

# Ukrainian Writers and Poets

Tuesday 29 August 2023, by [STARODUBTSEV Vladyslav](#) (Date first published: 5 August 2023).

**Ukrainian writers and poets have, throughout history, played an important role in shaping Ukrainian identity especially during the most difficult days, when Ukrainian culture faced existential crisis from occupation by the Polish, Russian (Tsarist, Soviet and Republican) and Romanian governments. These occupations threatened the autonomy of the people and our community, our “ourness” and our right to self-govern on our own land. Here, historically the issue of language rights was connected with social and political conflicts, as the Irish reader can understand, with Ireland’s own historic struggle for language rights and independence. The Ukrainian language was a language of peasants — landlords spoke in Polish, Russian or Romanian — the use of the language was social. Speaking Ukrainian outside of your small community was immediately an anti-landlord protest: it was a political issue. Speaking Ukrainian publicly meant to undermine and protest at the occupation of the country.**

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Ukrainian thus became the language of struggle. Struggle for political rights, as well as cultural self-determination. Now, Ukrainian authors continue the line and traditions of struggle, finding understanding from previous generations who fought against the occupiers the same way we do. For us, it was always a struggle for rights — including the right to speak in our own language — against Russian attempts to Russify Ukraine.

To understand the complexity and importance of language and struggle in our history, this article will recommend six historical Ukrainian writers and poets, and explain how their texts can provide better understanding of deep complexity of oppression, language, politics and, in the end, help understand Ukraine and our fight.

## Six Ukrainian Writers and Poets for Irish Readers

### Taras Shevchenko

No recommendation can be more mainstream than this.

I have rewritten my “Slepuyu” and am crying over it, what the devil has befallen me and for what sin, that here I am confessing to the Russians with a stale Russians word. Compatriots and non-compatriots here call me stupid [for writing in Ukrainian]. But what should I do, isn’t it my fault that I wasn’t born a Russian or a Frenchman?

1842, Letter to Yakiv Kukharenko

“The first people’s poet” as Karl Marx once wrote in his notes about Taras Shevchenko. He was a peasant, a person to bring and go with the language that even its natives were ashamed to speak — as it was the “poor man” and “peasant” language. His poems connect the issue of language, independence and anti-colonialism together as organically as it could be. To speak in “poor man” language was an act of defiance against the empire. And to write poems in it! Shevchenko was a visionary, a man celebrated, and his birthday and day of death every year after — became the time of biggest political rallies in Ukraine — for independence, social and national rights. His sharpest weapon was the poem *Kavkaz*. Written thirty years after Pushkin’s *Prisoner of the Caucasus*, where the Russian poet had arrogantly declared: “*Surrender, Caucasus: goes Ermolov!*”, Shevchenko, while being deeply Christian writer, went so far as to side with Muslim fighters for the independence of their land:

“Fight—and you’ll be victorious,  
God is helping you!  
On your side is justice, on your side is glory,  
And holy liberty!”

In the brutal context of current life, [Kavkaz](#) should be the first poem read to understand more about the spirit of Ukrainian writers and poets.

### **Ivan Franko**

Ivan Franko was founder of the first Ukrainian political party and an activist for what he then called “humane socialism”. In his political work, he organized cooperative societies, Prosvita associations (semi-secret societies to preserve and develop Ukrainian language, especially active in the nineteenth century) and participated in supporting student movements, peasant and workers organizations and all of that together with undertaking an incredible amount of work to translate popular European literature to Ukrainian, scientific work (to Ukrainian) and writing epic, revolutionary poems. His two most famous poems are *Kameniar* and *Eternal Revolutionary* telling the story of the enslaved nation, ready to painfully and slowly, undertake the struggle needed to gain its freedom:

The spirit of revolt abides,  
Spirit which spurs flesh to endeavour,  
To fight for freedom, progress, ever  
Lives with us still, it has not died.  
No tortures of the inquisition,  
Nor strong-built walls of Tsarist prison,  
Neither armies strongly mustered  
Nor cannon primed, around it clustered,

Nor the spy's art can seal its doom,  
Nor force it down into the tomb.  
It does not die, lives with us still,  
Though born a thousand years back, coddled  
Till yesterday, but now, unswaddled,  
Forward it strides by its own will.  
Ever more powerful, stronger growing,  
Thither it speeds where dawn is glowing,  
It's word of power, like a reveille,  
Calls millions forth, with it to rally,  
And millions follow and rejoice,  
Led onwards by the spirit's voice.

### **Olha Kobylianska**

Usually in lists such as this, people mention our great revolutionary writer — Lesya Ukrainka — but neglect Olha Kobylianskya, who in the West is unfairly forgotten in light of Lesya Ukrainka's popularity. Well – no more.

Solitude is poor?  
Who can prove that?  
Just listen to the torrent of tears it brings forth and how they spread!  
Look at the countless marble-white hands that bridge its space in convulsions  
of pain; look at the torn veils of hope rocking back and forth, back and forth;  
look at the swarms of thought crowding into it with brute force, thrashing  
about mercilessly and ever faster ... to get where?  
Dear God, to get where?  
Listen!  
Shut the door, huddle together, hold your breath—and listen!

A deer runs through the forest.

Through a green, airy, and lush forest, in search of something.

The deer runs, trampling and crushing flowers underfoot. The leaves of trees rustle and murmur. Within the forest, an old tree's imposing branches sway nearly imperceptibly.

The deer has just stopped short.

Has it arrived? It doesn't know.

It thinks it has. It darts ahead, side to side. Leaping and racing, it bounds ahead—and stops once more.

Its eyes open wide.

It stands motionless, trembling.

What was that? A shot has just rung out through the forest.

Faint sounds of something breaking, something crashing—and all coming toward it, coming toward it. Suddenly, the deer's wide-open eyes see something they have never seen before, and its ears hear something they had never heard before. The hushed forest fills with something the deer never knew before—and blood drains from its body.

That was why it had to race through the green forest.

Listen!

Olha Kobylyanska was a Ukrainian feminist writer and political activist in Bukovyna. She participated in the life of the region, organizing women organizations and socialist clubs. Her first works were in German, which was the formal language of the region: German and Romanian were taught in schools, Polish was the language of landlords and Ukrainian of the peasantry. From a mixed Ukrainian-Polonized-German family, she learned Ukrainian at home. At eighteen, Kobylyanska met Sofia Okynevskya. In her autobiography she writes: *"She spoke to me in Ukrainian, convincing me that I should not write in German, but in Ukrainian for my people, taught me phonetics to write, provided Ukrainian books"*. From that age she wrote in German and Ukrainian.

Kobylyanska's writing was an impressive combination of Ukrainian peasant culture, feminist and socialist ideals, and Nietzschean form, which resulted in books centered on emancipation, understood in the widest sense.

She studied the Ukrainian peasantry of the region, and then wrote the book *"Land"* — as a great text about the Land — nearly in mythical sense — Land, in the book, something that brings people together, creates communities, life, and commonality. The main problem of the text is, in some way, a problem that Erich Fromm described in his philosophical text *"To have or to be?"*. Kobylyanska writes about fratricide. Brother kills another brother for land ownership. For Kobylyanska land should serve humanity, and not the other way around. The social problem of ownership that becomes the cornerstone of society, for her, means that a person becomes owned as well by their property. The land gives power and authority, it is the goal and meaning of the entire peasant existence, but at the same time it absorbs. The problem of Land comes with secondary topics, namely of Ukrainians being separated and fighting and dying for the foreign Empires.

After the publication of *"Land"*, Kobylyanska received a letter from a rich landowner with a marriage proposal, expressing his belief that a woman who feels human tragedies so deeply can also love deeply. Kobylyanska replied that he was wrong, because the author of *"Land"* also knows how to hate as deep.

### **Mykola Khvylovy**

From 1921, young Ukrainian republics — Ukrainian People's Republic and Western Ukrainian People's Republic — both fell under the pressure of imperialist and expansionist states. The Ukrainian revolution was so strong that it forced the creation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic — a puppet state to Russia, at least formally equal. By the sheer sacrifices, even under occupation, Ukrainian identity and some form of statehood become recognized. Khvylovy was a unique author. He was from the start a very politicized Bolshevik. But his role as "the old bolshevik" in Ukraine made him brave enough to challenge Russification, political subjugation by Russia and growing totalitarianism. He wrote countless texts, calling Ukrainian authors to "Get away from Moscow!". He writes, Russian culture: "weighs over us like the master of a situation that has trained our psyche to slavish imitation". He wrote extensively on the need to develop independent Ukrainian culture and to realize Ukrainization — which for Russian Bolsheviks was more of a slogan — in practice. In his late texts he was one of the bravest; revolutionary to the end, he wrote *I am (romance)*: a story of cruel, morally compromised Cheka agents, where the main hero sentences his mother to death "for the ideals of revolution". Revolution is brought by brutal sadists, morally compromised figures and, as one of the names of characters suggests, "Degenerates". In his autobiography Khvylovyi says that he "wants to be *Ukrainian* Bolshevik". In 1927 he wrote a book about party officials, disappointed in revolution, who enslaved Ukrainian peasants and created a new empire. Most of the copies of the first part of the book, which was published in a literary journal, were immediately destroyed. In 1933, seeing that his friends and party allies were killed or silenced one by one, he committed suicide: which he probably planned for a long time.

So, let's talk seriously and not "boyishly". Khvylo is offended that we called Ukraine an independent state. Here you go again. Isn't it independent? Cross yourself, comrade, and look at our constitution. Expand the first paragraph and read it carefully. Do you think that our constitution was drawn up by "boys"? Or maybe you like Yurynets, do you vote again and again for Little Russia? Why do you turn around and smile so pitifully in a slavish way at the Russian bourgeois? All the same, five plus will not be put. There is nothing for you to "protest" against the Russians, who also have their own constitution and are also independent. Tell me please, which great statesman with Ukrainian Trident is trying to Ukrainize Muscovy right now?

— Ukraine or Little Russia, Khvylovyi

## Ukrainian Writers and Poets Fight and Die for Freedom

Since 2014, Ukraine has been suffering under an unprovoked invasion by the Russian Federation against Ukrainians. In 2022, Russia started a full-scale invasion, which spread the war to all the regions of Ukraine. All the different people, of different professions, origins and nationality, are fighting against occupiers.

### **Artem Chapeye**

**Artem Chapeye** is a modern Ukrainian writer, translator, social and political activist. With the full-scale invasion, he joined the military. In interview to [New Yorker](#), he says:

As an intellectual, I see this experience as a chance to be embedded in and observe the society beyond my bubble; as a left-wing person, I experience this euphoric sense of being “with the people,” but, when it comes to my usefulness, I’m rather envious of people who have special skills and can do more than just patrol. Then again, everyone is needed, and it’s good to know that we have an excess of people ready to resist the invaders.

What’s most amazing, I think, is that most of us didn’t even expect so much resistance and solidarity from ourselves. That came as a surprise, and it’s self-supporting.

Artem Chapaye is not only a writer, but an “old-school” intellectual — the one always by the side of the people in democratic protests and on the frontlines. He could be usually seen protesting against construction companies destroying Ukrainian cities’ unique architecture or fighting for social rights. Chapaye’s books were four times nominated for “Ukrainian book of the year” by the BBC. His book, “*The Ukraine*” – ironically named with “The” which was used by [Russians under the Soviet Occupation of Ukraine](#). In Chapaye’s reinterpretation – “The” gets the meaning of “This Ukraine”, or, to be precise, “*The*” is used to refer to things or people when only one exists at any one time — as Cambridge dictionary puts it. “The” used not as an outsider name of Ukraine, but as its opposite — an insider name, that underlines uniqueness, but also the reality of Ukraine. This is “The” Ukraine — not Ukraine for tourists, even internal ones, Ukraine without a good looking page-cover, but Ukraine as it is and as we love it — poor, controversial, dramatic, but in the end multifaceted and in weird ways beautiful and joyful. Now, Chapaye fights for “The” Ukraine — Ukraine, beautiful as it is. Together with other great writers, he defends our land, families and people against brutal and unprovoked Russian invasion and its continuation as full-scale invasion from 2022.

### **Viktoria Amelina**

**Viktoria Amelina** was a Lviv native — born in the infamous year of 1986 — the year of the Chornobyl disaster, she was studying in a Russian school. From the Soviet occupation of Lviv, the USSR pursued radical Russification policies, trying to turn Lviv into “A Russian city”. Tens of thousands of Russians were moved to Lviv — first it was teachers and NKVD/KGB workers — while Ukrainians were deported. The new Russian teachers [formed a privileged class](#), they didn’t know Ukrainian, and, in fact, Ukrainian became the second class language. From the end of the war to 1950 the percentage of Russians in Lviv increased from 5 to 30. This trend was overturned only by industrialization — Ukrainian peasantry joining the urban lifestyle to work in newly built factories. In that context, Ukrainian was mocked and blocked from the city ‘influential’ centers as a “peasant language”. To build a career, you needed to speak Russian. In that city, **Viktoria** was born. Speaking to the [Guardian](#), she says:

The Russian Federation invested a lot of money in raising children like us from the “former Soviet republics” as Russians... Hopefully, I will have turned out to be one of the worst investments the Russian Federation ever made.

Lviv, and Ukraine, a place of complexities, intertwined fates, crimes and joy. The book *“Dom’s Dream Kingdom”* reflects that. The complexities of the ordinaries. The identities, the city, the land, its history, senses — now, in past, in future. It’s a book about Lviv — Lviv (Post)Soviet. People navigating their lives in times of collapse of the Soviet Empire: on the death of the old, but where the new is still unfound. The book is told from the narration of a dog named Dom (Home in Russian) and in Ukrainian called “Home for Dom” (Home in Ukrainian for Home in Russian).

But I still fish for snippets of conversation in the hope of someday compiling the entire history of the city. I catch some. Though it seems to me at times that these excerpts are from different sets for different cities. And I’ll never manage to collect something whole. For example, about the same event some neighbors shout “occupation” and others use the word “liberation.” And one person, who funnily drew out the letter “f,” actually referred to the coming of the Soviets as “the reunification of Ukraine.” So, it was necessary? The colonel also seems to know the past badly despite having lived it. Just like me, the old man keeps trying to catch something from the radio waves as if looking for debris from ships or his fighter jets.

And there are still traces of which no one speaks at all, not a word...

However, don’t think that the depth is only excessive suffering or something as insignificant as spilled milk. There’s a map of joy, too.

Here in the park are not only battles and night robberies—there are all the goodbyes and kisses, all the first steps of children—Marusia’s in particular. And next to the university, that once was the Parliament of Galicia—a crown land of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, there’s an entire fountain of happiness. The children who frolicked here have long grown up. And perhaps it was them who then fought, got killed, or killed others in this city. But here, on the corner near the university, their joy is frozen for all time. Who brought them this feeling? And how? Maybe the children got all this happiness from the paper windmills, balloons, candy, and ice cream sold at the corner.

I love to wander in places like these.

What is home? Viktoria wanders through the book with that question. *“Home is “scattered fragments of frozen rivers above the earth”, and our home as long as it is with us. Home is more about people, I don’t hold on to walls like that. It is worth keeping it inside yourself. In the book, the image of home is connected to the search for identity: tell me where your home is, and I will tell you who you are. My heroes have it all messed up, at least at first: they celebrate the New Year according to Moscow time, because that’s what they’re used to, and according to Baku time, because one of the heroines was born in Baku. And when the other heroine, Masha, talks about the capital, it is not at all obvious which capital she is talking about — Kyiv or Moscow. To a large extent, “Dom’s Dream Kingdom” is a book about dangerous nostalgia, about such lag of heroes in time. For the colonel, in fact, Ukraine is home, although he does not even admit it to himself.”*

From the start of the full-scale invasion, Viktoria participated in efforts to document war crimes

committed by the Russian army, and organized humanitarian activities in Lviv and actively lobbying for weapons and all the possible help for Ukraine from the International community. Terrorist strike done by Russia on June 27 targeting Kramatorsk, killed thirteen people. Viktoria was dining together with famous Colombian writer Héctor Abad Faciolince and others, were in a pizza restaurant that was targeted. In tragic and criminal actions, Viktoria Amelina died a few days later. We all mourn her death. Soon, the last of her work, non-fiction *War and Justice Diary: Looking at Women Looking at War* will be published. It's a book about women documenting Russian war crimes.

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**P.S.**

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