**Military women in museum exhibitions in Lviv (Ukraine): past experience and modernity**

**Abstract**

Ukrainian women have received military experience during the First and Second World Wars and in the contemporary Russian-Ukrainian War in such military services as the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen (USS), the Ukrainian Galician Army (UGA), the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), the Soviet Army, and the Armed Forces of Ukraine (UAF). This paper highlights the representations of Ukrainian women's military experience during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in museum exhibitions in Lviv (a city in Western Ukraine). Based on an analysis of existing exhibitions in specialized museums, the authors show which museum exhibits are used to tell visitors about the war and women’s roles in it. The forgotten experiences of women veterans of the First and Second World Wars formed a one-sided representation of the military topics of the past and continue to shape representations of the contemporary Russian-Ukrainian War.

**Keywords:** museum, military women, war, exhibition, Ukraine, Lviv.

**Introduction: the context**

In the midst of a large-scale invasion, occupation of territories, military movements, and rocket attacks, the Ukrainian intellectual community is rethinking past experiences of conflict experiences and its memory policies. Many people visit military museums and exhibitions on military topics to supplement knowledge about wars acquired at school or through cinema, television, and other media. Yet during the current war, Ukrainian museums have struggled to maintain funding levels and to collect necessary additional funds. They have also been challenged by the task of reflecting on and presenting the conflict. Moreover, due to the war, many museums, archives, and libraries have limited their operations. A number of the most valuable exhibits and documents have been safely hidden from periodic missile strikes to preserve them for future generations. This has made it very difficult to research Ukrainian museum exhibits and to conduct an in depth analysis of their representations of women. As a result, women's experiences of war in Ukraine have been and continue to be a poorly studied topic (Baidak 2016: 1289-91).

Around the world, museums claim they are paying more attention to women, including the roles of women in war. Women's and gender museums, which operate in 96 countries around the world, have a unique mandate to disrupt problematic gender perceptions and narratives that are prevalent throughout in many cultures. By hosting exhibitions, conferences, workshops, literacy courses, and collaborating with scholars and women's organizations, women's and gender museums, in general, are adopting a feminist consciousness. In certain places, these efforts have brought the history of women and their contributions out of the shadows (Сlover 2022: 94). For example, the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) in Tokyo (Japan) and the War and Women's Human Rights Museum (WWHRM) in Korea offer different perspectives on this topic. They reveal dark histories such as the existence of military sexual slavery, which has rarely been included as part of official history in museums. The museum exhibitions are based on the testimonies of participants in the events (Clover 2022: 103). According to Cheeyun Lilian Kwon, the activities of the War and Women's Human Rights Museum have: ‘moved beyond a postcolonial, ethno-nationalist and bilateral framework, instead positioning itself in feminist humanitarian discourse that questions a patriarchal power system that produces, legitimises, and perpetuates acts of gendered violence’ and ‘by fostering empathy with victims, educating visitors about a state-sanctioned system of rape and sexual violence, and informing and memorializing the effects of transnational activism, the museum is designed to inspire visitors and encourage them to take part in human rights activism` (Kwon 2020: 51).

Larger institutions like the National Army Museum in London, covering the military history of Great Britain, pay attention to women's stories of wars and women's military branches (Women's Royal Army Corps, Women's Army Auxiliary Corps)[[1]](#endnote-1). Focusing in part on the obvious exclusion of women from mainstream cultural knowledge, these institutions offer women a space of visibility and confirm the direct participation of women in war. They are present as more than witnesses, thereby correcting harmful gender stereotypes and myths (Szitanyi 2020: 119).

Despite these positive signs, scholars are not entirely optimistic about the prospects for women at war to be equitably represented in museums. Analyzing the progress made by the Canadian War Museum (CWM) in this regard, Laura Brandon expresses ‘hope that men will no longer dominate in war and that women will be less marginalized so that our picture of history will be more complete’ (Brandon 2010: 112). One important prerequisite on this path is the ‘introduc[tion] of gender as a category of historical analysis’ in war studies (Brandon 2010: 113). As part of this process, she recommends that institutions conduct necessary research, alter or design more inclusive exhibitions, and review their collections to identify gaps. Only then can museums present more accurate perspectives on women’s roles in wartime. The activities of museums should be aimed at solving misconceptions and misunderstandings about the role of women in wartime (Brandon 2010: 112-113).

Museums in Ukraine started to address these issues before the current war began. In 2008, `Let’s create a museum about ourselves` (Kharkiv, Ukraine), was launched; the project was intended to create Ukraine’s first museum focusing on gender. The Museum of Women and Gender History’s website describes its mission as ‘to collect exhibits that demonstrate the process of gender construction, to show that gender issues are not only the problems of women, but also of society as a whole; that, despite all the positive changes in society, both women and men continue to suffer from gender discrimination’[[2]](#endnote-2) Currently, the museum offers several online projects related to the war, including interviews, memoirs, exhibitions, and postcards. These feature women’s experiences and roles during the current war. A particularly notable 2022 project is the two-volume publication *100+ stories of women and girls from Russia's war against Ukraine*, which includes, among other accounts, the stories of women volunteers in the Ukrainian army.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Other types of museums represent women and gender to varying degrees. Ukrainian women participated directly in the First and Second World Wars. They are involved in the contemporary conflict in divisions including the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen (USS), the Ukrainian Galician Army (UGA), the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), the Soviet Army, and the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF). To assess the extent to which these military women are represented in Ukrainian museums, we visited museums in Lviv with exhibitions of the history of the twentieth century and military affairs: Lviv Historical Museum (LIM), Lonsky Prison National Memorial Museum, ‘Territory of Terror’ Memorial Museum, the Private Military Museum ‘Shturm’, and the Military Museum of the 58th Officers’ Brigade. The creation of collective memories about the war in these museums and the place of military women can be determined through a visual overview of exhibits containing uniforms, weapons, photographs, and private belongings. This brief article is written even as the war continues, and it is not intended to offer a complete analysis – here, as so often elsewhere, war is (re)presented in part through fragments separated from their contexts.

**Ukrainian Women in Uniforms of the First Half of the Twentieth Century**

The Museum of the Liberation Struggle of Ukraine (a branch of the Lviv Historical Museum) reveals the main stages of the struggle for the independence of Ukraine in chronological order and covers the period from the late nineteenth century to the early 1990s. Here visitors can find photos, documents, weapons, military uniforms, and more. A significant part of the exhibit represents the activities of units of the UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Western Ukraine).[[4]](#endnote-4) The exhibition includes a photo of Olena Stepaniv, the *cornet* or lowest rank commissioned officer of the USS (later she became the *chotar*, or a chief officer of UGA). It also displays a silver medal ‘For Bravery’ – replica of the one she was awarded. The names of other military women in the USS and UGA remain little known because of gender stereotypes (Olena Stepaniv is a kind of exception). After the war, women such as Stepaniv had to return to the roles and rules of peacetime, which meant that they were overshadowed by their husbands and relegated to household chores and stereotypically female occupations. For example, Olena Stepaniv took up teaching and research. According to her, the return to peaceful life, to women's clothing, to everyday routines, proved to be long and difficult (Baidak 2021: 112). Over time, the military experiences of Stepaniv and other women were largely forgotten.

An exhibition depicting experiences of women at war up to more recent times (the one described above ended with the 1990s) offers an insight into representations of women in more contemporary conflicts and through more recent curatorial perspectives. The exhibition *The Army of the People in the struggle for independence*, devoted to the 80th anniversary of the UPA creation in 1942, opened on October 13, 2022, in one of LIM halls. In particular, visitors can see Second World War UPA flags; personal belongings of the rebels and their family members; weapons; samples of freedom fighters’ underground press materials; archival documents, photographs, and more.[[5]](#endnote-5) Yet women in uniform are depicted in only five of 77 photos of people (either in groups or alone). In two cases, these are photos of men and women together. Another two photos show women in civilian clothes, perhaps because they served as communication agents). The exhibition also presents women's civilian clothing of the time – a skirt and an embroidered shirt or *sorochka vyshyvanka* (the embroidery is a fundamental element of the Ukrainian folk garments for both sexes). A watch and a handkerchief belonging to Mariia Savchyn, a UPA communication agent, also the wife of UPA Colonel V. Halasy, are shown in one of the cases. Next to it are *rushnyky* (unique and special ritual scarves used for weddings, baptisms, funerals, or other holidays) of another female resistance fighter, V. Makomelia. Thus the focus remains on domestic and military objects and documents, often suggesting more traditional and stereotypical female roles.

The Lonsky Prison National Memorial Museum takes a somewhat more inclusive approach to the representation of women. Its exhibition presents three storylines: 1) the history of the building (figures who were in jail throughout the entire existence of the prison – 1920-91 are mentioned here); 2) prison life; 3) mass executions of prisoners in June 1941.[[6]](#endnote-6) Among the exhibits representing women insurgents in the UPA are two photos depicting unnamed rebels from the Lviv Region in the late 1940s. Also displayed are the personal belongings of female underground fighter Sofiia Lahodych or ‘Lida’: a bag, a chevron (badge of rank), and a small icon of the Virgin Mother. The exhibition features embroidered shirts of women who took part in the liberation movement and children's shirts embroidered by them in the Gulag. But the main focus of the museum is on the bloodiest page in the prison’s history – the mass shootings at the end of June 1941 – when 1,681 people were executed by Soviet troops. To date, only the names of 747 of those shot are known.[[7]](#endnote-7) The names, including those of 24 females, are stamped on the memorial ceiling at the end of the exhibition. To a large extent, the lack of documentation can be attributed to the loss of a large part of documents in 2010.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The Private Military Museum ‘Shturm’, too, presents weapons, ammunition, and photos of various military groups from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. However, the experiences of military women are only minimally reflected in the exhibition. Only one 1941 group photo, ‘Battle for Crimea’, shows a woman, and she is a member of a Soviet division. Yet this neglect of Ukrainian women is not the result of a scarcity of pertinent materials. The museum has a collection of about 10,000 photos, among which are images of female military personnel from the USS, in particular Olena Stepaniv, Olha Pidvysotska, Darka Levytska-Nedilska, Hanna Dmyterko, as well as nurses Vasylka Oshchypko, K. Gladun, and others. A collection of images of the UPA includes women in group photos celebrating Easter in 1947. They are communication agents and doctors dressed in military uniforms and bearing weapons. Yet these photos have not been displayed to the public; consequently, the exhibition’s narrative remains one promoting masculinity.

**The Current Russian-Ukrainian War, Women and Museums**

Women have served in the Ukrainian army from the very beginning of the Russian offensive on Ukrainian territory in 2014. By the beginning of October 2015, about 14,500 female military personnel served in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Of them, 938 took a direct part in hostilities; almost 2,000 were officers; and 35 held managerial positions in the Ministry of Defense, the General Staff of the Armed Forces. The rest 30,500 were in various other support roles (Bakovetska 2021: 154).

These numbers reflect the reality of aspirations toward gender equality that are not consistently achieved. In 2015, the non-governmental research and monitoring organization Kyiv Institute of Gender Studies  launched the advocacy project Invisible Battalion to draw attention to women’s contributions in war. At the beginning of this project, researchers investigated and documented the participation of Ukrainian women in the war against the Russian occupation army. In 2017, the project issued two documentaries, and the following year, the Women's Veterans Movement was founded. The result of the Invisible Battalion advocacy campaign was the adoption of a new law in 2018, ‘On ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men during military service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other military formations’. However, even now, women are not permitted to serve as full-fledged members of the Airborne Assault Forces. Women’s military careers are limited by restrictions limiting access to officer positions and military education.[[9]](#endnote-9) These restrictions are remnants of the stereotypical idea that war is not an occupation for women. Nevertheless, there are some encouraging signs. The official press service of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine stated that about 30,000 women served in the Ukrainian army in 2021. As of December 2022, more than 60,000 women served and worked in the various divisions of the Ukrainian Armed Forces: about 19,000 were civilian workers, 41,000 women served elsewhere in the military, and about 5,000 of them were on the frontline.[[10]](#endnote-10) One would therefore expect growing representation of military women in museums.

Indeed, this issue is often raised by women's organizations, which attempt to remedy the situation. In August-September 2022, the Lviv Municipal Art Center hosted the temporary exhibition entitled *Women and War* organized by the Kharkiv Women's NGO, Sphere.[[11]](#endnote-11) Organizers created an online information platform to enable female artists to demonstrate Ukrainian women’s contributions to the fight against Russian occupiers. The site also focused on the most acute problems currently facing Ukrainian women. As a result, women were presented as volunteers, refugee children’s guardians and protectors, and soldiers. One of the series of works by the artist Sonia Saletska is appropriately titled ‘Invisible hands holding the World’ (Pluzhenko 2022).

Unfortunately, other institutions continue to lag. From 5 January to 5 February 2023, the Lviv Historical Museum hosted a photo exhibition named *The Black Land is Plowed*. Its purpose was to demonstrate the struggle of the Ukrainian people against the invaders since the full-scale attack commencing 24 February 2022. The photographs depicted military operations involving soldiers; evacuations; widespread destruction; and everyday scenes from the front and in the rear.[[12]](#endnote-12) Women appear in only three of twenty-five photos of soldiers. In the Private Military Museum ‘Shturm’, women are not represented at all in the displays dedicated to the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The Military Museum of the 58th Officers’ Brigade has three exhibitions open: *The History of the Defense of Ukraine in the Context of Military Uniforms*; *The Defense of Luhansk Airport*; and *Heroes of Ukraine from the Lviv Region, Recognized Posthumously*. Women are not represented in any of these exhibitions. However, at the entrance to the museum, a photo exhibition is dedicated to life during the war. Five photos depict women in uniform (in one of the photos a woman is next to a man, and in another one military women are next to civilians and volunteers). One can interpret the location of the exhibition as signaling its importance, but this fails to compensate for the exclusion of women elsewhere.

**Conclusion**

These exclusions and limited representations are likely to be consequences of the dominant models of femininity in Ukraine. Oksana Kis, identifies two such models. The first is *Berehynia*, from the verb *berehty*, which means to take care of, to protect family and home (Kis 2005: 106). The other model is Barbie, a beautiful woman with a perfect figure (Kis 2005: 118). And although on the surface the models differ, their inherent meaning is the same. Berehynia's body is intended for to serve men through reproductive and domestic functions, while Barbie's body is an object of male aesthetics and erotic pleasure. In both cases, a woman's body is intended to serve men and the state. However, Oksana Kis believes that Ukrainian women are gradually trying to find an alternative between these two dominant models of femininity (Kis 2005: 128-9).

The analysis of wartime museum exhibitions in Lviv (Ukraine) demonstrates that women in the military continue to be excluded from museum narratives, despite the widespread presence of women in the Ukrainian military and in civilian war-related roles. Museum displays featuring female soldiers are exceptions rather than a common phenomenon, with women featured in support roles - as communication agents, nurses, or auxiliary volunteers. The participation of women in previous military services, such as the Soviet Army, is completely absent, with the emphasis on their work in the nationalist underground. Here, the most frequent image is of a female assistant who takes care of the fighters and courageously withstands interrogations and exile in case of capture Alternatively, women are shown in domestic roles, for example, a woman embroidering a shirt for her child or *rushnyk* in exile; a girl wearing *sorochka*. A third approach shows women in museums as victims of war and totalitarian regimes of the first half of the twentieth century. It is important to show women not only as victims of conflicts but also as participants in their solution, especially at a time when thousands of Ukrainian women are fighting alongside men at the front. Museums should show a variety of representations of the war, including different experiences of gender and sexuality. In particular, they should exhibit material related to women’s access and integration into the forces, the needs and problems of army women, and women’s occupations in the military.

At the current moment, many Ukrainian museums erase decades of women's participation in war and define state and national defense exclusively as a heterosexual male sphere. It is important to show military women and LGBTQ individuals to reverse narrow gender perceptions and to create a new feminist historical consciousness. It is necessary to blur the boundaries of gender stereotypes and avoid additional confrontation (in this case between and among genders), especially in a society under threat, as Ukrainian society is today.

**Notes**

1. National Army Museum. London, (n.d.), https://www.nam.ac.uk/search?search\_api\_fulltext=women&fbclid=IwAR1KaFJMrCGqNim2qespLxPlm9HQ-5DaGMJbkbOPG3UhnuelFyOt1U2FePM, accessed 7 January 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Museum of Women and Gender History, (n.d.). <https://gendermuseum.com/en/>, accessed 15 April 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Muzei zhinochoi ta hendernoi istorii ‘Проекти про війну’ [Museum of Women and Gender History ‘Projects about War'] (n.d.) <http://surl.li/gqceu> , accessed 15 April 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. LIM. Lvivskyi istorychnyi muzei, `Музей визвольної боротьби України`. ‘Muzei vyzvolnoi borotby Ukrainy’ [Museum of the Liberation Struggle of Ukraine], (n.d.). https://www.lhm.lviv.ua/location/liberation.html, accessed 15 January 2023. [in Ukrainian]. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. LIM. Lvivskyi istorychnyi muzei, ‘Експозиційний проєкт до 80-річчя УПА` ‘Ekspozytsiinyi proiekt do 80-richchia UPA’ [Exhibition project for the 80th anniversary of the UPA], (2022). https://www.lhm.lviv.ua/event/ekspozicijnij-projekt-do-80-richchja-upa.html, accessed 12 January 2023. [in Ukrainian]. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Natsionalnyi muzei-memorial zhertv okupatsiinykh rezhymiv ‘Tiurma na Lontskoho’, ‘Перший етап експозиції’ ‘Pershyi etap ekspozytsii’ [The first stage of the exposition], (n.d.). http://www.lonckoho.lviv.ua/ekspozytsiya/pershyj-etap-ekspozytsiji, accessed 16 January 2023. [in Ukrainian]. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Natsionalnyi muzei-memorial zhertv okupatsiinykh rezhymiv ‘Tiurma na Lontskoho’, ‘Масові розстріли 1941’ ‘Masovi rozstrily 1941’ [Mass executions in 1941], (n.d.). http://www.lonckoho.lviv.ua/arhiv/masovi-rozstrily-1941, accessed 15 January 2023. [in Ukrainian]. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. In 2009, Ukraine opened access to archival materials of the Soviet period, in particular the activities of the KGB. This made it possible to draw on a number of documents to reproduce the chronology of repressive actions carried out by the Soviet regime in Lviv. However, in 2010, during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovych, the state policy regarding the openness of historical sources changed, and a criminal case was initiated against the Museum Prison on Lontskoho regarding the disclosure of state secrets. Documents and objects that were in the museum at that time were confiscated for investigative purposes. Most of them were not returned to the museum. (Personal communications with museum staff 03.01.2022 ). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The Invisible Battalion’global advocacy project. Our story (n.d.). https://invisiblebattalion.org/en/about-2/ , accessed 5 January 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Informatsiine ahenstvo Ministerstva oborony Ukrainy Armiiainform, ‘На захисті України стоять понад 60 тисяч жінок’ ‘Na zakhysti Ukrainy stoiat ponad 60 tysiach zhinok’ [More than 60,000 women stand on the defense of Ukraine], 2022. https://armyinform.com.ua/2022/12/28/na-zahysti-ukrayiny-stoyat-ponad-60-tysyach-zhinok/, accessed 12 January 2023. [in Ukrainian]. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Non-governmental Organization ‘Women Association Sphere (Kharkiv, Ukraine)’ (n.d.) <https://sphere.org.ua/eng/> , accessed 12 January 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. LIM. Lvivskyi istorychnyi muzei, ‘Фотовиставка ‘Чорна рілля ізорана…’ відкрита’ ‘Fotovystavka ‘Chorna rillia izorana...’ vidkryta’ [Photo exhibition ‘Black plowed field...’ is open], 2023. https://www.lhm.lviv.ua/location/liberation.html, accessed 15 January 2023. [in Ukrainian].

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