

# **FRONTLINE, PEACE LIFE:** **Ukraine's Revolutionaries of the Forgotten War**

J.T. Blatty

Valkyrie—her war name. In Norse mythology, chooser of the slain in battle. A Russian citizen fighting for Ukraine since she was 18, she stands on a chair around a breakfast table inside of a flat in Kyiv, quiets the youthful brouhaha of the room as she speaks, then pours half of her glass of whiskey to the floor by my feet. The others follow her lead, including myself, because I know what they are doing: honoring the fallen. We've done it other times, where these soldiers and veterans of the war in eastern Ukraine have come together to congregate, to celebrate, to remember and to forget, and to tell war stories among comrades and even myself, a veteran of two other wars, from an Army in a country so far removed from their reality.

Valkyrie is the face of a generation—she is one of the thousands of ordinary men and women, who in 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Revolution of Dignity in Kyiv, self-deployed into eastern Ukraine to fight a war against a Russian-backed insurgency. Entirely of their own free will, these individuals were not paid, were not conscripted by the government, and most had no military training. They voluntarily abandoned everything they knew to fight for their homeland, their fellow citizens, their civil rights and their vision for a life free from government corruption.

As this undeclared war nears its sixth year, now under tenuous control of Ukraine's government, casualties continue to rise on both sides and the global stage has been made aware of the plight. And the 2014 volunteers who endured the most violent period of the conflict, many who remain undocumented for their participation, face a new struggle. To speak nothing of the physical and psychological injuries they carry, how can they abandon a war when it's still ongoing, in such close proximity and without a resolution in sight? How can they begin the process of healing and reintegration when their comrades are still taking up arms and dying a six-hour train ride away? How do they rest when the impetus that caused them to risk everything, that they lost so much for, still looms so large and seemingly in vain?

I came to Ukraine as a U.S. combat veteran and photojournalist two years ago, drawn to the community of the soldier, inspired to document and preserve a form a patriotism that was so far from my own reality of fighting wars, under contracted obligations. But over time, the project became far more than making the invisible visible and the unheard heard. There is a common thread amongst most combat veterans around the world, an ultimate realization that in our wars, we were pawns in a larger agenda that we might never understand. The volunteers were not pawns in 2014, but now their story needs to be told more than ever, because their story is so far from over.