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Women's Biography in Modern Ukrainian Women's War Fiction: the Case of the Novel *Because It Hurts* by Yevhenia Senik

SUMMARY

The article deals with the interaction of authentic women's war experience and ideological requirements while shaping the female biographical narrative in modern Ukrainian fiction as exemplified by the novel *Because It Hurts* by Yevhenia Senik. The idea of strengthening the national identity with the topics forbidden in Soviet times is presented in the introductory part. The main part of the article shows how the author seeks to respond to both public expectations connected with strengthening the national identity and the need to understand the psychological crises caused by the war. The novel unveils women's war experience, shaping the social frames of memories about it and influencing the public perception

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of current women soldiers. However, rather than follow the ideological tradition, Senik focuses on women's agency and self-awareness.

Keywords
women's war experience, female biographical narrative, modern Ukrainian fiction, Yevhenia Senik

Since the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine in 2014, the central theme of Ukrainian women's war fiction has been the discovery/affirmation of national identity. National identity in novels is presented as a factor that gives the characters a foothold to transform themselves from victim of war into force. In this way, the plot unfolds in three of the most famous war novels: *Mariupol Process* (2015) by Halyna Vdovychenko, *Daughter* (2019) by Tamara Duda, and *Cecil the Lion had to die* (2021) by Olena Stiazhkina.

This narrative of identity is recognised as socially important, in particular, due to prizes which the aforementioned works have been awarded, such as Grand Coronation of the Word 2015 for *Mariupol Process*, Shevchenko Prize 2020 for *Daughter*, Lviv City of Literature UNESCO Prize for *Cecil the Lion had to die*. Moreover, the narrative of identity is so important that works about war that do not contain it are not considered relevant. For example, Haska Shyyan's novel *Behind the Back* (2019) was awarded the European Union Prize for Literature, but caused a wave of criticism in Ukraine as the hedonistic character's aspirations contradict the social need to survive as a national community.

It is generally recognised that collective memory is an important factor in the formation of national identity. As Anthony Smith argues, "one might almost say: no memory, no identity; no identity, no nation."[1] Since these novels unfold as a story of separation between *us* and *them* on the territory of the Russified East of Ukraine, the characters in these works also refuse to share the memory of the Soviet past, which is most clearly represented in *Cecil the Lion had to die*.

At the same time, the ongoing war encourages authors to pay attention primarily to the experience of wartime in the past in the search of experience that can be used today. However, the experience of World War II is ideologically biased: researchers of the memory of World War II in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia emphasise that the wars of memory and the real war of Russia against Ukraine are "deeply interconnected on many levels,"[2] especially that the Russians imagine and narrate their aggression as a continuation of the Great Patriotic War. Therefore, deconstructing the narrative of the Great Patriotic War is part of the strategy of decolonising the Ukrainian cultural space. According to studies by Jonathan Brunstedt

[1] Anthony Smith, "Memory and Modernity: Reflections on Ernest Gellner's Theory of Nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism,* no. 2(3) (1996): 383.

[2] Julie Fedor, Simon Lewis, Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "Introduction: War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus," in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus,* eds. Julie Fedor et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 5.

and Alexander Melnyk,[3] the Great Patriotic War was positioned as a fundamentally supranational experience and the basis of a transcendent, pan-Soviet imagined community."[4] In addition to the idea of the common experience of different peoples of the empire, the myth of the Great Patriotic War also covertly reinforced Russian dominance. After all, it was the Russians who were presented as liberators, while other nations were accused of treason (cases of collaboration occurred throughout the Nazi-occupied territory, including Russia, due to the cruelty and injustice of the Soviet government but non-Russians were massively evicted to remote areas of the empire; the Crimean Tatars, Ingush, Chechens, Kalmyks, Volga Germans, and some other peoples of the Caucasus were blamed as the whole nation). This legitimised mass repression and imposed a sense of guilt on the colonised toward the colonisers.

In modern war novels about the past, there is an appeal to those pages that were silenced or rewritten in the Soviet era. The authors address the topics of the anti-Soviet resistance of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Khrystyna Kotsira's *Apples of Eve*, Yevhenia Senik's *Because It Hurts*) and the Holocaust (Sofia Andrukhovych's *Amadoka*, Anna Gruver's *Her Empty Places*). The knowledge of the past helps the characters to control themselves and survive the crisis. There is a tendency in these works to gravitate toward the documentary (referring to biographies of historical figures, imitating a diary), which is most fully realised in Senik's documentary novel *Because It Hurts*. It combines the story of Anna Popovych, a real-life member of the anti-Soviet underground, with the autobiographical story of Zhenia, a young woman living through the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This text combines societal expectations for a representation of the past that would help strengthen national identity with the author's quest to understand herself through another woman's experience.

Researchers agree that: "life narratives are ideological constructs, more or less carefully crafted for consumption by specific audiences for specific purposes and with reference to existing conventions of genre"[5] and ideological requirements depend on gender and, at the same time, shape readers' views on gendered agency.[6]

This research paper aims to investigate the interaction of authentic women's war experience and ideological expectations of the society during the formation of the female biographical narrative in modern Ukrainian literature to demonstrate how the novel pushes the boundaries of societal expectations and thus helps different women feel as a part of the community. To achieve this, the article examines the representation of women's war experience in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UIA) in the biographical part

[3] Oleksandr Melnyk, *World War II as an Identity Project: Historicism, Legitimacy Contests, and the Re-Construction of Political Communities in Ukraine, 1939–1946* (Stuttgart-Hannover: ibidem Press, 2023).

[4] Jonathan Brunstedt, "Building a Pan-Soviet Past: The Soviet War Cult and the Turn Away from Ethnic Particularism," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review,* no. 38(2), (2011): 149.

[5] Julia Novak, Caitríona Ní Dhúill, "Imagining Gender in Biographical Fiction: Introduction," in *Imagining Gender in Biographical Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 2.

[6] Ibid., 8.

of the novel *Because It Hurts* in the context of the discourse of national history and memory. Subsequently, the paper focuses on the autobiographical part of the novel to interpret the author's motives for referring to Anna Popovych's biography.

Women's story of fighting in history and literature

The attitude towards women in the army has traditionally been negative. As Jennifer Turpin notices, the conventional relationship between gender and war is that men make war whereas women make peace. Men, as representatives of their peoples or social groups, fight with men of another group, while women remain on the sidelines of the battle, protected by their husbands.[7] Men tended to perceive the appearance of women in the army as an encroachment on their masculinity, hegemony and power, and therefore belittled women's abilities and capacities. The society as a whole sees a contradiction between the army and motherhood. However, despite the belief that "A nation at war is a male nation,"[8] women are also recruited into armed formations during difficult periods of war.

Restoring the experience of Ukrainian women's participation in armed formations is complicated by the fact that before World War II, Ukrainian territories formed part of different states. Citizens of the Ukrainian SSR were recruited into the Red Army. As Anna Krylova summarises, a woman in the Red Army represented both a state and a personal project. The contradictions of Stalin's gender policy and the social militarisation of the 1930s in the USSR, which prepared citizens for the war with the 'bourgeois West,' formed a new social identity of the 'warrior woman,' who considered her "right to participate in combat violence and acquire the specialised and technical knowledge required of the modern soldier, which was seen by young women as an expression of their new liberated Soviet womanhood."[9] According to the research, women in the Red Army served in positions related to military equipment, which signifies that they had high military qualifications. Nevertheless, as Svetlana Alexievich's characters testify, after the war the Soviet society devalued the contribution of female combatants, reducing their participation to sexual pleasure of men.[10] Krylova does not pay attention to this transgression, nor to the national differences in women's stories, referring to all her heroines as Soviet or Russian women. These peculiarities of the attitude towards Soviet women combatants had an impact not only on the story of former Red Army women but also indirectly on women in the anti-Soviet underground, who were perceived as traitors and sexual objects.

In the interwar period, there was an active women's movement in Western Ukraine that subordinated its tasks to the ideas of national liberation.

[7] Jennifer Turpin, "Many Faces: Women Confronting War," in *The Women and War Reader,* eds. Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jenifer Turpin (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 3.

[8] Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1990), 88.

[9] Anna Krylova, *Soviet women in combat: a history of violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 14.

[10] Svitlana Aleksievych, *U wijny ne zhinoche oblychcha* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2020).

This contributed to the involvement of women in the ranks of the insurgent army, which was traditionally portrayed as a purely male world. As Olena Petrenko concludes, "despite the existence of archival materials and memoirs that emphasise distrust of women as soldiers, numerous documents and orders of the underground demonstrate the large-scale involvement of women in the UIA."[11] J. Burds even uses the phrase "feminisation of the underground."[12]

There were mostly young women in the army, who joined for ideological reasons or because of personal or family relationships with soldiers.[13] Women served as liaisons, couriers, scouts, propaganda officers, nurses, procurers of supplies (food and clothing), and riflemen. Participation in the armed struggle forced women to abandon their families, including children. That did not meet traditional expectations and contradicted the role of reproducing the nation, which the ideology of nationalism assigns to women.[14]

The humiliating attitude of the Soviet military toward women in the army determined the targeted use of prisoners of war by the Soviet special services in the fight against the underground. Olena Petrenko points out that the mass arrests of insurgents after the arrival of the Soviet army coincided with the massive involvement of women in the UIA, which led to complaints within its ranks.[15] The Soviet authorities used the insurgents' prejudice against women in the army for manipulation: women were arrested *en masse*, arousing suspicion against them, intimidated, tortured, blackmailed, and deceived by theatrical attacks by insurgents to whom the most ardent women told everything they knew. By driving women into the trap of betrayal, the Soviet secret services achieved not only the destruction of the insurgent network but also the symbolic devaluation of the struggle itself.

Burds suggests that the long silence of Ukrainian historiography on the contribution of women to the resistance is explained by the fact that the story of the massive abuse of women by the Soviet secret services undermined the masculinity of the insurgents, who were unable to protect themselves.[16] This story could only be interpreted as a defeat and could not be part of the narrative of resilience.

Separating itself from the common Soviet experience, Ukrainian culture focused on the memory of the struggle for independence, whose influential figures were the UIA fighters capable of resisting the Soviet rule from 1942 to the 1960s. It is in this perspective that they appear in contemporary Ukrainian culture, while the authors leave to historians the first two years

[11] Olena Petrenko, "Instrumentalizatsiia strakhu. Vykorystannia radianskymy ta polskymy orhanamy bezpeky zhinok-ahentiv u borotbi proty ukrainskoho natsionalistychnoho pidpillia," *Ukraina Moderna*, no. 18 (2011): 134.

[12] Jeffry Burds, *Sovetskaia agentura: Ocherki istorii SSSR v poslevoennye gody (1944–1948)* (Moscow-New York: Sovremennaya istoria, 2006), 120.

[13] Oksana Kis, "Mizh osobystym i politychnym: genderni osoblyvosti dosvidu zhinok-uchasnyts natsionalno-vyzvolnykh zmahan na zakhidnoukrainskykh zemliakh u 1940–1950-kh rokakh," *Narodoznavchi zoshyty*, no. 4(112) (2013): 593.

[14] Nira Yuval-Davis, "Nationalist projects and gender relations," *Narodna umjetnost*, no. 1(40) (2003): 9–36.

[15] Olena Petrenko, "Instrumentalizatsiia strakhu…", 137.

[16] Jeffry Burds, *Sovetskaia agentura…*, 158.

of this formation's existence, which were marked by bloody and unjustified interethnic conflicts and controversial decisions. Under the influence of the threat of USRR restoration, cultural narratives of honoring and acknowledging those who resisted Soviet rule are becoming an element of the security strategy of Central and Eastern European countries, as demonstrated by the research of Maria Mälksoo.[17] In this case, as Weronika Grzebalska[18] shows on the example of Poland, the narrative of women's participation in this struggle can be fully subordinated to the ideas and needs of nationalism:[19] focusing on those women whose "lives can be presented within the framework of heroism and martyrdom" and "promoting wartime women as symbols of national struggle."[20]

Nationalist hestory is also popular in Ukraine. Since 2007, a number of biographical studies on women in the UIA have been published, including those by Lesia Onyshko (2007), Oleksandr Panchenko (2007), Volodymyr Ivanchenko (2009), Oleksandr Ishchuk and Volodymyr Ivanchenko (2010).[21] In this way, women's stories fit into the general history of the struggle against enslavement.

Nationalist herstory is also present in fiction. In her famous novel *Museum of Abandoned Secrets* (2009), Oksana Zabuzhko notes "typical portraits of indomitable, male-oriented, ideologically stable characters. And their main role in the novel is to help the apologetic presentation of the history of the UIA and to legitimise the insurgents as ideal fighters for Ukraine's independence."[22] According to the story, journalist Daryna Hoshchynska accidentally sees an archival photo of a group of insurgents and wants to restore the story of the only woman in it. But the story of Olena's struggle as an insurgent is replaced by the story of failed love, which makes her participation in the underground look like a fatal mistake that prevented her from realising her potential as a mother. This is the role that the novel programs women to play.

By presenting women's experiences in the nationalist herstory format, Zabuzhko and other authors fit them into the traditional War Story, which, as Miriam Cooke states, "gives order to wars that are generally experienced as confusion."[23] By structuring the experience into oppositional pairs (foe and friend; aggression and defence; combatant and civilian, etc.), she

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[17] Maria Mälksoo, "'Memory must be defended': Beyond the politics of mnemonical security," *Security Dialogue*, no. 46(3), (2015): 221–237.

[18] Weronika Grzebalska, "Between gender blindness and nationalist herstory," *Baltic Worlds*, no. 10(4) (2017): 71–82.

[19] Ibid., 77–79.

[20] Ibid., 77.

[21] Lesia Onyshko, *«Nam sontse vsmikhalos kriz rzhavii graty...»: Kateryna Zarytska v ukrainskomu natsionalno-vyzvolnomu rusi* (Toronto–Lviv: Litopys UPA, 2007); Oleksandr Panchenko, *Zviazkova henerala. Halyna Dydyk: «…Na zhal, i ya zhyva»* (Hadiach: Hadiach, 2007); Volodymyr Ivanchenko, *Kvitka v chervonomu pekli: zhyttievyi shliakh Liudmyly Foi* (Toronto–Lviv: Litopys UPA, 2009); Oleksandr Ishchuk, Volodymyr Ivanchenko, *Zhyttievyi shliakh Halyny Holoiad –«Marty Hai»* (Toronto–Lviv: Litopys UPA, 2010).

[22] Ibid., 153.

[23] Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 15.

"reinforces mythic wartime roles."[24] However, the researcher's analysis of women's literature demonstrates that authors who rely on their own experiences of war more than on traditional structures present war as "the situation as out of control"[25] and redefine "the meaning of the nation as that entity that needs everyone, including its women, to talk, to dialogue, to debate, and to function as active citizens for it to be able to survive."[26]

Senik's novel undermines the traditional War Story in several ways. First of all, this happens through the combination of two stories: of Anna's resistance and Zhenia's exclusion, which are treated as equivalent. The story of resistance is meant to emphasise national identity and therefore is in tune with contemporary societal demands for stories about self-determination. However, the seemingly nationalist story in the novel turns into the story of a woman who realises the value of preserving her own identity and agency. Therefore, the story is not limited to the theme of resistance but reveals the experience of private relationships, as well as the experience of knowing God. It is difficult to structure Anna's story in clear oppositions, but it is even more challenging to do so with Zhenia's story, and these ambiguous narratives that intersperse each other dialogise the understanding of women's experience during the war.

Presentation of Anna Popovych's life story

Senik's novel *Because It Hurts* offers the reader a story about a young woman from the Luhansk region who begins recording conversations with Anna Popovych in 2012 in order to write a novel about her. Anna "Ruzha"[27] (1925–2015) is presented through her own story, which the author does not edit or organise. Therefore, the story appears in repetitions, gaps, and silences. Although this narrative features well-known commanders and several important NKVD operations against the UIA, it is not about them, but about women's experience.

The story of Anna is the story of a girl who, remembering the atrocities of Soviet troops during the retreat, joins the ranks of the rebels when the Red Army approaches the Carpathians. At first, she procured food for the UIA, which led to her being persecuted by the NKVD and temporarily arrested. After her mother was murdered by the NKVD in 1947, she joined the army, where her brothers were fighting. Then she went through a series of dangerous events. After being wounded, to avoid capture, she tried to blow herself up with a grenade but survived. Her arm was amputated in the prison hospital. The rebels rescued her from there, but she refused to stay with them in the bunker and spent the winter alone in the mountains. When she returned, her commander was arrested, but later escaped and joined the unit. However, his second arrest led to the collapse of the hideout where

[24] Idem.
[25] Ibid., 16.
[26] Ibid., 299.
[27] All soldiers in UIA used nicknames. In this article, they appear in quotation marks. *Ruzha* means "rose."

Anna and their senior commander were staying. She was arrested and after two years of interrogations she was sent to a camp, where she spent eight years. After that, she returned to Ukraine. In this way, it is a story about the defiance of a nation personified in Anna: "The commander ["Hrim"] said before he died: «Popovych, Ukraine needs you. Ukraine does not need the dead, it needs the living.»"[28]

However, along with the story of her struggle ("For me, freedom is an independent Ukraine"[29]), the story of her relationship with the commander "Dovbush," Luka Hrynishak, is brought to the fore. Focusing on her own experience, Anna does not seek to evaluate the commander from a historical perspective; in her story, Hrynishak is her lover. Their relationship was complicated by the fact that Hrynishak was married in civilian life. Anna became his *de facto* wife, but after the return of his legal wife (who attempted to emigrate), she ended the relationship. Angry about this breakup, "Dovbush" did not believe the warnings of her intuition (Anna trusts her dreams and believes that they warn them of trouble) and walked into a trap. Drama is the defining factor for this romantic story, and there is no room for sublime feelings or ideological assessments.

The line of relations with the enemy in the national-centred narrative can only be a story of confrontation or betrayal. However, there are details in Anna's story that undermine this unambiguity. This line begins with the violence that Anna refuses to talk about: "We were held for two weeks. They beat us... every night we were dragged and beaten. They did with us what they wanted, we were young girls... I won't even tell you everything."[30] Later, Anna mentions that she had a child who died quickly but she avoided any details. Therefore, the narrator suggests that:

> the child about whom Anna spoke so little and who died as an infant was the result of interrogations during her first arrest in 1944. Perhaps even as a result of rape by the same investigator who, according to Anna, «beat her a lot, but also loved her»"[31]

and this is the only attempt to supplement Anna's story by interpreting it.

Later, however, the line of relations with the enemy took an unexpected turn: before being sent to the camp, Anna received a parcel with boots with the image of a tattoo popular in the Soviet Union. Consequently, Anna considered them a gift from the investigator. Since the Soviet system did not care about providing its prisoners with warm garment, a gift from the enemy helped her survive in Siberia. And this real experience contradicts the unambiguity of the nation-focused narrative and traditional War Story.

In the discourse of nation-focused literature, the ending of the work recorded a moral victory on the side of the man with whom the woman

[28] Yevhenia Senik, *Bo bolyt* (Brustury: Discursus, 2023), 245.
[29] Ibid., 268.
[30] Ibid., 84
[31] Ibid., 224.

remained. Since, as Nira Yuval-Davis notes, "Women are associated in the collective imagination with children and therefore with the collective, as well as the familial, future."[32] In the novel, this scheme is destroyed: "Dovbush" is executed, and Anna, although she marries a fellow Ukrainian after her imprisonment, cannot have children because of forced sterilisation. In other words, she is no longer provided for the role of the nation's reproducer. By offering the reader an image of a strong and self-aware woman, the novel confronts this belief, convincing that women are valuable for more than just their ability to bear children.

How the novel records violence is notable not only in its social aspect but also in its literary one. In Soviet-era texts,

> sexual violence indicates the actual destruction of a woman's agency, the loss of identity, which is directly related to corporeality. Rape makes a woman an "outsider" and is automatically perceived as being removed from the group of "our own." The presentation of sexual violence is traditionally used for demonization[33]

In the novel *Because It Hurts*, the violence she experiences does not destroy Anna's agency: she retains her beliefs and her ability to defend them; she also does not fall under the influence of Soviet NKVD officers. And for the rebels, as well as for the readers, only her actions remain significant. Neither the rape nor the sterilisation defines Anna, just as the loss of her arm does not define her life.

Overall, Anna's story in the novel is the story of a woman who had to live in difficult conditions but did not let them define her. Until the end of her life, she remained true to her own vision of herself and her purpose. Senik honors this vision by letting Anna tell her own story. In addition, this emphasises the authenticity of the story, which is extremely important given the practice of subjugating women's experiences to ideological narratives. On the other hand, refusing to organise the events into a plot means refusing to comprehend them, because a plot involves establishing cause-and-effect relationships. Thus, Anna Popovych's experience is recorded, but it is not interpreted.

This specificity of the narration is especially significant in comparison with the film *Zhyva* (*Alive*) directed by Taras Khymych (2016) and based on the same story recorded by Senik. The central motif of the film is Anna's faith in her dreams. She gained the ability to see the future after surviving a fall into a well. Her dreams repeatedly saved the unit of "Dovbush", and when he did not heed her warnings, he fell into a trap. The main idea of the film is summarised at the end: you should believe your intuition because it is the voice of your destiny.

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[32] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Nationalist projects*…, 18.

[33] Olena Petrenko, "Literaturni obrAzy «banderivok» u konteksti ideolohichnykh voien," in *Zhinky Tsentralnoi ta Skhidnoi Yevropy u Druhii svitovii viini: henderna spetsyfika dosvidu v chasy ekstremalnoho nasylstva*, eds. Helinda Hrinchenko, Kateryna Kobchenko, Oksana Kis (Kyiv: Art Knyha, 2015), 146.

Anna's story has been simplified to emphasise this plot. Her role in the UIA is reduced to that of a fortune teller and a cook; her political beliefs and motivation for resistance have been left out of the story. The relationship with the unmarried "Dovbush" loses its drama, but the fictional character "Nico" is introduced to organise the plot. He is in love with Anna, but without reciprocation, he betrays the unit. (That is, the film repeats the prejudice that women were indirectly responsible for betrayals). The investigator's line remains as a recognition of Anna's uniqueness.

Both the novel and the film encourage the reader/viewer to empathise and present Anna's story as a story of self-identity. At the same time, the degree of individual agency that Taras Khymych and Yevhenia Senik endow Anna with is different. In the film, Anna is limited in her agency, and the influence of circumstances is decisive, but in the novel, her agency is extended to political autonomy (in the stories about the camp and life after liberation).

Why does Zhenia need Anna?

The story of Anna Popovych in the novel is accompanied by the story of her recorder, Zhenia[34] from Luhansk region. During her work with Anna, she lived through the Revolution of Dignity[35] (2013–2014), the outbreak of war, and the occupation of her hometown of Lutuhino. She is unable to overcome her fear of war and leaves Ukraine whenever she can, leaving her cancer-stricken mother and father with Ukrainian beliefs under the occupation. This story is autobiographical and the author wants to tell it for the sake of scriptotherapy.[36] In the preface, she points out that it was originally supposed to be a novel about Anna, but tragic events prompted the author to add her own experiences.

At first glance, the combination of these two stories under one cover seems unmotivated, even for the author ("These stories did not stick together, did not fit into any of the genres. In my notebooks, they remained fragments of the stories of two women"[37]). One is even tempted to think that Anna's story is told in order to be able to tell one's own, since in a struggling society there is a demand for a story of resistance, not a story of fear and anxiety. At the very least, the narrator believes that this story can become a kind of ransom for her emigration: "even if I have to do it someday, I want to create something worthwhile first, to do something important for Ukraine."[38]

At the beginning, the narrator declares that the connection between the two stories is the discovery of national identity: "I can't leave everything now and just live and be happy, because I don't know who I am and what

[34] A short form of Yevhenia.

[35] Mass protests of Ukrainians against the arbitrariness of Yanukovych's government, which he tried to suppress by force, but failed and fled the country.

[36] Suzette A. Henke used the term 'scriptotherapy' to name "The process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment." In her opinion, writing an autobiography can be a therapeutic tool. Cf. Suzette A. Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (London: Macmillan, 1998), xii–xiii.

[37] Yevhenia Senik, *Bo bolyt* (Brustury: Discursus, 2023), 250.

[38] Ibid., 26.

my identity is... I feel that it is Anna's story that will help me find answers to the questions I have not yet asked."[39] In Zhenia's opinion, the realisation of one's own identity gives strength and answers most existential questions. Zhenia explains the lack of her own national identity with history: in Soviet times, the East of Ukraine was deliberately settled by Russians instead of Ukrainians who were killed by the Holodomor, and it was unprofitable and dangerous for the survivors to preserve their national identity. However, Zhenia recalls that both she and her parents were listed in the documents as Ukrainians. However, she did not know what it meant.

At first, Zhenia became interested in Jewish culture and decided to look for her Jewish roots. However, having no reliable confirmation, she turned to existing family documents and transfers. She gathered information about her grandfather, who served in the NKVD, in particular in the Gulag, and later fought in the Winter War and then in World War II, where he met Zhenia's grandmother. He reached Vienna with the Soviet troops and, according to Zhenia, could stay there, but when he learned about the famine in Ukraine, he sold his motorcycle, bought food with all the money, and returned to his relatives. This truly epic story could have been the basis of a novel, but the author tells it in a few pages. Another promising character for a story about national identity was Zhenia's father, who, in her opinion, wanted to atone for her grandfather's service in the Soviet punitive authorities throughout his life and remained in the occupation to defend his space (even if it was only a room and later his grave) as the Ukrainian territory. However, his story was also short, because for Zhenia, his motives were irrelevant: she "realized that we are not responsible for the actions of our fathers or grandfathers."[40]

By the end of the novel, Zhenia admits: "I am Ukrainian. And that was enough for me... That's how I identified myself and had no desire to prove it to anyone."[41] But the character no longer gives special power to the national identity:

> As never before, I completely freed myself and gained a deep sense of myself and my path at the same time. I absorbed the experiences of all previous generations, transcended the boundaries of families and nations. Perhaps most of all, I affirmed myself in one thought: I am a human being.[42]

Anna's life story has a paradoxical role in Zhenia's story: instead of pushing her to join the struggle in any form, comprehending the dramatic story in conditions that could become similar prompts Zhenia to recognise that she is not a hero: "I need to stop trying on this role and finally admit to myself that I am too weak for this struggle."[43] So Zhenia emigrates from the war-torn country. In the context of nationalism, this decision should be interpreted as a betrayal, but in the novel it is interpreted as a need for self-identity.

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[39] Ibid., 31–32.
[40] Ibid., 233.
[41] Ibid., 283.
[42] Idem.
[43] Ibid., 190.

This contradiction between the two stories indicates the author's desire to undermine the traditional narrative of both War Story and Nationalist herstory and to resist the militarisation of the idea of nationality by demonstrating the complexity and diversity of women's wartime experience. At the same time, given that this novel has an autobiographical basis and was most probably created as a result of scriptotherapy, a psychologically sensitive approach should be used to interpret the connection between the two stories.

Feminist criticism allows us to interpret the story of Anna and Zhenya's relationship as a story of separation and individualisation. According to Bell Gale Chevigny, when a woman writes a biography of a woman from the past, a connection is created between them that "symbolically reflect their internalized relations with their mothers and in some measure re-create them."[44] Cultural practices of motherhood promote the symbiosis between mothers and daughters, preventing separation and individualisation (Chodorov,[45] Flax[46]). Therefore when female authors write about women of the past, they perceive them as mothers from whom they can more easily and effectively separate themselves.

In her story about her family, Zhenia emphasises the male experience: she talks about her grandfathers and father but mentions her grandmothers and mother only very briefly. What their experience of the war and the Soviet era was like and what Zhenia's relationship with them was likewas left out of the story. The narrator seeks to clearly outline her relationship with her father, although she avoids provocative moments but says little about her relationship with her mother and her attitude to her mother's decision to return to occupied Lutuhino to support him. The nature of Zhenia's parents' relationship was complicated, but her mother gave in to her own desire to stay in Lviv for the sake of duty. Zhenya is less committed to her duties, thus she needs to find an acceptable form of recognition that she, Zhenya, is not her mother and will act at her own discretion. Consequently, Anna becomes a substitute for Zhenia's mother, someone she can get close to and then distance herself from.

In the end, the story, which was to be about the search for national identity, turns into a story about the realisation of one's own individuality. Zhenia perceives Anna's story as a model for realising her own agency and does everything she can to achieve self-identity without looking back at social expectations.

Conclusion

Contemporary Ukrainian women's literature seeks to respond to both public expectations for the comprehension of national identity and the need to understand the psychological crises caused by the war. The public demand

[44] Bell Gale Chevigny, "Daughters Writing: Toward a Theory of Women's Biography," *Feminist Studies*, no. 1(9) (1983): 80.

[45] Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

[46] Jane Flax, "The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and within Feminism," *Feminist Studies,* no. 2(4) (1978): 171–189.

for a revision of history (embodied in the policy of decommunisation) encourages women to address the topic of the Soviet past, in particular the war experience.

The topic of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army is popular in the literature along with the Holocaust and Soviet deportations. The experience of women in UIA has long been marginaliszed in history and literature, and nowadays it is often framed as a nationalist herstory. Yevhenia Senik's documentary novel does not fit into this trend as it recreates an authentic woman's story about her participation in the UIA, unconstrained by the need to create a metaphor for loyalty. Anna's story, told in her own words, reveals both the authentic experience of a woman in an anti-Soviet resistance unit and the emotional experience of trauma and psychological crises. The lack of structuring of the material and ambiguity of the oppositions "friend/enemy," "defeat/victory," and "army/civilian" reproduce wartime as chaos, unable to be understood, and therefore the character's efforts are aimed at understanding herself. Therefore, the peculiarity of the story is its focus on self-reflection.

Unlike the biographies written by historians who focused on the experience of women involved in the power (wives of the main commanders, their liaisons, successful counterintelligence officers), the novel tells the story of an ordinary insurgent who survived the war and imprisonment, retaining her unbreakable spirit. In this way, the novel expands the circle of those whose experience is important for modern women.

In the autobiographical part, the author shows that knowledge of the authentic experience of the past is important not only for the political sphere but also for the psychological one. Zhenia's account of her experience of separation from Anna invites readers to reflect on the fact that identifying with the characters of the past is not the only way to master the text. This encourages the recognition of the multiplicity of scenarios of living through war and asserting one's own identity, which, in turn, helps women with different life experiences feel part of the community. Thus, the feminist perspective of women's wartime biographies emphasises women's individual agency. The experience of preserving it becomes more important than the experience in the sphere of power.

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