

## MILITARY TOURISM AS A MECHANISM FOR REVITALIZING DEOCCUPIED RURAL TERRITORIES OF UKRAINE

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### Abstract

The article analyzes the current state, transformational processes, and development prospects of military tourism in Ukraine amid the full-scale war. Particular attention is paid to changes in the tourism industry in frontline regions that have suffered significant destruction due to hostilities and temporary occupation. Military tourism is considered a form of memorialization, a tool of public diplomacy, and a mechanism for local development. The study aims to identify the factors influencing the growth of military tourism, assess the readiness of local communities to host tourist groups, and examine the practices of tourism companies operating in de-occupied territories. Qualitative and quantitative research methods were applied: semi-structured interviews, regional sample observation, content analysis of open-ended responses, and statistical data analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics 21. The survey results of two respondent groups (local population and tourism business representatives) indicate the multifaceted perception of military tourism. On the one hand, it is associated with the opportunity to preserve the memory of wartime events, promote patriotic education, and stimulate economic revitalization. On the other hand, it raises concerns about the ethical boundaries of such activities, safety issues, and the privacy of those affected. The article also incorporates international experience and demonstrates how war-related tours shape a new interaction model between memory, business, and communities. Thus, military tourism in Ukraine is acquiring the features of an integrated socio-cultural practice that combines knowledge, empathy, commemoration, and economic support for affected communities.

**Keywords:** military tourism, revitalization, de-occupied territories, combat zone, post-war recovery.

### Introduction

Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine has posed new challenges for the tourism industry, related to its recovery and functioning on qualitatively different foundations. The most significant transformations in the tourism sector have occurred in frontline regions that have suffered severe destruction due to hostilities and occupation. In this context, the study of international experience in restoring tourism potential, the analysis of views from representatives of the tourism industry in war-affected local communities, and the development of scientifically grounded and practically oriented recommendations for sustainable tourism development in these areas become especially relevant.

In their research, Umut Uzar and Mucahid Samet Yilmaz emphasize tourism's importance in global economic recovery. The study's results highlight the key role of political stability in a country and the spread of democracy and freedom of speech in increasing tourist numbers, particularly in low-income countries (Uzar & Yilmaz, 2025).

Adam Weaver argues that market forces determine how the military-industrial complex in the United States increasingly shapes the tourism industry. The business-oriented military structure, which has created a massive destructive potential, has significantly influenced the provision and nature of tourism. Examination of certain aspects of the tourism sector reveals, at times, a paradoxical yet ultimately profitable combination of pleasure-oriented consumption and the byproducts of the military economy (Weaver, 2011).

The article by K. Tomej, I. Bilynets, and O. Koval provides a brief overview of the resilience of the tourism business during wartime in Ukraine (Tomej et al., 2023).

An exciting approach to analyzing the present through the lens of the past is found in the publication by Alena Pfoser and Guzel Yusupova. Combining perspectives from memory studies and the geopolitics of tourism, the article highlights how memory is employed by the Russian Federation in constructing geopolitical relations, shaping its behavior toward both neighboring and distant countries (Pfoser & Yusupova, 2022).

Kristof Tomej and Iana Bilynets explore the complex changes in Ukraine's tourism system during the first year of Russia's full-scale military invasion. The study's results demonstrate how the Ukrainian tourism system transformed to survive, altering its structure and functions. New functions beyond recreation include humanitarian efforts, rehabilitation, community, and nation-building, thus establishing tourism's significant and unique contribution to the country's socio-ecological system (Tomej & Bilynets, 2024).

Military tourism draws foreign visitors to Ukraine at the height of the conflict. While some view it as a way to raise global awareness and build a profitable business that indirectly supports Ukraine's resistance, others criticize it as a form of morbid voyeurism that capitalizes on the suffering of Ukrainians (War Tourism in Ukraine, 2025).

The goal of this research is to explore the current state, transformational processes, and development

prospects of military tourism in Ukraine during the full-scale war, taking into account the impact of hostilities on the tourism sector in frontline regions, the perspectives of local communities, and the practices of tourism industry representatives. The study also builds on analyzing international experiences in shaping memory policies and restoring tourism in post-conflict zones.

This objective determines the following tasks:

1. Conduct a retrospective analysis of the development of military tourism in Ukraine before February 24, 2022, considering historical, patriotic, and regional tourism initiatives.
2. Evaluate the structural changes in the tourism industry of Ukraine's frontline areas following Russia's full-scale aggression, including new tourism functions, such as humanitarian, memorial, and rehabilitative roles.
3. Examine the attitudes of residents in affected regions toward the idea of organizing military tourism, their willingness to engage with tourist groups, and the moral-ethical boundaries of such activities.
4. Study the practical experience and vision of tourism business representatives specializing in military tours, including types of tours, target audiences, logistical and legal barriers, and marketing approaches.

### Materials and Methods

As part of a comprehensive study examining the state and prospects of military tourism development in Ukraine, the research team employed a system of interrelated scientific methods that ensured an in-depth analysis of both quantitative and qualitative characteristics of this socio-cultural and economic phenomenon.

The assessment of the state of military tourism before 2022, as well as its evolution following the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, was carried out using methods of analysis and synthesis through an analytical generalization of previous studies, reports, and empirical data. This approach enabled a retrospective analysis and tracked the transformational changes in this activity area.

Semi-structured interviews were used to survey respondents, combining closed and open-ended questions. This allowed for the collection of statistical data and captured the emotional and motivational components of respondents' answers, which are critically important.

The study sample was based on a purposive observation method (using a geographical-regional approach), which ensured the geographical relevance of the research and enabled generalizations that consider the territorial context.

Open-ended responses from respondents, particularly representatives of the tourism business, were processed using the qualitative content analysis method. This enabled the identification of core values, perceptions, concerns, and expectations related to the development of military tourism and the detection of emerging thought trends within the professional community.

The research team also investigated the activities of tourism companies organizing military tours and the prospects for military tourism development in Ukraine. Additionally, the study examined the opinions of local populations in settlements under occupation and/or active combat zones, which have become destinations for military tours.

- The study gathered opinions from two groups of respondents: residents living in Ukrainian settlements located in zones of active hostilities and/or under occupation, currently attracting the attention of tourism companies organizing military tours. The first group included 180 respondents from six regions of Ukraine: Kyiv region – 52 people (28.9%); Kharkiv region – 42 people (23.3%); Sumy region – 30 people (16.7%); Chernihiv region – 23 people (12.8%); Mykolaiv region – 18 people (10.0%); Kherson region – 15 people (8.3%).
- Owners, managers of tourism businesses, and representatives of civil society organizations involved in military-patriotic activities and operated in Ukraine's frontline regions. The second group consisted of 35 respondents from six regions of Ukraine: Kyiv region – 9 people (25.7%); Kharkiv region – 6 people (17.1%); Mykolaiv region – 4 people (11.4%); Kherson region – 2 people (5.7%); Zaporizhzhia region – 3 people (8.6%); Dnipropetrovsk region – 6 people (17.1%); Chernihiv region – 3 people (8.6%); Sumy region – 2 people (5.7%).
- Data collection was conducted from June 2024 to December 2024. The survey was conducted using the interview method, and the collected data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics 21.

### Results and Discussion

Before Russia's full-scale invasion, military tourism in Ukraine was at an early stage of development and lacked a systemic or mass character. The term 'military tourism' was rarely used officially – more common were terms such as 'military-historical tourism', 'patriotic tourism', and 'museum tourism'. The absence of a national policy, a register of relevant sites, safety regulations, or ethical standards hindered the development of this sector. It evolved as a niche, primarily regional tourism, targeting historical, patriotic, or educational audiences (Hladkyi & Hashimov). The main participants in such tours were schoolchildren, students, veterans of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO), their families, military reenactors, and history enthusiasts. Foreign interest in military tours in Ukraine was limited but gradually grew among journalists, researchers, and members of the Ukrainian diaspora.

Between 1991 and 2022, the main sites of military tourism in Ukraine were places associated with World War II, the UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army) liberation struggle, and the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1921. Military equipment museums,

fortifications, battlefields, memorials, and mass graves were among the most visited locations. Examples include the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War (Kyiv), the 'Saur-Mohyla' Memorial, and defense lines in Volyn and the Carpathians (Tkachenko & Klymova, 2021).

Following the war in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, a new subtype emerged – modern military-patriotic tourism. Travel companies began offering informational tours to frontline areas, including Mariupol, Avdiivka, Sloviansk, and meetings with ATO/JFO veterans. Some volunteer initiatives and organizations also arranged tours for foreigners to the contact line.

Given the extensive destruction and war crimes committed by the Russian armed forces in many Ukrainian cities, the development of any form of tourism must be considered through the lens of

residents' willingness to host tourist groups. Not everyone wants their life and trauma turned into a tourist attraction. On abandoned homes, signs have appeared warning visitors not to enter or take photographs.

At the same time, the world must witness the crimes against humanity, the torture, and the atrocities committed by Russians on Ukrainian soil. Therefore, it is essential to show such sites to international visitors and compare such excursions to visits to Auschwitz. Considering this aspect, we conducted a study with the first group of respondents, focusing on the attitudes of residents in Ukrainian territories affected by combat or occupation toward providing tourism services in settlements that have become symbolically significant for the Ukrainian people. The results of this study are presented in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2.

**Table 1**

*Attitudes of residents toward the idea of Military Tourism in Ukrainian settlements that were in zones of active hostilities and/or under occupation*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Yes, %</b>	<b>No, %</b>
Do you support the idea of developing military tourism in your locality?	74	26
Are the residents of your locality ready to receive tourist groups in places where fighting or occupation occurred?	66	34
Do you consider it appropriate to compare visits to destroyed and affected cities with visits to Holocaust museums such as Auschwitz?	81	19
Are there places in your city/village that you would personally recommend for inclusion in a military tourism route?	96	4
Do you consider it morally acceptable for tourists to photograph and publish images of destroyed objects in your city/village?	63	37
Do you believe that tourist interest in war-affected cities and villages can help preserve the memory of the tragedies that occurred?	78	22
Should the state take into account the opinion of local residents when deciding to open tourist routes in affected communities?	95	5
Are you personally willing to share your story of living under occupation (or in a combat zone)?	69	31

Source: developed by the authors.

In response to the question 'What, in your opinion, should be the purpose of military tourism in your region?' – to which multiple answers could be selected – the respondents' answers were distributed as follows: Honoring the memory of the fallen – 100 responses informing the international community about Russia's crimes – 92%; patriotic education of children and youth – 86%; economic support for the community – 57%; other – 11%, Figure 1.

Respondents were also allowed to select multiple options in response to the question 'What conditions, in your opinion, must be strictly observed when organizing military tourism?', Figure 2.

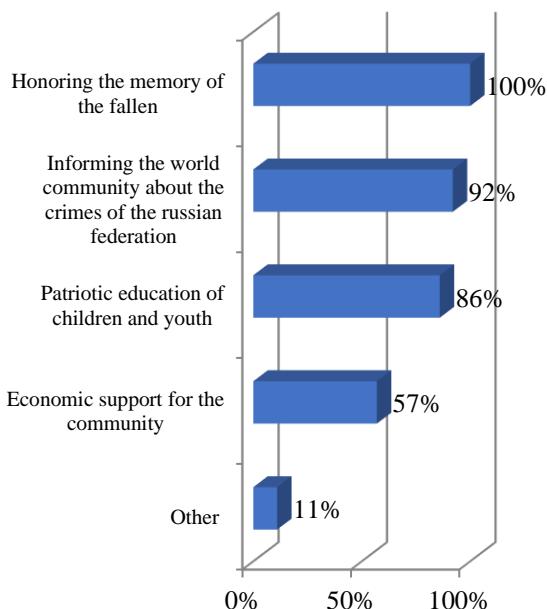
As a result of the large-scale destruction caused by military operations, many rural communities in Ukraine are now facing the need not only for physical reconstruction but also for socio-economic renewal. In

this context, military tourism is emerging as an effective mechanism of revitalization – a process of reinvigorating life in rural areas that experienced occupation or were located in combat zones.

In practice, military tourism is already positively impacting local communities. By creating routes passing through war-affected villages and settlements, tourism traffic is increasing, demand for local services (such as food, lodging, guiding, and handicrafts) is rising, and investments are being attracted to restore infrastructure. For example, in communities across the Mykolaiv, Chernihiv, and Kherson regions, early cases have already been recorded where sites of tragedy are being transformed into centers of military tourism, which is combined with restoring the social environment.

**Figure 1**

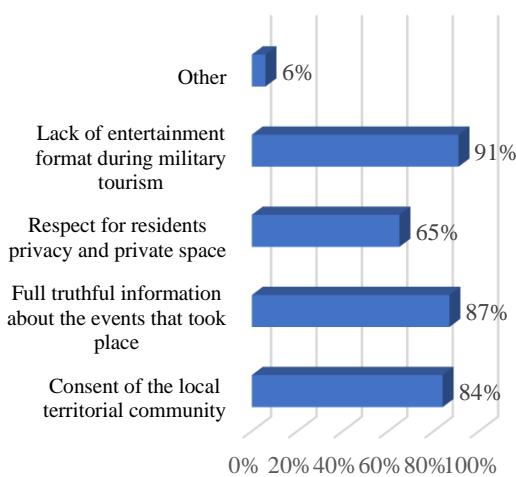
*The purpose of military tourism in Ukrainian settlements that were located in zones of active hostilities and /or occupation*



Source: compiled by the authors.

**Figure 2**

*Conditions required for organizing activities in residential areas that were located in zones of active hostilities and/or under occupation*



Source: compiled by the authors.

Beyond the economic impact, a crucial aspect is the psychological and social rehabilitation of the population through engagement in tourism activities. Residents increasingly act as guides, guesthouse hosts, consultants, or volunteers. In this way, a new local identity is formed, where people transition from being

perceived as 'victims of war' to active agents of revitalization. These foster social resilience, inner resilience, and motivation for further development.

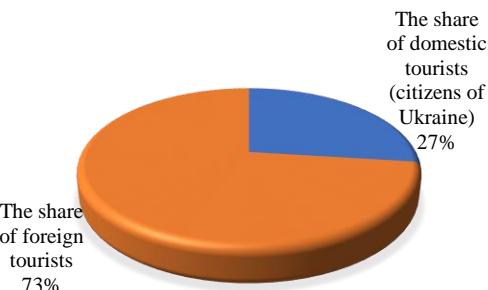
Alongside the sociological survey of the first group of respondents (i.e., the population of areas affected by active hostilities or occupation), a study was also conducted among the second group of respondents representing the tourism industry and public authorities. They were asked eight questions, and the results are summarized below.

In response to the question 'What formats of military tourism does your tourism company implement or support?' (multiple answers allowed), the respondents answered as follows: excursions to sites of battles and occupation – 63%; visits to memorials and museums – 24%; guided expeditions with veterans – 72%; educational and patriotic tours – 32%; volunteer-tourism projects – 18%; other – 13%.

Regarding the question 'Which categories of tourists are most interested in military tourism in your experience?', it was found that domestic tourists (Ukrainian citizens) made up 27% of the total volume of military tourism. In comparison, the share of foreign tourists was significantly higher – 73%, Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Categories of tourists interested in Military Tourism in Ukraine*



Source: compiled by the authors.

Domestic tourists included ordinary citizens, researchers, journalists, academics, veterans, family members, students, and schoolchildren. The foreign clientele of military tourism tours primarily consisted of politicians, journalists, researchers, military tourists, volunteers, civil society activists, and other interested individuals.

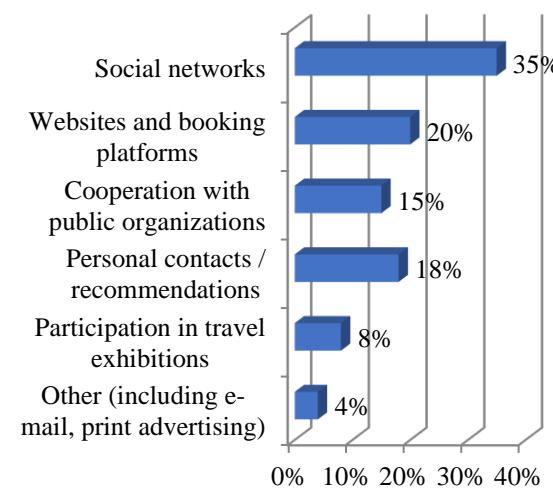
Tour prices start at \$120 and typically range to \$350, part of which tourism companies usually donate to support the Ukrainian army. The most expensive are 'Donor Tours' – their price reaches \$2,000. This project combines traditional tourism with a humanitarian mission, organized with a local guide in southern Ukraine (Mykolaiv region). Participants are first given a tour of the city of Mykolaiv, followed by medical training sessions in the afternoon. The next day, local guides take them to the deoccupied territories of the region, where they distribute aid to medical facilities or children's centers, help animal shelters, or provide heating equipment and building

materials. The tour program is customized based on the preferences of the client.

This format is considered too radical for most military tourists, with only one or two monthly bookings. However, the company offers these tour (Visit Ukraine, 2025) plans to enhance its marketing efforts and collaborates with international organizations to attract more tourists and thereby contributes to the recovery of de-occupied territories. Figure 4 presents the list of marketing tools used by Ukrainian tourism companies in organizing military tours.

**Figure 4**

*Marketing tools used by tourism companies to promote Military Tours (multiple answers allowed)*



Source: compiled by the authors.

Table 2 lists the main challenges tourism companies face when organizing military tours.

**Table 2**

*Main challenges experienced by tourism companies in organizing Military Tours (multiple answers allowed)*

Issue	Share of total responses, %
Security restrictions	100
Psychological sensitivity of the topic	96
Negative attitude from local residents	62
Legal or administrative barriers	49
Lack of infrastructure	71
Other	13

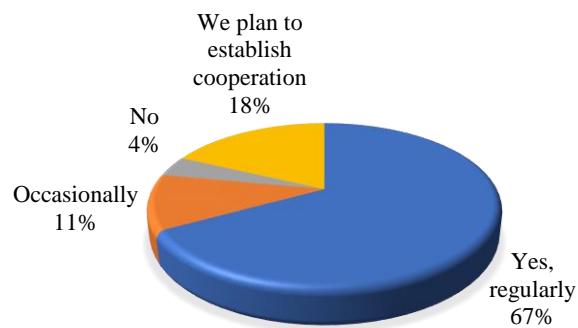
Source: compiled by the authors.

The authors also attempted to determine the widespread collaboration between tourism companies

and military unit leadership, local self-government bodies, and regional military administrations. The results are shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5**

*The level of cooperation between tourism companies and government bodies or military structures in organizing military tours*

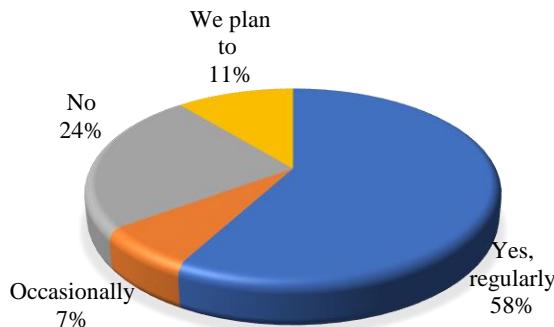


Source: compiled by the authors.

During the study, the research team found that Ukrainian tourism companies are working on developing new routes related to military tourism and are actively engaged in the search and training of guides for such tours. In this process, preference is given to veterans of the Russo-Ukrainian war, Figure 6.

**Figure 6**

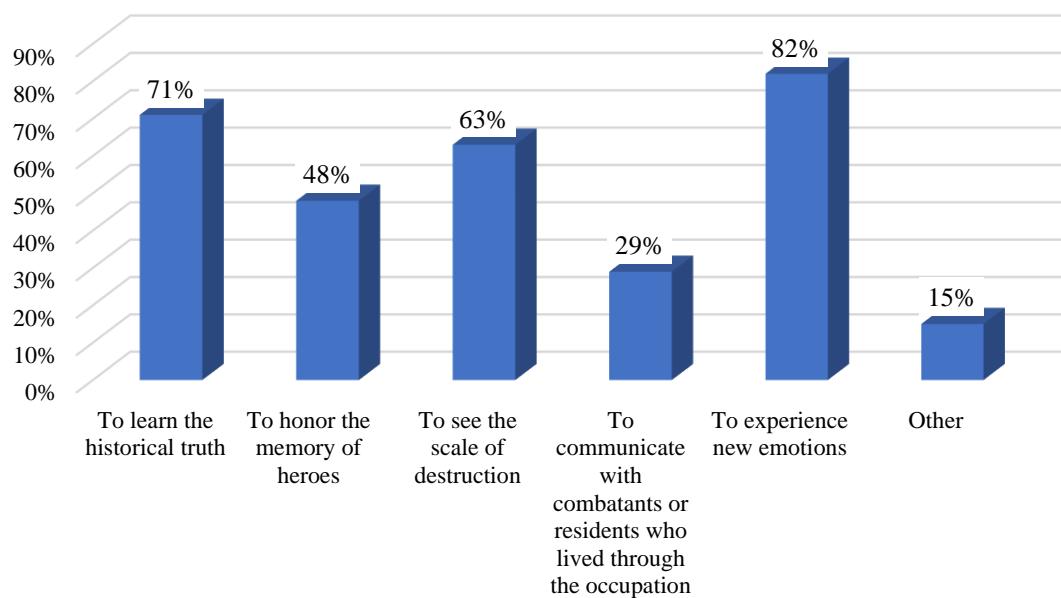
*Implementation of guide training activities for military tours by tourism companies*



The final question concerned the purpose of purchasing a military tour and the quests or interests expressed by potential military tourists when contacting tourism companies (multiple answers allowed), Figure 7.

The data indicate a multifactorial motivation among tourists interested in military tours to Ukraine. Since respondents were allowed to select multiple answers, the results reflect not a single dominant motive but a broad spectrum of expectations shaping demand for military tourism.

**Figure 7**  
*Main expectations of tourists regarding military tours*



Source: compiled by the authors.

The main drivers of interest in military tours include emotional engagement, the pursuit of knowledge, and the visual experience of war, which places a significant ethical responsibility on tourism companies. Military tourism is characterized by diverse motivations, ranging from humanitarian and memorial aspects to consumer-driven emotional experiences.

Organizers should consider the low level of readiness for direct interaction with victims, which requires a delicate approach to including elements of live communication in the tour program. The data confirm the relevance of developing educational, ethical, and interactive components within military tourism.

### Conclusions

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is the largest continental war since World War II. The global community seeks to understand how a war of this nature could unfold in the 21st century. And, of course, they want to pay tribute to those who died and those who defended Ukraine. Military tourism in Ukraine serves as a form of shock therapy for those who may have forgotten that the war in Ukraine is still ongoing.

1. Military tourism in Ukraine remains a niche segment, primarily appealing to those interested in military history and those working in related fields,

such as historians, ethnographers, and tour guides.

2. Before the full-scale war in 2022, military tourism in Ukraine was not institutionalized; lacked a systemic niche within the broader tourism industry, operated mainly through historical and volunteer initiatives, had no official status, methodology, or state regulation. However, recent events laid the foundation for a new model of tourism activity, emerging after 2022, and shaped by the experience of modern warfare, the patriotic demand of Ukrainian society, and growing international attention.

3. Given the increasing role of military tourism as a driver of local development, it is advisable to implement specialized national and regional support programs for tourism initiatives in de-occupied rural areas. Such support could include simplifying legal procedures, providing grants for tourism infrastructure development, training guides from among veterans and residents, and creating branded routes that integrate local histories into the national narrative of remembrance.

4. Thus, military tourism in Ukraine is gradually transforming from a tool of memorialization into a multi-purpose mechanism for sustainable development and revitalization of territories that experienced occupation and/or active hostilities. It is capable of harmonious combination of economic, social, and humanitarian objectives.

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