

In popular imagination there are two versions of the Ukrainian soldier. One is a brawny, brave, bearded berserker, tattooed and seemingly unstoppable, scything his way through Russian invaders like a combine harvester. And there are indeed a lot of hard men like that fighting to liberate their country. The other archetype is that of the flower of Ukrainian manhood — authors and actors, athletes and activists, many of whom enrolled in the early weeks of the war when patriotism and optimism was at a fever pitch.

Ukrainians often tell me that they worry their country is losing its best and brightest. And it's easy to understand why when nearly every day there are doleful social media posts about those who have given their last full measure to the nation. This year a poet, a powerlifter, and a parliamentarian were among the many who fell in battle.

But there's a third group too. These are the ones who, in the words of a friend, "were not born to be warriors", and in Odesa, a notably arty city, they are often creative types. There's young Nikolai, a composer and sound engineer, who incorporates the rustling of wind through bullrushes into his ethereal melodies. He spends most of each day and night in the apartment he shares with his girlfriend, hidden away from army conscription officers. There's Oleg, a bearded virtuoso, able to play virtually anything that has strings, keys, or a mouthpiece, but who suffers from terrible depression. Max is a programmer, bright and autistic; he averts his eyes as he describes his struggles to afford medical treatment for his ailing mother. Slender Misha runs a cafe and at 23 is two years too young to be mobilized, but he's nervous nonetheless, for his friends and family. His grandfather was killed in 2022 fighting in Luhansk region.

These men love Ukraine and describe themselves as patriots, sometimes raising money for the troops. But too often they are defined by their fear. Fear of abandoning their wives or girlfriends, but equally afraid of being thought cowards by those same women. Fear of cowering in a muddy trench waiting for the awful scream of an incoming artillery shell or the whine of a suicide drone. Fear of being led by officers who are untrained, incompetent, or in some cases corrupt. They want more than anything for the Russians to go home and to be able to restart their young lives, on hold since February 2022. Yet they also recognize that their fear is nothing special, and that many men in uniform would rather be anything but soldiers. So there's immense guilt at the thought of mechanics risking their lives on behalf of

musicians. And tension too. Lately, I've heard of ugly fistfights in local bars between soldiers on leave and civilians.

On a broader level, all Ukrainians understand that many more men need to be under arms. For all the talk of robot wars being waged by air and sea drones, Ukraine is fighting a country with four times its population. Even assuming Ukrainian losses are proportionally lower than Russia's, this imbalance is untenable.

I have no right to draw conclusions here. As a foreigner, no one will put a gun in my hand and ship me to the front. And I have deep sympathy for the sadness and stress of these young guys. But in the words of Hemingway, someone who knew a fair bit about human conflict: "Once we have a war there is only one thing to do. It must be won. For defeat brings worse things than any that can ever happen in war."

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