

Today, in 2026, in the fifth year of Russia's war against Ukraine, I find it just as difficult to speak about *A Ukrainian Dictionary of War* as I did at the very beginning, before this project (and this book) had fully taken shape.

Why is it difficult? Perhaps because it belongs to a past that now feels distant, and because it is inhabited by different versions of ourselves. Perhaps better, braver, more resolute selves, illuminated by the flames of the great catastrophe that was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As I listened to people's stories and committed them to memory—stories that would later become *A Ukrainian Dictionary of War*—I understood that they would never again be told in quite the same way as they were in those first hours, days, and weeks of the full-scale war. It was not only the stories themselves that mattered, but also the words through which they came into being. Perhaps that is precisely why the project eventually took the form of a dictionary rather than something else.

If I had to answer, in a single sentence, the question of what this book is about, I might say this: it is about the way war tears apart the familiar human world, and about how, through words, we try to hold that world together against all odds.

Do words remain intact? Do the mouths that speak them remain intact? Can anything be healed by words and mouths that have themselves been wounded? The answer is never simple. *A Ukrainian Dictionary of War* tells many different kinds of stories: stories of healing and resilience, but also stories of helplessness in the face of chaos and violence. Is there still light at the end of these fragmented narratives? I would like to believe there is.

Because *A Ukrainian Dictionary of War* is ultimately a book about both the power and the powerlessness of language when confronted with a reality that exceeds the limits of imagination, I have found it fascinating to watch it begin to speak in more and more languages. Today, the book has been fully translated and published in eight languages. I did not write it with an international readership in mind, yet it has found an unexpectedly warm reception abroad. It is remarkable to see different languages grappling with a reality that defies every notion of the ordinary and resembles an absurd, terrifying dream. One might think of this process as a kind of crash course for languages whose cultures have not experienced war for many decades—languages that possess neither an image nor a vocabulary of contemporary warfare, a war in which cutting-edge technology has become intertwined with prehistoric evil. Sometimes translators had to recover this vocabulary from memory, at other times, they had to invent it.

Yet it is especially meaningful when *A Ukrainian Dictionary of War* is translated into languages that are themselves endangered. Not only because Ukrainian, too, was considered an endangered language as recently as thirty or forty years ago. At the time, some historians, philologists, and writers were already preparing its obituary. It seemed as though the process of its disappearance had become irreversible. What speakers of Ukrainian and those devoted to preserving it have achieved over the past decades can only be described as an extraordinary act of dedication, if not a miracle. But the story of the destruction of the Ukrainian language, which nearly led to catastrophe in the late 1980s, is now repeating itself in the territories occupied by Russia. There, the war against language continues. Language itself has become both slogan and symbol, weapon and means of recognising who belongs and who does not.

That is why we are so sensitive to the disappearance of languages, to their slow fading away. Even invisibly, the very structure of endangered languages often carries the memory of injustice, resistance, and violence—of something that arrives from outside and imposes itself, replacing one vision of the world with another. This is perhaps the most far-reaching form of mental violence. Languages do not simply disappear on their own.

I believe that within the cultural memory of such languages, violence—in whatever form it takes—finds a particularly deep resonance. That is why I think it was such a wonderful idea to translate excerpts from *A Ukrainian Dictionary of War* into Shetlandic and Scottish Gaelic. These are languages in which, it seems to me, fragility and vulnerability, transience and loss, but also the strength to resist loss, acquire a uniquely delicate voice.

When I worked with Roseanne Watt and Christopher Whyte, who translated *A Ukrainian Dictionary of War* into Shetlandic and Scottish Gaelic respectively, I was struck by the extraordinary sensitivity of these languages to detail, nuance, and subtle shades of meaning. The world's larger, thriving languages can, of

course, also be sensitive and nuanced. But this is a different kind of subtlety—free from the gilded ornamentation and quiet arrogance that often accompany languages backed by powerful and influential cultures, especially those with an imperial legacy. It is the subtlety of home, of human closeness, of work done by hand rather than by precision machinery.

And so, in the translation of the piece *Freedom*, there appears the remarkable Shetlandic word ‘haandmakkit’. Where, in the original, the narrator says that freedom is ‘handmade’ because ‘only you can make it for yourself,’ Roseanne Watt chooses this word, which resembles the English handmade but carries a different shade of meaning. It refers not merely to something made by hand, but to something woven by hand. The root *mak* evokes associations with weaving and intertwining. It suggests the work most essential in the harsh northern climate of the Shetland Islands: knitting warm clothes to survive the cold, weaving fishing nets to put food on the table. In Ukraine, we also weave nets—camouflage nets—and that, too, is among the most essential things we do. They, too, sustain life. Perhaps this is how we weave our freedom.

Or take the story *Farewell*, in which people forced to flee their homes embrace the hosts they barely had time to get to know before continuing their journey, holding them as though they were their closest relatives. Here, in the phrase “we barely know each other,” the Shetlandic word ‘fremd’ appears. It means ‘stranger’ or ‘outsider,’ yet it echoes its own opposite, ‘frend’, meaning ‘kinsman’ or ‘relative.’ The closeness of these two words highlights one of war’s quiet revelations—never stated outright, but radiating through the text: that a stranger can become the dearest person of all.

Christopher Whyte describes endangered languages as “languages under pressure.” But what kind of pressure is this? Perhaps it is the pressure of a world that leaves less and less room for what is small, vulnerable, and rooted in its own place—a place of life and memory. Perhaps it is the pressure of ambitions that compel some to extend their influence over others by ‘correcting’ their linguistic picture of the world. Whatever form that pressure takes, all of us who have lived—or continue to live—under it, each in our own way and to our own degree, need to hear one another and to translate one another, so that we may continue to be.

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