

Military Women in Museum Exhibitions in Lviv (Ukraine): Past Experience and Modernity

Olena Hanusyn and Yuliia Kurdyna

Abstract

Ukrainian women received military experience during the First and Second World Wars and in the contemporary Russian-Ukrainian War in services such 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 analyzes the representations of Ukrainian women's military experiences during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in museum exhibitions in Lviv (a city in Western Ukraine). The authors conclude that the experiences of women veterans of the First and Second World Wars frequently remain neglected, creating an incomplete picture of the past and continuing to shape representations of women's roles in the current Russian-Ukrainian War.

Key words: museum, military women, war, exhibition, Ukraine, Lviv

Introduction: the context

In the midst of a large-scale invasion, the occupation of territories, military movements, and rocket attacks, the Ukrainian intellectual community is rethinking past conflicts and national memory politics. 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. The International Association of Women's Museums lists over 150 institutions¹ that seek to disrupt problematic gender perceptions and narratives that are prevalent in many cultures. By hosting exhibitions, conferences, workshops, literacy courses, and collaborating with scholars and women's organizations, these museums are generally adopting a feminist consciousness. In certain places, these efforts have brought the history of women and their contributions out of the shadows (Clover 2022: 94). For example, the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) in Tokyo and the War and Women's Human Rights Museum (WWHRM) in Seoul 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. These museums' exhibitions are based on the testimonies of participants in historical 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

[the museum] in feminist humanitarian discourse that questions a patriarchal power system that produces, legitimises, and perpetuates acts of gendered violence'. The museum offers a transformative experience:

by fostering empathy with victims, educating visitors about a state-sanctioned system of rape and sexual violence, and informing and memorialising 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, also pay attention to women's military branches (Women's Royal Army Corps, Women's Army Auxiliary Corps).² Focusing in part on the obvious exclusion of women from mainstream cultural knowledge, these institutions offer women a space of visibility and demonstrate that they have been active participants in war. They show that women have been present as more than witnesses, thereby correcting harmful gender stereotypes and false myths (Sztanyi 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), Laura Brandon expresses the '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 is the 'introduc[tion] of gender as a category of historical analysis' in war studies (Brandon 2010: 113). Brandon also recommends that institutions conduct necessary research and review their collections to identify gaps. Exhibitions should be (re)designed to make them inclusive. Only then can museums present more accurate perspectives on women's roles in wartime.

Museums in Ukraine started to address these issues before the current invasion began. In 2008 the project, 'Let's create a museum about ourselves' was initiated in Kharkiv with the aim of creating Ukraine's first museum focusing on gender. Now called the Museum of Women and Gender History, the institution'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.³

The museum offers several online projects featuring women's experiences in the current war, including interviews, memoirs, exhibitions, and postcards. A notable 2022 project was 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.⁴

Other categories 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 Lviv institutions with exhibitions pertaining to twentieth-century history and military affairs: the Lviv Historical Museum (LIM), Lonsky Prison National Memorial Museum, the Territory of Terror Memorial Museum of Totalitarian Regimes, the Private Military Museum 'Shturm', and the Military Museum of the 58th Officers' Brigade. We assessed the creation of collective memories about war and the roles of military women through a visual overview of exhibits containing uniforms, weapons, photographs, and private belongings. This brief article is written even as the war continues, so 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 uniform during 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 Ukraine's independence in chronological order

and covers the period from the late nineteenth century to the early 1990s. Visitors can find photos, documents, weapons, military uniforms, and more. A significant part of the exhibit presents the activities of units of the UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Western Ukraine).⁵ The exhibition includes a photo of Olena Stepaniv as a *cornet* or lowest rank commissioned officer of the USS (later she became a *chotar*, or a chief officer of UGA). It also displays a silver medal 'For Bravery' – a replica of the one she was awarded. But Olena Stepaniv is an exception – the names of other military women in the USS and UGA remain little known. 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. Olena Stepaniv took up teaching and research. According to her, the return to peaceful life, to women's clothing, to everyday routines, proved long and difficult (Baidak 2021: 112). Over the years, 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 eightieth anniversary of the UPA creation in 1942, opened on 13 October 2022 in one of the LIM halls. Visitors can see Second World War UPA flags; the personal belongings of rebels and their family members; discarded weapons; samples of freedom fighters' underground press materials; archival documents, photographs, and more.⁶ Yet women in uniform are depicted in only five of the 77 images of people. Two photos depict men and women together. Another two photos show women in civilian clothes, perhaps because they served as communication agents. The exhibition also presents clothes worn by women civilians at the time – a skirt and an embroidered shirt or *sorochka vyshyvanka* (the embroidery is a fundamental element of Ukrainian folk garments for both sexes). A watch and a handkerchief belonging to Maria Savchyn, a UPA communication agent, also the wife of UPA Colonel V. Halasy, are shown in another case. Next to it are *rushnyky* (distinctive ritual scarves used for weddings, baptisms, funerals, or other holidays) of another female resistance fighter, V. Makomelia. Thus, the emphasis remains on 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 and its prisoners from 1920–91, when the building was decommissioned; 2) prison life; 3) mass executions of prisoners in June 1941.⁷ 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 primary 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, the names of only 747 of those shot are known,⁸ and they are inscribed on the memorial ceiling at the end of the exhibition. Only 24 are female. To a great extent, the lack of information can be attributed to the loss of access to a large number of documents in 2010.⁹

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. 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, and Hanna Dmyterko, as well as nurses Vasylika Oshchypko, K. Gladun, and others. A set 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 are not on public display, so the exhibition's narrative continues to promote masculinity and minimize women's contributions.

The current Russian-Ukrainian war

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 these, 938 took a direct part in hostilities. Almost 2,000 were officers and 35 held managerial positions in the Ministry of Defense, serving in the General Staff of the Armed Forces. The rest occupied various other support roles (Bakovetska 2021: 154).

These numbers reflect the reality that aspirations toward gender equality 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 wartime. 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. Restrictions on access to officer positions and military education limit women's military careers.¹⁰ Although these restrictions are remnants of the idea that war is not an occupation for women, there are some encouraging signs. The official press service of the Ministry of Defense stated that about 30,000 women served in the Ukrainian army in 2021. As of December 2022, more than 60,000 women 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 were on the frontline.¹¹

One might therefore expect growing representation of military women in museums. 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 a temporary exhibition titled *Women and War* sponsored by the Kharkiv Women's NGO, Sphere.¹² Organizers created an online information platform to enable female artists to illustrate Ukrainian women's contributions to the fight against Russian invaders. The site also focused on the most acute problems currently facing Ukrainian women. Women were presented as volunteers, refugee children's guardians, and soldiers. One of the series of works by the artist Sonia Saletska bears the appropriate title, *Invisible Hands Holding the World*.¹³

Unfortunately, other institutions continue to lag behind. 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 the rear.¹⁴ Women appear in only three of 25 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: *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 accompanied by 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 femaleness 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). On the surface the models differ, but their inherent meaning is the same. Berehynia's body is intended to serve men through reproductive and domestic functions, while Barbie's body is an object of male aesthetics and erotic pleasure. In both cases, the 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 models (Kis 2005: 128-9), which may result in further changes in museums.

The analysis of wartime museum exhibitions in Lviv (Ukraine) demonstrates that women in the military continue to be excluded from narratives, despite the widespread presence of women in the Ukrainian military and civilian war-related roles. Museum displays featuring female soldiers are exceptions, with women mostly featured in support roles – as communication agents, nurses, or auxiliary volunteers. The participation of women in military services formerly prominent in Ukraine, such as the Soviet Army, is completely absent, with the emphasis on women's work in the nationalist underground. Here, the most frequent image is of a female assistant who takes care of fighters and, if captured, courageously withstands interrogation and harsh exile. Alternatively, women are shown in domestic roles, for example, an exiled woman may be depicted embroidering a shirt or *rushnyk* for her child; or a girl may be seen wearing a *sorochka*. A third perspective shows women 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 resolution, especially at a time when thousands of Ukrainian women are fighting alongside men at the front. Museums 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.

Museums should show a variety of representations of the war, extending to diverse experiences of gender and sexuality. At the current moment, many Ukrainian museums erase decades of women's participation in conflicts and define state and national defense exclusively as a heterosexual male sphere. It is important to show military women and LGBTQ individuals in order to reverse narrow gender perceptions and to create a new feminist historical consciousness. It is necessary to break gender stereotypes, preemptively avoiding confrontations between and among genders, especially in a society under threat as Ukrainian society is today.

Received: 30 January 2023

Finally Accepted: 30 May 2023

Notes

- 1 'List of Women's Museums', IAWM (International Association of Women's Museums) 2023. <https://iawm.international/about-us/womens-museums/museums-list/>, accessed 30 May 2023.
- 2 See https://www.nam.ac.uk/search?search_api_fulltext=women&fbclid=IwAR1KaFJMrCGqNim2qespLxPlm9HQ-5DaGMJbkbOPG3UhnuelFyOt1U2FePM, accessed 7 January 2023.
- 3 Museum of Women and Gender History, 'We Write, Create and Preserve History: Museum of Women and Gender History: Museum for Dialogue', n.d. <https://gendermuseum.com/en/>, accessed 15 April 2023.
- 4 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.
- 5 LIM, Lvivskiy istorychniy muzei, 'Музей визвольної боротьби України'. 'Muzei vyzvolnoi borotby Ukrainy' [Lviv Historical Museum, 'Museum of the Liberation Struggle of Ukraine'], n.d. <https://www.lhm.lviv.ua/location/liberation.html>, accessed 15 January 2023 [in Ukrainian].
- 6 LIM, Lvivskiy istorychniy muzei, 'Експозиційний проєкт до 80-річчя УПА' 'Ekspozytsiyniy proiekt do 80-richchia UPA' [Lviv Historical Museum, 'Exhibition Project for the Eightieth

- Anniversary of the UPA', 2022. <https://www.lhm.lviv.ua/event/ekspozicijnij-projekt-do-80-richchja-upa.html>, accessed 12 January 2023 [in Ukrainian].
- 7 Natsionalnyi muzei-memorial zhertv okupatsiinykh rezhymiv 'Tsurma na Lontskoho', 'Перший етап експозиції' 'Pershyi etap ekspozytsii' [Lonsky Prison National Memorial Museum, 'The First Stage of the Exposition'], n.d. <http://www.lonckoho.lviv.ua/ekspozytsiya/pershyi-etap-ekspozytsiji>, accessed 16 January 2023 [in Ukrainian].
 - 8 Natsionalnyi muzei-memorial zhertv okupatsiinykh rezhymiv 'Tsurma na Lontskoho', 'Масові розстріли 1941' 'Masovi rozstrily 1941' [Lonsky Prison National Memorial Museum, 'Mass Executions in 1941'], n.d. <http://www.lonckoho.lviv.ua/arhiv/masovi-rozstrily-1941>, accessed 15 January 2023 [in Ukrainian].
 - 9 In 2009, Ukraine opened access to archival materials of the Soviet period, in particular the activities of the KGB. This made it possible to reproduce the chronology of repressive actions carried out by the Soviet regime in Lviv. However, in 2010, during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, the state policy regarding the openness of historical sources changed, and a criminal case was initiated against the Lonsky Prison National Memorial Museum 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 (Museum staff, personal communication, 3 January 2022).
 - 10 The 'Invisible Battalion' Global Advocacy Project, 'Our Story', n.d. <https://invisiblebattalion.org/en/about-2/>, accessed 5 January 2023.
 - 11 Informatsiine ahenstvo Ministerstva oborony Ukrainy Armiainform, '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].
 - 12 'Non-governmental Organization "Women Association Sphere (Kharkiv, Ukraine)"', n.d. <https://sphere.org.ua/eng/>, accessed 12 January 2023.
 - 13 Lina Pluzhenko, 'Моя серія робіт про підтримку. Ти можеш підійти і взяти когось за руку. У Львові проходить виставка 'Жінки та війна' 'Moia seriia robit — pro pidtrymku. Ty mozhesh pidiyti i vziaty kohos za ruku'. U Lvovi prokhodyt vystavka 'Zhinky ta viina' ["My Series of Works is About Support. You Can Go Up and Take Someone's Hand": Exhibition "Women and War" Takes Place in Lviv'], Liuk: onlain-zhurnal [Luke: Online Magazine] 2022. <https://lyuk.media/behind-city/women-and-war>, accessed 3 January 2023 [in Ukrainian].
 - 14 LIM, Lvivskiy istorychniy muzei, 'Фотовиставка 'Чорна рілля ізорана...' відкрита' 'Fotovystavka 'Chorna rillia izorana...' vidkryta' [Lviv Historical Museum, 'Photo Exhibition "Black Plowed Field..." is Open'] 2023. <https://www.lhm.lviv.ua/location/liberation.html>, accessed 15 January 2023 [in Ukrainian].

References

- Baidak, M. (2016) 'Втеча та повернення: українки в лавах Січових Стрільців' 'Vtecha ta povernennia: ukrainky v lavakh Sichovykh Striltsiv' ['Escape and Return: Ukrainian Women in the Ranks of the Sich Riflemen'], *Narodoznavchi Zoshyty*, 6 1286-93 [in Ukrainian].

(2021) Війна як виклик і можливість: українки в роки Першої світової війни
Viina yak vyklyk i mozhlyvist: ukrainky v roky Pershoi svitovoi viiny [War as a

Challenge and an Opportunity: Ukrainian Women in the First World War], Lviv: Institute of Ethnography, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine [in Ukrainian].

- Bakovetska, O. (2021) 'Українські жінки у війнах XX–XXI століть' [Ukrainian zhinky u viinakh XX – XXI stolit'] ['Ukrainian Women in the Wars of the 20th – 21st Centuries'], *Molodyi vchenyi*, 3 (91) 152-6 [in Ukrainian]. doi: <https://doi.org/10.32839/2304-5809/2021-3-91-33>.
- Brandon, L. (2010) 'Looking for the "Total" Woman in Wartime: A Museological Work in Progress', in Amy K. Levin (ed) *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, 105-14, London, New York: Routledge.
- Clover, D.E. (2022) 'Women's and Gender Museums: Feminist Pedagogies for Illumination, Imagination, Provocation, and Collaboration', in Rob Evans, Ewa Kurantowicz and Emilio Lucio-Villegas (eds) *Remaking Communities and Adult Learning*, 94-109, Leiden: Brill. doi: [10.1163/9789004518032_007](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004518032_007).
- Kis, O. (2005) 'Choosing Without Choice: Dominant Models of Femininity in Contemporary Ukraine', in Ildikó A. Morell, Helene Carlbäck, Madeleine Hurd and Sara Rastbäck (eds) *Gender Transitions in Russia and Eastern Europe*, 105-36, Eslöv: Förlags ab Gondolin.
- Kwon, C.L. (2020) 'Sexual Violence, Imperialism, and Museum Activism: The Case of the War & Women's Human Rights Museum', *Museum International*, 72 (1-2) 42-53. doi: [10.1080/13500775.2020.1743056](https://doi.org/10.1080/13500775.2020.1743056).
- Szitanyi, S. (2020) 'Military Museums and Memorial Sites: Disappearing Women in the Military', in Stephanie Szitanyi, *Gender Trouble in the U.S. Military*, 119-45, London: Palgrave Macmillan. doi: [10.1007/978-3-030-21225-4_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21225-4_5) [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-21225-4_5](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-21225-4_5?fbclid=IwAR3hL4lna1LSLpDijwecUGyedpxPZgKZ_dgmhEkuqTImWVynRFA5VYayi2k) https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-21225-4_5?fbclid=IwAR3hL4lna1LSLpDijwecUGyedpxPZgKZ_dgmhEkuqTImWVynRFA5VYayi2k.