

Photography exhibition showing off the human side of Ukraine



An Edinburgh College photography student is staging an exhibition of images she shot of Ukrainian rebel fighters and refugees while covering the conflict as part of her course.

Monika Holkova's exhibition is a documentary of time spent in and around Donetsk last year to record the effects of the conflict on the people of Ukraine. During her spell in the war-ravaged area with rebel fighters, she came under fire herself from government troops.

The exhibition – Pochemu?, Russian for 'why' – launches this Friday at the Creative Exchange in Leith. It features 36 black-and-white images of Ukrainian refugees and rebels, showing how they are living through a period of turmoil.

Monika, originally from Slovakia, wanted to cover the events in Ukraine for her BA Professional Photography course project, so arranged to visit Russia and Ukraine over two trips in October and November. She visited a refugee camp in Russia where Ukrainian people were living after fleeing the conflict. She spent time with refugee families, hearing their stories and taking their photos.

She also spent a week in Donetsk with a group of humanitarian workers as part of an aid effort for residents. Monika travelled with the group as it went round the city to deliver food and supplies, capturing images as she went.

The noise of bombs falling outside the city formed the soundtrack to Monica's time in Donetsk, a city in which some

areas were decimated.



Monika said: "I don't know if you can prepare yourself for what you see and hear. All the time we were in Ukraine you could hear the sound of bombing outside the city. Most of the time it was far away but one day we were in the supermarket and the bombs sounded much closer. Everyone stopped what they were doing to listen but then started shopping again right after. For the people that was normal. They just had to live with it as part of their daily lives."

Monika also spent time with rebel fighters, and was with a group in a small village a couple of hours from Donetsk when

they came under fire from army forces. Army snipers pinned them down for almost three hours, and the group was unable to move from a safe position behind a house. The village and the surrounding area were also being bombed throughout this time.

She said: "Ten minutes after arriving in the village the fighting started and we came under fire from snipers. The rebels and the army were shooting at each other and the group I was with couldn't move. We were safe hiding behind a house but we couldn't even move a few metres to get into the house. We could see tracer bullets flying past. It wasn't scary as you just have to make yourself think logically, and we knew they couldn't reach us."

The trip had a profound effect on Monika, who says she was treated with immense kindness by refugees and rebels.

Monika said: "It was hard to listen to some of the stories. People had lost everything, including friends and family. Their homes were destroyed and they didn't know when the fighting would end. The people didn't understand why there needed to be a war and they just wanted it to end. One older woman I spoke to remembered the Second World War and thought she'd never have to live through something like that again. Sometimes hearing their stories was too much to bear so I just had to switch off and concentrate on the photos."

Monika is keen to go back to Ukraine to continue her work and may head out over the next couple of months. And when she graduates she intends becoming a war photographer.

"I'm really proud of the photos I took and I'm pleased to tell the stories of these people. When you hear about the people affected by war on the news you don't always remember that for every statistic there are stories behind every single person, and it's important to try and show this."

Pochemu? is on at the Creative Exchange from today until March 27 at Creative Exchange, 29 Constitution Street, Leith.

Admission is free.