

The Arts of War: Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia

Written by **BLAIR A RUBLE**

Not Just Battles, but Humans

Historian and playwright Olesya Khromeychuk tells the story of her brother Volodymyr's 2017 death on a Donetsk battlefield in a deeply moving and profoundly wise interrogation of the meaning of the current war in Ukraine.

Near the end of her remarkable book [*The Death of a Soldier Told By His Sister*](#), Olesya Khromeychuk observes, “What Ukrainians do revere is freedom. This value of freedom was shaped by the lived experience of generations who were forbidden from speaking their language, or even perceiving it as a language, denied statehood and thus political representation, whose culture was belittled and misunderstood. The culture that expressed the urgency of freedom from external colonizers and internal oppression for the nation’s survival.”

No one reading this passage, let alone Khromeychuk’s poignant recounting of her brother’s death at the front lines, should doubt why Ukrainians have been fighting so furiously. This war is not so much about territory, alliances, and oil profits. It is about the most profound values that lie beneath a culture.

Khromeychuk’s book, which first appeared in England in 2023, appears at first glance to be the moving account of a sister losing her brother Volodymyr at war. It also is an account of the bureaucratic requirements encountered by the soldier’s sister and mother as they set out to bury their loved one. These stories, in turn, become a touching exploration of what it meant to grow up in Lviv during the 1990s, as well as the severities of living abroad as immigrants from a distant, largely unknown land. Khromeychuk adds additional layers as a theater person and history professor. Each layer worthy of a book all its own; together they form an unparalleled entirety making a must read by anyone interested in Ukraine.

The story begins with Volodya Pavliv’s death at 42 in 2017 in a war few outside of Ukraine acknowledged. He had lived in the Netherlands for eleven years, piecing together a tenuous immigrant’s existence while trying his hand at art. Tired of the daily large and small affronts of immigrant life, he returned to Lviv where he was in 2014 when Russia seized Crimea and launched its ancillary attacks on Donetsk and Luhansk.

Volodya volunteered for the front in 2015, explaining to his family that the conflict was a European war which happened to start in eastern Ukraine. Olesya gathered as many supplies in England as she could – including a pair of top-grade boots – and sent them off to her brother to ensure that he had everything he needed to fight when the Ukrainian military had been unable to step up.

At first, he served as a machine gunner in the Donetsk Region before reenlisting for additional service a year later. A few days before going on leave after fighting for two years, he left his platoon behind to move closer to the enemy as a spotter. He successfully warned his comrades of three attacks before shrapnel from a fourth crushed his skull.

Olesya and her mother (also living in England) returned to Ukraine as soon as they heard that he had died. They arrived in Lviv in time for Volodya's official funeral, working their way through Ukrainian civil and military bureaucracies that were simultaneously warm, supportive, officious, and insensitive. Volodya was buried at the city's historic Lychakiv Cemetery in what Olesya came to regard as a cozy grave.

Volodya's resting place would bring Olesya, her mother and second brother Yura back to Lviv many times over. Previously, the city had been the place they had left. Olesya remembered various childhood experiences, including her father's service as a reservist in the Soviet Red Army. Life during the 1990s became precarious so family members left for the presumed safety of the Netherlands and England. Olesya pursued a PhD in history at University College of London, eventually teaching at several prestigious British universities. Currently, she is the Director of the Ukrainian Institute London.

Lviv became merely a conference venue to Olesya. Her brother's death led her to reclaim Lviv as her hometown, eventually leading the family to find an apartment within walking distance to Volodya's grave. These visits became an essential element in her grieving process, which offers another thread through the book.

A few days following Volodya's funeral, Olesya and her family received his belongings including his cellphone. Balancing curiosity and guilt, Olesya eventually logged onto the phone and found a trove of photographs and messages from Volodya's final days. She discovered a brother she never knew she had.

Struggling with grief, Olesya assembled these materials becoming, as she writes, "a researcher and a responder." Having been drawn to theater since adolescence, Olesya had joined with other Ukrainian immigrants to form the Molodyi Teatr London. She and the troupe pulled together a script for the performance piece *All That Remains* and took it to the [Edinburgh Fringe Festival](#). The run continued in London where *Ukrainian Events in London* gave it five stars declaring the work "raw and painful. Very real but unimaginable." Together with her book, the play became a deeply personal act of catharsis empowering Olesya to move ahead.

Olesya simultaneously faced her grief as an historian. Her scholarship had focused on the violent conflicts of modern east Europe including World War II. Setting Volodya's story against the backdrop of this history, Olesya gradually reconfigures our understanding of the current war. She establishes its start with the Euromaidan uprising of November 2013 rather than Putin's seizure of Crimea in 2014. This change amplifies Volodya's assertion that the war is European in scope and highlights underlying conflicts that transcend redrawing international boundaries.

Returning to London, Olesya stepped back into the classroom to continue her lectures on the history of World War II. After one class, a student who was getting ready to join the British Army told her, "Your classes on the Second World War are different from the other classes I have on the subject." When asked why, the student responded, "You talk about people. It's all about humans in your classes. Not just battles, but humans." Herein lies the fundamental truth found in *The Death of a Soldier Told by His Sister*. Whenever humans begin to fade from view during this horrible war, pick up Khromeychuk's compelling book to remember why what is happening in Ukraine today is important for all of us tomorrow.

