

Ukrainian Women on the Frontlines of Cultural Resistance

Conversation with Yuliia Iliukha and Iryna Tsilyk

In Ukraine, artists continue to create despite the ominous echoes of war. Poet and journalist Yuliia Iliukha, along with filmmaker and writer Iryna Tsilyk, share how they transform the experience of conflict into a powerful tool for cultural resistance. Both artists will be featured at the event "Ukraine: Three Years Later," part of the *Lire le monde* series organized by the Bpi on February 27, 2025.



Yuliia Iliukha ©Natascha Reiterer



Iryna Tsilyk ©Oleksandr Boyko

Born in the Kharkiv region, Yuliia Iliukha is both a witness and participant in the war, as a writer and she volunteered to help the Ukrainian army. Through her stories, she aims to "write about the war and tell the world about it." In her latest work, *My Women* (2025), Yuliia Iliukha crafts a mosaic of forty short texts, poignant and intense testimonies of ordinary women live, confronting the Russian invasion of their country. Iryna Tsilyk, filmmaker, writer, and poet, is another leading voice in Ukraine's cultural resistance. Winner of the Directing Award at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival for her documentary *The Earth is Blue as an Orange*, she delves into the impact of war on individuals. Deeply involved in cultural diplomacy, Tsilyk offers a powerful and incisive perspective on the role of art in wartime, all while documenting the lived experiences of the Ukrainian people, both on the front lines and behind them.

Their voices represent a generation of artists for whom creation has become a form of political commitment. They embody an essential cultural resistance and highlight the crucial role of women in this fight.

Interview by Samuel Belaud (Bpi).

How has your work evolved and been influenced by Ukraine's recent history, particularly since 2014 (Maidan, annexation of Crimea), and the new invasion in 2022?

Yuliia Iliukha: I started writing before the war began, in 2011, but my first published book, a collection of short stories, contains some stories about the war. After my first novel about the war, I told myself that I didn't want to write about it anymore. But when war is always in your mind, it's impossible to write about anything else. It so happened that all my books for adults are about the war. Moreover, I strongly believe that the main task of Ukrainian writers now is to write about the war and tell the world about it.

Iryna Tsilyk: I was an active participant in the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity. My husband, who is well-known Ukrainian novelist, has already given over 4 years of his life to military service. And my entire bubble is either defending Ukraine or waiting for those who are at the front. Therefore, my whole life, not just my creative work, has been focused on the theme of war for many years. I sometimes feel hostage to this theme, but the war is still going on...

How is cultural and artistic life maintained in Ukraine today? Are there places, organizations, or initiatives that play a key role in preserving Ukrainian culture?

Yuliia Iliukha: I can only speak about book publishing. Foreigners were and still are surprised that books are still being published and read in Ukraine. Most of the Ukrainian publishing houses are located in Kharkiv, and they temporarily stopped working only in the spring of '22. Now many writers have taken up arms to defend the country, and their voices in the form of new books are very important now.

Iryna Tsilyk: During the war, Ukrainian culture flourished as never before during the independence era. Of course, there are problems and challenges of many kinds. Some areas, such as the film industry, cannot withstand the pressure. But literature, especially poetry, has acquired a new life. However, it's important that many contemporary artists defend Ukraine with weapons in their hands, many of them were killed already, and we already have a new "Executed Renaissance". We lose too many bright artists today.

Art historian Alisa Lozhkina speaks of a "permanent revolution" to describe Ukrainian art's ability to renew itself despite hardships. Does this idea resonate with your own experience?

Yuliia Iliukha : After the full-scale invasion, we all went through 5 stages of acceptance of the inevitable, from denial to the realization that something must be done. It seems to me that this is not just the ability of Ukrainian art, but the ability of the entire Ukrainian people to survive despite the circumstances and overcome them.

Iryna Tsilyk: Ukrainian art mirrors the existence of Ukrainian society and its grueling search for self-identity, despite the years of occupation, Russification and attempts to impose an inferiority complex on us. We are always in a state of struggle and it is very exhausting. Today's war is in fact the war of identities. And yes, we are used to being reborn from the ashes again and again. But I dream of a different, calm life and other topics to reflect about.

What does it mean to be a woman artist in times of war? How do you perceive your/their role in this "cultural resistance"?

Yuliia Iliukha: In the spring of 2022, in Kharkiv, my role was as simple as possible: to find at least some medicines for the Ukrainian army soldiers who were defending the city and to transfer disinfectants to the Kharkiv morgue. Thanks to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, I can now write and tell my stories about the war in Ukraine, including through the prism of women's fates.

Iryna Tsilyk: A "room of her own" for Ukrainian woman artist is often a trench and a weapon today. I'm not one of those brave women, but as a wife of a soldier and a mother of a teenager I have my own challenges today. And my path of resistance is working in the field of cultural diplomacy. Today we all try to be useful where we can.

Have you noticed a change in how your art is perceived since the beginning of the war, both in Ukraine and internationally?

Yuliia Iliukha: Since the main theme of most of my works for adults is war, I now consider it my task to find publishers abroad and translate my latest book into foreign languages. Because in my own experience, meeting foreign readers is the best way of cultural diplomacy and, at the same time, a way to convey important information about the war in Ukraine.

Iryna Tsilyk: I recently learned about an Italian man, for whom my documentary film was one of the reasons why he came to fight for Ukraine. All the years of the war I have seen foreigners discover my country, and often this happens precisely thanks to power of art. And as for Ukraine... Have you seen the overcrowded halls at poetry readings in frontline cities? I have been lucky to see them all these 11 years again and again.

Do you think your works, and those of other Ukrainian women artists, contribute to writing a collective memory of this war? Will the major role played by women in this struggle be remembered?

Yuliia Iliukha: It seems to me that it is too early to talk about preserving the memory of the war, which is now in full swing. The main task of Ukrainians now is to survive and preserve the state, which means to win. Without preserving independence, no talk of preserving memory makes sense.

Iryna Tsilyk: Female perspective is sometimes very important to depict the reality: there are things only a woman can tell or do. However, the puzzle of collective memory now consists of talented reflections and testimonies, regardless of gender of artists, intellectuals etc. The front also doesn't choose gender – everyone who can fight. Modern challenges are erasing some boundaries, this is also a topic for special reflections.