VOLODYMYR SHEIKO

What Is Ukrainian Culture Fighting For?

A BROCHURE *to* STIMULATE THE MIND

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Introduction

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has confronted us with a massive cognitive clash. This is a crisis of the limits of the imagination; of conceiving the "inconceivable"; of seeing the reality behind words which for decades our cultural reality has considered historical – words like "invasion"; "shelling"; "trenches"; "bombarding"; "shelter" – compelling us to ask some old questions all over again.

The question of building a national identity. The Ukrainians' struggle for self-determination; to decide for themselves; to choose the language they want, the cultural model to which they wish to belong, has again prompted us to give thought to the concept of "nation." In recent decades, Poland has grown accustomed to vacillating between extremes on this matter – for some, Polishness is a response to every question, no matter how complicated; for others, it is even a slightly shameful affiliation that has to be reined in and brought to a state of European usability. February 24 was like a bucket of cold water on an overheated forehead. Our debates and quarrels suddenly

proved superficial compared to the real peril that the war unfolding before our eyes clearly represented. Even if the analysts and political commentators continued to convince us that the armies amassing at the border had to be just a tactical maneuver. The unimaginable was suddenly real.

The question of the role of the Polish cultural center. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians arrived in Poland. We went from being a monocultural country dominated by Polish-speaking Catholics (or post-Catholics) to a state of two nations. In every larger Polish town (and some smaller ones) you hear Ukrainian and Russian everywhere. What are Polish cultural centers to do in this situation? Practice provides the answer: translate our activities into Ukrainian and, as called for here by Volodymyr Sheiko, present properly contextualized works of Ukrainian culture to Polish audiences. Here Polish institutions got down to work with enthusiasm and a great deal of open-mindedness. Is there work left to be done?

The question of the canon. Volodymyr Sheiko's essay questions the possibility of establishing a canon of Ukrainian culture. I would like to disagree with him on this one point. Whatever we may say or think about it, a nation is an imaginary structure – regardless of whether this is evident to us (as when we observe the forging of the Ukrainian nation) or iconoclastic (as when it comes to the centuries-long history of France, whose nation-building processes stretch over many generations). This image can be helpful, as when a certain group of people inhabiting

a particular territory jointly decides to change the direction of their culture. It can also be troublesome, when the image of a nation stands in conflict with its neighbors' image for theirs, and also when the image of a group inhabiting a defined area has internal contradictions and can in fact be divided into two separate groups.

In this respect, it is a useful (though doubtless vastly difficult) task to establish a canon. Or even something that could be an introduction to a canon. A collection of ten key texts; symbols; places. Ten Commandments. The best worded sentences, allowing an outsider to understand what this tale is really about; why it is important to this group of people; why they want to tell the story; why they are (or were) ready to die for it. Because it seems we are dealing with matters of the utmost importance here.

What requires careful attention, here, is keeping up to date. An introduction to a culture, if it is to be convincing, has to be current, and if it is not, it must be updated. An introduction that we share with one another, but which we can also use when we want to tell others about ourselves. Or maybe two different introductions? Or several? Because it would surely be valuable to have a common denominator, from which we can begin a dialog. We would surely tell a different story about the Ukrainians than we would about the French. And the Chinese story would be totally different. Do we know how to do this? I would very much like to discuss a set of views for thinking about Polish culture today. What defines us most? What do we believe in? As a certain collective, which proved itself exceptionally

prepared to help out in Ukraine's hour of need. I would also want this kind of Ukrainian *starter pack*. A place to begin, ten key books to help me better understand Ukraine, an alphabet from whose letters I can assemble the first picture, one that I can later expand in everyday contact and individual work.

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SHOWING UKRAINE'S FACE

On February 24, 2022, the world discovered Ukraine.

For many of the globe's inhabitants, this was an elementary discovery: on the day of the Russian invasion they found out that Ukraine, the country with the largest territory in Europe, even existed; that there were people living here who had their own language; their own history and culture; their plans in life and desires, and who now, once more in their turbulent history, were standing up to defend their rights to existence and self-determination.

At the Yale University lecture series *The Making of Modern Ukraine*,[1] the famed American historian Timothy Snyder stressed that, although Ukraine has always been in the middle of Europe's political and social events, for some reason it has always been outside of historians' attention, and its role at the nodal points of European history has been pushed into the shadows, neglected by the rest of the world. Furthermore, Ukraine's absence from the world's mental maps

for many centuries has coexisted with processes of breaking its political and cultural identity. We might even speak of a certain silver lining: the war is a great tragedy for us Ukrainians, but it has also become a moment of awakening and a chance to speak to the world in our own voice, not the words others have found for us – insofar as they even noticed our existence.

The present interest in Ukraine is unprecedented. This is a fascinating moment in our history, when the world is giving us a phenomenal amount of attention, but there is a clear lack of "access points," a knowledge base that could help the international community understand who the citizens of Ukraine are and why they are fighting. The main part of our work, both at the Ukrainian Institute created in 2018 and in the whole cultural sector, involves answering questions from various foreign communities as to what Ukraine presently is. We receive many requests for a "top 10" of Ukrainian culture, artists, and works that could help explain Ukraine to the world.

We can clearly see that, to understand the meaning and the essence of the current war, it is not enough to follow news about the new location of the front line, to know when new weapons shipments are coming, or to analyze statements by the leading politicians involved in the international community's support of Ukraine's war effort. The nuances are found in Ukraine's cultural situation: in its history, identity, and diversity. And this is what foreign institutions are looking for: festivals; publishing houses; galleries. They all want to find answers through theater;

literature; cinema; through living culture, created here and now: What is Ukraine? How to understand this situation in which we all have found ourselves?

I think the present situation might be called an indirect Ukrainian victory. It is a victory because, over the past year, the world has learned more about Ukraine than in the whole century before. But this is an indirect victory because Ukraine will not hold the world's attention for long. Sooner or later, the world will get tired of Ukraine; it will slip away from the front pages of the world's newspapers. For cultural diplomacy, understood as diverse ways of communicating with the world, this means that we have to make full use of the opportunities – contacts with people and institutions – to raise awareness about Ukraine to a new and higher level; to build a foundation on which we can support further actions.

This foundation, undoubtedly, is culture – it is only through culture that we can know a country and the community that creates it. Metaphorically speaking, other forms of activity – political, media, promotional, or tourist – let us sketch an outline of our country. Through culture, on the other hand, we can show the face of Ukraine, with what makes it special and unique.

Although perceptions of Ukraine have changed a great deal in Poland and the world after February 24 – everyone speaks of Ukraine's desire for freedom, their strength of resistance, and the determination of their civilians – we cannot say that Ukraine is now understood. For Ukrainian

cultural diplomacy this is a vital challenge: how to communicate and explain who we are and what we want.

Of course, this works both ways: Ukraine also has to encounter the surrounding world. A society that undergoes a tragedy should not close itself up. The point is not to feel sorry for us, and we do not only want to speak of Ukraine as a victim, naturally. A great task remains – to learn to speak of ourselves and to listen to others. To find our place in the family of Europe, Ukraine has to know its neighbors, and our neighbors have to know us. As we see clearly today, culture is a guarantee the community will survive; a community of people who understand what binds them and what they are striving for.

THE NEUROSIS OF NON-RECOGNITION

Since Ukraine became an independent state in 1991, when our society decided to radically break with its Soviet past, our intellectuals have noted universal symptoms of the "neurosis of non-recognition."[2] This is a sense of constant irritation caused by the continual imagining of Ukraine in a way that is far from reality, as a big unknown, or a segment of the "great Eastern empire."

Of course, this view and understanding of Ukraine differs from country to country. In Poland, the Baltic states, and some of Scandinavia, which know all too well the historical context – the destructive impact of the Soviet architecture of power – we can speak of a high level of understanding and shared points of reference. In many countries of Western Europe, on the other hand, differing historical experiences affect their view of the present situation and their perception of Ukraine's position toward the real danger of Russia's imperial ambitions.

In terms of cultural diplomacy, work in Western European countries is not easy (though there are many exceptions,

of course) – they take a cautious approach to Ukraine. It can be hard to distinguish sympathy and solidarity from a desire to cooperate (or a lack thereof). We can find explanations for this in history and political relations, yet the main obstacle is that Ukraine has never been perceived as an equal partner, a country you can talk to; cooperate with, whose culture is regarded as commensurate with and just as significant as French, German, and other so-called great cultures.

Although the division into "great" and "minor" is presently discarded as anachronistic, in this approach we can see the remains of fossilized (post)colonial imaginings. From a colonial optic, which makes hierarchical divisions between the great empires and cultures and small, insignificant countries of lesser-known cultures, this is how Ukraine has always been perceived – as a provincial part of the Russian (and later Soviet) empire.

In Europe and the countries of the Global South, the decolonial discourse is thoroughly developed in academia, the media, and social dialogue. Yet it is curious that Ukraine has almost never fallen within the sights of postcolonial theory. They have focused on the former colonies of the great European empires, which have been researched and incorporated into the discourse of Western academia. No one has spoken of Ukraine in this context; the Soviet Union has not been perceived as an empire.

Efforts to bring the history of Ukraine – not to mention the Baltic states, the Caucasus, or Central Asia – into post-

colonial discourse have not always been a success. Not everyone agrees to apply this optic or terminology. Yet colonialism essentially concerns the hierarchical structure of the world, building relationships in terms of center/periphery, absorbing resources and intellectual potential into the center. This prevents local culture from being practiced and developed, wiping it out and blurring the differences between colonies. It imposes an image of insignificance, of being presumably weaker and less interesting than what is in the center. When we begin applying these categories to specific segments of historical reality in various countries, we clearly see they apply to Ukraine, Africa, Latin America, and other former colonies. Despite the actual and historical differences, a structural similarity emerges – and it is on this structural level that we may seek a community of experiences and, as such, explanations for why reality is the way it is.

In Ukraine, almost from the beginning of this war, begun in 2014 with the taking of Crimea and the occupation of the eastern parts of the country, we spoke of a neocolonial war waged by Russia. All our opposition and desire for cultural emancipation, as well as our military response to our breached borders, is a decolonial struggle that stretches for decades, even centuries. It is of the utmost importance for us to stress this optic with regard to Russia and Ukraine; to explain that, although we have not been a classical colony in the sense of postcolonial theory, in essence we are grappling with the results of cultural and political forms of dependency that were foisted upon us. We need to discuss this, because it is a clue to understanding

the nature of this war: it is also a cultural war being waged behind the front lines.

This perspective sheds new light on calling the Ukrainians "nationalists" – a subject that is constantly arising in terms of using the Russian language in the public space in Ukraine. Many inhabitants of Western Europe have trouble realizing that Ukraine is phasing out the Russian language in our everyday and public life; that we are dropping it as a language of instruction in schools and universities; that we do not want to publish books by foreign authors translated into Russian. While we may understand that, owing to its memory of history, Europe is cautious toward all tendencies associated with the far right, it is highly absurd to suggest that using the French language in France is normal and natural, but when Ukrainians want to communicate in Ukrainian, this demonstrates a nationalist attitude…

In these cases we always try to explain that language is not just a means of communication, it is a tool that is highly saturated with meanings and contexts. We cannot take a purely functional approach to it. The fact that we do not want to use Russian does not make us nationalists; it frees us from our colonial heritage. Yet Ukraine's striving for cultural emancipation; for self-determination; for freedom from a foreign tongue and culture is still taken with a heavy dose of mistrust.

It is also difficult to explain that, in Russian hands, culture often becomes a tool of manipulation; a method of disinformation; a way of stripping other nations of the

right to live as they please. In response to the calls from many Western circles to build cultural bridges with Russia, the famous Ukrainian essayist Mykola Riabchuk aptly noted that, as the history of Russian/Ukrainian relations shows, "those bridges do not break down the stereotypes that wall off Russia from the real Ukraine. They do, however, make it easier to mobilize their tanks, agents, and propaganda against us."[3] Defining the Russian cultural policy as "building Trojan bridges," he reminds us that "it is precisely through those 'bridges' that they shipped in their cement; their bricks and concrete, erecting walls in our people's minds between various groups and regions; between Ukraine and the world. In war it is high time we blew those 'bridges' up."[4] We ought to keep this metaphor in mind to understand why laying down arms would not mean the end of the war, only consent to occupation.

Our great allies in explaining the specifics of the present armed conflict are Timothy Snyder, Anne Applebaum, and Serhii Plokhy, who speak of Ukraine as acknowledged authorities in the West. Their role is all the more important, paradoxically, because they are not representatives of Ukraine, and so they enjoy more trust and credibility in Western eyes. The fact that Ukrainian intellectuals or historians cannot count on such trust or interest prompts us to sadly reflect upon Ukraine's marginal position on the mental map of the Western world and its perception as not fully legitimate. This is one consequence of the Soviet Union's colonial policies, resulting in Ukrainian scholars and artists, apart from those active in the diaspora, remaining outside the international intellectual milieu.

Including a Ukrainian perspective in the process of constructing a new, inclusive image of European history is a chance to correct a partial, "external" view of contemporary world history. The present-day war provides an opportunity to redefine not only Ukraine, but our whole region of Europe, Central or Eastern, which sometimes goes by the dreadful moniker "post-Soviet region." This must be our shared cultural space. We can collectively strengthen our common voice in the European project. It is our chance to work through the old, fossilized definitions and often superficial views concerning our part of Europe, which includes Ukraine and Poland. This is a task for us, and for Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Georgia, and Moldavia.

A FLUID IDENTITY

While in most European cultures, outstanding figures and historical events – particularly of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when national ideologies took shape – can be seen as points of reference; the pillars and roots of a national identity. With Ukraine the issue is more complicated. “It is significant that the historical time of Ukrainian culture has no continuity; it is broken: at every stage in its development the evolution was interrupted at the point of ‘rising’,” writes Oxana Pachlovska, a lecturer on Ukrainian culture at the University of Rome. “The same can of course be said about the process of national self-consciousness, which was also sometimes interrupted at the most decisive moments. The only truly unbroken process in Ukrainian culture has been its consistent and total destruction.”[5]

Much of Ukrainian heritage has been appropriated by Russia at various stages of its history as part of its imperialist policies; anything that contributed to the distinctiveness and specificity of Ukrainian culture was prohibited and

purposefully uprooted from the collective memory – only the phenomena and figures admitted by the Soviet regime entered circulation. As a result of this wide-ranging program for the planned destruction of the language and repression of Ukrainian artists, scientists, and political and social activists, a massive amount of the nation's cultural heritage is unfamiliar even to Ukrainians themselves. It is only recently that we have begun discovering it, more and more widely and effectively. This makes our image of our own culture fragmentary, eclectic, and uneven.

To be better aware of Ukraine's "blurred identity," Oksana Zabuzhko – a philosopher, writer, essayist, and our great national teacher – paints a picture of a strange, disorderly library. "A library is not just the number of books it has collected; it is the 'shelves' on which the books are arranged, according to a logic and order. But in Ukraine there are no shelves yet, and in the middle of the library (Ukraine) is a 'mountain' of scattered books and events. And everyone can take what they want from that mountain, according to their judgment. Though there remains little awareness of this problem among Ukrainians, and outside of Ukraine even less, our culture has riches. For a culture whose modern stage of development came in a colonial period, its riches are astonishing; taking into account the historical conditions, its persecution, it should not exist at all."[6]

During a strategic session of the Ukrainian Institute, we wondered how we could create our own canon from this wealth of scattered texts, something like a gold standard of Ukrainian culture: a list of the hundred most outstand-

ing artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians, composers, and scientists whom we could make our "backbone" in promoting Ukraine. Yet we swiftly decided this was an impossible task. This list would be an artificial construct, probably contested by various circles, and the debates and research that would lead us to agree both in Ukraine and, no less importantly, with our neighbors, would surely take at least a few decades. Quite quickly we shifted the question from "*how* should we create a Ukrainian cultural canon?" to "should we create one?"

This fundamental question remains open-ended; there is no unequivocal response to it. Yet the fluidity of the category it involves, its lack of a solid framework, can be seen as an asset and a kind of positive challenge for cultural diplomacy. It grants us a certain freedom in choosing our subjects and content, whether historical or contemporary, to match them to the present reality. This comes at a risk, as a discursive approach prevails – in place of a set, rigid canon, we can tease out and discuss particular phenomena and content from the history of Ukraine, to help us understand our present reality and the historical circumstances in which we find ourselves. This flexibility could be very helpful in shaping the dialogical relations with other cultures.

Of course, we must understand that without our cultural pantheon we would not be where we are today. Important past figures and events have formed our present identity; without them, we probably would not have come to exist as an independent state. They should undoubtedly be

given their share of recognition and fame. Yet this comes with a risk: canons provide an illusory sense of security, providing a vantage point that is safe, as it is chronologically far away. After all, our great ancestors cannot speak up in current dilemmas which are important to us, and surely would be for them as well, if they could see them. They remain pigeonholed in their words and gestures perpetuated by tradition. Our knowledge of them is generally limited, and they themselves can say nothing new – this paves the way for myth-making.

The use of such myths for enacting politics is prevalent. On the other hand, it is significant that politicians often mistrustfully approach contemporary art, even with hostility or concern, as in a sense it opposes the myths, shatters them, by taking a hard look at reality; questioning the formulae; posing uncomfortable questions; provoking, and undermining ways we think. Meanwhile, in cultural diplomacy, contemporary art can be a very effective tool for building authentic, sincere intercultural relations and (sometimes provocative) dialog. This does not, of course, exclude the simultaneous promotion of our canonical figures, yet in these too we should see partners for dialog. Instead of putting them on pedestals, we should see them as sharp observers of their realities and try to patch them into the stream of thoughts on topics that are most pressing.

The power of Ukraine's fluid identity comes from the fact that we do not try to squeeze it into a framework that is too confining; to define it in an unequivocal, static form. It changes every day – we see this now in particular with

the full-blown war, when Ukrainian society is responding to the experience and trying to cope with it constructively. Our identity changes daily through how we try to understand our own selves; how we collectively perceive our Ukrainian political project. The war is changing us, but we are also changing how it is perceived, through how we express our values and find ourselves in this experience. Thus understood, the fluidity of the Ukrainian identity is much more interesting as the content of cultural diplomacy than as a closed, polished image. The fact that Ukraine's identity is fluid means it is always developing.

We also see this in the stereotypes, which changed diametrically after February 24. Whereas before knowledge of Ukraine basically boiled down to Chernobyl, Euromaidan, Russia's neighbor, the Klitschko brothers, athletes, etc.,[7] we are now beginning to be seen as a nation of courageous people, as proven by the commitment of millions of Ukrainian citizens, both men and women.

I think the question "who are Ukrainians today?" can be answered indirectly: by listing the associations and traits that presently come to the foreigner's mind when looking at how we respond to and deal with the reality of the war. Narratives in the strategic state bulletins and the fantastic messages from the Ministry of Defense, reporting on the current events in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, are a human way of opposing the Russian army's despicable acts in Ukraine. They are also stories of human attitudes, refusal to surrender humanity, mutual support, and solidarity. They are stories of valor and freedom as values for which

people are prepared to give their lives. They are stories of endurance and resistance. Finally, they are stories of humor – the ability to laugh even in tragic times, at oneself and others. These associations presently make up what we might call the Ukraine brand. It seems to me a very good reflection of our community of values. It makes one even want to be a Ukrainian!

THE WARTIME PALIMPSEST

The present reality of the war is a history of loss; destruction; the forced migration of millions. Hundreds of sites of Ukrainian heritage, mainly in the northern, eastern, and southern parts of the country, have been destroyed. Many museums have been ruined and their collections looted. Exhibits from Melitopol, Kherson, and Mykolaiv have been spirited off to Crimea or to Russia. The city of Mariupol has been utterly wiped from the face of the earth.

This war is happening almost right before our eyes: we see images of destruction on television screens and mobile devices. Yet it seems that, despite such a powerful and relentless display of pictures of war, the international community remains under the sway of certain stereotypes. The differences in perception of the world can be seen when we compare the outpouring of emotion from the world to France as they rebuilt the Notre Dame cathedral after the blaze and the relative indifference toward the destruction wrought by Russia in Syria. As we know, the responses were different… This is because we feel or

sense a community with what we culturally recognize. Cultural empathy prompts a desire to give a helping hand; to respond to misfortunes. One task of cultural diplomacy is to build this closeness and empathy.

It is no accident that the center of Kyiv recently held an exhibition initiated by our Polish partners, presenting images of a Mariupol that was leveled to the ground alongside photographs of a Warsaw that was obliterated in 1944.[8] The Ukrainian Institute, in turn, is publishing a series of "Postcards from Ukraine,"[9] documenting ruined places and sites in war-torn regions of the country, in two versions: the prewar state juxtaposed with a picture of the present destruction. On the one hand, this is an archive of the losses Ukrainian cultural heritage has incurred since February 24, but it is also a way to communicate a belonging to the European sphere of culture to the outside world, through pictures. We are using the optic of cultural connection to stress the ties between Ukrainian tradition and European heritage.

Ukraine is also losing its people of culture in this war. I will recall the names of a few of them to highlight what trauma this war is for society and the craters it leaves in Ukrainian culture. In Bucha, just outside of Kyiv, Lyubov Panchenko died of emaciation at the age of eighty-four; she was an outstanding painter and a dissident from the "sixties generation" – she was too weak and alone to evacuate the town while it was still possible. Professor Oleksandr Kislyuk, who translated Xenophon and Thomas Aquinas, among others, into Ukrainian, died to north of Kyiv in the spring; there too was where they found the body of Max

Levin, a great photographer and documentary filmmaker. Lithuanian director Mantas Kvedaravicius perished in Mariupol while filming *Mariupolis 2,* documenting the siege of the city. Yurii Kerpatenko, a conductor at the Kherson philharmonic, was killed for refusing to cooperate with the occupying authorities; the body of Volodymyr Vakulenko, a popular author of children's books, was found in a mass grave after the de-occupation of Izyum. These victims from the world of culture are not by chance – people of culture were purposefully targeted by the Russian aggressors. It is enormously important for us to hold onto their memory.

For our Western partners it is not always obvious that a defensive war is not only fought by Ukraine's armed forces, but that important figures in culture take active part – scientists; writers; translators; teachers; artists. Although speaking of the "front lines of culture" is a fairly widespread trope at present, we have to maintain some caution: work in culture is incomparable to the real experience of war. Regardless of the terminology, however, the essence of this experience remains the same – we are fighting to exist. It is a struggle for survival – not just in a physical sense, but also for the survival of our community; for every person as an individual; for the freedom of every one of us. It is extremely important that a person understands who they are; what community they want to be a part of; what they are striving for – all this forms our identity. The fight must go on.

Ukrainian artists are continuing this fight, persistently, constantly – both at home and abroad. In receiving the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, one of our greatest

contemporary writers, Serhiy Zhadan, emphatically stated that culture cannot fall silent during a war, because when writers fail to speak it means fear has triumphed. “So long as we have our language, we at least have a chance to explain; to tell the truth; to put our memories in order. That is why we are speaking, and we will not stop. Even when our throats hurt from the words. Even when they mean you feel lost and empty. A voice gives truth a chance. And it is important to use the opportunity. It may be the most important thing that happens to any one of us.”[10] We need more such voices and chances to speak, to arm ourselves with thoughts and words. In this sense, the fight is inextricable from the front lines.

Working with intellectuals, institutions, and representatives of various countries’ governments, we understood how hard it was to explain our experiences, to express what we are presently enduring in Ukraine. Empathy alone is not enough to understand what is happening to us. Ukrainian artists and diplomats are up against a constant sense of powerlessness when our attempts to communicate our experiences lead to no understanding – as if our interlocutors’ heads do not have the compartments necessary to arrange this knowledge to make it comprehensible. Foreigners often register the simplest things – for instance that you cannot fly out of Kyiv because air traffic is closed; that women have to give birth in shelters; that people are living without electricity or heating – and they try to imagine it. Yet even such basic experiences remain elusive for those with no personal experience.

It seems that, no matter how much we speak about this war, we will never manage to fully capture what Ukraine is going through – I call this experience the trauma of the inability to express what we are feeling. Although we have many friends and allies, we will have to deal with this trauma alone. Much as the Georgians, Syrians, Afghans, and Chechens were left with similar traumas. It is hard for us to say how it is to live without heating in the winter, with no light, and why we are prepared to suffer this in name of freedom – that ephemeral, intangible idea.

This is, of course, a great task for the world of culture: to show and describe what is happening to us. Culture is meant to incorporate that nerve which feels the present. Yet capturing and understanding what we are now experiencing means working through it on a deeper level, and for this we need the distance of time.

We will probably only be able to speak of the war for some time to come. The further we get from February 24, 2022, the more subjects we dare to address; the fuller our understanding will be of what happened to us. Sharing our experience, we will correct the past; change our memory; know ourselves and our interlocutors better. We will be constantly writing the wartime palimpsest in our imperfect and helpless language, but thought, language, and words are all we have left to feel unity and community; to stitch together our torn and shredded world.

We have a great deal of work in front of us, to rebuild what was destroyed: not just the buildings, museums, and

plundered collections, but a whole system of relationships based on people who – I hope – will return after their forced migration. It mostly depends on people whether or not we will create the critical mass needed to guide our fate from here on out. But we will surely have to face putting our culture back together again. I believe it will be stronger and more splendid, livelier and more interesting, for us and for the world. We will surely celebrate our victory, but we must understand that before this celebration stands a great challenge. And it is hard to say what the greater hurdle is: what we are going through now or what the future will bring.

DIALOGUES OF LIVING CULTURES

The brutal test of strength commenced by Russia, between totalitarian imperialism and the values of European civilization, is not strictly focused on Ukraine. The war has raised a number of pressing topics for the whole world. These include problems of forced migration, the mission and (in)efficiency of international institutions, food security, racism, and decolonization; it is also an opportunity to rethink what we call the Western cultural canon.

This whole tragedy and the attention that came with it should serve not just us. Ukraine's victory should bolster the voices of all those who endure similar problems and social anxieties. Oleksandra Matviichuk, leader of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Ukrainian organization, the Center for Civil Liberties, has pointed out that we need an international humanities movement.[11] This movement should unite intellectuals and social activists on a conceptual level, beyond borders, because ideas of freedom and human rights know no borders. Together – and only together! – we can pose questions and seek solutions to

global challenges: wars; inequalities; invasions of privacy; growing authoritarianism; climate change; human rights abuses. In this way, we can make the world a safer place.

Building deeper understandings between societies can only happen through the language of culture. This is work on our image, urgently needed, because mutual unfamiliarity makes us vulnerable to manipulation: it makes us worse informed and more susceptible to baseless generalizations; biases; stereotypes; populism – and that weakens us. This is great and difficult work, but it must be done, not only at the governmental level, but also in the sector of culture and whole societies.

We need a culture that is reflective, not myth-making. In cultural diplomacy this means that, above all, we should be honest with the world, not try to create an exceedingly positive picture of our country – this will always be superficial in content or approach. Let us try not to avoid the hard subjects, including those that have divided us from our neighbors and other communities in the past. These topics may seem delicate, yet when we begin to address them in the language of culture and art, a position of sincerity evokes empathy. People then understand that we are not trying to fool them, but we are just presenting things honestly. This honesty is of great value.

Let us recall that in cultural diplomacy there is no room for monologues: we must first think of what may be interesting, what unites us, and what our interlocutors are

prepared to hear. Imposing our way of thinking comes to nothing – such partnerships simply fail.

In this context we must bear in mind that the war consumes the present-day life of Ukraine and its partners, by whom I primarily mean our neighbors. It would be interesting, for example, to speak about the paradoxically positive experience this war has been for Ukraine, as well as for Poland. How have our societies shown their strength; their ability to mobilize themselves; how have we managed to create such an incredible movement of volunteers? What has united us in that recent past? What made us feel such a powerful and profound solidarity in such a short time?

Of course, we should also speak of a shared history, not in a destructive way, but with mutual respect, and ethically, without distorting the facts. We must recall the history of World War Two; what happened afterward; the history of territories that belonged to Poland, Austro-Hungary, or Ukraine at various points in history. The shifting borders of these territories could in itself be an interesting field of research.

Let us meet through the figures that unite our cultures. The list of figures our cultures share goes on and on: Juliusz Słowacki, Zbigniew Herbert, Joseph Conrad, Zofia Nalepińska-Bojczuk, Bronisława Niżyńska, Bruno Schulz, Stanisław Lem, Debora Vogel… The multicultural phenomenon is also fascinating – foreigners seldom realize that Ukraine is home to Crimean Tatars; Jews; Roma; Poles; Greeks; all of whom help create today's Ukraine. They

indisputably deserve their place in the cultural scene. Feminism, gender equality, and the experiences of women during the war could be interesting and important subjects for the Polish society. But above all, they should be stories of people, concrete people, concrete experiences of Poles and Ukrainians. This is the best kind of storytelling, the most effective way of talking to each other. Not through abstract concepts or constructs, but through the experiences of actual people in art.

Apart from sharing lists of recommended works and artists, it is important that we contextualize them as far as possible. Screening a film by itself is not enough for foreigners to better understand Ukraine. And the reverse: Ukrainians also needed to locate phenomena and works in terms of categories they know in thinking about the world. We need to speak about what we are showing: why we are recommending a particular film or a specific book, so this is not a purely aesthetic experience. It is also highly important that we address not only the present experience of the war but also tell each other more broadly of the processes underway in our societies.

Although we are pleased to quote large numbers in our reports passed on to ministries, offices, or other state organs, we bear in mind that mass communication does not replace our personal experience. To get through to a person, not superficially but authentically, you have to speak through emotions; through personal conversations. And these cannot be one-sided presentations with hundreds or thousands of people, but meetings where we track the

emotions and experiences we have together. This effect can only be reached in dialogues with living people.

Meaningful and effective acts of cultural diplomacy always have to start with ourselves. We have to be constantly expanding and broadening our knowledge about our own culture as well as our partners'. Even if one is a historian or a cultural scholar, one can always find interesting things and discover something new about each other. And of course, we must always recall that every trip abroad, every conversation with foreigners is, in a sense, an act of cultural diplomacy. It is there that understanding or a sense of alienation is born, depending on how the conversation goes. We should all be conscious of this and remember this role.

At such a dramatic moment in history, we must keep asking what added value culture brings to our lives. This is not only about the high quality of the works created and presented – whether it is a film, book, exhibition, or play. In our cultures, we seek critical reflection on who we are, and why. Culture is meant to be a looking glass in which we see not only a reflection of our social relationships but also a road to a better, safer future.

NOTES

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8 See: Надія Смян, "«Варшава-Маріуполь – міста руїн, міста боротьби, міста надії»" *Голос України*, 02.10.2022, http://www.golos.com.ua/article/364832 (accessed: 26.04.2023).

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Małopolski Instytut Kultury w Krakowie [Małopolska Institute of Culture in Krakow, abbr. MIK] is an independent body set up by the Małopolska local government. MIK engages in many activities to study and promote cultural heritage of the Małopolska region. MIK provides workshops and training as well as organizes conferences and seminars for culture sector employees. We also research the evolution of cultural trends and development directions.

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