# Deminers battle deadly remnants of war to save lives in Ukraine



In the war-torn landscapes of Ukraine, a dedicated team of deminers is working relentlessly to rid the country of the deadly remnants of conflict. Nika Kokareva, 39, once a carefree diving instructor in the clear waters of Egypt, now leads a team of nine Ukrainian deminers for the British-based humanitarian organisation, Mines Advisory Group (MAG). Equipped with armoured vests and protective helmets, Nika and her team painstakingly comb through farmlands near Mykolaiv, a region less than 30 kilometres from the active frontline, seeking out unexploded cluster munitions, landmines, and bombs left scattered by invading forces.

MAG, headquartered in Manchester and active in 35 countries, began its operations in Ukraine in August 2022 to tackle what is believed to be the world’s largest minefield. An estimated two million explosive devices are thought to be scattered across Ukraine, posing an ongoing threat to civilians. The organisation estimates it will take about six months to clear the 46,000 square metres (roughly six and a half football pitches) of farmland currently under Nika’s team's scrutiny.

Speaking to the Daily Mail from the hazardous fields, Nika affirmed her commitment to the cause, stating, “I am prepared to devote the rest of my life to this work. It is in my blood as a Ukrainian to want to do something to contribute to the vital war effort. With this work I know I am saving lives and doing something good by helping people get back to their fields.” Her team follows a meticulous process involving trimming grass, scanning sections with metal detectors, and probing suspicious spots with metal wires before calling in specialists for potential mines.

The dangers these devices pose are underlined by tragic incidents such as that of Lidia Borova, a 70-year-old widow and gardener from Izium near the eastern frontline. On 24 July 2023, while mushroom foraging in a forest marked with warnings of landmines, she accidentally triggered a 'butterfly mine'—a small, butterfly-shaped mine banned under international law. The explosion resulted in the loss of her right foot and ankle, though she survived the incident, highlighting the ongoing human toll of unexploded ordnance.

Mykolaiv itself has seen casualties from mines continue into 2024, with four deaths recorded in the first quarter alone. Residents of this region, numbering almost 500,000, live under persistent threat from both mines and missile strikes, with disrupted access to essentials like clean water and electricity. Local schools have engaged with MAG volunteers to educate children on mine awareness, emphasising safety practices and recognition.

In an innovative approach to accelerate detection efforts, another NGO, Apopo, is training an elite squad of all-female mine detection dog teams in Ukraine's demining training centre in Mykolaiv. Among them is 23-year-old Daryna Hzomychenko, who, alongside her Malinois dog George, is preparing for deployment in August. These dogs are trained to scent explosives, scanning large areas much faster than human teams. Daryna shared with the Daily Mail her sense of duty: “If I find just one landmine then that means I will probably be saving someone's life.” Despite the personal risks and the anxiety of her family—her uncle is missing in action and her boyfriend serves on the frontline—Daryna remains focused on the mission.

The work extends to frontlines where military sapper teams face even greater dangers. Harley Whitehead, a 34-year-old volunteer originally from Burnley, UK, joined the Ukrainian volunteer army’s sapper team in June 2023. His team has successfully neutralised over 14,000 mines, though not without loss. Harley's close friend, an Australian volunteer, was killed by a booby-trapped landmine last year during a medical evacuation operation. Harley expressed his grief in an Instagram post, describing his friend’s death as “a hero’s death.” Despite injuries to colleagues, such as Oleg, who lost part of his leg to a butterfly mine and is now in rehabilitation, Harley remains committed, saying, “I completely believe in the work we are doing... I will never tire of fighting for what I believe in.”

Human Rights Watch has identified 13 different types of mines deployed by Russian forces, designed to maim or kill individuals rather than targeting vehicles. These devices can remain dormant for decades, posing ongoing hazards to communities. Experts anticipate that demining Ukraine will take many years and entail significant expense. Darren Cormack, CEO of MAG, observed that the dangers from mines would endure “long after the guns have fallen silent.” The dedicated efforts of people like Nika, Daryna, Harley, and their teams continue to offer hope for a safer future as they work under extremely hazardous conditions to reclaim and secure Ukraine’s land.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.maginternational.org/whats-happening/mag-awarded-8-million-for-ukraine-operations/> - MAG has been awarded an $8 million grant by the United States Government to clear landmines and unexploded ordnance in Ukraine, as well as to deliver risk education to communities affected by the conflict.
2. <https://apopo.org/ukraine-landmine-detection-dogs-accreditation/> - APOPO's Ukraine team achieved certification from the National Mine Action Center (NMAC) Chernihiv to conduct Technical Survey and Mine Detection Dog operations, enabling them to begin conducting Technical Surveys across contaminated areas in collaboration with MAG.
3. <https://apopo.org/press-release-eu-funds-technical-survey-dogs-to-clear-ukraine/> - The European Union funded a €2 million grant for the deployment of sixteen Belgian Malinois Technical Survey Dogs and eight Ukrainian women handlers to clear landmines and unexploded ordnance across Ukraine, in collaboration with MAG.
4. <https://www.maginternational.org/whats-happening/mag-awarded-2-million-ukraine/> - MAG was awarded a $2 million grant to clear landmines in Ukraine, conduct Explosive Ordinances Risk Education (EORE) training for 10,000 beneficiaries, and support the Ukrainian Deminers Association in developing EORE content and training deminers.
5. <https://www.maginternational.org/whats-happening/mag-and-ukrainian-government-sign-agreement/> - MAG and the Ukrainian Ministry of Energy signed a Memorandum of Understanding to clear landmines and unexploded ordnance from energy facilities and their adjacent territories, facilitating the safe reconstruction of critical energy infrastructure.
6. <https://apopo.org/what-we-do/detecting-landmines-and-explosives/where-we-work/apopo-in-ukraine/> - APOPO's involvement in Ukraine officially launched in 2023, with scoping missions taking place and a permanent presence beginning from January 2024, in collaboration with MAG to address the urgent need for clearance of regions affected by explosive contamination.
7. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14658931/women-volunteer-risk-life-landmines-laid-Russian-army.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data