

## Foreword

Russia's war against Ukraine, ongoing as I write this, commenced in 2014 and escalated when Russia began its full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. In discussions and question-and-answer sessions after seminars and other scholarly and semi-scholarly events dedicated to understanding this war, I have often heard members of the audience say that they would be glad to learn about Ukraine through its literature, but cannot because so little of Ukrainian literature is available in English translation.

In fact, a great many English translations of Ukrainian poetry, prose and drama exist, and a surprisingly large number of them are freely available online. But it is true that Ukrainian literature has not been a priority for the most visible English-language publishing houses. It is also true that in order to begin looking for Ukrainian literature in English, potential readers need to know names of authors and titles of works and to have some idea of the content of the latter. It is to such potential readers that *Ukrainian Literature: A Wartime Guide for Anglophone Readers* is addressed.

I assume that these readers are interested in matters that the war has brought to the fore: Ukrainian identity in its present form and at earlier stages of its evolution; Ukraine's relationship with its present aggressor and former colonial master, Russia; and Ukrainians' relationships with other states and ethnocultural groups with which they have historically interacted – Poles, Jews and Crimean Tatars among the latter – on the territory bounded by the present-day internationally recognised border of Ukraine. I also assume that readers are primarily interested in the situation that currently exists and in the past mainly as it helps understand the present. For that reason, the component sections of this Cambridge Element have headings that begin with dates of significant cultural milestones and are arranged in reverse chronological order, proceeding from 2023 to medieval times.

The Element is a *guide for Anglophone readers*. That is to say, first, that its emphasis is on translated texts; of those that are not available in English, I mention only the most important. Second, the Element's purpose being to *guide* the reader, I have tried to make locating the works referred to as straightforward as possible. The following should be noted:

1. If the title of a work appears in the main text in English only, it is the title of the English translation. The two dates that follow in parentheses are the date of original publication (or, in particular instances where this is noted, composition) and the date of publication in English. Where a work was published over a number of years – for example, if it was serialised in a journal – the first and last years of publication are separated by a slash. Only the English translation appears in the list of References.

2. In cases where an untranslated work is mentioned, the title is given, first, in the language of the original in Romanised form. My translation of the title and the year of publication follow in parentheses.
3. Many translations have been published in anthologies, and I often refer to more than one text included in a single such collection. In these instances, the English-language title of the text is followed by the year of its original publication, an abbreviation of the collection's title, and the relevant page numbers. A list of such Abbreviations appears before the list of References at the end of this Element.
4. Some translations, in particular of recent poems and poems by Shevchenko, are most easily found through an online search of the author's name in combination with the title of the work. In such cases, I do not give the year of publication in brackets but state it in the main text if necessary.
5. Many of the books that appear in the list of References, especially older publications, may be downloaded from online repositories. The one that houses the greatest number of books that I refer to is Ukraine-based <https://diasporiana.org.ua/>, where search terms can be entered in English into the search line (labelled ШУКАТИ). An asterisk at the end of an entry in the list of References or Abbreviations indicates that the text is available through Diasporiana. There also exists an invaluable online bibliography of Ukrainian literary works translated into English (Tarnawsky n.d.).
6. In the main text of this Element, names of persons, places and titles of works are transliterated from the Cyrillic using the Library of Congress Romanisation system modified for ease of reading (initial letters *C*, *IO* and *Я* are rendered as *Ye*, *Yu* and *Ya* and terminal *uï* as *y*; the soft sign is transliterated only in the word 'Rus'). Exceptions are the names of contemporary authors who have published in English; their names are given as they appear in their English-language publications. In the list of References, however, the LC system (without ligatures) is used without modification.

I have called this Element a *wartime* guide not only because it deals with subject matter that the war has made topical but also because in a war there are sides, and this Element sides with Ukraine. It is a partisan text, in solidarity with the sovereign and territorially integral Ukraine whose existence is at present under threat. It is also unapologetically in sympathy with the idea of a Ukrainian nation of individuals of different cultures, languages and faiths, but united by a shared attachment to their state and its democratic civic ideals.

I thank Alessandro Achilli and David Roberts, as well as the anonymous peer reviewers who read drafts of this Element, for their valuable suggestions. I dedicate the Element to its unsung heroes: the translators.

Marko Pavlyshyn  
December 2024

### 2023: Invasion and Defiance

On 1 July 2023, Victoria Amelina, a Ukrainian novelist and poet, died of wounds suffered as a result of a Russian missile strike on Kramatorsk, a city in Eastern Ukraine. Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The war itself had begun in 2014, soon after the mass civilian protests known as the Euromaidan or the Revolution of Dignity. At that time, Russia occupied Qırım (Crimea) and brought a small part of South-Eastern Ukraine under its control. Eight years of continuous warfare preceded the escalation of 24/2.

Amelina (see Figure 1), born in Lviv in 1986, had a career in information technology management before dedicating herself fully to writing. Born into a Russian-speaking family, she chose to write in Ukrainian. A lyrical poet at first, she made prose her main idiom, returning after the invasion to the brevity



**Figure 1** Victoria Amelina, 2018. Photo: Rafał Komorowski. Reproduced unchanged under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International Licence.

and emotional immediacy of poetry. Her debut novel, *Syndrom lystopadu: Homo compatiens* (The Leaf-Fall Syndrome: Homo Compatiens, 2014), was one of the first literary works that incorporated the Euromaidan into its plot. The novel dealt with the ethical person's responsibility to combat injustice: the central character, the 'compassionate human being' of the novel's subtitle, is supernaturally burdened with empathy. He enters into others' consciousness and experiences their sufferings, mentally sharing the pain of the protesters of the Arab Spring in Tunis and Cairo. In the end, he cannot resist joining the Euromaidan protests in Kyiv – not in his mind this time, but in fact. Amelina's second and only other published novel, *Dim dlia Doma* (A Home for Dom, 2017), is whimsically framed as a first-person narrative told by a poodle named Dom. A sympathetic portrayal of urban life in the last years of the USSR and at the start of Ukraine's independence, it tells of a family, once part of the old Soviet military elite, whose members must modify their loyalties and identities in a new Ukraine where they no longer enjoy privilege.

Amelina's wartime poems, in keeping with much Ukrainian poetry written in the wake of the invasion, formulated a new and starkly polarised world view, loyal to compatriots and outraged by Russia, the atrocities perpetrated by its army, and its history of colonialism: 'You're brothers, perhaps? / No, our arms crossed / not in embrace, but in battle / . . . As our battle begins / You'd do well not to ask / Why we resemble those / who have killed us since time began' (Amelina 2022).

Victoria Amelina's return to poetry was part of a broad cultural phenomenon: the burgeoning of poetic creativity in response to the war. From at least the time of Taras Shevchenko (1814–61), celebrated as Ukraine's national poet, poetry helped define and defend Ukrainian national identity in the face of colonial predation. After 2014, poets – many with established reputations, but also a great number of amateurs – eagerly embraced this task. An anthology of contemporary lyrical poetry about the war published in 2022 included works by no fewer than 142 authors (Sydorzhevs'kyi 2022). Poetry is well suited to recording personal responses to war: lyrical poems, traditionally brief, take less time to compose than works of other genres; their task is to express emotions; and the boundary between the 'speaker' of the poem and the poet as a real person is often blurred. Social media has made possible the presentation of poetry to the public without the mediation of publishers. The poetry of amateurs may well be less sophisticated than that of established poets, but both record and reflect on the feelings of men and women in their wartime roles as soldiers, volunteers, providers of essential services, refugees or carers. Both reflect on same large themes: the preciousness and fragility of life; the meaning of suffering and self-sacrifice; and the individual's obligation to the community.

While anthologies of war poetry have proliferated in Ukraine, they have appeared in translation as well. Among the collections available in English are Oksana Maksymchuk's and Max Rosochinsky's *Words for War* (2017), Anatoly Kudryavitsky's *The Frontier* (2017), Kalpana Singh-Chitnis's *Sunflowers* (2022) and Carolyn Forché's and Ilya Kaminsky's *In the Hour of War* (2023). Translations favour the work of established poets over the verse of poetic newcomers, but in wartime Ukraine, straightforwardness and sincerity are embraced as poetic virtues, while 'professional', 'literary' expression seems extravagant – alongside ambiguity, ornament, playfulness and other residues of the postmodernism of the 1990s and 2000s. As Halyna Kruk (b. 1974), herself a literary scholar, put it in the opening poem of her provocatively named collection, *Crash Course in Molotov Cocktails*, 'the main thing is not to forget that none of this was about literature' (Kruk 2023: 31; see also Kruk 2024).

Among the topics that contemporary Ukrainian poetry *is* about are the emotions that the war evokes: fear, such as a mother's fear for her children in Kruk's 'In a Dream'; anger, like that of the lyrical subject at being separated from her family in 'How I Killed' by Lyuba Yakimchuk (b. 1985), a native of Donbas and author of the collection *Apricots of Donbas* (2015, 2021); and grief, such as the anguish caused by the ruination of people, their homes and cities that Marianna Kiyanovska (b. 1973), who had explored historical trauma in *Voices of Babyn Yar* (2017, 2022), brings to expression in 'the heart trapped in guilt-pain'. On the other hand, there is love: love as the sensation that suffuses soldiers as they go about their dangerous duties, as in 'The First Letter to the Corinthians' by Artur Dron (b. 2000); love for home, depicted by Ostap Slyvynsky (b. 1978) in 'Latifa' as most keenly felt when that home is lost; love for one's comrades-in-arms and one's family; and even love for one's fellow creatures, exemplified in 'Let me tell you a story', Maksym Kryvtsov's poignant portrait of the cat that is his companion in the trenches. Kryvtsov (1990–2024) was killed at the front shortly after the publication of his first collection of poems.

The war challenges its lyrical chroniclers to document thoughts and feelings at moments of trauma or catastrophe. In his laconic 'Debaltseve Prayer', Volodymyr Tymchuk (b. 1979) transforms the soldier's certainty that he faces insuperable odds into a mental prayer for the dead and a plea to be given the chance to improve the world. Nataalka Marynchak (b. 1981) relates images of the carnage after the bursting of a shell to the colours of Ukrainian embroidery ('our embroideries are like notches red on the bare flesh . . .'), while the Russian-language Ukrainian poet Lyudmyla Khersonska (b. 1964) observes that 'Buried in a human neck, a bullet looks like an eye, sewn in' (Khersonska 2023: 15). In 'Caterpillar', Lyuba Yakimchuk terrifyingly reconstructs the dissociated

pictures that arise in a woman's mind before and while she suffers serial rape. The agony of a veteran who lives with ineradicable memories, and the agony of the spouse who cares for and suffers with him, is the theme of 'April 6' by Kateryna Kalytko (b. 1982), author of the collection *Nobody Knows Us Here and We Don't Know Anyone* (2019, 2022).

Serhiy Zhadan's strategies for making the war tangible include depicting its impact on people at the margins of society: the tattoo artist who has become politicised ('Needle'), the alcoholic who is also an esoteric poet ('Headphones') or the Seventh-Day Adventist ('Sect'). Zhadan (b. 1974; see Figure 2), a poet, novelist, singer and political activist, remained in Kharkiv as a volunteer when the city came under bombardment and in June 2024 enlisted in the army. His collection *How Fire Descends* begins with poems written in 2021 and 2022; in contrast to the hard-bitten irony of much of his earlier poetry, some of these 'New Poems' soften the pain of war with hopes for a newly meaningful life and a return to lost homes.

Few contemporary Ukrainian poets reject war absolutely, independent of the justice of the cause for which it is fought. Yuri Izdryk (b. 1962), whose nonconformist cultural activities brought him fame and notoriety in the 1990s, is one of the rare exceptions, deeming war, including 'this war', 'a chance not to kill anyone' ('Make Love'). More characteristic is the stoic stance of poets who acknowledge war's hellishness, but concede the absence of alternatives to fighting it – Iryna Shuvalova (b. 1986) in 'Volunteer', or Borys



**Figure 2** Serhiy Zhadan, 2020. Photo: Venzz. Reproduced unchanged under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International Licence.

Humenyuk (b. 1965), who volunteered in 2014 and has been missing in action since late 2022. Humenyuk likens a soldier who keeps his rifle in good order to a father swaddling his infant, while a trench becomes a symbolic place of encounter with earth, land and country, all three captured by the single Ukrainian word *zemlia* ('When You Clean Your Weapon').

The pathos of much Ukrainian war poetry is that of endurance and resistance, which Natalka Marynychak captures in her image of a heart of reinforced concrete ('and each of us will have a separate war'). 'We Won't Go Anywhere!' declares Oleksandr Kozynets (b. 1988). In 'Abraham is walking', Boris Khersonsky recalls that Christ died and arose again through His own power, implying that Ukraine's life force is a similarly self-generated. Such invocations of Biblical narrative are not uncommon in Ukrainian war poetry: Halyna Kruk's 'and Jesus ascended' draws an analogy between Christ's crucifixion and the atrocities committed in Bucha (Kruk 2023: 35).

Many poets invoke the motif of the inadequacy of language in the face of the brutality of war. For Marianna Savka (b. 1973), poetry in wartime is a hot-air balloon that has turned to lead ('We wrote poems . . .'). Ella Yevtushenko (b. 1996) laments the failure of words to convey the horrors of occupation (#BuchaMassacre). In Lyuba Yakimchuk's 'Decomposition', the fragmentation of the names of cities mirrors the destruction of the cities themselves: 'hansk' is what remains of Luhansk, and Debaltseve breaks up into 'deb', 'alt' and 'eve'. Iryna Shuvalova, author of the collection *Pray to the Empty Wells*, doubts the morality of writing poetry amid war-inflicted suffering ('the unspeakable'). But poetic language can also be a weapon. Yulia Musakovska (b. 1982), who in 'The God of Submission' mocks non-resistance to violence and acceptance of victimhood (Musakovska 2024: 102), asserts that 'There is nothing more durable, / nothing less fleeting' than 'Our words, hard and swollen with rage, / black from grief, / like the concrete covering of an old bomb shelter' ('Words'). For Zhadan, 'it turns out that the language is mightier than the fear of speaking' ('Perhaps It's Time to Start Now'). Kateryna Kalytko's poem 'Here, take this language, woman' instructs its reader, 'Use it [language] to shoot. . . . There are plenty of bullets, don't spare them, / if they run out – / make new ones out of words'.

The relationship between language and national identity has been a motif of Ukrainian literature, intellectual debate and politics since the nineteenth century. Many Ukrainian writers and poets were born in parts of Ukraine where the Russian language prevailed over Ukrainian in daily use. In independent Ukraine, some writers, while identifying as Ukrainians, wrote in Russian. Outrage at the Russian invasion made it difficult for some to continue doing so. Boris Khersonsky, who previously had written in Russian only, began

writing in Ukrainian as well. Others, such as Iya Kiva (b. 1984), abandoned Russian altogether. For twenty-five years, Volodymyr Rafeyenko (b. 1969), a native of Donetsk, had written and published in Russian. He fled his native city in 2014 and settled near Bucha, intending at first to alternate writing novels in Ukrainian and Russian. But after the atrocities of which Bucha became a symbol, he wrote, ‘never again in my life would I write or publish any of my work in Russian. I no longer want anything to do with a culture of murderers and rapists’ (‘I Once Wrote – and Spoke, and Thought – in Russian . . . No More’). Rafeyenko’s last novel in Russian (a Ukrainian translation by Marianna Kiyanovska appeared simultaneously), *The Length of Days* (2017, 2023), was a phantasmagoria in the gothic manner in which the grotesque is the appropriate mode for representing life in the city of Z, a transparent allegory of Donetsk. *Mondegreen* (Rafeyenko 2019, 2022), Rafeyenko’s first novel in Ukrainian, also an exemplar of non-realistic prose, depicts the tribulations of a newcomer to Kyiv and to the Ukrainian language, a refugee from his place and culture of origin.

Many authors found intolerable what they diagnosed as the complicity of Russian culture in Russian imperialism and its most recent embodiment, the invasion of Ukraine. Equally offensive for them was the failure of many in the West, including fellow intellectuals, to condemn the colonial criminality of the Russian state or the widespread acceptance by Russian society of Russia’s war aims. Oksana Zabuzhko (b. 1960), a poet, writer, philosopher and one of the pre-eminent voices of Ukrainian feminism from the late 1980s onward, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, berated the West for its blindness to Russia’s totalitarianism and long history of crimes against humanity. The West’s endeavours to grasp the rationality of evil, Zabuzhko contends, glide easily into acceptance of its normality; hence the failure to comprehend the pathological otherness of Russia, of which Russian literature, deeply admired by the West, is a direct expression: ‘Russian literature has, for 200 years, painted a picture of the world in which the criminal is to be pitied, not condemned. We should sympathize with him, for “there are no guilty people in the world” (Tolstoy)’ (Zabuzhko 2022: 7). In a similar vein, Donetsk-born Olena Stiazhkina (b. 1968) in her ‘War Diary’ reflected on the ‘little man’ in Russian literature who is unable to resist the compulsions that drive him to crime. As an example of such ethical paralysis, Stiazhkina holds up the character of Gerasim in Ivan Turgenev’s short story ‘Mumu’ (1852), a text taught as a literary classic in Soviet schools. Gerasim drowns the dog he loves because, to his mind, his circumstances leave him no alternative (*U22*: 22). Turgenev’s story also figures in Zabuzhko’s ‘No Guilty People’ and in ‘The Ouroboros Path’, an essay in which the writer and film director Iryna Tsilyk (b. 1982) decries the instincts

that manifest themselves in the outrages of the invasion and the historical tradition to which they belong: ‘primitive desire to humiliate another human being, to destroy, to desecrate someone else’s body and spirit, to close someone’s mouth, to tear tender flesh roughly, to “punish” someone else, their dignity, their otherness, their right to say no’ (*U22*: 157).

Anger is the dominant tone of Ukrainian writers’ essayistic responses to the war. But just as some war poetry is about love, so, too, is a strand of reflective prose. In ‘To You, Beloved River’, Taras Prokhasko (b. 1968) records the experience of loving one’s country as a sensation that moves body and mind: ‘Landscape comprises something seen by the brain of the heart and the heart of the brain . . . . To be able to be yourself in your landscape is to be in harmony with your inner and outer world’ (*U22*: 64). Even in war, there is space for the idyll.

One of the genres to which Ukrainian authors have turned during the war is the diary, in which the recording of events of the traumatic present is often accompanied by commentary, interpretation and digression into general reflection. Such are Rafeyenko’s narratives of his family’s flight from the vicinity of Bucha (*U22*: 57–62, 73–8, 83–8), Olena Stiazhkina’s *Ukraine, War, Love: A Donetsk Diary* (2024) about events between March and August 2014, Zhadan’s *Sky Above Kharkiv* (2023b) and *Diary of an Invasion* (2022) by Andrey Kurkov (b. 1961), a prolific novelist and perhaps Ukraine’s most translated contemporary author. Kurkov writes in Russian but makes a point of identifying himself as a Ukrainian writer. He had used the same genre in his account of the Euromaidan protests, *Ukrainian Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev [Kyiv]* (2014).

Since 2014, many Ukrainian authors have felt the need to respond to the war with prose that is compelling and aesthetically charged, but at the same time truthful, even documentary. Witnessing is one of the tasks addressed by Olesya Khromeychuk (b. 1983) in *The Death of a Soldier Told by his Sister* (2022), a memoir originally written in English; another, as the author puts it in her preface, is ‘to use the privilege that living in Western Europe gave me to remind the world that our [i.e., the West’s] freedom is just as fragile as that of our fellow Europeans in Ukraine’ (Khromeychuk 2022: 9). The memoir records the author’s efforts to supply a soldier in a distant country with what he needs (good boots, for example); her shock on discovering, through Facebook, that her brother has been killed; her incapacity to talk about his death; the nightmare of arranging the funeral; the renewed relevance of her brother’s death after 24/2; and the enduring experience of loss and survivor guilt.

Like *Stories from the Trenches* (2020, 2024) by Dmytro Stepanenko (b. 1975), *Absolute Zero* (2016, 2020) by Artem Chekh (pseudonym of Artem Cherednyk, b. 1985) is an example of what has come to be called ‘combatants’