

World

'I saw death smile. Finally the

Traumatised veterans tell Catherine Philp they've turned to ketamine to slay their demons



Ihor Kholodilo knows what it means to die. The first time, he heard his death mistakenly announced over military radio channels after writing his own name on a body bag. The second time, he was on ketamine in a psychotherapy session when he came face to face with death coming to claim him.

"It was a kind of silhouette, and then I see the face and it smiles at me," Kholodilo recalled. "And I have a thought: it doesn't matter whether she smiles at me, it matters if you can smile back at her." It would be a turning point in a ten-year battle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that started in 2014 and was aggressively accelerated by his experience as a frontline medic after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Kholodilo was not expected to survive the Russian tank shell that hit his vehicle as he was trying to evacuate wounded colleagues from the eastern front in early 2023. Surgery saved his limbs, his heart and his vision, but his enduring injury — a stutter so severe he could barely speak — stubbornly remained. It would be another year before he found the pioneering clinic in Kyiv that was using ketamine-aided therapy to treat what is fast becoming a PTSD epidemic in wartime Ukraine.

The first session was "terrible — it was traumatic", Kholodilo said. After the second, he wasn't sure he could even continue the treatment. The ketamine did not merely help him travel back to his worst experiences but see inside them from an entirely new perspective. The dead whose bodies he had handled, but whose deaths he had not witnessed, came back to him. "One guy appears and he is screaming that he is burning inside before he died. And I suddenly understand why he's saying this, what happened to the body I found," he said.

The vision of his own death came soon after. Within five sessions his therapist asked him whether he noticed a dramatic development. His crippling stammer had vanished and his speech had returned. "She said: 'Do you realise you are speaking normally now?'" His final war wound was healed.

Ketamine therapy has long been known as an effective solution for depression that has otherwise defied treatment. However, its dubious popular reputation, fuelled by high-profile addicts, has tainted it with a damaging stigma. Despite this, NHS Scotland is planning to set up the first non-private clinic in the UK that will use ketamine for treatment-resistant depression after successful trials at a private clinic in Lanarkshire.

In Ukraine, its therapeutic use has put the country "so far ahead" of others, such as Britain, in rolling out this treatment approach, according to David Nutt, a British neuropsychopharmacologist. It hands back to

soldiers and veterans years of life that could otherwise be lost to mental pain and alcoholism.

Critically for Ukraine, vastly out-manned by its invading neighbour, it is also proving effective in restoring damaged warriors to the health they need to rejoin the front line, rather than discarding them on a societal scrapheap that would drag the country down for years to come.

Ketamine is not a party drug, as it is often misdescribed. "I really can't imagine someone dancing all night on ketamine," Vladislav Matrenitsky, who runs Expio, the sole pioneering clinic in Kyiv that administers the therapy, said. If abused, ketamine is a "downer", a substance you might take after a night of hard partying on "uppers". It is both an anaesthetic and a psychedelic.

Its use in supervised therapy is to enable the patient to access and resolve agonising memories, including some that had never entered their active consciousness. Its use for the treatment of depression and PTSD has been legal in Ukraine since 2017, but is still not routine.

Forest Glade, Ukraine's only military psychiatric facility, began using it therapeutically at the beginning of this year. Its efficacy has brought the institution squarely behind a concerted effort to alter legislation to allow the wider use of psychedelic therapy with Ukraine's expanding generation of veterans.

Forest Glade recently held a conference to present findings, attended by government officials including from the Ministry of Health. "When I was listening to one veteran's story of healing through psychedelic-assisted therapy, I cried, because I realised how much time we are losing," Tetiana Syrenko, deputy director of Forest Glade, said.

"The path that someone can go through in just a few months of psychedelic-assisted therapy might otherwise take three or four years in conventional therapy. I deeply love and respect our defenders, and I believe their time is incredibly valuable. That's why we must use the very best of what we have — and of what the world has to offer."

Kseniia Voznitsyna, the director



of Forest Glade, said: "People who oppose this type of therapy have simply never seen someone battling their inner enemies. Protecting those who have returned from the front lines is our sacred duty."

The history of psychedelics in psychiatric treatment is long and controversial. It began, perhaps, with Timothy Leary in the 1960s, who argued that psychedelic drugs such as LSD showed potential for therapeutic use. He was jailed for drugs offences.

Now the US military is trialling the use of MDMA with soldiers — not merely for its apparent protective qualities against psychological harm but also for its potential to reduce fear.

But those involved in treatment — despite its Pentagon imprimatur — must travel abroad to partake because MDMA, a main ingredient in the drug ecstasy, remains illegal even for therapeutic use in the US. Psilocybin, the active component of "magic mushrooms", has also

shown huge promise as a therapeutic aid. The reason ketamine dominates existing state-sanctioned treatments, in Ukraine or elsewhere, is only because of its legal status as a clinical drug. Nutt, who achieved notoriety and a break with the British government over his insistence that alcohol was far more damaging than many commonly used illegal drugs, including ecstasy, says MDMA is unquestionably the most effective in PTSD treatment, a drug that is not a psychedelic but facilitates the openness and parking of ego that effective therapy requires.

"For vets experiencing PTSD, the best evidence is definitely for MDMA," Nutt said. Only Australia has so far licensed it for conventional treatment-resistant cases.

Olesia Kotliarova, 32, a former soldier, finished her ketamine therapy at the Expio clinic in April. Like Kholodilo, she began her military service in 2014, when the conflict with Russia began. She was 21, sociable, calm and outgoing. Like so many of the worst-affected veterans, her job was to deal with the dead and the dying, collecting bodies and body parts from the battle-

field. It became her job to call families of the dead and deliver the worst news of their lives.

"I became enemy number one with the families," she said. "Imagine telling a mother your son is dead when he's lied and said he was away working in Poland. I brought bodies back to families, too. This was the worst. And they were often pieces of bodies, a hand or a leg. We'd take photos of those pieces of bodies and send them to families to help them identify who it was, from a scar or tattoo." She demobilised in 2019, "having no idea of the toll it had taken on me", and despite years of intrusive memories, re-enrolled as a volunteer after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion.

Her breakdown came with a cascade of deaths of those close to her. Bakhmut was taken and a friend killed. She sent a care parcel to another friend that was never picked up; he too was dead. A third died on the southeastern front. She lay paralysed for days, staring at her ceiling. A headache set in that never left.

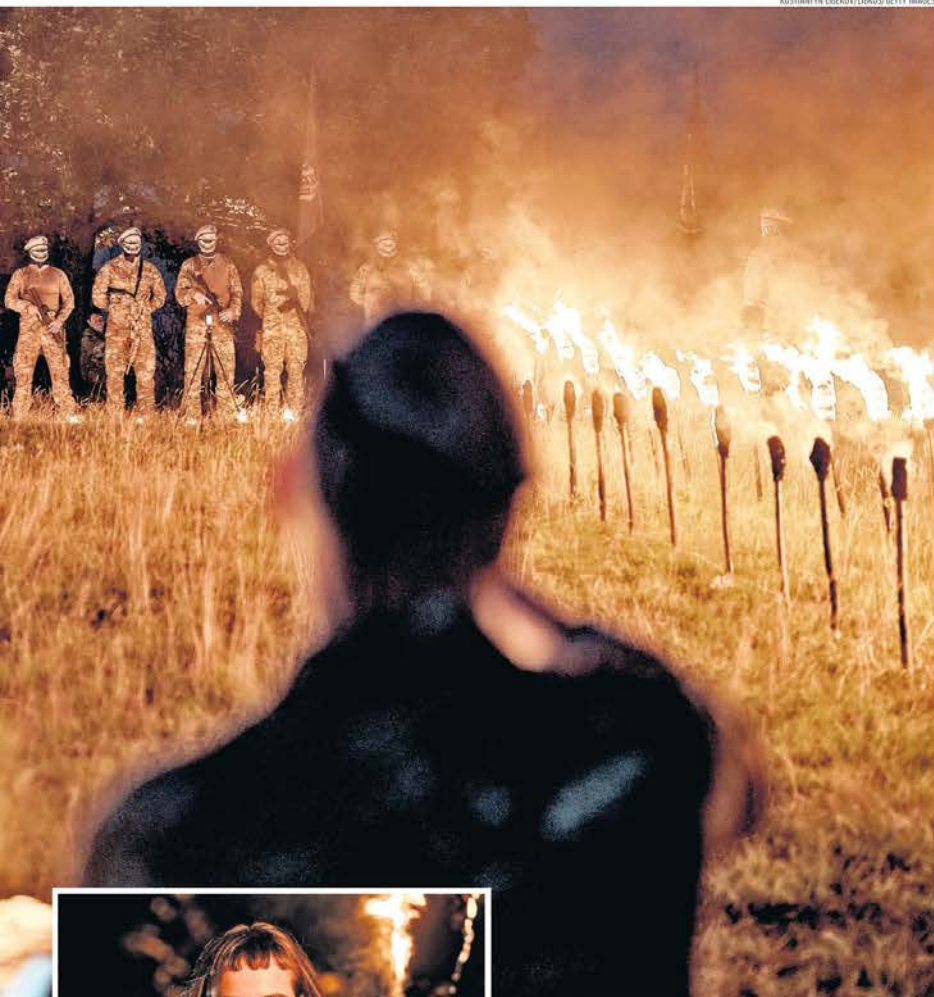
In the dappled sunshine of a Kyiv park, Kotliarova told how she went to Expio after hearing from another



**Foul! Robot footballers
are far from match fit**
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faces corruption inquiry**
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nightmare of war was over'



**Recruits are
inducted to
bolster Ukraine's
forces; drug
treatments for
survivors with
PTSD means
some can fight
again. Olesia
Kotliarova and
Ihor Kholodilo,
far left, both had
ketamine therapy
for the condition**

veteran about ketamine therapy. "In my first session, I saw abstractions, then a road, dark clouds, a forest," she said. "The therapist was guiding me, saying stop here; I have to concentrate on the road; it is my subconscious. I followed the road and I came to the problems."

Through the prism of ketamine, Kotliarova said, "I lived through the blackest stages of my life and I realised

I couldn't change it". She said: "I had always thought if I had done something differently, it would have turned out better. But I realised it wasn't like that."

She recalled a time she was supposed to go and find two missing men, both 18. She was only able to locate one before she gave up, under the pressure of the other work she had to do. "The next day he was captured and tortured and killed

by the Russians," she said. "I still know that it happened but I don't carry that burning sense of guilt inside. It's a terrible thing that happened but I understand I have to let it go."

Not all the visions were bad. "Once I had a happy memory that I had never remembered before and suddenly it was real," she said. "It was so basic, just a meeting with friends after demobilisation but I had completely forgotten it and then my subconscious released it."

Survivor guilt is one of the most crippling aspects of war-related PTSD and can also stand in the way of rehabilitation from physical injuries. Matrenitsky recalled a veteran who lost both legs but could or would not go for prosthetic fittings and rehabilitation. It was only after ketamine therapy that he agreed to start and can now walk again.

Ukraine's problems with alcoholism are not quite on a par with Russia's but not far behind. Alcohol has long been a prop used by Ukrainian men to deal with unspoken trauma. It lacks the stigma of "illegal" drugs, an irony in the eyes of clinicians who see the damage it causes to individuals, their loved ones and society. Alcohol only "numbs",

Nutt said; it is a tool of avoidance, not resolution. Its disinhibition is also dangerous, he noted. Half of all suicides worldwide are committed when the subject is intoxicated by alcohol.

"What psychedelics do is basically break the thinking patterns, which continue to perpetuate the psychiatric illness, whether that's depression, trauma, addiction, whatever," Nutt said. "Whereas what conventional treatments do is they numb it, so you just don't suffer so much."

What psychedelic therapy works on is neuroplasticity, allowing the brain to form new, permanent neural pathways to replace those that trauma has created. "Maybe a better analogy is this: if you've got a severely arthritic knee, you can either treat it with painkillers so that you can walk, or you can have surgery to replace it," Nutt says. "So psychedelics are a bit like surgery. They put your brain into a state where it's functioning normally, like a knee replacement that functions normally."

Ukraine has more than compassion to consider in its treatment of veterans. Most of those who were called up or volunteered when Russia invaded in 2022 are either dead, wounded or still fighting. It is seriously undermanned in the face of an enemy with almost unlimited human resources. The speed and efficacy of psychedelic treatments are very much in its favour, Kholodilo said. Those who leave the battlefield can return.

Kholodilo, who turned his hand to psychology after abandoning his business career to fight the first Russian invasion of 2014, sees endless potential for such therapies. A key moment in a warrior's evolution, he said, is the acceptance that he could die, but that is nothing like a surrender.

"There is a ritual in the war: you accept death," he said. "It's very unique for everyone but suddenly you understand or accept that you can be dead within 15 minutes or one hour. And after that, it's much easier to be in this environment. It's not that you stop being afraid to die or something. But you don't freeze. Fight or flight yes, but you don't freeze." Routine use of ketamine group therapy during decompression from frontline action, he believes, could preserve an entire generation of soldiers to fight on for another day.

A day or two before our meeting, Kholodilo removed the last piece of Russian shrapnel still in his body, which had started to move around, embedded in his upper arm. He used a military magnet to find it then a knife to bring it to the surface. The wound was still open as he spoke.

It had been a year since he finished his ketamine therapy and put himself on the path of advocacy for its wider use. He had never wanted to take it again — why would anyone, Matrenitsky argues against those who warn of addiction, when it is associated with the worst experiences of their lives?

Kholodilo knew within five sessions and the miraculous return of his lost voice that he was finally healed and done. "I knew it was enough because I feel again I am part of this world," he said. "I feel myself healing."

Before, every day was another battle, far from the real front line. "Now I know: you are part of everything. And everything is a part of you."

Additional reporting by Viktoriia Sybir

Ukraine quits landmines treaty to level the battlefield

Ukraine
Tom Ball Kyiv, Liz Cookman

Ukraine has taken the first legal step towards withdrawing from the international treaty banning landmines, arguing that the restrictions create an "unequal" situation on the battlefield as Russia makes extensive use of them.

President Zelensky signed a decree on Sunday instructing his government to begin withdrawing Ukraine from the 1997 Ottawa convention, also known as the Mine Ban Treaty.

The foreign ministry said Russian use of anti-personnel mines since 2014, which increased after the full-scale invasion of 2022, had created an unequal situation that limited Ukraine's right to self-defence.

In his nightly video address Zelensky accused Moscow of "using anti-personnel mines with utmost cynicism" in Ukrainian territory and of seeking to "destroy life by all means at their disposal". The mines, he said, were "often the instrument for which nothing can be substituted for defence purposes".

The decision must be confirmed by parliament before Ukraine can formally withdraw from the treaty.

Poland made the same decision a week ago in response to security fears over the threat from Russia. Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz, the defence minister, said at the time that Warsaw intended to leave the treaty because of "security conditions on the eastern flank".

Other countries bordering Russia, including Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, have either withdrawn, suspended certain treaty obligations or publicly signalled that they may do so. Russia is not a signatory to the treaty.

On Friday Lithuania said it had notified the United Nations of its withdrawal. It will cease to be bound by the treaty six months after the notification. Kestutis Budrys, the foreign minister, said on X: "This decision was not taken lightly."

The potential withdrawals are a blow to the Ottawa convention, which has 164 signatory states at present and is widely credited with reducing the civilian casualties from landmines globally.

Anti-personnel mines are small explosive devices, designed to detonate under a person's weight or with a tripwire. They can block an enemy advance, channel forces into kill zones and protect defensive positions. They are a threat to civilians, often being lethal for decades after a conflict has ended.

Two months before he left office in the US, President Biden approved the delivery of anti-personnel mines to Ukraine to help stall Russian gains in the east of the country.

According to a 2023 report by Human Rights Watch, Russian forces have laid landmines in at least 11 of Ukraine's 27 regions since the start of the war in 2014, making Ukraine one of the most heavily mined countries in the world.