

In the weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, three Ukrainian women poets from Lviv—Yuliya Musakovska, Kateryna Mikhalitsyna, and Halyna Kruk—were already publishing Ukrainian language poems of witness about the war on Facebook, a social media platform that provides them immediate access to readers. Dedicated translators would watch for these women’s poems and translate them almost immediately. Halyna Kruk’s poetry dissects war to its emotional core, exposing what is of essence. Her collection of poems in English translation, *A Crash Course in Molotov Cocktails*, translated by Amelia M. Glaser and Yuliya Ilchuk, has been recently published by Arrowsmith Press.

Halyna Kruk was born in 1974 in Lviv, Ukraine. She is the author of five books of poetry, a collection of short stories, and four children’s books. Her work has been recognized with many awards, including the Ptyvitannia Zhyttia and Granoslov Prizes in 1997, the Step by Step prize for children’s books in 2003, the BookForum Best Book Award in 2021, the Smoloskyp Poetry Award, the Bohdan Ihor Antonych Prize, the “Hranoslav” Award, the Polish Gaude Polonia Fellowship, and the Kovaliv Foundation Prize for Prose in 2022. Her work has been translated into over thirty languages, and she has translated from several languages into Ukrainian. She’s served as vice president of the Ukrainian PEN, holds a PhD in Ukrainian literature, and is professor of European and Ukrainian baroque literature at the Ivan Franko National University in Lviv.

I had the honor of interviewing Halyna Kruk on February 23, 2023, on the eve of the first anniversary of Russia’s war against Ukraine, engaging her in a conversation on poetry, war, freedom, love, and dignity. We met at the Vilnius Book Fair, where a selection of her poems in Lithuanian translation were presented in a newly published anthology of Ukrainian poetry edited and translated by the Lithuanian poet Antanas A. Jonynas.

Laima Vincé: Can you tell me about how your expertise as a medievalist influences your poetry?

Halyna Kruk: The literature of the Ukrainian baroque is my area of special interest. In Ukrainian literature, the baroque period spans from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Vincé: How does your work as a scholar of Ukrainian baroque literature influence the way you write poetry?

Kruk: It is not exactly an influence on my poetry, but more like a kind of mutual interest. Researching Ukrainian baroque literature and writing poetry are the two different sides of my personality, which are very closely connected because I’ve been working in these two fields for over twenty years already. The baroque is all about how to render the world in a sensual, sensitive context of emotion. That’s why the baroque is very important. The sensitivity of perception in baroque literature is very close to my own mode of writing poetry.

Vincé: I can sense that sensitivity in your poetry. Is your interest in Ukrainian baroque literature the reason why you live in Lviv or did Lviv inspire the baroque in you?

Kruk: I was born in Lviv, so the baroque architecture of Lviv has always surrounded me. This is my natural and native habitat. Living in the multi-dimensional context of Lviv inspired me to choose baroque literature as my area of study. It’s very close to me. Lviv has many layers of culture from different periods, styles, influences.

Vincé: How do you feel about your beautiful city, Lviv, being threatened by war?

Kruk: We are fortunate that Lviv has not yet been ruined by the war. On February 24, 2022, when the war had just started, I was in a distant neighborhood in the city, and I had to make it back home. However, public transportation was not running. So,

I walked home on foot. The distance home took an hour to cover on foot. For this one hour, as I walked, I was embracing my city, memorizing every detail, because in a war nobody knows what will happen next. I was just trying to absorb every detail of my city, as it is, into my memory. I am relieved that so far, Lviv has not been damaged by Russian missile strikes. There are so many unique expressions of architecture in Lviv. It would be a great loss to Ukrainian culture if Lviv were to be destroyed. The threat of destruction is very real for Kharkiv, which is also a unique and architecturally rich city. Kharkiv is constantly being shelled by Russian artillery because it is too close to the border with Russia.

Vincé: You are saying that the Russians do not have any respect for the architecture of Kharkiv?

Kruk: The architectural heritage of any city, even Kharkiv, is not respected by Russia. There are many, many examples of how Russia intentionally destroyed buildings, monuments, museums, libraries, schools—anything of cultural value to Ukraine. Old graves have been bombed. They are doing this to destroy our past. That makes it easier for Russia to say that there is no nationality that belongs to Ukraine, that we do not exist, that we do not have a cultural heritage. When these cultural heritage sites and cities in Ukraine are destroyed there is no longer any evidence that Ukraine has existed for centuries.

Destroying Ukrainian cultural heritage sites is nothing new. The Russians were doing this throughout the Soviet period. For example, when the artificial Kakhovka, Dnieper, Kamianske Reservoirs were created during the Soviet period, churches, entire villages, cultural sites were submerged under water. Russia continually destroys Ukrainian cultural sites of memory so that there would be no memory of Ukraine left for future generations.

Vincé: Do you believe Russia is destroying Ukrainian cultural memory intentionally?

Kruk: Schools, libraries, museums, architectural sites have all been destroyed intentionally by Russians. They shot off the head of a statue of our national poet, Taras Shevchenko, intentionally, to humiliate us.

Vincé: How do you manage your anger over what Russia is doing, destroying Ukraine? I feel angry listening to you telling me about how Russia continues to systematically target Ukrainian culture for destruction. It must take a lot of spiritual strength to endure this.

Kruk: This is nothing new for my family. My family lived in Western Ukraine during 1940–1945. At that time my family lost everything except for their own lives. I grew up with family stories of everything being taken away from us by the Russians. Even during the years of Soviet occupation, when no

one dared tell the stories of what had happened to Ukraine to their children because it was dangerous, my elders passed these stories on to me.

As I was told these stories growing up, I realized that the country I was living in—the Soviet Union—was not the country I should have been living in. I also learned that nothing is gained easily in life. Anger is not enough to take back your country. Anger is not enough to achieve what you want, even if it is a long simmering anger. So, you need to have a strategy and to work systematically towards your goal. That's what my family tragedy taught me. I explain this to my students as well.

Vincé: How has the war changed your poetry?

Kruk: I was writing about the war before the war actually started. An entire series of my poems about war was published in one of my books in 2005. The title of that series was “Not the Last War.”

Vincé: Did you have a premonition that Russia would declare war against Ukraine?

Kruk: It was not a premonition. I analyzed the political events that were taking place, and the course of history. The poems were more about my life. I understood that Russia had captured us as a country and had held onto us for so long that they were not about to let us go so easily. Russia would not let go of Ukrainian territory or the Ukrainian people.

Before the war started in 2014, in 2013 I wrote a poem about living in a bomb shelter. The poem is written exactly as if I'd already had the experience of living through this war. So, now we have the actual experience of living through war.

Even before the war started on February 24, 2022, I had experienced the war already because my husband had been fighting in Mariupol since 2014. He fought in Mariupol in 2014, 2015, 2016—a total of three years. During those years, I was a volunteer serving in the areas where my husband was fighting. I would bring necessary supplies to the front lines for the military. I also brought books and would talk to the soldiers. Back then, as I talked with soldiers who were fighting on the front lines, I would ask them about the war and what that experience actually was like. During this time, I met people whose lives had been in real danger because they'd just returned from fighting. After our conversations, they would return to fighting on the front lines. These people live with their lives constantly hanging from a thread.

While close to the front lines, I would wear a helmet and a bulletproof vest. That was during a time when Russians eagerly shot at civilians who came to those areas. It was the Russian way of drawing attention to their war.



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It would be a strange feeling for me when I'd come back to Western Ukraine or even just come back from the areas where active fighting was going on. I saw that the rest of Ukraine was living as though there were no war going on. But I knew that there was a war. During these trips I wrote a lot of poems about the war. I haven't published those poems together as a book yet because it feels to me as though the book is not yet complete.

After the twenty-fourth of February, other people who'd read some of my poems about my time visiting the front lines in Eastern Ukraine during war began publishing my poems on their Facebook pages. There was this feeling as though my poems had been written recently, just as this war started.

Vincé: Do you write poetry so that the world would hear and know and understand what is happening in

Ukraine? Or do you write poetry because you have a need to write poetry?

Kruk: Poetry is wired into my personality. The poems appear just because they need to. There isn't an aim to my poetry, and it's not directed at specific readers. Mostly, I write these poems because it is my way to cope with what is going on in and around me. To verbalize, to say out loud what I am experiencing, is my way to reflect. The poems that appeared after February 24 are my way of coping, of living with my own personal traumas. I would write a poem as a way of coming to terms with what I felt during the war. Then I would post my poem on Facebook, so that I could read the reactions of all the people who are living through the same thing. It meant they have the same feelings as me, the same traumas, but sometimes they lacked the words to express what they were living through. That was very meaningful. I named what we were all feeling.

The poems I wrote as I experienced the war were quickly translated into other languages. Then I received feedback from foreigners who wrote to me that my poems helped them understand what was going on in Ukraine. These are emotional and subjective poems that express a personal experience of war. That helps people understand because they can relate. My poems are a way of checking reality—both for me and for my readers.

Vincé: You've lived with this war for a long time already. Was it a shock to you when the war came to all of Ukraine?

Kruk: It was not a shock for me because I had already experienced the war. I knew that the war would not stop by itself. After February 24, I felt relief because now it had become obvious to everyone that Russia was waging war against Ukraine. Before that, this war was masked under an idea that it was a regional conflict, and not a war. After February 24, the world knew that this was a war.



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Vincé: Is your husband serving in the Ukrainian Army now?

Kruk: Yes.

Vincé: What part of Ukraine is he serving in?

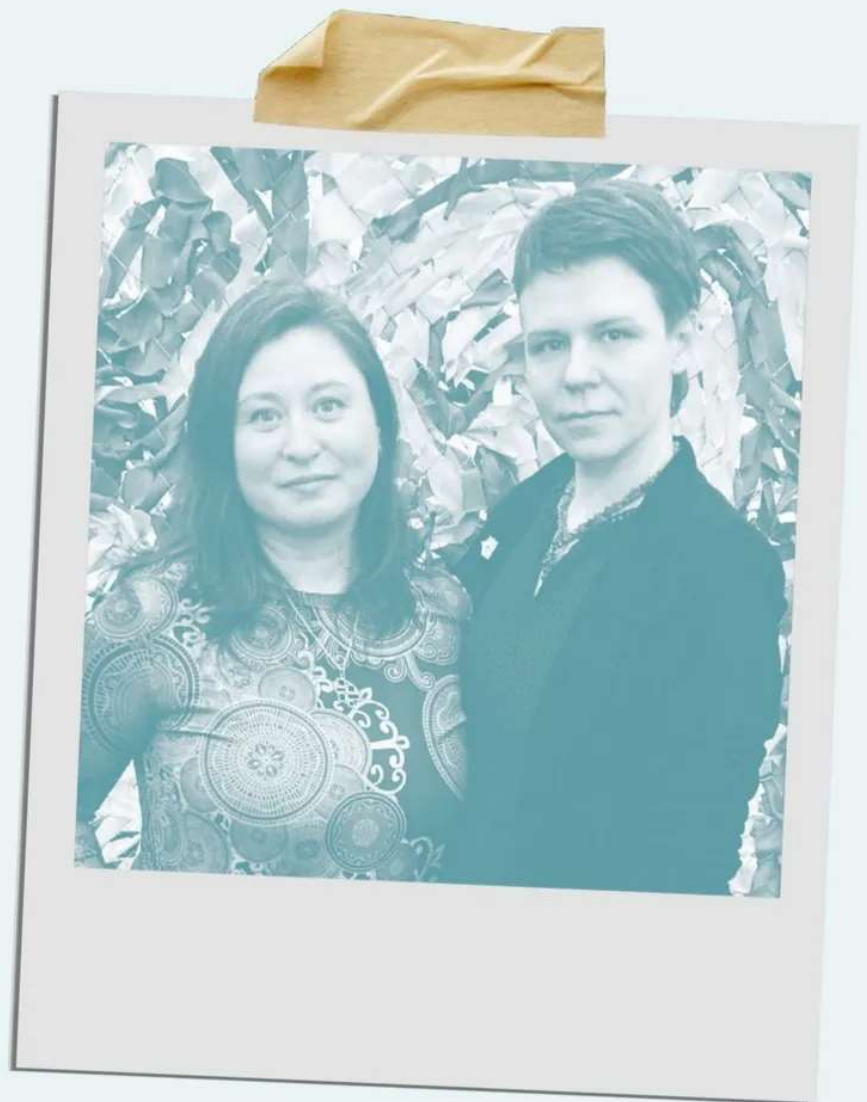
Kruk: My husband has been fighting since February 24, 2022. He'd been fighting in a different part of the country, but he was wounded and needed surgery. He has been home recovering for the past two months.

Vincé: Do you worry about him? How do you cope?

Kruk: It was really hard because he went to war as early as the twenty-fifth of February 2022. For two months I did not see him. I had no idea where he was and how much danger he was in. That was because at the time nobody knew what would happen next, so the whereabouts of the military had to be kept secret. We were not even allowed to make cell phone calls or text. Any communication could have endangered him. To cope with the anxiety, I started volunteering. I would collect gear and equipment that was needed, and I would bring it to military units that were in short supply.

Vincé: Are you teaching your classes right now? Have any of your students enlisted in the Ukrainian Army?

Kruk: After the war started it was only at the end of March that our university's classes resumed, but in an online format. We needed to reopen the university, but it is extremely hard to concentrate right now. I'm only teaching Ukrainian philology and most of my students are women. A few of my former students are fighting in the military. One of my students, a young poet named Artur Dron, is fighting as a soldier in the war. He has been writing poems about the war and a few have been translated into Lithuanian and will be read at the Ukrainian poetry event at the Vilnius Book Fair. Some of my former students have husbands fighting in the war. I've written a poem dedicated to ten of my former students



Halyna Kruk and Ukrainian poet Katarina Mikhalitsnya in front of a camouflage net made by volunteers like the ones used at the front. Photo taken by Laima Vincé at the 2023 Vilnius Book Fair on the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

who have already lost their husbands in this war. It is so hard to know that the person you love the most has been killed by Russians. It is so hard to know that everything war touches, it ruins. War destroys families. Some of my students have been left alone to raise young children because their husbands have been killed in the war. Many of my current students are having a difficult time concentrating on their studies because in every family people have lost family members and friends to this war.

Vincé: What are your feelings about President Biden's surprise visit to Kyiv?

Kruk: It is an important visit. It's a huge symbol of support and shows that America's support of Ukraine is long-term. I think President Biden's visit was aimed not only at Ukraine but also to send a message to Russia. I also appreciate that it changes history when an American president travels to a country at war, and especially to a country where America has no military bases. He came without any special protection. These are really important signs. Last May I was part of the Ukrainian delegation to the American Congress and the Senate. I was amazed at how much American congressmen and senators know about the situation in Ukraine and in what detail they understood what is going on there. I was moved by how much Americans support Ukraine. I saw this from the inside.

During Maidan, I wrote a poem that was later cited by the chief of the European Parliament. That poem is about the danger of being indifferent towards what is going on in Ukraine. It would be dangerous not only for Ukraine, but for all of Europe, if politicians in the West were no longer interested in the war in Ukraine. Therefore, President Biden's trip to Kyiv is a very positive signal for us.

Vincé: What are your thoughts about President Zelensky?

Kruk: I didn't vote for President Zelensky. During his election campaign his message was populist, and it was

directed towards a populist audience. However, in this historic moment President Zelensky plays a very important role just as he is.

Vincé: How did you feel in those moments when the war began, when President Zelensky did not flee the country, but stayed in Ukraine. Did that mean something to you?

Kruk: Even if President Zelensky had left the country when the war started, it would not have been the worst thing that could have happened because the people of Ukraine were determined to resist and fight no matter what happened. The worst would have been if Ukraine had ended up in a situation like Belarus as a puppet of Russia. The worst scenarios for Ukraine are these fake referendums and fake elections, like the one in Kherson. The question is not whether Zelensky runs or not, but how he behaves in the situation that he is in. And in this situation, he is doing the right thing.

Vincé: What is it in the Ukrainian spirit that makes people determined to resist Russian occupation?

Kruk: Most important are two things—there are more important things, but let's just stick with these two. First, there is the Ukrainian irrational need to be free, to love freedom, to live in freedom. The need to be free is so huge for us that it is more important than life itself. That is what makes Ukrainians resist every possible situation that takes away the people's freedom. The other important thing that became very important during Maidan, which is called the Revolution of Dignity, is dignity itself. Freedom and dignity are the two most important values for Ukrainians.

Laima Vincé is the author of the academic monograph, *Vanished Lands: Memory and Postmemory in North American Lithuanian Diaspora Literature* (Peter Lang) and *The Cerulean Bird: Matilda Olkinaitė* (Arc Publications), among other books published in the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe. She writes and publishes both in Lithuanian and English and divides her time between Vilnius and Maine. She is a recipient of two Fulbright grants in Creative Writing, a National Endowment for the Arts Award in Literature, a PEN Translation Fund grant, and other honors. She earned a PhD in Humanities from Vilnius University, an MFA in Writing (Poetry) from Columbia University, and an MFA in Nonfiction from the University of New Hampshire. For more about Laima's work please see her website: www.Laimavince.com