

Bearing Witness to the War For Ukraine: Nonfiction Texts

Effets Réels is an international literary festival dedicated to contemporary literature of reality, memory, and engagement. It took place in April 2026 for the first time. Effets Réels brings together European writers, journalists, artists, and translators around a shared question: how can the contemporary world be expressed in the face of political, social, and historical crises. Particular attention was paid to the Russian–Ukrainian War, in which truth becomes the first victim of aggression.¹

Through a series of lectures, roundtables, performances, screenings, and workshops, the festival explores the relationships between literature and testimony, personal narratives and collective history, the transmission of memory, as well as war, migration, and resistance. From Ukraine to the Mediterranean, from family heritage to erased memories, Effets Réels advocates for an embodied, critical, and open form of literature – one capable of reflecting on the present and renewing the forms of non-fiction storytelling.

The initiator and one of the key architects of Effets Réels festival is Claudio Milanesi, a professor at Aix-Marseille University, the largest franco-phone university in the world. The National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy was deeply represented at the festival. Konstantin Sigov, honorary doctor of Aix-Marseille University, Tetyana Oharkova, and Anastasia Fomichova contributed to the formation of a distinct “Ukrainian segment” dedicated to presenting real stories and narratives about the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war.²

My contribution, delivered both at the École de Journalisme et de Communication d’Aix-Marseille and within the Festival program, addressed issues of freedom of speech in Ukraine during the full-scale war, efforts to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation, the resilience of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, achievements of the Mohyla School of Journalism and the StopFake project, as well as the prospects for cooperation with Aix-Marseille University. I also participated in a discussion on Ukrainian non-fiction literature as a form of reporting real events and conveying truthful information about the war.

Russian-Ukrainian War

In addition to the fact that the title of my article is intentionally informa-

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tive – aimed not at metaphorization but at clearly indicating its subject – it is important to emphasize that the current Russian-Ukrainian War has multiple dimensions. For Ukrainians, this war, with intermittent pauses, has effectively been ongoing for several centuries. For contemporary Western observers, however, it is most often dated from 2022, marking the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In reality, the war began in 2014, immediately following the victory of the Revolution of Dignity.

This phase represents a continuation of a long historical struggle for independence from Russia, in which Ukrainians are reclaiming their country, defending their territory, values, and national identity. It is also, fundamentally, a struggle for the physical survival of the nation.

War Literature

In my review, war literature is not at all the kind that glorifies war, since Ukrainians do not create anything like that. Rather, it is the literature of people shaped by war: Ukrainian authors, soldiers, volunteers, and intellectuals who, at this very moment, are writing European history and turning its newest pages. They are not enthusiastic about war, they often hate it, but they understand that it cannot simply be wished away.

As Oleksandra Matviychuk, the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, has noted, “occupation is not peace; it is a form of continuing war.” Occupation entails murder, torture, rape, robbery, and the abduction of children, who are then raised to hate their homeland. Matviychuk is also involved in the documentary publishing project *Living the War*³, which, currently available in English, Spanish, and German, documents the lived experience of people during Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine. “Since February 24, 2022, the project has presented personal stories and photographic evidence through books, an online magazine, and exhibitions.” It was founded in Kyiv in May 2022.

The suffering of Ukrainians, whom the Russian army seeks to erase along with their state, language, and culture, is paradoxically transformed into resilience. Ukrainian resilience in the context of the full-scale war is a mosaic: it emerges from and is sustained by the combined strength of society, the army, and institutions, including the education system.

The first studies of texts about the war have already appeared in Ukraine. Yaroslav Polishchuk, the author of the book *Seven Views of War* (Kyiv, Dukh i Litera, 2025), notes that whereas in the Fall of 2022 there were such 900 books, by the end of 2025 their number reached 1,300 or more. “While the occupiers are fighting to restore the Soviet past, with which they associate illusory ideas about strength, power, and material well-being, Ukrainians are fighting for a worthy future – in an independent and democratic state, as well as in a free and open world.” Yaroslav Polishchuk also emphasizes the genre features of war literature, pointing to the “organic diffusion of literary forms” and “a new combination of fiction and nonfiction.” All this literature is connected to the authors' personal experiences and includes elements of documentary writing, essayism, and journalistic reporting.

For reasons of preserving the chronology of events related to the war, the first publication I would like to mention in this review is the book-dialogue with

the prominent Ukrainian intellectual Ihor Kozlovskiy, "Free in Captivity," edited by Anna Hoover (Lviv, Old Lion Publishing House, 2025). The philosopher Ihor Kozlovskiy was imprisoned in Donetsk in 2014. For 700 days, he was mocked and tortured: electrocuted, strangled, hung, his bones broken, a bag placed over his head, while he was told: "The Russian world has come; you will not get out of here alive." The book rightly draws an analogy with the life choices of Viktor Frankl, who could have avoided a Nazi concentration camp but did not do so because of his parents. Ihor Kozlovskiy also did not leave his paralyzed son with Down Syndrome in the occupied territory.

His first words after liberation were: "My heart is singing a song now. It is singing a love song. Love for the people of Ukraine." Ihor Kozlovskiy reflects on meanings and values, asking, "Why do we live?" In his view, "a person begins from the moment when he makes a decision based on a certain meaning." Ihor Kozlovskiy's life can be described as an apotheosis of humanity. Today, not far from Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, where he also taught, there is a park named after him. Since the current war is a struggle to preserve Ukrainian statehood, Ihor Kozlovskiy reminds us of its value-based purpose: "The state should be our tool to foster dignity, and for this we need two factors: dignity and mercy."

Already in 2022, a book by Serhiy Zhadan, one of the most prominent Ukrainian writers, whose work spans multiple artistic fields, was published in German: "Himmel über Charkiw: Nachrichten vom Überleben im Krieg" (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2022). In the same year, he was awarded the 2022 Peace Prize of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association.⁴ The following year, the book appeared in English as "Sky Above Kharkiv: Dispatches from the Ukrainian Front" (Yale University Press, 2023). This distinctive diary comprises the writer's social media posts from the first six months of the full-scale Russian invasion.

"For me, this book is special – making daily notes, recording something, and reacting to something, to be honest, I did not see a paper edition behind all this. But German friends gathered it all together and offered to publish it. I didn't even reread it – I thought it wouldn't be very honest with reality," writes Serhiy Zhadan, who was the commandant of Kharkiv Maidans during the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014), and whose writings have been translated into more than 30 languages.

The book conveys the daily experience of war in Kharkiv, a city under constant Russian shelling. It reflects on volunteering and evacuation, on the city as a community, on the Ukrainian language as a form of resistance, and on the preservation of ordinary expressions of humanity and culture under extraordinary conditions.

Olesya Khromeychuk's book "The Death of a Soldier. A Story Told by His Sister" (Kyiv, Vikhola, 2023) is also an important reminder that the war began in 2014. The author is the director of the Ukrainian Institute in London. She deeply loved her brother, Volodymyr Pavliv, who, having lived for a long time outside Ukraine – in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, where he also married – went to fight as a volunteer and died in 2017, after nearly two years at the front. Olesya Khromeychuk could not accept that the soldier's death would go unnoticed. She says, "I would rather not have had to write this book". This

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motif, when the author regrets that such texts had to be written, is present in many books about the current war.

The book by Volodymyr Vakulenko “I Am Transforming... Diary of the Occupation. Selected Poems” (Kharkiv, Vivat, 2024), tells the story of two Ukrainian writers. One of them, the author of the aforementioned publication, was kidnapped and tortured by the Russians during the occupation of his native village of Kapitolivka in the Kharkiv region in 2022. Before his death, he managed to hide his diary, which, after the Russians fled, was found by another Ukrainian writer, Viktoriya Amelina, founder of the New York Literary Festival in the Ukrainian village called New York, in Bakhmut district, Donetsk region. The following year, she herself died as a result of a Russian missile strike on Kramatorsk.

Viktoriya Amelina speaking at the posthumous presentation of the Prix Voltaire to Volodymyr Vakulenko, said: “I, a Ukrainian writer, have to speak today on behalf of my colleague Volodymyr Vakulenko, who, unlike me, did not survive another attempt by the empire to destroy Ukrainian identity. The award given to Volodymyr means a lot to the Ukrainian literary community, in particular because hundreds of Ukrainian writers, artists, and public figures in the 20th century were killed for choosing to be Ukrainian, but none of them received such an award in Norway.”

In a diary found by Viktoriya Amelina in Kapitolivka after the September 2022 offensive of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, children’s writer Volodymyr Vakulenko, identified from the nameless body No. 319, wrote: “Values become more important when you get into trouble.” The death of Volodymyr Vakulenko seems to become a metaphor for these poetic lines of his: “I turn into a chapter, into space, into a shot.”

The first major literary project aimed at documenting the early experience of the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 was the collection of essays, memoirs, and reflections by Ukrainian writers and public intellectuals, including those who served in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, titled “Martial Law” (Chernivtsi, Meridian Czernowitz, 2023), with a foreword by at that time Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Valeriy Zaluzhnyi. The curators of the publication are Yevheniya Lopata and Andriy Lyubka. The short texts by 50 authors convey the mood and attitudes of the first year of the full-scale war, including experiences of combat, occupation, evacuation, and, in some cases, emigration from those Ukrainian territories first entered and then rapidly escaped the Russian army.

In such cases, it is important to record the initial understanding – the immediate, natural reaction to events that have already become personal experience but have not yet been fully realized as history. This is also a work of literature about “love and tenderness” (Katerina Kalytko), but with the understanding that they must be “restarted” so that those who remain alive can emerge from a

“petrified” state of mind. Another author, Max Karuk, reflects on whether he is truly dehumanizing the enemy or simply recognizing the fact that the 45,000 body bags prepared by the Russians were intended to “clean up” Ukrainians who might, in various ways, hinder the restoration of the empire on Ukrainian soil. “Because the war will eventually end, but the Russians’ desire to bring body bags here will not.”

According to Alesia Ostrovska-Lyuta, director of the Mystetskyi Arsenal Museum⁵, “the consequences of the Russian occupation of the outskirts of Kyiv, the mass murders and torture of civilians were not surprising – all this fit well with the memories of our relatives, with the secret stories that were told in the family. Everything was reminiscent of the Soviet conquest of Halychyna (Western Ukraine) and Transcarpathia after World War II.” The deputy director of the Ukrainian Institute, a Crimean Tatar, Alim Aliyev, states: “See you soon in our free Bakhchisaray! It no longer sounds like a mantra, but like a real plan.”

Among the books of 2023, one should also mention “The Wild West of Eastern Europe” by Pavlo Kazarin (Kharkiv, Vivat, 2023). The author was born in Crimea and comes from a family of Soviet internal migrants who “wandered between identities since childhood.” On the second day of the full-scale war, Pavlo Kazarin joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine. He writes: “Russia unhooked my native carriage (Crimea) and hitched it to its train, which is not even heading east, but to the past.” This is a case in which the author defines his Ukrainian civic identity, emphasizing that it is “not blood” and “not soil.” At the same time, Ukrainian national and political culture should not be opposed, as they are closely interconnected and together form the values of civil society. In particular, Ukrainian tradition, which values responsible leadership, does not tolerate dictatorship.

In fact, Pavlo Kazarin finds his place, and even appropriates Ukraine for himself, by choosing to defend the state. Therefore, he is demanding. He pays particular attention to the complexity and pluralism of Ukrainian society and reminds us that “victory does not always bury old trenches. Sometimes it digs new ones.” The author thinks critically and speaks frankly, inviting the reader to do the same. Once again, the recurring motif is heard—the question of why such books had to be written in the first place: “I have a dream. I want this book to become obsolete,” because “sometimes becoming obsolete means winning.”

Oleksandr Mykhed started writing his book “Call Sign for Job. Chronicles of the Invasion” (Lviv, Old Lion Publishing House, 2023) on the first day of the full-scale war. “This is a book about what is impossible to forget. And forgive.” The author points to a dramatic difference between Ukrainian and Russian political cultures: “Russia suddenly believed its own propaganda, without understanding anything about Ukraine.” It may seem strange, but Russians truly do not understand who they are dealing with: “Russia attacked a country that mocks the enemy and is just forming a canon of new folk heroes of the Ukrainian resistance right in front of our eyes.”

What should the response be? Oleksandr Mykhed quotes the words of the Ukrainian poet Halyna Kruk at a festival in Berlin: “I am sorry that poetry does not kill.” He writes that Ukrainians are “a monolith of rage and love when you come on their native land.” The very title of the book is an allusion to the

biblical story of Job, “who lost everything, but did not lose his faith.” Culture cannot be considered outside politics, particularly because the entire “history of Ukrainian literature is when Ukrainian writers search for the bodies of Ukrainian writers tortured by the Russians” (an allusion to the story of Volodymyr Vaku- lenko and Viktoriya Amelina). Therefore, Oleksandr Mykhed insists that this war should not be called a “Ukrainian crisis,” so that the truth about it is known.

Born in Mariupol, a soldier of the “Azov” regiment, Valeriya Subotina, with the call sign “Nava,” published two books in 2024: “Azovstal. Steel Press Service and Captivity” (Kharkiv, Folio). A small woman with a lion’s heart and a powerful literary talent, she became a volunteer in 2015 and survived the defense of Mariupol and Azovstal⁶, as well as captivity in Olenivka. “Nava” appears before us as a witness to these events and as a representative of a Ukrainian nation whose many generations have borne witness to Russian crimes for over 300 years.

Remembering her fellow soldiers, Valeriya Subotina writes: “My steel soldiers... thank you for being with you!” She married officer Andrii Subbotin on May 5, 2022, in the besieged Azovstal, exchanging improvised foil wedding rings. He was killed three days later. Another Azov fighter, Vladyslav Dutchak, with the call sign “Docent,” was imprisoned with them in Olenivka. In a lecture at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy three years later, describing the situation in the encircled Azovstal, he recounted how the regiment commander Denys ‘Redis’ Prokopenko, using a computer, simultaneously coordinated the defense of another sector of the front in the Zaporizhzhia direction, within “Azov’s” area of responsibility.

This fact testifies not only to the courage, psychological resilience, and professionalism of “comrade Redis,” as his congeners called him, but also deepens our understanding of the nature of modern warfare, where skills such as operating drones are often rooted in earlier experience with computer games. “Nava” recalls with respect the commanders of “Azov” (then a regiment, since 2023 a brigade): “Redis,” “Kalyna” (Sviatoslav Palamar), as well as the photographer “Orest” (Dmytro Kozatskyi), as true heroes who “are important in war. These are symbols that people follow, for which they also fight.”

The title of Myroslav Layuk’s book “Bakhmut” (Kyiv, Ukraïner, 2024) is revealing, as this was the historical name of the Ukrainian Cossack fortress before it was renamed “Artemovsk” by the Russian communists. From this perspective, the battle for Bakhmut has not only a military but also a semantic dimension. In fact, the book grew out of journalistic reports the author wrote during his trips to the front. Here one encounters infantry soldiers, medics, chaplains, artillerymen, anti-aircraft gunners, men and women, and parents and children. Two protagonists of one reportage ask Myroslav Layuk when he will publish it. – “Probably in May.” – One of them replies in farewell: “I think I already will be gone in May.”

In the chapter “Rhymes,” Myroslav Layuk places Bakhmut within the context of Ukrainian and Western European philosophy and culture. Thus, Vasyl Stus, a prominent Ukrainian intellectual and dissident associated with the Donetsk region, who died in a Soviet concentration camp precisely because he was a Ukrainian poet, is presented as thoughtfully engaging with the philosophy of Al-

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bert Camus. Meanwhile, the opportunity for Ukrainian writers, the “Sixtiers,” (Writers and dissidents of the 1960s-Ed.) whom Sartre called “rebels,” to meet him and Simone de Beauvoir in Kyiv in 1964 did not “germinate” and, in fact, had no lasting intellectual consequences. Perhaps this was because Sartre, not fully understanding the political context, sought to maintain equally constructive relations with representatives of the Russian Soviet regime and with young Ukrainian opposition intellectuals.

The author also mentions the film director Larysa Shepitko, originally from Bakhmut, whose film *The Ascent* was awarded the Golden Bear at the Berlinale in 1977, as well as the prominent Ukrainian actor Leonid Bykov, who was also born near Bakhmut. Both were incorporated into Russian cultural narratives by the Soviets. Strikingly, Larysa Shepitko, Leonid Bykov, and Vyacheslav Chornovil, a Ukrainian dissident who later became an influential politician and presidential candidate, died in car accidents. It is not definitively known whether their deaths were accidental, yet they have acquired a symbolic, almost metaphorical dimension (as, in French context, did the death of Albert Camus), particularly in light of the consistent Russian policy of appropriating Ukrainian history and culture, as well as documented assassinations by Russian agents of figures such as the composer Volodymyr Ivasyuk, the artist and dissident Alla Horská, and political leaders Symon Petliura and Stepan Bandera, alongside Russian figures Boris Nemtsov and Anna Politkovskaya (of Ukrainian origin, née Mazepa).

The front line extends not only across Ukrainian territory but also through Ukrainian history and culture. As Myroslav Layuk writes: “I look now, on April 25, 2023, at the map of hostilities. The Russians have captured three-quarters of Bakhmut. But Larysa Shepitko Street is still under Ukrainian control.”

Writer and volunteer Andriy Lyubka, who purchased 415 vehicles for the Armed Forces of Ukraine using social media fundraising before joining the army, published the book “War from the Back Side” (Chernivtsi, Meridian Czernowitz, 2024). He writes that “war steals everything from us, but above all – our time, our productive years, the period that is denoted by the idiom ‘in the prime of our lives.’” Like many other Ukrainian intellectuals of his generation, he feels at ease in an international context and therefore emphasizes that “literature deepens, explains and advocates, therefore it is an ideal means for (cultural) diplomacy in times of upheaval.” He also hopes that readers, having learned “about wonderful people and examples of humanity during war, [will] close this book with one conviction: despite everything good and inspiring, war is the worst thing that can happen to the humankind.”

When he first arrived from peaceful Uzhhorod, located in the far west of Ukraine on the border with two EU countries, to the front in the Donetsk region,

the author realized that “fear is an internal concept, not a geographical one.” Andriy Lyubka describes the Russian president as “the embodiment of pure evil,” a force that “has been emerging in different corners of the planet for thousands of years to sow death and chaos.” Therefore, “each generation must go through its school to remember that democracy, security, and peace are not gratis, but a reconquered value. And each generation must reconquer them anew, rediscover their forgotten advantages;” “today evil has opened the door to Europe and is trying to strangle Ukraine in the hallway, but this does not mean that it will stop and will not go to the next rooms.”

The editors Khrystyna Parubiy (the originator of the project and interviewer) and Iryna Berlyand published two collections in 2024 and 2025: “Women at War” and “Women at War 2” (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera).⁷ Both volumes are based on video testimonies originally broadcast on the Espresso TV channel. They bring together the stories of women who became soldiers in response to Russian aggression.

As Iryna Berlyand emphasizes, women soldiers “do not talk about peace. They talk about victory”; indeed, “pacifism kills.” As she explains, “if Ukraine stops fighting, it will disappear. We know that armed resistance, that is, war itself, is the only thing that can save us from disappearance.”

Khrystyna Parubiy dedicates the second volume to her godson, Andriy Parubiy, Hero of Ukraine; speaker of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine; Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council; and the commandant of both Ukrainian Maidans in Kyiv during the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity, who was shot dead by a Russian terrorist on a street in Lviv on August 20, 2025.

Tetyana Oharkova and Volodymyr Yermolenko define the genre of their book “Life on the Edge: Ukraine, Culture and War” (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2025) as “philosophical reportage⁸.” Both authors are public intellectuals and volunteers engaged in a wide range of initiatives. Like many contemporary Ukrainian writers, they reflect on the frontline of the war with the so-called “Russian world,” which seeks to destroy culture as such. As they write: “To understand Ukraine, you need to be at the front, go to the front, help the front. To understand Europe, you need to understand Ukraine. What the front is for Ukraine today, Ukraine is for the free world. This is the border, which is the center – even if it is a bleeding center.” At the same time, they emphasize that “this border runs inside us. In fact, it always passes within us.”

What, then, is the source of Ukrainian resilience? The authors argue that “the Ukrainian idea is connected with an intense reflection on freedom and restriction, on the combination of freedom and honor, on liberation from slavery for the sake of freely finding a rule that you follow because you believe it is good.” In this sense, “to be free as air, you must be solid as a rock.” The mission of Ukrainian intellectuals today, they suggest, is to bear witness to the war: “Speaking today is not only our right, but also our duty.” Crucially, “speaking is always uniting people. To be a witness is to stitch us together.”

Continuing the discussion of the sources of Ukrainian resilience, the traditions of political culture deserve special attention. The features of Ukrainian individualism, inherited from the Baroque era and the Cossack state of the seven-

teenth century, are complemented by longstanding traditions of national liberation movement, self-organization, the influence of modern social networks, and the strength of civil society.

The simple conceptual titles of the book's short essay-stories recall the approach of Michel Montaigne, whom Tadeusz Breza once described as an "active reader." The story "Trust" portrays people who "are not going to run away anywhere, and therefore rely on trust in each other – and nothing else." In "Roots," the authors describe "something botanical in Ukrainian identity": roots that "can exist even when the trunks are destroyed," that "know how to live underground" and "how to wait for their time." The book is also suffused with love, humanity, and compassion. "Ukrainians look at their war-torn country as their native home after many years of separation (...) These are the roots from which you grew up. And it is the love for this place that makes you continue the fight. After all, this love is the only thing we really have." As the authors conclude, "the fiercest fury will not be enough to endlessly destroy the enemy. But love is able to stand up for itself to the end."

In contrast, Oharkova and Yermolenko argue that "changes very rarely happen in Russia," because "there is no body of society, no majority that cares." The current national unity of Ukrainians, by contrast, is grounded in the role of an engaged majority, united by mutual trust and the values of a pluralistic political culture. At the same time, prior to independence in 1991, generations of Ukrainians continued to struggle for dignity, identity, and statehood. Under conditions of statelessness, the revolutionary national liberation movement exemplified the decisive role of an active minority.

Artem Chapay, like many other Ukrainian authors, seeks to be heard by Western intellectuals in his book "Not Born for War" (Chernivtsi: Books – XXI, 2025). He firmly rejects the framing that Ukraine was merely "drawn" into the war: "Ukraine was not 'drawn' into the war, as you say. Ukraine was attacked, even without a formal pretext like the one created by Hitler before the attack on Poland." He calls for an ethical reorientation of analysis: "Start with the suffering of millions, not with geopolitical chess. Start with the columns of refugees, start with families with children, with the elderly and with pets. Start with the oncology hospital in Kyiv, where young patients in the bomb shelter miss chemotherapy." In this perspective, the humanity and courage of Ukrainians define their existential choice: "Your actions change both you and your view of yourself."

Without diminishing the epic scale of the historical events currently unfolding, Chapay insists on fidelity to lived reality. He expresses the hope that "in half a century, at least children will not be told in history lessons that 'everyone stood up as one.'" Instead, he calls for minimizing hypocrisy: "We are what we do. Ukraine still holds its own in the face of Darkness primarily due to that real 'Here-Ukraine' – all those unostentatious or ostentatious, pleasant and unpleasant, ordinary and extraordinary people."

The book "The Game of Dress-Up" by Artem Chekh (Chernivtsi: Meridian Czernowitz, 2025) addresses the difficult return of soldiers to civilian life. The abnormality of war, once internalized, becomes an obstacle to re-entering what is conventionally understood as "normal" life. This raises fundamental questions about the very notion of normality and suggests that society itself must

Ukrainian authors are deeply concerned with their ability to convey to international audiences the truth about a war that, according to the aggressor's intent, is meant to destroy Ukraine and Ukrainians.

also change in order to meet veterans halfway. In this sense, reintegration is a movement toward each other.

At home, Chekh describes how changing clothes becomes a symbolic act of trying on different roles – yet also of returning mentally to the war and becoming trapped within it. As he puts it starkly: “Kill the katsap, otherwise he will kill you⁹.” For him, going to war proved easier than escaping it; yet returning from war to peaceful life is even more difficult than remaining within it. War not only destroys externally but also produces deep and often tragic inner transformations.

The search for inner balance, in Chekh’s account, is ultimately tied to the recovery of love. This leads him to ask: “Maybe I will simply live in a free country that has defeated evil and never write about war again? Maybe I will write about love, of which there is so little left in my heart?”

Anastasia Fomichova, a volunteer of the “Hospitaliers” medical unit, in her book “Volia. Engagée volontaire dans la résistance ukrainienne” (Grasset, 2025), written in French and awarded the prestigious André Malraux Prize¹⁰, recounts not only her combat experience, but also her family’s history within the broader context of Ukraine’s 20th century past and the transformation of the independent Ukrainian state.

The book recounts the author’s participation in the Ukrainian resistance while also immersing readers in the deeper roots of the war between Ukraine and Russia. Through Anastasia Fomichova’s personal story, it sheds light on key historical traumas, including the Holodomor, Stalinist repressions, and the Chornobyl disaster. These events form part of a family history marked by displacement: following the Chornobyl disaster, the author’s mother, together with her young daughter, who had been living in Kyiv, immigrated to France in the 1990s.

“Hemingway Knows Nothing” by the frank and witty Artur Dron’ (Lviv: Old Lion Publishing House, 2026) is marked by a transparency of language that the author inherits from his admired Erich Maria Remarque and Ernest Hemingway, both of whom wrote truthfully about war. At the same time, Dron’s book articulates a fundamentally different ideological position that he is keen to convey to European intellectuals. This, he insists, is not a war in which it is possible to “understand both sides.”

As he argues, responding to a Scottish journalist’s question about the “dehumanization” of the enemy: “In fact, they have dehumanized themselves by what they are doing – they are raping children.” He raises a broader concern: “How can such a sincere desire to help us be combined with such a sincere misunderstanding of what is happening to us?” For Dron’, this is “our great existential war with evil itself.” What distinguishes this war, in his view, is that whereas in the past soldiers often fought for the economic or political interests of own

national elites, Ukrainians today are defending themselves against what he sees as evil embodied in a criminal Russian political identity, devoid of dignity and compassion.

Dron' further reflects that "literature is used to condemning weapons. And instead it should separate those who attack with weapons from those who defend themselves with weapons." Hence the provocative title: Hemingway "knows nothing," because in his youth he "took part in the war because he wanted to. And it was a foreign war that did not threaten his nation." By contrast, "young Ukrainians fight because they have to. And this is a war for our existence, in which to flee or surrender means the death of an entire nation." The author is also concerned that, in the future, Russian narratives might appropriate Remarque's words to justify their crimes.

He mentions on faith within the context of war while acknowledging the presence of atheists among his fellow soldiers. Author evokes a striking image: Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. A soldier reading the Gospel on Maundy Thursday for the first time, he suggests, might feel that it speaks directly to him: "There are the closest people around, but no one can understand you. You are alone with what awaits you. You know what horror, blood and dirt you will go into tomorrow. What's more, you go there voluntarily." In a powerful personal moment, returning to his native village on Maundy Thursday and carrying the Gospel, Dron' felt as if he were "carrying not a book, but each fallen comrade in his arms."

Kateryna Yegorushkina, in contrast, adopts a different narrative approach in her book "And Then Our House Became a Ship" (Kyiv: Laboratory, 2026), gathering testimonies of people affected by the war in various ways. These are true, intimate, and documented stories. "Probably, this feeling of kinship holds us all together," she writes. The protagonists remain rooted in their cultural frameworks, even amid traumatic experiences. "How did this experience change us? We became stronger. If you are a person, then under any circumstances you remain a person." The book explores survival through trauma and occupation, the rebuilding of trust, the search for home, and the persistence of hope. In this context, human openness emerges as a form of therapy.

A Few More Books

In my review of books and authors, there are several works that do not fit within the category of nonfiction. Nevertheless, they are highly relevant to this discussion, as they contribute to shaping public discourse and the broader cultural context.

First, I would like to mention the book by the well-known chaplain Father Andriy Zelinsky, "Caring for the Spirit" (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2025). The author, a Greek Catholic priest, Jesuit, and the first military chaplain at the ATO¹¹ Headquarters since 2014, offers what can be seen as a kind of guide to the spiritual history of Ukraine. The book includes philosophical reflections on the theological foundations of pastoral care for military personnel. According to Zelinsky, the essence of such care "is revealed precisely in the art of sincere and dedicated work with the spirit – of a warrior, a unit, and a commander." The volume contains much that is essential for understanding Ukrainian cultural identity.

I would also like to highlight the autobiographical novel “Immigrant” by Natalia Teramae (Kyiv, Yakaboo Publishing, 2025). In this accomplished prose debut, the author, a well-known Ukrainian journalist, constructs a compelling public discourse around the experience of Ukrainian emigration during the full-scale war, with particular attention to the motivations for returning to Ukraine. Through a series of vivid personal stories, she explores how individuals build their lives despite obstacles, reflecting on what unites Ukrainians and allows them to remain themselves even after losing, if only temporarily, their homeland. The difficult Ukrainian experience is juxtaposed with the “comfortable Finland,” which Teramae first encounters, then gradually comes to understand, and ultimately grows emotionally attached to. Thus, the book explores the meeting and interpenetration of cultures, as well as the characters’ processes of self-understanding and mutual understanding.

The poetry collection by another representative of Ukrainian civic journalism – if one may so describe the servicewoman and writer Yaryna Chornohuz – “C’est ainsi que nous demeurons libres” (That Is How We Remain Free) has been translated and published in France.¹² Having become a military volunteer in 2019, author remains an active participant in public debates on the war and the sources of Ukrainian resilience. Serving at the front while also acting as a public intellectual, she is widely translated into several languages.

Finally, the book by BBC Ukrainian journalist Vitaliy Chervonenko, “Cancer, War and the ‘Canton(a)’: Notes on Remission” (Kyiv: Vikhola, 2026), is not about the war, aside from its dedication to “those who went to defend Ukraine while the author was undergoing treatment,” but rather about the experience of confronting a life-threatening illness. I include it here because it reflects the atmosphere of mutual assistance and trust on which Ukrainians rely—a kind of psychological “hive model” that enables them to endure, survive, and prevail during the full-scale war. Individuals can either join forces or share their personal experiences to support others in similarly difficult circumstances. As the author notes, “perhaps this will make the cancer journey easier for someone, and it will help healthy people better understand cancer patients, their experiences, and the specifics of their behavior.” The book offers practical advice and candid descriptions of often uncomfortable social realities. Chervonenko himself emphasizes that, had he encountered such a book at the very beginning of his struggle with the disease, it would have been invaluable in helping him choose a more rational path.

Conclusions

Ukrainian intellectuals are being targeted by the Russian regime as “particularly dangerous” to the mythology of its morbid “greatness.” Among those killed by Russians are the writers Volodymyr Vakulenko (1972-2022), Yuriy Ruf (1980-2022), Ilya Chernilevskyi (1991-2022), Hlib Babich (1969-2022), Maksym Petrenko (1983-2022), Artem Dovgopoly (1994-2022), Viktoriya Amelina (1986-2023), and Maksym Kryvtsov (1990-2024).

It should be emphasized that Ukrainian nonfiction literature about the war does not belong to the sphere of propaganda. It is devoid of bravado or romanticization. Rather, it reflects what might be called the voice of an “adult in

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the room”: a responsible literature, imbued with compassion, humanity, and a rejection of war as such. At the same time, it offers an important source of knowledge for uninitiated readers about Ukrainians’ readiness to defend their dignity and values, as well as about their powerful military traditions. Ukrainian authors are deeply concerned with their ability to convey to international audiences the truth about a war that, according to the aggressor’s intent, is meant to destroy Ukraine and Ukrainians. It is important to understand that this is a war waged by Russians, not only by the criminal Putin regime, but one that, in reality, rests on broader societal support.

In the West, such statements from the Ukrainian side are often perceived with caution or even irony, as if Ukrainians, being deeply affected by the war, are unable to remain objective in their judgments. Undoubtedly, war always leaves its mark. However, in this case, a powerful illustration of contemporary Russian political identity is provided by the film “Intercepted” by Oksana Karpovych (Canada – France – Ukraine, 2024)¹³, which is based on documentary footage and intercepted phone conversations at the beginning of full-scale Russian invasion between Russian servicemen and their families—wives and mothers.

It should be noted that there are no adequate equivalents in the French language capable of conveying the full meaning of these conversations. Without exaggeration, such forms of communication would be inconceivable in a Ukrainian family – unless we were speaking of maniacs who are wanted for grave criminal acts.

I harbor no illusions that broad educational goal cannot be achieved through nonfiction literature alone. Yet the step taken by Ukrainian authors is significant. The vast majority of them possess international experience, are fluent in foreign languages, and produce texts that are ideologically and stylistically contemporary and contextually grounded. However, in today’s “post-reading” age, the mere availability of reliable sources of truthful information across the world – and even the ability to read – often proves insufficient to change perceptions.

The competing political identities constructed within the fragmented environment of social media, which increasingly used to manipulate mass consciousness, lack a grounded understanding of culture and the public interest. Such confrontation is not rooted in critical thinking; rather, it is driven by pervasive propaganda stereotypes.

Moreover, truth does not always become evident even to researchers and

public intellectuals. The “evil empire” must be destroyed; otherwise, Ukrainian history will once again be rewritten, the name of Ukrainians appropriated, and the achievements of their democratic political culture, including the crucial role of freedom of speech and freedom for choice, erased. The Western fascination with the “mysterious Russian soul” may return alongside “cheap” gas, think tanks may once again lose their relevance, and fundamental human values risk being relativized.

For this reason, reading Ukrainian nonfiction literature about the war matters: it is sincere, responsible, and grounded in truth. **I**

References

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- ⁴ Friedenspreis 2022. Serhiy Zhadan: <https://surl.li/aaaynw>
- ⁵ National Art and Culture Museum Complex.
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- ⁷ Three chapters of the first book have been translated into French: <https://desk-russie.eu/2024/07/21/yana-alias-brenda-commandant-de-section.html>
- ⁸ French edition: Oharkova, Tetyana & Yermolenko, Volodymyr. *La vie à la lisière: être ukrainien aujourd’hui*. Paris: Gallimard, Témoins, 12 février 2026: <https://surl.li/oyykho>
- ⁹ “Katsap” is a derogatory slang term used in Ukrainian to refer to Russians. It carries negative and often hostile connotations, especially in the context of historical conflicts and the current war.
- ¹⁰ Prix André Malraux littérature engagée: <https://www.grasset.fr/actualite/prix-andre-malraux-litterature-engagee/>
- ¹¹ The anti-terrorist operation of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in Eastern Ukraine lasted from April 14, 2014 to April 30, 2018 – after the beginning of the Russian army’s invasion of the territory of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.
- ¹² Chornohuz, Yaryna. *C’est ainsi que nous demeurons libres*. Paris: Le Tripode, 4 septembre 2025. 128 p. ISBN 978-2370554680: <https://le-tripode.net/livre/yaryna-chornohuz/cest-ainsi-que-nous-demeurons-libres>
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