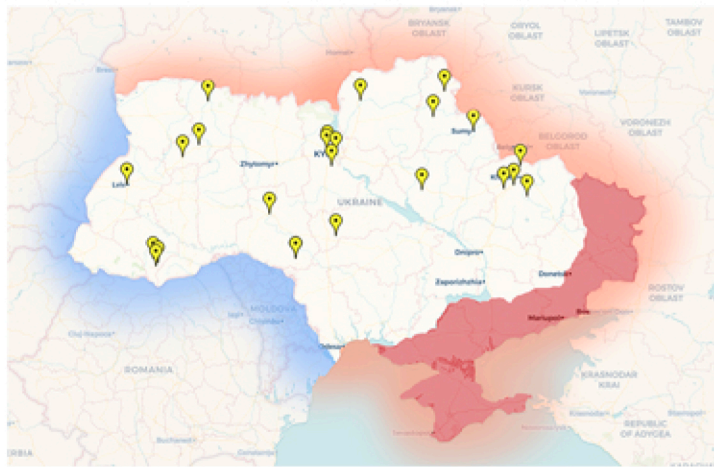


# UKRAINE: A CULTURAL REVIVAL

Since 2014, the Russo-Ukrainian war and subsequent conflict has raised huge international interest in Ukraine. However, the news that reaches Western countries is largely political and people are still very unaware of Ukraine's rich and vibrant cultural traditions. This collection of portraits offers a window into the lives and experiences of a diverse group of Ukrainian people at the climax of a history of immense conflict. Each of the subjects of these photos share one thing in common: a passion for tradition and freedom of expression.

The Ivan Honchar Museum, National Centre of Folk Culture represents a huge body of knowledge and expertise about Ukrainian tradition. With their guidance, British photographer Michael Garrett travels all over Ukraine to meet with, and photograph, people who are at the forefront of a cultural revival. He explores their passion for cultural traditions, learning how they have been affected by life in a country at war, and a deeper history of cultural oppression.



Ukraine has enormously diverse cultural traditions, with different ethnographic regions and a deep, varied history. The effects of war on Ukraine's people have been similarly diverse and, in order to provide a balanced collection of stories, people have been photographed from all over the country.

This portfolio documents pain and tragedy, but also hope and beauty. As these stories attest, Ukrainian history has been tumultuous, but the Ukrainian people are resilient. Right now, there is a palpably dynamic energy affecting every aspect of Ukrainian culture. Through the remarkable openness of the subjects in this exhibition, people far from the conflict can access a part of that dynamic energy, and hopefully see the country through a different lens.

“There’s a Ukrainian soul sleeping inside many, many people. Now it’s waking up and starting to be visible...”







## TARAS

### Kyiv

On our way to meet Taras we pass wives, mothers, friends, pushing their newly wheel-chair-bound loved ones around corridors and struggling to learn the spacial logistics of door management. The rehabilitation centre seems to contain examples of every possible war-inflicted disability.

Taras lost his arm in a drone strike. Before his time on the front lines, he was a master instrument maker and musician. Under his remaining arm, he holds a Ukrainian Lira (a type of Hurdy-Gurdy) that he made entirely by hand. Minutes before taking this photo, we watched Taras meticulously tune this beautiful instrument; a task not designed for one hand. I start to think about how few tasks can be done with one hand and I feel painfully naive. Each meeting throughout this photography project has been humbling in some way, but meeting Taras is particularly affecting. His hearing was also damaged in the blast that took his arm. Perhaps I find his situation especially melancholic because he himself seems to be a relentlessly positive person; there is rarely a moment during our meeting without laughter. Taras smiles patiently as his over-enthusiastic young room mate offers me photography advice.

When we talk, Taras is animated as he shares his passion for the traditional Ukrainian instruments he makes. “Something mystical happens when I touch these instruments. They resonate with me. If you find something that connects with your own history and traditions, it connects deeply with you.” He gestures a link between the Lira and his heart and jokes “I don’t have enough fingers to show you what I mean”.

We start to talk about Russian influence on Ukrainian traditional music: “The Soviet state destroyed authentic Ukrainian culture in such a well-planned way, bringing other types of musical instruments to replace our own.” He remembers from his childhood that his local shop had all sorts of Soviet versions of traditional instruments, but nothing Ukrainian. “This was not an accident,” he explains. “The idea of the Soviet approach was to make animals out of humans. It sounds extreme, but it’s true: they wanted you to only think about earning money, eating and resting. They didn’t want people to have any soul - no artistic ideas. There is a moment of revival now. The Soviet system broke people’s minds and we need time for people to recover. The war pushes this recovery to happen faster.”

During the photoshoot, Taras places the Lira on his lap and starts to play. He produces a deep drone, spinning a wheel that rubs against the three strings of the instrument. The melody, normally played with the left hand, is compensated for as Taras sings with a rich and impassioned voice. As I listen, I realise that no degree of oppression or violence can silence people like Taras. The more that is taken away, the louder they will sing.



## OLHA

### Chernihiv, Chernihiv Oblast

Standing in front of one of around 3000 homes that have been destroyed in Chernihiv, Olha holds berries from a guelder rose tree. This plant has significant folkloric importance and, in the liberation struggles of the late 20th century, it became associated with state independence. “It’s a winter berry and I love winter,” Olha says. “Every winter it gives me warmth and energy. Maybe it’s a symbol for life”.

Attacks on this city started on the very first day of the full-scale invasion: February 24th 2022. Ukrainian troops managed to defend Chernihiv from occupation, but the damage was severe. It’s a strange experience to drive down a street and see the remnants of houses that have been completely flattened right next to houses that have been untouched, people still living inside. It’s a visceral reminder that survival in a country at war is largely down to the luck of the draw.

“About the war, I have only vulgar words” Olha says, laughing awkwardly. Her husband is a tank operator and she has been looking after her two children alone since he went to war. She’s a seamstress and, in the photo, wears clothes she made in the traditional styles of the Chernihiv region. “It’s hard to express the emotions. When you live a peaceful life, raise your children in love, make art, enjoy the beauty of nature - which is so rich in our region - and then one neighbour thinks he has the right to come and take everything you have. He comes and kills your relatives, destroys your homes and abuses you in the most brutal ways imaginable. I have no words to express my feelings”

Olha, like so many Ukrainians, has a long family history of oppression. She tells me of how her grandparents’ family was split up and exiled by the Soviet state. “In some beautiful places in Europe, people can live and pass on their heritage for future generations. But in Ukrainian history, everything is destroyed and stolen over and over again. Every generation has to start from the very beginning. The only thing you can leave for your children is love, kindness and decency. We have nothing more.” Chernihiv has been the site of numerous well-documented civilian attacks which have continued since early 2022. Despite this, Olha and her family are still living there.







## CAMILLA & SOPHIYA

### Chernihiv, Chernihiv Oblast

Camilla sits on a school bench we pulled out from under some bricks in the school she studied in until March 2022. Her sister Sophiya stands looking at the wreckage. In the same airstrike that destroyed the school building, they also lost their home. Their grandmother was killed in the blast and at the time this photo was taken, Sophia still had 5 pieces of shrapnel in her body.

As I struggle to arrange the sisters at the best angle in the dwindling light, children continue to run about in the playground below as if the gaping hole in their school and cascades of rubble had always been there.

Air raid sirens are commonplace in Chernihiv and locals tend to continue their days' activities, paying little mind to the background wail. On this occasion, the sirens started about 10 minutes into our photoshoot and we decided that it would be best to head to the nearest available basement until the Air Alert app gave us the "all clear".





## VASYL & MYKOLA

### Kosmach, Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast

We follow a family hatchback for 15 minutes down a bumpy lane not designed for such vehicles, and descend a valley in the early evening to meet Mykola and his family (and several other curious locals). Mykola is a towering presence who seems to be using his walking stick more as a statement than a walking aid. Whilst exchanging pleasantries I struggle to decide whether he feels dubious or amused by our presence on his isolated little farm. I ask him an awkward question about his feelings on the war, to which he responds: “Which war?”

Mykola was a young child when the Soviet army arrived in the second world war. I try to maintain eye contact with him as Myroslava translates: “We know what the Moscovites are capable of. At that time, they just came and killed. They took everything from the house. There are some stories I will never forget.” Mykola is 83 years old. “We understand how it is now in occupied villages in the East”.

The New Year's Eve tradition of dressing up and wearing home-made masks is one that's well-known in many regions of Ukraine. It's called “Malanka” and is traditionally accompanied by a theatrical element where groups of men would arrive in local houses and, whilst singing, play out a scene with specific roles and characters. During the Soviet period, Christmas and New Year practices like this were forbidden in Ukraine, and Kosmach was no exception. After Ukraine's independence in 1991 these traditions were revived, but never with the same fervour. That said, there are many who still celebrate Malanka, spending the whole day before New Years in costume singing together around the village. Here, Mykola and his grandson Vasyl are pictured in their characters' costumes with accompanying masks that Mykola made in his youth. Like so many people I've met in Ukraine, Mykola and Vasyl haven't felt able to engage in such a celebratory tradition since the Russian invasion in 2022.







## YULIA

### Kyiv

Yulia poses atop a hill in the old centre of Kyiv at sunrise. She wears traditional clothing from Rivne, the town she grew up in. The patterns, colours and style are typical of her region in the North-West of Ukraine. Yulia has been interested in Ukrainian folklore since a traditional folk singer came to her school when she was in 5th grade. She's now a singing teacher and performs regularly, singing folk songs in various different musical groups.

We talk at length about the differences between the progressive attitude of people in the capital city and those of her more conservative home town. She says that in Kyiv, traditional culture is seeing a real renaissance: "fifteen years ago, singing traditional songs was considered unsophisticated and didn't have its place in a contemporary context. Now there is more interest in every aspect of Ukrainian heritage - the good and the bad - and people aren't shy of it"

I ask how the war has affected her life and tears fill her eyes. Her husband is on the front lines "I'm alone and it's very hard for me. The worst thing is that you don't know how long it could last, and we all think it could last a very long time. It's difficult because you know that it's happening during the best years of your life and [my husband and I] should be together."

I get the impression that Yulia wears her heart on her sleeve - something I find refreshing after having met many people who seem so hardened by the war. "There's a Ukrainian soul sleeping inside many, many people. Now it's waking up and starting to be visible. It's amazing that this nation is still alive after all this war, propaganda and oppression from Russia. How can people still know what it is to be Ukrainian?"