

Blair A. Ruble

THE ARTS OF WAR

**Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia
Year Four**



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1: Introduction

The Ukrainian response to the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of its country inspired new appreciation for Ukraine, both within and beyond its borders. The steadfastness of Ukrainians surprised many. The stories, presented here, highlight the ways in which Ukrainians have long explored the meaning of their country and culture through the arts, and the way the arts and their creators empowered Ukrainians to confront the Russian invaders. These developments offer intriguing clues about the culture, society, and politics of a postwar Ukraine.

These essays represent my attempt to allow Ukrainian artists to speak for themselves. I have been fortunate to be able to collaborate in the preparation of these essays with several of the artists mentioned here. I have striven to keep my own voice in the background. I have followed a variety of performing and visual arts endeavors in a range of regional settings in order to capture the expanse of Ukrainian creativity. The 54 pieces here follow the course of the war's fourth year of profound resistance; they show a striking creative resilience. Together with those I have collected from the previous three years, these tales reveal a reinvention of various art forms as a distinctive Ukrainian artistic voice consolidates.

I began writing this series for the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute in Washington, DC. Between March 2022 and March 2025, 150 essays in this series appeared online as part of the institute's *Focus Ukraine* blog (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/collection/arts-war-ukrainian-artists-confront-russia>). Ibidem Verlag and Columbia University Press have published these collected posts in three volumes: *The Arts of War: Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia, Year One* (2023), *Year Two* (2025), and *Year Three* (2025).

The essays in this volume cover the war's fourth year. They represent a relaunch of the series with the Center for International Theatre Development (CITD) following the Wilson Center's dismantling by the Elon Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).

For more than three decades, CITD founders Philip Arnoult and Carol Baish, together with longtime collaborators John Freedman, Yury Urnov, and Howard Shalwitz, have encouraged me to explore the arts in post-socialist societies. My interest in this area arose during the mid-1990s, when I noticed that my Russian and Ukrainian friends spoke more about the arts than politics. I realized that these conversations were as much about politics as they were about the arts. Moreover, as they focused on the arts, my friends revealed the deep and growing divide between Ukrainians and Russians. This awareness set me on a path that prepared me to see the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion through the arts.

These essays may be read chronologically, or by genre (music, dance, theater, video, the visual arts, etc.). Turn to the index to seek those set in specific locations (Kyiv, Kharkiv, Lviv, Odesa, etc.). Direct your attention to the multiple connections, financial and creative, that have emerged between Ukrainian artists and the international community. Or search out the many moments when Ukrainian civilian and military authorities have endorsed the performing arts as a means of advancing their country's fortunes.

However approached, I am confident that even the most informed readers will discover a depth and creativity to the Ukrainian artistic scene in these essays that they hardly suspected existed prior to the Russian invasion.

2: Kharkiv, Where the Arts Empower Life Over Death

May 5, 2025

Kharkiv lives, despite having lost around a quarter of its buildings and an unknowable number of its 1.5 million residents since Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022. The city's cultural scene thrives. This remarkable vitality continues to sparkle even during the war's fourth year.

Kharkiv's musicians, artists, dancers, and actors pursued their crafts in bomb shelters, metro stops, and basements as Russian bombs and rockets shook the city above. Opera singers and philharmonic violinists strolled through underground areas overflowing with those who had fled the horrors above. Painters and photographers set up makeshift galleries wherever they could. University professors arranged lectures about the arts for all who would listen.

Over time, these initiatives have become more ambitious. This past spring, young performers expanded the reach of alternative theaters, a new cultural center opened, and puppet masters found ways to entertain the city's anxious children.

The Nafta Theater, founded in 2018, has served as a vibrant alternative theater devoted to inspiring social change. Instead of performing traditional plays with linear plots, Nafta's actors interact with their audiences to develop a storyline through give and take. Their immersive play-making challenges audiences to rethink the society and city around them.

This theatrical model has served the company well at a time when Russian assaults interrupt everyday life. Some works—such as Mykola Kulish's expressionist comedy *Myna Mazailo*—transport viewers back to the 1920s to explore what the city was like when it was the capital of Soviet Ukraine. Others—such as the documentary performance *Nobody Died Today* created in partnership with the Austrian Theater im Bahnhof—seek to inform European audiences of the horrors unfolding in Ukraine.

As the subways have been transformed by war into community centers, performance spaces, and schools, the Nafta Theater recently captured this transformation through a three-episode audio drama, *Tunnels of Imagination*. In the first session, audience members tune in to ponder the metro-inspired inattention that causes passengers to lose sight of those around them. The second session focuses on the absurd characters who come and go through metro trains and stations, while the third creates a detective story played out on a single metro car.

If Nafta Theater's productions remain purposefully fleeting, Magran Tata's Druk cultural center seeks a degree of permanence. Tata, a Syrian refugee, arrived in Kharkiv in 2012 with his Ukrainian mother. Graduating from a local high school seven years later, he continued his education with degrees in architecture and urban planning. A leader in Ukraine's small Libertarian movement, Tata believes that conservatives should embrace cultural urbanism as strongly as those on the left. He conceived of the Druk center as a space amplifying a shared desire for freedom while serving as a focal point for youth culture. He secured funding from the Kharkiv City Council and moved ahead with the project, despite the war.

Housed in a 19th century printing house, the center's exposed brick interior yields spare yet attractive exhibition halls, conference rooms, and performance spaces open to the neighborhood and city. The Druk center's underground galleries launched this year, with an exhibition entitled "Art Shelter" focusing on the power of art to provide asylum from turmoil. The Ocheret Theater Company will perform in an adjacent renovated building.

Puppeteers Dariia Kushnirenko and Pavlo Saveliev have continued to present shows there every Sunday. They have done so to bring moments of joy at an otherwise terrifying moment. Their performances begin with assurances that it is okay to laugh, especially in difficult times. Their puppets demonstrate life lessons adapted for those whose families have been displaced and damaged by war. Kushnirenko and Saveliev have discovered that the adults in their audiences often are more moved than the children.

Several months ago, Oksana, a foster mother of six, told a reporter for the *Christian Science Monitor* that "we came here because

we knew it would make the children happy, but it's also important that they learn through the story that life goes on, that we all have trials, but life wins over death."

All of Kharkiv's intrepid artists and performers have demonstrated that the arts empower life to win over death, from the moment the first Russian rockets hit their city. They continue to do so.

3: Unexpected Artists

May 12, 2025

Beyond the art galleries, concert halls, and opera stages of professional artistry, tens of thousands of Ukrainians have turned to the arts for sanity and solace during the hardships of war. Together, their creative reactions to national—and all too often personal—trauma have fueled their ability to survive, resist, and recover. Their collective creativity nurtures an inspirational base that will serve the country well when peace arrives.

Andrii Bychkov is just one among thousands of Ukrainians whose embrace of the arts has sustained them during this brutal conflict. Bychkov's biography might not suggest his compelling use of a paint brush to add beauty to the world. A graduate of the National University of Internal Affairs, the 50-something Bychkov served for 20 years in the Ministry of Emergency Situations, rising from cadet to colonel.

Upon retirement, he went to work in the gaming industry, where he created graphics, designed interfaces, and produced animations. These efforts rekindled an older dream of becoming a creative artist. During this time, he grew from a gamer to a concept artist to an artistic director. By the early 2010s, he had turned to watercolor and oil painting. Each stage prepared him for his war-time endeavors.

The 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine intensified Bychkov's commitment to his art. Like many among his hometown of Kropyvnytskyi's 220,000 residents, he has remained at home. Posting on Facebook, he notes: "My main goal in art is to convey to people that joy is not just an emotion, but the meaning of life. And even such a terrible test as war cannot extinguish this flickering flame." He wanted to share his love of nature at a time when everything that he admired was coming under threat. This commitment becomes even more startling as his home in Kropyvnytskyi has often come under attack.

Bychkov's artworks offer a colorful, simplified vision of life, be they landscapes, provincial townscapes or vases full of flowers. There is neither a twinge of abstraction nor a suggestion of a folk motif in his work. He simply shares what he sees: a straightforward world full of color, beauty, and warmth. His is a world of perpetual spring offering a deceptively simple balm for the pains of war.

As Bychkov's artistry moved from refuge to vocation to new heights of professionalism, his painting empowered him to imagine a different world. His Ukraine would be a gentle place full of color, kindness, and beauty. This vision foresees a peacetime Ukraine that can move beyond the trauma of war to emerge as a country overflowing with joy.

Bychkov is but a single voice among millions, and perhaps not a realistic one. However, he hardly is alone, as tens of thousands of Ukrainians similarly have turned to artistic expression in endless forms to find relief from the horrors unfolding around them. Collectively, they promote a search for fresh imaginary horizons. Like all horizons, the joy and beauty Bychkov promotes might be unattainable. The collective pursuit of such gentleness, however, opens a window on a postwar Ukraine that is unlike prewar Ukraine. The grassroots embrace of beauty created by everyday Ukrainians represented by Bychkov infuses life with a sense of promise.

4: Elevating a Musical Tradition Too Long Neglected

May 19, 2025

In February, contralto Vira Slywotzky, cellist Valeriya Sholokhova, and pianists Pavlo Gintov and Margarita Rovenskaya performed the Ukrainian Music Initiative's (UMI) debut concert at New York's Shevchenko Scientific Society. A month later, UMI joined with other New York ensembles in performing in the 2025 Ukrainian Contemporary Music Festival called "Letters and Notes," which took place over three days at the Orchestra of St. Luke's splendid DiMenna Center for Classical Music in Manhattan's now-fashionable Hell's Kitchen.

Slywotzky, Sholokhova, Gintov, and Rovenskaya are some of the musicians who have been playing and promoting Ukrainian music throughout the world. They joined with musicologist Leah Batstone and Boston-based entrepreneur and activist Alex Gamota to launch UMI to bring attention to the extensive Ukrainian classical repertoire. Batstone founded the Ukrainian Contemporary Music Festival, which has become an important platform for promoting Ukrainian music, in 2020.

Slywotzky, Sholokhova, Gintov, and Rovenskaya are attractive advocates for Ukrainian classical music. Gintov, Sholokhova, and Rovenskaya are native Ukrainians, while Slywotzky was born in the United States with strong connections to Ukraine. In addition to their flourishing careers as performers and teachers in New York for many years, they have performed internationally, appearing at famous venues like London's Wigmore Hall, Tokyo's Kioi Hall, Milan's Teatro Verdi Nazionale, and Paris's Musée des Arts Décoratifs, in addition to Carnegie Hall.

New York musicologist Batstone similarly has been working to bring greater attention to the Ukrainian classical repertoire as a researcher, teacher, and impresario. Building on the annual Ukrainian Contemporary Music Festival in New York, she has joined forces with UMI to establish it as a vibrant platform supporting the