



Oskar-Halecki-Vorlesung

2022

OLESYA KHROMEYCHUK

# Choosing Freedom in Ukraine: Historical Roots and Contempo- rary Meaning

Jahresvorlesung des Leibniz-Instituts für  
Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Europa (GWZO)



Leibniz-Institut für Geschichte und Kultur  
des östlichen Europa e.V. (GWZO)

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rary Meaning

Olesya Khromeychuk

Edited by  
Maren Röger

SANDSTEIN

### **Olesya Khromeychuk**

Olesya Khromeychuk is a historian and writer. She currently serves as director of the Ukrainian Institute London. She has taught the history of East-Central Europe at the University of Cambridge, University College London, the University of East Anglia, and King's College London. Her research explores the history of Eastern Europe, with a particular focus on Ukraine in the twentieth century, and touches on such controversial topics as collaboration in the Second World War and gender perspectives on militarisation and political violence. Khromeychuk has written for the *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Der Spiegel*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Prospect*, and the *New Statesman*. She is the author of *'Undetermined' Ukrainians: Post-War Narratives of the Waffen SS 'Galicia' Division* (2013) and *The Death of a Soldier Told by His Sister* (2022).

### **Oskar Halecki (1891–1973)**

Born in fin-de-siècle Vienna as a Pole of Croatian origin, Oskar Halecki went on to become one of the leading specialists in interwar Poland on medieval and modern history. At the International Congress of Historians in Brussels in 1923, he shaped the first European-wide debate on the design of the newly emerging historical sub-discipline of Russian and Eastern European History. Forced into emigration in 1939, he founded the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America in New York in 1942, which became the centre of Polish historiography in exile during the Cold War. While living in the United States, Halecki developed his meso-regional historical concept of East-Central Europe, and published his seminal books *The Limits and Divisions of European History* (1950) and *Borderlands of Western Civilization: A History of East Central Europe* (1952).

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# A Comprehensive Scholar and Gifted Facilitator: Olesya Khromeychuk's Work on Ukraine<sup>1</sup>

**Maren Röger**

At this moment in history, when Western Europe has revealed the full extent of its ignorance of both Ukraine and Russia, Olesya Khromeychuk has become the woman of the hour. She has been one of the most sought-after voices since 24 February 2022, when Russia extended its attack on Ukraine, which had begun in 2014, to the entirety of the country, a move that has escalated the conflict to a full-scale and exceedingly brutal war. In English-language media, from CNN to the *New York Times*, Khromeychuk has become one of the most notable speakers on this topic. She has worked tirelessly to explain to listeners and readers the historical background of the war and informed them about present-day Ukraine, the war, and its consequences for Europe, always finding the right words for the right audiences, in line with their prior knowledge. In the academic arena, too, she has risen to become one of the most prominent experts on Ukraine's history and present. Reading her list of public presentations since February 2022 is enough to make you feel dizzy: she has spoken frequently all over Europe but has also toured Australia and Japan. Her academic knowledge provides a firm foundation for her interpretation of the Russian invasion as a 'war against Europe',<sup>2</sup> and she has repeatedly sought to clarify this concept, holding up a mirror to the academic and non-academic communities she addresses. She is analytically sharp, clear in her choice of words, and a gifted narrator who does not separate intellect from affect—a long-standing tradition in Western academia and culture. She has the courage and confidence to think and formulate herself integrally.

Given Khromeychuk's Europe-wide, even global commitments, we at the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe considered ourselves very lucky

<sup>1</sup> Leticia dos Santos helped in preparing this introductory article by researching publications by and about Olesya Khromeychuk, by transforming my first bilingual manuscript into English, and by formatting the text according to the series guidelines. Gaëlle Fisher, as always, gave valuable feedback on the content and language of the text, while Simon Coll provided additional language editing.

<sup>2</sup> Olesya Khromeychuk, "My Ukrainian brother was killed on the frontline—he was right when he said this is a European war", *Metro*, 25 February 2022 <https://metro.co.uk/2022/02/25/my-ukrainian-brother-was-killed-on-the-frontline-16164342/?fbclid=IwAR2TDPzx1fMjajYrhGa6vtPojSo6qqBHcqZo5ttd9kXjk7qlpWwnZLfx9o0> [accessed 4 July 2023].

when she agreed to give our annual Oskar Halecki Lecture in 2022. Halecki himself was a figure well known for his crossing of the boundaries between disciplines, countries, and contexts. He was a researcher of Central and Eastern Europe (without, obviously, using those terms) who began his career in the region before leaving for the USA. One of the central figures of his time, and a scholar who greatly advanced our understanding of the history of the region, he was somebody who made a difference—a quality he shares with our distinguished speakers at the Halecki Lectures, all of whom are influential thinkers from the academic, political, and cultural spheres.<sup>3</sup>

Olesya Khromeychuk is from all these realms, a 'crosser of frontiers' on various levels and somebody who most definitely makes a difference. Her life's journey has taken her through several countries, through academic and non-academic cultures, and has given her considerable experience of the wider world's ignorance about Ukraine. It has also taken her through far more painful territory, as in 2017 she lost her brother, who had been fighting against Russia in the Luhansk region of Ukraine. All this has made her ideally suited to reaching Western European audiences with her words. In particular, she is in a strong position to counter the prevalence of 'Westplaining', a phenomenon recently identified in public discourse whereby Western commentators are given greater weight in discussions of Ukraine, regardless of their level of expertise, to the exclusion of voices from Ukraine itself, who are dismissed as more emotional than rational.<sup>4</sup>

Born in 1983 in Lviv, then still part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Khromeychuk spent her childhood in Ukraine. She experienced the country's independence, as she recounts in the lecture reprinted here, as well as the economically and socially trying years of its early transformation in the 1990s. Her family then emigrated to the United Kingdom, where she studied Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London, and then Russian and East European Studies at the University of Oxford. In the following years, she completed a PhD at University College London on the post-war narratives of the Waffen-SS 'Galicia' Division.<sup>5</sup> Her thesis topic touches on an aspect of Ukrainian history that remains acutely controversial. John-Paul Himka, one of the doyens of Ukrainian historiography, has praised her contextualisation of the 'Galicia' Division; according to Himka, she 'dances brilliantly in a minefield'.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Kate Brown has lauded her for challenging 'long-held assumptions' and contributing to 'greater accuracy and complexity' in work in this area.<sup>7</sup>

3 For the list of speakers, see <https://www.leibniz-gwzo.de/de/wissenstransfer/oskar-halecki-vorlesung>

4 Olesya Khromeychuk, "Why the West underestimated Ukraine", *The New Statesman*, 20 December 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2022/12/the-west-underestimated-ukraine-war> [accessed 4 July 2023].

5 Khromeychuk, Olesya, *Undetermined' Ukrainians. Post-War Narratives of the Waffen SS 'Galicia' Division*, Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2013.

6 Himka, John-Paul, in *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* Volume III, 1 (2016), pp. 179–181.

7 Brown, Kate, in *Slavic Review* 74, 1 (2015), pp. 153–156.

The subject of the 'Galicia' Division is of considerable importance to Ukrainian society, which continues to discuss the ambiguities of the Second World War with great emotion. The part played by some Ukrainians in the perpetration of crimes against their Jewish neighbours remains a challenging topic of discussion. But it is also relevant to the general historiography of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and post-war memory in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, according to Khromeychuk, there has been resistance to her choice of research topic. More than once, she has been advised to broaden her focus rather than concentrate solely on Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> In her recent work, she has shed light on these hierarchies that exist in the academic study of Central and Eastern Europe, hierarchies that are not only implicit but also quite openly expressed.

In the wake of the war of aggression against Ukraine, many researchers in the field of Eastern European area studies have begun to reflect on their own perspectives on the region—though it should be added that this is not the first debate about such assumptions, at least in the German-speaking world.<sup>9</sup> In many places, there are now ongoing debates on whether Eastern European history and Slavic studies have been too focused on the imperial centre of the Russian Empire/Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, this is a conversation about research foci, and therefore also the value of the research questions typically pursued by scholars. Khromeychuk is one of the strongest voices in this debate in the English-language research: 'What we need is a permanent alteration—de-colonisation, de-imperialisation—of our knowledge.'<sup>11</sup> This is also because she sees a direct connection between 'mental maps' and the threats posed to real borders: 'If Ukraine does not exist on these mental maps, its existence on the actual map of the world will continue to be at risk.'<sup>12</sup>

Following the completion of her PhD and a decade of teaching at a number of British universities, including the University of Cambridge, University College London, the University of East Anglia, and King's College London, Khromeychuk became increasingly involved in public outreach work. Since September 2020, she has been the director of the Ukrainian Institute London, an institution dedicated to the wide-ranging popularisation of the history, culture, and language of Ukraine. Public-facing discussions, lectures, and educa-

**8** British Association for Slavonic & East European Studies, "Dr Olesya Khromeychuk (Ukrainian Institute London), Keynote Lecture at British Association for Slavonic & East European Studies, 8 April 2022", published 20 April 2022, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/CJthJb1tKOY> [accessed 4 July 2023].

**9** In the 1990s, there was an intensive discussion among German historians on the relationship between the history of Eastern Europe and 'general' history, which was often equated with the still-dominant national history. The debate started with a controversial essay by Jörg Baberowski: "Das Ende der Osteuropäischen Geschichte: Bemerkungen zur Lage einer geschichtswissenschaftlichen Disziplin." *Osteuropa*, vol. 48, no. 8/9, 1998, pp. 784–99.

**10** The situation seems to differ in German academia. While, at many universities, Eastern European history has often been (and still is) dominated by historians focusing on Russian/Soviet history, there are research institutes with a specific focus on Central and Eastern Europe, among them GWZO.

**11** Olesya Khromeychuk, "Where is Ukraine?", RSA, 13 June 2022, <https://www.thersa.org/comment/2022/06/where-is-ukraine> [accessed 4 July 2023].

**12** Ibid.

tional courses all form part of the Institute's programme. Since the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine, the Institute has broadened its online learning offerings.<sup>13</sup> In this role as leader of an organisation aimed at reaching a broader, non-scholarly audience, Khromeychuk is able to draw on all her networks and competencies in both Ukrainian and British academia, as well as in the literary world.<sup>14</sup> Cultural creation in general, but especially literature and theatre, is a vital part of Khromeychuk's work as a facilitator, and one she uses with virtuosity to get her message across.

In addition, since 2010, Khromeychuk has led a theatre company that focuses on documentary theatre. The company's work is aimed at correcting the widespread neglect of Ukrainian culture, an omission she has observed even in Slavic Studies, which are often taught in a Russo-centric way.<sup>15</sup> Few, for example, know the literature of Taras Shevchenko, Lesia Ukrainka, Ivan Franko, Olha Kobylianska, Maik Iohansen, Mykola Kulish, Vasyl Stus, Lina Kostenko, Oksana Zabuzhko, Boris Khersonskyi, Serhy Zhadan, Olena Stiazhkina, or Iryna Shuvalova, 'not because it is not worthy, but because its existence has been systematically undermined through political repression, as well as scarce linguistic knowledge and chronic lack of funding for translations'.<sup>16</sup>

Khromeychuk's theatrical work started with adaptations of Ukrainian classics. She then moved on to produce documentary pieces on the Holodomor and the Maidan protests, before the company attracted considerable attention with a self-written satire about the experiences of Eastern European migrants in the UK.<sup>17</sup> The disruption that migration can cause came across in a humorous way in the 2014 performance of this piece. Robin Ashenden, journalist and former editor of the *Central and Eastern European London Review*, phrased it as follows: 'About the company's energy and joie de vivre, there can be no question, and the amount of Ukrainians laughing in the audience suggested that many points about émigré life in Britain were being slyly nailed.'<sup>18</sup> But experiences of migration are present in Khromeychuk's work not only in this light-hearted form, but also in her acknowledgements of the sadness and despair it can bring about. This is the case, for example, when she describes her own search for rootedness as a migrant in Britain,

**13** Ukrainian Institute London, "10 Things Everyone Should Know About Ukraine", Ukrainian Institute London, <https://ukrainianinstitute.org.uk/10-things-everyone-should-know-about-ukraine/> [accessed 4 July 2023].

**14** Olesya Khromeychuk, Uilleam Blacker, "Foreword: Ukrainian Women Poets. How can faith, hope, and love live in a space of pain", *The Continental Literary Magazine*, 2 June 2022, [https://continentalmagazine.com/2022/06/02/ukrainian-women-poets-foreword/?fbclid=IwAR01xhvYaDnLx3IY6fur8ofQxLvr8rOQw7k4s62YR12E9NFg\\_mUZ-goDX-0](https://continentalmagazine.com/2022/06/02/ukrainian-women-poets-foreword/?fbclid=IwAR01xhvYaDnLx3IY6fur8ofQxLvr8rOQw7k4s62YR12E9NFg_mUZ-goDX-0) [accessed 4 July 2023].

**15** Olesya Khromeychuk, "Laat je niks wijsmaken, dit is een Europese oorlog", *NRC*, 3 June 2022, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/06/03/laat-je-niks-wijsmaken-dit-is-een-europese-oorlog-a4132195> [accessed 12 July 2023].

**16** Olesya Khromeychuk, "Where is Ukraine?", *RSA*, 13 June 2022, <https://www.thersa.org/comment/2022/06/where-is-ukraine> [accessed 12 July 2023].

**17** Olesya Khromeychuk, "Molodyi Teatr London", <https://www.olesyakhromeychuk.com/theatre-curated-projects> [accessed 14 July 2023].

**18** Robin Ashenden, "Robin Ashenden reviews 'Bloody East Europeans' by Uilleam Blacker and Molodyi Teatr", *THE THEATRE TIMES*, 11 June 2014, <https://thetheatretimes.com/robin-ashenden-reviews-bloody-east-europeans-by-uilleam-blacker-and-molodyi-teatr/> [accessed 14 July 2023].

as well as her attempts to connect with her culture of origin; or when she reflects on her brother, who, having lived in the Netherlands for a long time, decided to join the Ukrainian army and defend his country's territorial integrity.<sup>19</sup> Part of her brother's story, moreover, was the xenophobia he experienced in the Netherlands.

Khromeychuk's most recent work, *The Death of a Soldier Told by His Sister*, was published in 2021. Reflecting on this book, she writes, 'I would have preferred not to have had to write this book, to have had no subject matter to write about.'<sup>20</sup> The book is about the death of her brother, Volodymir Pavliv, who was killed in 2017 on Ukraine's eastern front, in the Luhansk region. In 2015, following Russia's first invasion of Ukraine (in violation of international law), he volunteered for the army. By that time, he had not lived in the country for decades. Khromeychuk's book is an autopsy of her pain, her mourning process, her struggle to understand her brother, her feelings of strangeness; it is simultaneously powerful, analytically sharp, and intimate. She reminds us in a compelling way of the immense cost of war, of this war that has been ignored by most of the world, although it has been going on since 2014 and, even prior to the full-scale invasion in 2022, had led to the loss of over 14,000 human lives.<sup>21</sup> The book offers far more than this, however: it is also a reflection on migration, on the work of a historian. Until 2014, she writes, studying 'the worst of humanity' was merely her job;<sup>22</sup> then the war struck her closer to home, later even claiming the life of a loved one. In the book, she reflects on how studying and experiencing the war and its losses also shattered her professional identity. That she explores all these layers of experience, this anguish felt on so many levels, the ambivalence of the grieving process—that is what makes *The Death of a Soldier*, in my opinion, a radical book, and one of the must-reads of the twenty-first century.

Equally indicative of European hierarchies of knowledge, is the publication history of the book itself. The first edition was published by ibidem in 2021, in a series called 'Ukrainian Voices'. This series was edited by Andreas Umland, an expert on Ukraine responsible for shaping much of the existing Western European public discourse on this subject. It was print-on-demand only. Even after years of war in Ukraine, after thousands upon thousands of deaths, interest in stories from this country immediately bordering the European Union remained limited. It took the escalation of the conflict into a full-scale war of aggression for this individual story of loss, and the story of Ukraine in general, to be heard. In 2022, a more prominent publisher took an interest in the book. A revised edition was

**19** Khromeychuk, Olesya, *The Death of a Soldier Told By His Sister*, London: Monoray, 2022.

**20** Khromeychuk, Olesya, *A Loss: The Story of a Dead Soldier Told by His Sister*, Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2021 (first edition), p. 9.

**21** Numbers according to United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "Conflict-related civilian casualties in Ukraine", 27 January 2022, [https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Conflict-related%20civilian%20casualties%20as%20of%2031%20December%202021%20%28rev%2027%20January%202022%29%20corr%20EN\\_0.pdf](https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Conflict-related%20civilian%20casualties%20as%20of%2031%20December%202021%20%28rev%2027%20January%202022%29%20corr%20EN_0.pdf) [accessed 5 September 2023].

**22** Olesya Khromeychuk, "What it's like to lose a loved one in a war that's live on social media", Daily Mail, 1 September 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-11165655/Olesya-heard-worst-brother-fighting-Ukraine-Facebook.html> [accessed 12 July 2023].

published by Monoray, an imprint of the British-based Octopus Publishing Group, which is known for the wide range and high quality (in terms of both content and design) of its titles. The new edition included a foreword by Philippe Sands, a prominent Professor of International Law who had written the extremely successful *East West Street: On the Origins of 'Genocide' and 'Crimes Against Humanity'*. The release of a revised edition by another publisher has brought the book new attention. Henry Marsh, bestselling author of *Do No Harm*, considers it 'a deeply moving and beautifully written account of her brother's death fighting the Russian invasion of Ukraine. If you read only one book about the war, this is the one to read.'<sup>23</sup> Philippe Sands, meanwhile, describes it as 'a remarkable, intimate memoir. Not history, but now. Not distant, but proximate. Not imaginary, but real.'<sup>24</sup> And Ukrainian author Andrey Kurkov, in his introduction to the new edition, states, 'Olesya's history reflects the history of modern Ukraine with its problems, hopes, victories and losses... It does not focus on numbers and dates, but on human experience in a country that has found itself in a state of war.'<sup>25</sup>

As important as Khromeychuk believes it to be to pay attention to Ukraine's experiences of the ongoing war, which she advocates on many levels, in her recent essays she has warned against reducing the country and its identity to the war. 'No, Putin Didn't Awaken Ukraine', she insists in a recent piece in the *New York Times*, in which she emphasises the country's long struggle for freedom and sovereignty.<sup>26</sup> She states, 'For Ukraine, 2014 was a year of tragedies that changed everything: the killing of protesters during the Maidan Revolution; Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea; the start of the Donbas war in the East. Yet these events also deepened Ukrainian civic identity and accelerated the maturation of Ukraine's democratic culture in ways that continue today, even as Russian rockets and bombs fall on its cities.'<sup>27</sup> The West, she stresses, should stop making the mistake of falling for propaganda narratives, because 'the war entered our safe homes long ago as misinformation fed to us by the Kremlin and tolerated by the international community, as economic blackmail that floated through the gas pipes, as indifference fuelled by fear and ignorance'.<sup>28</sup> In particular, culture and history have repeatedly been used as propaganda weapons.<sup>29</sup>

**23** Olesya Khromeychuk, "The Death of a Soldier Told by His Sister", <https://www.olesyakhromeychuk.com/publications/the-death-of-a-soldier-told-by-his-sister> [accessed 14 July 2023].

**24** Ibid.

**25** Ibid.

**26** Olesya Khromeychuk, "Putin says Ukraine doesn't exist. That's why he's trying to destroy it.", *The New York Times*, 1 November 2022, [https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/01/opinion/ukraine-war-national-identity.html?fbclid=IwAR04TFm9i-zXodgCUVEdj5O0dgHXcnJtIV1D\\_tIFCw6nK7eTI06ZBPa0bBI](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/01/opinion/ukraine-war-national-identity.html?fbclid=IwAR04TFm9i-zXodgCUVEdj5O0dgHXcnJtIV1D_tIFCw6nK7eTI06ZBPa0bBI) [accessed 14 July 2023].

**27** Olesya Khromeychuk, "The Nation Ukraine Has Become", *The New York Review of Books*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2022/03/25/the-nation-ukraine-has-become/> [accessed 14 July 2023].

**28** Khromeychuk, "Laat je niks wijsmaken, dit is een Europese oorlog".

**29** Olesya Khromeychuk, "Wir kämpfen für das Recht, eine Zukunft zu haben", *Der Spiegel*, 23 March 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/olesya-khromeychuk-ueber-ukraine-krieg-wir-kaempfen-fuer-das-recht-eine-zukunft->

Khromeychuk's narrative of Ukrainian identity formation and conceptions of freedom is also the subject of her Oskar Halecki Lecture, which begins with the Cossacks but places a clear emphasis on contemporary events. It is important to facilitate an in-depth understanding of this history, she argues, because 'glorifying Ukrainian resilience without understanding its roots is another form of misunderstanding the country and its people. The root of that resilience is the intolerance of imperialist oppression, both historic and recent.'<sup>30</sup>

Khromeychuk relates these concepts of Ukrainian freedom, mirrored in her own history, with a courageous willingness to be personal, even emotional. In this way, she renders accessible the history of a country of which there is hardly any knowledge in parts of the West, and thus achieves her goal as an educator of the general public. The title of her lecture, 'Choosing Freedom in Ukraine', reflects its role as a treatise on historical and contemporary Ukrainian concepts of freedom, and at the same time as a political appeal—an appeal that must be made again and again in order to counter war fatigue, a phenomenon that Khromeychuk has also described clearly (and somewhat clairvoyantly) as a 'weapon of war aimed at those who are not under fire'.<sup>31</sup> 'In 2022', she wrote, 'the world had only discovered Ukraine, and is already tired'.<sup>32</sup>

'Freedom in Ukraine'—may this part of Khromeychuk's title soon become a reality.

zu-haben-a-b79bbe18-10cc-4b70-839f-252563f77275?utm\_source=dlvr.it&utm\_medium=twitter#ref=rss [accessed 12 July 2023].

**30** Khromeychuk, "Where is Ukraine?".

**31** Olesya Khromeychuk, "In Ukraine, we are all carrying phantom pain", Prospect, 16 May 2023, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/europe/ukraine/61414/in-ukraine-we-are-all-carrying-phantom-pain> [accessed 12 July 2023] "Putin's regime is banking on western Ukraine fatigue", Prospect, 17 September 2022, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/60105/putins-regime-is-banking-on-western-ukraine-fatigue> [accessed 5 September 2023].

**32** Ibid.

# Choosing Freedom in Ukraine: Historical Roots and Contemporary Meaning

## **Olesya Khromeychuk**

I was a very lucky child. My TV had only three channels and half of the time even those needed encouragement to broadcast smoothly. But I had something much better than a TV: a window in our old flat. The view from my window opened onto a shabby square with a kitschy fountain complete with disco lights and terrible music. Across the road from the fountain was a somewhat terrifying soviet hotel. It bore the name of the city in which it stood—my hometown—Lviv, but looked nothing like the city itself. A concrete, eight-storied box with little uniform windows lined up in long rows, it was so out of place among the Austro-Hungarian tenements with their exquisitely decorated balconies and doorways.

I grew up in one such tenement. The beautiful face of a woman with an unfurled head shawl adorned our entrance. Each time I pushed the heavy metal door open on my way home, I looked up at her face, hoping I would be pretty like she was when I grew up. If you stood facing the beautiful woman above my door and turned your back to the shabby square with the fountain, the window immediately to your left would be that very window that was much better than a TV. I could sit on the windowsill together with my cat for hours and stare out. Not because I had a liking for disco lights or soviet architecture. It was because between the square and the hotel there was one of the main roads leading to the centre of the city. The road that history walked.

I could literally see history pass by my window. In the late 1980s, I watched crowds with red flags during Victory Day parades. They moved unenthusiastically past the hotel 'Lviv' towards Lenin Avenue, the central street of Lviv. Similarly to the hotel that looked nothing like the city it was named after, the name of the leader of the Bolsheviks was totally foreign for an avenue that started with the famous fin-de-siècle Habsburg Opera Theatre and ended with a monument to Adam Mickiewicz—a Polish Romantic poet whose verse inspired anti-imperial revolutions.

Lenin Avenue had suffered through the years of Nazi occupation as Adolf Hitler Platz. But that was before my time. In the late 1980s, my cat and I watched soviet tanks wheeled out to demonstrate the might of the military, already crumbling but like much else in the USSR pretending not to, pass our house towards the Opera Theatre to then half-heartedly roll along Lenin Avenue. The annual ritual of celebrating victory over Nazism was in



fact a way to reinforce communism in a country that kept trying to shake it off. I didn't join those parades. My parents were not members of the Communist Party and had no obligation to play the game of being 'good communists'. They paid for it in reduced career prospects, but it was worth it. Not being a member of the Communist Party for them meant exercising relative freedom in a society mostly deprived of freedom. For me, this meant that I could watch this bit of history from the safety of our home.

The next time history went past my window, I was able to join it. In 1991, my family and everyone we knew, walked along the very road sandwiched between the fountain and the hotel on our way to the Opera Theatre. There were two major differences between this march and the Victory Day parades I had watched through the window: we were waving blue-and-yellow flags, and the avenue we were marching towards was no longer named after Lenin. It was now Svoboda Avenue. *Svoboda* is Ukrainian for freedom.

## Practicing freedom

The archetypal image of a Ukrainian that springs to mind is often that of a Cossack. A rowdy, flamboyantly dressed, moustached and dishevelled vagrant. Slightly scary, but mostly charming. A wild adventurer, a people's hero, a lovable rogue. This romantic view of the Cossacks has been cultivated for centuries. Ilya Repin's 'Zaporozhian Cossacks write to the Sultan of Turkey' (1844–1930) depicts Ukrainian Cossacks penning a rude response to a demand from Mehmed IV, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire to submit to his rule in 1676. Those Cossacks who don't have pipes in their mouths are sporting a smug grin; their eyes sparkle with rebelliousness and mischief.

The episode depicted on Repin's canvas is most likely a legend. But legends can be more powerful than facts. The letter supposedly composed by the Cossacks, is full of profanities and insults. It is an example of bad diplomacy, but it is also an example of insubordination to foreign rule. And that is what guaranteed the longevity of the legend: a version of Repin's painting could be found on the Maidan during the protests in 2013–14, Ukrainian soldiers replicated it in photos from the front in the Donbas, while in 2021, Ukrainian MPs who had been sanctioned by Russia posed for a photo in the Parliament dressed in Cossack outfits, referencing Repin's composition. The difference was that unlike in Repin's painting, there was a woman and a Crimean Tatar among the MPs, and the letter was addressed not to the Sultan, but to Putin.

History is full of examples of Ukrainian defiance in the face of foreign oppression. It is romanticised and passed on through art, literature and oral history. My own great-grandfather taught me to sing. His favourite song was about a freedom-loving Cossack who won't be constrained even by love. I lapped up the songs and the legends about these freedom-loving Ukrainian rebels. But more formative was my great-grandad's own life, deprived of romanticism and idealisation. He witnessed the violent 20<sup>th</sup> century with his own eyes. His father left at the turn of the century for North America never to be heard of again, and my great grandfather, then a boy himself, became responsible for his siblings during the First World War. During the Second World War, he was looking after his own family. He lived

in at least four different states without leaving his native village: occupations, wars, change of borders and regimes meant that he was born in the Habsburg empire, spent his youth in Poland, witnessed Soviet and Nazi occupations as a grown man, and saw the beginning of the end of the USSR in his old age. He didn't live to see independent Ukraine, but he could sense the freedom in the air as he taught me to sing about Cossacks.

Throughout his life, a village man with basic education, he kept himself informed about the numerous political groups running wild in his village and the wider region but joined none of them. He never warmed up to the soviets even though he had served in the Red Army during World War II. In the 1980s, he was surprised that my mother, his granddaughter, could do business with the Poles: 'These people sacked me just because I spoke Ukrainian', he would remind her frequently. He had a clear sense of self, and it wasn't defined by political affiliation. This sense of self might have been reinforced by the stuff of legends, but it was rooted in daily choices he had to make in his life that stretched nearly the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Freedom for him was imperative for survival. This example demonstrates that attempts of foreign subjugation of Ukraine cultivated resentment of foreign rule, distrust of authorities and the sense of self for which independence and freedom were vital.

## Historical legitimacy

Ukraine did not appear in 1991. Ukrainian statehood was restored in 1991, but a nation can exist without a state. In 1995, Mark von Hagen, one of a very small number of non-Ukrainian historians of Ukraine, wrote an article with a provocative title: 'Does Ukraine Have a History?'. Von Hagen openly states that if 'we leave Ukraine and look to the political geography of history teaching, we find virtually no recognition that Ukraine has a history.' He explains this overlooking of the largest state in Europe:

Because none of the states which exist today between Berlin and Moscow existed at the time of the rise of modern historiography in the early and mid-nineteenth century, their histories continue to carry a tint of artificiality, non-genuineness; real states are Britain, France, Spain, Russia, and with qualifications, Germany. But Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and especially Ukraine are suspect candidates in the international order and somehow undeserving of the prerogatives of genuine statehood.<sup>1</sup>

Fast forward three decades, this denial of historiographical legitimacy is still widespread in the western world both inside and outside of academia. And it has indirectly prepared fertile ground for Putin's denial of Ukraine's historical legitimacy in both rhetoric and action.

A young, aspiring historian writing about Ukraine's experience of the Second World War, I was told by many academic well-wishers to expand my analysis to 'proper' nations, in particular Russia.

<sup>1</sup> Mark von Hagen, "Does Ukraine Have a History", *Slavic Review*, vol. 54, no. 3 (1995): pp. 659–60.

'But I want to study Ukraine', I replied naively but honestly.

'Study Ukraine by all means, but choose another *more serious* case study or else you won't get a job', they replied.

They were right. PhD passed, monograph published and well-received, I didn't find a job teaching Ukraine.

I was stuck in endless teaching of 'proper' history: that of the empires that ruled everything between Berlin and Vladivostok. If Ukraine featured in the modules I was asked to teach, it was often an afterthought. In one of my classes on the history of East-Central Europe, I got my students to draw a line around Europe as they imagined it. The vast majority of them drew the easternmost border down the Dnipro river. My students would not be the first to cut a sovereign state in half: political maps in rooms with more geopolitical impact than a university classroom disregarded Ukraine's statehood aspirations more than once.

Historically, the role Ukraine played in Western, and in particular in 'old' Europe's imagination has been that of a buffer zone. This has led it to be turned into a war zone on several occasions in the past. When the empires collapsed in the aftermath of the First World War, the allies chose to support a stronger Poland, restored after 123 years of partitioning by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, to protect themselves against the violence of the Bolsheviks. The lands populated by Ukrainians were treated as a buffer zone necessary for the safety of 'proper' Europe. In the aftermath of WWI, in theory everyone had the right to self-determination, but in practice it turned out that some had more rights than others.

Just before the Ukrainian lands were split between Poland and the USSR, they had briefly come together into one state. The newly formed Western Ukrainian People's Republic, encompassing the territory formerly under Hapsburg rule merged with the Ukrainian People's Republic, comprising the lands that were under the rule of the Romanovs. The Unification Act was signed on 22 January 1919. Soon after, the Bolsheviks defeated the fledgling state, but the vision of Ukrainians united into one country remained.

## **Vision of unity**

Seventy-one years to the day since that unification, I got to experience Ukraine's unity first-hand as a six-year-old. In 1990, my parents took me to the centre of Lviv to participate in a human chain uniting Kyiv and Lviv, East and West, in remembrance of past statehood and in hope for the future. Standing there, holding my mother's hand on one side and a stranger's hand on the other, I imagined a spark travelling through the clenched fists for hundreds of kilometres.

It passed through cities like mine, through villages like those where my mum and dad came from, through the motorways we travelled in my father's car exploring Ukraine, and into the grand city of Kyiv, a city I didn't love like I loved Lviv, but which I came to respect as a capital of my country. My country was being willed into existence by people who held on to the vision of their nation's independence as strongly as they held on to each other in the human chain.

'If Ukraine has a future, then Ukraine will have a history', von Hagen quotes a Ukrainian scholar's response to his question, in the paper he wrote in 1995.<sup>2</sup> It is a vision of the future that has seen Ukrainians through years of statelessness.

To mark the anniversary of the Act of Unity in January 2022, people took to the streets to form a human chain once again. The country was encircled by Russian troops ready to attack. The centuries of statelessness and the three decades of statehood made the vision of the future crystal clear for Ukrainians. It was also clear that that future was worth defending. What I am stressing here is that the condition of statelessness for Ukrainians should not be perceived as a weakness that makes a nation non-historical and thus of lesser significance on the world stage, but rather as an experience that made Ukrainians think of themselves as a collective whose identity was defined by opposition to external and oppressive political rule.

On the TV that only had three working channels, on 24 August 1991, I watched history being made: the Parliament proclaimed the independence of Ukraine. I watched the blue and yellow flag brought into the large room of the parliament by overly excited people's deputies. I watched grown men—the vast majority of the parliamentarians were men, in the best tradition of soviet 'gender equality'—cry like children. I was a child. I didn't cry. I didn't fully understand what had just happened, but I knew it was big.

A few months later, on 1 December 1991, the citizens were asked to confirm if they supported the declaration of independence in a referendum. Their answer was an unequivocal 'yes': 92% supported the declaration made by the parliamentarians in August. Just under 30 million voted their country into independence. The future that Ukrainians saw for themselves consigned the USSR to the past. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics collapsed a week later. I remember going with my parents to vote in the referendum. We were all dressed in our finest traditional embroidery. A seven-year-old, I felt terribly important, as if I had been given the vote too.

'How do you remember the day of the referendum?' I ask my father who has been living in London since the late 1990s. I ask this a week or so ago in a short break between discussing the distressing news of Russia's current war in Ukraine.

'I remember getting really drunk with my work mates', my father says.

'We went to the demo, and then got absolutely wasted'.

The entire nation was drunk with excitement. No more statelessness. No more foreign rule. No more repression. Ukraine was free.

## Maintaining freedom

The hangover was painful, the sobering up quick. The 1990s were years of poverty, hardship, and unemployment. The rule of law was replaced by the rule of organised crime. The people of Ukraine kept trying to make their voices heard: workers' strikes became a regular occurrence. But as the vast majority of citizens became poorer and poorer, a small

<sup>2</sup> Mark von Hagen, "Does Ukraine Have a History", *Slavic Review*, vol. 54, no. 3 (1995): p. 658.

minority grew richer and richer. These were the challenges that came with the acquisition of freedom. In the context of economic deprivation, abuse of authority, people made different choices in order to survive. Many, like my family, left the country unable to fight corruption and unemployment.

Loving Ukraine from afar turned out to be tough. In the UK, where my family settled after leaving Ukraine, I felt exoticized by the locals and misunderstood by 'my own people'. Most locals didn't have a clue where Ukraine was and the knowledge of those who did was limited to Chernobyl and Shevchenko. Not the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic poet, the founder of the nation Taras Shevchenko, but Andrii Shevchenko, a footballer popular at the time.

The Ukrainian diaspora in the UK, most of whom were descended from people who had come after World War II, didn't really understand why people like my family had left. 'We had to run away from the war and the communist yoke. You ran away from freedom. You abandoned your independent state', some of them said.

I tried to explain that we might have been free from communism, but we were not free from the legacy of corruption it left behind. I tried to explain that independence on paper means little when it cannot be put in practice. I tried. And then I gave up.

I brought with me to the UK all my beautiful embroidered shirts, including the one made by my grandmother in the Hutsul style that is worn in the Carpathians, where my father is from. I didn't feel like wearing any of them. I didn't own a blue and yellow flag for a while. I didn't feel like waving it because it reminded me of my parents' excited faces when Ukraine had become independent. These same faces were now marked by a permanent state of anxiety left by years of poverty and immigration.

I grew tired of educating everyone I met from students and lecturers at my university to customers in the pub where I worked after lectures that 'no, Ukraine is not part of Russia', and 'yes, we do have our own language'. Eventually, I realised that I was free to create my own vision of Ukraine, even if it didn't resemble reality at the time.

My leaving the state did not make me exit the nation. My leaving Ukraine meant that I joined that portion of the nation that lived beyond the political borders of the state. Ukraine was becoming a diaspora nation and I chose to be part of it. As I was grappling with my identity, Ukraine was grappling with hers. Abuse of power by the authorities was testing Ukrainians' patience to the limits.

## Living withing truth

Writing about Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s, Vaclav Havel argued that people contain within themselves 'the power to remedy their own powerlessness'. In his *The Power of the Powerless*, he stressed that power is only effective inasmuch as citizens are willing to submit to it and a citizen who yearns for freedom and dignity cannot be fully repressed. His view was that individuals can choose to 'live within truth' even when the authorities force them to 'live within the lie'.<sup>3</sup>

3 Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge), 2009.

In the 2000s, Ukrainians had a choice: to go back to the soviet-style inertia of accepting their life within the lie in which the oligarchy was presented as a version of democracy, or not. Freedom of expression was still very fragile when, in 2000, Heorhii Gongadze, a Ukrainian journalist and the founder of the internet newspaper *Ukrainska Pravda* was kidnapped and murdered.

The newspaper was renowned for its criticisms of corruption and for calling out abuses of power. The channels of truth-telling were being threatened, and Leonid Kuchma, Ukraine's second president, was widely seen as responsible for these anti-democratic processes. Although Kuchma decided that he would not run for a third term, he found a successor who would continue the strengthening of oligarchy.

The students who had defended Ukraine's right to independence in the early 1990s, including by going on hunger strikes, were now in their 30s. My own generation, which remembered the referendum of 1991, had come of age in early 2000s and was ready to take to the streets to protect their right to live within the truth.

The 2004 presidential election proved to be a perfect storm. Viktor Yanukovich, Kuchma's chosen candidate, was presented by the state-controlled media as the people's man, an ordinary guy from industrial Donbas who understood the sorrows of the average Ukrainian and promised stability. In reality, he was a crook with a criminal record and limited intelligence.

His opponent, Viktor Yushchenko, on the other hand, represented a vision of Ukraine that took the country out of the grip of the soviet legacy and closer to what were understood as European values: equality, human dignity and freedom.

Yanukovich chose blue as his campaign colour. Yushchenko opted for orange. The country was painted a version of blue and yellow as the results of the first round of election came in. The candidates were neck and neck, and a run-off was inevitable. The second round of voting was marred by widespread irregularities: in the face of electoral fraud, voter intimidation and pressure to support Yanukovich, Yushchenko called for a protest and people responded.

Thus began the Orange Revolution. The protesters demanded a rerun of the election which was held a month later. International observers flocked into Ukraine to monitor fraudulent activity in the polling stations.

Having just turned twenty-one, I decided that I was grown up enough to take part in my country's political life. I hopped on a plane and joined one of the groups of international observers from Britain.

On the bus taking us from Kyiv to Izmail in the Odesa region, where we were sent to observe the run-off, I listened to Vera Rich, a British translator of Ukrainian and Belarusian literature recite poetry of Ukrainian classics in her rendition. The lines from Shevchenko, not the footballer, but the Romantic poet, translated by Vera Rich no longer seemed overly romantic. They began to acquire a real meaning:

Struggle on—and be triumphant!  
 God Himself will aid you;  
 At your side fight truth and glory,  
 Right and holy freedom.

The Orange Revolution ended in what seemed like a victory for democracy. Yushchenko was sworn in as the President of Ukraine. The transition of power was peaceful.

I returned to London with mixed feelings. I was happy to see my country back on the route to democracy and was thrilled to have witnessed this historic moment. Yet I couldn't force myself to share my friends' euphoria. Perhaps the four years in the UK had spoiled me: I had gotten used to thinking that it is the politicians who should be fighting for the electorate, not the electorate fighting for its right to have their voices heard.

I wondered how far the promises of the democratic future made by the 'orange' camp would stretch in a system that was rotten with corruption. I wondered if the Orange Revolution was truly a turning point in Ukraine's political life and whether those who witnessed it as seven-year-olds, like I had witnessed the referendum of 1991, would have to fight for their right to choose freedom when they came of age. 'Living within the truth' continued to be a struggle in Ukraine.

## Choosing dignity

The Maidan protests of 2013–14 had at least one character left over from the Orange Revolution. Yanukovich made a comeback in 2010 in the presidential elections. His awkward balancing act between the EU and Russia fell through in November 2013 when he refused to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union and tightened the connection with Russia instead. There's a degree of tolerance in the Ukrainian society of self-interested politicians. When their actions reach the limits of societal tolerance, the citizens know the drill: they take to the streets.

The first phase of the protests that was dubbed the 'Euromaidan' because of its connection to the EU association agreement resembled the Orange Revolution: Ruslana, the winner of Eurovision, and others sang from the stage on the main square, the protesters were mostly students, those who had been school kids during the Orange Revolution. This was a generation that had been born in an independent Ukraine. It had no personal memory of the USSR. It knew Europe not as a mysterious place of dreams but as somewhere you go on a student exchange programme. This generation knew freedom intimately.

The peaceful protest turned violent when the riot police brutally dispersed the young demonstrators. Rather than responding to violence with fear, Ukrainians, now including those who took part in the protests in the 1990s and in 2004, flooded the squares not only in Kyiv but all over the country. The next wave of violence came when the riot police began to shoot at unarmed protesters, killing more than a hundred. The protest turned into a war against authoritarianism. The citizens were not prepared to give ground and eventually Yanukovich was forced to flee.



Figure 1: A protest sign on the Maidan, Kyiv, 2014: 'We're changing the country. Sorry for any inconvenience caused.' Picture taken by Olesya Khromeychuk

When I arrived in Kyiv to interview the women who had taken part in the Maidan to include their stories in a piece I was writing, the barricades were still intact in the centre of Kyiv, the fires that kept the protesters warm were still smouldering, the crosses marking the spots where civilians were shot were new. The city looked like a war had just finished, but in fact the war was just beginning.

The Maidan was a turning point: it showed the ability of Ukrainians to stand united in times of crisis even if their political, social and ideological position varied radically. It demonstrated that people could not only make their voices heard but actually make a difference. The protest came to be known as the Revolution of Dignity. The price for this dignity was high and it was imperative that this time the change would be lasting. A country that set out to reform itself, to reload, as one of the protest signs put it, was a country that threatened the old order across the border in Russia. Putin's response to the ousting of the Ukrainian president he worked hard to control was the occupation of Crimea and the invasion of Donbas.

The reaction of the international community was mostly limited to declarations of concern, and the continuation of business as usual including purchasing oil and gas which funded Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Unsurprisingly, this emboldened Putin to keep



destabilising Ukraine through violence and to expand the police regime he had successfully created in his own country into the Ukrainian territories occupied by his army and proxies. Both Crimea and Donbas became sad examples of the 'Russian World' Putin set out to create: a world where ordinary civilians could be abducted, tortured and jailed if they showed any disagreement with the occupying forces.

Many of those who stood on the Maidan went to the front either as soldiers of the Armed Forces or as volunteers. We didn't sing 'soul and body we'll lay down all for our freedom' for nothing, one of them told me, quoting a line from the Ukrainian anthem that was sung frequently by the protesters. 'It's not just words for us. We mean it.' They meant it. Even those who had never visited the Donbas before the invasion were eager to fight for eastern Ukraine in order to defend their country's territorial integrity. My brother was one of them. He joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2015. He took a bit of time to make the decision, waiting for a draft. The draft never came, so he volunteered instead.

## **Fighting for freedom**

In 2017, my brother was killed in action in the Luhansk region. He was fighting against the Russian army, which pretended not to be there while the world pretended to believe it. When he was killed, the same phrase kept coming up when his comrades spoke of him: they called him a free man. When composing the text for his gravestone, before listing his roles in the army I wrote the following line: a brave warrior, a native of Lviv, an artist, a free man.

Just before my brother returned to the frontline after his first deployment, he told me that I was naive to think that the war in Donbas would be contained to that area or even to Ukraine.

'It's a European war that happened to start in eastern Ukraine', he said.

I didn't pay much attention to those words at the time, but I remembered them frequently when Putin staged the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The brutal shelling of civilians caused millions of Ukrainians to flood into EU states seeking safety. Eastern Europe was coming into 'Europe proper' not thanks to political agreements, but thanks to Russian aggression.

When my brother died, the state gave us a small flat in Lviv as a form of support for a family that had lost a relative in the war. The flat is nothing like the old tenement building with a window that opened onto history. It is located in a converted 1950s Soviet block, built as a hostel for workers. When it was first built, the rooms that now make up the flat were used as the 'Red Corner', the mandatory room in soviet institutions filled with propaganda literature and decorated with a dusty red banner. When in 2022 the attack by the Russian troops pushed Ukrainians from east and south to the western regions of the country, we offered our flat to internally displaced people.

At one point, it housed seven people, a dog and a cat. When I visited it in September 2022, I met the family that resides there now: four generations of women from South-Eastern Ukraine. The youngest is four, the oldest is in her 70s. East and west united in a



Figures 2 and 3:  
Choosing Freedom: the Ukrainian flag  
on a Russian vehicle destroyed  
in the battle for Kyiv, near St. Sophia  
Cathedral in Kyiv, 2022 and a Ukrainian  
soldier in St. Michael's Golden-Domed  
Monastery, Kyiv, 2023.  
Pictures taken by Olesya Khromeychuk

flat that was given to a family of a soldier fallen in the war against oppression. A free man, now dead, was hosting free people from different parts of his free country.

When Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there were many from Berlin to Washington who didn't trust Ukraine to hold its ground for more than a few days. They overestimated Russia's strength and underestimated Ukraine's resilience. That disbelief in the determination and unity of the Ukrainian people meant that the much-needed weapons and other aid arrived late—why arm a state that will fall in days?—and that more military and civilians were killed by the invading troops than would have been the case had the necessary provisions been supplied in advance, or at least promptly. At least part of the reason why the military, political and financial support was slow before the escalation, at the start of the full-scale invasion and continues to be hesitant at least in some countries today lies in misunderstanding of Ukraine as a state and a nation. And in misunderstanding of the brutality that Russia is capable of.

Trusting Ukrainians with their experience of the past, their defence of the present and their vision of the future is absolutely vital for the survival of Ukraine. But this trust is based on knowledge. To acquire that knowledge, we need to learn not just what Ukraine is not—in other words, that it's not like Russia—we need to learn what Ukraine is. We need to stop thinking of it as a buffer zone between our comfort and Russia's threat to disturb it. Because if it doesn't stop being a buffer zone on our mental maps, it will continue to be a warzone. The democratic world is learning many lessons from the Ukrainian experience of fighting for freedom. A key lesson in my view is that freedom is fragile. Those who know its price, are willing to fight for it.

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## Publications by Olesya Khromeychuk

The publications are listed in chronological order. Current publications are listed first, followed by earlier publications.

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- *The Death of a Soldier Told By His Sister*, London: Monoray, 2022. (First edition: *A Loss: The Story of a Dead Soldier Told by His Sister*, Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2021.)
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When Russia expanded its war against Ukraine in early 2022, many Western observers expected the country to surrender within moments. But Ukrainians are fighting resolutely for their freedom—once again. This text explores Ukrainian conceptions of freedom, starting with the Cossacks, but placing a clear emphasis on events since 1991. Writer and historian Olesya Khromeychuk argues that the roots of Ukrainians' contemporary resilience can be found in a long-standing rejection of imperialist oppression. She relates these concepts of Ukrainian freedom, mirrored in her own history, in a courageously personal manner. In this way, she renders accessible the history of a country about which there is too little knowledge in many parts of the West.



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