



Taras Shevchenko from the series *Icons of the Revolution* by Sociopath (2014). The text is from Shevchenko's poem "Hamaliya": "Fire does not burn those tempered by flames."

# NEW YEAR IN KIEV

BY SOPHIE  
PINKHAM

**A**s the months of fighting wore on, I got used to thinking of Ukraine as a war zone, a landscape strewn with corpses, a place where people did terrible things to each other. But when I returned in December 2014, the Kiev airport's arrivals hall was the same as usual. For a moment I thought that maybe everything hadn't gone to hell after all.

Then I heard a group of men on the other side of the customs booth singing the Ukrainian national anthem.

*Souls and bodies we'll lay down for our freedom*

"Listen to how soulfully they sing!" said a middle-aged woman standing behind me in line. She'd been speaking Russian with her grown daughter, but now she started drifting into a mix of Russian and Ukrainian. "Can you imagine them singing the Russian national anthem in Sheremetyevo?" Sheremetyevo is an international airport in Moscow.

Her daughter murmured in agreement.

*Glory to Ukraine!  
Glory to heroes!*

"Ukraine has so many beautiful things, doesn't it?" the mother mused. "Like sarafans." A sarafan is a traditional dress, a bit like a jumper.

"My ears ached on the plane, the whole way," the daughter said.

"Why didn't you put drops in?"

*Glory to Ukraine!  
Glory to heroes!*

"Ukraine is a European country," the mother said happily. By the time we made it past customs, the singing patriots had dispersed.

On the way into the city, I passed the big soccer ball that had been placed there in honor of the Eurocup. It was right next to the Kiev city limits sign, which had the words HERO-CITY above it: this was the official Soviet designation for the cities that had suffered most during the Second World War. Graffiti along the highway shouted, THIS IS OUR GOD-GIVEN COUNTRY! My driver turned up the volume on the radio every time the news came on. I'd decided that my old apartment on Bohdan Khmelnytsky had become uninhabitable, so I was staying with Alik. It was already dark when I arrived at his apartment in Podil. He heated up a carrot "cutlet" for me—a vegetarian variation on the Eastern European staple, the kotlet, a meat patty made of ground meat, breadcrumbs, eggs, and onion.

"Just like Tolstoy ate," Alik told me. "He invented them."

Like Tolstoy, Alik was a pacifist: he couldn't understand why anyone was

volunteering to fight, especially people with children.

Any mention of the war made him snarl with anger and disgust. Alik was a humanitarian; he had no interest in national ideas.

Alik took me to visit his friend Jacques, a French artist who'd been living in Kiev for a year. Long-haired and skinny, in white jeans and huge plush slippers bought at a market stall, Jacques talked about every kind of event with the same sarcastic, self-deprecating humor. He told us about his love interest; the night before, he said, they'd had a whole bottle of vodka, but she still wouldn't sleep with him. In the same tone of amusement and feigned outrage, Jacques spoke about his experience of Maidan. He'd moved to Kiev just after the protests started, and he'd been living right off Khreshchatyk Street, on Ivan Franko Square. When the barricades went up, he'd been almost trapped in his apartment. Soon he didn't want to leave anyway, because of all the fires and explosions. Snipers were shooting from just above his building. "I mean, fuck, man," he kept saying, as if he were complaining about a traffic jam or being kept on hold while he called customer service.

Now Jacques was back to the expat good life, in a huge underpriced apartment with mirrored walls and ceilings and northern and southern views. The revolution had caused some stress, but the resulting collapse of the Ukrainian currency had made

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Director Alexander Cooley and Sophie Pinkham in the director's office before the Harriman book launch (November 14, 2016)

the expat good life even better. Jacques said that he liked Ukraine because it was a really free country, not like France or England or the United States. In Western Europe, he said, there were too many rules, and everyone was always asking questions. Here you could do as you pleased, especially if you were an expat. He said he was working on a nude portrait of Trotsky's great-granddaughter.

**THE OPERA** was decorated with a huge banner that said WE WELCOME THE HEROES OF ATO. (Everyone referred to the antiterrorist operation by its initials.) Despite this warm reception, many would-be heroes were still wearing their masks. At the Christmas fair on St. Sophia Square, Santas posed for cash while men in camouflage and balaclavas collected money for the Azov Battalion, the volunteer battalion with the strongest neo-Nazi tendencies. The previous summer Azov members had told the Guardian that once the war in the east was over, they'd "bring the fight to Kiev," and that they wanted to

install a strong military leader, perhaps a dictator. They didn't think it would be very hard. "What are the police going to do?" asked one Azov fighter. "They couldn't do anything against the peaceful protesters on Maidan; they'll hardly withstand armed fighting units." Azov used a modified version of the Nazi-era Wolf's Hook as their insignia; like the ultranationalists of the 1990s, they said it represented the words "Idea of the Nation." Azov was funded by Ukraine's most prominent Jewish oligarch, Igor Kolomoysky. Nothing was surprising in Ukraine anymore.

**MY OLD FRIEND ZAKHAR**, the proprietor of the underground art gallery-garage, invited me over to his house. I took a taxi; at the new exchange rate, I was suddenly very rich. When I arrived, Zakhar and a friend were watching an American romantic comedy dubbed into Russian. We were soon joined by Zakhar's long-suffering girlfriend, Alla.


"What's new?" I asked, though I knew this was a fraught question.

"I have no news," Zakhar answered, in his usual bantering, slightly deranged tone. "I haven't done anything for an entire year—that's a record for me. I've just been monitoring. During Maidan I lived in the gallery so I could monitor the revolution more closely." (His gallery was a short walk from Maidan.)

"Sometimes I didn't leave the garage for three days at a time. Alla was the only one who knew I was there—she'd come and make me go outside. You could eat well on Maidan! We used to line up for borscht, didn't we, Alla?"

Alla rolled her eyes.

Zakhar and his friend, an unpleasant man with a pointed nose, beady eyes, and long, greasy hair, started talking about the war. Everything came down to money, they said. People joined the Azov Battalion for the money—and no wonder, now that there were no jobs. Zakhar and his friend discussed a rumor they'd heard about how you could make big money by buying weapons in the ATO zone and selling them for twice as much in Kiev. The problem with this



otherwise appealing plan was that it required going to the ATO zone.

Ukraine had reintroduced conscription the previous May, and a new wave of troop mobilization had just been announced for February.

“Don’t you understand that we could be drafted at any time?” Zakhar’s friend said, his voice shrill with anxiety. “I don’t want to be cannon fodder!”

“You think they want me in the army?” Zakhar said ironically.

Alla and I laughed at the idea of drafting an emotionally unstable, alcoholic bohemian with a penchant for public nudity. “They could take you,” his friend insisted. “They can take anyone, whenever they want.”

**ALTHOUGH MANY PEOPLE SPOKE** loudly about their support for the war, far fewer intended to go and fight. Friends shared strategies to avoid being drafted; to many, the draft seemed like a form of human sacrifice. An estimated fifteen hundred servicemen had been killed during nine months of fighting, but evidence suggested that the real death toll was higher, that the government was trying to conceal the scale of its losses.

Misha Friedman, a Russian-American photographer, invited me to meet Sveta, a longtime AIDS activist from Donetsk, and her husband, Aleksei, a fighter who’d just been released in a pre-New Year’s prisoner exchange. Both Sveta and Aleksei were HIV-positive former drug users. When Sveta had started her AIDS NGO, Aleksei had been on the board of directors, but he’d soon grown tired of the paperwork and become a mechanic. For him the war was personal: he’d lost his apartment in Donetsk, his work, his hometown. He volunteered early for the Donbas

Battalion, which was on the front lines from the beginning. When he joined up, it wasn’t even a proper battalion, just a band of patriots without a name.

Misha had told me we were going to a party for the released prisoners, and I’d imagined a big event, a noisy hall full of men in fatigues. But it was only a few close-mouthed couples at Il Patio, a faux-Italian chain restaurant on Bessarabska Square. Aleksei had the high, stripped cheekbones that you often see among people who take HIV medications, which change the distribution of body fat. With his glassy, beatific green eyes, he was beautiful in a way peculiar to some drug users and people with HIV or TB, people who seem to have one foot in the next world. He and Sveta were already on intimate terms with Misha; they’d even let him photograph them in bed on the first night after their reunion, as they lay in the dark, staring at their phones and frowning. I had the impression that they were relieved to have an intermediary.

In August, Aleksei had been captured in the battle of Ilovaisk, a strategically important town between Donetsk and Luhansk. Pro-Ukrainian volunteer battalions managed to raise their flag in Ilovaisk without any casualties and were said to be clearing the city of terrorists. But then the separatists appeared. There were battles in the streets, with many casualties. Ukraine promised to send reinforcements, government troops, but these never arrived: a terrible betrayal. The pro-Ukrainian fighters in the city were surrounded. After several days, the separatists agreed to allow them to retreat via a “humanitarian corridor,” but the retreating battalions were ambushed, killed, and captured. Survivors reported seeing not only

***Ukraine promised to send reinforcements, government troops, but these never arrived: a terrible betrayal. The pro-Ukrainian fighters in the city were surrounded.***

separatists but also Russian troops. Before Ilovaisk, it had seemed that Ukraine was about to win the war.

As prisoners, Aleksei and his fellow fighters had been beaten, made to confess, and paraded for Russian news cameras. Eastern Ukrainians like Aleksei usually tried to hide their origins, so that the separatists could think them natural enemies from the west rather than traitors, who might be treated even more cruelly. But the separatists weren’t always strict. People in Ilovaisk had written letters asking the Donetsk People’s Republic for POW labor, and the people’s republic had complied. Aleksei and some other POWs were assigned to do repairs in a woman’s house. The woman felt sorry for Aleksei, and let him Skype with Sveta.

The families of the exchanged prisoners hadn’t been informed in advance about where the men would arrive; President Poroshenko kept all the joy for himself, having the prisoners deposited on an airstrip at night. He was the only one photographed greeting them. The wives were furious.

Now Sveta looked anxious and happy, her eyes open as fresh wounds. Aleksei was drinking a half-liter glass of



Pinkham holding a copy of her *Black Square*

beer; he had been sober for ten years before the war, but he'd gotten smashed on his first night as a free man.

During his four months in captivity, Aleksei had shared a bed with a friend, who was also at the table with us. The friend was only twenty-four, and his fur hat with its earflaps askew made him look like a little rabbit. He and Aleksei and the other men muttered in their guttural Donetsk accents, showing each other war videos on their phones and discussing military equipment. Aleksei's eyes lit up at the talk of weapons.

"I don't think he'll be a mechanic again," Sveta said. "Look—he already misses his gun." I made some anodyne comment about the need to organize help for the fighters who returned with PTSD; Sveta snorted. No one was going to help these men.

Il Patio closed, and the party was over. I arrived at the Maidan metro station just before the train stopped running for the night. Men in camouflage and balaclavas were wrapping up a drunken fight

out front; empty beer bottles were scattered on the ground.

**NOT ALL THE VOLUNTEER FIGHTERS** were motivated by political ideals or national ideas. For a certain type of man, the war offered an opportunity to recapture a sense of potency and significance, whatever the cost. In a society in which so many men were adrift, war had appeal, especially if it paid.

Oleksandr Techinskiy, who made the Maidan documentary *All Things Ablaze* and went on to work with a number of foreign journalists covering the war in eastern Ukraine, put it more cynically, saying that many of the guys who were fighting were just "looking for an excuse to get away from their wives, stop showering or changing their underwear, and get drunk."

Once the country had taken up arms, it was hard to put them down. "People have gone over to war now," Techinskiy told me. "They've gotten used to it, they're comfortable there, and they don't want to leave.

"At one point I was in Piski, near Donetsk, with Right Sector. A Right Sector guy asked a Right Sector girl if she had ten towels. 'I do,' she said, 'but what will you give me in return?' He traded her a hand grenade—an F1, a kind of grenade that was invented in the Second World War."

Weapons became playthings, sometimes literally: two Luhansk separatists and a couple of bystanders were injured after the separatists tried to bowl with grenades. Weapons offered relief first from the boredom of everyday life, and then from the boredom of war.

"You spend hours just sitting around waiting, with nothing to do," Techinskiy told me. "Fighters are

fun people—they know how to keep themselves occupied. One fighter once said to me, 'Oh! You're a journalist! Want to throw a fly?'" *Mukha*, or "fly," is the nickname for a Russian rocket launcher developed in the early 1970s. When Techinskiy declined, the fighter shot the rocket launcher himself, just to keep busy.

**OLENA**, an acquaintance from my public health days, told me straight off that the last year had almost killed her. During Maidan she had coordinated medical aid to the wounded, sending people to clinics and buying medicine, equipment, and prosthetic limbs. In August her husband, father of her nine-year-old daughter, had been drafted. Olena hadn't wanted him to join up. She knew that there were plenty of ways to get out of the draft; after all, this was Ukraine, still one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Even military personnel, she'd heard, were managing to escape mobilization. But Olena's husband said he wanted to defend his country. He had no real military training, only some theoretical knowledge of artillery.

The impoverished Ukrainian army provided almost no equipment to its conscripts, so Olena and her husband scrambled to purchase several thousand dollars' worth of gear and medical supplies with assistance from friends and colleagues. Through personal connections, Olena was able to obtain prescription painkillers, another thing the government didn't provide. (The government was shocked to discover that because of its own labyrinthine requirements for opioid prescription, it was unable to procure painkillers for its own soldiers.) After just three weeks of training, Olena's husband was sent to

Donbas. When Olena and I met, he had been on duty for three months without any break or hope of rotation. He was already used to killing people, and to people trying to kill him.

Olena said that Maidan had “crystallized” civil society, proving that self-organization was far more efficient than anything orchestrated by the corrupt, useless, badly managed state. But the story was no longer an inspiring one. Olena and her husband had been lucky to have the money and connections to get the necessary equipment and supplies, but they couldn’t do anything about the broader problems: lack of equipment, training, and experience, and incompetent officers who exposed soldiers to unnecessary risks.

“Many people are killed because of pure stupidity,” Olena told me. “My husband and many others are hostages of this situation—they cannot escape. Or if they do, they’ll be criminals.” Her husband was one of the many people who predicted that the soldiers would come back very angry at the government, with their own military equipment and fighting experience, and that Ukraine would become even more dangerous than it had been in the 1990s.

#### **ALIK’S FRIEND SPINNER**

(pronounced “Spee-nehr”) came over to visit. Spinner was an extremely good-looking raver.

He was thirty but seemed younger, with a boyish face, yellow-tinted glasses, baggy camouflage pants, and brightly colored high tops. His outfit was perfectly normal for a raver, and I wouldn’t have looked at it twice in New York in the 1990s. But in Kiev in 2014, when every underpass held a cluster of shady, unshaven men in fatigues,

Spinner’s outfit seemed more than outdated.

Spinner stood in Alik’s living room, looking in the mirror, admiring himself, practicing his dance moves. “I’d like a car and an apartment on Bessarabska Square and a pistol,” he said dreamily.

“Why do you want a pistol?” I asked.

“I like pistols,” he said. “There are weapons everywhere now.” “The nineties are coming back,” Alik said.

“We have to be ready!” Spinner laughed.

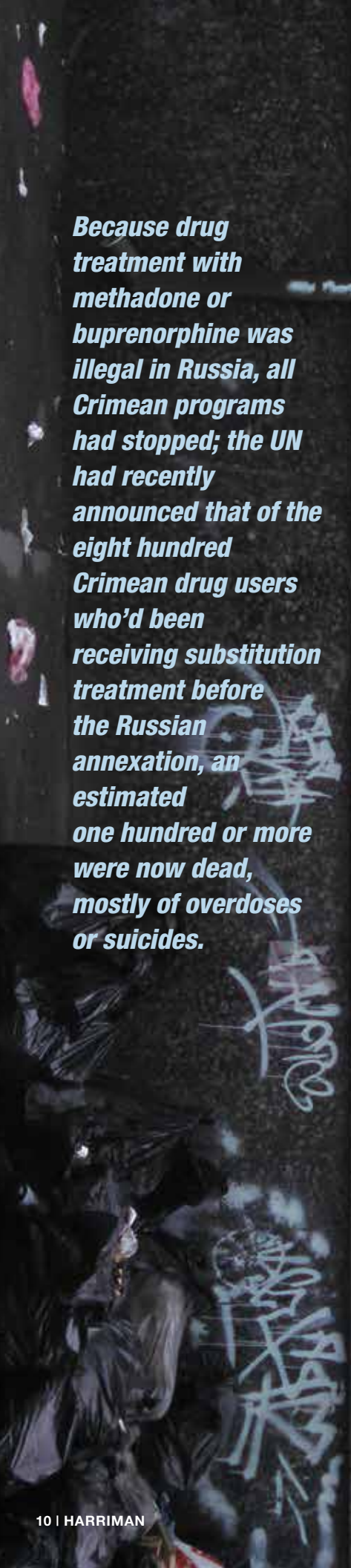
#### **AT A TRENDY NEW CAFÉ** off

Khreshchatyk Street, I interviewed Nikita, the eccentric harm reductionist I’d first encountered several years earlier. Huge, broad-shouldered, and bald, in a red-and-white-checked cowboy shirt, Nikita was out of place, out of proportion, out of time. American Christmas music was playing in the background: Bing Crosby’s “Jingle Bells,” “Last Christmas” by Wham!, and “All I Want for Christmas Is You.” Nikita looked around with impatience, declined a coffee, and told me about the Soviet Union.

“We had a very tough country. You had to wait online for two hours to buy underwear. There was food to eat in the capitals—in Kiev, Moscow, Tallinn. But not in other places. Every Saturday and Sunday people rode on the train to buy sausage. On Sundays in Kiev, you’d have to wait in line for four hours. People stood and read, wrote whole dissertations, while they waited to buy sausage.” He laughed. “So anyone who robbed the government was a saint. Now it’s the same way.”

He told me about working as a black marketeer in the 1980s. “I’d go up to a foreigner who’s visiting. ‘How’s life, kid? Give me a T-shirt or some

**“Many people are killed because of pure stupidity,” Olena told me. “My husband and many others are hostages of this situation—they cannot escape.”**



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underwear. Or dollars.' For dollars you got eight years.

"Russia wants to bring us back to Soviet times. But Putin has given us a nation. I used to be closer to Donetsk in spirit. But now I'm not close to Donetsk at all. I would never invite Putin to come to Ukraine. I'd get a gun and shoot him instead." He said this in a very casual way.

I asked him about anti-Semitism in Right Sector and Svoboda. (Nikita was half Jewish, which was part of the reason I'd wanted to interview him.)

"Svoboda works for the KGB," he said. "What makes you *think* so?" I asked. "I don't *think* so. I *know*."

"You *know*?"

"I'm an old Jew, what do you want? I know everything," he said, and laughed.

Because drug treatment with methadone or buprenorphine was illegal in Russia, all Crimean programs had stopped; the UN had recently announced that of the eight hundred Crimean drug users who'd been receiving substitution treatment before the Russian annexation, an estimated one hundred or more were now dead, mostly of overdoses or suicides. Others had moved to parts of Ukraine where treatment was still available. There were drug users and HIV-positive people among the refugees from the east as well. Nikita had new harm reduction clients, but he didn't like them much.

"The good ones from the east or Crimea are somewhere else, doing something else," he said. "They're not the ones who came here. The ones I see want to take with both hands—they have Russia in their heads." In his opinion, although all drug users were tricky, the HIV patients and drug users who had moved to Kiev from

Crimea or the east were more cunning, more dishonest than Kiev natives.

"People from Donetsk come and think we owe them something. So you're a drug addict, so you're HIV positive—go ask Russia for help. Why are you coming here? Maybe you shouldn't have been waving those flags and begging Putin to come."

**ON NEW YEAR'S EVE**, Alina and I went to visit Alina's colleague, Yury, and his wife, Yulia. (Alik had disappeared.) Yury and Yulia were good-looking, charming, successful people in their thirties, with a beautiful blond son about five years old. They lived just off St. Sophia Square, in a high-ceilinged, Euro-renovated apartment furnished with white IKEA furniture.

We drank champagne and ate ham that Yury's mother had baked.

"Why don't you show us your present?" Yury asked his shy son, who was playing quietly in the corner. The boy's eyes widened, and he ran into his bedroom. When he came back, he was holding a huge black air rifle, as big as his body.

"He was begging for it for six months!" Yury said, laughing. "It's real—it works. But there are no bullets in it, of course."

Kiev residents traditionally celebrated New Year's Eve on Maidan, but now there were too many painful memories; the festivities had been moved to St. Sophia Square. When it was almost midnight, we went downstairs. Bundled in our parkas, scarves, hoods, hats, and gloves, watching our breath in the night air, several hundred of us greeted a new year. Everyone was eager to chase away the old one.



Street graffiti in Kiev. Photo by Sophie Pinkham

In the morning, Kiev's snowdrifts were strewn with empty bottles of cheap champagne. ("Soviet Champagne" was one of the most popular brands.) While nursing my hangover, I saw on Twitter that Evgeny Feldman, a Russian photographer, was at the annual torch march in honor of the nationalist hero Stepan Bandera's birthday, January 1. Feldman's pictures were ominous; a mass of torches burning in the night, the marchers almost invisible. I headed to Maidan.

A man was leading a pony through the Maidan underpass, and drunk men in Winnie-the-Pooh costumes were propositioning laughing women who shoved them away. The menacing, torch-wielding hordes of Feldman's photos, which had already been retweeted again and again by those who were concerned, or who wished to seem concerned, about Ukraine's far right, had dispersed. All that remained was a small group of flag wavers. About half the flags

were blue and gold Svoboda flags; the others were red and black, for Right Sector and other nationalist groups. Passing clusters of men in fatigues, some of them in balaclavas, I stopped behind a family.

"It's not too scary for you?" the father asked his children, laughing. The children seemed unconcerned. Their father was showing them a historical curiosity, a zoo exhibit.

A group of pensioners were wearing traditional Ukrainian clothing; one babushka wore a woven headband covered in pompoms and little pins with portraits of Bandera. Small children slid across the icy cobblestones. An attractive blond woman had Right Sector's black and red flag painted on her cheek.


"Glory to Ukraine!" the group shouted. Only a couple of people yelled "Death to enemies," and they didn't sound convinced.

On a small stage, a pretty woman stood and smiled radiantly, holding a portrait of Bandera. An old man

held a Ukrainian flag and a portrait of Taras Shevchenko. An Orthodox priest made a speech, and then everyone sang a song. As the rally's speakers stepped down from their little stage, they clustered around Oleh Tyahnybok, the leader of Svoboda, asking him to pose for photos with them. Robust and photogenic, he towered over the crowd. He looked like a real politician, but if this was his constituency, he was in trouble. The crowd was full of people who were one-eyed, disabled, elderly, visibly marginal. It was hard to take them seriously as a neofascist menace. Feldman, the journalist, said the march was smaller than it had been in previous years; maybe this was because the young and able-bodied had gone to fight in the east.

On the steps leading up to the square, some young men in camouflage were clowning around, waving flags and singing some kind of nationalist limerick. Suddenly a few of them began to shout "Glory





**“All this will pass.  
Suffering, sorrow,  
blood, hunger, and  
mass death. The sword  
will vanish and the  
stars will remain . . .”**

**— Mikhail Bulgakov, *White Guard***

to Ukraine! Glory to heroes! Death to enemies!” the guttural chant tearing out of their throats. This time it sounded genuinely frightening.

**AT THE BULGAKOV MUSEUM,** housed in the novelist’s childhood home, a sign on the door announced, “The entrance into our museum of individuals who support the military occupation of Ukraine is not desired.” Inside, one of my fellow tourists was wearing a Right Sector scarf.

I could tell that the tour guide, a well-kept woman in her fifties or sixties, was the kind of person for whom literature is a religion and a favorite writer is a messiah. Though she spoke quickly, her voice had the modulation of a professional actress’s, and she looked very dignified in her black cardigan sweater with its grid of thin white lines. It was clear that current events had inspired her with new fervor, new grief.

Speaking Russian, she told us grimly that by 1918 this house had become a communal apartment; Bulgakov couldn’t go home again. The world of his childhood had vanished. He lived in Moscow for a while but soon returned to Kiev, because it was freer there.

“That was a hundred years ago,” she said meaningfully.

She led us through the living room, where there were two pianos and a Christmas tree—which would not, she pointed out, have been allowed during Soviet times—and then into a painstaking reconstruction of Bulgakov’s sisters’ bedroom. With great ceremony, she opened the wardrobe to reveal an apartment door with a tablet that read “50.” This was apartment 50 on

302-bis Bolshaya Sadovaya Street, the Moscow communal apartment where Bulgakov lived with his first wife. He hated the apartment and made it the site of the dance of the unclean spirits in *The Master and Margarita*.

We walked through the wardrobe into Bulgakov’s room in Moscow, then into a final sitting room, back in Kiev. The guide lined us up in two rows, shortest to tallest, in front of a mirror.

“This room can never be peaceful,” she said, “because it is full of doors. There is another room where peace can be attained, but we cannot reach it; I can only show it to you.”

She turned off the lights and pressed a switch. The mirror became a window, and instead of our own reflection, we saw a ghostly white bed, a bookshelf, and a cluttered writing desk that seemed to be suspended in the air, trembling. We gasped. Then she flipped another switch, and we saw nothing but stars.

“Why do we look at the night sky so seldom?” she asked. She was referring to the famous last lines of *White Guard*:

All this will pass. Suffering, sorrow, blood, hunger, and mass death. The sword will vanish and the stars will remain, long after the shadows of our bodies and our affairs are gone from the earth. There isn’t any man who doesn’t know this. So why are we so reluctant to turn our gaze to the stars?

“Thank you for coming to our beautiful city,” our guide concluded, “where, as you can see, there are no fascists or Banderites.” ■



Graffiti at the Bulgakov Museum (Tothkaroj / CC-BY-SA-2.0)



**IN HER BOOK**, *Black Square: Adventures in Post-Soviet Ukraine*, Sophie Pinkham uses the lens of public health, specifically HIV prevention and advocacy, to organize the story of her decade in Siberia and Ukraine. After graduating from Yale in 2004, Pinkham traveled to Siberia as a Red Cross volunteer to work in HIV/AIDS education and prevention. She continued her work in the HIV field in Russia as a representative of George Soros’s Open Society Institute, moving to Ukraine in 2008 to study Russian and collect oral histories about women’s rights and AIDS activism in Ukraine. In her work with activists, many of whom are former injection drug users, Pinkham comes into contact with young men and women only slightly older than herself, members of the first generation to come of age in post-Soviet society. And not only activists and doctors, but also musicians, artists, and teachers, thus bringing into focus a youth culture flourishing amidst collapse, ruin, and war. The tension between keen observation of post-Soviet life and culture and the practicalities

of working for a nongovernmental agency, including facing the negative attitude toward international donors and their prescriptive policies, propels Pinkham’s narrative and keeps it from being mere travelogue or memoir. Instead, *Black Square* perfectly captures the decade in all its manifest absurdity, poignancy, and tragedy.

“New Year in Kiev,” from the book’s final section entitled “War and Peace,” recounts Pinkham’s return to the capital city, but now conversations with friends frequently touch on war, volunteer fighters, prisoners of war, weapons, and even toy rifles. The chapter ends appropriately enough with an eerie visit to the Mikhail Bulgakov Museum in Kiev, during which the guide quotes lines from the civil war-era novel, *White Guard*. Bulgakov’s words, written in the 1920s at the beginning of the writer’s career, remain as effective and moving almost a century later.

One final note: The transliteration of proper names in “New Year in Kiev” follows that of the book publication; for example, *Kiev* and not *Kyiv*.

*Sophie Pinkham, a Ph.D. candidate in Columbia’s Department of Slavic Languages, is writing her dissertation, tentatively titled, “Sanctuaries, Strolls, and Slander: The Pushkin Myth after the Thaw.” She is a 2012 graduate of the Harriman Institute’s MARS-REERS program, for which she wrote the thesis “Blatnaia pesnia, the Odessa Myth, and Alternatives to Utopia in Soviet Song.” Pinkham’s writing has appeared in the New Yorker, the New York Times, n+1, the London Review of Books, and Foreign Affairs.*

*The Harriman Institute hosted a book launch for Black Square on November 14, 2016, as part of the Harriman at 70 lecture series.*



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