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## **Fighting for the Future: Women and the Fights for Ukrainian Independence in the 20th and 21st Centuries**

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The 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries were marked by three important points in Ukrainian history, which are conventionally called the Liberation Struggles. The First Liberation Struggle was the struggle for Ukrainian statehood during the First World War and the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917-1921. The Second Liberation Struggle was the struggle for Ukrainian statehood in 1939-1956, and the Third Liberation Struggle encompasses the preservation of the state's independence in the context of Russian military aggression against Ukraine since 2014.

In all three struggles, women were active participants and were involved in a myriad of roles – all of which were essential for the viability of the cause. While more than a hundred years have passed between some of these events, there are strong commonalities in the motivations and forms of women's involvement in the struggle for the Ukrainian state and its independence.

The scope of women's involvement in the national liberation struggle for statehood in Ukraine in 1917-1921 was quite wide. After the February Revolution of 1917 in the Russian Empire, a part of the Ukrainian population which had previously been incorporated into the empire was held the opportunity to revive their own state. The western territories of Ukraine (the historical and ethnographic regions of Haluchyna, Bukovyna and Zakarpattia) were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and from 1918 Ukrainians were able to exercise independent political development in these territories.

Between 1917 and 1921, various forms of national statehood existed within the territory of modern Ukraine, with political regimes of the Ukrainian Central Rada (UTsR), the Hetmanate of Pavlo Skoropadskyi, the Directorate of the Ukrainian People's Republic, the Western Ukrainian People's Republic (ZUNR), and others. At the same time, the period was characterised by constant political and military struggle and attempts by neighbouring states to re-occupy Ukrainian lands. Women took part in defence of the newly established states' independence. There were female MPs, government members, military service workers, NGO creators and members. Although statehood was not preserved and Ukraine was occupied by the Soviet Union, Ukrainian women remained a powerful force.

The Second Ukrainian Liberation Struggle for Statehood once again took place against the backdrop of a World War and lasted many years after it. In the previous struggle, some political and public structures and armies had



official status, but now the patriotic movement was almost entirely underground. Therefore, the role of women was characterised by even greater versatility and multitasking.

One of the most striking examples of women's national liberation activities in this period is their participation in the ranks of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Women were engaged in political and military activities, took on the tasks of medical personnel, material support, scouts, liaisons, agitators. The struggle lasted for decades, but the repressive Soviet regime suppressed these attempts.

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Ukraine regained its independence. The process of reviving Ukrainian socio-political thought and culture began, alongside the formation of the state's institutions, the renewal of the socio-economic system, and the development of international relations between an independent Ukraine and other states. Although the Russian Federation formally recognised the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine, it sought to maintain political and economic control in Ukraine from the outset. Eventually, Russia launched a war against Ukraine in 2014 and escalated it in 2022. Throughout the Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukrainian women have continued to be members of various structures in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (ZSU), and more recently in the Territorial Defence Forces. Women help to preserve independence as MPs, government workers, diplomats, human rights defenders and activists.

Our reading of the historical record points to the importance of social and political concerns in shaping women's decision to join the fight for Ukrainian freedom. Threats to national survival also clearly motivate women to take up arms and engage in support efforts to defend their families and their country. Once the Russian invasion is fully repelled, activism and engagement will be important inputs into the rebuilding and strengthening of Ukraine.

Over 50% of respondents (mostly women) of the recently conducted "COGS" survey report that they have been involved in social or political activism, with cultural activism being the other most widespread type of activism (about 20%). Some people had experience in different types of activism. Some respondents also noted that they devote a lot of their civic activity to volunteering for the benefit of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. These most common types of activism reflect the aspirations of Ukrainian society. Indeed, since Ukraine regained its independence, there has been a desire



to develop a civil society in which as much of society as possible is involved in decision-making.

The results of our survey show that women in the 21st century in Ukraine are engaged in various types of activities that are largely related to the affirmation of the nation's identity, work for the future of citizens, and urgent issues of preserving the country's independence.

*You can find links to the full paper and all of COGS's work at the DCU ARC Website: <https://www.dcu.ie/arc>*

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