

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF SURVIVAL
IN TIMES OF EMERGENCY
REVIEW OF MODERN UKRAINIAN RESEARCH

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I wrote this review during the protests against the Lukashenko regime in Belarus. Belarusian women became the face of the opposition. The video of 73-year old Nina Baginskaya, with the white-red-white Belarus flag walking through the ranks of the heavily armed men of the OMON (AMAP, lit. *Special Purpose Police Detachment*) state riot police, has become iconic. Baginskaya, confronting the police saying: “I’m on my walk,” a statement of defiance that recalls the attitude of women during the Ukrainian turmoil in the first half of the 20th century.

We’ve seen this all before: the women’s revolts called ‘*babii bunt*,’ efforts on behalf of imprisoned family members, the courage of the older women for they felt “I lived enough, and there is no reason to care much about life,” and the women’s networks of solidarity. Recent research by Ukrainian historians presented many stories of resistance and survival. Some of their books are among the most popular in the *non-fiction* genre, meaning that there is high interest among the public (Kis 2017a; Kis 2017c). I will deal in this review with the books which are available to the broader public rather than to the readers of scholarly journals or academic papers.

The experience of survival during the Holodomor (Great Famine) and World War Two is one of the most significant issues Ukrainian female researchers refer to. Oksana Kis was among the leaders in Ukraine to study gender and female issues. Her works are a “manifested feminist project” (Styazhkina 2017b, 213), in which she is using existing methodological frameworks for measuring wom-

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en's agency. She is an anthropologist. The living conditions, the rules of relations among people, traditions and innovations, physicality practices, and sexuality focus on her research interests. All this seems obvious, and this often slips away from historians' attention (Kis 2018). She initiated a collection of historical essays (published in 2017), *The Ukrainian Women in the Forge of Modernization* (Kis 2017a).

The book is composed of 11 texts (chapters) written by nine female researchers. Different aspects of women's history during the mid 19th to mid 20th century are presented: the lives of women in traditional society; the struggle of Ukrainian women for education in two empires (Austro-Hungarian and Russian); the social activities of women during World War One; the role and place of women in the Soviet discourse; the political struggle of *Halychyna* (Galician) women in the interwar period; the experience of women's survival in the most dramatic disasters of the 20th century – the Holodomor, World War Two, the Nazi occupation, and in the GULAG.

Nevertheless, Mariana Baidak's and Olha Bezhuk's on Ukrainian women in World War One are relevant to this review (Baidak and Bezhuk 2017). The war brought about many ordeals, the deaths of relatives, the loss of the family breadwinners, property loss, and orphanhood. It also gave an impetus to women's self-awareness and rapidly broadened the area of women's self-realization in formerly inaccessible spheres.

The authors open up an almost unstudied history of the military service of Ukrainian women. They examined women's activities in the Legion of Ukrainian Sich Riflemen (so-called USS, *Ukrainski sichovi stril'tsi*) – an army formation of volunteers in the Austro-Hungarian Army. They were members of the youth paramilitary organizations *Sich*, *Sokil*, *Plast*, in which they received basic military training. Many of them had university or some other higher form of specialized education.

Women in USS were not segregated but instead, they were dispersed among numerous units, which made their conditions less than favorable. They were a clear minority in a male environment. On top of that, women in the military were under double pressure. They had to suffer from the burdens of service and face male prejudice, most often from educated circles. Males from high society were alert to the possible competition from females, as the latter were usually well-educated and had special training. Men also had difficulty relating to women of their social circles in the unusual role of fellow trench comrades. However, some women were able to advance to officer ranks and received decorations.

The authors, as mentioned above, provide facts or statistics on 34 Ukrainian women on the front but try to contemplate why young women took up arms and decided to stand side by side with the men on the front line. Analyzing the

available sources and reconstructing their biographies, the authors conclude that the front was for these women was “the place to escape from the reality they were trying to change” (Baidak and Bezhuk 2017, 83). Yet, as the war ended, they had to return to the same old problems and some new problems as well in their traditional social roles. And not all of them were able to adjust to their new lives.

Forming charity and educational organizations helped overcome the war's economic, social, and psychological aftermath. Activities in these organizations provided women with the valuable experience of social work, solidarity, and publicity. They assisted prisoners of war, veterans, widows, and orphans. Mariana Baidak and Olha Bezhuk present the different activities of these groups based on the sample of *The Ukrainian Women's Committee to Assist Wounded Warriors*.

In contrast to their military service, the social activities of Ukrainian women were more in line with the traditional image of the “sacrificial woman,” mother, wife, and housemaker. The authors draw this conclusion from newspapers, memoirs, diaries, and private correspondence.

Learning about the peculiarities of the fate of women during the Great War, their self-perception, and their intimate aspects are possible only for a narrow segment of the educated public female intellectuals. These women published articles in newspapers under their real names, kept diaries, and wrote memoirs. But the majority of females in the cities and villages remain an unidentifiable mass of “war victims”: refugees, widows, and orphans.

Oksana Kis wrote her essay *The Holodomor from the Perspective of the Women's Experience of Survival* on the Great Famine of 1932–1933 (Kis 2017a, 156–175; Kis 2018, 123–168). She is critical of the widely spread victimization of women's Holodomor experience. For that would almost automatically exclude the possibility of recognizing and studying a woman's agency during the famine. According to the author, the view of women as passive objects of history is both incorrect and unfair.

Referring to the studies of women's survival strategies during the Holocaust, she suggests studying the different active practices of daily survival and hiding food, clothes, etc., the women revolts, the intimidation of (pro-regime) activists, and the legitimate fight for their rights via appeals to the authorities. As far as proper women's survival resources are concerned, there were exchanges of female properties for food, female mutual assistance, referring children to state orphanages, and the use of the female body.

The Body experience of women became the most suppressed issue in the stories of the famine. Forced or by acting under constraint, prostitution could be an additional resource for saving the family. Meanwhile, the body could also be

a risk factor for the woman if there was a man partner (husband). Witnesses point out cases of unpunished violence towards women, especially ones from the families, stigmatized as “socially hostile.” women could be humiliated or raped by the local bosses (*nachalniki*) or by pro-government activists.

It isn't easy to summarize the experience of women under these challenging survival situations during the Holodomor. There were different conditions and different ways of surviving in rural and urban areas. The point is to pay attention to these efforts and to study them. Researchers tend to consider a women's experience first and foremost through the lens of “patience, suffering, and loss” and construct a historical image of women as victims of dire historical circumstances.

Women actively used the survival practices elaborated upon during the Soviet era social experiments, Stalinist terror, and Nazi occupation. Olena Styazhkina writes about it in her essay “Occupied women: women's everyday life during World War 2” (Styazhkina 2017a).

The author suggests abandoning the division of people under occupation into heroes, victims, and traitors, which is characteristic of the Soviet concept of the Great Patriotic War. She points out the difficulties with generalizing women's experiences with all at a place: “suffering and its absence, sacrifice conformism, stupidity, devotion, tortures, struggle, the birth of kids and deaths of their loved ones” (Styazhkina 2017a, 235). The different chronology, geography, power structures, and demography of Ukraine also complicate any simple generalizations.

Apart from this, she finds many standard features in the lives of Ukrainian women during the occupations. First, it is the common Soviet experience. The researcher shows which skills and attitudes were applied when German troops arrived. For instance, the idea “to stand in place of a man” became an inversion of the gender roles under occupation. The traditional perception of war as a danger to men rather than women turned into believing that “women will not be punished” (Styazhkina 2017a, 247–248). The “rewriting” of biography or writing “proper for conditions of occupation” biography was actively used as one of the earlier mechanisms for survival. The facts concealed the most first – any German origins, or the existence of repressed relatives, were actualized under these new conditions. Poverty on display, the use of the power of bureaucracies, the formation of information networks became women's typical practices for survival.

Women had recourse to both apolitical active and passive resistance, e.g., legal appeals, the practice of exchange, female mutual assistance, the use of the body as a resource. The central figures for exchange for “life for life” were elderly women and grandmothers. The “Body to be nothing to pity about” was

one of the mechanisms of the behavior of elderly women, who openly put their lives at risk by traveling in forbidden areas, engaging in disputes, protecting and hiding younger family members, and taking responsibility for themselves (Styazhkina 2017a, 255).

Other scenarios for using the body as a resource can be described as the “body in exchange for one’s own life,” the “body in exchange for food,” the “body in exchange for security.” Depending on the circumstances, these scenarios were used to protect themselves, or relatives, and sometimes –strangers. Sometimes just as a “choice of her own” by a woman was disguised under the concealed violence over women. The occupying forces, the police, local men (neighbors or acquaintances) could be the violators. Women were forced to have sex with men who, under those wartime conditions, had power.

Sometimes sex was used on their enemies or to acquire someone’s property. Women could use their status as influential lovers to punish somebody. The survival experiences during the occupation were diverse. But it served the most important trend – “to survive and preserve her personality” (Styazhkina 2017a, 255–257).

Preserving a person’s life while living under enemy occupation (survival, even existence, the ability to feel joy) was not in line with the Soviet concept of struggle and martyrdom. For this reason, all those who were “not-dead” after the liberation fell under suspicion. Women who perceived themselves as Soviet had an overstated guilt complex. Olena Styazhkina continues to consider the issues of living during the enemy occupation and presenting the experience of women who self-identified as Soviet in her book “Occupation Stigma: Soviet Women in their Self-Perception of the 1940s” (Styazhkina 2019). As Styazhkina mentions in the introduction: “to some extent has become a way to articulate the current war trauma” (Styazhkina 2019, 9), working on getting over her grief that an effort was made to figure out whether we have a right to blame those who remained in German-occupied Donetsk. How can we know how we would have behaved under occupation. Olena Stiazhkina’s research is not about the Nazi occupation or the course of the war but about the scenarios of living through it by creating women’s own stories in the context of Soviet ideology. This book has to do with non-linear experiences, the burden of horror, which was inevitable for the women under enemy occupation.

Three main stories of women during wartime occupation are constructed here as an anthropological interpretation of ego-documents: Memoirs of underground fighter Polina Gubina, a testimony for professional corroboration by Vira Nabokina, a teacher, her colleagues and friends, the investigation files for an engineer in the fishing industry Yelyzaveta Biriukova and the people she saved.

Soviet ideology assumed that there was no alternative for people under occupation but to “heroically die.” Any attempt to survive has become an “aggravating factor,” a stigma in the biography. Polina Gubina felt guilty more than the others because she returned after being imprisoned twice in Nazi jails. This guilt complex before Soviet power runs through her diary. She was more scared of punishment (by the Soviets), making her 7-year old daughter a hostage of her mother’s “not being Soviet enough” behavior. This was a more robust fear than to die at the hands of the Nazis. Ultimately Polina Gubina passed away and made it into the pantheon of Soviet heroes.

Vira Nabokina and Yelyzaveta Biriukova, the other two heroines of the book, struck a symbolic agreement with Soviet power and took part in the formation of the guilt of “non-evacuation,” “work for the enemy,” “indecent behavior” by creating schemes to justify themselves. However, they acquired the helpless victims’ non-prestigious status under Nazi occupation and were suspect, compromised Soviet citizens. Official Soviet questionnaires contained an entry about time spent in the occupied territory until the collapse of the USSR.

One would assume that people who did not consider Soviet power as “native” but imposed by Moscow would stand more of a chance to articulate or describe their experience internally. Yet the stories of the women of the Organization of the Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) show that they also had to bear their common lifelong trauma. Any recollections of the past were dangerous to both themselves and their families.

At the beginning of the 1990^s, participants of the national liberation movement received certificates of rehabilitation. That meant the recovery of a right to memory. But the diverse female experience, especially ones which do not fit into simple black and white stereotypes, remains on the margins, outside of academic and social discourse. Researchers noted the inconsistency between women’s participation in OUN and UPA and a small amount of research on female experiences in the national liberation movement. Olena Petrenko was one of the first to study the theme from the gender and feminist methodological standpoint (Petrenko 2017). She critically rethought the gender aspects of the Nationalist underground and showed the differences in women’s motivations during their cooperation with OUN in the 1930^s and 1940^s. She also studies such controversial topics as women’s roles in the underground as female spies/agents and women in the OUN Security Service.

Marta Havryshko’s research deals with the highly taboo and controversial aspects of the experience in the underground (Havryshko 2017). They have to use their body and sexuality, both in the nationalistic and OUN and UPA formation. She based her study on different sources – OUN and UPA documents, documents from the punitive-repressive bodies, and the memoirs of underground

female fighters. The researcher studied the norms of sexual ethics and the control of female sexuality in the underground, the regulations regarding intimate relationships and the double standards in the sanctions for breaches of the rules, the personal and (semi) family relations among the underground fighters. She also elaborated on the ambiguity of the leader's partner's (wife or consort) social position and the tragic side of motherhood for the Ukrainian nationalist underground. Although the leaders' wives ran significant risks, they were more privileged than the rank and file women of the underground.

Marta Havryshko touches upon one more controversial issue – the violent practices towards “our” women and “alien” women by men in power. This research optics, equipped with contemporary theoretical and methodological instruments, compromises the idealized ideas of the female condition in OUN and UPA and deconstructs the over-glorified image of the insurgents.

Analyzing the testimonies of living underground fighters is one of the best ways to make women visible in the historiography of the nationalist underground. Besides academic publications, Marta Havryshko also regularly publishes passages from the oral histories of former underground fighters. She published her book “Overcoming Silence: Women's Stories of War” in 2018 (Havryshko 2018). She presents 27 biographies of former underground fighters based on interviews with UPA veterans.

The book's subjects got into the underground in many different ways due to various circumstances. Adventure and curiosity attracted some people; some searched for protection, and others followed sisters, brothers, fathers, lovers, or friends. Some women mention ideological and political factors as being pivotal in their decision to join the OUN. Some had suffered under Soviet repression. Hanna Ivanytska was forced to undergo psychiatric treatment in Lviv (Ukraine) and Kazan (Tatarstan, Russia) (Havryshko 2018, 123–129). Most women were sentenced to different terms in the labor camps, and their property was confiscated. Some of their relatives were killed while in the underground or were deported to remote regions of the USSR.

“The book heroines have different experiences, but the common experience of silence on the events they lived through” – Marta Havryshko (Havryshko 2018, 12). It seems that not all of those who were interviewed were ready to talk about these traumatic memories. The “forbidden stories” were the most attractive to the author. The author mentions in the introduction that all the stories presented are adapted for a broad audience. She describes in detail the process of working with her informants on the texts. “The informants knew that their stories would be preserved on audio and used for academic and educational purposes. So, some women felt uneasy to say something “excessive,” “wrong,” or “unnecessary.” Sometimes they asked me to switch the recorder off, to delete

some passages, not to make public some information about them” (Havryshko 2018, 14).

Some misunderstanding in the treatment of the past between the interviewer and the informant can also be seen. The author notes that she was recording interviews “with the special group of women, most of which were OUN members under oath and who shared nationalist ideology by now” (Havryshko 2018, 16). Most likely, the women did not share the researcher’s attitude and did not want to perceive themselves as being the traumatized victims of male violence. They shared the everyday struggles of those in the nationalist underground. Perhaps, the researcher should have more carefully discriminated between their feminist attitudes and their feminist methodology and treated the witnesses more carefully and more tolerantly.

The author explained the former underground fighters’ unwillingness to speak on controversial issues was due to the glorification of the national-liberation movement in Ukrainian society and by the state. She points out that the “comprehensive desire of my informants to stick to a heroic standard was a formidable obstacle for talks on controversial, sensitive issues” (Havryshko 2018, 16). In a way, nationalist values helped these women sustain their hardships, imprisonment, and torture. It might be that these former underground fighters see no reason to change their worldview during the final stage of their lives, to think of themselves and fellow male fighters as anything but heroes.

Consistent political beliefs and values were among the resources of Ukrainian women— as political prisoners fighting for survival under the inhumane conditions of the Stalinist camps. It is the idea behind Oksana Kis’s research, “Ukrainian women in GULAG: survival means victory” (Kis 2017c). She focuses on Ukrainian women political prisoners and their memoirs – both written and oral, published in Ukraine and abroad. More than 120 women are featured in this collection. The majority of the authors of the memoirs’ were young women of Ukrainian origin from Western Ukraine. For most of these women, Soviet power was not “native” but imposed from Moscow, and, consequently, they had no illusions regarding the justice of this power. They did not expect any mercy and saw the camps as a continuation of their fight. That was a mentally different group of prisoners, united based on their national and political identity. They stood better chances to form a community, a system of mutual assistance, and passive resistance.

Oksana Kis’ research has to do with a high level of theory and generalization. Here are the author’s conclusions on the tasks that women managed to achieve in order to survive in captivity: “1) overcoming isolation and information shortages (in order not to get lost among alien people) via communication among Ukrainian women; 2) Adapting to the location (in order to not get lost in alien

surroundings) via the imitation of a “normal way of life”; 3) overcoming monotony and uncertainty of time (in order not to get lost in the time flow) via the reproduction of the traditional time flow, Sunday lethargies, the celebration of holidays; 4) overcoming depression and despair (in order to not lose hope) via female solidarity; 5) the preservation of values (in order to not lose an ethical guide) via regular religious practices; 6) sticking to femininity and female practices (in order to remain a woman) via active care about their outlook; support for Ukrainian identity (in order to stay the Ukrainian – via setting up informal network of cells of compatriots...)” (Kis 2017c, 254–255) The main achievement of this book is reflected the title – to discover the relatively hidden but highly efficient forms of women’s agency.

In this review, the Soviet authorities and GULAG are presented as non-concrete women’s experiences rather than structured repressive institutions. Tamara Vronska’s works are particularly relevant here, although she does not use women’s history or feminist methodologies. Her research on “enemies of the people” families, encircled people, citizens in Nazi-occupied territories lay down the necessary historical and legal framework for the Soviet women’s experience research. The woman is always in the focus of her research, whether it is a peasant’s wife, robbed and exiled prosperous peasant labeled a *kulak*, the Red Army soldier in captivity, a close relative (wife, sister, aunt) of a member of the OUN nationalist underground (Vronska 2013).

Tamara Vronska’s new book, *Povtornyky: pryrecheni branci GULAGu (1948–1953 rr.)* [The Repeaters: The doomed Prisoners of GULAG (1948–1953)] (Vronska 2019), deals with the insufficiently researched question of the category of GULAG prisoners, who were repeatedly punished in 1948 for their former “crimes” to life sentences. They became commonly known as *povtornyky* (the repeaters).

The author pays special attention to the women members of the parties that were rivals with the Bolsheviks during the October Revolution on the political left. Members of organizations that were falsified by Stalinist investigations, as “enemies of the people” the wives and other relatives of repressed people during the Great Terror. Twenty-seven biographies are presented in the book. It is hard to comprehend the absurdity of the situation when an unfairly sentenced person who had served their term and was freed is arrested once again for the exact manipulated charges and sent into lifelong exile without the right of appeal.

There is little mention of the women, who repeatedly served sentences for crimes they never committed: Ukrainian writers Zynayida Tulub and Nadiya Surovtseva, and Institute for the Party History researcher Sofiya Volska, the wife of the USSR People’s Commissariat for Education Volodymyr Zatonsky Olena

Zatonska, Varvara and Pelaheya, the sisters of the Soviet party activist and statesman Panas Liubchenko and many other “unknown” women.

Vronska’s research consists of 11 sections and is structured along all the stages of the search, detection, arrest, captivity, and rehabilitation of different categories of the “particularly dangerous state perpetrators.” That was the way the repeaters were treated in the documents of the Internal Ministry of the USSR. The text is dense, comprehensive, full of legal terminology. The author thoroughly studies each detail of the Soviet bureaucratic system, the behind-the-scene procedure for these people’s persecution. Thanks to ego-documents, it is possible to study the repeaters’ perception of their situations, limiting their capacities and their ways of actions. Vronska’s book helps examine archival documents, investigative cases, communication with witnesses, or studying their memoirs.

Research into the experience of women during the catastrophes of the 20th-century remains very relevant for Ukraine. Such research meets both scientific and social demands. The books reviewed here represent the progress in women’s history made within the last five years, even though this direction remains marginal in an academic sense.

The topics most intensely studied by the Ukrainian historical academia (the Holodomor, Nazi occupation, national-liberation movement) have received the most in-depth theoretical-philosophical grounding. Yet, the books wrote by Oksana Kis and Olena Stiazhkina needs to be mentioned in this context.

Meanwhile, new or oft-neglected topics are elaborated on at the practical level and have to do with searching and studying the sources. The documents that would deal with women’s personal feelings and intimate life details during times of suffering and turmoil are incredibly scarce. Sometimes, there were no possibilities to work on such sources, particularly those involving military service or imprisonment. Even if there is an opportunity to ask the witness questions, you can not always count on a response, as Marta Havryshko’s experience of interviewing underground nationalist participants has shown.

Working on trauma is one of the most widespread methods of studying women’s theatrical experience in the 20th century. At the same time, methodological approaches to the women’s agency are highly productive. They add up positivity to the history of the “dark ages.”

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