



# Ukrainians fleeing the war

Stories and studies in reception contexts

*edited by*  
**Federico Zannoni**  
**Dzvenyslava Gladun**



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## Introduction

Olesya Hudyma is a 43-year-old established Ukrainian painter. Having moved from Ternopil a few days after the Russian attack together with her husband and four children, she first found refuge in Rivalta, on the outskirts of Reggio Emilia. Even in Italy, Olesya has never stopped painting because she believes – now more than ever – in the importance of safeguarding and letting the world discover Ukrainian culture with its heritage, symbols, and hidden meanings. Painting is her work, her salvation, and her mission.

The picture we have chosen to feature on the cover of this book is entitled *Ukrainian Soul* and dates back to 2019. The centre of the image is dominated by a young, enigmatic woman wearing traditional Ukrainian necklaces and the flower wreath, from which poppies and a myriad of magical plants sprout in turn reaching out and expanding in every direction, as if moved by an irrepressible vital and life-generating energy, in a sort of crowded, starry magnetic field. Fishes, saints, maidens, winged and angelic female figures engaged in a harmonious, dreamy, and mystical dance gravitate around this stoic and bright figure, wholly withdrawn into herself, into her dream and interiority. There are no empty spaces on the canvas, just as there is no trace of gloomy or dull tones, despite the torment lived by a country that has long suffered from war and destruction. On the contrary, the painter chooses to resort only to vivid and vibrant colours, juxtaposed with refined vivacity, as if to express an unshakable confidence in how much the beauty of art, women and nature can counteract the barbarity of war. When granting us this image, the artist explained that she intended to represent tranquillity, peace, and well-being, that earthly paradise for which the Ukrainian people have been yearning and fighting for centuries. The woman symbolises the earth, and it is through her that the sacred passes, just as it is from her that the process of creating beauty and bonds with future generations is born.

Today, more than ever, the land on which Ukrainians would like to build their secular and tangible paradise, the motherland rich in grain and culture, exhausted by air raid alerts and danger, is the victim of a spiral of aggression. Barbarity and violence are severely testing the tenacity to maintain hope by leaving death and rubble along the streets as well as in the souls of the survivors: of those who stayed to fight and those who preferred – and were able – to flee.

The *Ukrainians fleeing the war* are primarily women and children, whom today, we can meet all over Europe. Together with bodies tired from the journey and hardships, they bring biographies, at times dramatic, plans pulverised by bombs, nostalgia, and torn affections, but also inner worlds and human qualities that contain surprises, preciousness and boundless possibilities. Especially in the first weeks after the beginning of the exodus, in spring 2022, the numerous flows of Ukrainians managed to channel the attention, interest and solidarity of millions of Europeans, suddenly aroused from the lethargy and apathy of quiet living. In numerous cases, the latter became active by performing concrete gestures and demonstrations of incredible generosity. It is as if the boredom, weariness, and egocentrism that fuel disinterest in the Other have, for a while, given way to a new glimmer of warm and dynamic humanity, albeit driven by media clamour. In European cities and small villages, Ukrainian refugees could experience all the fullness of encountering and being welcomed.

This book is about encounters and welcome, stories of people fleeing and people opening the creaking doors of their homes. It is also about war because these are some of the consequences that all wars, not just the one in Ukraine, bring with them. The combination of war and migration is inseparable and deep-rooted in history.

The scientific and human journey that led to the production of this volume was, in turn, punctuated by encounters not only between scholars of different ages, nationalities (Italian, Ukrainian, French, Russian), backgrounds and disciplinary approaches (history, anthropology, linguistics, psychology, pedagogy), united by their interest in facing such a dramatically topical issue and by the awareness that they cannot do so by locking themselves up in their single, individual point of view, but also between researchers and refugees, between researchers and host families, between researchers and reception professionals. Some contributions report the direct words of those who met, hosted, or were



hosted: the Ukrainian refugees, the families and the professionals who did their best to offer hospitality.

What we would like to propose is a plural and interdisciplinary journey into the complexity of migration caused by the war in Ukraine, which can combine accuracy, precision and scientific rigour with a language that can also be used by non-experts, interweaving theories, and research with the living words of the people involved in the phenomena analysed in these pages. The starting point is inevitably the tragedy: the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the bombing and shelling, the destroyed houses, and the people forced to flee.

In her contribution, emblematically entitled *A War that does not Say its Name: What is Putin's Russia Waging in Ukraine?*, Vanessa Voisin offers an overview of the current historians' analysis of the meaning of the war Putin's Russia launched against Ukraine unofficially since 2014, and openly, though through the use of a special lexicon, since February 24th, 2022. While not ignoring analyses focusing on geopolitical, strategic and economic factors, this chapter focuses on the words: the vocabulary used by Russian leaders, and the ideas these words articulate or obscure.

Afterwards, in the chapter *Formation of the Ukrainian Citizens' Migration Flows to Europe Before and After February 2022*, Arina Topoleva aims to consider how and to what extent Ukrainian refugees arrived in Europe, where they were going, and what measures were taken by the European authorities to support and assist Ukrainian refugees, also considering the shaping of the post-Soviet Ukrainian emigrant community, which was formed in Europe even before Russia's full-scale invasion. She draws attention to the problems faced by refugees upon their arrival and tries to characterize the possible consequences for European societies, engaging in critical thinking and providing a range of arguments supported by evidence for a future possible discussion and reflection on the topic.

The themes, suggestions and open questions that emerged in the first two chapters find a significant deepening in the article by Olga Beshlei, *Crossing Borders, Crossing Narratives: the Landscape of European Perceptions of Ukrainian Refugees*, which examines the representation of Ukrainian refugees within European media, highlighting the specific ways language moulds, reflects and potentially influences public perceptions. Through a systematic analysis of language use across various online European newspapers, the study dissects the linguistic nuances

that underpin the portrayal of Ukrainian refugees, revealing underlying societal attitudes and biases. The findings prove that Ukrainian refugees are often encapsulated within specific narrative frames, elucidating a dichotomy between compassion and suspicion, integration and alienation, victimhood and threat. These narrative frames illustrate the refugees' multifaceted identities in the eyes of host countries.

The first three essays make up the first part of the volume, which we have titled *War and Migration*. The second part of this research focuses instead on the moment of encounter, care and the offer of new possibilities and perspectives: after the war, outside the war, there is the pain of the undertaken and unwanted flights, the problems linked to the integration which is not always straightforward, in contexts which are not always simple, but also the commitment and the many positive energies that flow into the experiences gathered in *Reception and Hospitality*.

Clinical psychologists working in Milan in the Unit of Research in Emergency Psychology, Fabio Sbattella, Svetlana Loginova and Marialaura Moreni, report the results of a research conducted in the Lombardy region on *Host Families and Ukrainian Refugees: Experiences and Encounters*. Moved by the conviction that highlighting, disseminating, and promoting the best practices observed among welcoming families can contribute to enriching the training of individuals willing to offer hospitality to refugees and asylum seekers, the authors analyse and reflect on the experiences of families who have hosted Ukrainian refugees, collected through interviews, also thanks to the contribution of individuals belonging to institutions, associations, cooperatives, and projects involved in refugees' reception, who acted as intermediaries between the research team and the interviewed families.

Moving from Milan to Reggio Emilia, the following two articles, written by Federico Zannoni and Dzvenyslava Gladun and entitled respectively *"Everything is Extremely Complex": the Point of View of Hospitality Workers* and *The Testimonies of Ukrainian Refugees in Reggio Emilia*, analyse the results of a wide-ranging research in which both the operators of reception facilities and services and the Ukrainian refugees hosted by such services were interviewed. An inextricable and humanly meaningful complexity emerges from the intertwining of points of view – a complexity which is painful and dramatic but also generous and willing, determined and grateful, curious and resilient, potentially fertile to allow manifestations of encounter and dialogue

to take root and address the present emergency by opening glimpses of planning and hope for the future. Contrasting and even contradictory personal experiences emerge in the operators' answers, in which the dimension of the professional contaminates, dialogues and clashes with the dimension of the human being, of the man and woman engaged in helping other men, women and children who suddenly found themselves having to start a piece of their lives anew in places such as, for instance, Reggio Emilia and its surroundings. Only a few weeks earlier, these people would never have thought they would have to seek refuge in such distant corners of the continent, of which, in many cases, they did not even know the existence.

After pages devoted to the perspective of reception professionals, the focus of the research shifts to the Ukrainian refugees themselves, dedicating considerable space in this volume to their testimonies. Men, women and minors of very different ages and backgrounds share their memories of the first day of the war, of the Russian occupation, of the journey through the vast Ukraine to European countries, reflect on their experiences as refugees in the reception services in Reggio Emilia and confide their most intimate thoughts about concepts such as guilt, uncertainty, and future.

Fabio Sbattella and Diana Prada's article *The Mind that Flees War: Suffering and Trauma Among Civilian Refugees* comes to complete and systematise the discourse started in the previous three chapters, addressing from a clinical point of view the causes and psychological manifestations of the suffering and trauma experienced by refugees. Starting from the analysis of the deep wounds, the authors suggest paths and strategies that not only psychologists but also educators, social workers and other reception and care professionals can follow in their daily work, each adapting them according to their skills, tasks and personal predispositions.

Thus, the common thread linking the various contributions collected in this volume is precisely the attention on people: migrants, families, and reception professionals, but also citizens in arrival contexts and those in war contexts. Only people, in their daily interactions and predispositions, can revive and promote a culture of peace that can help prevent the devastating consequences of hatred and war.

*Federico Zannoni and Dzvenyslava Gladun*