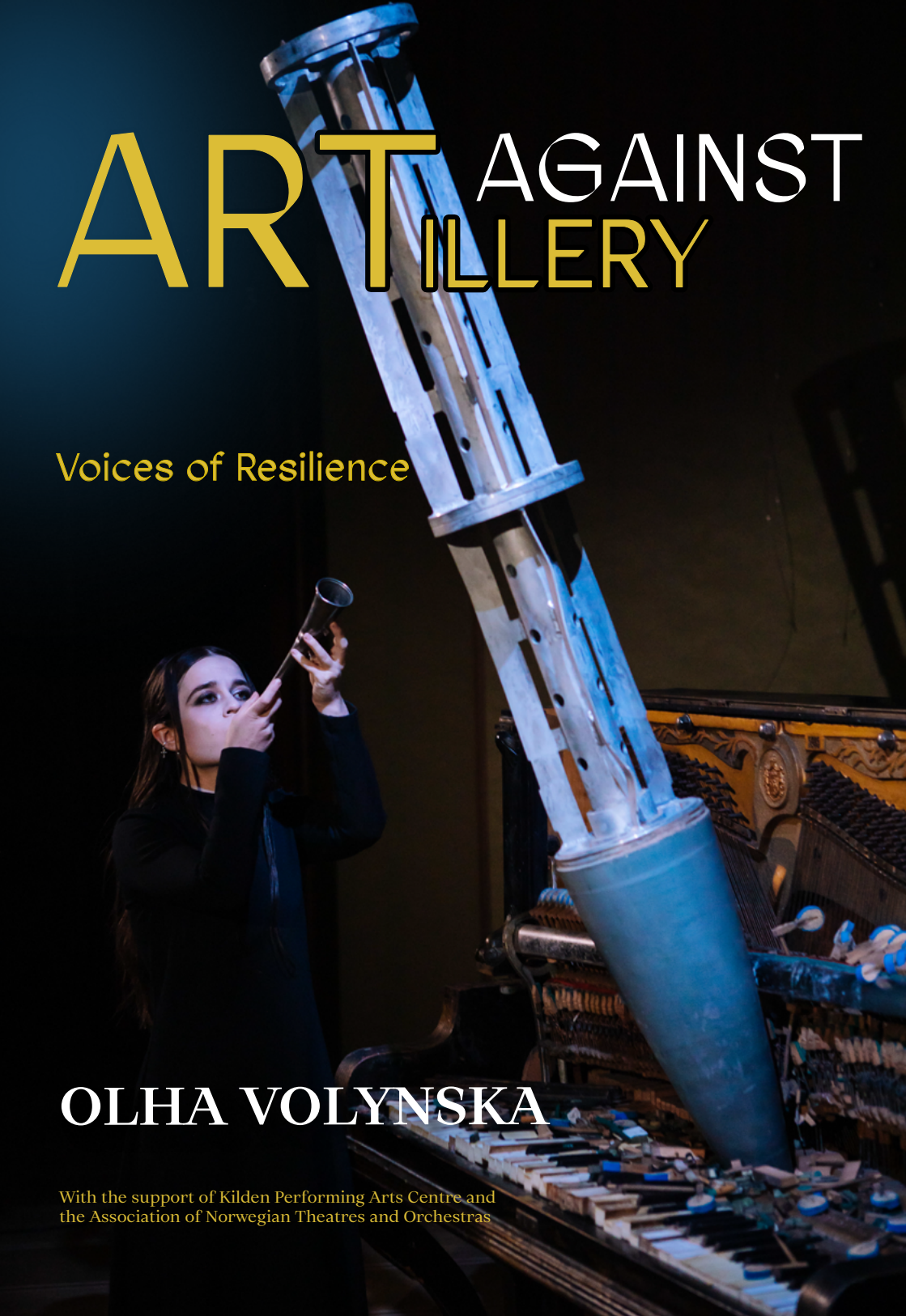

With the support of Kilden Performing Arts Centre and
the Association of Norwegian Theatres and Orchestras

ART AGAINST ARTILLERY
OLHA VOLYNSKA

Art against Artillery: Voices of Resilience by Olha Volynska explores the transformative power of art in times of war. It highlights how art becomes not only a source of resilience but also a means of survival. In the face of destruction, Ukrainian artists fight to preserve their national identity and culture, turning art into a vital tool for healing and resistance. This book was made possible through the kind support of Kilden Performing Arts Centre and the Association of Norwegian Theatres and Orchestras.

Olha Volynska is a multi-award-winning journalist, documentary filmmaker and human rights advocate from Dnipro, Ukraine. She has authored five books, including Wie der Krieg uns verändert (How War Changes Us), published in 2023 by Verlag Klingenberg in Graz, Austria.

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Cover photo: Marichka Shtyrbulova, opera GENESIS.
Kyiv, Khanenko Museum, 2022
Photo by Nastya Telikova

ART AGAINST ILLERY

Voices of Resilience

OLHA VOLYNSKA

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FOREWORD

Art in Warfare

As of spring 2025, the Ukrainian people still are engaged in a heroic struggle to preserve their land and democracy. Throughout three years of conflict, cultural institutions in Ukraine have played a crucial role in fostering identity, unity, and resilience.

Kilden Performing Arts Centre voiced its solidarity early on, together with fellow members of the Association of Norwegian Theatres and Orchestras (NTO).

This book has been created in collaboration between Ukrainian journalist Olha Volynska, Kilden Performing Arts Centre and the Association of Norwegian Theatres and Orchestras (NTO). It is a powerful and poignant account from behind the scenes of the Ukrainian cultural landscape—a landscape shaped by an ongoing full-scale war. This work exemplifies commendable and vital journalism, featuring descriptions and eyewitness accounts that repeatedly engage the reader.

Dialogue is a key element for those of us who produce performing arts. This applies whether the art we present is expressed through words and movement or through music. Our dialogue exists both with the audiences that occasionally fill our halls and with the society and world in which we all coexist.

We are accustomed to the myriad emotions and sometimes practical challenges that emerge behind our stage curtains and which

require creative responses and swift solutions. However, we have perhaps never gained insight into a backdrop characterised by such brutal and demanding realities as the one described by author and journalist Olha Volynska in this book.

Thus, we felt it essential to disseminate this timely, topical account from her and the many resilient cultural workers in Ukraine as swiftly as possible. It is an account filled with narratives that will surprise many.

From the bloody and brutal full-scale war inflicted upon Ukraine, artistic expression continues to flourish and evolve. This resilience emerges because individuals desire and need this expression to lead fulfilling lives—a sentiment underscored by poignant and committed statements from cultural workers engaged in a daily battle against death, violence, torture, and dire material conditions.

Read this account and allow yourself to be moved.

Kristiansand/Oslo, Norway, March 2025

Harald Furre
CEO
Kilden Performing Arts Centre

Morten Gjelten
CEO
Association of Norwegian
Theatres and Orchestras

War destroys; art heals

This book is about the rebirth and healing power of art amidst the chaos, pain and destruction of war. Who could have imagined that, in the 21st century, one aggressive state would erase entire cities from the world map with impunity—along with homes, peaceful gardens, innocent lives, and people's dreams?

It was clear from the very start: this war is about values, not territory —a battle between the defenders of those values and those who seek to destroy them, to erase the very essence of Ukrainian identity. The systematic destruction of Ukrainian culture has long been an integral part of Russian imperial policy—first under the empire, then the Soviet regime, and now evidenced by Russia's full-scale war. With each new generation in Ukraine, people have suffered in one way or another, and this has imbued the country with a sense of defiance. And so it is no surprise that a cultural renaissance is unfolding in the midst of the war. Defying all logic, Ukraine is experiencing a flourishing revival in literature, poetry, music, theatre and visual arts.

No longer merely an escape or an emotional refuge, art has become an act of defiance and a source of resilience in the darkest of times. Culture serves as a form of spiritual therapy, capable of healing wounds, helping to make sense of collective trauma and documenting the truth for future generations. If war brings death and destruction, art is a source of healing and revitalisation. It is, in short, a means of survival.

"Falsehood is no longer forgiven, especially in art," says filmmaker Taras Tomenko. This resolute sincerity and purity of expression now define every sphere of Ukrainian culture, which continues to evolve despite daily threats. Theatres sell out, museums are packed and poets fill stadiums. "Coming to the theatre now feels like visiting a healing spring that leaves you transformed. This is how we preserve our identity and humanity," says Oleksandr Knyha, the director of the Mykola Kulish Regional Musical and Drama Theatre in Kherson.

Even amid relentless shelling and daily loss of life, new bookstores are opening across Ukraine—not just as places to buy books, but as beacons of warmth, human connection, and resilience. The war meant to erase Ukrainian identity has instead become the catalyst for its rebirth. When Russia destroys Ukraine's power stations, plunging the country in darkness, Ukrainians visit exhibitions with torches. As Russia's missiles sow death, Kyiv composer Roman Hryhoriv picks up a fragment of one and plays music on it before world leaders: "Since the start of the full-scale war, we have been reborn as a society. Our culture is being revived. But our rebirth emerges from death."

War helped us to find our resolve to no longer tolerate the erasure of our historical memory: the process of decolonisation has swept across the entire country. We are rediscovering vast layers of our own history and culture, and rejecting all that is imposed, artificial, or false. The colonial, imperial nature of this war is most evident in the targeted destruction of culture. "Without understanding this, one might think this was just a war over territory, as if two neighbouring countries were merely negotiating borders," says former PEN Ukraine Executive Director Tetyana Teren.

Today, Ukrainians are fighting not only for their land but for their art, their museums, their monuments and their history. Since the start of the invasion, Russia has destroyed or damaged over 1300 cultural sites, looted more than 40 museums and stolen tens of thousands of priceless artefacts—cultural plundering on a scale unseen since World War II.

This book brings together the personal stories of Ukrainian artists—musicians, composers, painters, filmmakers, and theatre-makers—who demonstrate how art helps people endure the seemingly insurmountable. "It feels like you die every day," says musician Marian Pyrih, "and are reborn each morning to soldier on."

A century ago, the Soviet totalitarian regime brutally destroyed Ukraine's artistic and intellectual elite, known as the Executed Renaissance. Now as then, today's Ukrainian writers, artists, and cultural figures face persecution, repression and extermination. But this time, they are not willing to await their fate and are choosing to fight

the aggressor with weapons and words.

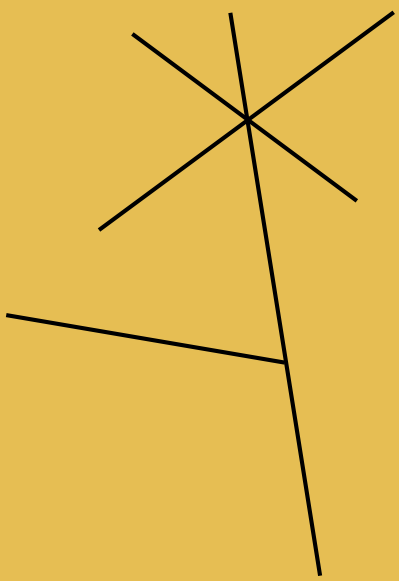
This book is also a tribute to the hundreds of Ukrainian artists who have lost their lives to this war. Among them, children's writer Volodymyr Vakulenko, who was executed simply because he refused to renounce his identity; conductor Yuriy Kerpatenko, who was murdered in occupied Kherson for refusing to conduct a propaganda concert; and writer Viktoria Amelina, whose life was cut short by a Russian missile. And yet, an artist lives as long as they are remembered. And in times of war, memory becomes the greatest of treasures and the most powerful of weapons. Art, in documenting, reflecting, healing and infusing life with new meaning, preserves their memory. The task now is to prevent all that we have preserved at such great cost from being lost and forgotten.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to the Kilden Performing Arts Centre and the Association of Norwegian Theatres and Orchestras, who were among the first to recognise how vital it is for Ukrainian artists performing during the war to be seen and heard by the world.

Olha Volynska, author

Mykola Kulish Regional Musical and
Drama Theatre of Kherson:

WHAT WE HOLD IN OUR HEARTS WILL NEVER DIE



From the very first days of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian theatres faced extraordinary challenges: they were forced to reckon with survival and adapt to the harsh realities of war. While many theatres suspended their activities, others transformed into volunteer hubs and bomb shelters. Ukrainian theatres became places where people received food, clothes, and medicines. Some, like the Les Kurbas Theatre in Lviv, became a temporary home for internally displaced people when the full-scale invasion began. While many artists fled abroad, others stayed behind to support their communities with their art. Mykola Kulish Regional Musical and Drama Theatre in Kherson continues its work despite daily bombardment. Dedicated theatre workers perform plays in bomb shelters, providing the city's residents with a source of strength and inspiration, helping them overcome fear and hopelessness.

Mykola Kulish Regional Musical and Drama Theatre. Photo by Oleksandr Kornyakov

Despite constant danger and staff shortages, the Kherson Theatre continues to stage performances, concerts, exhibitions, and therapeutic workshops. It remains the cultural hub of a city that is still home to around 300,000 people.

From the outset of the war, many Ukrainian theatres have not ceased their operations. Performing in shelters, they have staged performances for free with the aim of bolstering people's morale. Ukrainian actors have performed in metro stations, hospitals, on the streets and for soldiers on the frontlines.

During the eight months in which the Kherson Drama Theatre was under Russian control, the occupying forces sought to transform it into a Russian institution. Theatre director Oleksandr Knyha was abducted from his home and urged to collaborate with the occupiers. He refused, managing to escape the city with his family on the 40th day of the occupation.

Shortly thereafter, the exiled Knyha restarted the theatre's work, despite its actors being scattered across various Ukrainian cities and countries. The theatre hosted premieres to full houses in Kyiv, Lviv, Mykolaiv, and Kropyvnytskyi. After Kherson was liberated, the theatre resumed operations with a poster reading: "We Are Back. We Love You and Await You!"

Oleksandr Knyha was on a theatre tour in Lviv when we had the opportunity to talk. Despite his busy schedule, he agreed to an interview. As rehearsals for the evening's performance continued, he also remained engaged in organising humanitarian aid for Kherson residents, who continue to live under constant threat. Knyha admits that he has not had a day off since the war began nearly three years ago.

Dedicating his life to theatre, Knyha assembled a formidable team of drama elites to bring his regional theatre to the forefront of modern theatrical art. Before the war, the Kherson Drama Theatre staged up to 40 performances a month, serving as an artistic hub for local artists, writers, poets, and playwrights.

Despite chronic underfunding, Knyha found ways to keep his theatre afloat, by establishing a charitable board with local busi-

ness leaders, bankers, and entrepreneurs. Thanks to their contributions, the theatre's employees were able to receive stipends and awards and could work under improved conditions.

When the full-scale invasion began, Knyha was at home in Oleshky, 20 kilometres from Kherson. Like most Ukrainians, he did not expect their neighbouring state to launch a military operation on this scale. As Russian forces advanced into Ukraine, taking control of the Antonivsky Bridge in Kherson, Knyha and his family found themselves under occupation. It soon became clear that the situation would not resolve quickly.

Oleksandr Knyha has led the Mykola Kulish Drama Theatre for 35 years. Photo by Oleksandr Kornyakov

O.K.: It was a shock for us. No one expected full-scale hostilities and the occupation of Ukrainian cities. But it was clear to us that we couldn't allow this to happen. Every evening, local men organised themselves into territorial defence groups as a response to a perceived threat. At that time, there were no police, prosecutors or Security Service—they all had fled. So the residents themselves organised street patrols. We gathered 25 men of different ages who knew each other and made a duty schedule.

Kherson fiercely resisted the Russian invasion from the very first days of occupation. Thousands of people gathered for rallies, chanting "Kherson is Ukraine." At one rally, a resident of the city climbed onto a Russian tank and raised the Ukrainian flag.

"Forty heavily armed soldiers, masked and armed with rifles, turned our house upside down."

Oleksandr Knyha lived with his wife and children in a house he had built himself. The family witnessed Russian military columns moving through Oleshky towards Kherson. To hinder Russian forces, local men took down road signs and removed street name plates and house numbers.

O.K.: What struck me back then was that a family who had fled Mariupol was patrolling the streets with us. They had travelled 150 kilometres on flat tyres and with broken windows. And here they were, on duty with us: the father and his two sons. That's when we gained the confidence that we wouldn't ever surrender. Why should we obey this "horde" that came to subdue us with arms? Maybe that works in Russia, but not here.

In the second month of occupation, armed Russian soldiers arrived at Oleksandr's house in three armoured vehicles and jeeps marked with the "Z" symbol. They surrounded the house, and what followed felt like a Hollywood movie.

> O.K.: It was surreal: 40 heavily armed soldiers in masks and armed with rifles turned our house upside down. Everything looked like a "special operation". I don't know what they were looking for, but they claimed I had organised protests in Kherson. I tried to explain that people here are used to expressing their opinions freely, but the Russians couldn't understand that.

Oleksandr hadn't been to Kherson for the entire first month of the occupation. He wanted to go several times, but his family stopped him, pointing out how dangerous it would be for someone like him, a pro-Ukrainian figure. "They would have arrested me at the first checkpoint. So I stayed in Oleshky." By early April 2022, Russian forces had fully suppressed peaceful protests in Kherson through dispersals, threats, arrests, and by kidnapping activists.

> O.K.: The kidnapping happened in front of my wife, children, and grandmother. They just sat there, silently watching, their eyes filled with hatred. Then the Russian soldiers told my wife, "Pack his things, we're taking him!"
> I was brought to Kherson and thrown into a foul-smelling, empty prison cell. A Russian soldier opened the window and asked, "Who are you?" I said, "I'm the theatre director." "Wow, why you?" he asked. "I don't know ..." "Well, if you behave well, we'll feed you ..."
> They pulled a filthy hat over my eyes and took me to be interrogated. They pulled off the hat, photographed me, both front and profile, like a criminal, and took my fingerprints. The interrogations lasted from noon until late into the evening. The conversations were pointless: "We have

information that you organised protests and handed out money to people!" I said, "Are you kidding me, what money? I haven't been to any protests in Kherson. There was a protest in Oleshky, but I didn't hand out money; I gave flowers to women because it was the 8th of March." It was clear to me that their goal was to intimidate me and force me to cooperate.
Later, when it got dark outside, they said, "Oh, turns out you have so many friends." Only later did I understand what they meant. After my abduction, my colleagues and friends across Ukraine raised the alarm. The Eurasian Theatre Association, of which I'm the head and a co-founder, reacted. The Mayor of Istanbul called the Turkish Minister of Culture, who, I was told, even contacted the President of Turkey. Theatre professionals from around the world came to my defence.

The international uproar sparked off by the arrest of the Kherson theatre's director, resulted in his release. Russians put a hat over his head so that he couldn't see where he had been taken, dropped him off in the city centre and told him to count to ten before taking it off. The curfew was about to begin and being on the streets at that time of night could spell death, with Russian soldiers shooting anyone still out and about, whether man or woman.

O.K.: I panicked because the Russians were terrified of partisans and shot at everything that moved during curfew. I was lucky that my friends lived nearby, and I stayed with them for the night.

After Oleksandr Knyha refused to cooperate with Russian forces, the theatre's former security guard was appointed as its new director. Knyha was asked to resume at least the orchestra's work, but after consulting with the musicians, he replied that they would play the Ukrainian national anthem. After that, the questions stopped for a while.

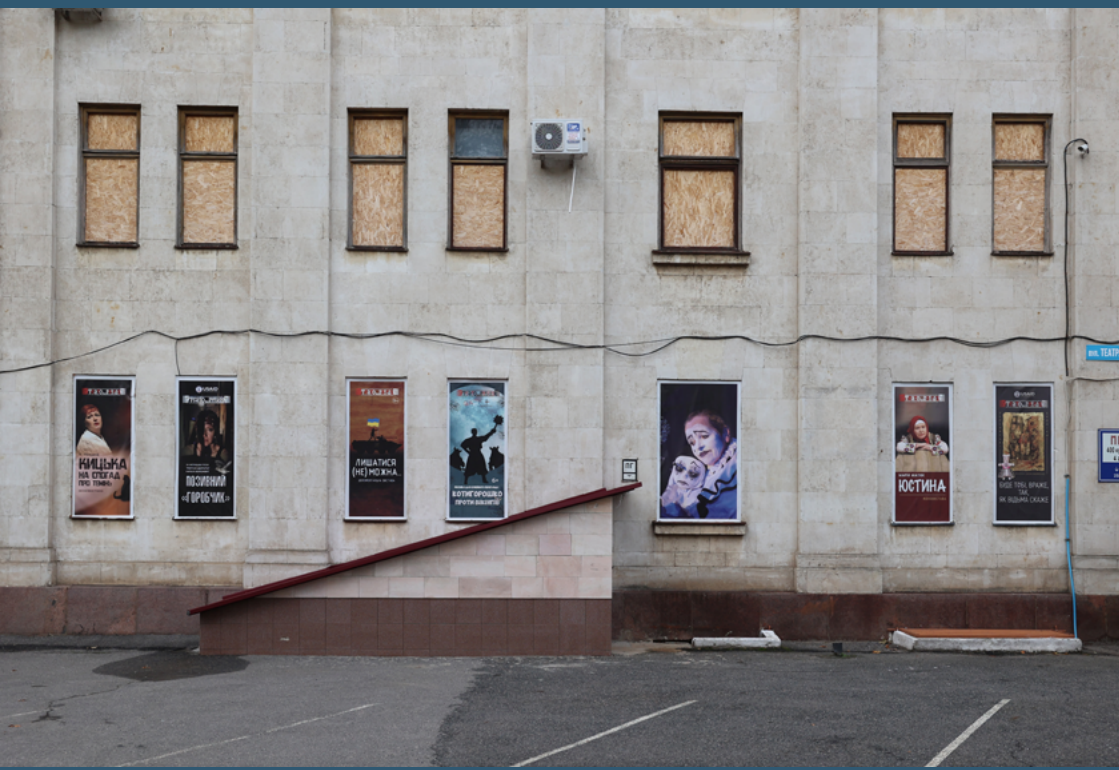
Fourteen out of the theatre's 250 employees nevertheless sided with the Russian occupiers. They later accused Oleksandr Knyha of abandoning them when he left the city. But Oleksandr did not take the decision to evacuate his family from Kherson until it was fully liberated lightly; in view of the constant surveillance and the risk of another arrest, he felt that he had no choice.

> O. K.: We gathered at home for a family meeting and decided that we needed to evacuate immediately. By that time, I had managed to destroy all documents that could "incriminate" my employees: the staff list, phone numbers... We even hid the employment records. I could just feel that they were watching me. Together with my family and friends, we left very early in a convoy, and after passing twelve Russian checkpoints, we finally reached Ukrainian-controlled territory. By the second day after our arrival in Lviv, I went to the director of the Maria Zankovetska Theatre and asked for help holding the Melpomene of Tavria international theatre festival. This is my brainchild, which I held annually in Kherson.
>
> By that time, I had already promised on Facebook that the festival would take place no matter what. I wanted to resume the theatre's work as soon as possible. The Russians had already begun claiming that our theatre was a Russian academic theatre, and I couldn't allow that.

In Ukraine, there are 113 state and municipal theatres, many of which resumed operations in the early months of the war. Packed halls and sold-out performances became a new reality for those Ukrainian theatres that continue to survive the shelling and in spite of staff shortages and lack of funding. For example, ticket sales for many Ukrainian theatres, including the Maria Zankovetska Theatre, increased by 28 to 110 percent in 2024. The most popular performance of the year was *The Witch of Konotop* at the Kyiv Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre, with all tickets selling out in just 13 minutes.

"Our first performances in exile represented an act of resistance."

— Oleksandr Knyha, theatre director



Theater performance posters on the shattered windows. Photo by Oleksandr Kornyakov

Through incredible effort, Oleksandr united his team and held the 24th Melpomene of Tavria international theatre festival in Lviv amid full-scale war. It featured 65 theatres from twelve countries, with each theatre performing in its own city and on its own stage, but mentioning Ukraine and Kherson. The festival's core message was its support of those who remained under occupation and those who had to flee their homes. Many of them still had tickets for the premiere of Eternity and One Day, which the theatre managed to perform only once before the full-scale invasion began.

> O. K.: We spent an eternity preparing for the premiere, but played it just once because of the invasion. I told the people of Kherson who had bought tickets to keep them, as we would perform the play again once Kherson was liberated.

After Lviv, Oleksandr went to Kyiv and immediately paid the director of the Lesya Ukrainka Theatre a visit. "Look, I'm a theatre director with only one stamp... I have no money, no actors, no props. Help me stage a play and find accommodation, and I'll gather the actors to restart the work."

> O. K.: At that time, Kyiv was home to over 70,000 internally displaced people, and there was no free space—no dormitories, nowhere. But we kept searching. Gradually the actors arrived from various cities in Ukraine and we began working on plays.

In 2022, Kherson's theatre resumed performances of the play A Cat for the Memory of Darkness. They also premiered a new production about Kherson, To Stay (Not) Possible, in which actors shared their personal stories of life under occupation at the Lesya Ukrainka Drama Theatre. The theatre went on tour, giving sold-out performances in cities across the country.

> O. K.: People who had moved to other cities invited us—and we came. Friends helped and theatres hosted us for free.

People collected donations to cover our travel and hotel costs. And that's how we realised how vital we were to our audience, how much they needed us. Our first performances in exile represented an act of resistance and of our belief in Kherson's return. People came, hugged us, and cried.

Theatres were the first to reflect on the events of the war, helping the audience release their "frozen" emotions; their tears, but also their laughter.

Oleksandr Knyha. Photo by Oleksandr Kornyakov

O.K.: And so, these 700 people—of all ages, genders, religions, and political views—gathered in the auditorium. In the space of just two hours, we transformed them into a single, unified organism, that sympathised, cried, and laughed together. They felt each other's support and realised they were not alone. And when the audience left after the performance, they were completely changed people. I looked into their eyes and knew that it was all worth it.

We kept waiting for Kherson to be liberated, because the city had resisted all along. When news of the event finally came, after eight months of occupation, I was at the Ivan Franko Theatre in Kyiv. We ran out of the theatre, down to Khreshchatyk. Even though it was already dark, people were standing in the main square, shouting "Kherson is Ukraine!" Music was playing from a battery-powered speaker, everyone was hugging. These were complete strangers, but the shared joy forged a bond between us.

"The aggressor is deliberately destroying our cultural heritage."

Oleksandr Knyha returned to Kherson immediately after the city's liberation. Once there, his first stop was his native Kulish Theatre. At his initiative, the theatre staff set up a stage in a bomb shelter, where they continue to hold performances, concert programmes, thematic exhibitions and creative meetings. The team's motto became: "What we hold in our hearts will never die". The theatre began working with the message: "We are at home". Despite incessant shelling, it continues to premiere new plays, such as Call Sign Horobchyk, Forbidden (in collaboration with the Kropyvnytsky Theatre), and the concert programme Heroes of the Unconquered Country.

O.K.: Our performances are not only about war and pain; they include comedies, like our life-affirming The Three of Us.

"People flocked to us. For them, it's a chance to momentarily escape the horror unfolding outside. Every day, Kherson is bombarded with rockets, cluster munition and drones. I look into their eyes and I just cry."

Ukrainians come to the theatre to find connection, healing and a chance to escape the madness for a while. Contemporary plays help them process traumas and address painful questions.

O.K.: In our theatre, almost all the windows are broken. Of 300 windows, only five remain intact. We joke that the Russians baptised us: A rocket struck from the right, then one from the left; a shell hit the service area above and the façade below. We've boarded up all the windows with plywood, yet some artists have even started displaying their paintings in the windows.

We work in a bomb shelter. We don't advertise, and we try not to speak on public channels in Kherson. We have a closed Telegram channel where we post performance announcements. We only work during the day because the city centre is deserted by 3 p.m.

The theatre also holds masterclasses for children and adults four days a week, organised by the Wings Foundation. Activities include painting, beadwork, doll-making and English language lessons. The masterclasses sell out closes within an hour because people are exhausted by isolation. Kindergartens and schools are working remotely; what they do is incredibly inspiring.

O.K.: But working under these conditions is, of course, difficult: We face not only a shortage of money but also a shortage of staff. Right now, we have only three actors working with musicians, dancers, and vocalists. We cooperate with other theatres, like the one in Mykolaiv. We have drivers, administrators, conductors performing on stage. And when we tell people these are not professional actors, they are very surprised.

Since the invasion, Ukrainian theatres have abandoned Russian repertoire, stopped hosting Russian theatre tours and are renewing their repertoires with more works by Ukrainian playwrights.

O.K.: The aggressor is deliberately destroying our cultural heritage, shelling theatres and trying to erase Ukrainian identity. This colonial inferiority complex was imposed on us for centuries. People were made to believe that good theatre happened in Moscow, not here. But this is clearly not true. We have long realised that we have power and the ability to surprise. And the war has washed away all these constructed narratives imposed upon us.

Today, the mission of the theatre, writers, playwrights and all our artistic community is to bring forth what has been hidden and deeply buried, what has been forbidden and denied us for many years, and show it to the people. And when they see it, they are amazed: "Oh, it turns out we do have complex dramaturgy, our own contemporary playwrights, and wonderful classics!"

"Yes, we have a whole layer of hidden, yet-to-be-discovered art. Coming to the theatre now feels like visiting a healing spring that leaves you transformed. This is how we preserve our identity and humanity."

The Kherson Theatre tours Ukraine and Europe, showcasing its performances and sharing the story of Kherson. Despite part of the team being scattered across different countries, the theatre has managed to stage about a dozen premieres during the war, including The Witch Says So, Kotygoroshko vs. the Vikings, Call Sign Horobchyk and a series of musical programmes. The theatre views its mission as supporting its audience through this difficult time.

> O.K.: Theatre is my life's work. I live for it and will continue to do it. But I also long to return home. At 65, I became homeless. I've lost the house I built with my own hands — it was flooded after the explosion of the Kakhovka Dam. And what the water didn't destroy was stolen by looters.
>
> This house was meant for an extended family: I have five children and four grandchildren. Before the "Russian peace" arrived, Oleshky was a thriving village. Now, hardly anyone remains — only the elderly who have nowhere else to go. There is no electricity, no gas, no water.
>
> We had a small family business — a Eco-Tourism base — where we held performances right in the forest. People came to our Green Theatre from all over the country to behold how we revived folk traditions. It will take me many years to restore everything that Russia has destroyed.
>
> My family supports me. We are very close, but now scattered around the world. My dream is to one day reunite them all. What also motivates me is that theatre in Ukraine is now flourishing. In Kyiv, it's impossible to get theatre tickets, even though they've tripled in price. And this is not just at major theatres like the Ivan Franko or the Lesya Ukrainka — it's happening everywhere.

For a charity screening of The Witch of Konotop, based on Kvitka-Osnovyanenko's play, at Kyiv's Ivan Franko Theatre, people began queuing up for tickets three hours before the box office

The Witch of Konotop by the Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre. Photo by Iryna Karpenko

opened—at 5 a.m. The theatre raised nearly two million hryvnias (approx. 53,000 euros) and purchased 100 drones for Ukraine's defence.

> O.K.: In Kyiv, we often perform small plays at the Lesya Ukrainka Theatre and we always sell out, even though these performances are on Mondays during working hours. And after the war, I just know there will be a theatre boom. I'm certain that it will be an incredible experience when we return to a regular theatre schedule and open all our halls.

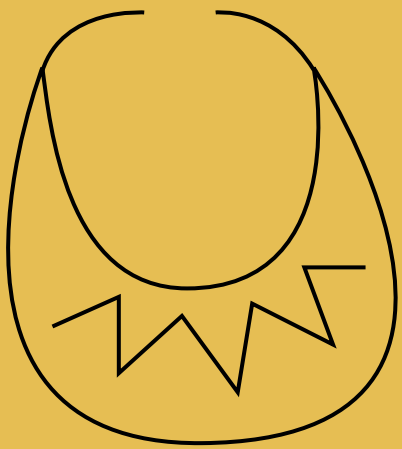
The country is experiencing an unprecedented interest in theatre, and according to the National Union of Theatre Workers of Ukraine, a significant percentage of the audience are people who have never attended the theatre before. Ukrainian theatres continue to

create art, helping people survive the horrors of war while preserving national identity. They stand as living examples of how culture can endure even in the darkest of times.

PRESERVING CULTURAL HERITAGE FROM THE RAVAGES OF WAR

Ukrainian curator and cultural manager Lina Romanukha:

IT'S A BATTLE FOR UKRAINIAN IDENTITY



Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, more than 1300 of Ukraine's cultural heritage sites—churches, museums, libraries, theatres and other icons of historical and cultural significance—have been damaged or destroyed.

In Kyiv, numerous cultural landmarks have suffered damage due to shelling, including the Kyiv Art Gallery, the Small Opera House, the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko National Museum of Arts, the National Academy of Sciences and the National Museum of Literature.

The Ukrainian curator and cultural manager Lina Romanukha believes this to be part of a deliberate strategy of cultural genocide to erase Ukrainian identity and has set herself the goal of preserving Ukraine's cultural heritage from the ravages of war. Collaborating with Ukrainian artists and with national and international organisations, she aims to develop better mechanisms for protecting this heritage that is so vital to a nation's identity.

Lina Romanukha is the author of a study that demonstrates a direct connection between a nation's cultural heritage and its ability to maintain its independence and define its own future.

For Ukrainian society, the war has prompted a re-evaluation and deeper understanding of its own history. It has become increasingly clear that Soviet policies were imperialistic and colonial.

Lina Romanukha. Photo by Ruslan Syngaevskiy

"The ongoing war in Ukraine is not just a fight for territory or resources; it is also a battle for Ukrainian identity. The Russian government denies Ukraine's sovereignty as an independent state, perpetuating a post-colonial narrative with deep historical roots."

L.R.: This realisation helps contextualise the conflict in Ukraine, highlighting Ukrainians' pursuit of recognition of their identity and cultural independence, which have historically been repressed by the imperial ambitions of our neighbour state.

My analytical research revealed that the destruction of Ukraine's cultural heritage at the hands of Russia has deep roots, going back far beyond 2022 or even 2014. This process began during the Sovietisation of Ukraine in the 1930s, where we saw a large-scale campaign against private ownership, particularly targeting Ukrainian farmers. This campaign, which was referred to as "dekulakisation", involved the confiscation of property as well as a mass repression of wealthier peasants, who were known as 'kulaks'. Thousands of families were exiled to Siberia or other remote regions of the USSR and their property was nationalised. Being a successful farmer was treated as a crime, as Soviet ideology dictated that everyone must be equal and uniform.

Many Ukrainians concealed their roots for fear of their safety, hiding family documents and archives, or even moving to other regions. This led to a widespread loss of family history and collective memory. I've witnessed myself how the older generation only recently began to retrieve old photographs and recall who their ancestors were. Sovietisation instilled a sense of disconnection; people lost their sense of responsibility, which can still be felt in our society today.

For example, in my grandmother's village in the Volyn region, where I often spent my summers, there was an old cemetery, from which locals pillaged bricks to build their garages. The same happened with an ancient tower. Over time, though, people began to understand the historical significance of these places, experiencing a kind of 'wake-up call'. This realisation prompted a sense of responsibility for heritage and a desire to learn more about their family, country, and the history of all these sites around them.
This awakening has shifted perspectives, encouraging people to see heritage not as something abstract but as living historical memory that the Soviet system tried to erase for decades.

Since Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the establishment of self-proclaimed "republics" in Luhansk and Donetsk, Ukraine has lost control of significant historical landmarks. Some were damaged during so-called "restorations", while others were destroyed altogether.

Following the full-scale invasion, these crimes intensified, including the mass removal of museum artefacts from occupied territories to Russia, illegal archaeological excavations, and the trafficking of stolen artefacts on the black market.

"We began to see our roots and what we have in a new light."

L.R.: The greatest challenge for artists today is the threat of physical destruction. In Ukraine, we have lost our ability to distinguish between safety and danger. Now, hearing explosions or witnessing the work of air defence systems no longer triggers the fear and anxiety it once did. We've become somewhat fatalistic, living with the awareness that each day could be our last.

Over 10,000 valuable items were removed from the Kherson Art Museum during the occupation in 2022. Photo by Oleksandr Kornyakov

L. R.: War affects artists in various ways. Some have stopped creating, unable to reconcile the act of producing art with the ongoing loss of human lives. For others, the war has been a stimulus to produce new works: "If I might die tomorrow, I must seize the chance to say, write, or show something to the world now." This urgency drives creativity, leaving behind a legacy for future generations.

Many artists have joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces; some have fled abroad, while others have left the profession entirely. According to research by the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, 37 percent of cultural workers were unemployed or underemployed in the summer of 2022.

At the start of the war, many cultural projects were left without funding as resources were redirected to the mil-

itary. Culture, unfortunately, is not a priority in the state budget right now. We often hear the phrase: "It's not the right time." When it comes to choosing between funding a new play or purchasing weapons or vehicles for a battalion, the answer is clear.

However, it's important to note that the full-scale invasion has united Ukrainian society. Artists' residences transformed into shelters, as seen in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil, and Uzhhorod. People shared resources and offered help to one another, including housing and transport for evacuation.

"I hope that this invasion has cured Ukrainian society of its inferiority complex. To me, this is one of the most significant aspects of this tragedy. If anything good comes out of this horror, it is precisely the loss of this complex."

Cultural heritage serves as a powerful shield against the Kremlin's propaganda, which aims to justify Russian military aggression. This is one of the main focuses of your research. How is this happening today?

L.R.: Cultural heritage stands as evidence that Ukrainian culture, language, and traditions exist independently of Russia, debunking the myths about a supposed 'united people'. Take, for instance, the ancient Vytautas Tower in the Kherson region, which dates back to the 14th–15th century. Ukrainian archaeologists have discovered that this tower is direct evidence that Kherson's lands were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania long before the Russian Empire arrived. This contradicts Soviet propaganda that portrayed these territories as barren lands "civilised" by Russia.

The Vytautas Tower is one of the few surviving examples

of medieval military architecture from the Lithuanian era. Today, it remains a significant historical and cultural monument, though in need of restoration.

Russia sometimes argues that historical monuments in Ukraine, including those located in territories once part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, of Poland, or even Kyivan Rus, are part of Russian cultural heritage. However, monuments like the Vytautas Tower have no historical connection to Russia. Many similar examples exist, proving the falsehood of these claims.

These historical sites symbolise what Russia is fighting against today. Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, thankfully, still stands as a testament to Ukraine's rich cultural and political tradition. This is one of Ukraine's oldest architectural landmarks, symbolic of Kyivan Rus — the earliest East Slavic state — and this Cathedral predates the Russian Empire — no matter what Russian propaganda asserts.

This is part of the vast cultural heritage Russia seeks to "appropriate", rewrite, and claim as its own. For instance, Scythian gold artefacts, now returned to Ukraine, were similarly targeted. Russia frequently accuses others of actions it commits itself, manipulating history to establish ancient roots, even where none exist. Such efforts aim to fabricate historical legitimacy for the invasion and the theft of Ukrainian heritage through falsification and distortion.

After the occupation of Crimea in 2014, Russia began the systematic appropriation of Ukrainian cultural heritage. One of the most striking examples of this was the illegal removal of unique Scythian artefacts.

At the time of Crimea's annexation, part of these priceless Scythian treasures was on display at the exhibition Crimea: Gold and Secrets of the Black Sea in the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam. This exhibition featured artefacts from four Crimean museums. Following

the occupation, Russia claimed these artefacts as part of its "Russian cultural heritage" and demanded their return to Crimea. However, Ukraine filed a legal case, asserting that the treasures were part of Ukraine's state museum collection and that Crimea was a temporarily occupied territory.

The legal battle lasted nearly a decade, and it was only in 2023 that the Supreme Court of the Netherlands delivered its final ruling: the Scythian artefacts belong to the Ukrainian state, which has the right to their return. A total of 565 unique artefacts were returned to Kyiv, including ancient sculptures, ceramics, and Scythian and Sarmatian ornaments dating back over 2000 years.

Not all of these cultural treasures could be saved. Following the annexation, Russia initiated the large-scale removal of artefacts from Crimean museums. Some were transferred to Russian institutions, including the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. Many others likely ended up in private collections or were lost due to illegal archaeological excavations, which intensified in the occupied territory.

L. R.: Deliberately destroying cultural landmarks on temporarily occupied territories has, sadly, become part of Russia's strategy. Archaeological excavations in Crimea, for example, are being neglected during the construction of highways. The so-called "renovation" of the Bakhchisaray Palace has damaged its authenticity, and the ancient Greek city Chersonesus, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site, is being devastated. Since the war began, parts of this archaeological complex have been severely damaged, and its preservation is now at risk.

These are examples of intentional destruction, theft, and removal of cultural valuables. Consider the Hryhoriy Skovoroda Museum in Kharkiv Oblast, where unique exhibits connected to the philosopher and poet's life were destroyed, or the Maria Prymachenko Museum, which housed works by the renowned folk artist, who is known for her unique style and vivid colours. When the museum was damaged

by a missile or artillery strike in March 2022, staff managed to save only 30 paintings from the blaze.

But proving these incidents as deliberate attacks is legally challenging, especially without clear evidence of targeted strikes. Nevertheless, the mere fact of cultural destruction is a reality we face daily.

When we talk about culture as cultural heritage, we are, of course, appealing to common sense and shared European values. We understand that when a cultural monument is listed by UNESCO, the country is responsible for its preservation, but in reality, this monument belongs to humanity. It is not just Ukrainian heritage; it is already part of world cultural heritage. And that's why it is so important for us to protect.

UNESCO estimates that Ukraine's cultural and tourism sectors have suffered damages of around $3.5 billion, with almost $9 billion needed for restoration over the next decade. Photo by Vladyslav Savenok

Odesa's Spaso-Preobrazhensky Cathedral was damaged by a direct Russian missile strike in 2023, which caused a fire and significant destruction to it. The Cathedral is situated in the city's historic center, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Photo by Nina Liashonok

"I believe this is one of the important elements of democracy: to protect not only Ukrainian heritage but the heritage of all the peoples represented within the borders of our state. And we are fighting not only for this territory but for the preservation of art, museums, exhibits and our shared history."

— Ukrainian curator and cultural manager Lina Romanukha.

You once described cultural heritage as a vital tool for fostering peace and democracy. Could you elaborate on how it achieves this?

L.R.: For example, when we created the Ukraine in Miniature exhibition, one of our messages was that we were presenting monuments that are part of European history. We called for the protection of Ukrainian heritage because it is part of European heritage. Culture is multifaceted, and when we speak of culture in Ukraine, we refer to all of the ethnicities that live here—Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Crimean Tatars and many others.

The UN classifies Russia's deliberate destruction of Ukrainian cultural heritage sites, including religious structures and artefacts, as a war crime. Photo by Vladyslav Savenok

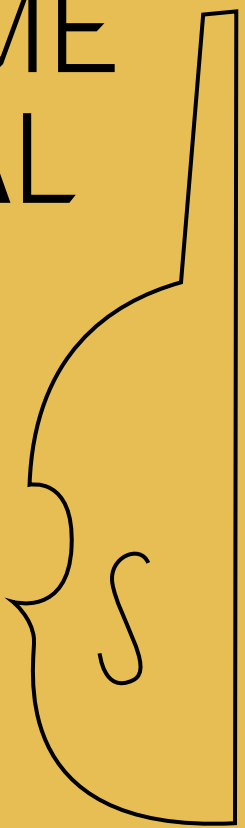
L. R.: Ukraine in Miniature exhibition showcases the most important Ukrainian monuments in the form of 3D miniatures and draws attention to Ukraine's long and rich heritage at a time when many monuments are at risk of destruction.

The power of culture and the arts lies in their emotional appeal. We used modern 3D technology to create the models, which allowed us to reproduce ornaments and architectural elements in the finest detail. There are 41 objects, including such iconic sites as St. Sophia's Cathedral, the Lviv Opera House, the Kamianets-Podilskyi Fortress, and the legendary Zaporizhzhia island of Khortytsia. In other words, we remind the world of the beauty Ukraine is protecting, and that each monument is an integral part of our identity.

Globally, it is important to amplify the Ukrainian voice on the international stage; on an individual level, the war has taught people the importance of preserving our history and culture. It's about talking to your grandmother about your family's history, digitising home archives, photographs and documents, recording Ukrainian recipes and folk songs. It's also about valuing our culture, like not being ashamed to wear national dress. It seems to me that these are the main lessons of the war: we must all reflect on how to be as effective as possible and act on different levels. Our men and women on the front line need our support, and we must understand what resources we can use to help them.

Ukrainian composer Roman Grygoriv:

CULTURE HAS BECOME A UNIVERSAL MENTAL THERAPY



The current Ukrainian cultural renaissance is measured not only by the number of books written, musical compositions created, concerts held and theatre premieres staged. It is also profoundly connected to understanding who we are and whether we can preserve our identity in this highly challenging time. This is felt most acutely by artists, who recognise that the revival of culture emerges from the deep wounds of the past and the painful losses Ukraine is enduring today.

The war has become a powerful catalyst for change across various art forms, and contemporary musical theatre is no exception. This genre has always been distinguished by its experimental nature, innovative approach and defiance of conventions. However, Russian aggression has prompted many Ukrainians to perceive modern opera as an act of resistance.

One of the most remarkable formations in this genre is Opera Aperta, founded by the award-winning composers' duo Roman Grygoriv and Illia Razumeiko. They have been working on contemporary opera and musical theatre for the past decade, exploring the boundaries and borders of contemporary opera and music theatre in Ukraine and worldwide. Their performances also serve as a space for reflecting on the tragedies of war, being a synthesis of avant-garde and baroque opera, video art, light installations and "all possible genres and styles," as the composers themselves describe it. Moreover, Opera Aperta incorporated nude bodies into performances, calling them "the most perfect costumes in the world".

Their operas have won awards at international festivals, yet they receive little institutional support in Ukraine. Opera Aperta's studio is a modest space within the National Union of Composers of Ukraine, and collaboration with state theatres remains rare. Nevertheless, The Times described their opera Chornobyldorf as "a contemporary Ukrainian masterpiece that everyone needs to see." Meanwhile, the Royal Society of Great Britain awarded them the top prize in the "Opera and Musical Theatre" category in 2024. It is striking that this small theatre, for which the awards ceremony was only a brief respite from the constant shelling, surpassed leading industry players with million-pound budgets.

GAIA-24. Opera del Mondo. Kyiv, 2024
Artists: Kateryna Hordiienko, Yuliia Vitraniuk, Marichka Shtyrbulova
Photo by Valeriya Landar

Opera Aperta's performances are more than just contemporary art. Their works have been called "performative rituals" that draw global attention to the war in Ukraine. Their opera GAIA-24, Opera del Mondo (2024), dedicated to the ecological catastrophe caused by the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam, became the highlight of the Ukrainian programme at the Venice Biennale.

The composers premiere their operas in Kyiv before taking them abroad, where they regularly play in sold-out venues and receive new accolades. Their opera IYOV was awarded the Shevchenko Prize and ranked among the top ten operas worldwide, according to Music Theater NOW, while Chornobyldorf made it into the top six music-theatrical performances worldwide.

Perhaps most striking is the language the composers use in their works. Roman Grygoriv created a piece for a fragment of a Russian rocket, accompanied by a chamber orchestra and voice. He performed this "symbol of death" before world leaders at the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2024 in Berlin. This requiem, titled Songs of the Unborn, is dedicated to all those killed and unborn due to the Russian aggression, serving as a poignant reminder of human tragedies in the heart of Europe.

Some may argue that Opera Aperta is ahead of its time in Ukrainian music theatre. But one thing is certain: its creators speak the universal language of art, which is understood throughout the world.

Roman, what does it mean to be a Ukrainian composer during wartime?

R. G..: It's not easy at all. There's a certain evolution of state: from depression to the realisation that you have to keep moving forward. In the first months of the invasion, even the concept of a "composer" didn't exist. How could one be a composer amid mass attacks? You turn into "biomass". It's a borderline state where you're incapable of writing music and making simple decisions. You ask those who are coping better: "Give me a task and I'll do it."

No, I was sure that there would be a war, but I never imagined

that the Russians would start bombing Kyiv and launch a major offensive across the entire country. I didn't know I would have to flee Kyiv with my two children, running through fields and vegetable gardens to Ivano-Frankivsk, my hometown. It was incredibly traumatic for us, and my elder son still refuses to talk about it.

Only after seven months, when I arrived in Vienna, where I had studied Media composition at the conservatory, did I write Gloria, my first composition since the invasion. It's a miniature piece, but it is incredibly dear to me because it marked the beginning of my gradual return to creating music.

A turning point came when I returned to Kyiv in the spring of 2023, where my colleague, Illia Razumeiko, and I worked on the opera Genesis. We used a fragment of a Russian missile embedded in a piano as an installation. It was an actual missile given to us by a military volunteer who collected war artefacts and offered us to choose one. We asked, "Where is this missile from?" He said, "Irpin or Bucha, I don't know..." We asked, "Are you sure it detonated?"—"Yes." That same type of missile destroyed the house of someone we knew. The explosion obliterated his piano so thoroughly that even the cast-iron frame was gone. Can you imagine the force required for not a single piece of that frame to remain? All that was left was the skeletal structure of his house. Everything else burnt to a cinder. We took that missile fragment, brought it to Kyiv and installed it in a piano, which became part of the performance in our opera Genesis.

We work in the building of the Union of Composers of Ukraine. That's where the missile stood. A few months after the opera's premiere, when I returned to the building, new bows had just been delivered—and in an instant, I had the idea for a performance. I picked up the missile and started playing it. And it roared. It's an unbearable sound, a deep-

ly layered and intense sensation. And you realise just how destructive the force before you is. There is a war against art right now, but here is art against war. It was a powerful revelation: art can be stronger than death. Yes, even a missile can become a musical instrument in exceptional circumstances. And playing it is, in essence, a ritual of purification. It's a way to emerge from trauma through art.

"The Ukrainian cultural renaissance emerges from death."

Marichka Shtyrbulova, opera
GENESIS
Kyiv, Khanenko Museum, 2022
Photo by Nastya Telikova

R. G.: It took me just one day to gather musicians—the Kyiv Camerata soloist ensemble. In a single night, I orchestrated Gloria and created a new composition—The Voice of the Infernal Arrow, also known as Songs of the Unborn. My colleagues and I decided to perform and record the piece on video in St. Andrew's Church in Kyiv. And it happened the very day after I came up with the idea.

Nothing went according to plan. We were permitted to play until noon because a school excursion was scheduled in the church afterwards. But by noon, we had only just set up our instruments. And then the children arrived. What to do? I walked outside in my stage attire—dressed in black, barefoot, with the orchestra behind me, waiting for a single command: "Record." I approached the schoolchildren and said: "Friends, you're about to be shocked, but I am recording a video with a Russian missile. Would you mind waiting for just ten minutes?" By then, I already knew that we would only have one take—two at most. And that's precisely what happened: the musicians played the piece flawlessly in a single reading. It was incredibly extreme, just like everything in our lives now.

Later, with my colleagues Illia Razumeiko and Marichka Shtyrbulova, we recorded Sacra Conversazione—Dialogue of Saints at the Altar.

Thus, Roman Grygoriv's album Irrenaissance was born from a performance in a baroque Church. The Ukrainian composer transformed an instrument of death into an impossible-to-ignore language of art. The album features twelve tracks for solo missile, a triptych for missile and orchestra, and a single composition without missile.

Roman performed one of these works alongside the Ukrainian orchestra Mriya at the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2024 in Berlin. The sound of a missile being played resounded before the presidents of Germany, France, Ukraine and other world leaders. Over 1500 attendees—diplomats, political elites and thought leaders—gathered in

Songs of the Unborn
Roman Grygoriv and Kyiv Camerata
St. Andrew Church, Kyiv, 2023
Photo by Denys Melnyk

the hall. But this was more than just a performance. It was a metaphor for the power of art during the war and a call from the composer to the world.

R. G.: I was playing on a real missile, and people couldn't believe their eyes. They kept asking me, "How did you make such a missile?" And I would reply, "It is not fake; it is a real bomb." They wouldn't believe me: "No way!" A group of diplomats stood among the conference participants—serious, self-important. I brought the missile and placed it on their table, saying, "Let's conduct an autopsy together. Show me where the fake is." They saw the Russian inventory numbers on the missile and were shocked. To this day, I don't know

how many lives it has taken. But when artists play on a missile during a full-scale war, this is not a performance—it is a ritual and must be understood as such.

How did audiences in other countries react to your performance?

R.G.: Reactions differed. At Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, there was a deep silence for two whole minutes at the end of the performance. Can you imagine what it's like for musicians to stand on stage in complete silence for two minutes? But the intellectual Oxford audience perceived the piece as a requiem. I like that. In Berlin, the reaction was also one of understanding. But there were moments when people approached the missile and took photos with it, smiling... It's hard to comprehend, yet those photos will become history someday. That's why we are not talking about a Renaissance, but rather an irrational renaissance of Ukrainian culture.

"Since the start of the full-scale war, we have been reborn as a society, our culture is being revived and Ukrainian culture is undergoing decolonisation in the context of war. But on the other hand, what kind of renaissance can be played on a missile? Our rebirth emerges from death."

Roman, could you tell us more about the Ukrainian cultural renaissance today?

R.G.: I see what everyone sees: theatres are packed, and tickets are sold out months in advance. Every theatre and every concert venue is experiencing sold-out performances.

Opera Genesis at
the Khanenko Museum.
Photo by Nastya Telikova

We are not talking about quality just yet—Ukrainian theatre is only beginning to show a desire for change, but it remains within the boundaries of domestic, conversational theatre. There are a million ways to make this art genuinely alive.

No, we are talking about the acute need for culture in Ukrainian society. Why has it emerged? Culture is not merely a means to escape from everyday life or an excuse to dress up. Culture, and theatre in particular, has become a form of universal mental therapy.

GAIA-24. Opera del Mondo.
Kyiv, 2024
Artists: Oleksandr Chyshii,
Sofia Pavlichenko
Photo by Valeriya Landar

Our nation is not just reviving—it is being reborn. Through war, we are becoming one nation. The East and West of Ukraine are no longer just together—they are a single entity. We see the Ukrainian cultural renaissance in cinema, theatre and music—literally in every sphere of art. But at the same time, the cultural avant-garde must recognise its significance, role and purpose. Every day in Ukraine, soldiers die, and among them are many representatives of the cultural sphere. Some are commanders, some are soldiers and others are riflemen, but all have been torn away from civilian life and are fighting for our independence.

And when people of art go to war, it is deeply poignant for me. It reminds me of Churchill's words: "If we have no cul-

ture, then what are we fighting for?" (ed: "If we cut funding for culture, then what are we fighting for?" is commonly attributed to Churchill during World War II when the British government discussed reducing cultural expenditure in favour of military needs.)

According to composers, modern opera can create a space for reflecting on war and the consequences of war crimes. A striking example is the opera GAIA-24. Opera del Mondo, which was written and rehearsed during the full-scale war and is dedicated to the environmental catastrophe caused by the Russian army's destruction of the Kakhovka Dam — an event that claimed hundreds of lives and left thousands homeless.

Just days after the tragedy, composers Roman Grygoriv and Illia Razumeiko travelled to the flooded areas to conduct field research — a crucial step in creating each of their operas. The artists worked near Khortytsia Island, composing music, filming videos and developing powerful metaphors.

One of the defining features of GAIA-24 is the use of nude bodies, symbolising human vulnerability in the face of nature's forces and the devastating consequences of human activity. The opera is deeply rooted in the philosophy of French anthropologist Bruno Latour, who argued that empires reshape natural landscapes for their purposes through colonial practices, resource exploitation and territorial transformation. This idea forms the core of the performance, which reinterprets the impact of a specific environmental disaster as well as exploring the broader consequences of human actions on the planet.

GAIA-24 resembles a musical-theatrical ritual, where every movement, note and gesture carries meaning. It is a two-hour musical collage that blends diverse genres, from folk songs to classical pieces, from techno to death metal. This sonic diversity underscores the chaos and complexity of the modern world, where humanity faces global threats that endanger nature and its resources.

In this opera, music and choreography do not merely

accompany the events; they become an intrinsic part of the emotional expression of catastrophe. The performance prompts reflection on how our actions reshape the planet, its ecosystems and even our understanding of what it means to be part of this world.

Roman, you are creating a fundamentally new artistic product that challenges the conventions of classical Ukrainian opera houses, which rarely engage with contemporary composers. What is essential for you to convey in your performances?

R.G.: The premiere of our opera GAIA-24 took place at the Palace of Culture and Arts in Kyiv in a vast hall seating two thousand people. It was a significant challenge for us be-

Maria Potapenko, opera
GENESIS
Kyiv, Khanenko Museum, 2022
Photo by Nastya Telikova

cause the entire second act is dedicated to the naked body, with almost all the performers — except for one — appearing completely nude. This is a profound and important subject for us. We have repeatedly asked ourselves: why is this relevant now, in 2024, amid Russia's genocidal war against Ukraine? Why is it essential to create contemporary opera incorporating the nude body? And we have come to several conclusions.

Firstly, in Russia, such an approach would be utterly impossible. This has a political reason: it would be labelled as "pornography" or something else, but not art. Here, in Ukraine, it is possible. And that is an achievement — proof that our country values artistic freedom. It is a symbol of a nation advancing in quantum leaps.

This opera stands on three pillars: the body, the voice and the land. The human body is a perfect, unique individual "costume" requiring no tailoring. Nature itself has created it, and it is distinct from billions of others. One of the best reviews I heard about this opera was: "The actors trust the director so completely that they created a unique magic on stage, where entirely naked bodies were not perceived erotically." And that's precisely it — because for us, the creators, eroticism on stage is out of the question. We are talking about aesthetics, and you understand how fundamentally different these approaches and perceptions are.

The second aspect is the exploration of the land. We conducted an expedition on Khortytsia Island, where the effects of ecocide are already visible. We filmed actors lying on cracked earth, submerging a piano in water and extracting sound from it. We built the opera in three acts, with video sequences at the beginning and the end.

The third crucial aspect is the human voice. Imagine a violin: What does it need to produce sound? Just a bow coated with rosin. But for the human voice to sing, a person must be alive. A billion processes are activated — rhythms,

molecules, atoms—a phenomenon of immense complexity and beauty. That is why the human voice is the perfect instrument.

Our approach to opera is entirely different, and I don't know if there is anything we haven't used in our music across the twelve operas we've created. Probably not—we've used everything. Ours is an art of poly-stylism, multidimensionality and interdisciplinarity.

This is not what audiences of Ukrainian opera are accustomed to?

R. G.: What are they used to? I don't know, maybe Verdi or Tchaikovsky. Our work is unlike classical theatre, where you play someone else—for example, I play Romeo and you play Juliet. I have a gun; I shoot, but it's a fake gun. No, in contemporary opera, you play yourself. We don't present somebody else; we present ourselves. Our singers dance, and our dancers play musical instruments. Moreover, a bow is not only for playing the violin or cello—it can also be played on the human body. That is the fundamental difference.

Every opera is a form of research, a field expedition where we study what we want to convey and how we want to do it. For Chornobyldorf, we conducted an expedition to the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone and Zwentendorf an der Donau (ed. a small town in Austria known for its nuclear power plant, which was never put into operation). That's why the approach is entirely different, and so is the outcome. Working with sound, space, voice and body is a completely different experience. This is precisely the language we must use to communicate with a modern audience so that we are indeed heard.

Chornobyldorf tells the story of the descendants of humanity who have survived a series of technological and climate catastro-

phes and are building a post-apocalyptic settlement on the ruins of a nuclear power station. Composers created the opera before the invasion, but it gained a new significance afterward, as Russian forces surrounded Ukrainian nuclear power plants, putting humanity at risk of a new nuclear disaster. This allowed the artists to explore the theme from a new perspective: What will we face after the war? What will our culture become? Perhaps we will find ourselves in a post-apocalyptic world, rebuilding destroyed cities and creating new values.

As always, the composers have combined music, theatre and visual art in their opera. The opera team also filmed the performances near the Chornobyl and Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plants.

The opera's UK premiere took place in the first year of the full-scale war at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. In addition to the UK, Chornobyldorf has been performed in the Netherlands, Austria, Italy, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and the USA. Music Theatre NOW named it one of the six best operas and music-theatre performances in the world.

> "Chornobyldorf gives you an overwhelming, again and again surprising, archaic as well as contemporary artistic vision of what life could be like after an apocalypse. It's a real spectacle which combines a wealth of rituals, visuals, movements and sounds you think you have somehow and at the same time never experienced.
> The gravitational force of the production pulls the audience into its own world and at the same time invites for individual reflections about the state of society."
>
> —MTNow 2021 Award Jury Statement

Through opera, Ukrainian artists thus tell the world about the war and showcase contemporary and competitive art. But only the composers know the actual cost of creating and making sense of such significant themes amid shelling, uncertainty, cultural underfunding and constant physical danger.

Roman Grygoriv.
Photo by
Nastya Telikova

"On the one hand, you can ask yourself: How can one create art in such times? On the other hand, what will happen if we don't? We have to do it because this is our field. If we don't operate in the cultural sphere, we must go to the frontline. This is what I meant when I spoke about recognising one's role."

R.G.: I don't care about popularity when I perform in Europe and worldwide. I care about one thing only—give Ukraine F-16s. That's why I brought an actual Russian missile from the front line. Give us F-16s, and you will prevent a situation where, in two years' time, I bring you a nuclear warhead and play on it. That was my only mission.

For me, every concert since the full-scale invasion began is cultural diplomacy. I always treat opera and all my performances with the same mindset: give us weapons and culture will thrive. If I don't do this, then I should be fighting. But I believe art is one of the few effective tools that can penetrate the decision-makers' strongholds.

Kharkiv Literary Museum:

NOTHING SCARES US ANYMORE AND NOTHING CAN STOP US NOW

During the full-scale war, the Kharkiv Literary Museum has emerged as a completely new phenomenon within Ukraine's museum landscape. At a time of mortal danger, the museum's staff not only revitalised the work of museum but made it fashionable, attracting renowned poets, musicians, painters and filmmakers. The announcement of the museum's official reopening after a year-long hiatus was met with a full house and thunderous applause.

The museum made a conscious decision to remain in the city and preserve its cultural space despite daily shelling and power outages. From the very first day of the Russian invasion, the staff continued to work—initially to save and relocate the collections to a safer place, and later to create new meanings and reflect on the role of Kharkiv, literature and Ukrainian art in this new reality. "We cannot stop our activity or surrender even a part of our lives or work to those who are trying to destroy us," say the museum's staff.

The Kharkiv Literary Museum's primary mission is to preserve the memory of literature that was banned during Soviet times and of artists silenced by the totalitarian regime—writers and poets, but also painters, composers, scholars and the theatrical elite. A museum of this kind would be at an immense risk if the city were to be occupied by the Russian army. Despite being aware of this risk, the team continues its work. More than that, they have launched a series of bold artistic projects that, just like in the past 100 years, unite the proactive cultural elite.

The museum strives to be an "open system" in Kharkiv, which remains one of Ukraine's cultural and literary hubs. Museums are not merely repositories of old artefacts, the staff argue, but places where invaluable experiences are preserved for the city's residents.

Interestingly, famous Kharkiv artists are using metaphors to strip the city of old stereotypes to reveal a fresh, contemporary image. Instead of "a city of concrete" or "a fortress city", they describe it as a "city-necklace", suggesting that any city is not just made up of buildings, people, trees and landscapes but the connections among them—and, most importantly, whatever arises from those connections.

For a long time, Ukraine's museums received little attention and remained underfunded and isolated within their cloistered ecosystems. Similarly, the conservation of cultural heritage was not a political priority. The outbreak of war exposed these shortcomings, revealing a lack of evacuation strategies for museum artefacts as well as a dire shortage of materials for packing, storing, and safely transporting cultural treasures.

The Kharkiv Literary Museum, which received even less state support than many others, nevertheless managed to preserve and relocate its collection to safer cities within Ukraine. It has also become the epicentre of intellectual life in Kharkiv and the city's only cultural institution that continues to operate fully despite the full-scale war.
The museum demonstrates that Kharkiv, as well as fighting and standing firm in the face of daily danger, is weaving the fabric of a future free from Russian influence. Decolonisation is a massive process currently sweeping through all of Ukraine's cultural institutions. And Kharkiv is exemplary for that.

Tetyana Pylypchuk, laureate of the Vasyl Stus Prize and director of the Kharkiv Literary Museum:

> T.P.: We have always envisioned the museum as a place that fosters a creative environment in Kharkiv and across Ukraine, uniting people around shared memory and Ukrainian identity. The museum was established in 1988 during a wave of major political and cultural change, a time when it became pos-

sible to rethink our own history. It could no longer serve as a tool of propaganda, as it was founded by individuals who were prepared to resist the Soviet regime—writers, literary scholars, and public figures. The museum was conceived as a space to preserve the archives of Kharkiv writers and the memory of Kharkiv's local literature.

In the late 1980s, a wealth of materials became available, revealing that Kharkiv's literary heritage extended far beyond the boundaries imposed by the Soviet Union, transcending mere regional particularities.

At that time, the museum began collecting materials banned in the USSR—from the 1920s to the early 1990s.

Tetyana Pylypchuk, director of the Kharkiv Literary Museum. Photo by Oleksandr Osipov

T.P.: These now form the most precious part of our collection. We uncovered and preserved works by authors like Mykola Khvylovyi, Mykola Kulish, Mykhailo Yalovyi, and Valerian Pidmohylnyi, artists branded as 'enemies of the people' during Soviet rule. The museum's early staff worked closely with the children and relatives of these writers to compile these archives. The collection also includes works by writers who survived repression.

Writers of the 1920s were the pioneers of decolonisation, crafting unique strategies that remain extraordinarily relevant today. Their efforts extended beyond culture to include education, economics, the information space and many other facets of social life. Literature of that era was a powerful driving force influencing all these processes.

When asked why the 1920s are so important to me, I always say that this period is not necessarily defined by global masterpieces or Nobel laureates. Its uniqueness lies in the creation of a new environment: a new reader, viewer, and listener. It was a time when art broke free from a hermetic narrative, isolated within itself, and became an integral part of societal transformation.

The theatre director Les Kurbas, for instance, was a remarkable producer who created a space for directors with diverse approaches, which fostered a multifaceted theatrical landscape. Despite this diversity, quality always took first place. Theatre became a platform for experimentation in those days, and the literary debates of the 1920s laid out key strategies for Ukrainian writers.

One of these strategies was decolonisation, which was viewed as a means to shed Ukraine's status of a cultural province. Artists believed that Ukraine, and Kharkiv in particular, could become a cultural hub on par with European capitals like Berlin or Paris. They sought to create unique cultural processes that would integrate Ukraine into the European context.

A particularly noteworthy strategy was distancing the country from Russian culture. Writers translated Russian literature into Ukrainian, not because Ukrainians were unfamiliar with Russian, but to underline its foreignness. This practice established a boundary between the two literary traditions, which served as a tool for cultural identification.

Les Kurbas founded Berezil—an artistic association that became much more than just a theatre. It was a laboratory that explored what modern theatre should be. Kurbas was not afraid to experiment: text readings with actors took place in his theatre, and plays were modified during the creative process.

His approach was not solely about creating 'pure art' but about understanding the influence theatre could have on the audience. Kurbas analysed which ideas resonated with the public, turning theatre into a tool for social change where every element carried meaningful significance and was integrated into broader societal processes.

Thus, a century ago, creative circles emerged that inspired the birth of masterpieces. This was likely one of the reasons for the repression of Ukrainian artists in the 1930s. Today, we are rethinking the museum's role and its place within Kharkiv's cultural ecosystem, which can serve as a foundation for the city's development in these extraordinarily challenging times.

Tetyana, how does the museum operate under constant shelling? What about the art collections?

T.P.: We have evacuated the collections to safer regions of the country. A blast wave once damaged one of the windows, but we quickly repaired it. As for exhibitions, they continue, but in alternative formats. We are still working in the museum. We have an exhibition, but larger events are held in safer locations.

"We have learned to be extremely flexible. This has become a key skill. Nothing scares us anymore — neither the lack of electricity or heat nor any other difficulties. Such things now seem trivial. Nothing can stop us now."

Fifth Kharkiv Literary Festival, 2022. Photo by Oleksandr Osipov

"Ukrainians are today constantly asking themselves: 'Who are we?'"

T. P.: Do you know what Kharkiv represents today? It's when a strike hits the street where the popular café Makers is located. The blast wave shatters all its windows, and yet the café staff post on Facebook: "We'll be selling coffee in two hours." That's resilience. They swept up the broken glass, opened their doors, and all of Kharkiv flocked to buy coffee to support them.

The same happened with the publishers Faktor-Druk after it was hit by a missile strike. (ed. Faktor-Druk was Ukraine's largest printing works. The attack on 23 May 2024, killed seven employees and destroyed 50,000 books.) The Vivat book shop was overwhelmed—queues stretched all the way outside and their website went down due to the surge in orders.

We, too, do all we can to turn challenges into opportunities. We kept our museum running even though we couldn't physically work in our building for a whole year. So we just moved our events to the basements of one of our partner organisations.

In May 2022, in the midst of war, we held an in-person Night of Museums. It was our message to the world that we would not surrender. We understand how crucial the material we preserve is—it provides answers to many of the questions society is grappling with.

Night of Museums,
Kharkiv Literary Museum.
Photo by Oleksandr Osipov

"Today, as people in eastern and southern Ukraine try to fathom their Ukrainian identity, we cannot afford to hide the values embedded in our culture. Museum artefacts must be protected from physical destruction, but their meaning, experience, and memory must remain accessible."

— Tetiana Pylypchuk, director of the Kharkiv Literary Museum

T.P.: For some, the experiences of linguist Yuriy Shevelyov, who chose his Ukrainian identity during the turbulent 1920s, will be invaluable. Others may find strategies from the 1920s relevant, or draw emotional strength from the philosophy of Hryhorii Skovoroda, an 18th-century wandering philosopher and poet.

We work with these narratives because there is a tremendous demand among Ukrainians today: 'Who are we? What was created before us? What lessons can we draw from the past to integrate into our contemporary cultural memory?' Our shared, new cultural memory is being formed right now. And it all begins with a warm, emotional connection to the past—one we must preserve and pass on to future generations.

Poetry on the Ladder

In March 2023, the Literary Museum reopened its doors to visitors after a year-long forced hiatus. The first offline event, immediately dubbed "Poetic Weapon", featured the traditional "ladder readings"—an annual opportunity for anyone to share their poetry from a ladder in front of the museum.

This format quickly gained an immense popularity that extended far beyond Kharkiv. The readings typically attract a diverse crowd, from youngsters to older generations. This unique tradition was born spontaneously: members of the Mad Cactus literary club of young poets once decided to hold a reading in the museum's garden. A large crowd gathered, but there was neither a stage nor microphones in the garden. However, the caretaker had left behind a tall ladder, which the poets placed against the wall, taking turns to climb up and recite their poetry. Thus the concept of ladder readings was born.

Over time, this format became a cherished tradition, bringing together creative minds and adding a unique charm to the Museum's events.

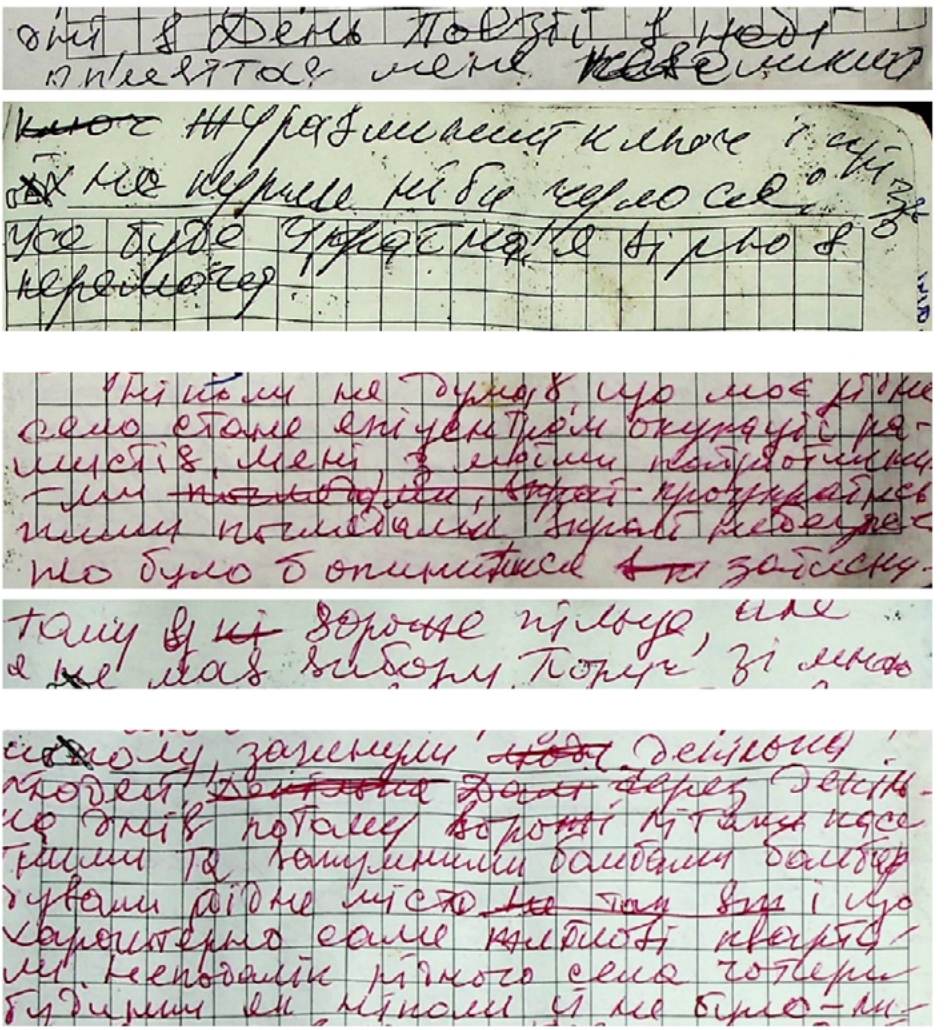
Poetry reading, Kharkiv Literary Museum. Photo by Oleksandr Osipov

"I remember the applause when we invited visitors to the museum garden and announced the Museum's reopening. People were thrilled, cheering and clapping. It was an incredible moment for me — when else can you witness such joy over a museum's opening?"

T. P.: I sometimes joke that literature is "boring", Ukrainian literature is "boring", a museum is "boring", but a museum of Ukrainian literature is the jackpot. By the way, the readings were opened by the Ukrainian writer Viktoria Amelina, who dedicated them to her colleague, the children's author Volodymyr Vakulenko, who was killed during the occupation of his native village, Kapytolivka.

Among the many tragic stories uncovered after the liberation of Ukrainian cities, the story of children's author, poet, and translator Volodymyr Vakulenko serves as a painful reminder of the scale of the atrocities committed by the Russian army.

Volodymyr Vakulenko's Diary



Volodymyr lived in the village of Kapytolivka near Izium, which was occupied in early March 2022. The author of 13 books had a special passion for children's prose, writing works dedicated to his son, whom he raised alone. Volodymyr had received several literary awards and was known for his staunch pro-Ukrainian stance, support for the Maidan revolution, and advocacy for Ukraine's orientation towards Europe. He stayed in Kapytolivka to care for his ailing son.

A few weeks into the occupation, Volodymyr Vakulenko was abducted by Russian soldiers. He had anticipated becoming a target for the occupiers—or even a victim of betrayal by fellow villagers—because he never hid his views, actively volunteered, and supported Ukrainian soldiers by bringing them medicine and giving them his very last cigarettes.

For a long time, there was no news of Volodymyr, and he was considered missing. Only after Izium was liberated in September 2022 that his body found in a mass grave, numbered 319 and marked with signs of torture. Forensic analysis confirmed it was the children's author Volodymyr Vakulenko. The mass grave also contained the remains of over 400 other people murdered during the occupation.

Aware of the imminent danger, Volodymyr managed to hide a diary before his abduction. In it, he recorded his observations of the occupation, the destruction, the sentiments of the local population, and his hopes for victory. Sensing the threat, he buried the manuscript beneath a cherry tree in his garden, instructing his father to retrieve it once Ukrainian forces had liberated the village.

This small 36-page manuscript became the poet's outcry to the world about Russia's crimes. Following instructions from Volodymyr's father, Ukrainian writer and war crimes documentarian Viktoria Amelina unearthed the diary. Her persistence, acute intuition and awareness of the diary's significance turned it into undeniable evidence of Russian war crimes and a legacy that gave Volodymyr a voice beyond death.

The diary became the first exhibit in the Kharkiv Literary Museum after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, where it is preserved to this day.

T.P.: Even before the full-scale invasion, Volodymyr and I discussed his performance at the museum. After the occupation of Izium, we heard nothing about him for a long time. The writer Viktoria Amelina began visiting Kharkiv during this time and was deeply impressed by our work.
Despite the danger of staying in Kharkiv due to the constant shelling, we continued documenting crimes against cultural heritage. Viktoria joined one of these programmes documenting Russia's crimes. She wanted to write a book in English about these events, and I suggested she use our literary residency. In 2023, Viktoria effectively revived the residency by becoming its first resident after the full-scale invasion.
In 2022, she visited Izium, where she met Volodymyr's father. He told her about his son's diary, and Viktoria went to great lengths to find it. She wrote to me that she had unearthed the diary but said it was very damp.

In the preface to I Am Transforming … Occupation Diary. Selected Poems (published 3 June 2023 in Kyiv), Viktoria Amelina writes:

"My worst fear is coming true: I find myself amongst a new Executed Renaissance. Just as in the 1930s, Ukrainian artists are being killed, their manuscripts disappearing, their memories erased. It feels as though time itself is blending and freezing in anticipation of resolution—I am searching in the black soil of Slobozhanske not only for the notes of one of us but for all the lost Ukrainian texts at once. All our losses—from ancient prints to Volodymyr Vakulenko's diary—seem like one great text that will never be read again.
'I found it!' I cry out in joy, as if I have unearthed not just a diary written under occupation but all of the lost Ukrainian literature."

T.P.: Viktoria asked me what she should do with the diary.

At that time, we were in the middle of the Fifth Kharkiv literary festival, but I told her that I was already leaving. Viktoria replied that it wasn't necessary, that she would come herself and bring the manuscript to Kharkiv.

As soon as she brought the diary, we conserved and scanned it.

After the challenging work of deciphering the text, which we completed together with Ukrainian PEN, the VIVAT publishing house printed the diary.

Viktoria decided that Volodymyr's diary would become a museum exhibit, and his parents supported her decision. I often say it is one of the museum's most valuable exhibits, but I wish it didn't exist at all. I wish Volodymyr himself had decided what to do with the manuscript.

This is not just a collection of pages with notes; these are documents of immense significance. They are intricate, deeply symbolic, and speak of us—our identity, our capabilities, our desires, and our future.

In his I Am Transforming... Occupation Diary. Selected Poems, Volodymyr Vakulenko writes:

"Values gain weight when you find yourself in trouble. In the early days, after the central gas pipeline was bombed by the Russians, and later, when energy supplies were destroyed, people's usual status of limitless possibilities shifted to one of survival. Many will be found in their homes, cellars, or under rubble, perished from hunger and cold. The March winds roared even more fiercely than the previous month's.

Fires lit between bricks near high-rise buildings became common sight. Shops had little left in the way of grains or other supplies from the early days of the war. The city was cut off from others ... I divided the last loaf of bread into five parts, but only for my child.

> After two weeks of occupation, I had already forgotten the taste of bread. I swept and the crumbs the little one left on the table, into my palm and ate greedily, just to feel a hint of the bread's flavour."

It was the writer Viktoria Amelina who made it possible for the story of Volodymyr Vakulenko and his Diary to become known to the world. As well as finding the manuscript, she then went to great lengths to ensure its publication.

For Amelina, this was more than just a literary undertaking; it became an act of memory and justice. The Ukrainian writer sought to restore the voice of an artist who gave his life for Ukraine's future and left behind evidence of the occupiers' crimes as well as a reminder to the world of the price of dignity and freedom.

She presented the book at Ukraine's largest literary fair, the Book Arsenal in Kyiv. Amelina also represented Volodymyr Vakulenko in Norway, where he was posthumously awarded the Prix Voltaire by the International Publishers Association.

> "I, a Ukrainian writer, speak today on behalf of my colleague Volodymyr Vakulenko, who, unlike me, did not survive the empire's latest attempt to destroy Ukrainian identity. The award given to Volodymyr means a great deal to the Ukrainian literary community, especially since hundreds of Ukrainian writers, artists, and public figures in the 20th century were killed for choosing to be Ukrainian. Yet none of them ever received such recognition in Norway. I am confident that Volodymyr Vakulenko would want to dedicate the Voltaire Prize to them as well. Volodymyr Vakulenko kept his diary during the occupation, hoping that you, the world, would hear him."
> (Preface to I Am Becoming... The Occupation Diary. Selected Poems, 3 June 2023, Kyiv. Viktoria Amelina.)

On 27 June 2023, writer Viktoria Amelina sustained fatal

injuries during a Russian missile strike on a café in the city of Kramatorsk, where she was meeting colleagues and foreign journalists. Her heart stopped beating on the day of Volodymyr Vakulenko's birth. He would have turned 51. Victoria was 37.

The children's writer made his final entry in his diary on 21 March, the International Poetry Day, ending it with these words: "And today, on Poetry Day, a small flock of cranes greeted me in the sky, and through their cries, it felt as if I heard: 'Ukraine will prevail! I believe in victory!'" Exactly one year later, on the same date, an exhibition of the diary opened alongside the traditional Readings on the Ladder, dedicated to his memory.

Fifth Kharkiv Literary Festival, 2022.
Photo by Oleksandr Osipov

The Literary Museum now works to preserve the memory of those deliberately destroyed by the Soviet totalitarian system and, more recently, by the Russian occupation regime: poets and writers, musicians and artists, printers and librarians—the people upon whom the existence and growth of literature, national memory and identity depend.

T.P. In the first year of the war, in September 2022, under the threat of shelling, we hosted the literary festival The Fifth Kharkiv, which we organised together with the renowned Ukrainian poet and musician Serhiy Zhadan. We decided it was time—the war was raging, but we were talking about the future. Even without being entirely clear about where we stood, we dreamed of what was to come.

This three-day festival was held in the atmospheric basement of the Art Area cultural centre. It turned out to be incredibly powerful, both intellectually and artistically. At that time, Kharkiv was at the forefront of resistance: the city stood firm and unyielding, and everyone was asking what was happening and what Kharkiv represented today. For many, the city revealed itself in a new light.

The festival brought together remarkable individuals and became a significant cultural event. Emotionally, it resembled the spirit of the Maidan—we had an incredible, uplifting atmosphere where everyone felt united and alive. We were used to being united in volunteer work, supporting one another, and here this unity took on a cultural dimension.

"The war has shown that good interdependence gives us the strength to live"

Poet, writer and musician Serhiy Zhadan, Kharkiv Literary Museum. Photo by Oleksandr Osipov

In 2024, Kharkiv lost 18-year-old Veronika Kozhushko — a talented local artist and poet, whose life was tragically cut short by a Russian missile strike. Veronika, known as Nika, was an integral part of every event at the Literary Museum, whether as a volunteer or as a participant. In her memory, the museum established the Generation of Nika award to support talented young artists.

The Museum also launched Skovorodance, a powerful literary and musical project that reinterprets the work of the wandering philosopher and poet Hryhorii Skovoroda through contemporary music. The poems are over 200 years old, yet they still sound remarkably relevant today.

The composer Yurii Hurzhy wrote twelve pieces for the event, based on Skovoroda's collection The Garden of Divine Songs,

describing the album as “poems that unite and music that heals”. Thirty-five renowned Ukrainian musicians joined the project, bringing Skovoroda’s philosophy of joy to life in a modern musical sound.

Incredible as it may seem, at a time when the city is hit daily by Russian Grad rockets, cluster munitions, Iskander missiles and kamikaze drones, Kharkiv reads poetry, writes music, sings, paints, dances, and creates a new cultural memory like never before.

Moreover, the city’s artistic elite reinterprets even death itself as a complex phenomenon and the opportunity to transform memory into a resource. Despite the missile strikes, the destroyed printing presses and the annihilation of tens of thousands of books, Kharkiv remains a symbol of resilience on the frontlines.

Kharkiv artist Konstyantyn Zorkin presents his works.
Photo by Oleksandr Osipov

T. P.: The renowned Kharkiv artist Kostyantyn Zorkin once came to us and said, "Tanya, I had a vision." I replied, "Kostya, I believe what we need right now is not business plans or projects, but a vision."

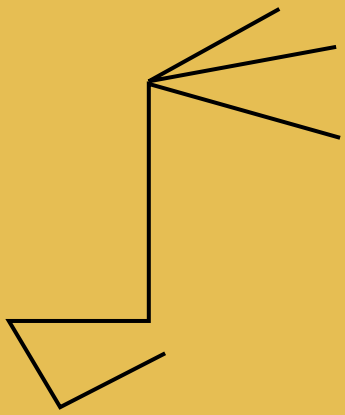
He suggested we create a fantastical world to help us make sense of our experience. Because memory is not just about the past; it's about our present. It depends on us: who we want to remember, how and what we will preserve, which places we will mark and reinterpret.

Thus, another project was born — In the Name of the City. Dedicated to those currently living through this difficult time in Kharkiv. Right now, we are trying to understand our collective experiences through an exhibition, a comic, a film, and a museum route, all part of this large project. We have marked important places in Kharkiv — those that have been lost or redefined but remain sources of strength.

We have held performances and discussions, are portraying certain characters: we are trying to understand what entities live in the city today. The city itself appears in a bulletproof vest, symbolic for action, struggle and death. In this sense, death becomes not only an end but also a life force, the ability to work with memories, turning them into inspiration.

"This is about our strength. The strength to support each other, to love and to feel unity. We have always dreamed of independence, of creating something of our own, of being autonomous. But the full-scale war has shown that it is precisely good interdependence that gives us the strength to live and move forward."

The Mariupol Philharmonic Hall:



SHEET MUSIC CAN BE RESTORED; A HUMAN LIFE CAN'T

"I escaped from hell"

Like other cultural landmarks in the city, the Mariupol Philharmonic Hall became a scene of destruction since Russia marched into Ukraine. Occupation, heavy shelling and looting severely damaged this emblem of Mariupol's cultural life. While the building itself survived, it temporarily became a shelter for people seeking refuge from the relentless bombing.

Vasyl Kriachok, the director and conductor of the Mariupol Philharmonic, spent two harrowing months under occupation, assisting colleagues and civilians who found refuge and solace in the Philharmonic Hall. By a stroke of luck, he managed to escape the occupation and went on to establish the Philharmonic of the Unconquered project, supported by the National Philharmonic of Ukraine. This initiative aims to support musicians from occupied and frontline regions, and stands as a symbol of how art can provide solace during the darkest of times.

"I escaped from hell,"

—says Vasyl Kriachok in the very first minutes of our meeting, recounting his escape from Mariupol. I meet the maestro in the stunningly picturesque Austria, where he is visiting his daughter. Offers to work in Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands abound, yet his heart belongs to Ukraine and it is there that he aspires to advance Ukrainian musical artistry.

At the onset of the full-scale war, Kriachok resolved to stay in Mariupol. A devoted musician and director, he felt a profound responsibility towards his team and the people who trust him. Like many Mariupol residents, he could not fathom that Russia would launch a full-scale war, let alone commit such atrocities against the civilian population. Six days after Russian troops invaded, communication with the Honoured Artist of Ukraine was lost.

Vasyl Kriachok, director and conductor of the Mariupol Philharmonic:

> V.K.: Even now, it seems unreal that such devastation truly happened in Mariupol. I remained there for two months after the invasion began because I couldn't abandon the Philharmonic and the people. They trusted and relied on me.
>
> I unwittingly became a witness to unspeakable crimes: the destruction of the city—smoke, soot, phosphorus bombs. When one of those bombs hits an apartment building, every floor goes up in flames, from the bottom to the top. Grads and bombs dropped from planes rained down on us constantly. The city was turned to ashes. I looked at it all and couldn't believe my eyes. I still don't know how I managed to survive.

During the heaviest shelling and fighting, the Mariupol Philharmonic became a refuge for hundreds of civilians seeking shelter from the bombings. People gathered in its halls and basement, hoping its thick walls would protect them from the relentless attacks. Though the building wasn't designed for this purpose, many who had lost their homes—and even loved ones—found solace and support there.

> V.K.: We never planned to use the Philharmonic as a bomb shelter, recalls Vasyl Kriachok. The building was not equipped for that purpose. We lacked proper fortifications, yet people kept coming. At one point, I realised there were around 1200 people in the Philharmonic—women, children, elderly, and

the sick. It was relatively warm inside and we managed to set up sleeping areas. I reached out to local businesspeople, who brought us blankets, food, water—everything we needed. I had to assume the role of commandant.

Food disappeared from store shelves almost at once—what wasn't bought up was looted. Yet thanks to local businesspeople, the Philharmonic had meat, sausages, cheese, water, and even a makeshift medical station. I couldn't have managed without people's help. We cooked food outdoors over open fires, recalls Vasyl Kriachok.

Vasyl Kriachok, Director and Conductor of the Mariupol Philharmonic. Photo by Yevhen Sosnovskyi

The humanitarian catastrophe in Mariupol worsened under the brutal siege by Russian forces. In addition to panic, fear and despair, residents faced severe shortages of food, water and medicine. The city was left without electricity, gas, a centralised water supply or heat. Attempting to escape was perilous; cars with families were often shot at. Many of Mariupol's residents believed it was safer to stay at home, clinging to the hope that the nightmare would soon be over.

"At minus ten degrees Celsius, people came to us barefoot."

Built in the 1960s, the Mariupol Philharmonic is renowned for its unique acoustics, making it one of the finest concert halls in Ukraine. Photo by Yevhen Sosnovskyi

> V. K.: People arrived in whatever they could grab — without warm clothes, even barefoot. Just imagine: at minus ten degrees Celsius, they came to us barefoot, wearing only their indoor clothes! I brought clothing and shoes from my home for those in need.
>
> One day, a 93-year-old woman arrived. She had been bedridden for years and could only walk with crutches. Her eighth-floor apartment was hit by a shell, setting fire to the entire floor. Somehow, she got up, found some sticks — not even proper crutches — and walked the 8 to 10 kilometres to the Philharmonic Hall. She told us it took her over a day to make the journey. When she finally arrived, she collapsed right in the Philharmonic's foyer. We warmed her up, fed her, but she was incredibly frail and ill...

After two months, the fear in the city had faded to numbness, Kriachok explains. People learned to identify the types of shells and where they were coming from. Meanwhile, Russian propaganda was spreading lies, with staged footage that was claimed to have been filmed in Mariupol. Kriachok was chased by Russian journalists trying to get an interview. They told him that Kyiv had fallen and that the whole of Ukraine was already under the control of Russian forces.

Without mobile or internet connection in Mariupol, rumours circulated rapidly. Journalists pressed the famous conductor for statements that fit their narrative. Later, while in Germany, he came across a Russian television report that featured him:

> V.K.: They had dubbed my voice with Russian translations, completely twisting my words. They needed to show their audience that Mariupol's cultural elite supported the occupation regime.

During the occupation of Mariupol, Vasyl Kriachok, like many others of Ukraine's intelligentsia, faced pressure and attempts

Vasyl Kriachok in occupied Mariupol. Photo from the archive of Larysa Halla

to coerce him into collaborating with the Russian "authorities". These actively sought to enlist influential cultural figures to their side, aiming to create the illusion of local support for the invasion and to portray a semblance of "normality" in cultural life under occupation.

Kriachok firmly refused to collaborate. This decision was extremely risky, as open resistance to the occupying authorities could result in severe consequences, including arrest. For him, though, it was crucial to preserve his professional integrity and moreover to remain true to his values and loyal to the Ukrainian cultural sphere.

> V.K.: They tried to persuade me to move to occupied Donetsk, promising me the title of professor, a position, and an apartment. "I am a Ukrainian," I told them. Then, I came up with a golden response: 'But who will restore the philharmonic in Mariupol?' That made them leave me alone for a while. But then they came back: 'Restore the philharmonic. We'll triple your salary, gather an orchestra, and prepare the 'Donetsk People's Republic' anthem for the 'Victory Parade.' I replied that I did not recognise the so-called DPR as a state and would do no such thing.

Vasyl Kriachok witnessed the systematic shelling of residential areas, hospitals, schools and cultural landmarks by Russian forces from the start of the invasion, which caused the deaths of thousands of people. Many civilians perished under the rubble, while queuing for water and food, or due to a lack of medical aid.

"Every day along my route, I came across dozens of dead bodies."

Estimates suggest that between 20,000 and 25,000 people have died in Mariupol due to bombings and the harsh conditions under occupation. The exact number is hard to assess due to the city's ongoing occupation and mass grave burials.

V.K.: Walking home from the Philharmonic and back again, I crossed the square near the Drama Theatre, where Ukrainian military personnel, officers of the Security Service of Ukraine, national police and many others gathered to exchange what little accurate information about the current situation was available.

The military warned us to be careful, as the city was littered with mines and unexploded shells. Although it was dangerous to walk through courtyards, I still took those routes to the Philharmonic. The open streets were even riskier, as there were always snipers and you could end up caught in a hailstorm of bullets.

Every day along my route, I came across dozens of dead bodies—people hit by snipers or civilians who had stepped on mines. Sometimes, you'd be walking, and suddenly a severed arm would fly out of an alley. It was horrifying...

The destruction of Mariupol's Drama Theatre was one of the gravest tragedies of the war. In March 2022, the theatre served as a shelter for hundreds of civilians, mainly women and children. Even the large warning signs that read "CHILDREN" on the pavement outside the theatre did not deter the Russian forces. On 16 March, they dropped an avia bomb on the building, completely destroying its central section.

V.K.: It happened right before my eyes. I live nearby and the windows of my apartment overlook the theatre. That morning, as on most days, I walked my dogs and was about to head towards the theatre to catch up on the latest news. Suddenly, I heard the sound of an approaching plane. I stopped, and in that instant, there was a sharp whistle and then a blast that hurled me against the wall of a pizzeria. When I reached the theatre, I saw women running, crying, searching for their relatives—sons, grandchildren—it was horrific. People died under the rubble.

Ukrainian prosecutors reported that at least 600 people were killed under the rubble of Mariupol's Drama Theatre. But the exact number of victims remains unknown, as many bodies were never recovered due to the collapse of the structures and because the occupying authorities then poured concrete over the rubble and used chlorine bleach to mask the smell of the bodies.

"After the theatre's destruction, many fled Mariupol."

After the destruction of the theatre, hundreds of people who had previously sought refuge in the Philharmonic Hall were terrified and decided to leave the city. They found that the only safe evacuation route was along the shoreline, across the sandy beach.

> V.K.: The city centre was completely devastated, reduced to rubble. Buildings were in ruins, many items destroyed or stolen. It felt as though there was nothing left but craters from the shelling.
> Many people walked on foot—some for a week or even longer, depending on their strength. They made their way through Melekino, a 12-kilometre stretch along the coast to Yalta in the Donetsk region, as there was no active fighting there. The evacuees formed a massive column—about 800 people, maybe more. They felt they had no choice but to flee, as the city had become too dangerous to stay.
> By 20 March, only about 150 people remained in the Philharmonic Hall, mostly separatists interested in the arrival of Russian forces. By then, I rarely visited the building. Everything was quickly looted—a temple of culture desecrated. There was no one left to talk to.

Destroyed buildings, dead bodies on the streets, people who

had been hiding in basements for weeks without food or water?—Kriachok witnessed how ordinary citizens were denied their basic right to safety and life and noted that the scale of these crimes betrayed a deliberate attempt to destroy the civilian population.

"I believe their orders were to annihilate civilians"

> V.K.: Russian soldiers forbade people to move freely around the city. They banned the use of phones. I once walked with a friend of mine, a university professor, and he pulled out his phone from his pocket. At once, a Russian soldier approached us and gruffly asked, 'Do you want a bullet to the head?
> The scale of crimes against civilians was almost unimaginable. I think the Russians acted even worse than Hitler's fascists. They forbade people from drawing water from public taps. I already knew that most men had been physically eliminated. Women would gather in groups of three or four and venture out to fetch water.
> The occupiers were brutal: raping, destroying, and killing the elderly, women, and even those who required medical care. Every living thing was annihilated. It's hard to put into words. I truly believe they were following direct orders to destroy civilians.

People survived as best they could. They took water from fire hydrants and boiled it on open fires. The conductor relocated to a basement, where together with his friend they set up a makeshift shelter. They cooked meals over an open fire in the courtyard.

The Mariupol Philharmonic Hall sustained significant shelling damage: although the structure itself remained standing, its roof, façade, stage, and auditorium were damaged, along with architec-

tural elements, decorations, furniture, and musical instruments. Musicians who stayed in occupied Mariupol are still working there now.

"They were destroying everything connected to Ukraine"

V.K.: As well as being devastated, the Philharmonic Hall, an important historical and architectural building, was also looted. Shrapnel from shells destroyed the roof and ceiling, and a double bass was smashed to pieces. The unique stained-glass hall was obliterated by the blast, leaving no windows or doors intact. What musical instruments weren't destroyed were stolen.

In my office, I kept my concert tuxedos, bow ties, cufflinks—all gone. I can't even fathom who would need such things. My conductor's batons were stolen too—there were ten of them, and I deeply regret their loss.

Through his family's tireless efforts, Vasyl Kriachok managed to escape Mariupol. The journey to Ukrainian-controlled territory was long and arduous: through Donetsk to Rostov, then across the Latvian border and on to Warsaw. There, the maestro was met and taken to Berlin, where his daughter was awaiting him.

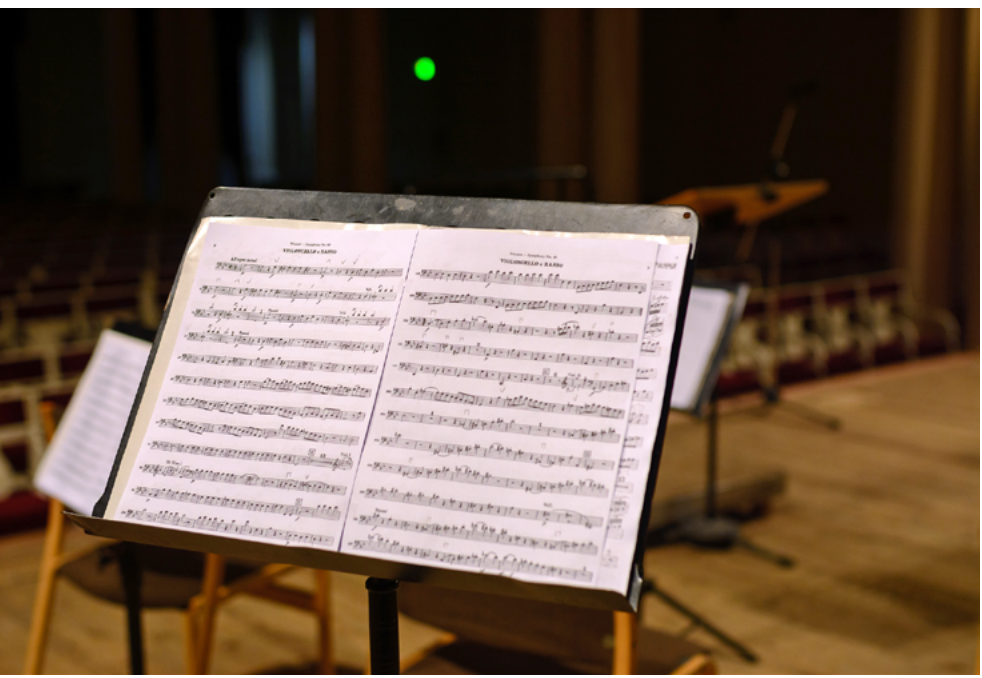
V.K.: During my evacuation from Mariupol, I could only take a few belongings. The most precious were my three little dogs—I just couldn't leave them behind. I also took with me two bags, a briefcase, my wife's violin, and a conductor's baton.

Besides his familiar life and beloved philharmonic, Kriachok lost his 35-year-old music library—both a personal and professional blow, as his collection of sheet music and scores was crucial for

the philharmonic's repertoire and his work as a conductor.

V.K.: Nothing could be saved. It was a vast library that I had built up over 35 years. In recent years, we had planned to digitise the library, but we didn't manage to do it in time. All these years before the invasion, I wrote the musical material for large performances, chamber concerts, and even opera productions. We performed on open-air stages in Mariupol, where we created a real brand for the city, a unique orchestra.

Thirty-five years ago, Vasyl Kriachok founded the *Renaissance* chamber orchestra. Its performances quickly became major cultural events in Mariupol. Photo by Yevhen Sosnovskyi



Perhaps part of the music library can be restored, but it will be very difficult. All the works I composed, I can no longer recreate—some were partially burned or lost.

When the Russians took over the city, they not only burned our books and libraries but also tried to destroy all traces of Ukrainian culture, including historical archives. They destroyed everything related to Ukraine, not just Ukrainian literature but also historical documents of Mariupol ...

Scores can be restored; a human life can't. The main thing I realised through this horror is that life is the most precious gift. It is priceless. This is truly the greatest value of a person. My entire life is tied to music, and as long as I live, I will continue to work.

In the end, the maestro found safety. For the first six months, he lived with his daughter in Berlin, where he was able to regain his health. He learned from doctors that he had suffered a mini-stroke during the occupation.

V.K.: I underwent treatment in Berlin. Everyone thought I wouldn't return to Ukraine, but I came back to Kyiv because we needed to rebuild our chamber orchestra. There were no scores, no technical equipment—nothing.

Within two weeks, we gathered a team of ten musicians. We didn't have music stands or scores, but we started anyway—just a small group of people. The orchestra wasn't full yet, but we had to do something.

I bought 20 music stands. When the power was cut off in Kyiv, we continued rehearsing. That's how we lived—holding onto the hope that one day everything would start working again.

Vasyl Kriachok spent a long time searching for a place where the orchestra could resume its work. Eventually, he found the Architect's House, which was perfect for the chamber orchestra's rehearsals.

V. K.: I went to see the General Director of the National Philharmonic of Ukraine, Mykhailo Shved, who I've known for over twenty years, and he said: "Why don't we create the Philharmonic of the Unconquered?" Normally, a new ensemble needs time to get in sync. For a chamber orchestra, this takes several months. But we prepared a programme in less than a month—it was fantastic!

The Philharmonic of the Unconquered—a project that supports musicians from occupied and frontline territories who wish to preserve Ukrainian culture and remind the world of the tragedy of Mariupol. Vasyl Kriachok became the project's leader and inspirer.

"More than just a performance, each and every concert is a way of healing for our people."

For the Renaissance chamber orchestra, the destruction of Mariupol and the loss of the Philharmonic Hall were a great emotional shock. But this did not stop the musicians who managed to leave the city continuing to perform in other cities in Ukraine and abroad, delivering the message of resilience through their music.

V.K.: In Kyiv, we held concerts at the National Philharmonic, and it was always a full house. The audience came and we received incredible support! I believe this happened thanks to our courage and bravery, as we are reviving Ukrainian music in wartime. The musicians in our team are simply incredible—we gathered the best of the best.

As well as playing the music of world-class composers, the Renaissance orchestra performed a lot of Ukrainian music—works by the famous Ukrainian composer, singer, and conductor Dmytro Bortn-

The Renaissance chamber orchestra opens the concert season in *the Philharmonic of the Unconquered* project to a full house in 2023. Photo by Yevhen Sosnovskyi

yansky as well as contemporary Ukrainian composers such as Stetsenko, Skoryk, and Froliak.

V.K.: What is important is that we work not only on classical music but also on spiritual and contemporary pieces. All these works were rearranged for the chamber orchestra, and I, in turn, collaborate with famous musicians and composers. We frequently perform in Kyiv and Lviv, collaborating with the philharmonic orchestras of Ivano-Frankivsk and Vinnytsia, as well as in other Ukrainian cities, where we are always warmly welcomed.

"More than just a musical performance, each and every concert is a means of healing for our people, who are enduring incredibly difficult times. Music has a remarkable ability to affect a person's emotional state, helping to relieve stress and find inner balance. I feel this myself when I play: after each concert, you feel like you have regained strength for whatever comes next."

— Vasyl Kriachok, Director and Conductor of the Mariupol Philharmonic.

Photo by Yevhen Sosnovskyi

V.K.: Music helps us overcome difficulties and stay strong. I believe that after this war is over, we will return to our Mariupol to resume life and revive the arts.

"We began to see our roots and what we have in a new light."

Vasyl Kriachok openly speaks about the destruction of Ukraine's cultural heritage by Russia as a deliberate act of cultural genocide. He believes that the destruction of theatres, philharmonic halls and other cultural institutions, as well as the persecution of artists, is an attempt to erase Ukrainian identity.

V.K.: I believe that this destruction of cultural heritage and the artistic elite is quite deliberate. Without a doubt, it is part of Russia's ideology. This was not news to me, as I studied at the Astrakhan Conservatory [in Russia], even though I ended up there by chance. I received a good education there, so I am grateful to everyone who taught me. But it was also there that I first encountered Russian ideology.

At the age of 23, I clearly felt that there was no place for Ukraine in that system. The ideology being taught there was completely different. Ukrainians didn't even have a real opportunity to influence this process, and it was a system that controlled everything—even down to what musicians were supposed to do.

I have stood and watched our heritage being destroyed in favour of Russian culture, how they appropriated our music, our works, which then became 'theirs'. But the war has changed everything. Ukrainian culture, especially academic music, has reached a completely new level. It began to resonate on a global scale—in Europe and across the ocean.

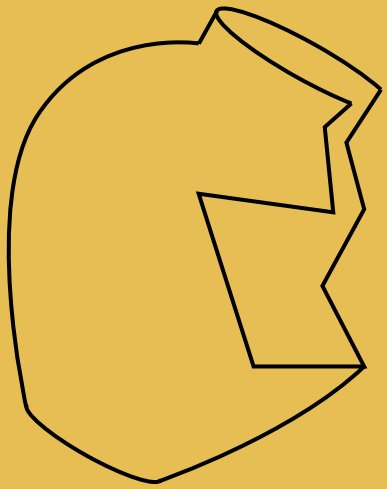
We started to see our roots in a new light. The music of Lyatoshynskyi, Lysenko, Barvinsky—it sounds different today, and it's no longer just music; it's a statement about our place in the world. And that is very important for all of us.

Vasyl Kriachok plans to continue working on the Philharmonic of the Unconquered project and aims to organise more concerts in Ukraine and abroad. He is expanding the orchestra's repertoire, adding works by Ukrainian composers, including those who are composing music as the war draws on. He also plans to hold masterclasses for young musicians from occupied and frontline territories to share his experience and to support them in these challenging times.

"Today, we have enormous opportunities to show the world that Ukrainian culture is alive, developing even in the midst of full-scale war. That's why I really want people around the world to learn more about Ukraine, about our music, about our talents. I believe this can help change how our country is perceived by the rest of the world."

V. K.: I am 70 years old now and I am brimming with strength and energy. Despite all the hardships, I continue to work, perform, and feel incredibly happy because I am doing what I love. We will continue to work with the chamber orchestra to ensure that Ukraine's cultural heritage is properly represented in the world.

The Renaissance chamber orchestra opens the concert season in the Philharmonic of the Unconquered project to a full house in 2023. Photo by Yevhen Sosnovskyi



Chronicle of Resilience,
Historical Agency:

WE SHOULD NEVER HAVE UNDERES-TIMATED THE AGGRESSOR

The war crimes Russia is committing against civilians often overshadow the country's calculated attacks on culture. In the occupied territories, it is relentlessly pursuing its strategy of erasing Ukrainian identity: rewriting history, banning the Ukrainian language, burning Ukrainian books and seizing cultural treasures.

First the Russian Empire, then the Soviet regime, and now modern Russia have systematically gutted Ukrainian culture and persecuted pro-Ukrainian elites in occupied territories. Artists—the guardians of cultural codes—face arrests, forced relocation, torture, and even death if they dare refuse to accept Russian identity. Education has become a tool for Russification, while cultural looting has reached unprecedented levels. In 2023, The New York Times called the looting of Ukrainian museums the largest since World War II.

Russian forces shell museums, theatres, temples, and libraries, often wiping them off the face of the earth entirely. In May 2022, a direct hit from a Russian missile caused a fire and the subsequent destruction of the Hryhorii Skovoroda Museum. Unique exhibits related to the life and work of the outstanding Ukrainian visionary, philosopher, and poet that could not be evacuated were lost forever. Remarkably, however, the statue of Skovoroda survived, becoming a symbol of hope.

In Mariupol, Russian forces removed original paintings from the Art Museum. The collection included works by famous Ukrainian artists such as Arkhip Kuindzhi, Ivan Aivazovsky and Mykola Hlushchenko. The whereabouts of these stolen paintings remain unknown.

Under the pretext of "preserving" exhibits, Russian occupying forces removed over ten thousand priceless treasured exhibits from occupied Kherson under the watchful eye of armed guards. The seized items included icons, paintings, ancient manuscripts, unique archaeological artefacts and ethnographic exhibits of immense importance for preserving historical memory. In the occupied city of Melitopol, Russian soldiers stole Scythian gold—unique artefacts that are part of the world's cultural heritage. A similar scenario can be observed across all occupied territories. Ukrainian volunteers and museum workers managed to evacuate the majority of cultural treasures to safe locations in time, and the documentation of war crimes is facilitating the collection of evidence for future trials and the return of stolen cultural heritage.

Following the full-scale invasion, many Ukrainian historians and art experts have also joined forces in innovative collaborations to counter disinformation and the distortion of historical facts. One such initiative is the historical agency Litopys Nezlamnosti (Chronicle of Resilience), whose team documents the aggressor's crimes and reflects on the events of the ongoing war.

A small group of historians, journalists, and artists is working to debunk myths about Ukrainian history and culture that have been perpetuated by Russian propaganda for decades. One of the agency's key focuses is exploring how culture and art help Ukrainians navigate the challenges of war. To achieve this, the agency's creators organise exhibitions of contemporary Ukrainian artists that address topics of social significance.

Iryna Zhyhulina, historian, co-founder and head of the civic organisation Litopys Nezlamnosti. Historical Agency.

I.Zh.: The idea for Chronicle of Resilience emerged during the chaos of the first weeks of the full-scale invasion. I clearly remember that moment when Ukrainians were bombarded with fake news, disinformation, and propaganda. As historians, we could immediately spot the outright lies, and we wanted to explain them to Ukrainians in simple terms.

Opening of the exhibition *Clay Man Story*, which explores the themes of life and death, identity and freedom. Iryna Zhihulina. Photo by Inna Bondarenko.

We assembled a small team of historians, publicists, and art historians united by the idea of dismantling Russian narratives about our past. After all, knowing one's true history means understanding the present and, to some extent, predicting the future, as history is cyclical.

We began documenting events and recording the stories of people who had escaped occupation because we knew that Russia could one day claim: "That never happened."

We understood that if not us, then who else would document today's events and provide historical context? Bloggers and opinion leaders often lack expertise, while our task was to tell history in an accessible way—so that tomorrow, it wouldn't be Russia telling it for us.

From the very beginning, it was all driven purely by enthusiasm. We wrote long reads, created a website, an Instagram page, a YouTube channel, and started organising conferences, lectures, exhibitions and events for young people. In The Rakes of History, for example, we discuss past mistakes to help avoid them in the future.

How do you assess the scale of destruction of Ukraine's cultural heritage?

I.Zh.: We should never have underestimated the aggressor. This enemy has centuries of experience in erasing the history of other nations. What do they do first when they seize new territories? They ban the Ukrainian language and books and rename streets. Russian occupying authorities

Part of the Litopys Nezlamnosti team with Ukrainian sculptor Rustem Skibin

renamed Freedom Square into Lenin Square in Mariupol, and the Ivan Franko Library was turned into the Pushkin Library. In Melitopol, Russians changed the names of over 55 streets.

Of course, this is no coincidence, as destroying historical memory is part of the aggressor's arsenal. The forced evacuation of children is also a form of genetic and cultural genocide: over 20,000 children have been torn from their roots to be given a new identity.

Emotional exhaustion and moral attrition are yet another way Russia seeks to break us. This is how they operate—as if by a manual. What they did a hundred years ago, they are repeating today, and their ambitions are so vast that the international community must understand: they will not stop.

"When it comes to cultural looting, over 40 Ukrainian museums have been plundered since the start of the full-scale war, with tens of thousands of cultural artefacts either stolen or destroyed. Icons, paintings and books have been taken to Russian museums and private collections."

In fact, these processes began much earlier. In 2020, Ukrainian archaeologist Tymur Bobrovskyy identified 57 valuable items that the Bolsheviks had looted from the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and St. Sophia Cathedral in the 1930s. These objects, mostly of religious significance and made of gold, silver and precious stones, were previously considered irretrievably lost. Today, they are kept in the Hermitage Museum.

History is now repeating itself. In 2023, the Russian occupiers looted over 120 archaeological artefacts from the Kamiana Mohyla National Historical and Archaeological Preserve in Zaporizhzhia Oblast and transported them to Crimea—an act of outright theft of world heritage. Among the stolen exhibits were petroglyphs (ed.: Ancient rock carvings depicting hunting scenes with goats and mammoths), household items from ancient civilisations, ceramics and stone-age tools.

"Art can not only entertain but also heal in difficult times."

Since the beginning of Crimea's occupation, Russia has taken to actively "restoring" cultural sites across the peninsula, and the organisations carrying out this work lack the required experience and expertise, says Iryna. In June 2021, "excavations" began on the territory of the ancient city of Chersonesus, a UNESCO World Heritage site, using heavy machinery.

According to UNESCO's 2021 report,

"Crimean artefacts are being taken to Russia without ensuring their safety or obtaining Ukraine's permission—as required by international occupation law—and are being displayed in exhibitions dedicated to Russia's cultural heritage. Plus, discoveries from numerous unauthorised archaeological excavations are often illegally taken to Russia or end up on the black market."

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the occupation authorities in Crimea have been rebuilding the Khan's Palace in Bakhchisarai under the guise of "repair and restoration works", leading to its destruction. Cracks have appeared in historical buildings, while

original architectural elements have been destroyed by “restorers” or discarded as rubbish.

The Khan’s Palace is by now the only surviving architectural complex of the indigenous Crimean Tatar people. Now, we are witnessing the gradual destruction of the world’s only material testament to the development of this ethnic group in Crimea– an immense tragedy for the Crimean Tatars.

Has the full-scale war catalysed a more profound rethinking of Ukrainian history and identity?

I.Zh.: I will say something you may not like. Contemporary Ukrainian society is going through a transformational period similar to transavantgarde. Old values have lost significance, while new ones have yet to fully take shape. A person may speak Ukrainian in public but switch to Russian at home. Many people have started speaking Ukrainian to follow a trend. Some people in the entertainment industry have adopted the language more as a form of indulgence—a way to maintain their popularity. For some Ukrainians, it is a way to support their loved ones on the front lines; for others, it is an opportunity to assert their identity with regard to the world.

Overall, being Ukrainian today encompasses vastly different experiences. For those abroad, it may seem fashionable; for those in Ukraine, it can be exhausting. In the occupied territories, remaining Ukrainian is dangerous and can cost one’s life. However, since 2022, there has been a surge in the creation of projects and brands referencing Ukrainian archaism, traditions and history.

At the beginning of the war, when we passed through Ukrainian checkpoints, the password consisted of old Ukrainian words that were difficult for Russians to pronounce. These words became a code, helping distinguish friend from foe. At The Chronicle of Resilience, we began researching these archaic Ukrainian words.

During the full-scale war, art emerged in unexpected formats: torch-lit exhibitions, theatre plays in bomb shelters, concerts and art installations in metro stations. What other examples of Ukrainian artistic resilience inspire you?

I.Zh.: We have to adapt to war. During one of our exhibitions, the electricity went out at the opening. It was July, during the peak of power outages. It happened spontaneously—because that's our reality now. No one could have predicted it. More than 100 people were at the exhibition, but no one left. They all took out their phones, turned on their torches, and lit up the space so we could continue. Everyone followed our curator, illuminating each exhibit, trying to see the details and grasp the concept.

At the beginning of the war, concerts were held in metro stations as people sought shelter during air raids—they sang and listened to music. Even famous Ukrainian bands performed, and this became an essential act of support for the people. Later, the metro stations reopened for public use and cultural events there stopped.

"But these cultural initiatives had played their role. They helped with emotional recovery, unity and the promotion of Ukrainian art. They also showed that art is not just for entertainment, but that it can heal and support people in difficult times."

I am particularly inspired by artistic projects involving veterans. Ukraine is already taking steps in this direction: veterans participate in advertising campaigns, fashion shows and artistic projects. The Kyiv Fashion Week was especially moving when veterans with prosthetics walked the runway. It's a powerful example of how our society is growing and learning to honour its heroes.

The Emotional Invasion exhibition took place without electricity, illuminated by torches. Photo by Serhii Mazurash.

What role has Russian propaganda played and continues to play in the war against Ukraine?

I.Zh.: I don't think Russian propaganda can be viewed separately from Soviet propaganda; they go hand in hand. Russian propaganda has been "enriched" with elements from other dictatorial regimes. Without propaganda, I am convinced that this war would never have started.

One of the biggest propaganda myths is that Ukrainians are "Nazis and Banderites". We know full well how absurd this is. Russian propagandists created this narrative to justify aggression, dehumanise Ukrainians and convince their population that we should be killed.

Another widely promoted narrative is that of the "brotherly nations" and the "shared historical heritage of Kyivan Rus-Ukraine". This is used as a justification for aggression, as if we are not an independent state but merely a "part of

Russia". At the same time, the physical destruction of cultural monuments only reinforces this ideological war.

As a historian, I can confidently say that the Muscovite state was not mentioned in history during Kyivan Rus's existence. The Principality of Moscow, as a state, was only created in 1277 when Kyivan Rus-Ukraine had already existed for over 300 years.

But this did not matter to the Russian Empire, which deliberately rewrote history. On 4 December 1783, by order of Catherine II, the "Commission for the Compilation of Notes on Ancient History, Primarily Russian" was established. The commission worked for nine years, distorting and rewriting historical facts to create a new history of the Russian Empire, linking its origins to Kyivan Rus. Contrary to historical truth, the commission asserted Russia's right to Kyivan Rus' political and cultural heritage, declaring all its people a "single nation".

Opening of the exhibition *Time Capsule or Golden Record*, New York. Photo from the Rukh Art Hub website.

In reality, throughout history, Ukrainians have fought for the idea of an independent state. This idea was not destroyed by mass repressions, deportations, the Holodomor genocide of 1932–1933, or the systemic Russification of Ukraine. Only in 1991 were Ukrainians able to fulfil their long-held dream: in a referendum, over 90 percent of citizens voted in favour of Ukraine's independence.

"Without Ukrainian treasures, Russian museum collections would look significantly poorer."

From its very beginning, The Chronicle of Resilience has been on a mission to restore historical justice. One of the project's authors is Nata Kushniruk, a Ukrainian art historian, art critic and curator of artistic initiatives. She is known for her work on projects that address significant social issues, including cultural genocide and the return of stolen artefacts to Ukraine. Nata actively promotes Ukrainian art, and her exhibitions stand out for their creative approach.

Since the start of the full-scale war, the first Ukrainian gallery in New York, Rukh Art Hub, has been organising exhibitions of Ukrainian artists in Manhattan. As one of the curators, Nata helps introduce American audiences to artists working in wartime. She believes this process is crucial for preserving Ukrainian identity.

Nata Kushniruk, Ukrainian art historian and art critic:

N.K.: There are many stereotypes about Ukrainians imposed by Russians on the world — for example that Ukrainians are all about flower wreaths, borscht, and salo (ed.: traditional Ukrainian dish made from pork fat). This is not true, of course. Ukrainian art includes painters like Bohomazov and Ekster, who for decades were presented to the world as Russian artists. Ukrainian art also includes

talented contemporary artists whose exhibitions we have been organising for over a year now with Rukh Art Hub in New York. We also write articles and publicise the history of Ukrainian art. It deserves recognition not because we are victims of military aggression but because it is a genuinely high-quality, mature and fascinating art.

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art and many other museums around the world, some of the most famous avant-garde artists—Kazimir Malevich, Arkhip Kuindzhi, and Ivan Aivazovsky—were, for a long time, labelled as Russian painters. Despite repeated appeals from Ukrainian art historians, the museum's response was slow to come. Eventually, instead of directly acknowledging them as Ukrainian artists, their works were relabelled as "Russian Empire, now Ukraine," meaning they worked within the Russian Empire but were geographically from what is now Ukraine.

"This distortion of facts prevents Ukrainian artists from receiving full recognition anywhere in the world. In my opinion, it is a form of historical injustice."

However, the process of reclaiming Ukrainian artists within their rightful cultural context is continuing, and the full-scale invasion has only intensified these efforts. It's important to understand that the appropriation of Ukrainian artists and cultural treasures has been happening for centuries, and it will take time to restore what was stolen.

How and why has this happened?

N.K.: Russia has always done it. Without Ukrainian treasures, Russian museum collections would be much sparser. The first significant case of cultural theft was the Vladimir

Icon of the Mother of God, initially called the Vyshhorod Icon because it was kept in Vyshhorod. Prince Andrey Bogolyubsky, who founded Moscow in 1147, along with his son Yuri Dolgoruky, took the icon to Pskov and later to Vladimir, where it became one of Russia's most significant religious relics. These actions were part of Russia's imperial ambitions—without Kyiv's treasures, they could not claim the heritage of Kyivan Rus, and they needed artefacts to cement this narrative.

Another example is Russia's appropriation of mosaics from St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery in Kyiv and parts of the frescoes from Saint Sophia Cathedral. Fortunately, Saint Sophia Cathedral has been preserved, including its unique graffiti, but the situation with St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery is much worse. Kyiv authorities have repeatedly requested the return of valuable artefacts, including the mosaic of St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki. These requests have been denied under the pretext that their absence (ed.: from Russia's museums) would make the history of Rus' incomplete. This is yet another way to monopolise Ukrainian history.

We also know well how the diptych of Lucas Cranach the Elder ended up in Russia. It originally belonged to Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko, prominent Ukrainian art patrons who founded one of Ukraine's most significant private art collections. During World War I, when the Russian army invaded their estate, Bohdan Khanenko was killed, and Varvara was forced to surrender her collection to the state, with only limited rights to remain in her home. Many valuable pieces disappeared at that time.

When it comes to Ukrainian avant-garde art, many of its masterpieces were either destroyed or burned. The artist Mykhailo Boichuk and his followers, known as Boichukists, created unique works that combined icon painting traditions with modernist trends. Their frescoes, which adorned

"The war has been a powerful catalyst for the Ukrainian art scene. Even those artists who previously worked quietly, securing contracts with galleries, including international ones, have mobilised. Unable to remain indifferent, they began reflecting on the horrors of war."

—Nata Kushniruk, Ukrainian art historian and art critic

Polina Kuznetsova, Oranta, 2023. Photo by the artist.

the walls of Kyiv University and churches, were deliberately destroyed because they did not fit the Soviet ideological narrative. As a result, the movement was nearly erased, with many members arrested or forced to abandon their work.

There are countless such examples. One of the most egregious acts of vandalism occurred in 1951 when over 2000 paintings and numerous sculptures from the National Museum of Andrey Sheptytsky were burned. This happened after World War II, when Soviet authorities replaced the museum's director. The artworks were burned in the Stefanyk Library furnaces, and the sculptures were smashed and discarded. These were mainly works by Ukrainian artists that did not subscribe to the principles of socialist realism and Soviet ideology.

In The Chronicle of Resilience, we focus on these events because art historians know they are not widely taught in schools or universities. We research historical as well as ongoing crimes committed by Russia, like the theft of more than 80 paintings, including original works by Aivazovsky, Kuindzhi and other artists from the Mariupol and Berdiansk Art Museums.

Most of the artefacts stolen from Ukrainian museums are now kept in Crimea. Some pieces have been sent to Russia for exhibitions, but the occupiers find it more convenient to keep them on the annexed peninsula. This gives us hope that we will eventually be able to reclaim our cultural heritage. We must continue to fight for these artworks on the international stage.

The war has been a powerful catalyst for the Ukrainian art scene. Even those artists who previously worked quietly, securing contracts with galleries, including international ones, have mobilised. Unable to remain indifferent, they began reflecting on the horrors of war.

Like one of the most striking Russian crimes—the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam. A remarkable piece by Kharkiv artist Polina Kuznetsova depicts the Oranta standing over submerged houses. Her face has the unnatural hue of a drowned woman, her eyes appearing empty, hollow. Behind her, the sky is sunny and bright;

rooftops are visible, but the flood has swallowed everything else. The Oranta cries silently, without tears, just like all those who drowned. This work profoundly conveys the artist's inner state. In general, every traumatic event finds an echo in the works of artists. Some depict events literally and directly, while others weave metaphors into their art.

Another example is Ukrainian artist Radyslav Dziuba, who has been raising donations to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine and now for himself, after deciding to join the army. He has reated a series of linocuts titled Clockwork Birds, each featuring an owl that tells the story of our struggle. The linocuts are marked with drops of blood as a symbol of sacrifice. The birds have multiple pairs of eyes, symbolising our soldiers' immense responsibility and round-the-clock vigilance. The key motif alludes to mechanisms—like the army and civil society, which must function as a single, well-coordinated entity.

"Ukrainian art is not just about suffering and loss."

N.K.: In New York, with Rukh Art Hub, we organised the Time Capsule exhibition, or the Golden Disc. Its concept was to imagine what would be left behind if humanity were to disappear due to war. This project served as a list of values, a record we could etch onto a golden disc and send to extra-terrestrial civilisations to showcase the best of humanity. The participating Ukrainian artists—Oleh Kalashnik, Polina Kuznetsova, Oleksandr Lyapin, Kostiantyn Zorkin and others—did not depict explosions or scenes of bloodshed. Instead, they allowed viewers to experience and process the war through metaphors.

For instance, at the centre of the exhibition stood a child's

sandbox featuring Oleh Kalashnik's soldier figurines in the form of candles. When lit, the wax dripped onto the sand. A space meant for children to play in had been transformed into something deeply disturbing.

Other examples include the boundless landscapes of the Kharkiv region captured in the paintings of Polina Kuznetsova and Kostiantyn Lysohub, which remind us that these landscapes may be lost forever due to the ongoing war; or the work of Oleksii Sai, whose canvases, riddled with bullet holes, symbolise the wounded land.

"We demonstrate that Ukrainian art is not just narratives of suffering and loss. It is a profound, multifaceted phenomenon capable of competing in the international art market."

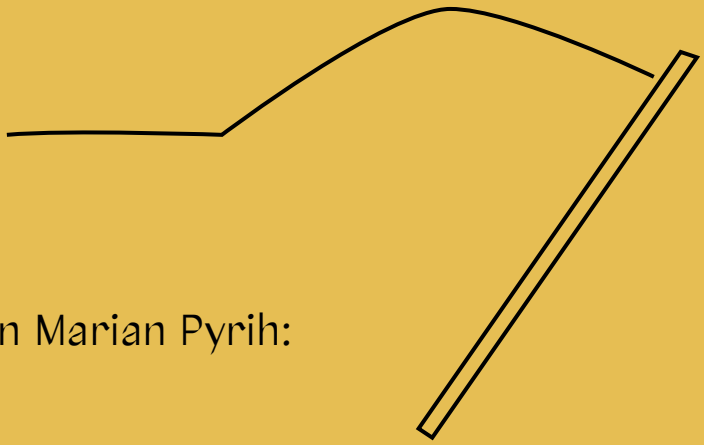
Nata, how do you see the future of Ukrainian art after the war?

N.K.: I see Ukrainian art finally opening its borders. Many artists, managers and cultural workers will begin speaking English. Previously, one of the main barriers for Ukrainian artists in international collaborations was the lack of English proficiency, which limited their interactions mainly to post-Soviet countries.

It is still unclear when the war will end and which generation will experience the Ukraine's renaissance. Perhaps it will be our children or grandchildren. Whatever the case, I hope they will overcome any feeling of inferiority, be open to the world and actively participate in global artistic processes. We do not need a "big brother" or external protection. We must establish ourselves as equal players in the global art market and art scene.

Radyslav Dziuba, Clockwork Birds linocut series, 2024. Photo by the artist

THE BAND THAT KEEPS UKRAINIAN POETRY IMMORTAL



Musician Marian Pyrih:

IT FEELS LIKE YOU DIE EVERY DAY AND ARE REBORN EACH MORNING TO SOLDIER ON

He is jokingly referred to as having "the longest and sharpest moustache on the Ukrainian stage. Marian Pyrih, the frontman of the band Pyrih i Batih, often jokes that he resembles Salvador Dalí, but instead of holding a paintbrush, he wields a guitar. He creates musical compositions that weave Ukrainian folklore with contemporary music styles, such as acoustic minimalism, improvisation and elements of ethnic psychedelia. But what truly sets them apart from other Ukrainian bands is their fusion of traditional melodies with the poetry of banned or killed Ukrainian poets, creating a metaphorical bridge between the present and the past, especially during wartime.

Marian Pyrih describes his work as "quiet resistance to the realities of the times". At the same time, the band members joke that they "gently whip the listener with a cultural lash" (ed. batih in Ukrainian) to remind them of important names from the past that have become symbols of the tragedy of Ukraine's artistic elite.

The musicians see their mission as "making people fall in love" with the Ukrainian language—and they achieve this through sensitive, tender poetry. They compose music not only to the works of unjustly forgotten, banned, or slayed poets of the Soviet regime but also to the poetry of those whom Russia has killed since the start of its incursion into Ukraine.

They also believe music is a powerful resource for fostering resilience. The musicians actively perform concerts, especially in

Marian Pyrih. Photo by Pietro Chekal

liberated territories, to support the local population that has endured the horrors of occupation. In small towns and villages, they are always warmly welcomed, and Marian begins each performance with the words: "A deep bow of gratitude to you for being alive and well! Glory to Ukraine!" The band firmly believes that music can also be a form of resistance to Russian aggression, with its aim of erasing Ukrainian identity.

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, musicians have been working "three times harder"—as if trying to reclaim the century of culture stolen from Ukraine. In 2023, they released the album Zamordovani (ed. The Tormented), the first of three planned collections. It features works by prominent Ukrainian poets who were slayed by the Soviet regime: Vasyl Stus, Hryhorii Chuprynka, Mykola Voronyi, Volodymyr Svidzinskyi and others.

The album begins with a text written by Marian's colleague, the Ukrainian poet, translator, and renowned cultural historian Yevhen Hulevych, who volunteered for the war and was killed near Bakhmut.

The creators avoid a didactic tone, instead choosing to highlight the beauty of Ukrainian poetry through the lens of music. To their surprise, the musicians themselves and their fans have discovered that texts written a century ago sound remarkably relevant today. Marian sees a historical parallel between the crimes of the Soviet regime against Ukrainian culture and those being committed by Russians in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

Marian Pyrih, musician and creator of Pyrih i Batih:

Pyrih is my stage name, but my friends call me Pyrozhok because my surname is Pyrozhok. That's how it became my pseudonym as a musician. As for the name "Batih" (ed. lash) it's—an artefact of serfdom, something sad and tragic. But for us, it has transformed from a punitive symbol into an educational mission. When we say, "to lash with the whip", it means to sing a song.

We refer to our performances as "gentle cultural lashings", but this is not an entertainment project. The name itself reflects that we are working in the realm of education. Through poetry, we demonstrate the beauty of the Ukrainian language. This was my idea back in 2011: we popularised poets who were unjustly forgotten, reminding people that language is an essential artefact of the past and has been banned eight times throughout the history of our land: first by the Russian Empire, then by the Soviet Union, and now by the Russian regime in the occupied territories.

With the onset of the full-scale war, I delved deeper into the poetry of the Executed Renaissance—the 1920s and 1930s. We started in 1921 when the Ukrainian composer Mykola Leontovych (ed. the composer of Carol of the Bells, shot in his sleep by the Soviet secret police) and poet Hryhorii Chuprynka (ed. Ukrainian poet, shot in Kyiv by the

Soviet secret police) were killed. Overall, we can talk about three generations of Ukrainian poets whose lives—or their work—were targeted for elimination. But they left a valuable legacy, demonstrating both the beauty of Ukrainian poetry and the tragedy of a generation that became a victim of the totalitarian regime.

The third aspect of our work is the awareness that history is cyclical. Since 2014, over 100 Ukrainian authors have been killed (ed. 143 Ukrainian artists have died as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion, according to the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine). This is very difficult because sometimes we work with the texts of people I know personally. To know this is excruciating.

At the moment, I am delving into 1930s female poetry, as female poets are not widely known. I want to fill this gap as well. In our collection, we will have songs to the poems of Veronika Chernyakhivska (ed. Ukrainian poet and translator, executed in 1938 on charges of "counter-revolutionary activities and espionage"), as well as Myroslava Sopilko, about whom I had never heard before (ed. Ukrainian poet and writer, executed in 1937 on charges of "counter-revolutionary activities" and espionage; all her works were banned in the Soviet period). Both left behind an impressive legacy.

For me, it is important to constantly remind people of the tragedy of the totalitarian regime's destruction of the Ukrainian artistic elite. I focus on what personally leaves a strong impression on me. The simple thought is: if this impresses me, it will impress others, too.

Our approach is straightforward and not linked to any financial gain. Unfortunately, in Ukraine, some people use the poetry of that time as a tool for entertainment or even hype. We try to explain to people that this poetry has a critical component. You can't just take it and sing it. It needs to be understood—and approached very delicately, carefully.

We want more people to engage in these processes.

Very soon, I will be moving to live in Kharkiv, where we are planning a series of projects, as it is the place where Ukrainian poetry was "forged". This is a sacred experience for me—returning poetry to where it was created. Kharkiv of the 1920s and Kharkiv of the 2020s resonate incredibly. It's like we are "cutting out" the Soviet period and returning its true cultural essence to the city—as the poetic capital, the capital of publishers, and the capital of concerned Ukrainians.

I am originally from Lviv, but when I return to my city from Kharkiv, I want to bring a piece of Kharkiv's true

Pyrih i Batih. Photo by Pietro Chekal

"Through the tenderness and beauty of poetry, we want to convey to people why Ukrainian poets were killed. We want this to be free of snobbery and accessible to everyone — children, intellectuals, people with different views — because culture is not something for the educated; it is for all of us, as it is part of our identity."

— Musician Marian Pyrih

Marian Pyrih. Photo
by Pietro Chekal

Ukrainian patriotism to the people of Lviv. The people of Kharkiv show a heartfelt love for Ukraine, unlike a certain snobbery you sometimes encounter in Lviv. There is a feeling that "everything has already been decided" because everyone there has always been Ukrainian. But our country is significant, and we need to unite as a community, not just remain within the confines of regional or local identity.

You make people fall in love with the Ukrainian language through poetry. How does that work?

M.P.: It's very simple. Every poet dedicates 80 percent of their poetry to the love of their homeland, writing about its beauty. For example, Mykola Voronyi's poem "My friend, I love beauty as I love native Ukraine"—although this poem is about beauty, the poet compares it to Ukraine.

It is not enough for me to take a collection and read it. I do not believe a person can read a collection and immediately understand what the poet wanted to convey. That doesn't happen. For example, right now, I am studying Vasyl Stus a lot (ed. an outstanding Ukrainian poet, translator, and human rights activist who was sentenced to 15 years in camps for openly protesting against the Soviet system and died in prison). And it is not enough for me to just read his poetry once. I reread one poem for three days to understand what lies between the words and between the lines and what meanings the poet has embedded there. It's like a prayer, and you pray for this land to finally experience the light it deserves.

I often wonder why this person was tortured when I read such pure and beautiful poetry. For beauty? For the love of their country?

Through the tenderness and beauty of poetry, we want to convey to people why Ukrainian poets were killed.

We want this to be free of snobbery and accessible to everyone—children, intellectuals, people with different views—because culture is not something for the educated; it is for all of us, as it is part of our identity.

How do people react to your concerts in the de-occupied territories?

M.P.: This is the most heart-wrenching experience of my life. People come up to say a kind word, to embrace you. It's hard to call this "feedback"; it feels like you're living another life. It's important for them to tell their stories and even show the destruction brought by the Russian army.

In the village of Tsyrkuni in the Kharkiv region, a local woman approached me and asked, "Will you be my son? You've given me such a gift! Yesterday was my birthday. Will you be my son? Because my two sons have been killed in the war..." I thought I would lose my mind. Another time, three children approached us with a spark in their eyes and asked, "We hope you won't sing to us in Russian?"

You feel the revival of this region. People who have experienced evil and seen it with their own eyes find this easier to understand. They want to read and listen to Ukrainian content. For example, we were in the village of Nepokryte, where the poet Volodymyr Svydynskyi was tortured during the Soviet era. In our performance, we sang for the first time a song to his poem Snow. This is how we want to preserve this legacy so that it never happens again.

Sometimes I am asked, "Why do you go there? There is shelling going on, it's dangerous!" But our people live there; there are children. I came and left, but they stayed. That's why we convey the importance of these trips to our fellow musicians. I'm moving to Kharkiv to visit these cities more often.

We often perform in schools. Recently, we were in the village of Oskil, almost on the border of the Kharkiv and

Marian Pyrih. Photo by Oleksandr Osipov

Donetsk regions. The children study poetry through our songs there. We arrive, and they sing these songs with us. It's so inspiring that it's hard to put into words! And these experiences, when you arrive in such towns and villages... you can't understand it unless you've been there.

Can poetry and art be tools for healing?

M. P.: Certainly, this is precisely the case now. Our country has proven to be incredibly poetic. We are witnessing an actual rise of poetic forms as they provide salvation. For example, when you describe certain adversities in prose, they become more penetrating and painful. But when you render these experiences in the form of poems, it's as

though you are relieving yourself of a burden. Rather than being just yours to bear, this burden becomes shared and divided with others.

Poetry lends everything a greater significance: rather than just being documented, it turns into something more akin to prayer and spirituality.

Poetry has emerged over the past three years more than it did in the last ten years. We have consciously awakened as a nation that gravitates towards poetic forms.

As we delve into history, we notice that poetry from past centuries sounds incredibly relevant today. And contemporary poets—like Serhiy Zhadan—fill huge stadiums; I don't remember the last time something like this happened. Now, everyone wants to create poetry, from young to old.

"The closer you are to the front lines, the clearer it becomes that tomorrow might never come. So you must leave some kind of legacy. In this sense, poetry becomes a tool for healing. It helps make sense of and transform difficult experiences, creating a metaphorical space in which everyone finds meaning and paths to self-healing."

How has the full-scale war affected your creativity and you personally?

M. P.: Clear priorities have emerged about what we need to do first. After the invasion, we set about popularising the works of Ukrainian poets that were destroyed over the last 100 years, first by the Soviet totalitarian system and now by Russia.

It was after the 24th of February that I discovered poets such as Hryhorii Chuprynka, whose grave no longer exists (ed. one of the leading Ukrainian symbolists who was executed in Kyiv for alleged "anti-Soviet activity"). My instinct told me it was important to bring up this layer at this particular point in time. There was even a feeling of shame—why hadn't I thought of this earlier?

So now, this is my personal confession. I am atoning for my indifference for all those years of my life in which I ignored this. And I have already decided that I will continue doing this for the rest of my days, however many they may be. There is so much material that I won't even have time to work through it all in a lifetime.

For example, the British number every one of their folk songs; they have entire catalogues. But we don't even have an inventory of Ukrainian songs. So we can be "played with": "Where is your culture? Where is it recorded, and how?" We must do this because we still don't know all the names that were exterminated and erased.

I immersed myself in Ukrainian composers, looked at the scale of the destroyed cultural heritage and realised how much we have lost. For example, the outstanding Ukrainian composer Vasyl Barvinsky spent ten years in camps, during which time his manuscripts and works were destroyed After his return, he tried to recreate them from memory, but, of course, they were different works because he had changed. The inner light was no longer there. So many of his works are lost forever. (ed. Vasyl Barvinsky was a Ukrainian composer, pianist, and honorary doctor of a Ukrainian University in Prague sentenced to 25 years in labour camps for "nationalism" and "anti-Soviet activity." After his arrest, he signed a consent for his works to be destroyed to save his life. After returning ten years later, he was banned from teaching). The enemies understood and destroyed not only the person but also their legacy.

Marian Pyrih. Photo by Oleksandr Osipov

I get very emotional when I talk about this because it's important to me. I want it to be imperative for everyone to put all our physical and spiritual energy into ensuring that this never happens again, that we never forget and that we don't allow it to be lost again.

Marian, where do you draw strength to work under shelling with endless sirens and prolonged power outages?

M. P.: I draw strength from performances; when I see the response from the audience, it energises me. Even if I feel exhausted before the performance, something shifts afterwards, and a kind of kinetic energy kicks in. The main thing is not to stop. No shelling will get in the

way. For me, even the question of safety is secondary because we live in a war zone. I don't want to worry about myself; I want to worry more about the country, about what will become of it.

I see there is so much work to do, and realise I won't see the Ukraine I've dreamed of, the one it could have been, as I imagined it. For 100 years, Russia pursued the russification of Ukraine, and it will likely take just as long to return to the Ukrainian society we should have been had it not been for our evil neighbour. It will be a long process—restoring all this won't just take a year, or two, or ten. But I am sure we will do it.

As a visionary, how do you see the future of Ukraine?

M.P.: It's a monumental endeavour—to create a Ukraine where people can live in dignity, free from threats from our neighbour. It's hard to imagine, but I do believe it's possible. Totalitarian regimes fall, sooner or later.

If they come here, there will be no Ukraine. They don't need us—we only need ourselves. Maybe the world doesn't need us either, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't make our presence known.

"How does a country assert itself? Through culture. A country without culture is not a state; it's merely a territory where anything can be done."

M.P.: Why, for example, are we "cancelling" everything Russian now? For some people abroad, Russian literature is just foreign literature. But for us, it is an instrument of coercion that was imposed on us at gunpoint. It wasn't

our choice; it was something that was forced upon us, regardless of our own culture.

That's essentially what the "cancelling" is all about: to draw attention to our own culture, because many Ukrainians don't even know their own culture. Instead, they read Pushkin or Lermontov, not realising that behind this "great" culture lies an ideology of aggression.

Their "great culture" is an inflated idea, created by the Russians themselves. And the word "great"—they are very focused on that. Our culture is limitless; it's the luxury of boundless space, not something "great" that has a particular shape. It is not confined by boundaries.

What has been the greatest challenge for you as an artist during the war?

M.P.: The hardest thing is the losses. When you see this happening almost every day, it isn't easy. But on the other hand, you constantly think: "What if it's me tomorrow?" Then you must get everything done while you still can. It's a paradox—a movement from death to love, a constant rebirth. It feels like you die every day and are reborn each morning to soldier on.

You write the music for your songs yourself. And you mix up different styles—modern folk, psychofolk, ethno and a bit of pop. Please tell us more about this.

M.P.: Yes, we work with different genres, but the most important thing is preserving our culture; essentially, this is our work with memory. For example, in the album Zamordovani (ed. The Tormented), the third part will not convey sorrow but hope. In the love lyrics of Vasyl Stus, we end not with death but with new life—because we want to show that even though we are killed every day, we continue to live through our creativity within our culture. And this victory of life over death is important.

What would you like to pass on to the next generations through your songs?

M. P.: I would tell the next generation: don't miss this opportunity! I can't emphasise this enough, because I am one of those who almost missed it. We fell prey to various predatory narratives. They told us: "Oh, you are just peasants." And we believed them. I don't want that to happen again.

Nurture the kind of Ukrainian who is strong, the one you won't be ashamed of. Once upon a time, Ukrainians were ashamed of being Ukrainian. In the past, we were sometimes almost in love with Moscow, thinking it was something better. This inferiority complex needs to be erased from our minds with rusty knives, not delicately but brutally, because it is the greatest disrespect to ourselves and our national identity.

I would say: be strong and confident in being Ukrainian, and when you go abroad, proudly say: "I am Ukrainian."

Anton Logov, Ukrainian artist:

ART IS A BRIDGE BETWEEN US AND THE TIME THAT LIES AHEAD

The renowned Ukrainian artist Anton Logov has gained worldwide recognition for his series of drawings, The War in Ukraine. This collection of over 60 works is a deep reflection on the Russian invasion.

In Ukraine, Logov is known as a representative of contemporary abstractionism. Following the full-scale invasion, however, he shifted his focus to art that is directly related to the war. His artistic practice became significantly more documentary and straightforward, aiming to convey the reality of war and to draw global attention to the aggressor's crimes.

Turned chronicler of war, Anton Logov transforms the pain of destruction into powerful metaphors. He began drawing actively in the early weeks of the full-scale invasion, creating sketches in small notebooks when access to art supplies was limited. His drawings were a reaction to the tragedies in Bucha, Irpin, Mariupol, Kharkiv and other Ukrainian cities.

Amid the shelling during the first months of the war, he created a series of installations from artifacts collected in field expeditions to the de-occupied Ukrainian settlements for the exhibition Ukraine. Crucifixion, which was the first large-scale exhibition during the full-scale war.

Logov's works have been exhibited on prestigious international platforms, such as the Saatchi Gallery in London, LITEXPO in Vilnius, and the National Museum of Georgia in Tbilisi. His drawings

have also gone viral on social media, appeared in magazines, and have become symbols of protest during rallies in support of Ukraine worldwide.

His series of angel-themed posters has resonated with civilians and military personnel alike. Prints of his works are displayed at exhibitions in the USA, Norway, Italy, the Czech Republic, Germany, and Bulgaria. One of Logov's most recognizable drawings—a depiction of

Anton Logov. Close the sky above Ukraine, 2022

a dove as a symbol of the fight for freedom—became the cover of the book On Freedom by American historian Timothy Snyder in 2024.

The artist himself believes that the power of art exists beyond space and time, making it more impactful on people than documentary footage. Logov consciously strives to preserve the cultural memory of the war, and his works help to comprehend the tragic chapters of Ukrainian history.

Anton, were you prepared for a full-scale war, and how has it affected you as an artist?

A.L.: Of course, I wasn't prepared for the war. Just a few days before the invasion, I was setting up a new exhibition scheduled to open at the National Reserve Sophia of Kyiv. I was working on an installation—a wooden structure symbolising the Crimean Mountains in an abstract form. At that time, some of my acquaintances began leaving their offices, but I didn't feel any panic.

On the eve of the invasion, Kyiv had this beautiful, calm evening—wintery, cool, with a stunning sunset that I still remember vividly. But the morning brought a completely different reality. I woke up to my wife's words: "The war has started."

I went outside to withdraw some cash and get groceries — and what I saw was sheer chaos. Cars were lined up in massive traffic jams, all heading in one direction, while people were running around in panic. That's when it hit me: something had happened that would forever change the course of our history.

During the first week of the war, I simply couldn't draw.

I didn't even visit my studio. We stayed at home, trying to figure out what to do next. On the first night, we spent hours in the basement; later, we hid from the shelling in the corridor, while my five-year-old daughter stayed in the bathroom. We could hear missiles flying over our neighbourhood and the fighting near Kyiv.

Shops had already closed, and the local territorial defence warned that Russian troops might enter the city. So, like millions of Ukrainians, we decided to pack up and take a train to Western Ukraine. But at the last moment, a sculptor I knew from Zakarpattia region called me and offered to drive us out of Kyiv to a remote village.

It felt like a sign. We quickly packed, walked on foot through half the city—since all the entrances to Kyiv were blocked — and met him at the agreed location. That's how we ended up in a secluded mountain village, where the locals hadn't even heard the sound of gunfire or explosions. We stayed there for a month and a half.

About a week in, I felt the urge to paint again. By early March, I was drawing nearly every day—sometimes two or three pieces in a single day. Using A4 sheets, acrylic paints, and entirely manual techniques, I began a new chapter in my work.

"Art conveys what camera cannot"

A significant new phase in the artist's creative journey started with a series of drawings depicting angels. The first of these was an angel stopping an aerial bomb with its wings. Logov created this piece in the early days of the full-scale war, trying to make sense of what was happening in the country.

This was followed by poster works such as Stop the War in Ukraine and Close the Sky. Later, the artist moved on to a series of pieces narrating some of the invasion's most tragic chapters. The drawing Bucha, depicting murdered Ukrainians on the streets of the devastated town, was completed even before widespread documentary footage emerged.

Anton Logov. Photo
courtesy of the author

Logov also created a drawing of a pregnant woman on a stretcher being carried out of the bombed maternity hospital in Mariupol. Tragically, the woman and her baby died from their injuries. Documenting war crimes through the medium of art, his works capture mass graves in Mariupol and other atrocities committed by the Russian forces.

Logov's pieces quickly went viral on social media, were printed and featured in exhibitions.

> A.L.: The first exhibition I participated in was The Seized House. It featured works by six contemporary Ukrainian artists. This Artists Support Ukraine project travelled to seven European countries, showcasing the face of war through the eyes of artists. Some of my earliest drawings were included in this exhibition.
>
> Among them was Mother with a Child, a piece showing a mother with her child amidst exploding shells, overshadowed by a giant black bird, larger than the figures themselves. It was a metaphor. Another drawing, Girl with a Candle, depicted a small, vulnerable child holding a candle in the darkness.
>
> At the time, I had specific associations with the events unfolding around us—and illustrated how the dead were buried in besieged Mariupol, in playgrounds and in mass graves near homes as thick black smoke rose over the city.

Girl with a Candle.
Anton Logov, 2022

Mariupol. Anton Logov,
2022

"The central message behind my initial drawings revolved around three key aspects. First, it was about processing and attempting to comprehend the reality of what was happening. Second, it served as words of encouragement — for both the military and civilians. And third, perhaps most importantly, it was about documenting war crimes."

— Anton Logov, Ukrainian artist

What was the response to your drawings?

A.L.: Sometimes, people messaged me saying that some of my works were too explicit. These were some of the first pieces about Mariupol, moments that don't usually get depicted in art: images of death or raw pain seemed excessive to some. But back then, it felt like even that wasn't enough, because artistic expression could never come close to the reality.

As the artist Joseph Beuys once said, the grandest and most dramatic installation is war itself, and it is simply impossible to compete with it in terms of emotional power. That's a fact.

In the early days of the war, many people wrote to me, and these were very sincere reactions: "Your works have moved me. This is what everyone feels but cannot express in words."

I also believe that art conveys what a camera cannot capture. I received messages from Ukrainians who found themselves abroad; from soldiers, asking for permission to print my drawings for their positions: "We have a corner with your works. They convey more than photographs."

My drawings were often used at rallies. At the beginning of the war, I would receive messages on social media almost every five minutes, and for many, my drawings became therapy: "They calm us and give us strength."

"Art is a bridge between us and the time still ahead"

A month into the invasion, Anton Logov, together with his family, returned to the deserted Kyiv, which was still reeling from the first explosions. He was invited by the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War to create an installation from ar-

Exhibition Ukraine.
Crucifixion. 2022

tifacts collected during field expeditions to Borodyanka, Irpin, Bucha, and other newly de-occupied territories. This became the first major exhibition about the Russian invasion created during the active phase of the war.

Among the more than 700 exhibits, there were Russian soldiers' boots with the five-pointed star emblem inherited from the Soviet era—an ironic symbol of the horde that leaves destruction in its wake. Maps showed meticulous preparations for the attack. The exhibition featured examples of Russian uniforms, patches, documents and diaries, personal letters, and various household items from the so-called "second army of the world" which overstepped all the bounda-

ries of humanity. In the museum's basement, Logov recreated a shelter using authentic items from liberated villages, while outside, fragments of destroyed Russian military equipment was on display.
In the weapons hall—Logov's idea—remnants of ammunition, a cross made of mines, burned gates from a destroyed church and children's toys were exhibited. A painting by the famous Ukrainian artist Maria Prymachenko, whose museum was destroyed in the shelling, was projected onto a fragment of a burned roof.

A.L.: Immediately after the liberation of Kyiv region, the museum organised an expedition to collect artifacts from the affected areas. And by early May, we opened a large-scale exhibition, Ukraine. Crucifixion, spanning 1500 square

Balck Bird,
Anton Logov, 2022

metres. The first floor showcased the face of the enemy and Russian military ammunition, while the second depicted the ruins of buildings, destroyed museums, including the walls of the Ivankiv Historical Museum. On one of the exhibits, we projected Maria Prymachenko's painting *May That Nuclear War Be Cursed!* (1978), which became a symbol of the possible threat of a nuclear catastrophe.

The exhibition was visited by thousands of people. It was covered by leading global media and a year later, in an expanded version, it was presented near the United Nations building in New York on 2500 square metres. Even Skabeyeva (ed. Russian propagandist) dedicated an entire TV episode to our exhibition. Many prominent big politicians saw it—and that was its purpose.

Do you believe art can become a resource for healing the wounds of war, and does it help you personally?

A.L.: As an artist, I can't imagine my life without art. It is both a way of existence for me and a form of communication with the world and other people. Art helps not only express what I know, but also create new meanings. Without it, nothing exists. If you think about it, everything around us—design, architecture, paintings, even sacred images in churches—is the result of the creativity of artists.

I believe that God is also a great artist who created this world. And it's so important to see art as something sacred, something that shapes our perception and the aesthetics of life. The aesthetics embedded in art influence our worldview and development. I believe that a love for art should be instilled from childhood, for example, by taking children to museums.

The first time I visited the Art Museum in Odesa was during my school years, and for me, it was an epiphany that forever changed my life: I still remember some of the paintings from that museum.

"Moreover, the language of art holds therapeutic power. I firmly believe this. In time, the paintings created today can have a tremendous impact, for the artist possesses the gift of foresight, often working one step ahead. Their works become a bridge between the present and the future, between the harsh realities of war and the peaceful life we long to return to.
Paintings can serve as this preparation for life in peace, helping us to keep in touch with this dream. They remind us that a normal life is possible and worth fighting for. Art is a bridge between us and the time still ahead."

— Anton Logov, Ukrainian artist

Snow in Kyiv,
Anton Logov,
2024

Even if contemporary art seems complex or incomprehensible, it's worth taking time to study it, to discover the conceptual ideas behind it. Visiting modern art museums allows you to witness the development of history, to understand how the world is changing and how visual culture is evolving, because art, like life, is a constant forward motion.

What would you like to convey to a European audience regarding the cultural genocide being carried out by the aggressor in Ukraine?

A.L.: I am convinced that Russia is engaged in a deliberate hunt for Ukraine—for our culture, our art, people, traditions; in short, for our entire Ukrainian identity. This hunt is accompanied by destruction, plundering, and the removal of all things valuable to them.

This has been going on for centuries. Many iconic and unique works of art from various eras are currently housed in museums in Moscow. Today's war continues this shameful practice. Museums in Mariupol, Kherson, and Mykolaiv have been looted, just like in Crimea. The Odesa Art Museum suffered partial damage, but fortunately, restoration works have been carried out. For Russia, anything Ukrainian simply does not exist. In their view, Ukraine is merely a part of their history, with no room for our unique culture and identity. This is a complete myth.

As for foreigners, of course, I cannot invite them to come to Ukraine during the war to see first-hand what is happening here and what Russia has done. But I can create paintings so that through visual material, they may at least partially understand and feel it.

What are the biggest challenges that Ukrainian artists, including yourself, are facing now, and how do you envision Ukrainian art after the war?

A.L.: Every day during the war is a challenge for me. And

when an artist works during wartime — to me, this is already an act of heroism, as it means that they find the strength to express something about their era, their time, for themselves and other people; perhaps even for the generations to come. I try to make the most of every opportunity: creating a new drawing, helping someone or organising an exhibition. It's important for me not to stop, not to give up, but rather to act with even more energy: step by step, day by day, moving forward.

Ukrainians and the explosions of Russian bombs in the Donetsk region.
Anton Logov
30 x 20 cm. Paper, acrylic
2022

As the Ukrainian artist Tiberiy Silvashi once said when asked about the importance of profit in an artist's life: "You do something every day, and then something will come to you. Don't search for opportunities, just do, and opportunities will find you." I follow this principle too. Even in difficult times, when it's hard to set my mind to work, art becomes my therapy.

Art has the power to transcend time. There are millions of photographs and videos that capture events, but they dissolve into the flow of information. Only a few unforgettable images endure. Art, meanwhile, lives on through the centuries. Personally, I look up to artists like Francisco Goya.

Kyiv Winter.
Anton Logov
2024

His work is an example of the universality of art: he created grand portraits, scenes of everyday life, and at the same time documented the horrors of war.

His dramatic paintings, such as the famous scene of the execution from The Third of May 1808 (ed. an episode from the Peninsular War, when Spanish rebels were executed by Napoleon's troops), tell the story of events that became a tragedy for humanity. These works made his name immortal. They stand as a testament to how art can respond to the challenges of its time and serve as a document of history. To me, this is an example of how art can convey what time will not erase.

Ukraine is incredibly rich in talented people—artists, musicians, poets. In every field, there are outstanding individuals who need support, attention and the creation of conditions for their development.

The prospects are vast, immense, but without government support, nothing will come of it. Artists will leave the country sooner or later because they are people with very sensitive souls, and society does not always react to them adequately. Without support from both the government and society, they will seek places where they can create.

Many artists have already left the country. And this raises the question: what will be considered Ukrainian art in the future? The people who created exceptional work before the war but have now left for abroad, or the incredibly talented artists who remain here but can't work during the war? This is a rhetorical question.

Are you currently working on topics other than the war?

Yes, I am not limited to the topic of war alone. I have started painting peaceful Kyiv: its streets in different seasons. These observations allow me to show the uniqueness of our city, even during wartime. Capturing these moments is not just a creative process; it is also a way to document reality.

Even if I depict a poplar tree on ordinary evening, there will still be a sense of the war in it. Sometimes this works more powerfully than directly portraying horrors of war. Through imagery and a different perspective, much more can be expressed, and a much deeper meaning can be conveyed.

Irpin, Anton Logov, 2022

I am truly pleased that I was born here, in a place where I understood who I am. All my art grows from this feeling. Everything here is simple and interconnected. I love these places very much because Ukraine is an incredibly beautiful country. So, how could I not paint Ukraine?

"You have the strength and the opportunity to create what you love. And the power of love and self-affirmation is something that is hard to argue with."

I am currently in Kyiv, and there's no talk of safety here: a full-scale war is raging. Something or other is constantly hitting us: yesterday, the day before yesterday, today. Although we've more or less become accustomed to it, perhaps that's wrong. But the times are wrong, too. We have to keep living, and we do...

Tetyana Teren, PEN Ukraine:

UKRAINIAN SOCIETY HAS AN OVERWHELMING DEMAND FOR ITS OWN CULTURE

War compels people to rethink their values and shift their priorities. It often forces artists to make difficult choices: to say farewell to the stage, their treasured art studio or creative team and take up arms to defend their country. Hundreds of painters, actors, musicians and other artists have been conscripted or have volunteered to join the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

And yet, despite the harsh realities of war—constant danger, separation from their accustomed lives and the nearness of friends and family—artists remain true to their calling. They write poetry and music, create sculptures and paintings, and use their leave to star in films, give concerts, organise exhibitions or present books they have written on the front line.

The Ukrainian writer, translator and traveller Artem Chapay, who translated the works of Mahatma Gandhi, was a lifelong believer in non-violent political change. But the Russian invasion moved him to take up arms, because, as he says, "pacifism, alas, does not protect against missiles and bombs." He continues to write on the front line, translating his works into different languages. Violinist Moisei Bondarenko, meanwhile, dedicates every free moment on the front to music. He plays, composes and creates covers of well-known works, even performing them on the battlefield to inspire his comrades.

In times of war, art becomes a source of resilience, not only for the artists themselves but also for their audiences. Since the beginning of Russia's war of aggression, many Ukrainian celebrities

have joined the army. They include the frontman of the band Boombox, Andriy Khlyvnyuk; the film directors Akhtem Seitablayev and Oleh Sentsov; the actor Olexiy Tritenko; and the renowned choreographer Dmytro Dikusar. Their messages from the front inspire hundreds of thousands of people.

> "My thoughts, my thoughts ... I won't write a lot. I remind you that we are one, I love you, and no one can change that, my brave and strong Ukrainians. Our sun rises!" wrote choreographer Dmytro Dikusar on his Instagram page.
> "For us, our native culture is critical. Not because we are aesthetically advanced or led by our hearts, we love to sing or our language is beautiful, but because it largely defines our values, our meaning, what shapes us and forms our identity," shared writer Serhiy Zhadan.

The renowned writer, poet and musician Serhiy Zhadan donated the money from his Freedom Prize from the Frank Schirrmacher Foundation—10,000 Swiss francs—to volunteer initiatives. Back in 2014, Serhiy established his charitable foundation to support the army and people in frontline areas. Since then, he has been donating his literary awards to volunteer causes. In 2024, Serhiy and two musicians from his band Zhadan i Sobaky joined the Ukrainian army.

Many artists who have not joined the military have been actively supporting it since the first days of the war: organising charity concerts, selling their works at exhibitions and raising funds for vehicles, anti-drone rifles, rangefinders and other essential equipment for Ukraine's defenders.

Those not directly involved in volunteer work or combat address European audiences. They include Andriy Kurkov, one of Ukraine's most renowned writers, whose books have been translated into 45 languages and who writes speeches for his public appearances. Published in leading European media, his texts draw attention to Ukraine and counter Russian propaganda.

> "Ukrainian classical literature was rarely translated into foreign languages because the Soviet Union, and also Russia, promoted only Russian classics, Russian culture and Russian literature. When I give talks, my main goal is to engage people, to deepen their understanding and to help them realise that Ukraine's history is distinct from Russia's history," Andriy Kurkov said in an interview.

War inevitably entails loss of human life. We will never know the exact number of artists lost at the hands of the Russians; what we do know is that they number in their hundreds and that each one of them is irreplaceable. Since the invasion began, the PEN Ukraine initiative has been recording Russia's crimes against Ukrainian writers, journalists, actors, musicians and other artists to preserve their memory. "They all had two things in common: their work made up the fabric of Ukrainian culture; and they were all killed by Russia," said researcher Sasha Dovzhyk.

Knowing that every second could be their last, artists increasingly choose not to remain silent or stay in the shadows. Instead, they use their art to document the war, seeing it as a mission to correct historical injustice and prevent the erasure of the history of Ukraine's struggle for its identity.

Tetyana Teren, journalist and former Executive Director of PEN Ukraine:

> T.T.: In my opinion, the essential thing today for everyone working with words and in culture in general is to record and document—our emotions, experiences and people's stories as well as the crimes committed by Russia against culture, artists and the country as a whole. Our main task is to preserve and record as much as possible of what has happened.
>
> There is an inner sense of duty that has been provoked by history because, during previous difficult and tragic periods of our history, we did not have this opportunity. The

empire stole and erased our memory, leaving no trace of it. Entire subsequent generations grew up without knowing their history or were fed distorted information. Russia will not succeed in doing this again. That is why we feel this duty to preserve and document Russian crimes so that they do not go unnoticed, so that future generations remember them and so that the whole world knows about them.

"The colonial nature of this war is evident in the destruction of culture."

Bullets and injuries on the battlefield are not the only causes of artists' deaths. Among the greatest crimes against Ukrainian identity are the persecution and physical erasure of Ukrainian artistic elites in the occupied territories. One of the most tragic losses for Ukrainian culture was the death of conductor, orchestrator and accordionist Yurii Kerpatenko, who was killed by Russian soldiers during the occupation of Kherson.

Kerpatenko was a virtuoso conductor who created original arrangements for ensembles and orchestras, leaving his mark on Ukraine's musical landscape. He was the chief conductor of the Gileya chamber orchestra of the Kherson Regional Philharmonic and had previously served for over ten years as the principal conductor of the Mykola Kulish Music and Drama Theatre. "He lived only for music," said his wife.

On 27 September 2022, the maestro's life was cut short. The Russian occupiers demanded that Kerpatenko conduct a concert for Music Day in Kherson—an act of propaganda meant to demonstrate the 'normalisation' of life in the occupied city.

After refusing to comply with this ultimatum, Kerpaten-

Tetyana Teren. Photo by Artem Galkin

ko was shot dead on the doorstep of his apartment. His wife, who was close by at the time of the shooting, suffered severe injuries.

T.T.: Yurii Kerpatenko did not die on the front line under shelling but because he refused to renounce his identity. He refused to obey the occupiers' orders to participate in their staged concerts, just like children's writer Volodymyr Vakulenko. Russian soldiers murdered him with two bullets from a Makarov pistol.

These are just a few stories, but we cannot even comprehend the scale of the tragedies unfolding in the occupied territories. When our prisoners of war and civilians return from Russian torture chambers, we learn of the horrors they have endured in captivity.

The tragedies of Volodymyr Vakulenko and Yurii Kerpatenko took place in territories that Russia calls "historically Russian lands" in its propaganda. But these stories prove that there are people who refuse to accept propaganda, who fight for their identity and pay the ultimate price for it.

Even the PACE Resolution on June 2024 concluded that the aim of the Russian-Ukrainian war is to commit cultural genocide, the cultural erasure of the Ukrainian people.

T.T.: Exactly. The first thing Russia does when it occupies Ukrainian towns and villages is to introduce its school curriculum and remove Ukrainian books from libraries. We have recorded numerous testimonies from occupied territories about book burnings, books being taken away in

Tetyana Teren.
Photo by Artem Galkin

black bags and the creation of lists of banned literature. These lists often include books on Ukrainian history and European-themed books that the occupiers consider "dangerous".
The occupiers demolished monuments and spread propaganda narratives about "primordially Russian land".
This is a deliberate war against identity aimed at destroying everything that distinguishes Ukrainians.
I would like to recall that the renowned international lawyer Raphael Lemkin (1900–1959), who introduced the term "genocide" into international law, included not only the physical destruction of a nation in the definition of this crime but also the destruction of its culture and identity. This means that genocide also encompasses the prohibition of a language, the introduction of special rules in the education system that exclude national elements and the imposition of foreign cultural products.
This also includes the theft and removal of artworks, rewriting history in textbooks and attempting to erase or distort cultural heritage. Such actions are components of a genocidal policy carried out by one state against another.
Unfortunately, this aspect was not fully incorporated into the international legal concept of genocide. However, today, the Raphael Lemkin Society in Ukraine is working to bring these aspects back into international discussion and is actively documenting crimes against Ukrainian culture.

What is the scale of Russian crimes against artists today?

T.T.: We still do not know the full scale of losses and tragedies, as we don't have access to the occupied territories. This is an ever-growing database of stories and cases that expands daily.
Our work began in February 2022 and we have so far gathered data on 145 such cases. However, we deliberately do

not focus on numbers, as the actual scale of the tragedy is far greater.

This work must go beyond reports and human rights initiatives within our organisation. It must be implemented at the state level. We contacted the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, The National Memorial to the Heroes, the Raphael Lemkin Society and other organisations. Together, we are now analysing and collecting all such cases and are planning to launch a dedicated platform—not just a report page but a full-fledged resource where all information on crimes against artists will be gathered.

Very often, after yet another book presentation or a memorial evening for a murdered artist, my colleagues and I feel an emptiness inside. It is the agonising sense of losing a person, an artist—and a cultural legacy that will never come to be. This is a deeply painful realisation for everyone working in the cultural sphere and for those who know the history of Ukrainian culture.

Can we draw parallels between the crimes against artists under the totalitarian Soviet regime and those committed by the Russian occupiers today?

T.T.: I always emphasise that the occupiers' and empire's methods remained unchanged. When dealing with a people and culture that is foreign to them, they always employed the same tactics: erasing, devaluing, and rendering them "inferior" and insignificant. The tragic fates of many of our fallen confirm this.

During the imperial period, we had no state of our own and could neither defend nor resist as we do today. Ukrainian artists and writers are not passive victims; they take up arms to defend their state and culture. This is why we cannot fully equate these events with the 1930s, when the totalitarian regime executed over a thousand Ukrainian artists. Undoubtedly, this is a war against identity—one

that Russia has been waging for centuries—and its colonial and imperial nature is most evident in the destruction of culture.

Without knowledge of these facts, the world might perceive this as merely a territorial dispute between neighbouring countries. In the 1930s, Russia believed it had banned and destroyed everything it possibly could. But there is something unfathomable and of incredible strength in our culture, language, and identity—something that compels Ukrainians to rise time and again and continue their struggle.

Today, Ukrainian society is experiencing a strong trend of "cancelling" Russian cultural products. Can this process be seen as liberation from a post-colonial inferiority complex?

T.T.: This ongoing discussion is and far from over. On one hand, particularly in 2022, significant changes occurred naturally. When someone comes to kill you, your instinct tells you that you no longer want their language, culture or any artefacts representing the aggressor state in your space. On the other hand, the full-scale war has affected everyone, accelerating and intensifying the process of self-identification. For some, this process began with Ukraine's independence; for others, it is a continuation; and, unfortunately, for some it has not yet begun.

This phenomenon is part of our post-colonial legacy. I am convinced that even without the war, every person in our country would sooner or later face the challenge of asking themselves: "Who am I? What is my country? What does it mean to me?" But when you live in constant, daily danger and lose loved ones, these questions arise suddenly and with great urgency. Some people realised who they are within just a few months and have begun to dig deeper. Others are still searching. This has amplified decolonial narratives within the country.

In our cities and villages, we have started to question things like: "Why do our streets have these names? Why do these statues stand here? Were we involved in making these decisions, or were they imposed on us? Why do our libraries hold certain books? Why does our museum carry this name or house that collection?" All these questions surfaced after 2022. People began understanding that Russia, at various points in history, stole artefacts, rewrote chronicles, and now once again uses the same methods of looting cultural treasures and plundering. These processes have been going on for centuries.

Today, understanding these issues is no longer just about emotions; it is deeply rooted. Every person in our country has experienced some form of loss, creating a deep sense of responsibility toward those who have perished. This makes the question even more poignant: "Who are you, and what can you do to ensure Ukraine endures and triumphs?" In this context, Russian culture, music, language and literature have become foreign, even hostile.

However, when you step outside your bubble, you meet people who still believe this issue is not a priority. This shows us that the discussion is far from over. For many, it is only the beginning.

Why would you say that Ukrainian culture "exploded" with new forms and meanings during the war?

T.T.: Many people are struck by the current surge in Ukrainian culture. It is impossible to ignore. This phenomenon is driven by a strong desire to understand ourselves and our roots. For instance, we are witnessing an incredible trend of rediscovering Ukrainian literary classics.

As a student, reading 19th-century Ukrainian literature seemed like a marginal interest. Now it has turned into a widespread movement across society: book clubs are opening, bookstores spanning multiple floors are thriving and

Tetyana Teren.
Photo by Artem
Galkin

Tetyana Teren. Photo by Artem Galkin

public readings fill entire halls. Poets are attracting huge audiences, which would previously have been unimaginable. This process is accompanied by the near-complete disappearance of Russian cultural products from our information space and market. And that has allowed Ukrainian literature to claim its rightful place. Our cultural product is modern, vibrant and immensely powerful, and Ukrainian society has an overwhelming demand for its own culture.

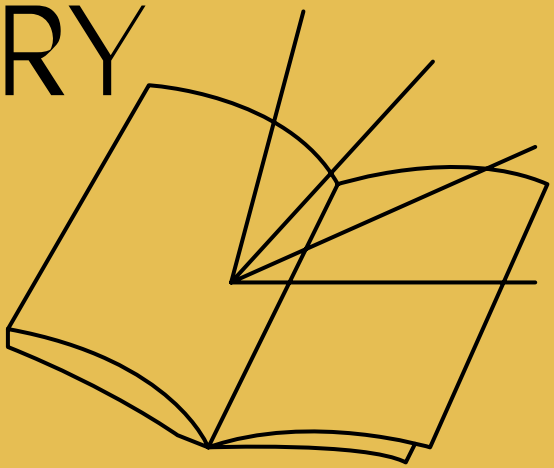
Throughout the war, PEN Ukraine has focused on supporting libraries in liberated and frontline areas that have been damaged or destroyed by the conflict. The team collects and buys Ukrainian-language books, mainly for teenagers and children, and delivers them to the libraries. The organisation also continues to gather stories, photos and footage to preserve the memory of artists lost to the war. One of

their key initiatives they launched in partnership with The Ukrainians media is a project, People of Culture Taken Away by the War, a series of essays dedicated to this cause.

In 2024, PEN Ukraine received the Democracy Courage Tribute Award for its efforts in documenting Russia's crimes against Ukrainian artists. Tetyana Teren dedicated this prestigious award to all Ukrainian journalists, writers, and artists who could have shaped the future of Ukrainian culture had their lives not been tragically cut short by Russian aggression.

Publisher Yuliya Orlova:

PEOPLE WANT TO FEEL CONNECTED TO THE CULTURAL PULSE OF THEIR COUNTRY



In what may seem like a pipe dream to many Western cultural managers, the book market in today's war-torn Ukraine is experiencing an unprecedented boom. Rather than succeeding in its aim of destroying Ukrainian culture, Russian aggression has instead acted as a catalyst for a veritable reading explosion. The market is growing as young people are eagerly buying printed books and discovering Ukrainian classics, with reading becoming a way of life.

New bookshops are opening across the country. No longer places just to buy books, they have become contemporary cultural spaces where Ukrainians come for the atmosphere, conversation, hugs and positive vibes. Bookshops have changed in appearance and ambiance, too, some having moved into basements for safety. Here, one can browse the latest releases, enjoy a coffee, buy pastries and meet like-minded people.

Unexpected formats have also emerged: in Kyiv, a bookshop-café-bar called Plekay (ed. Nurture) has opened, where visitors can buy second-hand books and rare books. The bookstore offers coffee, deserts and craft beer. And Lviv now has a bookshop especially for introverts, where customers can buy books without speaking—simply by writing their request on paper or on a mobile device.

The start of Russian aggression in 2014 heralded a rapid transformation of the book market, when Ukrainian publishers started phasing out Russian books. At the time, Russian publications accounted for up to 90 percent of the market. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of eastern Ukraine changed all that, prompting both publishers and readers to support Ukrainian authors. Following the full-scale invasion, this process rapidly gathered pace, further

Photo by Alona Malashyna

quickened by a legislative ban on the import of Russian literature.

Ukrainian publishers have, quite literally, spread their wings. Six months into the full-scale war, 86 percent of publishing houses had fully resumed their business. Sales surged, with book clubs emerging in many cities and drawing large audiences. And much to Ukrainian publishers' joy, the most active readership is the age group of 16- to 27-year-olds, who frequently choose contemporary authors and Ukrainian classics.

Publishing houses such as Vivat in Kharkiv continue to operate despite near-daily shelling. One of the leading players in the country's book market, it specialises in publishing global bestsellers, but sees its mission as producing high-quality books about the war. "I want Kharkiv to live," says Vivat's CEO, Yuliya Orlova, explaining why

she is staying put despite the constant peril.

Publishers have noticed that books are no longer just about recreation and distraction from the war but have acquired the additional function of providing a space for readers' reflection on their identity. Just ten years ago, the Ukrainian book market was awash with Russian literature; today, it has become a place where people seek answers and explore new meanings.

Yuliya Orlova, CEO of Vivat Publishing House:

Y. O.: Studying this phenomenon is genuinely challenging, but according to our estimates, approximately half of the books on the market were in Russian before the full-scale war. This share was even higher before 2014, before a gradual reorientation began after the start of Russia's aggression. Our publishing house in Kharkiv, for example, started working more closely with central and western Ukraine and wholly transitioned to publishing in Ukrainian.

It wasn't easy, as Kharkiv is a predominantly Russian-speaking city. We had to adapt gradually, recruiting native Ukrainian-speaking editors and switching to conversing in Ukrainian ourselves. This shift happened gradually over the years, and by the time of the full-scale invasion, we had almost entirely stopped publishing Russian-language books. The introduction of laws restricting the import of Russian-language literature (ed.: the 2023 law banning the import and distribution of publishing products from Russia and Belarus) has given us a firmer foothold.

Undoubtedly, there are several reasons why people have started reading more. First off, there is an element of escapism—books provide an opportunity to escape from a harsh reality. Power outages have led people to seek other ways to spend their time. Many also begin reading in Ukrainian because they want to improve their native language but can't always find or afford a tutor.

But we must also acknowledge the downside: A significant

number of small publishing houses have not survived the war. Many were forced to close, leaving mainly the major players in the market.

Since the onset of the war, Vivat has been opening new bookshops in various Ukrainian cities. In Kharkiv, a city plagued by incessant shelling and power outages, these shops have transformed into cultural hubs and become something of a phenomenon.

In 2023, the queue for the grand opening of Vivat's second bookshop in Kharkiv stretched around an entire block—something previously unheard of in Ukraine's book market. Much to publishers' surprise, more than 2000 of the city's residents visited the bookshop in the course of two days, with close to 1000 people attending an autograph session by the famous Kharkiv-born writer Serhiy Zhadan.

Can this be taken as a sign of broader societal change?
Y.O.: This is a significant marker. In Kharkiv, as in other Ukrainian cities, people want to live, not just survive, even in these harsh conditions.

"Kharkiv's cultural life has suffered immense losses, yet people long to return to normality — with its exhibitions, fairs, and events. And so any cultural gathering becomes essential for residents who long to feel part of something meaningful in these times."

Y.O.: The bookshop queue around the block formed for several reasons. The first is the sheer desire to live—to embrace the present rather than merely wait for the war to end. People want to feel connected to the cultural pulse of their country. The second reason is the book signing with

The publisher Yuliya Orlova.
Photo by Yulia Weber

writer and poet Serhiy Zhadan. The combination of a bookstore opening and the chance to see Zhadan in person naturally drew an immense crowd.

Thirdly, there's something special about our bookstores. They may not always have a flawless design, but they are appreciated for their warmth and sincerity. We create spaces where people can do more than just buy books—they can unwind. There's always a coffee corner, a friendly conversation, or even a board game.

We never pressure visitors into making a purchase; if they want to spend time in our space, they are welcome. We cherish the fact that people come for books as well as the unique, cosy atmosphere.

"Publishing, culture, and art were not brought to their knees"

One of the greatest setbacks for Ukraine's publishing industry was the destruction of the Kharkiv Factor-Druk printing facility by a Russian strike. When a missile hit the roof of the facility's binding workshop in the spring of 2024, the subsequent fire destroyed the building complete with the printing equipment. Seven employees lost their lives and 21 more were injured. Fifty thousand books—children's literature, global bestsellers, educational material—went up in flames, along with 60 tonnes of paper that had just arrived for printing new editions.

Factor-Druk was one of Europe's largest full-cycle printing complexes, printing for nearly all Ukrainian publishers. It was a particular blow for Vivat, which had up to 80 percent of its publications printed there.

Photo by Alona Malashyna

Occurring just before Book Arsenal, the country's largest book fair, Ukrainian publishers see this strike as nothing less than a targeted attack on culture. The response was immediate: people across Kharkiv and the entire country united to support the printing house, raising funds and buying books to help restore production.

How did the attack on Factor-Druk impact Ukraine's publishing industry and your publishing house?

Y. O.: The strike on Factor-Druk was deeply traumatic, not only for the publishing sector but for Ukraine's entire cultural community. It represented both a material and a psychological loss. Publishers lost millions and our own damages amounted to nearly 20 million hryvnia (ed. approximately 455,000 euros). The Howard G. Buffett Foundation funded Factor-Druk's restoration, but this did not cover the publishers whose books were lost in the fire.

Our most significant challenges were recovering financial losses and the moral dilemma of how to go forward under these conditions: Should we focus on keeping our team together and paying salaries, or should we prioritise publishing new books? I chose to support my team, as without them, the publishing house would collapse. It was a difficult decision because it meant curbing our development and being unable to print the number of books we had planned.

There was also a profound psychological impact. Knowing that people had died at the printing works and then returning to work there left an emotional mark. Many of our colleagues felt the need to change careers, and we are sadly witnessing an exodus of professionals from the book industry on account of the low wages and ongoing hardship.

At the same time, this attack—and the war as a whole—has reinforced our resolve. We now feel an even stronger responsibility to document these events. As Kharkiv-based publishers, we witness the war first-hand every day. That's

Photo by Yulia Weber

"The fact that publishing, culture and art have not been brought to their knees even in these challenging times is proof of how fiercely we are together fighting for our identity."

—Yuliya Orlova, publisher

why it is crucial for me to record everything, to ensure that future generations understand what we have endured and what is happening. Because for me, books are a way to speak to the future generations.

So this is an investment in the future, reflecting your social mission?

Y. O.: Yes, for me, publishing is no longer about profit but about a mission. We are talking about the experience and reality of war, about what is happening to Ukrainian identity, and this must be recorded today while we are still living in this situation.

I sometimes hear criticism about the re-traumatisation of society through books about war. But these documents tell the story of how we are experiencing the war. That's why it is essential for me to capture the experiences of our people and to select the authors carefully.

How do you see the role of literature and art in times of war? Can they serve as tools for healing painful experiences?

Y. O.: For me, this war is a struggle between the civilisation of life and the civilisation of death. We Ukrainians, are fighting for life, while Russians want to see us dead; that, in essence, is the difference.

I would not separate literature from other art forms, as together they create a unique force that helps us comprehend the war, heal wounds, and preserve our national identity. Literature can be a tool for healing and reflection, helping to make sense of what is happening. A book can help us process painful experiences.

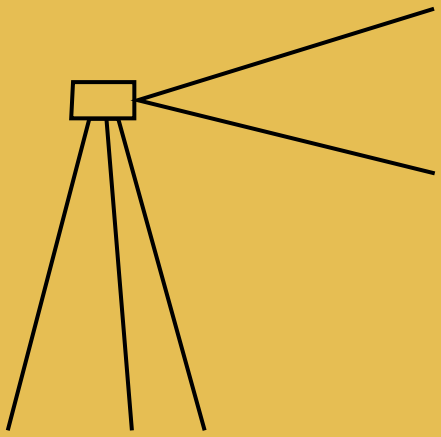
If we talk about "lighter" genres such as fantasy or romcoms, they provide a temporary escape from reality, which is essential for maintaining mental health. Moreover, we are witnessing a massive surge of interest in Ukrainian authors. Readers are now returning to our long-neglected

Photo by Alona Malashyna

classics. Many Ukrainian publishers, including ourselves, are releasing a series of Ukrainian classics. What sets us apart is that we publish uncensored texts—unabridged versions and works that had never been included in school curricula—to bring home the fact that Ukrainian classics are engaging and professionally written.

It is gratifying to see young people discovering Ukrainian classics that were previously unavailable or insufficiently studied. They say, "How can something this engaging have been written 100 years ago?!" So a century later we are now reading and discussing Ukrainian literature, with book clubs attracting huge audiences who are captivated by these works. Introducing our people to their literary heritage is a special mission for a publisher.

And finally, I am delighted that we are starting to love our culture. Ukraine is witnessing numerous exhibitions, theatre premieres and the emergence of new Ukrainian fashion brands. It has become fashionable and enjoyable to wear Ukrainian designs, which is truly inspiring. But it is not just about clothing—it is about building a new Ukrainian identity. And as the war grinds on, we must not give up—we must work swiftly and with perseverance for the sake of our shared future.



Photographer
Andrii Kotliarchuk:

WHEN I PHOTOGRAPHED THE RUINS, SOME OF THEM REMINDED ME OF WORKS OF ART

Photography has a unique ability to freeze a moment in time and transform it into a historic record. This becomes especially evident during war, when fine-art photography takes on a dual role: first as a chronicler of events that ensures the world does not forget the crimes of a nation; and second through the language of art, which speaks to us through emotions.

Ukrainian photographers working in combat zones are creating cultural and historical legacies that are vital for future generations. At the same time, they document destruction and capture the resilience of ordinary Ukrainians who, despite the danger and their unimaginable trials and tribulations, continue to live, love, and dream.

Today's renowned photographers include Evgeniy Maloletka, whose photographs from Mariupol have been seen throughout the world and who was one of the creators of the Oscar-winning Ukrainian film 20 Days in Mariupol; Maksym Dondyuk, who transforms war into an artistic reflection; and Yulia Kochetova, a winner of the international World Press Photo competition for her project War as Everyday Reality.

Particularly noteworthy are the photographs of Kyiv-based artist Andrii Kotliarchuk, who has documented the defence of Kyiv since the first days of the invasion. He also captured over 50 liberated villages, creating a visual chronicle of freedom. Sometimes, as the artist himself says, his photographs express more than words ever could.

Kotliarchuk is also an art historian, a member of the National Union of Artists of Ukraine and has held more than forty art photography exhibitions in Ukraine and abroad. He is one of the few who document the war on film. Even in combat zones, he operates with a heavy, tripod-mounted Rolleiflex camera.

The photographer also served as a volunteer, defending Mariupol from 2014 to 2015, and this experience adds depth and an intimate understanding of war to his photographs. His projects Volunteers: The Age of Heroes, The Salt of War, and Liberated Kyiv Region capture the resilience of the human spirit in even the darkest of times.

The artist believes that "human memory tends to forget what matters and clings to the trivial." This distortion of memory will inevitably begin when the devastating war ends. However, he adds, "photography will not only preserve historical truth but help us make sense of it."

Andrii Kotliarchuk, photographer:

A.K.: Photography, especially war photography, has always had an artistic dimension, even if its primary purpose was documentation. For instance, the British photographer Roger Fenton took the first war photographs on the territory of modern Ukraine during the Crimean War of 1853–1856. These works became significant not only as documentary records but also as artistic creations.

"Why has war photography left such a deep mark on art? Because the most iconic images capture events, emotions, and the spirit of the time. Photography can only be either good or bad: a good photograph can convey emotions and touch the depths of the soul."

Female soldiers participate in raids alongside men. Dnipro River, July 2023. Photo by Andrii Kotliarchuk

A.K.: Young photographers sometimes tell me that one should shoot things “as they are” without interference. However, such an approach is merely mechanical reproduction—artisanship at best. Photography is more than just capturing reality. It is a process in which the author filters the image through their own experience, inner self, conversations with God, and the legacy of past generations of photographers.

A complex operation. Rescuing a young female soldier of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. April 2023

Did you start photographing from the early days of Russian aggression?

A.K.: Yes, I began photographing the war back in November 2014 during the defence of Mariupol. At that time, I was documenting while serving with the St. Maria's battalion and created the project Volunteers: The Age of Heroes. I completed 90 shoots at the frontline, which was quite challenging. But creating something similar on the frontlines is practically impossible today.

Was the Volunteers: The Age of Heroes project your initiative or made for the media?

A.K.: No, I'm an artist, and initially, I didn't even think of it as a personal project. For me, it was a civic duty to my country because, at that time, almost no one else was documenting it this way. Photographers were working for salaries for various publications.

I was the first to start shooting on film in 2014 when the war was unfolding. I began taking portraits of volunteers because I understood the importance of capturing these events. I lived among soldiers, not just visiting for a few hours. I stayed in barracks, bunkers and trenches, interacting with them every day, documenting their routines and accompanying them on missions.

Most photographers were brought to the front under protection for two to three hours, but that was not enough. Living alongside soldiers, being part of their lives—that's is an entirely different experience.

"I feel a need to search for beauty everywhere, even in the midst of war."

The volunteer movement in Ukraine has become a unique phenomenon in the post-Soviet space and has demonstrated how deeply Ukrainians value their freedom. The first to join the ranks of volunteer battalions were men and women from the occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea, who dreamed of returning to their liberated homes at the earliest opportunity. At the same time, the volunteer movement brought together Ukrainians from all corners of the country, among them doctors, teachers, farmers, businesspeople and artists. Despite lacking combat experience, they united to defend the country from the aggressor.

Andrii Kotliarchuk spent five years working on Volunteers: The Age of Heroes. The photographer travelled hundreds of kilometres along the front line, creating 320 portraits of soldiers before and after combat. Many of them are no longer alive. His album received an avid response from photography enthusiasts. But Kotliarchuk's most pertinent recognition came from a Ukrainian soldier at a book fair, who, while purchasing the album, said, "Finally, we've learned to create photo albums about the war."

"The world of those who have experienced war is far purer than that of those who stood aside," Kotliarchuk believes, as he continues to dedicate many of his photographs to the military and to explore how people show their best side in the toughest of times.

A Ukrainian volunteer soldier, 2015

What is most important to you in photography, especially when capturing war?

A.K.: I feel a need to search for beauty everywhere, even in the midst of war. Plus, there's a tendency to overlook the passionate individuals who rushed to defend our country at the very beginning—the volunteers. Perhaps their entire lives were a lead-up to this moment.

One of my favourite photographs, taken in 2015, is of a volunteer with a radiant smile—it speaks for itself. It represents faith in victory and the future. These kinds of images remind me of scenes from an exquisite film. None of my photographs are accidental; my goal is to capture not just suffering and ruins, but the youth of the Ukrainian army, and the beauty of our warriors—both women and men.

If God has given you a talent, you must develop and refine it constantly. That is the essence of life. I've cultivated my talent and know how to create art, not just a collection of photographs. My work is shaped by having visited countless museums across Central and Western Europe and extensively studied paintings and war photographs from the Second World War and the Vietnam War. Whenever I come across something reminiscent of those works, I instantly feel compelled to capture it.

At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Andrii Kotliarchuk joined the Bratstvo volunteer battalion to document the war. After the Ukrainian army pushed Russian forces back to the Chernihiv region, he returned to Kyiv to photograph the newly liberated territories. He spent a month in de-occupied villages of the Kyiv region, shooting the traces left by the Russian army.

The photographer visited 50 villages in the northern part of the region, capturing the aftermath of the fighting: destroyed equipment, downed Russian helicopters, missiles lodged in residents' gardens, charred remnants of weapons, and ruins of buildings and churches. He also spoke to people who had lived through the occupation.

A.K.: I was the only photographer who travelled across Kyiv region immediately after its liberation. I wasn't motivated by money; I wanted to document and leave people with a perspective on the world as I saw it because it's vital for future generations.

What I saw in the north was horrific. In the village of Peremoha, for example, Russian soldiers caught a man in the forest as he tried to escape the occupation and reach our troops. They hacked him to pieces with a machete. He was just an ordinary man, a civilian. He is now buried near the church.

When I photographed ruins after the Kyiv region was liberated, some of them reminded me of works of art, for example the iron water pipeline destroyed by a direct hit in the village of Kukhari or the rocket motor from a Tochka-U, protruding from the ground like a monument to the battles.

One of the most powerful images I captured in 2022 is the skeleton of a Russian pilot next to the wreckage of a downed helicopter near Makariv. In the background, the scorched earth and cracked soil resemble scenes from Mars.

I shoot on film and used a tripod, even during combat. People are astonished that it's possible, but that's how I work. Although I've had my fair share of adventures, I've avoided injuries. One unforgettable moment happened in 2016 when I thought my end had come. We were under heavy artillery fire with nowhere to hide. We were encircled but managed to escape in a car, surrounded by explosions—ahead, behind, left and right. The car was white, which made it the perfect target in the frontline zone. But we made it out.

The most important thing for me is to leave a mark so that future generations can see the consequences of war.

What impresses or moves you most while working?
A.K.: A beautiful shot. It gives me the feeling that I've made another step forward, adding my small brick to our victory. Although, I try to work without emotions, some moments still leave an impression me. Once, for example, I saw two elderly soldiers digging trenches on the second line of defence—just 200 metres from the first line. And they were smoking Camel cigarettes. It struck me because soldiers smoked Camel in the trenches of the First and Second World Wars. And now, after all these years, soldiers are still smoking Camel. It's like we've gone full circle.

A local farmer sits at the bottom of a crater caused by a 500-kilogramme Russian bomb. April 2022

A.K.: Also, I was struck by the exotic weapons that ordinary people brought for the Ukrainian soldiers in 2014. I remember an older man who gave the volunteers two crates of grenades from the Second World War. Soldiers used them—they exploded just fine. They replaced the fuses and it worked.

The house of a local resident who actively supported the Ukrainian army, deliberately destroyed by artillery strikes

How do people react when they see your photographs? Does their perception of the war change?

A.K.: I don't create for myself; I create for people. They see these photographs as their own because the cultural code is familiar. Ukrainians remember mainly the middle-aged and older generations, black-and-white family photos. They also recognise elements of war. Many of them used to hang those black-and-white photos on the wall, under the icons, and these memories, embedded in our genes, evoke strong emotions and memories in them.

My photographs stand out because I don't chase soldiers with my camera, trying to capture something at random. Instead, I try to direct the shooting process even in the most challenging conditions: I search for the right angles and capture what I deem essential. It may sound strange, but even during combat, I try to shoot the way it should be. Thanks to my combat brotherhood, I had access to many units, and I put in significant effort to create these shots. And people notice it.

"I don't aim to convince anyone or change opinions. My main goal is to leave these images behind for future generations. They are engaging now and will still be interesting in 50 years' time."

I show real people, actual surroundings and real weapons. These are not hired actors. But photography, even documentary photography, is a kind of manipulation. A person doesn't know how they look in the frame, and if I ask them to stand to the left or right, that's normal. The camera sees differently than the human eye. Our field of vision is limited, we can hardly see in the dark, while modern cameras can see much more.

"The art doesn't just flourish — it explodes in wartime."

When Andrii Kotliarchuk held the Third Biennale of Ukrainian Fine-Art Photography, the full-scale war was already raging. He had established this platform a few years earlier to support Ukrainian artists engaged in fine-art photography.

He was the first to move photographers out of libraries, where they mostly exhibited their works, to modern venues such as the Taras Shevchenko National Museum, the Kyiv National Art Gallery, and the Kyiv History Museum.

In 2023, the biennale was hosted by the Taras Shevchenko National Museum and showcased over sixty works by twelve Ukrainian fine-art photographers. The exhibition's themes spanned beyond war, delving into broader reflections on the surrounding world, dialogues with God and conceptual ideas of existence as a form of being.

"The art doesn't just flourish — it explodes in wartime. Well-fed, contented people are often unmotivated; everything is fine, so nothing happens. But during a war, there's an incredible flurry of activity. Artists hurry to create and embed new meanings in bronze, stone and canvas. I believe Ukrainian art has blossomed and flourished precisely because of the war. Before the war, I remember there was a certain stagnation. But now galleries are packed, museums and theatres are in full swing."

A mobile apiary burned by Russian missiles. Over ten million bees perished. July 2022, Kyiv region

Ukrainian Polissia

You use only black-and-white photography. Why is that?
A.K.: Black and white is perceived as documentary, and many people associate it with reality because they're used to it. For them, black and white is a marker of authenticity. Besides, photography was always black and white. It only became colourful in the 1970s, with the boom in the chemical industry and the advent of synthetic dyes.
This explosion of colour, tied to synthetic materials, popularised colour photography. Yet today, it's hard to surprise anyone with colour photographs, so everything gradually returns to the source—black-and-white photography. It's become relevant again.

Tell us about projects that are particularly dear to you.

A.K.: I've photographed Ukraine's Polissia region for 11 years, shooting on 4x5-inch film using vintage lenses. The results are stunning. My work spans about 1000 kilometres of territory. Photographs showcases different aspects of life — from architecture to sacred rituals and the masquerade culture rooted in pagan traditions.

Astonishingly, this culture has survived there despite being lost across most of Ukraine, including the Carpathian Mountains, where tourism has long replaced authentic traditions. There are still places with next to no infrastructure in Polissia, but the rituals and mysterious stories that amaze and captivate people remain intact.

Andrii Kotliarchuk's photographs capture the atmosphere of Polissia, a northern region of Ukraine. While its residents preserve their mystical rituals, the wild forests and wooden architecture transport you to a world untouched by globalisation, a world where time seems to have stopped. Here, one can still find people who have a deep reverence for their traditions.

These journeys left their mark on the photographer, particularly visiting a sorcerer's hut in the middle of the forest and an unexpected encounter with Polissian pagans. This inspired him to become a guide to this archaic world, showcasing it to others through his photography.

A.K.: This is not mainstream media, but I will still complete the project. It has an interesting part about pagan rituals that have resurfaced due to the war. These are ancient rites that people were once afraid to go near, such as communicating with the dead. In the past, these rituals were carried out in remote villages, where the distance between settlements was 30 to 40 kilometres and the roads were almost impassable. People would turn to their ancestors to seek answers to essential questions.

These rituals were revived after the beginning of the war and have become a form of support for people in difficult times. Moreover, Polissia is a temple of nature, an actual jungle, where nature is held sacred.

I am also working on another project—documenting tattoos on military personnel. I regard it as one of the most crucial artistic explorations of the theme of war. I photographed tattoos for a year and a half, and at the final stage, I received assistance from the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, for which I am very grateful. This project contains 30 pages where soldiers talk about their tattoos and why they got them, with over 200 photographs.

Military tattoos were sometimes the cause of soldiers' deaths. If the Russians found a tattoo, they often tortured and killed its bearer, as most tattoos feature patriotic symbols—coats of arms, Ukrainian or European flags, Shevchenko's poems, embroidered shirts, but also Viking symbols representing combat spirit.

Today, the once-exotic tattoo culture has become routine. From 2014 to 2016, I spent a lot of time in the trenches, and back then, there weren't nearly as many tattoos. But let's remember that the people of Scotland, the Picts, who fiercely resisted invaders, also covered themselves in tattoos. Perhaps our ancestors were all tattooed as well, since the mummies of the Scythians are tattooed. Today, this culture has reignited and overtaken society.

How has the war changed your perception of art and of yourself?

A.K.: The war has drastically changed my perception. After the defence of Mariupol, I went through a phase where I simply minimised or even cut ties with those who weren't helping Ukraine. Yes, I stopped being tolerant, and it became easier for me.

When I freed myself from people I had been in contact

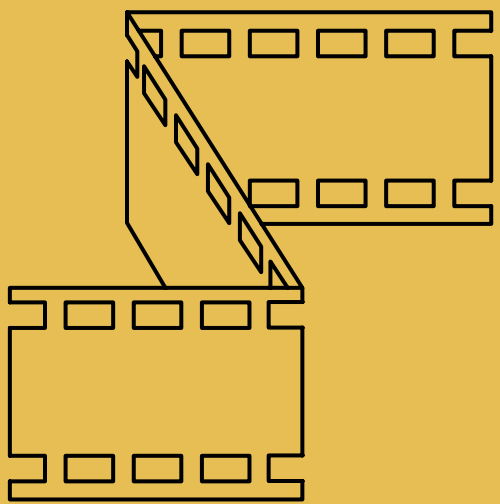
with only because it had happened that way, I realised that these people were like unattractive concrete posts I had been tied to. Because when you can't move or run, you can't take off. I simply freed myself from these people, and it became easier to breathe. I am now among my own people. I have many like-minded individuals who are energetic, constructive thinkers and who are working towards Ukraine's future.

Can art be a place of healing in difficult times?
A.K.: Everyone finds their path. If art helps someone heal, then thank God; I am happy about that. For me, art is something sacred, something divine. I seek it, and when I see a work of art, I feel where it comes from, what roots it has, and what thoughts are embedded in it. It inspires me, and ideas are born. If art helps people, that's a good thing.

RUSSIA USING SOVIET METHODS TO DESTROY UKRAINIAN IDENTITY

Taras Tomenko, Ukrainian film director:

FALSEHOOD IS NO LONGER FORGIVEN, ESPECIALLY IN ART



Taras Tomenko is a renowned Ukrainian filmmaker who explores collective memory and how society reflects on war. His film Slovo House. Unfinished Novel had a record cinema run of more than 8 months—a truly unique achievement in Ukraine, especially in light of the full-scale war and the major economic challenges faced by the film industry.

The film tells the story of the historical Kharkiv building known as Slovo House and its inhabitants. These were part of a generation of Ukrainian intellectuals of the 1930s who became known as the Executed Renaissance after being executed by the Soviet regime. The film plays a crucial role in preserving the memory of the repressed artists and raises the issue of the destruction of Ukrainian identity.

In 1927, the building that became known as the Slovo Building was constructed in Kharkiv to house Ukraine's most prominent artists, including writers, poets, painters, composers, theatre professionals, filmmakers and more. To be given the opportunity to live in this building's luxurious apartments seemed, to the creatives of the time, a recognition of their talent.

But it was a trap.

In reality, the Soviet authorities aimed to control the lives of distinguished artists and sought to identify "enemies of the people" among them. The apartments were bugged and the artists' activities were reported to the authorities. During later repair work, evidence of microphones concealed in walls and lamps was found.

Director Taras Tomenko.
Photo by Mykhailo Liubarskyi

The artists of that period were entirely unaware that cases were being fabricated against them, accusing them of espionage, nationalism, extremism, belonging to made-up organisations and preparing fictitious acts of sabotage.

These charges were later used as a pretext for repression, persecution, imprisonments and executions.

Among the artists were such prominent figures as Mykola Khvylovy, who is considered the most outstanding prose writer of his time; Les Kurbas, the reformer of Ukrainian theatre; the avant-garde writer Maik Johansen; poet and translator Mykola Zerov; the founder of Ukrainian Futurism Mykhailo Semenko; the founder of the distinctive artistic style of Boychukism, Mykhailo Boychuk; and many more of the remarkable artists behind the cultural renaissance.

By chance, or so they thought, they came to be in the same place at the same time, elevating their hopes that their innovative ide-

as and approaches would advance Ukrainian culture. Slovo House had a total of 66 apartments. In the course of just seven years—from 1930 to 1937—Stalin's regime persecuted more than forty of its inhabitants, who were tortured, executed, exiled or driven to suicide. Even those who managed to avoid death or exile were under constant surveillance, suffered persecution, had their spirits broken and were forced to glorify the Soviet Union. Working under strict censorship, they had to adapt their artistic output to comply with Soviet demands or even abandon their work for long periods. Artists were at constant risk of being accused of "anti-Soviet activity" or "nationalism", which could lead to arrest, exile, or even execution.

One by one, artists were taken from the Slovo Building, often at night. A black car, known among the people as the "voronok", was waiting to take them away. Subjected to humiliating searches, beatings and brutal interrogations, they were forced to write "confessions", often based on a ready-made template.

Watching Slovo House, one cannot escape the painful realisation that history is repeating itself in Ukraine's Russian-occupied territories. An atmosphere of fear and terror prevails, with people suspected of anti-Russian activities being abducted, interrogated, and tortured. Ukrainian language and books are banned and having a Ukrainian flag or playing a Ukrainian song can result in imprisonment or even death. A different regime, it uses the same methods to destroy Ukrainian identity by eliminating the country's artistic elite.

Sifting through volumes of declassified archives—letters, documents, eyewitness accounts—the filmmakers searched for historic photos and blueprints of the building to accurately recreate its original appearance. The director and screenwriter spent thousands of hours studying criminal files, often handwritten and containing fabricated evidence against the artists.

This in-depth research—from the very beginning to the film's release—took more than 12 years. The authors collected over 400 pages of material, which culminated in a documentary released in 2017. This later grew into a full-length feature film with Ukrainian star actors, which became a box office hit in 2024.

At the start of Tomenko's long and arduous journey, no one believed that the theme of artists repressed by the Soviet regime would appeal to a wider audience, let alone that it would enjoy such a long screening run.

For years, director and co-screenwriter Taras Tomenko—the son of a Ukrainian writer and poet—felt that he was creating art-house cinema. He believed that this was, first and foremost, something he needed to do for himself and that he was simply trying to uncover the truth that had been kept hidden for decades. During the time of Ukraine's independence, only a few researchers dared to reveal this hidden truth.

Only after the full-scale invasion did Ukrainians begin to realise the true value of this aspect of their cultural heritage, now forever lost. Tomenko's Slovo House certainly played a part in that. Ukrainian writer Oksana Zabuzhko believes that the artists of the Executed Renaissance were ahead of their time by several decades and would, had they not been eliminated, have had a major influence on European and world culture.

Today, the Slovo building houses ordinary Kharkiv residents. The Soviet regime succeeded in concealing its crimes to such effect that some of the building's residents only learned about its tragic history—and the names of the artists who once lived there—during the making of the film.

Many cinemagoers were entirely unfamiliar with the work of the artists of the Executed Renaissance before seeing the film, and there was a surge of interest at cinemas—something the

film's creators would never have dreamed of only a few years earlier.

Taras Tomenko, the film's director:

T.T.: The idea for the film came to me about 13 years ago. It was during President Yanukovych's time. If you compare Ukraine then and now—they are two different realities. Back then, it was almost impossible to make a breakthrough with Ukrainian-themed cinema.

Ukraine's film market was geared towards Russian products: Russian TV series were being made at a frantic pace, featuring the majority of Ukrainian actors. Kyiv was plastered in posters of Russian artists.

When I approached producers and suggested the Executed Renaissance as a theme, they were perplexed: "What? What's this Executed Renaissance, what is that?"—they looked on it as something weird, even laughable.

Still from Slovo House.
Courtesy of the film crew

T. T.: But we didn't give up.

I was particularly interested in the artists of this period, especially the fate of the writer Mykola Khvylovy. I felt the emptiness that their elimination left behind. They were shot, and with them, an entire layer of modern Ukrainian culture was wiped out. I realised there was a huge information vacuum around this topic. Only in the 1990s did Ukraine start gradually publishing the works of the artists of the Executed Renaissance. After that, for a while, there was again a strange oblivion. Even during the years of independence, this generation remained in the shadows of history. There were no full biographies and there was no talk of cinema.

So, we took a different approach: we dug into the archives and, little by little, collected material for the film. It took us years.

Still from Slovo House.
Courtesy of the film crew

Mykola Khvylovy was one of the brightest lights of that period and an ideologist of cultural revival. The writer advocated for the development of Ukrainian literature and culture in a European context and tradition, unfettered by Russian dictates. He opposed Russification and was one of the first to realise the inevitability of the tragedy that would befall Ukraine's artistic elite.

The repression grew increasingly brutal. When the writer Mykhailo Yalovyi, who was a close friend of Khvylovy, was arrested, Khvylovy dramatically burned his last novel. But that was only one step towards the abyss: on 13 May 1933, the writer shot himself in the Slovo Building. His final words to his fellow writers were: "Now I'll show you how novels should be written and what a writer should be like in the Soviet era."

It was an act of protest against the beginning of mass repression. Not long before his suicide, Khvylovy visited the Poltava region, where he witnessed how the artificially created famine was ravaging Ukrainian villages. The filmmakers recreated the scene of his suicide based on accounts of four of his contemporaries. Khvylovy's death was an outcry that the whole world needed to hear.

Most of his works remained banned until the final years of the Soviet regime in Ukraine.

"Slovo House was a kind of rehearsal for full-scale war."

T.T.: This is a colossal struggle that has been raging for over a hundred years. We simply do not fit into their concept of imperial identity, which claims that their civilisation is thousands of years old. Now they are not just destroying culture and art, they are killing you just for being Ukrainian.

But in the 1920s and 1930s, before the mass repressions began, they acted more subtly: first, they launched Ukraini-

> sation—a Moscow initiative to allow Ukrainian books and literature. Ukrainian art flourished. But it was a trap. It was merely a means of identifying the bearers and disseminators of Ukrainian culture, and then they immediately rolled back the Ukrainisation process. In Kharkiv, for example, all signs were changed to Russian within a week, and they began imposing the Russian language.
>
> When we were making the film, we realised that Slovo House was a kind of rehearsal for full-scale war. They were testing all these methods. We even found a KGB [Soviet Committee for State Security] manual in the archives that detailed how to interrogate and falsify facts. Nothing has changed. There were simple explanations so that ordinary Major comrades would know how to act. All these techniques are still in use today.
>
> What intrigued me most was working with the declassified archives. Forms, denunciations... It's a chilling feeling when you read who reported on whom and how it was done. The amount of dirt, and the pain inflicted. And you come to realise the drama of these little pieces of paper in the archive. It's a real, blood-soaked drama.

Poets, writers, directors and artists were exiled to remote Russian prison camps like Solovki on fabricated charges. There, they worked as loggers, laid railway tracks or built canals. But even in exile, many of them continued their creative work. The creator of Ukrainian modern theatre, Les Kurbas, for example, founded a theatre in Solovki, where he staged plays even under the horrific conditions of the prison camp.

The greatest atrocity of that period was the mass execution at the Sandarmokh site in Karelia in 1937 as part of Stalin's Great Terror. Over nine days, 1111 individuals of various professions and nearly sixty different nationalities, all considered "enemies of the people", were shot. Among them were artists from the Slovo Building: playwright Mykola Kulish, theatre director Les Kurbas, founder of Ukrainian cartogra-

Still from Slovo House.
Courtesy of the film crew

phy Stepan Rudnytsky, neo-classicist Mykola Zerov, and many more.
It wasn't until 60 years after this tragedy that Russian historians of the Memorial Society discovered the mass burial sites. And yet, Russia continues to deny the Sandarmokh tragedy.

T.T.: What struck me the most were the letters of playwright Mykola Kulish, whose plays became classics of Ukrainian drama. He was arrested on charges of "nationalism" and sent to Solovki. Incarcerated in a prison camp, he was unaware that his wife and son had already been thrown out into the street. Even before their eviction, other residents had been moved into their three-room apartment in the Slovo Building, leaving them with just one room, and eventually they were evicted entirely.
Kulish wrote small notes in Russian, in red pencil. Know-

ing that they would be checked by the guards, the notes contained very mundane things: "I've lost my teeth, I have scurvy ..." Then he asks, 'Why is it that you're now living in one room?' But by that time, they no longer had a room at all. They were on the street, outside the Slovo Building, and people just walked around them, too afraid to even speak to them.

Kulish's story moves me a lot. You hold these small pieces of paper in your hand, in his handwriting, and you realise how it connects to what is happening in Ukraine right now. You read Kulish's sentence and see that the phrasing of the made-up charges is almost identical to those used against Ukrainian film director Oleh Sentsov. The style

Still from Slovo House.
Courtesy of the film crew.

hasn't changed, the accusations are the same: "For connections with bourgeois nationalists."

In 2015, Russian courts sentenced Ukrainian filmmaker Oleh Sentsov to 20 years in a high-security penal colony. He was alleged to have formed a "terrorist group" and to have "planned attacks" in Crimea. When he was freed four years later as part of a prisoner exchange, international attention and support played a significant role in his release. The Ukrainian director and writer now serves as the commander of an assault company in Ukraine's Armed Forces, where he even filmed a documentary, Real, about the daily life of Ukraine's defenders using only a GoPro camera.

Taras Tomenko believes that the war has completely changed the agenda of Ukrainian cinema. The many plots that were conceived before the war have become irrelevant. Directors are now faced with the task of finding new artistic solutions. But Tomenko believes that in these times, where 'not making films at all is not an option,' documentaries have become the most effective medium to preserve collective memory.

Not only has cinema changed; so has the audience. For the first time since independence, people go to the movies not just for entertainment and leisure, but also to reflect on what is happening right now—both within the country and for each and every Ukrainian.

"War leaves no shades of grey. No one forgives falsehoods now, especially in art."

T.T.: The audience has changed a lot. I can see this very clearly with Slovo House. First of all, a lot of young people are coming now. I observe this first-hand: those who watched our documentary film are now also coming to see the feature film, and I recognise them.

"I think that people who are going to the cinema right now are looking for depth, sincerity and honesty. This is what is needed in these times. A director can no longer swear a false oath to Russian culture, as was done before. Russian TV serials no longer work. They've lost their relevance.
War leaves no shades of grey. It clearly separates white from black. No one forgives falsehoods now, especially in art."

I made my art-house film without considering the audience at all: I gauged everything by my own standards. If I found it interesting, I thought others would too. And it turned out to be a film fit for wide theatrical release. When my co-writer Lyubov Yakymchuk and I were collecting material, we never imagined that the film would be this successful. It enjoyed a record run and watched by over 83 thousand people in just the first three weeks.

Cinema is magic. People go to the cinema to be immersed in a completely different world. But cinema is also a mirror. In life, a person would hardly be able to look into a mirror for two hours, but in cinema, it's possible. And after watching Slovo House, people often tell me: 'Taras, it took me days to come down. I'm still walking around in a daze, reliving everything.' This is probably the greatest compliment for a film, when it continues to live inside a person and doesn't end with the credits.

After Slovo House, Taras Tomenko released Sentimental Journey to the Planet Parajanov. This marionette puppet film is a tri-

Still from Slovo House.
Courtesy of the film crew.

bute to Serhii Parajanov on the occasion of the genius of cinema's 100th anniversary—an event, the director believes, would have been wrong for Ukraine to ignore.

Tomenko is as yet undecided about the subject of his next film. In Ukraine, he is known for works that deal with the experience of war. This includes Terykony (Boney Piles) (2022), about children living on the front line, which gained recognition both in Ukraine and at international festivals, was screened at the Berlinale and included in the Academy Awards shortlist. This film shows the tragic reality of war through the eyes of children and leaves a profound emotional impression on the viewer.

With funding for filmmaking having been severely cut, the director doesn't rule out that he will have to write for a while without producing films, while hoping for the revival of Ukrainian cinema.

T.T.: Since film funding has been redirected to the Armed Forces, Ukrainian cinema faces a very long recovery period—possibly even decades—before we return to the level of opportunities we had before the full-scale war. Currently, the last films that were begun before [the full-scale invasion] are still being released. After that, there will be silence. Maybe we'll try to implement some projects through international co-productions.

But even here the situation is complicated. The pitching system is structured in such a way that you must constantly be in Europe and actively communicate with producers. Sitting in Kyiv, where travel is now restricted, makes this practically impossible. Plus, most European funds can only provide co-financing, and to get their support, you need an initial contribution from the state, but in Ukraine, cultural funding has been cut by 75%.

Should artists be supported now? Yes, but more than that, the army needs support. We, too, are doing all we can: making films and donating to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Right now, our Slovo House is also selling out in cinemas across Europe, and this provides our defenders with a vital source of financial support. Artists will wait. We've waited this long, so we can wait a bit longer. Right now, the most important thing is victory, so that our generation doesn't witness a repeat of the fate of the Executed Renaissance. The desire for victory is what keeps me going.

NEW VISION OF UKRAINIAN MUSIC, FREE FROM COLONIAL LEGACIES

Composer Alla Zagaykevych and cultural manager Oleksandra Saienko:

IT IS ESSENTIAL TO DISCOVER NEW MEANINGS IN UKRAINIAN MUSIC

Ukrainian music revealed a new face during the full-scale war. Unexpectedly, it brought to the surface a rich spectrum of artistic visions—from authentic Ukrainian traditions to contemporary avant-garde art. This is not only about cultural diplomacy but also about Ukrainian society's unrelenting demand to build a modern body of Ukrainian art that has historically evolved within the vector of European tradition.

One of Ukraine's most prominent contemporary composers is Alla Zagaykevych. She is a laureate of the UN Women in Arts award and the recipient of numerous prizes and accolades, including for soundtracks to renowned Ukrainian films. Her music adds profound depth and emotional resonance to historical films. She is also the first-ever "Best Composer" category winner at Ukraine's prestigious Dzyga Film Awards.

Just weeks before the onset of the full-scale invasion, Alla Zagaykevych completed her work for voice and piano, titled Signs of Presence. At that time, a sense of impending catastrophe hung in the air, and the composer turned to the symbol-laden poetry of Ukrainian poet Iya Kiva to convey the growing anxiety.

Of course, the scale of atrocities committed by the Russian army, now widely recognised, was almost unimaginable then. Nor could anyone have foreseen that just months after the invasion contempo-

rary Ukrainian poets and composers would begin creating extraordinary collaborations, conceiving new meanings and reinterpreting the symbols of the past. Interestingly, programmes emerging from this creative surge would bear names like Artistic Weapons or Poetic Arms and travel the globe, showcasing the uniqueness of Ukrainian culture and its rapid development despite the challenges of a full-scale war.

Today, Alla Zagaykevych's music is performed by renowned Ukrainian and international artists. She pioneered the development of electroacoustic music in Ukraine and has fostered many students and followers in this field. Zagaykevych versatility is remarkable: Composing symphonic and chamber music, operas and electroacoustic works as well as scores for stage and screen, she seamlessly blends modern technologies with the authentic sound of folk, all while tirelessly pursuing her exploration of new avenues.

Alla Zagaykevych. Photo by Elza Zherebchuk

Zagaykevych also has a passion for Ukrainian Futurist poetry and music of the 1920s–1930s, which she regards as the dawn of Ukrainian avant-garde. In her opinion, this period was free from victimhood and Russian influence, having instead been filled with "a bucket of joy and a waterfall of beauty".

Her works resonate on Europe's finest stages—works like her Spaces of Light for symphony orchestra and electronics, premiered at the closing concert of the Warsaw Autumn 2022 festival in the Warsaw Philharmonic.

She steadfastly refuses to perform alongside Russian composers or musicians, as she believes that the culture of the opponent in war also serves as a tool of war and cannot remain apolitical. In a bold move, she resigned from her position at the Ukrainian National Tchaikovsky Academy of Music in Kyiv, where she had worked for 30 years, when the administration refused to remove the Russian composer's name from the institution's title. Three other prominent Ukrainian artists and musicologists also left the conservatory and over 170 Ukrainian artists and creatives signed an open letter urging the international community to "pause all cultural ties with Russia until the war it has waged against Ukraine ends".

Remaining true to her personal and artistic principles, Zagaykevych continues her work in Kyiv, committed to developing contemporary music in collaboration with like-minded composers, musicologists, performers, and students.

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30 December 2024: a cold studio of the Association of Electroacoustic Music at the Union of Composers of Ukraine. Frequent power outages, the sounds of air-raid sirens and an overarching atmosphere of tension prevail. Sleepless nights, exhausting rehearsals, teaching students, organising concerts, performing abroad, pursuing her own creative work ... Composer Alla Zagaykevych not only endured this regime since the first day of the war but admits that she thrives in it. Kyiv is where she feels calm and truly at home.

Where do you find the strength and energy for your creativity during the war?

A.Z.: Beside my creative work, my students are a tremendous source of support. Since the start of the full-scale war, I've felt an even keener sense of responsibility—to them, to myself, to everyone. I truly want and strive to ensure that the field of electroacoustic music continues to develop in Ukraine, even though we still lack state support and manage everything on our own.

I founded the Ukrainian Association of Electroacoustic Music, oversaw its educational direction, conducted musicological research, mentored students and represented this genre abroad. Why do I do this? Because electroacoustic music has long been part of contemporary music culture worldwide. That's why it's vital for us to discover new meanings in Ukrainian music, to invite outstanding instrumentalists to collaborate, to explore the works of masters and to uncover new talents.

While studying at IRCAM in Paris, I realised that three elements are essential for electroacoustic music to exist: creativity, science, and education. In 1997, I established a studio for electroacoustic music at the National Music Academy in Kyiv. However, I had to leave due to differences in opinion.

Could you elaborate further, please? The reason for your resignation was ... Tchaikovsky? Specifically, the academy's management refused to remove the Russian composer's name from its title. What were your arguments?

A.Z.: I still cannot fathom how the Union of Composers and the Department of Composition, led by the luminary of Ukrainian contemporary music Yevhen Stankovych, accept such a humiliating situation. During a war with Russia, the academy bears the name of a central figure of Russian imperial ideology, whose music echoed over the ruins of

the Mariupol Theatre. This is the time to openly declare a responsible stance within the Ukrainian music community and finally rename Ukraine's leading music institution in honour of a Ukrainian artist.

Let me remind you that the conservatory was named after Tchaikovsky during Stalin's brutal repressions in 1940—coinciding with the naming of the Moscow Conservatory. Since Ukraine's independence, I recall how Polish conductor and composer of Ukrainian descent Roman Rewakowicz expressed his astonishment that the conservatory still carried Tchaikovsky's name. He urged, "It's time to change this, colleagues, let's change it!" Respected figures within the artistic community have long called for this change, but the matter was never taken up.

When the war began, I walked past the Russian Drama Theatre. Two days later, it was no longer the Russian Drama Theatre—a new signboard read National Theatre named after Lesya Ukrainka (ed. Ukrainian writer, poet and playwright, 1871–1913). Yet, my evident initiative to rename the conservatory wasn't supported within the department. I forever heard the same tired phrase: "It's not the right time."

My musicologists colleagues and I worked on this issue for a year: researching, writing articles, meeting with staff, presenting arguments, collecting signatures, doing everything possible. It seemed like one final step would resolve the problem. But it never happened.

When my colleague, the musicologist Olena Korchova, was the first to withdraw her documents from the conservatory, I joined her along with two other educators—some of the most influential musicians and teachers in the academy. Unfortunately, classes there are still conducted in Russian, and students are assigned tasks based on Tchaikovsky's works. We are not Soviet people; we are not serfs.

Tchaikovsky's name cannot be apolitical. His 1812 Overture and the opera Mazepa carry a distinctly imperial character.

But it's not just about that.

This situation allows Western organisers to combine Ukrainian music with Russian music in concerts. Their reasoning is clear: "You have a conservatory named after Tchaikovsky, so why should we separate your music from Russian music?" For instance, in London, a planned concert titled War and Peace will feature Ukrainian composer Lyatoshynsky's Third Symphony alongside works by Russian composers Prokofiev and Mussorgsky.

Our musicologists are doing everything possible to change this situation. But as long as there is a Tchaikovsky Conservatory, Western organisers will continue to say: "We work within the framework of peace and understanding."

I don't participate in such concerts. It has even reached the point of absurdity. On the second day of the war, a colleague from the International Confederation of Electroacoustic Music wrote: "Let's quickly organise a concert: we'll include your works and works by a Russian composer." I asked her, "Why now?"—"Well, Putin said your music doesn't exist, and you'll prove it does." It's absurd, but these situations are real.

If our conservatory bore the name of the founder of the modern Ukrainian school of composition, composer and modernist Borys Lyatoshynsky (1895–1968), we would be speaking to the world about entirely different meanings. It would signal that our musical culture is rooted in "our 1920s", in the avant-garde art of the 20th century, and that our foundations lie in the modern European school of symphonic and operatic art. This would mean that we have finally overcome our colonial inferiority complex.

Currently, I am teaching at the Kharkiv National University of Arts, named after Kotlyarevsky, where we are beginning to establish a studio for electroacoustic music. Despite daily challenges—sirens, shelling, a cold studio, sleepless nights, power outages—I feel calm and

confident. I am motivated by the opportunity to work in Ukraine, share knowledge and contribute to the development of modern Ukrainian art.

Has the war served as a catalyst for the development of music, particularly electroacoustic music?

A. Z.: At first, we were all gripped by fear that we might vanish. I remember sitting in the hallway, thinking, "God, what will happen to my scores? What will happen to my studio?" We quickly began copying and storing electroacoustic works in cloud storage. But that fear transformed into a push for action. Where I would previously have organised an electroacoustic music festival once a year, I now run the Electroacoustic Music Association's laboratory with monthly public events.

Even the Kyiv Philharmonic is doing plenty to create new meaning and trends in performing contemporary Ukrainian music, including electroacoustic works. This would have been hard to imagine three or four years ago!

"Ukrainian art is developing at an incredible pace. By staying in Ukraine, I'm doing something important and valuable that helps shape the world's perception of us."

Has the Ukrainian audience changed since the invasion began?

A. Z.: I think the number of conscious, responsible audience members has remained more or less the same. People who didn't believe in art before are still likely to turn to Netflix at most. However, young people have un-

doubtedly become more interested. I work at the Lysenko Music Lyceum, where students are aged six to eighteen. Over the past few years, I've noticed an increase in young people discovering experimental music and saying, "Wow, this is interesting and actually listenable!" (laughs).

Across Ukraine, changes in the repertoire are happening very slowly. I'd really like musicians to perform more works by contemporary Ukrainian composers. When they announce a contemporary Ukrainian music programme, I expect to see names like Silvestrov, Hrabovsky, Hodzyatsky, Runchak or Shchetinsky. But instead, we get Stetsenko, Lysenko, and Leontovych again. And I think, "Why not perform contemporary music?"

Another issue is the lack of sheet music, and there's still a certain mistrust of contemporary art at the educational level. This stems from the fact that the music repertoire traditionally leans towards the classical-romantic style. Changing this repertoire is difficult because it would require radical reforms throughout the musical system at the state level.

Our musical life is still largely built around big state-funded ensembles, like the Veryovka Choir or the Virsky Dance Ensemble, which have been consistently financed since the 1950s. Meanwhile, avant-garde music remains in the shadows. Symphonic orchestras have been the first to embrace contemporary music, but other ensembles, like folk instrument orchestras, have not. Conservatory students understand that their careers will likely involve working in these traditional ensembles. Furthermore, we hardly have any state-funded contemporary music ensembles.

All of this needs to change completely. That's why we're trying to fill the gap—we organise concerts, set up electronic music studios, and host events to shake up the old system and draw the state's attention to us.

Alla Zagaykevych.
Photo by Dan
Purzhash

"We form a new vision of Ukrainian music, free from colonial legacies."

Throughout the war, Alla Zagaykevych composed music for films. One of them was a historical action adventure, Dovbush, directed by the famous Ukrainian filmmaker Oles Sanin. Oleksa Dovbush was an actual historical figure of the 18th century—the leader of the mountain rebels known as the "opryshky", a local Robin Hood who fought for the rights of poor peasants against the Polish nobility and wealthy landowners. The film was shot on the mountain slopes of the Carpathians, in caves, near waterfalls, and along rapid rivers. The team had worked on it for almost four years and it became one of the most expensive Ukrainian films, with a budget of 120 million hryvnias (ed. 2,6 million euros).

To create soundtracks that convey the atmosphere and reinterpret the timeless theme of the hero's myth in a modern context, Alla Zagaykevych and her student Oleksandr Chorny undertook several ethnographic expeditions, studied historical material and analysed centuries-old scores. Drawing inspiration mainly from local Hutsul folk music, they crafted ethno-electronica infused with authentic Hutsul folklore and elements of jazz.

The number and variety of musical instruments featured in the film are truly impressive—more than ten folk instruments and a baroque ensemble that includes a harpsichord and baroque flutes. The same instrument produces different sounds through various playing techniques, such as using a bow on a bandura.

Dovbush is one of eleven films for which Zagaykevych has composed music, often inspired by actual historical events. For instance, the film director Oles Sanin uses the medium of cinema to explore themes central to Ukrainians today: the preservation of their nation, heroes and identity. Currently, Dovbush is touring

across Europe, aiming to raise awareness of Ukraine within the cultural sphere.

What motivates you to compose music for films?

A.Z.: It is very important to me. My collaboration with filmmakers began in the 1990s, mostly in arthouse films. For instance, the film Mamay was pure arthouse. Following Mamay, film director Oles Sanin directed The Guide and then Dovbush. He was present at nearly all the recording sessions, trying to feel the live rhythm of the music, sometimes even singing or playing something himself.

I've also worked on documentaries, like Breaking Point, about the Revolution of Dignity—a major collaboration with Americans. There was also a small film called Anna about Princess Anna of Kyiv in the Watch Ukrainian series. From arthouse, I gradually shifted to other genres—dramatic or action-oriented films like Dovbush. In those projects, the development of electroacoustic technologies becomes essential, and I find this fascinating.

Working on film scores pushes me beyond my artistic horizons. It's a completely different life, with other approaches and challenges, and I really enjoy it. At the moment, I am not working on major film projects, but I plan to continue.

As for my approach to composing film scores, it's always about exploring the theme and creating an atmosphere. For example, while working on The Guide, I managed to find the orchestra composition of the Kharkiv Theatre from a hundred years ago, where Les Kurbas worked, to showcase the musical instruments of that era and convey the atmosphere of the period.

In Slovo House, both in the documentary and in Taras Tomenko's subsequent feature film, this approach was equally important. But composing music for films is always a lengthy process.

Ukrainian people seem to be "reprogramming" their perception of themselves through their culture, including music. The erasure of Ukrainian identity has gone on for centuries, and the appropriation of Ukrainian composers and their works is just one aspect of this process. What are your thoughts on this?

A.Z.: When I started studying electroacoustic music in Europe, I felt like I was the first in this genre in Ukraine. I knew that this field was emerging in France in the 1920s through futuristic music. It was a huge revelation for me to discover that Ukrainian filmmaker Yevhen Deslav collaborated with the renowned Italian futurist composer Luigi Russolo in 1929 on the film The March of the Machines (La Marche des Machines). In this work, Russolo created sound effects using noise instruments, marking the first instance of noise music being used in cinema. (ed. Deslav is known for his experimental films, and his collaboration with Russolo influenced the creation of new synthetic art forms considered key directions in modernism).

However, we studied Ukrainian avant-garde artists only in limited numbers, as part of a course called "Soviet Music", and solely in the context of Soviet avant-garde.

Today, it is extremely important to see Ukrainian music through the lens of its development. For example, many comparisons claim that Ukrainian composer Borys Lyatoshynsky's symphonic style is influenced by Tchaikovsky. Last year, I worked on Lyatoshynsky's opera The Golden Hoop, preparing the score for a production at the Lviv Opera House, and I realised there is not a trace of Tchaikovsky's symphonic style there. In this 1929 score, you can feel Wagner's influence, modern European harmony and orchestration, and recitative-style vocals—it's closer to Berg, you see?

Similarly, music from the 1920s absorbed the spirit of European traditions, not those of Moscow or St. Petersburg.

Moreover, Borys Lyatoshynsky composed music for 17 films, including Oleksandr Dovzhenko's first sound film, Ivan (1932). This was never mentioned in the Soviet education paradigm.

"That's why it is crucial to rethink and present Ukrainian music in a different context to restore historical justice. This is about creating a separate space and forming a new vision of Ukrainian music, free from colonial legacies."

You mentioned that you are greatly inspired by Ukrainian poets who wrote during the war. Modern music, contemporary poetry and new meanings are truly fascinating.

A.Z.: For me, it helps to find a relevant tone in music and tonal solutions that resonate with our time. We have incredibly dynamic modern art, developing in quantum leaps—be it theatre, cinema, or literature. Contemporary poets articulate entirely new, non-stereotypical meanings that inspire admiration and a desire to share. Words have always been very significant to me. Even if music has no text, its sound and speech are immensely important. Literature is my source of inspiration and support. A few words can inspire and give strength. That's why I collaborate with Ukrainian poets, for instance Iya Kiva:

"I believe that Ukrainian poetry restores our sensitivity to life and, moreover, our dignity—the very awareness that we are still alive if we can feel this deeply, write this way, love each other so profoundly and hate the enemy so strongly. If we compare Ukraine to a great body in intensive care, poetry keeps it alive, trying to heal this body, which endures new wounds every day."—Iya Kiva, poet and translator.

So, art becomes a resource during the war?

A. Z.: Yes, it truly is a resource. Literature and language create a textual, intellectual, and linguistic field which provides immense support. International collaborations also inspire me greatly. For instance, the Ukrainian organisation Kyiv Contemporary Music Days, founded in Kyiv in 2015 and focused on promoting contemporary music, began actively seeking funds to support Ukrainian music abroad after the war started. I'm working on a piece for a Berlin contemporary music ensemble as part of their initiative.

Recently, there was a concert in Berlin where my composition was performed by Samuel Stoll, a horn player and performer who blends eclectic repertoire, minimalist installation performances and various artistic collaborations. It is imperative to utilise the already established infrastructure of European contemporary music ensembles, cultural institutions and educational facilities to integrate Ukrainian music into these contemporary international processes with world-class performers.

"This opera is a metaphor for Ukrainian history."

Ukraine's first academic modern opera and its most expensive production to date is Vyshyvanyi. The King of Ukraine. Alla Zagaykevych composed the music, and renowned Ukrainian author Serhiy Zhadan wrote the libretto. Creating two hours of opera music is a challenge for any composer, but for Zagaykevych, this opera holds special meaning, mainly because of its central figure.

The opera is dedicated to Austrian Archduke Wilhelm von Habsburg, Vasyl Vyshyvanyi, a descendant of the European Habsburg dynasty that once ruled Austria-Hungary. From a young age, the Arch-

Opera *Vyshyvanyi. The King of Ukraine*. Photo by Press Office of the *Vyshyvany* Project

duke deeply admired Ukraine, learned the language, writing poetry in Ukrainian, and becoming an unofficial contender for the Ukrainian throne. Historian Timothy Snyder chronicled his story and the tragic demise of his ideals in his book The Red Prince.

A.Z.: This is truly a lyrical work, an opera of dreams. Although all the scenes of Vyshyvanyi are connected to real events and figures from Ukraine's liberation struggle in the early 20th century, they unfold in the dreams and delirium of Wilhelm von Habsburg while incarcerated in Kyiv's Lukyanivska Prison in 1948. Serhiy Zhadan's libretto incorporates actual texts from Vasyl Vyshyvanyi's interrogation records. These dreams are trials, confessions; dreams of a free Ukraine.

A.Z.: The opera's musical language is based on the principles of contemporary European musical theatre, employing a wide range of vocal techniques—from Sprechstimme (ed. speak-singing) to classical operatic vocals and authentic Ukrainian singing. The piece is composed for a large symphony orchestra, choir, ensembles and soloists, with real-time electronic processing. To a great extent, the electronic component allows an instantaneous transformation of the acoustic space on stage, "transporting" characters from reality into dreams.

The opera was performed in Ukraine and Austria a few months before the full-scale war began, and it came to life thanks to one individual—Olexandra Saienko, a renowned Ukrainian cultural manager and producer based in Vienna. Sayenko not only secured private funding for the opera—a unique achievement for a Ukrainian theatre—but has also spent the past decade showcasing contemporary Ukrainian art in Europe as part of Ukraine's cultural brand.

Oleksandra Saienko, Cultural Manager and Opera Producer, Vienna:

O.S.: The idea originated from a request by the Kharkiv National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre, which wanted to expand its repertoire. They approached the Honorary Consul of Austria in Kharkiv, seeking assistance in creating a modern opera. At that time, in 2017, the situation in Ukraine's academic music scene was dire: hardly anyone was writing new operas, while works from 30 to 40 years ago were still considered contemporary. That gave rise to the idea: "Let's create a modern opera and involve renowned authors."

The Austrian consul contacted me and suggested creating an opera about Vasyl Vyshyvanyi—a fascinating historical figure. A century ago, this brilliant aristocrat, a member of the Habsburg imperial family and a progressive Euro-

pean, chose a Ukrainian identity. His family didn't support his choice, but his life, though tragic, exemplifies principled decision-making, the fight for freedom and a passionate spirit.

Historical sources reveal that he could have led Ukraine through military means but ultimately rejected seizing power by force. Vyshyvanyi was abducted in Vienna in 1948 by Soviet authorities, accused of collaborating with British and French intelligence against the USSR. The court labelled him a "Ukrainian bourgeois nationalist"—even though he was Austrian! This shows that Ukraine is a nation worthy of admiration, not merely a victim, though victimhood has long been imposed upon us.

The plot for the opera was based on historian Timothy Snyder's book The Red Prince, dedicated to Vasyl Vyshyvanyi. Alla Zagaykevych composed complex avant-garde music, and Rostyslav Derzhypilsky, artistic director of the Ivano-Frankivsk Theatre, directed it. Serhiy Zhadan wrote the libretto. All were highly renowned Ukrainian artists.

The ambitious production required significant resources. The theatre lacked essential sound and lighting equipment, instruments and costumes. I secured seven million hryvnias (ed. 158,000 euros) in private funding for the project. The costume designers created three hundred costumes from 2.5 kilometres of fabric and the main set piece weighed five tonnes. These may seem like mere numbers, but they vividly illustrate the scale of the production: involving 200 people, it became the first Ukrainian theatre project of its kind since independence.

Zagaykevych's music is complex—some compare it to the Second Viennese School. Serhiy Zhadan wrote an avant-garde text reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's theatre, where the main character is the people, represented by numerous choral parts.

The opera premiered in Kharkiv four months before the

full-scale invasion and was a resounding success. The audience included European ambassadors, diplomats and leading musicologists in the country who acknowledged that the opera had become a textbook example of its genre.

Unfortunately, the production cannot be staged again due to the war. But we created a video version of the opera, which we presented in Vienna. We also published a libretto in German, with a foreword by Karl von Habsburg (ed. Head of the House of Habsburg, a historic imperial dynasty). He wrote: "This book is not just a poetic work but a poetic message, reminding us that freedom does not come easily. Freedom must be fought for and defended." How relevant this sounds today! The first German edition sold out quickly, and we plan to issue a second.

"Culture is also a weapon."

Through her projects, Oleksandra Saienko was the first in Vienna to showcase Ukrainian art as modern, avant-garde and fashionable. This was at the beginning of Russia's armed aggression in 2014. At that time, not only was Ukrainian culture unknown in Austria, but it was also viewed exclusively through the lens of Russia.

The mission seemed almost impossible at first. Oleksandra started with prestigious venues and invited the best Ukrainian artists: painters, musicians and writers. This bold statement challenged the traditional perception of Ukraine as merely a part of an empire or a territory without history or culture—a notion often spread by Russian propaganda.

Gradually, through her Ukrainian culture festival UStream, lectures, and discussions, attitudes towards Ukraine, its history, and culture began to shift. This is a fascinating case of how, even under difficult circumstances, culture and art can shape a country's image on the global stage.

Oleksandra Saenko.
Photo by Iryna Karpenko

How do you think the perception of Ukraine and Ukrainian art has changed since the full-scale invasion?

O.S.: Our artists are resisting. Russia's goal remains unchanged—to destroy Ukrainian national identity through the destruction of cultural identity and the elimination of its bearers—the artists. However, they cannot simply gather all the artists and deport them. So they are destroying museums, libraries, and our cultural heritage. But the artists remain resilient because that is ingrained in our identity.

In the 20th century, victimhood was artificially imposed on us through the Holodomors and repressions. Before that, we were never victims; on the contrary, it's not in our blood. Just think of the Cossacks! The enemy tried to inflict mental and psychological trauma on us so that we would never become who we are. But we continue to fight.

At the start of Russia's armed aggression, Austrians widely accepted Russian narratives about Ukraine. Experts previously considered specialists on Russia suddenly became "experts" on Ukraine. Even among politicians, there was no clear understanding of the difference between Ukraine and Russia. In the minds of Europeans, particularly Austrians, it was seen as one large, conditional "Russia".

They didn't understand that it's not just about different passports, but fundamentally different nations.

However, in a few years, this notion disappeared. It's now increasingly rare to hear that "Crimea is a Russian island." When the full-scale war began, Austrians consciously began referring to Ukrainian territory as Ukrainian. Ten years ago, almost no one paid attention to this.

And what about art? Has there been an awareness that Ukrainian art is absolutely authentic?

O.S.: I believe that changes in attitudes toward Ukrainian art

have occurred not only in distinguishing between Russian and Ukrainian, but also in the understanding that Ukrainian art is not just folklore. The existence of contemporary Ukrainian progressive art often surprises Europeans. For example, at the start of the full-scale war, an exhibition of Ukrainian modernism, In the Eye of the Storm, opened at the Lower Belvedere and ran for six months (ed. 69 works by Ukrainian modernist artists from the 1900s–1930s, including Oleksandra Ekster and Kazimir Malevich). Before that, it was presented in Madrid and toured across Europe. This was a historic event: for the first time, such a large-scale Ukrainian exhibition was shown in one of Europe's leading museums. For Austrians, it was a revelation: "Ukraine is not just about dumplings, embroidered shirts, and wreaths, it's something much more multifaceted, profound, and integrated into the global cultural context." Previously, it was often the pastoral image presented by official cultural diplomacy and diaspora communities.

This has been a recent discovery, and it's very important to show Austrians contemporary Ukrainian art.

As for Ukraine's internal cultural environment during the war, it's a true quantum leap. I've communicated with artists since 2015 and see their tremendous development. For example, contemporary Ukrainian literature has made an incredible breakthrough.

"Within society, there is a massive demand for culture and art. Ordinary people, not involved in the arts, seek answers to the questions: 'Who are we?' and 'Where do we come from?' There's a huge interest in our own history, language, and culture."

Festival UStream-2023. Ukrainian poet and writer Serhiy Zhadan. Discussion *Art during the war*. Photo by Iryna Karpenko

O.S.: That's why it's possible for writers such as Serhiy Zhadan to draw crowds like rock stars. Ukrainians need this. They actively read, listen, and create. Music and theatre are developing. Musicians are creating musical performances about current events. And this innovative and bold mix of genres is also interesting to European audiences. The European Ukrainian audience, separated from their homeland, also needs their own cultural products and wants to feel part of their culture.

What other stereotypes about Ukrainian art and Ukraine have you encountered in Europe? What would you like to achieve with contemporary cultural events? Has anything already been achieved?

O.S.: The toughest stereotypes, which are hard to fight, are the widespread notions of corruption. I can't influence these aspects through cultural tools. But we are already actively changing the pastoral image often associated with Ukrainian art. We are showing that Ukrainian art can be trendy and modern. Our festivals are seen as examples in other countries.

For almost a year, I've been involved in the initiative of artistic decolonisation of Ukraine in the public discourse. This is a project of the Ukrainian Institute focused on returning lost and appropriated names of prominent artists who were unjustly considered Russian by the empire. One example is an event we organised in Vienna in 2024. This was a double presentation of the baroque opera Creon by the Ukrainian composer Dmytro Bortniansky, whose score was considered lost from the 18th century. But a few years ago, it was found in a library in Lisbon. The right to perform the opera was transferred to an Austrian orchestra, and they were the ones who highlight the composer's Ukrainian origin. We organised a presentation and public musicological discussion. The hall was packed—Vienna's artistic elite, diplomats, journalists—an audience in a position to perceive and spread information about Dmytro Bortniansky as a Ukrainian baroque composer. And this isn't just about the fact that he was born in Ukraine. Tchaikovsky was also born in Ukraine, but musicologists don't consider him a Ukrainian composer. Moreover, he was and remains an instrument of the expansive and colonial cultural politics of the Russian Empire.

In Bortniansky's music, you can feel the influence of Ukrainian tradition, especially in his sacred music. He was born in Hlukhiv, a city that "supplied" musical talent to St. Peters-

burg, and the empire also appropriated his talent. We are therefore now seeing widespread processes aimed at returning stolen names to Ukraine, recognising their authenticity and restoring historical justice. This is not only about composers, but also artists, writers and other creatives.

You have never invited artists collaborating with Russia to participate in your cultural projects. After the invasion, there was a large-scale cancellation of Russian cultural products in Ukraine, which is not fully understood in Europe. Can art even exist outside of politics?

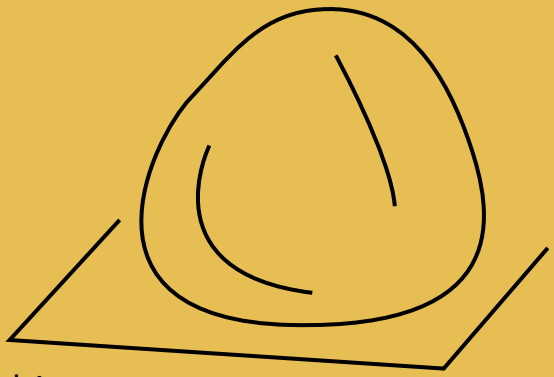
O.S.: Culture is also a weapon. Of course, we cannot claim that culture and art exist outside politics—that's nonsense. In our relationship with Russia, this has always had a negative aspect. They have appropriated, colonised and destroyed Ukrainian cultural heritage for centuries, using art and culture as tools of propaganda.

In 20, 30, or even 50 years, maybe we will listen to Tchaikovsky again and say it is beautiful music. But right now, it serves as a positive "label" that "decorates" the evil brought by Russian colonial policies. That's why we cancel Tchaikovsky—his work is currently a tool of hybrid warfare. Similarly, Pushkin was a voice for imperial narratives.

At the same time, some Ukrainian artists argue against cancelling Tchaikovsky, reasoning that Ukrainian ensembles might no longer be invited to Europe. But in times of radical change, we must adopt radical positions.

I don't call what I do "cultural diplomacy" because I'm not looking to succeed in specific negotiations or seeking rewards. I often patronise cultural projects and call it "branding Ukraine through art"—creating a new, modern, and strong brand for our country to restore justice.

Sophia Chamber Choir in Vienna. Photo by Iryna Karpenko



Sculptor Nadiia Nechkina:

EVEN IF WE APPEAR WHOLE ON THE OUTSIDE, INSIDE WE ARE IN RUINS

The Ukrainian sculptor Nadiia Nechkina works with clay from de-occupied territories. For her, this material carries a profound symbolism of loss and connection to the land that has suffered the ravages of war. Her ceramic sculptures, crafted from chamotte clay sourced from Donbas, are imbued with a deep meaning. Nadiia's creations are not merely reflections on trauma—they are a call to release pent-up emotions. Through her art, she reveals how creativity can heal and bring people together during the most challenging of times. The Russian invasion of her native Crimea in 2014 forced Nadiia to flee, leaving behind everything familiar and dear to her. She and her husband moved to Kyiv, where they began a new life that was filled with uncertainty, self-discovery and the pain of loss.

During our interview, which we hold in Ukrainian, Nadiia has even prepared notes to ensure she doesn't forget anything important. It strikes me that she speaks with care and deliberation. Having spoken Russian all her life, like many Ukrainians she consciously switched to Ukrainian after the full-scale invasion in February 2022. For her, this language is not just a means of communication but a symbol of resistance against the Russian invaders.

Art, particularly sculpture, became Nadiia Nechkina's salvation—a way to convey profound meaning through imagery and metaphor. And with her art, she also helps many other Ukrainians find solace and answers to complex questions arising from the war.

Nadiia's work reflects the experiences faced by Ukrainian society in wartime. Rich with layers of meaning, her sculptures explore such topics as loss, human resilience and hope. Making use of symbolism, she captures a broad range of emotions: from the pain of loss to the strength of spirit and determination to act. Encompassing resistance to external assault as well as the overcoming of personal fears and anxieties, her work creates a powerful connection between art and reality.

Nadiia Nechkina, sculptor. Photo by the author

Ukrainian sculptor Nadiia Nechkina:

N.N.: Sculpture entered my life after a long journey of self-discovery, which began in 2014 when my husband and I fled Crimea due to the occupation. My professional background is in psychology, but that tumultuous time forced me to reflect on where to go from here, on what would give me a sense of purpose. This is how I ended up doing ceramic sculpture.

Clay from Sloviansk holds a special place in my work. Every ceramicist in Ukraine knows the value of this material—it is the best clay for sculpture. It is incredibly pliable, but obtaining it has become extremely difficult, as the area where it is produced is constantly being shelled. Although this frequently disrupts its extraction and delivery, its producers go to extraordinary lengths to ensure it is available. That's the cost of art today. For me, Sloviansk clay has become a symbol of strength and loss at the same time.

"Working with clay during the war is about maintaining a connection to one's native land and creating something new that embodies resilience and hope."

Nadiia is one of the contributors to the Emotional Invasion exhibition in Kyiv (2024), which aimed to showcase the power of art as a tool for healing and introspection. The exhibition is a journey of transformation: from fear and despair to release and acceptance of deeply challenging emotions. In her sculptures, Nadiia conveys the struggles of ordinary Ukrainians who have experienced occupation or, like her, lost their homes.

Her works reveal how war violently intrudes into a person's life, blowing it down like a fragile house of cards, yet simultaneously awakening the strength to endure the darkest of times. Nadiia uses creativity as a therapeutic process, reminding us that even amidst the ashes there burns a small flame of rebirth and hope.

N. N.: These pieces are the result of my emotional journey, which began on the first days of the full-scale invasion. I poured not just meaning but a part of myself into them. When you create something profound, there will always be those who understand it.

"Right now, many people are experiencing the same emotions that surfaced at the start of the full-scale war: fear, pain, paralysis. Some have managed to move past this stage, while others remain stuck in it. That's why it was important to create a space where people could fully feel and process these emotions."

N. N.: At the Emotional Invasion exhibition, I saw visitors in tears, allowing themselves to feel what they had been holding inside them for so long. This is incredibly important because all too often we put off addressing our traumas, waiting for 'better times'. I wanted my work to help people release their emotions, to find relief and discover their strength to move forward.

For me, it's about transitioning from a state of paralysis to action. Paralysis is pain and emptiness—a state where we remain stuck. Action, on the other hand, represents

strength, movement, even struggle. The goal of our exhibition was to help people break free from what holds them back and find the inner resources to move forward.

Warrior of Light.
Photo by
the author

At the time of the full-scale invasion, Nadiia was in Kyiv. Her mind refused to accept the horrifying reality, and during the first week of the war, she couldn't bring herself to get out of bed.
It felt like a terrible nightmare that was bound to end soon. The sculptor was haunted by what she calls "the fears of the civilised world". Above all, Nadiia feared the occupation of Kyiv, unlawful arrests and a lifetime of imprisonment in Russian camps.

> N.N.: I often think about how unprepared we were to face the true nature of Russia. It's like living an illusion — viewing the world through the lens of your own experience, unable to imagine the sheer depths of the emptiness that exists in the minds of others. At first, it seemed like a misunderstanding or perhaps our naivety. But the reality turned out to be far worse.
> The first weeks of the full-scale invasion were like a cold shower. Bucha was the horrifying truth that opened our eyes to the immensity of the cruelty. Then came Mariupol, and with each new tragedy, we realised that what we thought was rock bottom was merely another layer of pain and despair.
> The destruction of the Kakhovka Dam finally shattered our notion that things couldn't get any worse. This emptiness, cruelty and terror are all but impossible to comprehend. Yet, amid all this chaos, I see Ukraine's strength and resilience. It feels as though the earth is swaying beneath our feet, yet Ukrainians remain steadfast.

Nadiia creates sculptures that embody the traumatic experience of war and humanity's interaction with a fractured reality. Every sculpture carries an element of destruction. Deeply metaphorical, her works reimagine human nature — especially its vulnerability in the face of war.

> N.N.: After the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam by Russian forces, I felt an overwhelming need to create a new

piece. Over 40,000 people lost their homes because of the massive flooding. I created a sculpture of animals trapped in waves of blood. Right now, we are all like those animals—lost, vulnerable, yet forced to survive in the face of chaos.

The process of creating was incredibly emotional for me. Usually, when I finish a piece, I place it on the table and wait for my husband's reaction. That's also what I did this time—set the sculpture down and sat down to wait for his reaction. But then I was surprised to suddenly see it in a different light myself. It was as though I felt the full depth of what I had created for the first time. I was overcome—I just sat there, crying uncontrollably.

Freedom, 2022.
Photo by the author

N. N.: When my husband came home, he was alarmed, thinking something terrible had happened. I told him it was because of the sculpture, because I had felt all that pain. The sculpture contains a Trypillian symbol of a domestic animal, encircled by a wave I formed into a red spiral. That wave engulfs everything around it, much like a catastrophe sucking helpless people and animals into its vortex.
This piece is deeply personal to me because war is always personal. It is a personal enemy, a personal pain and a personal hatred. Sculpture is my way of fighting back.

Nadiia believes that it is not she who chooses the works but rather they that choose her, as she cannot help but create. By using clay from de-occupied territories, she emphasises her connection to the land and its suffering.

The themes of her sculptures emerge naturally for Nadiia, as a response to that which she cannot ignore. A way of expressing what words cannot express—a deep reflection on the unsayable. Her works are attracting attention beyond Ukraine at international art exhibitions across Europe. They have been showcased in Poland, Germany and Norway as part of programmes that emphasise the importance of artistic reflection on war and its impact on art.

N. N.: My sculpture Weapons of Mass Destruction is a symbolic representation of emptiness, filled with explosives. It resembles a traditional Russian matryoshka doll but with a grenade pin on its back. This iconic Russian doll is familiar to everyone, yet it hides explosive aggression while also representing inner emptiness.
Another piece of mine, The Hell Machine, illustrates how propaganda works. It was exhibited in Germany and Poland and shows a process where individuals transform into a faceless mass, becoming tools to carry out someone else's orders. Devoid of subjectivity and the ability to resist, this 'biomass' is easily controlled.

"Sculpture is my way of fighting back."

— Nadiia Nechkina, Ukrainian scupltor

Weapons of Mass Destruction. Photo by the author

N.N.: These two works became a conscious choice for me. While I used to create intuitively, driven by emotion, these sculptures are the result of deep reflection. They reveal how this mechanism operates and the consequences it has. I often think that I may not be here tomorrow, but my works will remain. They will speak for me, preserving the

In the foam of the waves 2023. Photo by the author

truth that is so important to pass on to future generations. This is essential for our identity, for those who will come after us. My works also address the theme of mourning. For example, I created a sculpture where 40 people sit in a posture of sorrow. It speaks of experiencing loss, of the cycles of death and rebirth. Wars end, and after that there is always recovery. It comforts me to know this. Art has become a way of experiencing and transforming pain for me, while also allowing to feel hope for the future.

"At the same time, I see a transformation in Ukrainian art and culture, overall. We are shedding the Soviet grime that destroyed our identity. It is a process of cleansing, a final break from old traumas and the systems that broke us. There is no turning back now. We are building a new cultural reality that is finally distancing itself from colonial influence."

N. N.: Of course, geographically, we remain neighbours, but it is important for us to learn how to express our wounds, so that we can heal them over time. It's a difficult process, but one that is essential for our future.

Nadiia has not abandoned her primary profession and continues to work as a psychologist in the Psychologists in War project. She travels to de-occupied territories and works with people, helping them cope with trauma, using clay therapy as a powerful tool for recovery. After the occupation of Crimea, Nadiia realised that, as well as a profound reflection of reality, sculpture could be a source of strength and healing, helping people cope with intense emotional shock.

N.N.: When there is so much loss and pain, we stop being sensitive to it. It's a protective mechanism of the mind, designed to keep us from going insane. Then we are filled with emptiness. A state of complete apathy, where we are indifferent to everything and have no internal resources for anything—no strength, no desire to keep living, no answers. It's empty, like entire dead cities. I believe that art can help heal our wounds.

Art also allows us to better understand history. For instance, a textbook might say, 'On 24 February 2022, the full-scale invasion began,' but that's not enough. To truly feel what happened, we need images, which only art can provide. It's important for those who come after us to not just know what happened, but to truly remember it. So that these events never happen again. After all, our history has already been written in blood.

Each of her works is a metaphor for battling personal fears and anxieties—things we cannot avoid but can experience and transform through art.

Nadiia spent a long time searching for a form that would allow her to most intricately express the complex emotions and states she underwent as the war raged on. This led her to discover a symbol that became part of her language as a sculptor:

N.N.: My ideal form now is the circle. Of course, it's not a new form, but it has become very significant for me because of the war. I remember the moment when I fashioned my first circle. For me, it was about integrity and the cyclic nature of everything; about how all wars, sooner or later, come to an end.

Now I want to make more complete forms. Yes, all my sculptures have elements of destruction, because that best reflects my current state. We all of us who are still alive today are witnessing destruction, not just external but all too often internal as well. Even if we appear whole on the

outside, we may be in ruins on the inside. I believe that there will come a time when, in place of these ruins, we will rebuild our playgrounds, homes and cities—the places where we feel safe.

Grief. 2023. Photo by the author

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