

Ukraine's Hare Krishnas survive war by Zoom and serving neighbors

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The Hare Krishna temple in Kyiv, Ukraine, before the current war with Russia. (Photo courtesy of Acyuta Priya)

With no time even to wash her clothes as the Russians approached Mariupol a year ago, in southern Ukraine, Kalakeli Devi Dasi fled her native city with only a small suitcase filled with her dirty laundry. She also took with her a letter she was unable to deliver to her mother before Kalakeli and her friends joined a large convoy of cars heading southwest to the city of Berdyansk.

“It was very scary and we did not know what to expect,” said Kalakeli of the escape. “We saw much destruction. I saw burnt and torn bodies. It was a terrible and frightening sight. . . . We kept chanting the holy names of the Lord the whole way.”

Kalakeli is one of an estimated 15,000 Hare Krishnas who call Ukraine home, many of whom have continued their daily practice and serve their neighbors, even as several of their roughly 30 ISKCON temples have been damaged or destroyed and their communities scattered.

The Hare Krishna movement, whose formal name is the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, or [ISKCON](#), has been active in Eastern Europe since 1971, when ISKCON's founder, [A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada](#), traveled to the Soviet Union in the company of [Shyamsundar Das](#), a close friend of Beatle George Harrison.

[Prabhupada](#) arrived in New York in 1965 from Calcutta to spread faith in the Hindu deity Lord Krishna. Related to the nearly 500-year-old Krishna consciousness movement in India, ISKCON is a [monotheistic tradition](#) within Hinduism whose main spiritual text is the [Bhagavad Gita](#). Its adherents practice vegetarianism and meditation, Bhakti yoga, and public chanting of Krishna's names, and in the US it is best known for its groups of saffron-clad devotees chanting mantras in public spaces or passing out literature on the street.

Having planted the seeds of ISKCON in the US, Prabhupada went to the Soviet Union in 1971 to teach the faith. From there, the theology spread underground by word of mouth, despite the Communist Party's anti-religious agenda, eventually finding its way to Ukraine.

Other Hare Krishnas from abroad followed Prabhupada to continue to nurture the movement in the former Soviet Union. One of them, Niranjana Swami, a convert to ISKCON from Massachusetts, entered the USSR under the guise of a tourist in the late 1980s but broke away from his tour at night to lecture in small, packed apartments, teaching as many as 100 people on an evening.

"I felt these people were so sincerely looking for God, because it had been suppressed in their lives for so long by the regime, that I felt the regime actually did much to expand God consciousness," said Niranjana Swami. "Anything beyond the party line was, to them, seen as a potential message from the divine."

Now 70 and a governing body commissioner for ISKCON, Niranjana Swami oversees communities in Moldova, Belarus, Lithuania, and Ukraine, traveling widely and visiting Ukraine when he can.

When the war broke out in Ukraine in 2022, local devotees turned to Niranjana Swami for support and guidance, and he began lecturing via Zoom. His collection of lectures about the war were recently compiled and published in a book titled, [*Krishna Protects His Devotees*](#).

Niranjana Swami also helped mobilize the worldwide ISKCON community to raise thousands of dollars for those suffering from the effects of the war. [*Share Your Care*](#), based in Kyiv, aims to help Hare Krishnas and their families relocate from conflict zones, supplement their loss of income, and distribute food. Since the war began, an estimated 2 million plates of food have been distributed by ISKCON to Ukrainians in need.

The war has claimed the lives of at least [*five Hare Krishna devotees*](#), and devastation in Kramatorsk and Bakhmut has cost the local communities its temples. In the face of this violence, deities have been relocated while larger temple rooms have been closed and their basements converted into bomb shelters.

Temple services and programs have resumed in cities in safer locales, while on the streets of Kyiv and other cities west of there, public chanting and book distribution have also resumed.

Much of this activity is overseen by Acyuta Priya, ISKCON's zonal supervisor for Ukraine. Born to a staunchly Communist family when Ukraine was still a Soviet state, he joined the underground movement in 1980. "Of course I hated the Communist regime, because it wasn't allowing me to dedicate my life to God," he said.

The war has ended his normally itinerant existence; he is currently staying in a contact's basement sauna in Chernivtsi, though he travels to various cities when possible. According to Acyuta Priya, 71 of the nearly 100 Hare Krishna community groups are still operating, serving Hare Krishnas and their neighbors. He said they continue to see new people joining the movement.

"People just come, they want to help and they have this volunteer spirit," said Acyuta Priya. "I will tell you honestly, I am native Ukrainian, here from my birth, and I have never seen people be so united. It was unexpected for me."

He attributes the Hare Krishnas' resilience to their faith. "You have to understand that the Lord controls everything, and we need to see this war as an opportunity to raise up and to grow, and to grow mostly by giving and not just be in survival mode .

. . There is a need to dedicate yourself to a higher cause, and it should be practical, not just theoretical,” said Acyuta Priya.

But some, like Kalakeli, have found homes outside the country. She moved frequently during the early weeks of the invasion, moving from Berdyansk to Zaporizhia, then to Dnipro, before finally leaving Ukraine and finding shelter with a community of fellow devotees in Denmark.

For nearly two months, Kalakeli was unable to contact or locate her mother, sister, and nephews back in Mariupol.

“My life became just an existence. Only ‘kirtan’ (devotional singing) dulled my pain for a while,” said Kalakeli. “Totally desperate, I began to have thoughts of going back and looking for my family.”

In April of last year, she was finally able to connect with her family via phone. They had all managed to stay safe back in Mariupol, but their home was destroyed in the war. They recently joined Kalakeli in Copenhagen.

“The war taught us a lot,” said Kalakeli. “The main thing I have learned is that no one can take God away from me. In such difficult situations, there was nothing else we could do but trust in Krishna. Love for God will end all wars. We offer it to everyone and want nothing in return.” —Religion News Service