

Olesya Khromeychuk: The Death of a Soldier Told by His Sister

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Why would an artist and intellectual wish to voluntarily become a soldier? How does a person change when wearing khaki? How does the state benefit from women volunteers defending the country? How can a scholar continue to research war when it enters her everyday life? What is it like to share the private pain and grief through a war play on a theatre stage? And how do feelings towards the enemy evolve? In this important and timely memoir, *The Death of a Soldier Told by His Sister*, history scholar and writer Olesya Khromeychuk elevates uneasy and uncomfortable questions as she tells an intimate and deeply engaging story of her brother's loss of life on the battlefield. She does so by cleverly blending attention to agency and the everyday presence of war, with the broader settings of the gendered structures of the Ukrainian state and war economy, Europe's East-West hierarchies and Ukraine's invisibility in the hegemonic knowledge production. All that, enriched with insights into Ukrainian history and culture, allows the reader to directly learn knowledge about Ukraine and its existential struggle. Through the everyday perspective she employs, Khromeychuk sheds light on the hierarchies and injustices surrounding Ukraine's 'double-coloniality' in-between the West and Russia (ПОТАПОВА – O'SULLIVAN 2024; SEE ALSO SONEVYTSKY 2019), which is perhaps the most valuable contribution of her book.

Khromeychuk originally published her book in 2021, four years after her brother's death in the war spurred by Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and at a time when the war was nearly forgotten. In the newer edition of her memoir from 2022, the author already briefly reflects on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Since then, Khromeychuk, as a Western-based historian and the Director of the Ukrainian Institute in London, has become one of the leading voices of Ukraine internationally, and her book has garnered much attention worldwide. While helping the West with "discovering Ukraine" (p. 6), she has been challenging the politics of knowledge production which has rendered Ukraine invisible on the "mental maps" (KHROMEYCHUK 2022A). Hence, even though this is not an academic book, it makes a vital contribution to the scholarship on epistemic imperialism that highlights the harmful knowledge and misunderstandings permeating the Western debates that get most things wrong about this ten-year war which has lasted for centuries (SEE HENDL ET AL. 2023; OKSAMYTNA 2023; BURLYUK – MUSLIU 2023; SONEVYTSKY 2022; TSYMBALYUK 2022; O'SULLIVAN – KRULIŠOVÁ 2023). In this review, I am approaching

this book not only as a reader but also as an active participant of this academic debate that critiques epistemic imperialism.

Khromeychuk opens her story by revealing that her brother Volodymyr Pavliv, known as Volodya, was killed by a shrapnel on the frontline in eastern Ukraine in 2017 (p. 13). The rest of the book is ordered largely chronologically, as she recalls her personal experience with buying Gore-Tex Pro Combat British Army boots to support her brother, and as she talks about a Ukrainian folk song which resembled her doubts about having a wedding while her brother was at war, and how she learned about his death and travelled to her hometown Lviv for a state-supported military funeral. The army boots eventually come back to her covered in Ukraine's fertile black earth, only to be polished and given away to serve another soldier. The author then narrates how she and her family had been coping with the grief and trauma privately and later publicly through a war play intended to bring attention to the war. As the story unfolds, the reader learns how the presence of war and grief enters the most intimate spaces of her everyday life as a sister, daughter, friend, woman, scholar of war, migrant academic, feminist, theatre performer and playwright, and a Ukrainian.

One of the most powerful aspects of the book is Khromeychuk's ability to portray the war from the everyday human perspective. As a scholar of history and political violence, Khromeychuk has critiqued war theorizing for too often still lacking a human approach (p. 146). The author enables the reader to sense the everyday nuances by bringing in a feminist perspective which she reflects throughout the book when presenting the stories of women volunteers, citing Lesia Ukrainka, referring to her mother as (figuratively) made of iron, and critiquing militarism and those who benefit from it and the socioeconomic realities of war and migration. Khromeychuk demonstrates that these embodied human stories are inseparable from the war battles and high politics, and without them, our understanding of Ukraine and the war will only be partial.

This is apparent when the author touches upon Ukraine's inter-imperiality between the West and Russia (SEE ALSO HENDL ET AL. 2023). On the one hand, Khromeychuk points at the precarious status of Ukrainian immigrants in Western Europe working for a minimum wage. On the other hand, she highlights the political economy of the militarization of the country

due to Russia's imperial ambition, which affects the personal choices and the socioeconomic situation of Ukrainians. The author explains that unlike her, her brother left his "odd jobs" in the Netherlands after 11 years and returned home to Lviv, "where he felt more complete" (p. 16). She later contrasts his intense relationship with the city of Lviv, to which he always tended to return (pp. 15–16), with her own gendered childhood memories of the city. These memories come up as she mentions collecting the medal for bravery posthumously awarded to her brother in the military commissariat, a building next to her school which she remembers from her school years as a place of conscription with no entry for girls (p. 148). Even now, she still sees the building as "epitomiz[ing] Sovietness, institutionalism, and patriarchy" (p. 151). On other occasions, the author portrays her relationship with the city through her militarized perception of the famous Lychakiv Cemetery in Lviv. She raises her concerns about her brother being "forever militarized" in the cemetery and her effort to make the uniformed military grave more cosy and civilian, including by discovering how to prolong the life of flowers on the grave (p. 157). During the funeral, it feels like a small blessing for her to see a photo of her brother in civilian clothes as she knew him because she had struggled to recognize him in his khaki uniform in his last years (pp. 14 and 70).

While reading the book, I could not but think of my visit to Lviv in early March 2017 for a feminist workshop, realizing it was just a couple of weeks before Khromeychuk's brother's funeral took place there.¹ I remember the charming city streets busy with the Women's March on International Women's Day and crowds of people in cafés. You could not directly feel the conflict in the city, as one of my Ukrainian respondents returning from the conflict zone later also told me (SEE O'SULLIVAN 2019: 750). But Khromeychuk brilliantly shows that the everyday war realities were still very much present in Lviv although more hidden at that time, as they appeared behind the walls of the church, cemetery or military commissariat.² This is why reading her book is so important for *understanding* Ukraine, even for feminist scholars who may be more attentive to epistemic hierarchies when researching wars. It is this everyday embodied knowledge of war which cannot be grasped by outsiders, including myself from my own positionality in a country in-between the East and the West (SEE O'SULLIVAN – KRULIŠOVÁ 2023) that has historical experience of Russian imperialism but is now anchored in the Western security structures via NATO,

and also in a country which has been a recipient of Ukrainian economic migration for a long time.

Throughout the book, Khromeychuk's compelling narratives of everyday militarization evoke the author's being influenced by feminist international relations icon Cynthia Enloe (2013; 1983), whose theoretical tradition continues to inspire many of us who study gender and war, and whom the author acknowledges on the final pages. Khromeychuk's earlier work also bears this feminist tradition. As a feminist scholar of Ukraine, I initially came across her piece on women's role during the 2013–2014 Maidan protests, where she describes how women made a "*revolution within a revolution*" by challenging gender stereotypes and negotiating their presence (KHROMEYCHUK 2018). This publication is connected to her book through the story of her friend Maria Berlinska, whom she calls Masha. Berlinska is well recognised in Ukraine for her army volunteering and successful lobbying for legislative changes that opened the army to women, and her name always comes up in discussions on gender and the war, including my own field research (SEE KHROMEYCHUK 2018; O'SULLIVAN 2019; MARTSENYUK – GRYSSENKO – KVIĆ 2016). In her book, Khromeychuk acknowledges Masha's determination to improve the status and state protection of women who were fighting in the frontline but were formally registered as 'administrators'. At the same time, however, she remains critical of the military by drawing attention to how the political economy of war operates both formally and informally through volunteers. In her words, the state had left the Ukrainian Army in a dismal state and poorly equipped and trained as of 2014 (p. 19), and by volunteering, women substitute for the role of the state and enable its passivity (p. 87).

It is important to note that Khromeychuk and many other Ukrainian and CEE feminists, have clarified or revised their position toward the military after February 2022,³ while staying critical toward militarization (SEE, FOR EXAMPLE, FEMINIST INITIATIVE GROUP 2022; POTAPOVA 2023; DUTCHAK 2022; HENDL ET AL. 2023). The personal experiences of Ukrainian feminists with calling for arms have also exposed some limitations of the largely Western-centric and abstract feminist peace and security theorizing, including those of Enloe's work regarding countries like Ukraine, which has no security guarantees while facing the everyday reality of Russia's brutal imperial aggression (O'SULLIVAN – KRULIŠOVÁ 2023). Khromeychuk's book and emphasis

on the everyday war could certainly help to bridge these epistemic divides. This is very much needed as Western responses to Ukraine have tended to ignore or erase Ukrainian perspectives and agency, thus reinforcing the academic culture of epistemic injustice and imperialism, including in feminist debates (HENDL ET AL. 2023; O’SULLIVAN – KRULIŠOVÁ 2023). Khromeychuk (2022A, 2022B, 2023) has actively spoken about the lack of epistemic trust and the continued misunderstanding of Ukraine which has made knowledge a matter of security. She also pays attention to it at the end of her book, where she details how things have changed for her after February 2022 with Ukraine suddenly being placed on the mental maps as the world could watch “*Ukrainian cities and towns being bombed more or less live*” (p. 189). She takes this as “*an opportune moment*” to pursue structural changes that would allow for understanding Ukraine by recognizing and elevating its agency. This will not happen overnight but everyone who reads this book can start thinking about it.

Khromeychuk’s book is heartfelt and deeply moving. Her stories do not answer all the uneasy questions raised but rather create many new ones. The human stories are one of the most powerful aspects of the book and the author brilliantly shows that if such stories are omitted, our understanding of Ukraine and the war will always be incomplete. She offers her own tale full of “*embodied and uncomfortable knowledge*” (TSYMBALYUK 2022), which enables the readers to learn about and, most importantly, better *understand* Ukraine (SEE ALSO KHROMEYCHUK 2023). Her memoir is now all the more pressing given that the everyday war and grief have taken on yet another dimension with Russia’s genocidal aggression since February 2022. In this context, she considers her situation as privileged, recognizing that her brother is buried in a beautiful cemetery and not in a mass grave (p. 184). While her feelings towards the enemy evolve, she emphasizes her strong belief in justice (p. 187). Although we as feminists studying wars know that justice never comes to all, her book can serve as an appeal against these odds and a useful guide for pursuing structural change.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Khromeychuk mentions in one of her posts on social media that her brother was killed on 24 March 2017. See <<https://twitter.com/OKhromeychuk/status/1639218885479079942>>.
- 2 On a similar aspect of the everyday presence of the war, namely its everyday presence through Café Patriot in Lviv, see Uehling (2020).
- 3 Khromeychuk has acknowledged this, for instance, during her talk at the NATO panel discussion with Irene Fellin, the NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security, on 22 September 2023.

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