

# Harper's BAZAAR

JULY/AUGUST 2022

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on stardom, self-doubt  
& saving the world

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truth in Ukraine



# THE WOMEN OF DATTALION

UKRAINE'S DATA WARRIORS

*Helena Lee meets the all-female army fighting disinformation on an international scale*

**A**

t the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Valentina Synenka, a prominent businesswoman in the technology sector, was told that she'd been brainwashed. The

Ukrainian national was in touch with her mother's family in the Russian province of Siberia, who were checking in with her. 'My relatives believed there were Nazis in Ukraine, that the Russians were helping clean them up.' Her voice is taut with emotion. 'My mother and I kept trying to tell them what was actually happening, and they wouldn't believe us; they put their heads in the sand and

thought we were being shown fake news. It was very painful. We had to stop communicating. I felt we couldn't reach them.'

**'Ukrainian women are resolute. Nobody's stealing our dreams'**

So when Nataliya Mykolska, a consultant who had spoken at one of Synenka's conferences, approached her about setting up a database to counter Russian misinformation, she immediately said yes. Dattalion – the name a combination of 'data' and 'battalion' – launched on 27 February, three days after the war began. By mid-March, the female-led

collective had over 100 volunteers, all women. Many had been high-flying professionals in technology, politics, media and fashion; they delivered their children to safety abroad, then returned to their home country, using phones and laptops as their weapons to document the atrocities committed on the front lines. More than 1,800 videos and 3,500 photographs were uploaded by the end of April to what is now the largest existing war-media database: powerful testimonies of civilian bloodshed and cities stripped of life.

At its core, Dattalion has one mission. 'It's about delivering and

*From left: Katherine Vellinga wears coat, from a selection, Bevza. Wool and silk trousers, £2,250, Dior. Calf-leather heels, £545, Manolo Blahnik. Shirt; necklace, both her own. Alicia Lewis wears linen dress, £195, Sleeper at Fenwick. Jewellery, her own. Mariya Dykalo wears jumper; shirt; trousers; jacket; jewellery, all her own. Suede heels, £575, Manolo Blahnik. Valentina Synenka wears block-panel dress, about £737, L'itkovskaya. Emma Sinclair wears coat, £460, Chershnivska. Shirt; trousers; jewellery, all her own. Suede heels, £545, Manolo Blahnik. Make-up by Shiseido. Photographed at the Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral, London*

HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY MARLENE ANDERSSON AND LUCIE PEMBERTON, USING SHISEIDO

sharing the truth,' says Synenka. On the day we speak, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission has confirmed at least 5,000 civilian casualties, but without the personal story, it's difficult to comprehend the cost of war. Dattalion's Instagram feed shows those affected: the radio journalist; the promising sportswoman; the artist in her eighties who starved to death; the three-month-old baby killed by a missile. And this is just a glimpse of what is on the database itself, which charts thousands of stories, all verified by its regional groups. The images also reveal the unreported war crimes against women and children, who are often the hidden victims. Historically, the news narrative has concentrated on the number of soldiers killed; what's less widely known is how many people are victims of sexual violence, used as a weapon of war, suggesting that rapes are just collateral damage. Dattalion is redressing that balance.

Alicia Lewis, another Dattalion leader, was drafted in to help set up the public-relations strategy, raise funds and lobby United States Congress members, to whom she sends daily reports with footage from the database that is now included in the leadership's morning briefings. Though not Ukrainian herself, Lewis, who has a background in media, politics and humanitarianism, now leads the US team, and plays a varied role – one day, it may be connecting with journalists in Ukraine, the next, providing for the women on the ground. 'We're working with reporters who need help finding witnesses in certain locations,' she tells me. 'We have women leaving their children back in Lviv, driving humanitarian trucks in and out through Poland. I consider myself a soldier within this battalion of women and mothers.'

The media plays a key role in amplifying this truth, and so Dattalion relies on its advocates, who include the former world number-three tennis player Elina Svitolina and Mariya Dykalo, the creative director of the luxury brand Aspinal. Dykalo, who is based in London, has been involved with the collective since its inception, having grown up with Synenka in Lviv. 'Dattalion has allowed the people of Ukraine to create raw, real-time footage of exactly what is happening in our country so it can be accessed by international media outlets and act as a historical archive,' she says. 'It also helps people trace displaced loved ones and is a vital source of communication, so by championing Dattalion and sharing the content, we can help tell the truth of the war. It's not just a physical war, but a cyber-information one, too.'

## 'We can help tell the truth of the war. It's not just a physical war, but a cyber-information one, too'



*Valentina Synenka  
and Alicia Lewis*

Dattalion also draws on the influential Ukrainian diaspora, who are rallying the international business community. Katherine Vellinga, the Canadian-Ukrainian CEO of Zirkova, a brand that runs the country's largest vodka distillery, was taken as a child to march in demonstrations calling for Ukrainian independence. In February, due to President Zelensky's extension of martial law, which prohibits the trade in alcoholic drinks and alcohol-based

substances, the vodka industry ceased operating, so she turned her efforts to fundraising for Dattalion. 'Every day, I wake up, and it's my mission to help Ukraine. To fight,' Vellinga says earnestly. 'Ukrainian women are resolute. Nobody's stealing our dreams.'

Similarly, the London-based entrepreneur Emma Sinclair, whose own ancestors fled Ukraine's pogroms in the 19th century and in World War II, has been connecting Dattalion with key professionals. She has assembled a consortium of more than 160 companies, including PwC, Mulberry and AstraZeneca, mobilising huge corporates with the resources to match demand for jobs with the skills offered by Ukrainian refugees, on a significant scale. 'I am known in my community for being an activist,' says Sinclair. 'I have refugees living with me at home, I'm an ambassador for Unicef. So when things to do with refugees happen, quite often, I get a call. My goal was to create a united voice.'

What started as a database has grown to become a sophisticated, multi-layered operation in record time. The collective is now working with a group of lawyers who are helping identify witness reports to build up a war-crimes case, while reaching the highest echelons

of power in both America and Britain. Together with Aspinal, Dykalo is founding a new initiative, Fashion for Ukraine, to raise money for the Centre of Women's Perspectives, an organisation that builds shelters and helps evacuate women and children from the besieged eastern areas in Ukraine to the relative safety of Lviv. She is also producing a film with Dattalion that will launch with the initiative.

'In normal circumstances, this would be a complex start-up, and it would take at least half a year to reach such a level,' says Synenka. 'But we have all collaborated, communicated and delivered value so quickly. Dattalion is for everyone, but especially for women. This is a moment where we truly show the power of women.'

[www.dattalion.com](http://www.dattalion.com)