Studia Ucrainica Varsoviensia 14
ISSN 2299-7237, e-ISSN 2545-157X
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https://doi.org/10.31338/2299-7237suv.14.5

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Women at War in Ukraine – Selected Stories

Abstract
The article is devoted to the participation of Ukrainian women in the Russian-Ukrainian war that began in February 2014 and which has become a factor destabilizing contemporary international relations. The aim of the article is to provide a cultural studies analysis of the transformation of women's roles in the context of war through the personal narratives of Ukrainian women combatants. The article proper presents the service of selected female soldiers in the Ukrainian Armed Forces and their participation in the ongoing military operations in Ukraine. For example, the military activity of Tetiana Chornovol, a Ukrainian MP, journalist and social activist, was analyzed in detail. After joining the 72nd Independent Mechanized Brigade "Black Zaporozhians", she became part of the 3rd battalion and was sent to the town of Skybyn in the Brovary district. She then took part in the tank battle near the city of Brovary, during which the largest confrontation of tanks and artillery since World War II took place. The examples of women's involvement in the war taking place in Ukraine presented in this article not only show the female face of war, but also prove that women are able to fight effectively, just like men, to defend the independence of their homeland and fundamental human rights and values.
Keywords: Ukraine, Russian Federation, international relations, war, battle, women.

Wars are a phenomenon that has accompanied humanity almost since the dawn of its history. Their significance increased particularly in the 20th century, a period that frequently employed these means – described by Karl von Clausewitz as "other means of continuing politics."[1] In the century mentioned above, wars also underwent the most profound changes. These changes included military and technological

[1] C. Clausewitz, *O naturze wojny* [On the Nature of War], Warsaw: Jirafa Roja 2010, p. 46.

aspects, the socio-political landscape, the scale of human destructiveness, as well as their impact on society, particularly on women.[2] In the traditional paradigm, war was perceived as the exclusive domain of men, with the military regarded as an institution oriented toward men, built upon male traditions and practices that were at odds with the effective assimilation of women.[3] Moreover, during war or other armed conflicts, women were generally perceived as vulnerable, suffering individuals – waiting wives and mothers – who primarily played the role of passive victims.

It should be noted that the above perspective was largely based on the long history of violence against women during armed conflicts.[4] All of this contributed to the fact that, for a significant part of the 20th century, both the study and practice of war and international relations were dominated by men.[5] As Jerry Indrawan rightly observed, the end of the Cold War and the evolving nature of warfare – particularly the unique and immense challenges posed by intrastate conflicts – have transformed the way policymakers and experts perceive war and its consequences:

> At the conceptual level – as he wrote – we have witnessed a shift from a perspective that sees security solely through a military lens and thus emphasized the security of states to a perspective that takes into account nonmilitary aspect of security, drawing on the notion of human security to focus on the individual and relations between individuals and groups within societies. This changed perspective has also led to greater awareness of the role of gender in international relations. At the operational level, we have witnessed a call for a more active role for the United Nations and greater sensitivity to the specific challenges faced by women in conflict situation.[6]

Gender ideology also had an impact on the debate on the role of women in armed conflicts.[7] As this is not the place for a detailed analysis of the issue, it is sufficient to mention Susan Jeffords' research on gender in the Vietnam conflict, which demonstrated that the structural relationship between warfare and gender is deeply

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[2] T. W. Orłowa, "Wijny XX stolittia i ukrajińske żinoctwo u dzerkali istoriohrafiji"*, Storinky istoriji: zbirnyk naukowych prać,* 27 (2008), p. 136.

[3] L. J. Peach, *Women at War: The Ethics of Women in Combat,* Indiana Center on Global Change and World Peace: Indiana University 1993, p. 8.

[4] T. W. Orłowa, *Wijny*, p. 136; J. Indrawan, *Women in War: Being Protected or Combatant?, Jurnal Hubungan Internasional*, 4 (2015) 1, p. 79.

[5] J. Indrawan, *Women,* p. 78.

[6] *Ibidem*.

[7] See: M. Röger, R. Leiserowitz, eds., *Women and Men at War. A Gender Perspective on World War II and its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe*, Osnabrück: Deutsches Historisches Institut 2012; J. S. Goldstein, *War and gender: how gender shapes the war system and vice versa,* Cambridge: University Press 2001.

interconnected to the extent that *one does not survive without the other.*[8] Jean Elshtain, in her analysis of dominant gender role representations in war, also observed that men are characterized exclusively as warriors, while women are depicted as beautiful souls.[9] These perceptions prevent women from participating in combat and men from abstaining from it.

The article aims to contribute to the contemporary discourse on women's military service by examining the experiences of Ukrainian women participating in the Russian-Ukrainian war, which began in February 2014. Moreover, it assumes a cultural studies analysis of the transformation of women's roles in the context of war through the personal narratives of Ukrainian women combatants. The article aims to contribute to the contemporary discourse on women's military service by examining the experiences of Ukrainian women participating in this Russian-Ukrainian war.

The study employs a qualitative research methodology appropriate to cultural studies, based on narrative and interpretative analysis. The research material consists of selected personal narratives of Ukrainian women participating in the war, including interviews, public statements, media accounts, and biographical testimonies. The selection of cases was purposeful and included figures representing diverse social roles and wartime experiences, which makes it possible to reveal varied models of female subjectivity and transformations of gender roles in the context of war.

The Russian Federation launched an attack on Ukraine in the early hours of 24 February 2022. Under the orders from President Vladimir Putin, an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 Russian troops advanced across the border.[10] The Russian Air Force used missiles to attack airfields and military installations across the country. Columns of Russian tanks and armoured personnel carriers entered Ukrainian territory from three directions: the area of Belarus, Russia and occupied Crimea. Forces advancing from Belarus took Kyiv as their target, those from Russia moved toward Kharkiv, and those from Crimea attacked Kherson and Nova Kakhovka. There were also reports, later proven false, of Russian amphibious landings near Odesa and Mariupol.[11]

Although the war, which began with the annexation of Crimea and military actions in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014, had been waged by Russia

[8] S. Jeffords*, The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1989, p. 3.

[9] J. Elshtain, "On beautiful souls, just warriors and feminist consciousness", *Women's Studies International Forum,* 5 (1982), pp. 3–4, 341–348.

[10] See, A. Malkiewicz, P. Szymaniec, *Wojna nowego wieku? Agresja Rosji przeciw Ukrainie 2022–202*3 [War of the new century? Russia's aggression against Ukraine 2022–2023],Tarnowskie Góry: Infort Editions 2023; S. Plokhy, *Rosja-Ukraina. Największe starcie XXI wieku* [Russia-Ukraine. The greatest clash of the 21st century], Kraków: Znak Horyzont 2024.

[11] S. Plokhy, *Rosja*, p. 238.

against Ukraine for eight years,[12] neither Ukrainian women nor men nor citizens around the world expected to witness the unimaginable acts of cruelty perpetrated by Russian occupiers across various parts of Ukraine. A certain justification for the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be found in President Putin's address to the nation, delivered on the day of the aggression at 6 a.m. (Moscow time).[13]

In it, he announced the launch of a "military special operation" to: *protect people who had been victims of violence and genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years.* Therefore, he continued, they: *will strive for the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine, as well as to hold accountable those who had committed numerous bloody crimes against the civilian population, including citizens of the Russian Federation*. Addressing Ukrainians, he stressed that citizens: *fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers did not fight against the Nazis and defended our common homeland for today's neo-Nazis to take power in Ukraine.*

Reminding them that they: *swore an oath of loyalty to the Ukrainian nation, not to the anti-national junta that robs and mocks Ukraine.* He called for: *an immediate ceasefire and urged perpetrators to return home.* In conclusion, he warned that if anyone attempts to *interfere with them or even creates a threat to our country, to our nation, they should know that Russia's response will be immediate and will lead to consequences never before encountered in their history*.[14] There is no doubt that Putin's primary objective, considering his statements, was to take control of Ukraine and establish a pro-Russian government, which, in his view, would be nothing less than the restoration of a just order.

It should be noted that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy also delivered an address to the nation, in which he informed of Russia's launch of a new military operation against Ukraine. He described this action as an unjustified, deceitful, and cynical invasion.[15] Announcing the imposition of martial law, he stressed that:

> Ukrainians would never surrender their freedom and independence to anyone. Since 1991, he continued, only we, ourselves, all citizens

[12] In the rightful assessment of the authors of the work dedicated to Russia's wars against Ukraine from the 12th to the 21st century, 2014 marked only the "heated phase" of the war, as, since the moment Ukraine regained its independence in 1991, the Kremlin, Russian elites, and even common Russians consistently indicated their unwillingness to accept the emergence of an independent Ukrainian state and the dissolution of the USSR. Moreover, they expressed a belief in the inevitability of Ukraine's return under Moscow's control, W. Brechunenko, W. M. Kowalczuk, M. A. Kowalczuk, W. Wiaczesław, B. Kornijenko, *"Bratnia" nawała. Wijnyrosiji proty Ukrajiny XII-XXXI st*., Kyjiw: Wipoł 2016, p. 221.

[13] *Obraszczenye prezydentarossyjskoj federacyy 24 fewrala 2022 hoda, 06:00, Moskwa, Kreml,* http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843 [11 April 2024].

[14] *Ibidem*.

[15] *Rosija rozpoczała nowu wijśkowu operaciju proty naszojiderżawy, po wsij terytoriji Ukrajiny zaprowadżujet'sia wojennyj stan, 24 lutoho 2022 r*, https://www.president.gov.ua/news/rosiya-rozpochala-novu-vijskovu-operaciyu-proti-nashoyi-derz-73105 [11 April 2024].

> of Ukraine, decide about our future. But now, not only the fate of our country but also what life will be like in Europe is being decided.[16]

At the time of writing this article, the war is still ongoing and shows no signs of coming to an end. The invaders continuously bomb cities and demolish houses, hospitals, schools, kindergartens, theatres and administrative buildings. Murdering civilians, looting and forced deportation of the population of occupied Ukrainian cities to Russian territory, where they are kept in specially established camps, continue. While the Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich stated that "war has no female face", the Russian-Ukrainian conflict nonetheless pushed hundreds of Ukrainian women to take up arms.[17]

It is worth noting here that the subject of Ukrainian women's participation in the ongoing fight against Russian aggression was raised at the latest session of the *Women in Conflict* conference, held on 9 June 2022, in Brussels.

The First Lady of Ukraine, Olena Zelenska, who took part in the event, informed the participants that there are 37,000 women serving in the ranks of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, over 1,000 of whom hold command positions. Zelenska also stressed that today women in Ukraine fight on all fronts and: *cannot be called passive victims.*[18] She appealed to the international community not to forget Ukraine: *It could be said that everyone's life in Ukraine was split in half; it was divided into the time before the outbreak of the war and the time after it. But we Ukrainian women cannot be called victims. Each of us has our own history of resistance.*[19]

Deputy Defence Minister of Ukraine Hanna Malar also commented on the number of women in the Ukrainian army. During the Second International Summit of First Ladies and Gentlemen in Kyiv, held in July 2024, she reported that 50,000 women serve in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, with 5,000 of them currently on the front lines: *In addition to the 38,000 female soldiers* – as the deputy head of the Ukrainian Ministry of National Defence said – *we also have female civilians who work in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In total, there are more than 50,000 women in the army.*[20]

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[16] *Ibidem*.

[17] S. Aleksejewicz, *Wojna nie ma w sobie nic z kobiety* [The Unwomanly Face of War], Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne 2010.

[18] B. Tkaczuk, "U ławach ZSU ponad tysiacza żinok wże stała komandyrkamy – Zełeńśka," 10 czerwca 2022, https://hromadske.ua/posts/v-lavah-zsu-ponad-1-tisyacha-zhinok-vzhe-stali-komandiramizelenska [11 April 2024].

[19] "'Kobiety w konfliktach II': brukselska deklaracja na rzecz sprawczości kobiet" [Women in Conflict II: Brussels Declaration on Women's Empowerment], European Council, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/pl/events-gsc/women-in-conflict-9-june-2022/ [11 April 2024].

[20] M. Puzyr, "Ministerstwo Obrony Ukrainy ujawniło, ile kobiet służy w Siłach Zbrojnych" [Ministry of Defence of Ukraine revealed how many women serve in the Armed Forces], *Nowości Dziennik Toruński,* 24 July 2024, https://nowosci.com.pl/ministerstwo-obrony-ukrainy-ujawnilo-ile-kobiet-sluzy-w-silach-zbrojnych/ar/c1-16519705 [11 January 2024].

Marta Hawryszko, a Ukrainian historian and feminist, offered interesting insights into women's service in the Ukrainian army and the reasons behind their enlistment. In an interview with the OKO.press portal, she mentioned that the Ukrainian army is currently one of the most feminised armies in the world. *In Ukraine*, she noted, *women currently make up 15 percent.*[21] When asked about the motivations for Ukrainian women joining the army, she responded: *Firstly, of course, it is the growth of patriotism and a sense of national identity. You must protect the country; you have to do something. This was encouraged by a number of historical programmes and exhibitions showing the participation of women in the struggle of the Ukrainian underground against the Soviets during and after the Second World War.*

In addition, as Hawryszko emphasised, considerable effort has been made *to romanticise the figure of the female warrior.* This, she continued, was the aim of the photographic project *If Not War: Portraits of Women Dressed in Luxury Dresses, Holding Arms*, which sought to portray women as warriors while, at the same time, appreciating their efforts to defend the homeland. The Ukrainian scholar summarized her remarks by stating that many women: *left their jobs, sometimes well-paid, and went to fight*. *Now we have,* she continued*, women not only in the Armed Forces of Ukraine but also in territorial defence, the National Guard, and various security units*.[22] Among the several thousand Ukrainian women who have served and continue to serve in the military, Tetiana Chornovol deserves particular attention. Born in Kyiv in 1979, this former MP and journalist, as well as a social activist,[23] started her venture in the army a few days before the Russian invasion. At that time, she completed a course for operators of Stugna-P anti-tank guided missiles.

As she recalled: *I completed the course a week before the war. On top of that, I also contracted coronavirus. I was sure the war would be on 22 February, and I had to make it in time. Well aware that I was ill, I put on a mask and went to class. But interestingly, as I went in there, everyone was sick*.[24] After she had completed the above-mentioned course, Tetiana joined the 72nd Black Zaporozhians Independent Mechanised Brigade stationed in Bila Tserkva and commanded by Oleksandr Vdovychenko.[25]

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[21] R. Pavlovsky, "Kobiety w Ukrainie chwytają za broń. Czy wywalczą także prawa dla siebie?" [Women in Ukraine take up arms. Will they also win rights for themselves?] [Interview], *OKO.Press*, 10 April 2023, https://oko.press/kobiety-w-ukrainie-chwytaja-za-bron [11 April 2024].

[22] *Ibidem*.

[23] Cz. Tat′iana, 21 October 2024, https://file.liga.net/persons/chornovol-tatyana [11 April 2024].

[24] T. Nikołajenko, *Tetiana Czornowoł* "W tomu znamenytomu boju, de na wideo rozlitajut′sia tanky, nasprawdi praciuwały nebajraktary, a naszi dwi 'Stuhny' i 'Korsar'," 6 May 2022, https://censor.net/ua/resonance/3339473/ [11 April 2024].

[25] M. Gawęda**,** "Obronić stolicę Ukrainy. 72 Brygada Zmechanizowana w bitwie o Kijów" [Defend the Capital of Ukraine. 72nd Mechanised Brigade in the Battle for Kyiv], *Defence 24*, 2 May 2022, https://defence24.pl/obronic-stolice-72-brygada-zmechanizowana-w-obronie-kijowa [11 April 2024]

It should be added that the 72nd brigade consisted of three mechanised battalions, a motorised infantry battalion, a tank battalion, a brigade artillery group as well as other subdivisions. Its main task was to defend Kyiv.[26] After joining the 72nd Independent Brigade, Tetiana became part of the 3rd Battalion and was sent to the town of Skybyn in the Brovary Region.[27] She then took part in the tank battle near the city of Brovary, during which – according to the authors of a recently published work on Russia's aggression against Ukraine – the largest confrontation of tanks and artillery since World War II took place.[28]

It should be emphasised that Ukrainian forces managed to ambush the advancing column of the 6th Tank Regiment of the 90th Infantry Division, commanded by Colonel Andrei Zakharov. According to the heroine's account:

> The tanks were advancing rapidly along the Brovary highway due to recent renovations, where a high barrier had been erected, limiting my view to their turrets only. As a result, two of my bullets missed, and the third hit; I even joke that it was a miracle. My colleague, my platoon sergeant Oleksiy shot down a BMP-1 at the time. This meant that we basically ended this first battle with a very modest result – 2 for our unit.[29]

We were rehabilitated – Tetiana continued – *during another attack by tanks from the 6th Armoured Regiment: I took a pretty good position, and when the tank column started to attack, I targeted and destroyed the first tank in the column – the flagship tank [...] in my opinion it was even a T-90. After this, the others turned and fled*.[30]

The Battle of Brovary did not bring the result expected by the Russians. The attempt to capture the city of Brovary failed, and Russian troops suffered quite heavy losses. The Ukrainian report cites the destruction of 17 tanks, three infantry fighting vehicles and the death of around 55 enemy soldiers as the results of the battle. The commander of the 6th Tank Regiment was also killed.[31]

It is also worth highlighting that the skirmish near Brovary did not mark the end of Tetiana's military career; at the beginning of 2023, she assumed the position of platoon commander in the 1st Independent Special Purpose Brigade named after Ivan Bohun. It should also be added that, in cultural terms, the figure of Tetiana Chornovol breaks with the traditional opposition between the political and the military

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[26] *Ibidem*.

[27] T. Nikołajenko, *Tetiana Czornowoł.*

[28] See, A. Malkiewicz, P. Szymaniec, *Wojna,* s. 227.

[29] S. Koszkyna*, Tetiana Czornowoł:* "*Ja pociłyła w perszyj tank u kołoni – flahman. Inszirozwernułysia i wtekły. Cym bojem ja pyszajusia*", 1 February 2023, https://lb.ua/news/2023/02/01/544177_tetyana_chornovol_ya_potsilila_pershiy.html [11 January 2024].

[30] *Ibidem*.

[31] M. Gawęda**,** *Obronić.*

spheres, revealing a model of female subjectivity in which civic responsibility finds its consequence in direct participation in armed combat. The woman politician does not appear here merely as a commentator on the war but as its active participant, which leads to a redefinition of leadership – from symbolic to embodied and risk-laden. Her figure fits into a new cultural pattern of the political elite, which legitimizes its authority through personal engagement in the defense of the community.

The war with Russia also became a part of Olena Bilozerska's life. Formerly a poet and journalist, she now serves as a sniper in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. A testament to the remarkable effectiveness of her sniping is the fact that just one month into the invasion of Ukraine, the Russians circulated a fake video online purporting to show Olena Bilozerska, the Ukrainian sniper, killed in action.[32] In a comment on the video, Olena said that this was not the first time her enemies had "buried" her.[33] Olena Bilozerska first took up arms in 2014, when she participated in the fight in Donbas – initially as a member of the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps "Right Sector" (2014–2015)[34] and the Ukrainian Volunteer Army (2016–2017), and since 2018, as part of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

On the day the Russian aggression began, she returned to military service and soon received the rank of senior lieutenant.[35] In Olena's account, she was at home in Kyiv when the war broke out on 24 February 2022. As she recalled, her husband woke her with the words, *"It has begun"*: *We didn't even wait for a call from the unit*, she continued*, to which we had signed up the day before. Just after an hour, we were ready; we said goodbye to our loved ones and headed to the unit*.[36]

In one interview, Olena spoke about the tasks that snipers in Ukrainian Armed Forces units must perform. The first task, she said, which all snipers perform brilliantly, is to demoralise enemy forces. As she emphasised, the ideal target for a sniper is an enemy officer or machine gunner. But most often, they simply act to eliminate enemy soldiers. She also stated that the aim of a sniper is not always to kill or even wound the enemy. Often, there is no shooting at all; it is only reconnaissance, fire correction, or simple observation from a position. In response to a question about whether there are any superstitions among Ukrainian snipers, she announced

[32] "Rosjanie twierdzili, że zabili ukraińską snajperkę. Nagły zwrot w sprawie" [The Russians claimed to have killed a Ukrainian sniper. Sudden turn in the case], 31 March 2022, https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/rosjanie-twierdzili-ze-zabili-ukrainska-snajperke-kobieta-dementuje/nh86bp0 [11 April 2024].

[33] J. Osadcza, "'Najkraszczi wojiny – zawżdy rozdowbaji' Snajperka Ołena Biłozerśka pro służbu w ZSU ta perspektywy wijny", *Ukrajińska prawda*, 17 April 2022, https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2022/04/17/248251/ [11 April 2024].

[34] M. Gawęda*, "*Prawy Sektor na wojnie. Ukraiński Korpus Ochotniczy w Donbasie" [Right Sector at War. Ukrainian Volunteer Corps in Donbas], *Defence24*, 24 December 2014, https://defence24.pl/sily-zbrojne/prawy-sektor-na-wojnie-ukrainski-korpus-ochotniczy-w-donbasie [11 April 2024].

[35] O. Biłozerśka, (11 April 2022) "Służu ukrajińskomu narodowi" [a post on Facebook], https://www.facebook.com/bilozerska/posts/5300055386718786 [11 April 2024].

[36] J. Osadcza, "Najkraszczi wojiny – zawżdy rozdowbaji."

that there is a certain superstition that does not allow taking personal belongings of killed enemies.[37]

Undoubtedly, the case of Olena Bilozerska demonstrates a transformation of artistic identity into military identity without a complete rupture from previously accumulated cultural capital. A poet and journalist functioning as a sniper, she combines two seemingly contradictory roles: a creator of words and a practitioner of wartime violence. In cultural terms, her figure destabilizes the stereotype of the sensitive female artist, proposing a model of female subjectivity capable of operating both within the symbolic sphere and on the battlefield. War does not nullify her earlier identity but rather endows it with new, radical meaning.

One should not forget to mention 21-year-old Kateryna Polishchuk, known as "Birdie" – a defender of Azovstal.[38]

Kateryna was born in the village of Sosnovka, which belongs to the Ternopil region. She graduated from Ternopil's Solomiya Krushelnytska Art School (vocal department) and then took up a job at Kyiv's motorbike driving school, "The Riders." In the spring of 2021, after completing a first aid course in Kyiv, she travelled to the Donetsk region to help wounded soldiers. There, she joined the volunteer medical battalion "Szpitalniki"[39] as a nurse. In the early days of the Russian invasion, Kateryna went to Mariupol to work at the local hospital. After it was bombed, she, along with others, ended up at the Azovstal plant, thereby becoming one of its defenders.[40] It is worth noting that this Ukrainian metallurgical plant was the last stronghold of resistance in Mariupol. For 86 days, approximately 2,500 soldiers from the Azov Regiment and the 36th Independent Marine Brigade effectively resisted around 20,000 soldiers of the Russian Armed Forces.[41] Kateryna became famous primarily for performing several Ukrainian patriotic songs in the underground of Azovstal to lift the spirits of her colleagues: *When things became terrifying, and it seemed there was no chance of survival in Mariupol, I realized,* Kateryna recalled*, that only through my example, strong spirit and resilience could I unite the people around me*.[42]

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[37] *Ibidem*.

[38] K. Orda, "'Ptaszek' z Azowstalu w rosyjskiej niewoli. Propagandyści publikują wywiad z Ukrainką" [The "bird" of Azovstan in Russian captivity. Propagandists publish interview with Ukrainian woman]*, Wprost Ukraina*, 20 September 2022, https://www.wprostukraine.eu/pl/wiadomosci/10712404/ptaszek-z-azowstalu-w-rosyjskiej-niewoli-propagandysci-publikuja-wywiad-z-ukrainka.html [11 April 2024].

[39] T. Mełeżyk, "Żinky w ZSU: najwidomiszi herojini wijny", 6 December 2022, https://tsn.ua/ukrayina/zhinki-v-zsu-statistika-i-biografiya-vidomih-viyskovih-zhinok-2217496.html [11 April 2024].

[40] *Ibidem*.

[41] A. Malkiewicz, P. Szymaniec, *Wojna,* p. 266.

[42] "Informacija pro Kateryna Poliszczuk (Ptaszka) Paramedykyniamedycznoho bataljonu 'Hospitaliery'", uczasnycia oborony Mariupola, https://forbes.ua/profile/katerina-polishchuk-ptashka-699 [11 April 2024].

On 19 May 2022, Polishchuk, along with doctors and military personnel, left the Azovstal plant[43] on the orders of President Zelenskyy. All of the defenders were taken captive by the Russians.[44] After four months in prison, Kateryna was released following an exchange of prisoners and returned to Ukraine. The figure of Kateryna Polishchuk fits into a cultural model of a young woman as a bearer of collective hope and a symbol of resistance. Her singing within the space of Azovstal lends the war a performative and ritual dimension – an artistic act becomes a tool for sustaining community in a liminal situation. In this perspective, femininity is not positioned in opposition to war but is transformed into a medium of meaning, emotion, and endurance. Culturally, Polishchuk functions as a figure in which youth, art, and war intertwine into a single narrative of heroic resilience.

The figure of Ruslana Danilkina is undoubtedly an example of extraordinary heroism, patriotism and readiness to make a full sacrifice for the motherland. When she was only 18 years old, she volunteered for war. Although it was not an easy decision for her, as she recalled: [...] *I wanted to take part in this – it's my country and I love it very much. I thought the more people did this, the stronger we would be. I was aware that I could not work miracles, but I wanted to do something to help my country*.[45] Her choice to go to war was strongly influenced by her parents' firm opposition to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. It is worth recalling that in 2015 they participated in an anti-terrorist operation in Donbas against the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.[46] Initially, Ruslana was sent to Zaporizhzhia, where she mainly did office work. She then joined the 197th Territorial Defence Battalion, where she worked as a communications operator.[47] The event that changed her life forever took place on 10 January 2023. While travelling through the Kherson Oblast with other soldiers, Ruslana came under Russian artillery fire. Fragments from one of the fired bullets hit the passenger seat where she was sitting: *I remember the moment of the explosion well,* Ruslana recalled*. I scowled, and I only remember how I grabbed my knee. It was immediately clear to me what had happened, but I couldn't believe I had lost my leg. I asked colleagues what had happened, but they remained silent*.[48]

The wounded Ruslana was transported to a hospital in Chornobaivka, where she underwent immediate surgery. Unfortunately, despite the doctors' best efforts,

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[43] 1908 soldiers surrendered, 177 civilians, including 87 women and 47 children, left the ruins of the plant. A. Malkiewicz, P. Szymaniec, *Wojna,* p. 267.

[44] T. Mełeżyk, *Żinky.*

[45] M. Barba*,* "Rusłana z Odessy: 'Nie mam nogi, ale mam marzenia'" [Ruslana from Odesa: "I don't have a leg, but I have a dream"]*,* 12 April 2023, https://www.dw.com/pl/rus%C5%82ana-z-odessy-nie-mam-nogi-ale-chc%C4%99-spe%C5%82nia%C4%87-swoje-marzenia/a-65288863 [11 April 2024].

[46] *Ibidem*.

[47] W. Trudko, *"*Poznajcie niezwykłą 19-letnią Rusłanę. To zdjęcie to też walka z Rosją" [Meet the remarkable 19-year-old Ruslana. These pictures are also war with Russia] 1 March 2023, https://ukrayina.pl/polish/7,190250,29516814,poznajcie-niezwykla-19-letnia-ruslane-te-zdjecia-to-tez-walka.html [11 April 2024].

[48] M. Barba*, Rusłana.*

they were unable to save her leg. It was necessary to amputate above the knee. She was then transported to Odessa Hospital, where she continued further treatment surrounded by her immediate family. Despite her extremely difficult experience, Ruslana wants to motivate other war victims: *I want to show people*, she stressed*, that anything is possible and that there is no need to sit idly by and hide. If something happens to someone, it is frightening and painful – but life goes on. And this life must be lived*.[49] It should also be emphasized at this point that the case of Ruslana demonstrates how the war in Ukraine is generating new cultural models of female corporeality: a body that is non-ideal, wounded, yet active and meaningful. This is a body that is not excluded from the symbolic space of the nation; on the contrary, it occupies a central place within it as evidence of sacrifice endured and of the resilience of female subjectivity under conditions of extreme violence.

To summarise the above considerations, it is essential to emphasise that war – whether civil or international – not only serves as a destabilising factor in contemporary international relations but, above all, represents one of the greatest tragedies for those involved. Women who participate directly as combatants are compelled to assume previously unfamiliar roles and acquire new competencies. The fate of Ukrainian women fighting against Russian aggression presented in the article proved that they were able to perfectly master almost all military specialities and perform military service in the armed forces side by side with men. Moreover, they showed that Ukrainian women can fight just as effectively as their husbands, fathers and brothers to defend the independence of their homeland and fundamental human rights and values. In conclusion, it is worth recalling the words of Iryna Grabovská, who stated that *the true nature of a Ukrainian woman will never allow insulting her family and country. A Ukrainian woman will neither hide nor remain silent. She will stand alongside the defender on the Maidan, serving as a doctor or volunteer. On the front line, she will serve as a paramedic, sniper, cook, or journalist. A Ukrainian woman will always find her most meaningful purpose, even if she is physically outmatched by male warriors*.[50]

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[49] *Ibidem.*

[50] I. Hrabowśka, "Żinocze 'obłyczczia' wijny Ukrajiny proty rosijśkoho ahresora," *Ukrajinoznawczyj almanach* 30 (2022), p. 3.

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