



Part 2: Autobiographical narratives

Katharine Terrell¹

Abstract

This paper introduces the second section of the special issue. The section includes the 'personal diaries' of Ukrainian educators during wartime.

Keywords

storytelling, poetry, personal narratives, war

This second section showcases four academics whose writings can be thought of like diaries, describing their personal experiences of the war. Just as in the previous section, they are all struck by a sudden change – and yet also with life continuing. Ievgen startles us, perhaps, by making a coffee on hearing the news that war has broken out, and by writing, matter-of-factly, “The third day of the war. Morning. Had breakfast” – but, like Shuhai in the previous section, this mundane moment of domestic life becomes emblematic of life continuing. There are even moments of joy: in food, in drink, in the celebration of a wedding and finding a gift from the Tooth Fairy.

But of course, for many, life does not continue. For Volkova, the loss of her brother Andriy is palpable. It is each of these individual losses, and the resulting pain and heartbreak, that we cannot lose sight of when discussing the countless victims of the war. Anyone who has experienced the loss of a loved one can empathise with the painful realisation that it is not a dream, as we achingly question, “Why didn’t I take more photos?” But of course, the real tragedy is not that there are no photos: it is that the person we love is gone. Those dates in the diary become sad memorials. No longer just another day, they take on new meaning: the day the war broke out, the day someone died. As notes, on certain dates, life stops. But then, of course, it continues. Tretinichenko measures the passing time by the passing of semesters – a reminder of the ever-ticking clock of the academic year. For Volkova, time passing means spring turning into summer; a new normal, “some relief” and some kind of hope for the future. Yet every day brings new worry: as Tretinichenko says, checking in on students, “Everyone is here. Thank God.”

Like the other writers in this section, Bachynska begins by talking about “typical” and “ordinary” lives being interrupted. Things that “seemed important” – a conversation with a partner, the loose tooth of a child – fade into unimportance when the war breaks out. The idea of being awoken by a Russian attack rather than an alarm clock is a startling and

¹ University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

Corresponding Author:

Katharine Terrell, Academic and Digital Development, University of Glasgow, 64 Southpark Avenue, Glasgow, G12 8LB, UK

Email: Katharine.Terrell@glasgow.ac.uk

disturbing image that highlights the cruel shift from the mundane to wartime. For Bachynska, as with other writers in this special edition, the physical safety of children is paramount, but their mental and emotional needs are also vital. There is a stark contrast between, on the day before war starts, the excitement of the Tooth Fairy and, in the days and weeks afterwards, the impact on children, with a lost innocence and asking unanswerable questions. Like Tretinichenko, Bachynska is torn between the reality of the situation, and the hope that “it will be over soon”. Of course, hope can also mislead us. Ievgen describes the “naïve confidence” that the war will be over soon. Some of us might hear in this echoes of the refrain at the outbreak of World War I, learned from history lessons or (great-)grandparents, that “the war will be over by Christmas”. Perhaps these very similar sentiments at two outbreaks of war, over a century apart, tell us something about human desire to hope for the best, even in the face of the worst. But what does it also tell us about humans that the “war to end all wars” did not, of course. Ievgen, like Bachynska, describes moving children away from their home out to safer areas – a decision countless parents across the world have had to take (and some, heartbreakingly, are not able to take).

The role of a father is explored further by Ievgen: explaining the war to his children and protecting them. There is also some reinforcement of traditional gender roles, in contrast to Martsenyuk’s reflections on gender in the section above. Ievgen states “Now all men are military” ... “give shelter to our women and children, put weapons in the hands of our men” – a reminder of the uncomfortable reality that the fates of so many men and women in Ukraine are based on these gender roles. Ievgen is unsure of his role on joining the territorial defence. Yet he finds meaning in this work that he loses on return to “normal” work. Unlike many of those in the first section, Ievgen experiences of the war mean that academia seems less relevant, more distant from the reality of war. Yet despite his experiences and agonising questioning (Why us? Why now?), he continues to have an analytical mind. He reflects on and challenges his own beliefs that the Russians are “inhuman” – seeing the world as more complex than that. This is testament to our power to see the human in everyone – because if we name one group of people “inhuman”, where does it end?

Cultural note

This section contains touching reminders of often-overlooked animals who provide humans with such comfort: Volkova describes cats and dogs in bomb shelters, and Ievgen adds to this with the whimsical image of Vovchuk the Wolf having a conversation with Tim the English bulldog. The role of animals, including dogs and wolves, in Ukrainian fairy tales is complex, reflecting a long Ukrainian folk history (Kryzhko, 2021). In writing this fairy-tale ending, Ievgen both references and reproduces the importance of folk stories to Ukrainian national identity (Jakubowska-Krawczyk, 2025).

References

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