

EXCLUSIVE

By Lord Ashcroft IN KYIV

His curriculum vitae doesn't resemble that of any other politician in the world. To start with, he has a colourful family background as the son of a Soviet dissident. Then his role for a year before being appointed as a Ukrainian Minister was serving in the military – tasked with killing as many Russian soldiers as possible.

Meet Oksen Lisovyi, a peace-loving teacher and academic who joined the Army as a volunteer. He is now Ukraine's Education and Science Minister, tasked with the challenging role of providing schooling for his nation's children while war rages.

Quietly spoken but with an air of authority, Oksen, 52, agreed to meet me at a central Kyiv hotel to discuss his passion and sense of duty for his country.

Since the start of the all-out war in February 2022, he has been willing to serve in any capacity he was asked to fulfil to help Ukraine's cause.

Like his father, Oksen has a hatred of Russia's brutal, authoritarian regime.

The Minister explained to me his main motivation for serving in the military: "War is terrible but to me fighting for truth, values and dignity is more important than my life. If we allowed Russia to seize



SERVICE: Oksen Lisovyi on the front line with fellow troops

our country, there would be no freedom, no free speech, no democracy. They just want to cancel everything that I love.

"I wanted to take an active role in the war, not stay away from the frontline."

Oksen was born in Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, in July, 1972.

He is the son of exiled Soviet-born Vasyl Lisovyi and his wife Vera, a Ukrainian philologist – someone who studies the history of languages – who represented her husband during his trial for his dissident views. Oksen did not meet his father until he was five years old due to his imprisonment in Siberia and elsewhere.

A graduate of Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts, he worked as a teacher, fencing coach and senior youth worker.

In 2010 he was appointed Director of the National Center "Minor Academy of Sciences of Ukraine".

After Russia illegally seized Crimea and other parts of eastern Ukraine in 2014, he began quietly preparing for all-out war.

Back then, aged 41, he started getting fit and underwent regular weekend military training with special forces and other groups.

Like many intellectuals, he accepted one day he might have to fight, and even die,



Oksen Lisovyi's military role took him into some of his war-torn country's most dangerous killing grounds. Now he has taken responsibility for its 3.7 million children – one in ten of whom can't safely go to school because of Russian shelling and drone strikes

I PUT DOWN MY SNIPER RIFLE TO SERVE AS UKRAINE'S EDUCATION MINISTER

Pictures: COPYRIGHT OKSEN LISOVYI AND LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC

for his country and its values. "From my childhood I understood that Russia was the enemy. I also understood the DNA of Russians and their desire for expansion."

ON FEBRUARY 24, 2022, the day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Oksen knew it was time to put his military training into action and he soon volunteered for, and was accepted into, the

95th Air Assault Brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. A powerful man with a long, dark, bushy, greying beard, Oksen is 6ft 1in and weighs more than 15 stone.

For the best part of a year, his main role was that of a medium-range sniper, firing and, if successful, killing or wounding Russian soldiers. He used a rifle from a range of approximately quarter of a mile.

He served along the frontline, defending eastern cities and towns such as Sloviansk, Izium and Kramatorsk.

Today speaking through an interpreter,

Oksen recalled: "No one knows how they will react in an intense combat, when the artillery shells arrive and bullets are flying all around you.

"Some people freeze, some people panic, some people get very emotional.

"I first saw action in a village near Sloviansk. In some ways I was more worried about my reaction than the shelling!

"But I was lucky to be with a great unit and the commander gave me some good tips on how to act.

"All I can say is that I was satisfied with



DEVASTATION: Oksen in full battle uniform during a military operation; below, a Ukrainian classroom after a Russian attack

times you feel you no longer have enough strength to do your job well but you have to carry on.

"The saddest times are when your comrades, including two people I was close to, are killed. It just felt so unfair that the best men had died."

The Armed Forces discourages soldiers from detailing how many enemy servicemen each have killed and Oksen respects that request.

"In my civilian life, I would feel terrible if I hurt someone in a road accident or something similar.

"But in war it is different – your main goal is to protect civilians and to stay in your position even under fire.

"Those attacking you have a different state of mind, acting like zombies. My targets, especially at night, felt like I was aiming at red dots that were 300 to 500 metres away. It was my job and I didn't feel sad [for the people he killed]."

Oksen ended his frontline role in March 2023 when President Volodymyr Zelensky asked him to be Ukraine's Education and Science Minister.

He felt he could make a difference in this role and so he accepted the invitation.

"I feel satisfied when I work with children and students and when I am being creative," he said.

Today 3.7 million children receive a school education in Ukraine, compared with 4.2 million before the war.

MANY mothers and their children have left the country. An estimated 12% of the children left in Ukraine are educated online because the Russian army shells civilian infrastructure, especially in frontline and border areas.

Schools have frequently come under direct or indirect attack, hit by missiles and drones and many children are learning in basements. "I am making many changes to the national curriculum," he said.

"The war touches children and youths of all ages from kindergarten to university students. I want them all to understand the importance of values and integrity.

"There is a lot for me to do in a short time under difficult conditions."

However, Oksen, who is married with two grown-up sons, including one serving in the military, keeps in touch with his old comrades from his unit.

"Some of these brave men fought in the Kursk region [Russian territory held by Ukraine until recently]. One man I liked and admired was called Sergiy. He had no combat experience yet he learned quickly and now he is a talented officer who has been decorated for his bravery.

"Others I fought with have been demobilised after being wounded.

"I help these men with their education, looking for a new job and searching for a new pathway in life. But it is also true that this war, like previous ones, has claimed the lives of many of our nation's bravest and most talented people."

My final question to Oksen is: whether he found his role as a frontline soldier or as a politician more rewarding?

He gave me a wry smile, paused and replied: "I feel most satisfied when I work with youth but, unfortunately, as a minister, I find myself spending too much time with politicians and dealing with paperwork.

"But my current role is my mission and I want to succeed."

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how I dealt with everything and gradually got used to life on the frontline."

His most frightening moment came when he and his comrades were subjected to a heavy Russian bombardment of artillery shells, tank fire and gunfire – one that lasted several hours – when they were in a frontline village.

"You sometimes feel it's impossible to stay alive in such conditions, but we were lucky and survived," he admitted. "Other

