for day-to-day survival.

Therefore, the analysis suggests that the image of the drone as a hunter is corroborated by the majority of testimonies, though it manifests itself in varying degrees: ranging from the direct description of a “*human safari*” to indirect accounts of pursuit, surveillance, target acquisition and a person's attempts to remain undetected.

This range of manifestations is significant in itself, as it does not reduce the entire image of the drone solely to the “*safari*” formula. Rather, the “*hunter drone*” constitutes the central core of a broader symbolic complex. In the respondents' minds, it combines several interrelated characteristics: the ability to see a person from above, the possibility of selecting a specific target, the unpredictability of the moment of attack, the psychological effect of pursuit and destruction, and the sense of the randomness of death. In many accounts, an artillery shell remains impersonal. It may or may not hit its target; it may destroy a house or fly past. A drone, by contrast, is psychologically perceived as something that “*sees*”, “*searches*”, “*descends*”, “*attacks*” and “*drops its payload*”.

In this context, the personalised nature of drone terror takes on particular significance. Respondents repeatedly emphasise that the fear of drones differs from the fear of artillery, precisely because of the sense that the threat is directed at them personally. Objectively,

artillery may cause more destruction; however, subjectively, drones are perceived as more frightening precisely because of the personalised nature of the threat. According to I. Kravchenko, a drone represents “*anticipation*”; as T. Cherkashyna recounts, a person hopes that “*this drone simply didn't notice, flew past, didn't pay any attention*”. Therefore, throughout the testimonies, the main psychological aspect of drone terror is the fear of being spotted, singled out and attacked.

At the same time, the image of the drone is shaped by its ability to subjugate everyday life. In the respondents' accounts, ordinary activities of civilian life – going to the shop, visiting the post office, walking the dog, waiting for transport, being in the courtyard, carrying things – lose their neutral character and become risky practices. In many accounts, the drone erodes the boundary between war and civilian routine, and danger becomes embedded in the very fabric of everyday life.

Furthermore, an analysis of the documented testimonies shows that the image of the drone as a hunter – which is central to most respondents' perceptions – represents only the first level of understanding of contemporary Russian terror. A much deeper analysis of the narratives reveals that this image is undergoing further evolution in the minds of Kherson's residents. The drone is taking on the characteristics of a personalised pursuer, conducting individual surveillance of a specific person. This aspect, in my view, constitutes one of the fundamentally new characteristics of modern warfare – one absent from previous academic research. Whilst artillery or aviation have historically been associated with the mass destruction of territory, the FPV drone, in the minds of civilians, personifies individualised violence, because a specific individual has become the target of the war.

Almost all respondents use roughly the same vocabulary, typical of descriptions of a living being: “*sees*”, “*hovers*”, “*looks*”, “*noticed/did not notice*”, “*searches*”, “*hunts*”, “*catches up*” and so on. This vocabulary shows that respondents are describing the conscious behaviour of a specific entity. This suggests that collective consciousness already attributes anthropomorphic qualities to the drone. The impression is that the drone behaves as if it were independently making decisions regarding a specific victim.

This process is particularly evident in the account given by Zh. Dotsenko. Describing her first direct encounter with a drone, she said: “*I first saw a drone when we were packing humanitarian aid*”, and later added: “*...everyone froze, staring and staring at that drone whilst it flew about going about its business*”². In everyday language, the expression “*was off doing*

¹ Кирпукhin Олександр (псевдонім), 2002 року народження, м. Херсон. Інтерв'ю проводив О. Черемісін 01 червня 2026 р. Дешифрував аудіозапис та створив транскрипт О. Черемісін.

² Доценко Жанна Іванівна, 1981 року народження, м. Херсон, Херсонська область. Інтерв'ю проводив О. Черемісін 07 січня 2026 р. Дешифрував аудіозапис та створив транскрипт О. Черемісін.

his own thing” is usually used to describe a person who is going about their own business or pursuing their own aims. The application of this phrase to a UAV suggests a – perhaps unconscious – anthropomorphisation of the drone. In the respondent’s perception, the drone has taken on the characteristics of an independent entity with its own behaviour, flight path and logic of action.

A similar pattern can be observed in the accounts of other respondents when they describe the drone’s behaviour using phrases such as *“the drone has already spotted you and that’s it; in other words, it sees that you are a target for it, and it is already hunting you down”*. The logical structure in this example follows the sequence: spots, sees, identifies a person as a target, hunts.

Thus, respondents effectively reconstruct the operational algorithm of an FPV drone as a sequential process of detecting, identifying, tracking and targeting a specific individual. At the same time, the drone is imbued with anthropomorphic characteristics in the unconscious collective perception of Kherson’s residents. This anthropomorphisation that is one of the key elements in shaping the overall image of the UAV. A civilian interacts with a drone that hovers overhead, changes course, pursues, circles and carries out an attack. As a result, the drone becomes the primary embodiment of Russian violence in the respondents’ everyday experience, and its image naturally transforms into a personalised image of a hunter who is purposefully searching for and pursuing a specific person.

Similar points can be seen in the account of S. Vorobyov¹, about seeing the drone: *“I saw it, quickly ran back into the hairdresser’s, and said to the girls: ‘Girls, there’s a drone up there’”*.

These examples are significant in that they draw a distinction between different models of warfare. Model No. 1 involves coordinate-based strikes, where the target is an area (for example, a street, a neighbourhood or buildings). Model No. 2 involves the active search for a specific individual. The very concept of ‘hovering’ indicates the presence of a deliberate process of selecting a victim. Similarly, according to T. Cherkashyna’s testimony, *“the drone is flying and ... it’s looking for a target. A car, a person, a group of people”*. It is worth noting here that in this list, a person is placed on a par with other objects as a fully valid target option.

It is significant that this personalisation is also evident in the behavioural reactions of the respondents themselves, as their accounts reveal a shift in their survival strategies. Whilst during artillery shelling the main priority is to leave the danger zone as quickly

as possible or take cover, when a drone appears, the primary concern becomes the desire not to be spotted. According to T. Cherkashyna’s account, *“very often, when you hear the sound of a drone, you really hope that you haven’t been seen”*. In this example, the respondent is not concerned with the force of the explosion or the direction of the drone’s movement; what matters to her is not being seen. Visual contact, therefore, is perceived here as the main dividing line between safety and danger.

Tellingly, the figure of the drone operator is almost entirely absent from these accounts, and, psychologically, the drone itself that becomes the main perpetrator of the violence. Given that the operator is virtually absent from the testimonies, this pattern is unsurprising, since the drone is what civilians come into direct contact with. This is precisely why, in oral history, the drone is portrayed as an independent participant in the hostilities, giving the impression that it acts autonomously and independently.

Changes in urban behaviour are directly linked to these aspects. The respondents’ accounts reveal the emergence of a new culture of concealment, as people seek to disappear from view. For all respondents, the city’s architecture begins to serve as a series of hiding places. Trees, buildings, arches, balcony recesses and building entrances are transformed into means of visual concealment. Consequently, the war has influenced the formation of a new way in which people interact with their surroundings, and this has been a direct consequence of drone warfare.

An equally important aspect of personalisation is the shift in the perception of death and the very image of death itself. Comments from respondents such as *“once you hear it, there’s nowhere to run”* or *“it started to descend and was heading straight towards me”* indicate an extremely high level of personal threat. Death is now perceived as the result of a specific victim’s personal choice, although when asked, *“Did you ever think, ‘I might not survive this?’”*, far from everyone answered in the affirmative; the majority said they tried not to think about it.

In this context, the pattern of the drone hovering deserves particular attention, as it recurs with considerable frequency in many testimonies: *“hovering”, “circling”, “hanging”, “waiting”*. In my view, these moments should be interpreted as an effect of psychological pressure. It is as if the drone is assessing the situation. Consequently, the pause between its appearance and a potential attack becomes one of the most powerful factors in psychological dominance.

Consequently, the respondents’ general perception of the drone as a hunter is gradually transforming into a far more complex image of a personal pursuer. This characteristic, in particular, sets modern drone terror apart from other forms of military violence. Respondents describe the drone in virtually identical and unanimous terms as an entity that observes, assesses,

¹ Воробійов Сергій Олександрович, 1979 року народження, м. Херсон, Херсонська область. Інтерв’ю проводив О. Черемісін 09 січня 2026 р. Дешифрував аудіозапис та створив транскрипт О. Черемісін.

tracks, waits for, searches for and pursues a specific person or vehicle. As a result, a fundamentally new model of interaction between civilians and war has emerged: people have ceased to perceive themselves as random victims of war and have begun to see themselves as potential targets of individual selection. This process of personalising violence constitutes one of the most significant features of the drone's image in the collective memory of post-occupation Kherson's residents. It also lays the groundwork for broader interpretations in which the drone functions as a specific form of control over civilians' everyday lives.

3. Drone terror in everyday life

Generally speaking, in the collective imagination of Kherson's residents, drones go far beyond the immediate use of military force. They have come to play a role in a kind of surveillance over the city's everyday life. The very presence or absence of a drone determines whether the simplest civilian activities can be carried out, and this has a significant impact on the behaviour of ordinary people. It is telling that virtually none of the respondents describe their own daily lives as being free from the threat of drones. In most interviews, decisions regarding any activity are made only after assessing the situation in the air. According to T. Cherkashyna, reports of drones *“are the only thing that can alter our movements, or indeed whether we leave the house at all”*, and when information about their activity is received, it *“forces us either to seek shelter or simply to change the direction in which we are travelling”*. What is revealing in this example is the general pattern of how daily life is organised. Therefore, the presence or absence of a drone determines which route a person will take and whether they will be able to go about their daily business. In effect, a situation arises where the freedom of civilian movement is subordinated to the operational logic of Russian drones.

A similar pattern can be observed in most of the interviews. For example, according to I. Kravchenko, *“routes have changed completely”*, and people are travelling *“only along tried and tested routes”*. According to E. Konovalova, once drones have entered her neighbourhood, any sense of relative safety disappears, and *“movement has been reduced to a minimum”*¹. According to L. Dvornikova, even a simple trip to the post office or a shop can be a very frightening and dangerous experience: *“I'm now trying to go to the shops that are closer to home. And I make sure there's a road running between the houses, so there's no open space. At the moment, whilst there are no leaves on the trees, it's quite scary. But once*

*the leaves come out, I'll be able to hide under the trees”*². You can simply forget about taking a leisurely stroll through the city's parks or public gardens. Urban space is beginning to function according to the logic of the drone threat and aerial surveillance. Unfortunately, the drone has become the defining factor in the new geography of everyday life, and those who survive are precisely those who adhere to established methods of living in such an environment, moving under cover and at the highest possible speeds.

Whereas in peacetime the organisation of the city was determined by transport accessibility, under conditions of drone terror the main criterion has become the level of potential vulnerability to an air attack. According to respondents, the areas near Dnipro, Kindiyka, Ostriv and Richport have effectively been excluded from the system of everyday travel because of the high activity of drones. Particularly telling in these accounts is the specification of streets where there is nowhere to hide, as the area is assessed on the basis of maximum vulnerability. For each respondent, their living space has been reduced as much as possible to a few relatively safe routes. It is therefore entirely fair to speak of a complete reorientation of urban space in the minds of civilians.

At the same time, the acoustic dimension of this image deserves particular attention. A comparative analysis of eyewitness accounts suggests that sound has become one of the main vehicles of drone terror. Whereas in the traditional wars of the past the civilian population reacted first and foremost to explosions, in modern warfare the characteristic whirring of a drone has become the primary warning signal. Y. Kalinichenko recalls: *“I was once walking to work from the bus stop, having got off the minibus, when a very loud sound came from the sky near the Central Market area. The sound of a drone – it's like an old, rattling moped, the kind you can sense just by the sound. So I looked up, but I couldn't see it anywhere. The sound was very loud, but it wasn't visible”*³. Other respondents emphasised that at first this sound was unfamiliar, but over time they began to recognise it *“from the very first second”*. According to V. Melikhova, at first *“you hear only the sound, and you start looking up”*. I. Kravchenko recounted: *“I heard a distinctive sound, one I already knew and had heard before, and saw the drone hovering. Right above my head, you might say”*. According to V. Kolisnyk, it is the buzzing itself that triggers an immediate psychological reaction: *“Trembling and, let's say, a racing heart – it really does happen – and you immediately start figuring*

¹ Конавалова Євгенія Володимирівна (псевдонім), 1980 року народження, м. Херсон, Херсонська область Інтерв'ю проводив О. Черемісін 15 травня 2026 р. Дешифрував аудіозапис та створив транскрипт О. Черемісін.

² Дворнікова Лариса Миколаївна, 1980 року народження, м. Херсон, Херсонська область Інтерв'ю проводив О. Черемісін 02 квітня 2026 р. Дешифрував аудіозапис та створив транскрипт О. Черемісін.

³ .Калініченко Юлія Віталіївна (псевдонім), 1976 року народження, м. Херсон, Херсонська область Інтерв'ю проводив О. Черемісін 15 грудня 2025 р. Дешифрував аудіозапис та створив транскрипт О. Черемісін

out where to run and where those around you are. Of course, it's better in summer – there's foliage on the trees. And you can immediately work out which building entrances are open – unfortunately, not all of them – where you can take cover. I'm glad when an entrance is open; my wife and I can dash in there, or you might run to a shop – the shop's always open"¹. Consequently, the sound of a drone has gradually taken on a symbolic meaning of its own. Over time, it has become a kind of acoustic marker of mortal danger. What is significant in this regard is that many respondents identified the sound itself as the trigger, whilst in response to the question *"What helps you to calm down?"* they answered *"music"*. This combination suggests the emergence of a new type of sensory dimension to war. An analysis of most of the interviews shows that living for long periods under the constant threat of drone attacks forces civilians to develop fundamentally new skills for perceiving their surroundings. People gradually learn both to recognise a sound within a second and to automatically interpret it as a signal to change their behaviour immediately. Many respondents noted that they now listen out for everything, are always looking both upwards and down at their feet, and, if danger arises, instantly decide where the nearest hiding place is. Over time, sensory orientation becomes second nature, and a person is able to orient themselves simultaneously in both air and ground space. It can therefore be said that drone terror has forced a change in the way the environment is perceived.

In this context, the perception of the open sky takes on particular significance, as it is from there that potential danger arises. Respondents often noted that when a person hears a drone, they feel as though they are being targeted, that they could be seen, and that there is no place where they are completely safe. Surveillance is carried out from the air; it is from there that control is exercised and force may potentially be used. It is important to emphasise here that the enemy's control of airspace often leads to a real possibility of an attack. This potential is what creates a mechanism of psychological pressure. Therefore, psychological control should be added to the list of key mechanisms of terror, as it is fundamentally impossible to predict the behaviour of a drone and the operator controlling it.

In this context, it is worth noting that whilst an artillery strike ends with the explosion, a drone continues to monitor the area even after a direct hit. It can observe what happens after the explosion – how people move their belongings and clear up the aftermath – it can coordinate subsequent artillery strikes, and afterwards, finish off any survivors itself. It hinders the

evacuation of the wounded, lies in wait for the State Emergency Service and medics, and strikes at them; it prevents the provision of aid and the restoration of normal life for residents. This is why the terror can be described as having taken on a protracted, ongoing nature.

Consequently, the impact of drones on everyday life is at its greatest; people are unable to distinguish between times of war and times of relative calm. The use of FPV drones has virtually eliminated this distinction. Everyday life is entirely dictated by the presence or absence of a drone in the air.

Attention should also be paid to the transformation in the organisation of time in people's lives. In the vast majority of interviews, respondents already describe their day in terms of drone activity. The chronology of daily life boils down to constantly checking notifications about drone activity; walking the dog is automatically accompanied by an assessment of sounds in the air; even a trip to the shop is regarded as a *"risky"* act. Consequently, the logic of time boils down to expressions such as *"Groundhog Day"*, in which everything repeats in a vicious circle from which it is simply impossible to escape.

In this context, the phenomenon of the automation of behavioural responses is worth noting. Almost all respondents emphasise that, in the early days of FPV drones, they did not yet have established behavioural patterns; consequently, there were instances where they simply watched the drone, trying to work out what it was, not yet knowing how to react. However, over time, experience accumulated and led to the development of almost automatic response patterns. People learnt to react to the situation as it arose: instantly changing their route, running for cover under trees or into a building entrance. Consequently, these behavioural responses have become integrated into the realm of everyday reflexes. But what is most striking is that the respondents do not describe their daily lives as anything out of the ordinary. Every day, they live in confined spaces, change their routes, seek shelter, experience fear when they hear the sound of a drone, and listen out for sounds – yet they do not perceive this as anything extraordinary. This suggests that the respondents have integrated psychological trauma into the structure and logic of their daily lives, turning the process into a routine. For them, it is a normal daily routine that has become the norm.

This routine nature of everyday life highlights an important pattern regarding changes in the behaviour of the entire urban community – one evident in almost all the interviews. Furthermore, a complex system of mutual information-sharing and mutual aid is taking shape. This manifests itself through alerts about the appearance of drones via specialised Telegram channels, with information on their location becoming a vital resource for survival.

¹ Колісник Віктор Вікторович, 1966 року народження, м. Дніпро, Дніпропетровська область. Інтерв'ю проводив О. Черемісін 24 січня 2026 р. Дешифрував аудіозапис та створив транскрипт О. Черемісін

4. Conclusions

A comprehensive analysis of oral history accounts leads to the conclusion that the image of the drone, as shaped by the collective experience of residents in post-occupation Kherson, cannot be reduced to a single characteristic or a single metaphor. Despite the unquestionable dominance of the ‘hunter’ image and the concept of a “*human safari*” – which do indeed form the central core of most interviews – the empirical material reveals a significantly more complex structure to this phenomenon. In the minds of the respondents, the drone has gradually transformed into a multidimensional symbol of modern Russian terror, simultaneously combining military, social, psychological, spatial, temporal and cultural dimensions. This multi-layered nature is one of the most important features recorded in the oral history testimonies. Respondents almost never describe the drone solely as a technical means of attack. On the contrary, each subsequent account complements the previous one, forming an ever-expanding system of interrelated symbolic meanings.

In this context, I consider it fundamentally important that the image of a “*human safari*”, which is widely used in public discourse today, only partially reflects the substance of the collective experience. Undoubtedly, a certain proportion of respondents directly or indirectly endorse precisely this model of perception, and this is confirmed in the interviews. At the same time, the oral history materials demonstrate that the residents themselves interpret the role of drones in their own lives in a much broader sense. For them, the drone is a constant companion in everyday life, a spatial regulator, an acoustic symbol of war, a mechanism of destruction, a means of psychological pressure, and the materialised embodiment of the enemy hovering over the city. That is why, in my view, reducing the image of the drone solely to the concept of a ‘safari’ inevitably narrows the rich empirical material contained in the oral history interviews.

It is particularly noteworthy that, for most respondents, there is a gradual shift in the focus of their perception of the war. Whilst at the initial stage of the full-scale invasion the main symbols of the war were the occupation, Russian checkpoints, military equipment or massive artillery strikes, after de-occupation, the drone came to occupy a dominant place in the structure of everyday wartime experience.

At the same time, it should be noted that the image of a drone is shaped as an integrated system of everyday experience. As a result, most respondents make almost no distinction between descriptions of continuous attacks and accounts of everyday life. A trip to the shop, walking the dog, waiting for the bus, travelling by minibus, stepping out into one’s own courtyard, helping neighbours after shelling – all these ordinary civilian activities are described through the prism of the possibility of a drone

appearing. In effect, the war has completely permeated the fabric of everyday life. This points to a fundamentally new form of wartime experience, in which the war has become so deeply integrated into ordinary life that it no longer exists separately from it. People have learnt to recognise the sound of a drone in a split second, identify its model, automatically assess the urban landscape, change their route, hide from surveillance, make quick decisions, and constantly monitor both the air and the ground. All this constitutes life in a new reality, where adaptation has become the result of long-term social and psychological consequences. And in this life, the “*drone*” has become an integral symbol, uniting the physical, psychological and social dimensions of modern warfare. This complexity is what distinguishes the use of drones from traditional military technology, which is usually associated with swift death.

By synthesising the oral history materials collected, it is possible to propose a theoretical model of the structure of the image of the drone in the everyday experience of Kherson’s civilian population. Its universal element is the image of the drone as a hunter, which personifies terror and creates a sense of individual persecution. At the same time, only some of the respondents verbalise this image through the local concept of a “*human safari*”. Despite the relatively small number of direct references, it is telling that respondents use this expression without further explanation, indicating that it has become firmly established in the linguistic landscape of Kherson as a clear symbol of the targeted hunting of the civilian population.

The second level forms an anthropomorphised image of the drone, which, in the respondents’ minds, takes on the characteristics of an autonomous entity capable of carrying out individual surveillance, pursuit and the selection of victims. This anthropomorphisation reinforces the image of the drone as a hunter, conveying a sense of a targeted (personal) threat.

The third level presents the drone as a symbol of aerial power, which regulates freedom of movement, controls urban space, determines the feasibility of everyday practices, and exerts psychological pressure. The fourth level presents the drone as an acoustic symbol of war, altering the sensory perception of the surrounding world and triggering automatic behavioural responses. The fifth level is represented by the image of the drone as a symbol of unceasing Russian terror, which integrates all the previous components into a single system of everyday experience. In my view, this multi-layered nature most fully reflects the findings of this study.

The project was supported by Documenting Ukraine, a program of the Institute for Human Sciences, IWM Vienna. / Проєкт реалізовано за підтримки Інституту гуманітарних наук у Відні (Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen, IWM) у рамках програми Documenting Ukraine.

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Conflict of interest. The author is a member of the journal's editorial board. To ensure the independence of the editorial process, the manuscript was handled by a designated editor who was not subordinate to the author and had no conflict of interest. The author did not participate in the selection of reviewers, the peer-review process, or the decision to publish the article. The manuscript underwent the standard double-blind peer review process.

Date of initial submission: 21.07.2026
Date of acceptance after peer review: 21.08.2026
Publication date: 05.10.2026