

Liberating people, not territories

Interview with a Ukrainian exile

Ilya Kharkow

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I want to dedicate this interview to those who have never killed anyone. Today, they try to convince us that it's abnormal. But we must remember that it's not.

Could you tell us something about yourself?

Recently, I bought the memoirs of the famous anarchist Peter Kropotkin. I intended to read it before going to sleep. However, the beginning of the book intrigued me so much that I couldn't fall asleep. I felt like taking a walk, and that's how I ended up at a costume sex party in Porto. Most of the attendees were dressed in similar leather shirts, black leather ties, and pants with open ass, resembling Nazi uniforms. I tried to get horny, but I couldn't. So, I went home to the revolutionary Kropotkin.

In this interview, I will try to be as frank as possible to portray reality as I see it. Why is this necessary? Because in 2023, I read too many articles and interviews about life during wartime that were filled with falsehoods. I understand the falsity of these texts, but that doesn't mean I accept it. I'll get back to this point later. For now, let me introduce myself.

My name is Ilya Kharkow. I am a writer from Ukraine but don't want to be called a Ukrainian writer. I have been in exile for over a year now. I have lived my whole life in Ukraine, but my native language is Russian. And no, I am not an exception.

Why don't you want to be labelled a Ukrainian writer?

Because *I'm more than my nationality*. Propaganda works in a way that makes people believe the opposite. And when people believe in it, they start to be manipulated. My task as a writer is to remind them of the opposite. That is, to bring a person back to the original state when they are creators, not someone's tools.

What has the war done to Ukrainian society?

In response to your question, I'd like to share a story that I briefly described in my latest book. It's about a typical Ukrainian family.

A husband and wife. Around 40 years old. Average income. Two children. Happy. Engaged in self-improvement. Recently, they filed for divorce. The goal – to protect the husband from mobilisation.

This is necessary so that the father, not the mother, gains custody rights over the kids. In that case, he will be exempt from military service. Does this show the societal changes brought about by the war and two years of compulsory mobilisation? I think so.

To achieve this, they explain to their young kids that their mom used to hit them, but they have forgotten about it. The mom apologises to the children for recently disappearing from home for entire weeks, even though the kids don't remember this. Successful parents teach their kids to pronounce "ephedrine" correctly – their mom's favourite pills.

This story had an unexpected continuation! The neighbours of this couple began to wonder why the woman continued to come home after the divorce. Could she pose a threat to the children's well-being? Curious neighbours ask the man if they should contact the child protection

services to conduct a check. All this takes place in a small Ukrainian town where everyone knows each other almost too well.

The curious neighbours recently buried their adult son in the war. Now, they want the entire town and the entire country to pay the same price in this war as they did. They are upset that not every man is willing to go to the battlefield. Therefore, they ask the father who got divorced that maybe he wants to protect his kids in the true way with weapons in hand.

How often do men face hatred?

Men face hatred more often than one might think. Elderly people demand protection, aggressively so. Women demand the same. *Just because I may be physically stronger than an elderly person or a woman, it doesn't mean I want to use that strength for killing.* But what strikes me is that society believes it has the right to make that decision for me.

In one of the stories from my collection, "Holes in the Shape of Humans," I described a case of childhood aggression. Two girls threw a firecracker into a sewer manhole where a plumber was working. When the frightened and angry plumber emerged after the explosion, he shouted after the girls, "Why did you do that?" The girls replied that he should go to war and protect them instead of hiding in the sewers.

What measures does Ukraine take to find and recruit soldiers?

Once, as a hungry student at the philology faculty, I didn't have enough money to buy books. So, I started stealing books. My ex-boyfriend taught me how to do it. By the way, he was in the military. The actions of the military enlistment office in Ukraine remind me of my own actions during my student years. *Representatives of the enlistment office simply snatch guys off the streets, just like I snatched books from stores.* The logic justifies it. A hungry philologist must read, and the country demands defence. But still, there is something wrong with it.

Fortunately, today, I have an iPad. eBooks are cheaper than paper ones. And since a solution has been found to satisfy my hunger for books, I'm sure there will be another way to satisfy the army's manpower hunger besides compulsory mobilisation.

Are guys really being taken off the street?

Yeah, this happens on the streets. By now, this is already commonplace. Representatives of the military enlistment office come to saunas and fitness centres to hand out summons to guys. They stand at the exits of supermarkets and shopping centres. Near subway stations and at public transport stops. In big cities, checkpoints are appearing again, but if previously the checkpoints were aimed at protecting the city from the enemy army, now their goal is to catch men and send them to war.

Enterprises are required to submit lists of men of draft age to the military enlistment offices. Some companies sabotage this. A company is fined if it does not submit a list of men; fortunately, the fine is relatively small. I know several Ukrainian IT companies that deliberately evade submitting lists, but I also know companies that consider it their duty.

Rarely, but still, there are reports of guys resisting the representatives of the military enlistment office. For example, recently, a group of guys beat up an army officer near Kyiv for distributing summons. I have heard similar stories about Lviv and Poltava as well. Such things could be easily googled.

Do people in Ukraine support mobilisation?

Forced mobilisation is supported by all those whom it does not affect. Nothing new, although it is a convenient position.

Several years ago, I was in a relationship with a Ukrainian military guy. When they found out about his sexual orientation, he had to pay huge compensation and resign. Not even his relatives in the military structures helped him.

After that, he changed – he lost himself. I saved him from suicide several times. But everything happens for the best. I'm glad he's in Germany now, not in the grave.

What role did being gay play in your decision not to fight?

A few days before the war started, I was sitting at the bar of a gay club. I was talking to a man who had walked in there by mistake. He sat hunched over, paying attention only to his glass. He thought it was a regular club, and hugging guys annoyed him.

We were talking about something abstract, and suddenly, he asked me, “Do you think there will be war, or are they bluffing?”. I didn't know. Suddenly, I felt just as lost politically as he did, as if I were the straight guy who accidentally ended up in a gay club and was now asking a gay man if same-sex love existed at all.

So, my orientation doesn't affect my choice not to fight, but it gives me strength. Because all my life I've been opposed to the homophobic society, I've developed immunity to idealising home. Moreover, common sense tells me that it's not me who's abnormal but the homophobes. Otherwise, why would Netflix make movies about gays, not about them? Just kidding. But the same principle applies to forced mobilisation – they are the criminals, not me. *Everything that comes from love is good; everything from hatred is bad. This is a big oversimplification, but that's what my inner compass says.* Knowing that truth is on my side, it's easy for me to call myself both a faggot and a traitor. But propaganda is stronger than truth at the moment.

Where do you consider your home today?

Today, my home is Portugal. I rent half of a villa here. My books are here. My workspace is here. I don't receive any assistance from the government. I rent housing with my own money. But I can move to another country at any moment, and it will become home for me because I'll take my books there.

The manipulation levers seem innocent at first glance. Romanticising home is one of them. Exaggerating the importance of nationality is one of them. A special attitude towards traditions is one of them. *Everything falls into place only at the moment when the dominant role is given not to traditions, nationality, or home but to the person.*

Is there resistance within Ukraine to the loss of rights / mobilisation?

Frankly, besides a dozen news about the beating of guys from military registration and enlistment offices, I don't see much resistance in Ukraine. That's why I try to act on my own. If I can argue the position of refusing military duty in my prose, then I must do it for those who also don't want to fight but lack arguments and for those who don't have the strength and time for it because they are still trapped in Ukraine, having to survive every-flipping-day.

Everyone should have the right to do or not do what they want. Those who want to fight should have that opportunity. But it should be with a contracted army with decent pay and conditions. Those who don't want to fight should have the right not to. An absolute right.

Furthermore, *telling someone else that they should sacrifice their life for you is immoral*. That's what should be emphasised. And I'm not even talking about the ban on travelling abroad, which violates human rights, clearly stating that in times of danger, everyone should have the right to seek refuge in another country.

Do you yourself receive support?

I didn't expect such a large number of people to support me. In Denmark, I've successfully cooperated with the magazine HEARDCORE. In Poland, I received support from the local theatre. And in America, I became part of a literary agency.

Recently, I cooperated with A Radical Guide, where we did a great podcast episode about forced mobilisation. Overall, I received a lot of offers for help and collaboration from activists from Germany, Austria, Luxembourg, Canada, and again from America.

What are you hoping to achieve by talking about forced mobilisation?

Alas, literature is a slow occupation. At the beginning of 2024, we are discussing the publication of 'The Mining Boys', a novel I wrote back in late 2022. I'll be optimistic if I hope it will be published by the end of this year.

So, I don't delude myself with the illusion that my books can stop the war in Ukraine. Nope. But I'm convinced that my books will help foster a more critical attitude towards war in the future. Accordingly, the guys will not suffer the way I suffered in Ukraine. After all, there's nothing to suggest that the war in Ukraine will be the last war. *If my books initiate a reevaluation of mobilisation methods and provide arguments for guys, then I'll be satisfied.*

At the same time, neither my struggle nor my prose are limited to this. My texts are intellectual, erotic diaries. My struggle is the path to liberating people from numerous social, artificial paradigms.

Can you give an example of such liberation?

At the beginning of this interview, I mentioned that for the whole year, I had been reading articles and interviews about the war that were saturated with falsehood. I promised to tell you more about this. So, *this falsehood is formed when the desire to conform to social norms differs from the true desires of a person.*

This is exactly what is happening now to Ukrainians abroad, who are enduring the hardships of emigration, knowing that their problems and joys will be devalued by the war. War devalues everything, and this devaluation is a dangerous syndrome.

You can suppress your emotions and desires briefly, but not for 2 years! We all want to be happy and sad, want to have sex and complain about work. This does not mean we have forgotten about the war; it just means that we have our own needs.

Do soldiers have such needs? Absolutely, everyone has them. The wives of those mobilised regularly hold rallies in the centre of Kyiv. They demand the guys be demobilised after 18 months of service. According to the latest data, the Ukrainian authorities have proposed demobilisation after 36 months. But how many soldiers will survive this time in the war?

What is the situation with the Russian language in Ukraine?

Suppression of what matters to you is exactly what happens to Russian-speaking Ukrainians. The state declared that the Russian language is the language of the enemy, which put half of the country in a situation where their whole life seemed to be voiced in the enemy's language.

Several of my friends committed suicide when I was a teenager. We spoke in Russian. My memories of them are in Russian. And I won't let that be taken away from me. But that's me, and most people prefer to be evasive. For them, falsehood is a means of protection. I respect this choice, but I find another path for myself.

What makes you respect a choice you understand but don't accept?

I respect that because *demanding radicalism from everyone would be equivalent to demanding the state to send all men to war.* To put it simply, I believe that you can't demand from others what you demand from yourself. Because we're all different, that means everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. So, it's foolish to make a miner dance or a dancer design buildings. Unfortunately, this is exactly how forced mobilisation works.

Is it possible to fight for democracy while taking away human rights and democratic rights?

I'd say *people cannot fight for something they don't believe in.* Military propaganda in Ukraine has proven to be so powerful that at some point, I realised – absolutely all of my friends support the war, and they talk about mobilisation as a necessary measure. This is a demonstration that war deprives you of loved ones, not only through death.

Why was military propaganda in Ukraine so successful?

Once, I received an offer to work at the literary museum in Ukraine. I went for the interview, enjoyed everything about it, and they wanted me on the team. But the salary they offered was around \$130! On my way to the interview, my Steel boots suddenly tore. Those boots cost a bit more than the monthly salary at the literary museum in the cultural capital of Ukraine. What a nonsense!

I turned down the job. But this incident perfectly illustrates the state of culture in Ukraine before the war. Should I miss those times? At the interview, we laughed about how the literary museum building needed repairs, but the authorities didn't allocate money for it. The roof leaked, leaving orange streaks on the walls. Employees covered these streaks with glossy awards the museum had received. We laughed about it, although, of course, there was nothing funny about it.

Thanks to Boris Vian's prose, we know that lilies bloom in girls' chests, and musical instruments can mix cocktails. But that's not all. These words also needed to be preserved so people could read them today. And in Europe, the attitude towards culture seems fine. At least at first glance. *Without culture, a person isn't just unaware of lilies or cocktails; they become easily manipulated. If there are no values, they can be easily replaced with patriotism and some duty to the homeland, and at some point, you find yourself dying for a territory you've never even been to.*

That's why the orange streaks on the walls of the literary museum are the reason why military propaganda in Ukraine has been so successful.

What would a victory look like?

While Ukrainian TV still talks about returning to the borders of 1991, I would focus on more realistic goals. *In 2024, victory for me isn't about liberating territories but about liberating people.*

Guys should regain their rights. I mean the right to leave the country and the right to refuse to participate in combat operations. Those who voluntarily went to war should have the right to demobilisation. Of course, not after 36 months, but much, much sooner. Because *nothing can be forcibly defended.*

An act of defence is an act of heroism, meaning it's done out of free will. I enjoy taking Kropotkin's memoirs to bed, but if someone forced me to do it, I would rebel even against Kropotkin. And if he taught me anything, it's that *you can't force a person to be free against their will.*

If there had been no coercion in Ukraine, partisan detachments and some green armies, like in 1917, would have appeared. But nothing like that is happening. And the reason is obvious: *in the attempt to fight evil, the fighter became what he was fighting against.*

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