

Combatant prose as an important component of the contemporary Ukrainian literary process

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Combatant Prose. Ego-document. New hero. Decolonization. Ukrainian literature.

Under the influence of the Russian-Ukrainian war, many texts on military themes have appeared in contemporary Ukrainian literature. An important part of these works is combatant prose, books written exclusively by battle participants. This article focuses on the structural features of this prose (genre diffusion and genre variations). Some stylistic characteristics are outlined (for example, the active use of comic forms). These texts are important ego-documents of the time. Modern combatant prose is rooted in the entire tradition of military literature and at the same time expands it with new problems and methods of text creation. In particular, this is a change of “colonized thinking” to “national thinking”, therefore decolonial discourse may be suggested.

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The Russian-Ukrainian war, which has been going on for more than ten years, has significantly impacted the contemporary literary process. Not surprisingly, the most comprehensive catalog of books about this war to date, compiled by researcher Hanna Skorina, includes more than 1,500 titles (2023), and this list is constantly being expanded and supplemented, with the full-scale invasion causing a real “boom” in military-themed works.

Texts by male and female direct participants in the hostilities are an important part of this list, with more than 270 titles. This number gives grounds for discussing a separate literary segment in contemporary writing. Narratives of the military are more descriptively expressive and marked by the emotions they experienced, and therefore inspire greater reader trust because their authors do not need to invent or write down their feelings and sensations in someone else’s voice, and the events taking place in the realities of war often surpass any writer’s imagination. Therefore, in 2019, to specify and emphasize a wide range of works and to facilitate the signaling of the phenomenon, it was proposed to define this layer of texts as a separate subcategory and unite them with the term “combatant prose”:

Combatant prose – is a type of military prose, written exclusively by combatants who continue to fight or are in the military reserve after demobilization. These narratives are characterized by autobiographical nature, factual accuracy, and may contain elements of documentary or memoir writing. Such works belong to different prose genres (both fiction and nonfiction), but they always cover the author’s personal war experience.¹ (Riabchenko 2019, 63)

This distinction may also be relevant in relation to international literary studies, where the term “combatant literature” is occasionally used, for example, Leonard V. Smith (2001), Wood Jamie (2023) etc. Contemporary combatant prose has both traditional and new features, and it reflects important processes in the cultural and social space of Ukraine. This article focuses on its key points, and the generalized observations are based on the present author’s previous research (Riabchenko 2019).

COMBATANT PROSE FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The appearance of authors whose talent was revealed by war is not new to the Ukrainian literary process. The Ukrainian combatant prose of the 20th–21st centuries includes texts that appeared under the influence of the First and Second World Wars, the national liberation movement of 1917–1921 (it is essential to note that the authors were on different sides of the physical and ideological barricades, and therefore the reader has the opportunity to see events and reflections from different points of view). In the late 20th – early 21st centuries, Ukrainians often participated in foreign conflicts either unwillingly or as part of peacekeeping missions or volunteer groups, which expanded the geographical scope of this prose with descriptions of events in Afghanistan, the former Yugoslavia, Transnistria, Georgia, Chechnya, etc. A diachronic analysis of these works makes it possible to identify the main features of Ukrainian combatant literature, trace the common and distinctive features of such prose from different eras, and track its traditional and unique components.

For instance, the works of combatant writers of different times are characterized by the authenticity of the events depicted, reflections on their own war experiences and traumatic impressions, and descriptions of military camaraderie and real life in the trenches without embellishment. Combatants pay considerable attention to victimization, the moral insecurity of veterans in society, society's unwillingness to adequately accept a person with a military background, and the difficulties of returning to peaceful life in general. Many works express pain and fear that all the sacrifices may be in vain, and the heroic deeds of soldiers will be forgotten. It is worth noting that these components are not unique to Ukrainian combatant prose. All of the above is equally found in the texts of world-renowned authors participating in active warfare (e.g., Erich Maria Remarque, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and Kurt Vonnegut). Therefore, Ukrainian combatant prose (particularly contemporary) is a full-fledged part of the world literary process.

The distinctive features of Ukrainian combatant prose are caused by the actual time of writing. Thus, texts by participants in World War I are marked by fatalism and a lack of understanding of its meaning, since stateless Ukrainians had to fight for other people's interests. An exception is the prose of the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen, who saw the war as an opportunity to restore Ukraine's independence. The emergence of the active pro-Ukrainian battle and the subsequent national liberation movements 1917–1921 created the ground for the appearance of conscious fighters, and therefore the combatants of the World War II already had a clear goal and vision of the endpoint of their fight. However, this vision differed ideologically: the texts of Soviet Ukrainian soldiers are marked by Bolshevik dogmatism, and the writer himself (for example, Oles Honchar) did not always realize the antinomian nature of his views. On the other hand, representatives of nationalist Ukrainian non-Soviet military formations, such as the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UIA) and the Galicia Division,² dreamed of an independent Ukraine and were prepared to do anything to bring this goal closer (Yevstakhii Zahachevskyi, Stepan Stebelskyi, Roman Lazurko, Oleksa Konopadskyi). Yevstakhii Zahachevskyi praised the valor of his congeners as follows: “Death burst into laughter! Yet her mad cackle did not frighten the divisionnaires. Even she, that bony monster, recoiled before the courage, the fervor, and the knightly spirit of the Ukrainian soldiers” (2019, 335).

The war unleashed by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan received a minor response in Ukrainian novels such as Vasyl Slapchuk's *Knyha zabuttia* (The book of oblivion, 2013) and Ihor Moiseenko's *Sektor obstrilu "Aisty"* (The sector of fire – “Storks”, 2010), which are vivid examples of the colonial impact on a creative personality. In these works, Ukraine is conceived as a purely geographical marker, and neither national culture and history nor the military tradition have any influence on the main characters, who refer to their stay on foreign territory with the propagandist term “international duty”. In contrast to the “Afghan” texts, the fiction-documentary books by UNA-UPSD (Ukrainian National Assembly – Ukrainian People's Self-Defence) volunteers (Valerii Palchyk, Volodymyr Ushchapovskyi, Valerii Bobrovych, Oleksandr Kaskader), who fought in Transnistria or the Caucasus,

have a clear vision of the enemy, an open national position, and a desire to preserve the integrity of Ukraine and prevent invaders from entering their land.

Thus, considering Ukraine's long history of subjugation, the primary theme of Ukrainian combat texts was the fight for the nation's unity and independence. Importantly, in many conflicts, Ukrainians have faced the same primary enemy – Russia.

GENRE AND STYLE ASPECT

Today's military experience is differently comprehended in combatant texts. Obviously, documentary narratives are the first to respond to extreme events, apart from poetry, as there is a need to record the course of events, experiences, and feelings. Since 2016, there have been active publications of diaries written directly during military service: *Khronika odnoho batalionu* (Chronicle of one battalion, 2016) by Ihor Orel, *370 dniv u kamufliazhi: zapysky artylerysta* (370 days in camouflage: Artilleryman's notes, 2016) by Petro Soltys, *To ATO: Shchodennyk dobrovoltsia* (This is ATO: Volunteer diary, 2016) by Dmytro Yakornov, *Zhyttia PS* (PS life, 2016) by Valeria Burlakova, and others. If we use the terminology of Pierre Nora (2014), these texts should be described as important ego-documents because despite their self-descriptiveness and subjectivity, they contain historical facts. The main intentions of a combatant's diary are to record the memory of their personal and fellow soldiers' daily life, as well as to convey the truth of an eyewitness to avoid falsification in the future.

Often, warriors create diary notes in their phones while in the trenches, and organize them after demobilization. Such processing of the text leads to the combination of journalist and artistic styles of speech and a more expressive story (for example, *Voiennyi shchodennyk (2014–2015)* [War diary (2014–2015), 2019] by Oleksandr Mamalui). Moreover, it has an author's preface and epilogue that are not very typical for this genre. These parts of the book modify the temporal and spatial features of a traditional diary, characterized by the absence of retrospectives, as the recording is essentially immediate. Thus, the combatant diary combines features of different genres.

Many combatant documentary narratives belong to the genre of memoirs. For example: *Zvit za serpen '14* (Report from August '14, 2017) by Andrii Sova, *Savurmohyla. Viiskovi shchodennyky* (Savur-grave: War diaries, 2017) by Maksym Muzyka and Andrii Pal'val', *Ilovaivskyi shchodennyk* (Ilovaivsk diary, 2016) by Roman Zinenko, etc. These texts have a particular temporality: unlike classical examples of the genre, which are characterized by a significant time distance between events and the moment of their written recording, the memoirs of today's fighters are created almost immediately after demobilization. The reasons include the aspiration to narrate the trauma, the desire to avoid distortions that may appear over time, and, perhaps most importantly, memorialize their brothers- and sisters-in-arms. Memoirs are also characterized by genre diffusion. Thus, in the foreword to the *Notatnyk mobilizovanoho* (Mobilized man's notebook, 2020) the author Nazar Rozlutskyi writes that he has combined journalistic reportage and personal reflections in the book. At the same time, the title refers to a "notebook", while the narrative structure is close to a diary. In addition, the material is divided into chapters, each with a poetic epigraph.

Apart from being a significant ego-document of the time, these texts fulfill another important function: they deprive society of the propagandistic Soviet perceptions of war that have been cultivated for a long time and are deeply rooted in the collective consciousness. Even after Ukraine regained its independence (and before the full-scale Russian invasion, neocolonial discourse was also quite significant in its area), old military mythologies had a significant impact on the perception of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Reliable descriptions of current events, aiming to be free of idealization or special embellishment of the story (including at the linguistic level), moralizing, pretentious patriotism, and didacticism, destroy these mythologies and allow the reader to see the true picture, to independently form a holistic view of the price of freedom from many stories, to get rid of the romanticization of the image of the defender and, accordingly, to be able to perceive and understand it in the future adequately.

No less significant and quantitatively filled is the segment of fiction. Combatants use smaller forms (short stories, novellas) and larger ones (novels) in almost equal measure. It is important to note that a significant part of these publications are works by combatant writers whose talent was revealed by the war because before this, they had not held professions related to fiction writing. Today such authors as Vitalii Zapeka, Martin Brest, Serhii Serhiiiovych “Saigon”, Valerii Puzik, and Andrii Kyrychenko are well-known and recognizable in the contemporary literary space, and their works have won many literary awards.

Fiction by combatants is mostly a realistic narrative that describes lived experience. The authors may remove themselves from direct participation in the narrative, using the function of an omniscient extra-textual narrator, the characters in these works are often collective images, and the events did not necessarily happen to the writer personally, but are authentic (*Karateli* [The punishers, 2018] by Vlad Yakushev, *Liudy viiny* [People of war, 2018] by Borys Hoshko, *Monolit* [Monolith, 2019] by Valerii Puzik). The authors can also use first-person narrative, acting as the main character of the work. In this case, we can talk about the transformation of the classical genre of belles-lettres (novelized) biography into a romanticized, or rather fictionalized, autobiography: they are documentary in content but fictional in form (such as Pavlo Belyansky’s to *Bytys ne mozhna vidstupyty* [Fight cannot retreat, 2024], Martin Brest’s *Pikhota* [Infantry, 2017a], Vasyl Palamarchuk’s *Viiskovy nepotrib* [Military junk, 2019], etc.).

An important point in contemporary combatant prose is the comprehension of individual formation and the acquisition of a new self-awareness. An example is the novel *Slidy na dorozh* (Traces on the road, 2018) by Valerii Markus. This is a confessional and autobiographical narrative where the protagonist morally evolves from an indifferent person, who lived without a particular life goal and acted according to circumstances, to a Ukrainian warrior and citizen, who understands what he is fighting for. The easy and simple narrative style allows readers to directly try on such a soldier’s experience themselves, to correlate their own understandings with those of other people, because the process of national self-establishment does not only occur through direct participation in hostilities, it is characteristic of civilians as well.

Consequently, the symbolic integrity of public views and beliefs is created, regardless of where a person is. In this way, individual positions and experiences form a collective experience, which is very important in the conditions of defending the country's independence.

A distinctive feature of contemporary combatant prose is using a wide range of comic means. Such diversity and intensity were not observed in the texts of soldiers-writers in previous wars (both Ukrainians and writers of other countries). This includes a humorous depiction of military everyday life and various situations, irony and self-irony, satire and sarcasm. The intention of writing a work can be purely humorous (*ATO v Seredzemi* [ATO in the middle lands, 2017b] by Martin Brest) or a rehabilitation work exploring psychological and physical traumas (*Zhyttia pislia 16:30* [Life after 4:30, 2018] by Oleksandr Tereshchenko). Most often, however, the comic is interwoven into the overall narrative and is an integral part of it, along with other means of textual creation. It can be assumed that this humorous intensity is caused by a conscious or unconscious desire to narrativize traumatic experiences. After all, the works of many combatants in the past appeared much later than the events described in them. For example, Erich Maria Remarque's novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929; Eng. trans. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929) was published only nine years after the end of the war. Today, this period is minimal.

There are also texts of combatant prose by women authors, although they are fewer in number than the narratives by men. According to the Ministry of Defense, there are currently almost 70,000 women in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, including 47,200 servicewomen, and 4,000 on the front line (Ministry of Defense of Ukraine cited in Kalmykova 2024). The texts of female combatants often do not show a traditionally (or stereotypically) "feminine" viewpoint. For example, they are not marked by "greater intimacy" or "emotionality" than male texts, and do not focus on "women's issues" (one exception is Valeria Burlakova's book *Zhyttia PS*, which can be classified as a diary-requiem for a deceased beloved). Neither are they explicitly feminist, the themes of their struggle for equal rights are not the primary focus, and it is possible to speak more about their implicit presence. However, it is worth noting that a combination of nationalist and feminist tendencies is common in Ukrainian society. In particular, this is confirmed by the research of Marta Bohachevsky-Homyak (1995) and Tetiana Zhurzhenko (2011). As is the case for men in the military, for women fighters writing becomes both a therapeutic and commemorative practice, the main intention always being to record the memory of their brothers-in-arms (many of whom died), as well as an attempt to convey the truth about the war to the general public. These include *Pozyvnyi Cassandra. Lito 2014* (Call sign 'Cassandra': Summer 2014, 2019) by Oksana Chorna, *Shchodennyk nelehalnoho soldata* (Diary of an illegal soldier, 2020) by Olena Bilozerska, *Liubov na linii vohniu* (Love on the firing line, 2016) by Vasyliisa Mazurchuk (Trofymovych), and others.

CONCLUSION

Combatant prose is an important component of today's Ukrainian literary process. We can talk about its affinity with the works of Ukrainian combatants of previ-

ous conflicts, while at the same time, contemporary works expand the militaristic tradition with new genre modifications. The short time distance between being at war and the publication of the book affects the stylistic characteristics of combatant texts (a significant share of humorous components). The presence of women's authors is also growing compared to previous years.

Combatant prose reveals important changes in the cultural space of Ukraine and in the minds of its citizens: colonized thinking is being replaced by civic and national awareness, and the image of the Ukrainian soldier is replacing the previously imposed image of the victim from the collective imagination. Therefore, we can speak of this prose as an important nation-building factor and part of the process of decolonization in Ukraine.

NOTES

- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Ukrainian are by the present author.
- ² When discussing the Galician Division, we cannot overlook the controversy surrounding its complex history as part of the German army during World War II (14. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS; see e.g. Khromeychuk 2015). For example, Timothy Snyder, in his book *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (2003), gives a negative assessment of some of the activities of the division soldiers. Not all historians in Ukraine approve of the glorification of the division (e.g., Dorobovich 2021). In my research, I rely on the conclusions of the Nuremberg Tribunal, on the findings of the Deschênes Commission in Canada (1987) and Sir Thomas Hetherington in Great Britain (1989).

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