

Instrumentalisation of War History in Contemporary Memory Politics in Ukraine. A Gender Perspective¹.

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The paper discusses how history is used to explain the current war in eastern Ukraine, and the implications this has for gender relations and equality in contemporary Ukrainian society. In Ukraine, historical narratives are presented in a way that emphasises that the current war is just another episode in Ukraine's lengthy struggle for independence and statehood. The paper employs gender analysis in order to assess the construction of war heroism and assesses the impact of the growing militarisation of society in Ukraine on gender equality. By analysing uncontextualised inclusion of women's stories in war histories the paper states that such inclusion can be instrumentalised for the purposes of militarisation, which reinforces traditional gender roles. The paper stresses the need for the inclusion of difficult stories from the past that do not fit the established narratives in order to improve our understanding of the nature of war more generally and the ongoing war in the Donbas specifically.

Keywords: Militarisation, Gender, Instrumentalisation of History, Memory Politics, Ukraine, the Second World War.

Scrolling down the Facebook page of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (*Ukrainskyi instytut natsionalnoi pam'iaty*, UINP) I come across posts about vandalised graves of the fighters of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA, active in the 1940s-1950s),² followed by posts from the regular rubric on the page entitled The Fallen Heroes of the Russian-Ukrainian War (*Zahybli heroï rosiïsko-ukrainskoïviny*), followed by posts about rediscovered battlegrounds and burial sites dating back to the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917-1921.³ The bones of the historical dead are mixed with the dead of the ongoing war not only in my newsfeed. In 2014, the UINP made recommendations to create cemetery sectors reserved for military burials, and by March 2017, there were 450 such sectors all over Ukraine. The UINP stated that these sectors should be “structured in such a way that, if necessary, they can become a space for holding appropriate commemorative events, such as commemorative worship, the laying of flowers, standing military guard or visits by official delegations”.⁴ Thus, it is not surprising that such sectors are sometimes created as an extension to the existing military burial grounds.

The Lviv's Lychakiv Cemetery is an interesting case in point. Besides containing one of the new military sectors, the military cemetery there houses graves of UPA fighters, soldiers of the army of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR, 1917-1920), the Ukrainian Galician Army (UHA, 1918-1920) and a memorial to the unknown

soldier of the Waffen SS *Galicja* Division (active in 1943-1945). In addition, the military pantheon of those presented as the fighters for Ukrainian statehood is located in very close proximity to the burial of the Lwów Eaglets (*Obrońcy Lwowa*), young Poles who fought for Polish control of Lviv/Lwów in 1918-1919.⁵ Turn around and you will see a field that once contained the graves of Russian prisoners of the First World War (the graves are no longer there).⁶ Another neighbouring field contains the remains of the Polish insurgents of the January Uprising (1863-1864). A short walk away is the so-called Field of Mars, containing graves of Red Army soldiers killed in the Second World War. These generations of one-time adversaries were ultimately reconciled in their death. However, we, the living, who are tasked with the upkeep of their memory, tend not only to light the candles on their graves, but also keep fanning the flames of their wars by the way we construct our memories of our war dead.

One other burial site in the Lychakiv cemetery, where the graves of the Polish November Uprising (1830-1831) fighters are located, contains memorial plates with an inscription from Virgil's *The Aeneid*: “*exoriāre aliquis nostrīs ex ossibus ultor*” (Out of my dust [bones], unknown Avenger, rise!).⁷ Although this inscription is over one hundred years old, it seems to be relevant to the way military burials are perceived today: we are not content to let the dead's ashes rest but are continually exhorting those ashes to separate themselves and rise in order to serve our present needs.

The extent to which this disturbing of the dead is practiced by a wider public is, however, questionable, which becomes a source of anxiety for those who are particularly invested in the politics of memory. In an interview for the national television channel, the head of the UINP, Volodymyr Viatrovykh, expressed his concern that Ukrainians did not fully realise the importance of military burial sites and still preferred to bury their dead—the casualties of the ongoing conflict—in family graves.⁸ He said that by creating military cemeteries, the most important thing that the UINP wanted to achieve was “to show that the struggle that is currently taking place is one of the links in the chain in the struggle of Ukrainians for independence; to weave it into wider process”.⁹ Judging by recent developments in the Lychakiv cemetery, at least in Lviv, the UINP has been successful in its aim.

On 1 November 2017, as part of the marking of the 99th anniversary of the formation of the Western Ukrainian People's Republic (ZUNR), the local authorities held a common commemoration of the Sich Sharpshooters, UHA soldiers and the soldiers of the anti-terrorist operation (ATO) in eastern Ukraine.¹⁰ The Governor of the Lviv *Oblast*, Oleh Syniutka, stated:

*Today we pay tribute to the fallen fighters for the freedom of Ukraine [...]. The great mission started by the Sich Sharpshooters 99 years ago will be accomplished, and in the 21st century, Ukraine will establish itself as a free and independent state with a powerful army and a strong people.*¹¹

In this context, the dead ATO soldiers truly look like the avengers who rose up from the dust of their military predecessors. Even their gravestones resemble the gravestones of the fighters from the UPA, UHA, etc., and evoke a sense of continuity.

Militarised Society

The establishment of the continuity between historical wars and the present-day conflict makes more sense if we consider contemporary Ukrainian society as militarised. However, defining Ukrainian society in this way could raise some readers' eyebrows. When you find yourself away from the frontline whether in Lviv, Kyiv or Kharkiv, few things will remind you that this country is at war. You might spot some advertising boards for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which are desperate to find new recruits. One such advertising board simply says: "I am the army" (*Ya armija*).¹² Among such reminders are also political slogans that address the war directly or indirectly. For instance, Petro Poroshenko's presidential campaign in 2018 emphasised the value applied to the armed forces. The three words stressed on the omnipresent posters were: "Army! Language! Faith!".¹³ You also might come across someone in a uniform claiming to be an ATO veteran and collecting money, or a café decorated with military insignia.¹⁴ Or you will spot a military funeral procession while walking through the centre of an otherwise peaceful Ukrainian town. Yet, mostly, Ukraine does not look like a country at war. However, it is important to remember, that, as Cynthia Enloe argues, "militarisation does not occur simply in the obvious places but can transform the meanings and uses of people, things, and ideas located far from bombs or camouflaged fatigues" – it involves military people as well as civilians.¹⁵

My understanding of militarisation for the purposes of this essay is based on Enloe's definition of it as a "step-by-step process by which something becomes *controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from* the military as an institution or militaristic criteria".¹⁶ In a country that still conscripts its soldiers, a significant percentage of Ukraine's population—not only the recruits themselves, but their families too—is *controlled by the military*. The fact that the borders of the territory controlled by the Ukrainian state continue to shift even in the sixth year of the conflict serves as a reminder that Ukraine's territorial integrity—and thus the degree to which people in Lviv, Kyiv, Kharkiv, etc. can continue to live their ordinary lives—is *dependent on the military*. One of the factors that fuels militarisation, according to Enloe, is a "diffusion of military ideas into popular culture and into social workings".¹⁷ Referring to the USA, she states that an increasingly favoured candidate for a school principal would be an ex-army person.¹⁸ A similar situation can be observed in Ukraine. People who have been involved in the war in the Donbas region enjoy a great deal of trust. Political parties are keen to include war veterans on their party lists, as this is likely to boost their ratings.¹⁹

These former combatants and now people's deputies turn up to parliamentary sessions in army uniforms, displaying their association with the military. Other politicians also enjoy sporting camouflage (like in the case with Poroshenko who was frequently seen in uniform), or stylised military outfits, (like in the case with the leader of the *Batkivshchyna* party and the former Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko). The choice of military or militarised clothing over civilian suits indicates that in the view of these politicians, the military is valued highly by their voters.

In addition, paramilitary groups such as the National Militia Units (*Natsionalni druzhyny*) position themselves as "former participants of combat operations, patriotic youth and concerned citizens".²⁰ Their declared aim is to "ensure order on the streets of the Ukrainian towns",²¹ but they have also taken part in anti-Roma pogroms.²² Such groups are, if not supported, then at least tolerated by the state and parts of Ukrainian society.

Other indicators of a society that *derives its value from the military* include the huge volunteer movement that enjoys high levels of public trust.²³ It essentially replaced the state in the first years of the war, securing provisions for the army. Since the start of the war, state defence expenditure has increased significantly, but as it is eroded by corruption,²⁴ the volunteer movement continues to address the needs of the army.

Seeing militarisation as something that is related to the frontline only, and not to the rest of civilian society, is to understand only one fraction of it. To refer to Enloe again, militarisation happens on many levels and occurs away from the obvious places. "It's happening at the individual level, when a woman who has a son is persuaded that the best way she can be a good mother is to allow the military recruiter to recruit her son so her son will get off the couch. When she is persuaded to let him go, even if reluctantly, she's being militarised. She's not as militarised as somebody who is a Special Forces soldier, but she's being militarised all the same".²⁵ Focusing on the soldiers and the frontline and disregarding how militarisation affects the rest of the population removes the responsibility from society for facilitating or taking part in militarisation.

Interpreting Military History

A particular state-endorsed interpretation of military history can also serve the purpose of militarisation, albeit in more subtle, indirect ways. In order to examine these official narratives of past wars, I will employ gender analysis, as it offers a lens through which the construction of war heroism can be seen clearly. The way history has been written, as Enloe argues, has helped to create an assumption

that women should feel themselves protected and should act gratefully about being protected whereas men, and even those who don't want to, should be encouraged—pressured—into thinking that their main role in the world, this

*dangerous world, is as a protector.*²⁶

In a country that is engaged in a war, this becomes particularly relevant. As Susan Sontag writes in her analysis of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, the widespread perception of war is that it is "a man's game—that the killing machine has a gender, and it is male".²⁷ War defines manhood, and soldiering is the ultimate expression of masculinity, especially in the imagination of a militarised society.

Anniversaries of famous battles provide excellent opportunities for using the past to explain the present. In January 1918, several hundred Ukrainian cadets met several thousand Bolshevik troops outside of Kyiv in a fight for the capital. Outnumbered, the cadets lost the battle. One hundred years on, what came to be known as the Battle of Kruty is remembered in Ukraine as a glorious defeat and a valiant sacrifice, and the cadets are held up as role models for contemporary soldiers. In 2018, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory together with the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine produced posters which called the Kruty cadets "the first cyborgs", thereby comparing them to the soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces who fought for control of the Donetsk Airport in 2014-2015 and were nicknamed "cyborgs" for their endurance.²⁸ The website of the Ministry explains: "The Battle [of Kruty] has become a symbol of heroism and self-sacrifice of the young generation in their fight for independence for the entire Ukrainian people".²⁹ The symbol of the Battle of Kruty is a young man, a student, who was still a child only yesterday, but who entered his manhood by joining the battle and dying a hero's death.

Mykhaylo Grushevs'kyi, a historian and the head of the Central Rada of the Ukrainian People's Republic (1917-1918) began his speech at the reburial of the Kruty casualties in March 1918 with a line from the Roman poet Horace: "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori!*" (It is sweet and proper to die for the fatherland).³⁰ Heroic death was highly valued by Ukrainian state builders not only in 1918. It is similarly regarded in contemporary Ukraine where a hero's death is often the highest reward soldiers can get in return for their services. If they died "correctly" (i.e. not from an illness or in a drunken fight with their comrades, or somewhere in captivity with no reliable proof of their death, etc.) their families will also get monetary "compensation",³¹ but the main reward for the soldiers is living on in the myth about self-sacrifices of heroic warriors. Official delegations can visit their graves, politicians can have their photos taken laying wreaths by the memorials,³² and families—who, as Viatrovych noted, do not always appreciate the importance of militarised funerals—can slowly learn to value the honourable position of their dead. The image of the noble, heroic, correct death, however, is to a large extent the stuff of romantic mythology. In his short story *Testament (Zaveshchanie)*, Oleh Sentsov compared the romantic view of a military hero's death with a more realistic one:

There was once a man who was asked how he would like to die, and he answered: With a shout of 'hurrah!' on my lips, a gun slung over my shoulder and a mouth full of blood. I'd also like that – it's beautiful, it's manly. But that's not how it works. Heroes only die beautifully in movies and books. In real life, they piss blood into their pants, scream from pain and remember their mothers.³³

Such a picture would not make a good poster, nor would it sell a movie.

Defeat on the battlefield or an expression of weakness (remembering your mother or wetting yourself) might merit sympathy but not respect. Accentuating bravery (or manliness—*muzhnik*—a popular word in Ukrainian discourse around war specifically and patriotism more generally) rather than fear, the glory of a proper man's death rather than the tragedy of a lost life, is more conducive to the creation of a palatable portrayal of war, the sort of war that, as Sentsov notes, exists in books and movies.

It is no coincidence that both the Donetsk Airport Battle and the Battle of Kruty have been turned into films. *Kiborhy* (Cyborgs), directed by Akhtem Seitablaiev was released in 2017 and *Kruty 1918*, directed by Oleksii Shapariev, was released in early 2019. The tagline for *Kiborhy* is "Heroes don't die", the one for *Kruty 1918* is "Bravery [*muzhnik*]. Love. Freedom". Both films tell heroic tales of male camaraderie, valour, and heroism. Both tell the story of a similar protagonist: a young man who is not a natural warrior, but who, in the course of a war, takes up arms and is ready to sacrifice his life for the country. *Cyborgs* has an almost entirely male cast with women appearing only in the background as volunteers or wives and daughters whose voices we hear when they phone their men at the frontline. One of *Kruty 1918*'s main characters is a woman, but she is no less symbolic than the women of *Cyborgs*: she is the object of love of the two brothers and, as such, is an embodiment of Ukraine itself.³⁴

Ukraine's Minister of Culture, Yevhen Nyshchuk, who is a professional actor and has cameo parts in both films, said of the Battle of Kruty that "a people, a nation and a country is built on such heroism".³⁵ The heroic depiction of war helps society to stomach a defeat and restores conventional masculinity discredited by the failure on the battlefield.³⁶ Nyshchuk also stressed that the history of the Battle of Kruty is relevant to the events of the present. Talking about the leaders of the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic he stated: "they didn't manage to hold on to it [the Ukrainian state], but it is *our* task to hold on to it".³⁷ Like the UINP's depiction of the Kruty cadets as the first cyborgs, the parallels emphasised by Nyshchuk help create an impression of Ukraine being engaged continuously in a just war.

The desire to create a visible link between the past and the present was manifested also in 2018 when the then President Poroshenko renamed the Military Institute of Telecommunications and Information Technologies after the Kruty He-

roes. It is telling that the predecessor of the Institute was known as the Bohdan Khmelnytsky First Military School, and some of its cadets participated in the Battle of Kruty. While the name of the Military School harked back to the Cossacks in order to demonstrate a continuous military tradition, one hundred years later, this link was updated to establish a symbolic connection between the Battle of Kruty and the current war in the Donbas. In his speech at the renaming ceremony, Poroshenko emphasised that although 97 years separate the Battle of Kruty and the defence of Donetsk airport,

*these events carry the same weight and, I am sure, come from the same symbolic line. The enemy is the same and the cyborgs, just like the heroes of Kruty, became exemplary symbolic defenders of Fatherland, and the next generations of the defenders of Fatherland will measure themselves against them.*³⁸

Kruty is one of many examples of historical war narratives playing a powerful part in state-endorsed initiatives to shape the image of the contemporary conflict in the Donbas region. The current war has created an opportunity to draw parallels even between armies that would be difficult to compare otherwise. Speaking about Ukrainians who served in the Red Army during the Second World War, Viatrovych has pointed out that

*on the one hand, we see them as people who fought against Nazism, who drove the Nazis out of Ukraine and other East European countries, on the other hand, the same Red Army men were instruments of the totalitarian communist regime both in Ukraine and other East European countries.*³⁹

Nevertheless, on the Day of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in 2017, the ATO veteran Volodymyr Lahuta told his story of fighting for Lysychansk and Savur-mohyla in 2014 to students of the Ivan Bohun Military Lyceum at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv. He told the young people that his grandfather had also fought for Lysychansk and Savur-mohyla as part of the Red Army in 1944,⁴⁰ thereby drawing a parallel between the ATO soldiers and those who had fought on the territory of Ukraine in WWII.

Also in 2017, an exhibition that opened at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv compared photos of the members of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army with those of contemporary fighters in the Donbas region, stressing the similarity and continuity between these two conflicts.⁴¹ An exhibition project unambiguously entitled *Objective History (Obiektivna istoriia)* states that it “combined two generations: that of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) that fought for independence of Ukraine 75 years ago and that which is defending it now in the ATO”.⁴² The twenty-four pairs of photos emphasise remarkable similarities between warfare then and now. The photographer and ATO veteran Yurii Velychko stated that when he looked at the archival photos of the UPA he realised that he had already seen all this at the frontline in the battalion where he

had served.⁴³

While the authors' wish was to emphasise the continuity in the struggle for independence, what struck me in the parallels was that the frontline life of the guerrilla forces of the 1940s and a regular army in the 21st century in a country that spends 5% of its GDP⁴⁴ on defence look so similar: poor equipment and weapons,⁴⁵ mismatched uniforms, makeshift trenches and living quarters, and graves in the middle of fields. Another striking resemblance was in the representation of gender roles: men were armed and tough-looking; the few women that appeared on the photos were mostly civilian and unarmed, they posed to look "feminine" and supportive.⁴⁶

War and Gender

Gender relations in the military tend to reflect gender norms in society as a whole. In the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, gender roles prevalent in peacetime were exacerbated in the context of war. The place allocated to women both in the social and military hierarchy was unquestionably below that of men.⁴⁷ In this context, men, especially of a senior rank, often expected sexual favours from women, in particular those under their command. Marta Havryshko, who researches gender relations in the UPA, argues that the power structure facilitated coercive relationships, often leading to gender-based violent crimes perpetrated by the nationalists against women from their own side. She states that while "rape was considered a severe criminal offense, which was even punishable by death," the outcomes of trials for such crimes "depended on the decision of the commander or the court" and could result in the punishment of the (female) victim rather than the (male) perpetrator.⁴⁸ Havryshko describes the case in which one of the members of the underground, a leader of the Lutsk region, Mykhailo Bodnarchuk was tried by his commander for raping a woman, Anna Kovalchuk. The trial, however, concluded that it was Kovalchuk who was to be punished, not Bodnarchuk. Kovalchuk was executed as a result.⁴⁹

Similar attitudes can be observed today. A man who participates in a war is perceived as a hero by default. His military or off-duty conduct might be less than immaculate—he might have taken part in activities that could be classified as war crimes, or he might have taken out his anger on his partner or children, adding to the already dangerously widespread domestic violence in Ukraine—but few will dare criticise his behaviour, because he defends his motherland.⁵⁰ In 2016, an ATO veteran who had raped an underage girl was allowed to walk free from a courtroom precisely because he was an ATO veteran.⁵¹ The judge stated that "the mitigating circumstance in his case was that he was a participant in the military conflict in the Donbas region and that he had two children of his own".⁵² His only punishment was a penalty of three thousand hryvnias (around \$120).⁵³

In both this case and in the previous example, we see how militarism, masculinity and heroism are interlinked. Additionally, we see how an emphasis on the continuity of heroic struggle is transposed onto a continuity of perceptions about gender roles, and all the consequences they carry.

The case of Nadiia Morozova, a servicewoman killed at the frontline in 2017, is telling in this regard. As soon as the news of her killing in the ATO zone became public, the media reported it as a “heroic death”.⁵⁴ Many outlets based their reports on a Facebook post by the regional administration of Morozova’s native town, which stated that

*our countrywoman, Nadya Morozova, died heroically while executing her combat mission. [She] bravely [muzhno] and courageously defended our Fatherland from the terrorists in the ATO zone. Under enemy fire, she received fatal injuries.*⁵⁵

Morozova was not a combatant. Indeed, because of the legal restrictions that were in place until recently, very few women could be officially registered for combat positions.⁵⁶ Morozova worked as a chef, having joined the Armed Forces as a way of earning her living and to support her young son. Soon after she was buried with full military honours, it turned out that Morozova had died not because she was “executing her combat mission”, but, as was later stated officially, because one of her comrades, “having broken the rules of handling weapons, caused [her] death”.⁵⁷ The media moved on to discuss the potential reasons behind her death/murder, and the tone filled with war pathos was replaced by one more suited to a detective story. Morozova’s mother, who was kept poorly notified by the authorities about the details of her daughter’s death, was left confused. Oleksii Bratushchak, one of the few journalists who tried to make sense of the story behind the sensationalist headlines, reported Morozova’s mother’s words:

*Her child will grow up. I will tell him: your mother was a hero. And someone else will tell him, no, she was not a hero, she was murdered. How will I explain this to him? What will I say? That his mother was killed by one of her own soldiers?!*⁵⁸

Bratushchak states that he tried to interview Morozova’s commanders, but the only person he managed to speak to, one of the deputy commanders of the brigade in which Morozova had served, said “you’d be better off writing about others; we have many combat losses here. She didn’t exactly distinguish herself here”.⁵⁹ In his view, the loss of a combatant was more newsworthy than that of a (female) chef killed by one of her own men. Others shared this view: once the details of her death started to be revealed, the hailing of her as a heroine on social media gave way to holding her responsible for her own death, because a woman, especially a mother, should not be going to the frontline.⁶⁰

Societal perception of what constitutes heroism is influenced by the popular

portrayal of historic heroes. This historical portrayal is, in turn, influenced by other factors, of which gender is one. A servicewoman who joined the war as a combatant—even though this occupation receives more value in a militarised society than that of a chef—is unlikely to receive the same hero's welcome upon her return as servicemen do. Some servicewomen have complained that their male partners felt awkward and even ashamed to meet them off the train when they returned from the warzone, because, placed in that situation, a man would risk having to openly admit that his masculinity, which militarisation equates with soldiering, has been undermined.⁶¹ In the meantime, men who return from the frontline are greeted with fanfare, regardless of their roles or conduct in the warzone. This type of behaviour has a long tradition: after the Second World War, the Red Army men who came back from the frontline were not asked whether they engaged in any heroic acts or, indeed, in atrocities, such as mass rapes, because their very belonging to the military was sufficient to hail them as heroes. The women, however, even those who were decorated, rarely revealed their military experience: the medal for combat services (*za boevye zaslugi*), in the possession of a woman, was often mocked as a reward for sexual favours (*za polovye uslugi*).⁶²

Because women lack visibility in the context of war, other than as symbols representing motherhood or victimhood, stories like the one of Anna Kovalchuk or Nadiia Morozova, as well as many servicewomen who are currently suffering from gender-based violence in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, remain untold.⁶³ When Volodymyr Viatrovykh was asked to comment on the fact that servicewomen who took an active part in the various armies remain underrepresented in official historical memory, he objected to the criticism:

It seems to me that the accusation that women are seemingly excluded from the Ukrainian memory politics is artificial. I am running several projects related to national memory. All of these projects, without exception, contain women's stories, although we include them not out of political correctness.⁶⁴

In the same interview, Viatrovykh then proceeded to give the example of the UINP's project "War makes no exceptions. Female history of the Second World War". Given that war narratives so often exclude women's stories, the UINP can indeed be commended on dedicating an exhibition specifically to women's experiences of war. However, what the UINP does not seem to realise is that simply including women's stories into otherwise unchanged male-centric and mostly heroic narratives of war, without commenting on the gendered nature of these women's experience of political violence, does not make the history of war truly inclusive.⁶⁵

A similar approach to the inclusion of women into the narrative of war can be seen in another official memory project. Aiming to "popularise the national-patriotic education of young people", the Ministry of Information together with the Ministry of Youth and Sport created a campaign entitled United (*Poiednani*). Seventeen advertising boards installed all over Ukraine depicted soldiers of the Ukrainian

Armed Forces and those from the UNR or UPA who came from the Donbas region.⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, only one of the thirty-four portraits is of a woman, Iryna Kostenko. Her historic advertising board partner and namesake, Valentyn Kostenko, is introduced with the same phrase as the rest of the men, “he fought/fights for[...]” followed by the military group to which he belonged. Iryna Kostenko’s introduction begins with “she develops tactical medicine in Ukraine[...]”.⁶⁷ Therefore, the campaign cannot be criticised for excluding women altogether. Yet choosing to include only one woman, a female medic, and disregarding thousands of women who have taken part in the conflict in many other roles,⁶⁸ is hardly revelatory of women’s experiences of war. Such an approach reinforces stereotypes of fighting men and caring women.

Uncontextualised inclusion of women’s stories in war histories is sometimes more problematic than their total exclusion because it seems not only tokenistic, but also instrumentalised for the purposes of militarisation, which, as discussed above, reinforces traditional gender roles. One example of this dynamic is the board game *Ukrainian Revolution 1917-1921*, developed for young people by the UINP. The cover of the game features photos of three people in uniform, one of them a woman, Olha Pidvysotska. She is a lesser-known member of the Ukrainian Sich Sharpshooters. Her face is on the cover, but her name and her story are not mentioned in the game. A better-known woman from the same military formation, Olena Stepaniv, is the only military woman and one of the few women in general included in the content of the game. The game portrays Stepaniv as the first female officer, the commander of a platoon of the Ukrainian Sich Sharpshooters, a participant of the November Action (*Lystopadovyi zryv*), a soldier of the Galician Army, etc.⁶⁹ This depicts the Sich Sharpshooters as a military formation far ahead of their time: not only did they recruit women, they also gave them officer ranks. But this version of Stepaniv’s biography, as well as the history of the Sich Sharpshooters, is incomplete without mentioning that Stepaniv was repeatedly prevented by the authorities, including those in the Sich Sharpshooters, from joining the unit simply because she was a woman, and that in spite of her military achievements and a successful return from imprisonment, she was ultimately dismissed by her own leadership because she was a woman.⁷⁰

The Uses of History

History is used both to reinforce narratives aimed at mobilising the population to support the state, but also to challenge such narratives, and with them the wider official rhetoric. In both cases there is a danger of selectivity pursuing a particular agenda. Ukrainian society is facing a conflict that was not expected by anyone in the country. The language of war has entered everyday speech, and frontline violence has become normalised. History can be useful in an attempt to make sense of

these alarming, complex and confusing events. The method that ensures that history is not instrumentalised for a particular political agenda—whether in support of the state or against it—is simple: history has to be used with honesty. An honest approach, however, is the hardest because it is unlikely to fit any established narrative neatly: if we talk about the patriotism of soldiers, we must also talk about war crimes in which they might have participated. If we hail the men for honourably defending their motherland, we must also see whether they were as honourable in their attitude towards civilians. If we portray women as joining the warfare, we must reveal the gendered setting in which this was done and the discrimination and violence that this setting entailed. By the same token, when we seek to highlight crimes and abuses, we must also accept that those who committed them, in other instances, may have acted honourably and bravely or have been unwilling participants of violence.

The inclusion of difficult stories from the past and the present might undermine the image that is being created of the Ukrainian army as strong, honourable, progressive, and united. The image of a scared young soldier—in Kruty or in the Donetsk airport—or that of a soldier “unheroically” killed by one of his/her own would ruin the conventional image of a heroic defender of the motherland. Yet the inclusion of stories such as these helps us understand the nature of war and the ambiguity of soldiering, which tends to include both the capacity for patriotic idealism and an ability to participate in atrocities.

To promote the Armed Forces of Ukraine and to encourage recruitment, which is highly unpopular especially given the high level of casualties and the fact that the war has been dragging on with no end in sight, the Ministry of Information produced a series of promotional videos in 2017, entitled *Always Defending (Zavzhdy na zakhysti)*. The videos were released on 14 October to celebrate the Day of the Defender (a holiday with complicated historical connotations, harking back not only to the UPA but also to the Cossacks).⁷¹

They are narrated by the children of ATO veterans, who describe their fathers as heroes. The videos emphasise the fact that these fathers do not like to talk about war, but this silence makes them even more heroic and manly. Staying silent is not unusual among veterans, especially given that many of them suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, which even to this day does not receive appropriate treatment in Ukraine.⁷² It is mostly state-run institutions who tend to speak on behalf of soldiers, both current and historic, both dead and alive. They too leave many silences in their narratives. The slogans the Institute of National Memory and the Ministry of Information use in their campaigns include “we remember – we prevail” (*pamiataiemo - peremahaiemo*), and “we remember the dead – we defend the living” (*pamiataiemo zahyblykh – zakhyshchaiemo zhyvykh*). These slogans leave little room for fear, PTSD, war-related suicides, war crimes, non-combatant deaths, violence among fellow soldiers, gender-based violence and many other subjects on

which the veterans remain silent.

Another slogan omnipresent not only in official memory narratives but also in popular ones is “heroes don’t die” (*heroi ne vmyraiuť*). However, the very nature of war is such that both heroes and ‘non-heroes’ do die. Their deaths are crucial for the official narrative, sometimes more important than their lives.

The UINP’s website states that the reasoning behind its recommendations for standardised gravestones for the ATO soldiers is to “demonstrate respect for the buried fighter not only on behalf of relatives and close friends, but also on behalf of his brothers-in-arms, the state and the entire society” and “to turn the sad field of a cemetery into a field of military victory, where even after death the fighters will remain in the ranks of their army”.⁷³ Such a step as well as mythologising the victories and glorious defeats of wars also limits the identity of the ATO dead to that of soldiers. In a country where a large number of soldiers who risk their lives on a battlefield are conscripts or volunteers rather than contract soldiers or professional service personnel, even the dead are militarised, whether they want it or not. Indeed, they seem to be afforded more respect after death, in their heroisation, than they were while serving in the army, which notoriously fails to provide for its troops’ basic needs.⁷⁴ The last line of the stated aims on the UINP’s website is to “encourage the patriotic education of young people”,⁷⁵ in other words, to militarise the next generation of ‘avengers’ who are to rise from the bones of their predecessors.

All of this raises questions that Ukrainians need to confront: are we as a society ready to take full responsibility for raising a militarised youth? And, in particular, do we realise the consequences of the perpetuation of gendered war roles (e.g. “manly warriors” and “supportive women”)? Are we prepared to face the costs of turning a blind eye to the many unheroic actions heroes are capable of just so that we can fit them into the category of the defenders of the motherland?

In the sixth year of a brutal undeclared war, we must ask ourselves if we want to write this war as yet another chapter of the fight of Ukrainians for their statehood without revealing the complexity of this conflict. Are we willing to ignore the oligarchic warlords and profiteering politicians? What about the erasure of men and women who join the army because in times of war it pays much better than many other industries?

Who will tell the truth about women who perpetrate violence, and men who pay a fortune to avoid the draft, not to mention everything else that does not fit into the neat narrative of another link in the chain in the struggle of Ukrainians for independence?

Some may see the problems outlined above as “untimely”. In fact, it is precisely during this conflict that we must speak openly about these issues, and act in order to ensure that we can speak honestly and without shame about them in the future. History is an essential tool in our efforts to understand the events of today.

If it is to provide any genuine insight, however, it cannot be the sort of history that is made to look good on mobilisation posters and in war movies.

About the Author

Olesya Khromeychuk is a Teaching Fellow in Modern European History at King's College London. She was a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of East Anglia in 2015-2018. Between 2012 and 2015 she taught Ukrainian, Russian, Soviet and East European history at the University of Cambridge, the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London and the University of East Anglia. She received her PhD in History in 2011 from University College London. Olesya Khromeychuk's current research focuses on the participation of women in military formations during the Second World War and in the ongoing conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine. She is guest-editor of Gender, Nationalism, and Citizenship in Anti-Authoritarian Protests in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, a special issue of *the Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 2(1) (2016). She is the author of *"Undetermined" Ukrainians. Post-War Narratives of the Waffen SS "Galicia" Division* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), which examines the problems of collaboration and post-war displacement through the case of the Ukrainian Waffen SS "Galicia" division.

Endnotes

- 1 This is an expanded version of an article published by Open Democracy. See Olesya Khromeychuk, “Militarised Society: Memory Politics, History and Gender in Ukraine”, Open Democracy (12 October 2018), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/memory-politics-history-and-gender-in-ukraine/>, accessed 15 July 2019. Some of these findings were presented at the conference “Official History in Eastern Europe. Transregional Perspectives”, organised by the German Historical Institute Warsaw, the University of Geneva and the Forum Transregional Studies Berlin. I am grateful to colleagues who offered their comments on earlier versions of this text, in particular Tom Rowley, Iryna Sklokina, Molly Flynn and Uilleam Blackler.
- 2 The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Ukrainska Povstanska Armiia, UPA) was a nationalist underground organisation active in the 1940s-1950s. It was an armed wing of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (Orhanizatsiia Ukrainskykh Natsionalistiv, OUN). Both organisations have a complex history of not only fighting for Ukrainian independence, but also of collaborating with Nazi Germany and participating in war crimes. The nationalists presented their collaboration with the German authorities as an opportunity for the establishment of the Ukrainian state, an initiative that the Nazis never endorsed. Shkandrij explains that “[t]he OUN’s association with the Germans caused irreparable damage to the organization’s image” (Myroslav Shkandrij, *Ukrainian Nationalism: Politics, Ideology and Literature, 1929-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 61). OUN members are known to have taken part in the implementation of the Holocaust. John-Paul Himka states that “[n]ot all policemen were in OUN, but OUN was deeply embedded in the police.” He also argues that “thousands of these policemen defected to the Volhynian woods with their weapons and formed the leadership of the OUN-led UPA” (John-Paul Himka, “Collaboration and or Resistance: The OUN and UPA during the War”, paper prepared for the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter Shared Narrative Series: Conference on Issues Relating to World War II, Potsdam, 27-30 June 2011, https://www.academia.edu/577915/Collaboration_and_or_Resistance_The_OUN_and_UPA_during_the_War, accessed 21 August 2019). Besides engaging the military and paramilitary formations of its enemies, the UPA is known to have attacked civilians. Its most notorious activity is the perpetration of the Volhynian massacre in 1943, in which thousands of Polish civilians were killed by the nationalists. See Grzegorz Motyka, *Od rzezi wotyńskiej do akcji “Wisła”. Konflikt polsko – ukraiński 1943–1947* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2011). For further information on the UPA, see Myroslav Shkandrij, *Ukrainian Nationalism: Politics, Ideology and Literature*; Oleksandr Zaitsev, *Ukrainskyi integralnyi natsionalizm, (1920-1930 roky): Narysy intelektualnoi istorii* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2013); Grzegorz Motyka, *Ukraińska partyzantka 1942-1960. Działalność Organizacji Ukraińskich Nacjonalistów i Ukraińskiej Powstańczej Armii* (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm, 2006).
- 3 See the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory’s Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/uinp.gov.ua/>, accessed 17 July 2018.
- 4 “De pokhovani heroï ATO? Infohrafka”, *Ukrainska Pravda*, 24 April 2017, <http://www.istpravda.com.ua/short/2017/04/24/149712>, accessed 17 July 2018.
- 5 “Terytorii Lychakivskoho tsvyntaria – tsvyntar ‘Orliat’”, *Tsentr miskoi istorii*, <https://lia.lvivcenter.org/uk/objects/polish-orlat-cemetery/>, accessed 17 July 2018.
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- 8 “Skladna rozmova. Volodymyr Viatrovych”, *UA:Pershyi*, 19 December 2017, https://youtu.be/BBfq_T06XT0?t=1009, accessed 11 June 2018.

- 9 See “Skladna rozmova. Volodymyr Viatrovych”, UA:Pershyi, 19 December 2017, https://youtu.be/BBfq_T06XT0?t=1071, accessed 4 June 2018.
- 10 The military hostilities in the Donbas, which started in April 2014 and are ongoing at the time of writing, are referred to in everyday speech in Ukraine as a war. The official term used by the Ukrainian authorities and much of the media was Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO). In April 2018, the ATO was proclaimed completed by the Ukrainian state and the Joint Forces Operation (JFO) was launched. For further discussion see Illia Ponomarenko, “As ATO ends, Joint Forces Operation launched in Donbas”, Kyiv Post, 30 April 2018, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/ato-ends-joint-forces-operation-launched-donbas.html>, accessed 27 June 2019.
- 11 “Na Lychakivskomu kladovyshchi vshanuvaly pamiat polehlykh voiakiv UHA ta Heroiv ATO”, Lvivska oblasna derzhavna administratsiia, 1 November 2017, <http://loda.gov.ua/news?id=31498>, accessed 11 June 2018. Ukrainiansi Sichovi Striltsi are usually translated from Ukrainian as Ukrainian Sich Riflemen. I choose to avoid the usage of the term which symbolically excludes women and use the term ‘sharpshooter’ to translate the Ukrainian strilets. The Ukrainian Sich Sharpshooters fought during the First World War on the side of Austria-Hungary and then in the fight for Ukrainian statehood.
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- 14 See Veterano Pizza Facebook Page, https://www.facebook.com/pg/Pizza.Veterano/about/?ref=page_internal, and “Veteranska Restoratsiia Patriot”, Ukrainska Pravda, 1 July 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gyAWTJTxE>, accessed 9 July 2018.
- 15 Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 289.
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- 17 Cynthia Enloe, “Cynthia Enloe on Militarization, Feminism, and the International Politics of Banana Boats”, *Theory Talks*, 22 May 2012, <http://www.theory-talks.org/2012/05/theory-talk-48.html>, accessed 26 July 2018.
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- 19 See Viacheslav Shramovych, “Kombaty-deputaty: Rada chy viina?”, BBC Ukraine, 24 February 2015, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/politics/2015/02/150223_mps_in_army_vs, accessed 26 July 2018. See also “‘Potaiky vid simi poikhav na Donbas’: heroii ATO v partii Vakarchuka vyklykav zakhvat u merezhi”, *Obozrevatel*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.obozrevatel.com/ukr/society/potajki-vid-simi-poihav-na-donbas-geroj-ato-v-partii-vakarchuka-viklikav-zahvat-u-merezhi.htm>, accessed 15 July 2019.
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- 28 “January 29th, Battle of Kruty’s 100th Anniversary”, Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine, 29 January 2018, <https://mip.gov.ua/en/news/2218.html>, accessed 17 July 2018.
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- 30 Horace Odes (III.2.13). See Andrii Liubarets, “Bii pid Krutamy v istorychnii pamiaty. Yak ekspluatuietsia mif”, *Istorychna Pravda*, 29 January 2012, <http://www.istpravda.com.ua/research/2012/01/29/70470/>, accessed 17 July 2018.
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- 33 Oleg Sentsov is a Ukrainian writer and filmmaker from Crimea. He was arrested and sentenced to 20 years in prison after an unfair trial in Russia. See Oleg Sentsov, *Testament*, translated by Uilleam Blacker, PEN International, <https://pen-international.org/news/oleg-sentsov-testament>, accessed 9 July 2018.
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- 35 “U Kyievi prezentuvaly treiler filmu ‘Kruty 1918’”, *Ukrainska Pravda*, 26 January 2018, <http://www.istpravda.com.ua/short/2018/01/26/151956/>, accessed 9 July 2018. The filmmakers draw the parallels between the events of 1918 and 2018 even in the trailer to the film, which begins with a young contemporary soldier walking towards the memorial to the Battle of Kruty and the subtitles that read “Ukraine 2018”. This is then followed by the footage of soldiers one hundred years ago and the text that reads “Ukraine 1918”. See “Kruty 1918. Ofitsiinyi treiler 2”, *Kruty 2018 Facebook page*, 11 July 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/kruty1918film/videos/651275955222360/>, accessed 17 July 2018.
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46 See ““ObiektyvNA istoriia” – fotovystavka voiakiv UPA ta ZSU”, Galinfo, 10 October 2018, https://galinfo.com.ua/news/obiektyvna_istoriya_fotovystavka_voyakiv_upa_ta_zsu_271448.html, accessed 17 July 2018.

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- 56 See Olesya Khromeychuk, “From the Maidan to the Donbas: the Limitations on Choice for Women in Ukraine”, in *Gender and Choice in the Post-Soviet Context*, ed. Lynne Attwood, Marina Yusupova, Elisabeth Schimpfoessl (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 47-78. See also Olesya Khromeychuk, “Experiences of Women at War. Servicewomen during WWII and in the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the Conflict in Donbas”, *Baltic Worlds X* (4) (2018): 58-70. See also Maria Berlinska, Tamara Martsenyuk, Anna Kvit, and Ganna Grytsenko, “Nevydymyi batalion”: uchast zhinko u viiskovykh diiakh v ATO (Ukr.), “Invisible Battalion”: Women’s Participation in ATO Military Operations (Eng.), (Kyiv: Ukrainian Women’s Fund, 2016); Tamara Martsenyuk, Ganna Grytsenko, Anna Kvit, “The ‘Invisible Battalion’: Women in ATO Military Operations in Ukraine”, *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal* 2 (2016): 171-187; Tamara Martsenyuk and Ganna Grytsenko, “Women and Military in Ukraine: Voices of the Invisible Battalion”, *Ukraine Analytica* 1(7) (2017): 29-37. In 2017, Maria Berlinska produced a documentary film, “Invisible Battalion”, which highlights the reality of women’s experiences at the frontline. See the Invisible Battalion Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/%20InvisibleBattalion>, accessed 30 October 2017.
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