



Part 3: Mixed narratives

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Abstract

This third section of the special edition presents ‘mixed narratives’; academics revealing their experiences of teaching and living during wartime. Authors are cited in relation to finding beauty in the darkest places, and liken themselves to the Japanese art of Kintsugi.

Keywords

war, displacement, poetry, heritage, silence, safety

In this last section are four academics whose writings combine their thoughts on teaching during war with their reflections on their personal experiences. Reading Solovei’s experience of engaging students in the Model United Nations, Covid ending, “life is getting back to normal”, we are struck by the proleptic irony of knowing that these “last goodbyes” will take on new meaning at the outbreak of the war. Like those in the previous sections of this special edition, these writers speak of believing that the war would be over soon – and then slowly, sadly realising that this would not be the case, and finding a sense of normalcy in very difficult times. Prokhorova, for example, explains how at first, she cannot think about books – and yet soon she returns to them, finding hope in the academy. Others reflect similarly, with Solovei pointing out starkly that “it’s completely impossible to gain new knowledge when you, personally, your family and your country are attacked by a nuclear power”. Yet we continue to be academics even in the worst of times – as Solovei points out with grim irony, her academic expertise came into sharp focus when war broke out on the day of her ‘Conflict Analysis and Peacebuilding’ course.

While conflict analysis is very clearly related to war, as we have seen in previous sections, others with also find their subject expertise come into sharp relief, finding new, nuanced meanings in the context of the war. Kiselova, for example, as a philologist, shows us the importance of poetry in giving us insight into the human condition. Poetry is also a way of celebrating Ukrainian national identity: When Kiselova talks about “dressing” the Skovoroda monument, this is more than a whimsical student tradition: Hryhorii Skovoroda was a Ukrainian philosopher, theologian, and poet and “a symbol of Ukrainian philosophy”, who influenced “many generations of Ukrainians” (Ukrainian Institute, no date) The Hryhorii Skovoroda Museum was attacked by Russian shells in 2022, destroying

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the roof, but the statue remains standing. The monument was one of many cultural sites attacked by Russia – with some arguing that this is pushing Ukrainians to appreciate and respect unique aspects of their culture more than ever (Shevchenko, 2024). Amongst darkness, there is light.

As well as promoting interest in Ukrainian culture, Kiselova observes students engaging with their studies more than ever, with 100% attendance (something many lecturers aspire to!) and increased interest in literary analysis. Perhaps because of a newfound sense of importance and urgency, perhaps because of an escape from the day-to-day reality of war, these students have a newfound appreciation for a subject often seen as inessential. Yet the war brings new meaning to the importance of poetry (and other writings) whose meaning is “revealed for the first time”. And this, surely, is why academia lives on, even (perhaps especially) through war: it helps us understand humanity. Kiselova describes how “students and teachers worked with some new enthusiasm, as if their work was part of the armed resistance.” This cultural resistance is just as important as an armed resistance. It is also touching to see Kiselova refer to students, colleagues and famous thinkers alike, giving each their full name and respect as Ukrainians on an equal footing, reading, writing and thinking about the world.

Kharchenko, too, describes the importance of the classroom at a time of fear and danger. She describes centring her students’ emotional state before all else. This is something we should all be thinking about as teachers, but for those in warzones and other humanitarian crises it must be fundamental. She talks of allowing for silence, supporting creativity and, above all, trying to “remain a human being”. And this seemingly simple wish seems much harder when we understand the huge dangers that Kharchenko, and so many others, have been through, things “too terrifying to describe”, to get to a state of relative normality. Reading about her desperate dash to get her child to safety and the relief of reaching somewhere where “We wouldn’t be alone” – the heartbreaking wish of a mother – we cannot understand why she is not the first, and will not be the last, person to describe war as “hell”. But Kharchenko, and so many others, have been through this hell and come out the other side, albeit forever changed.

And so, life goes on for Ukrainian teachers and students. People have manicures, apply for jobs, graduate high school, and buy apartments – but as Solovei explains, everything is different, harder. People question their role in life: juggling family, stay-at-home Dads, decisions millions of parents make all the time, and then suddenly the reality of being a refugee. Solovei expresses her gratitude to Scholars at Risk, “an international network of institutions and individuals whose mission it is to protect scholars and promote academic freedom” which arranges temporary academic positions for scholars fleeing threat (<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/>). She is also grateful for the safe new home-from-home her children were able to reach outside of Ukraine – not a camp. These are reminders of how the international community can help where the political will is there, and, sadly, of those refugees who are never able to reach safety, the children who spend their lives in camps without the support they need for a real home.

Solovei describes herself as like a broken cup that she managed to glue back together again – all the pieces there, but never unbroken. The Japanese have an artform named Kintsugi, whereby broken ceramics are not thrown away but carefully put back together, with the fault lines highlighted with a gleaming golden lacquer. This is not to pretend that everything is ok, and that victims of war should feel forced to find some silver lining in an

impossibly difficult situation. But the pieces in this special edition show that despite everything, Ukrainians find moments of peace, joy and satisfaction. Rather than trying to hide the broken bits, Kintsugi acknowledges that the object will always be broken, but it can also be beautiful again, given time and careful, skilful love.

Cultural notes

“Ilovaïsk sunflowers” refers to the sunflower field that became “a symbol of salvation and losses” at the Battle of Ilovaïsk in August 2014. 368 died, including volunteers. (Tsuba, no date).

The Taras Shevchenko National Prize of Ukraine (Shevchenko Prize) is a state award of Ukraine, the highest creative distinction for a significant contribution to the development of culture and art (<https://knpu.gov.ua/istorichna-dovidka/> - in Ukrainian).

Kiselova’s closing words come from Gaudeamus igitur “which is widely considered to be the most celebrated student anthem of medieval origin” (Chernyshov, 2021), celebrating the academy and often played at university graduations.

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