

QUEER UKRAINE

AN ANTHOLOGY OF LGBTQI+
UKRAINIAN VOICES DURING WARTIME



EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
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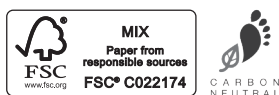
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Foreword

What do you think of when you think of queerness? Is it rainbow flags and parades, glitter and joy? Is it a corporate, sanitised version of pride, where you can only be seen if you're deemed worthy of a spotlight? Is it heart-warming coming-out stories? Is it the latest legal recognition of LGBTQI+ people's fundamental liberties?

In Ukraine, being queer is far from easy. But what is queerness if not resistance? What is queerness if not defiance? What is queerness if not the linking of arms, the echo of a hundred voices? For every voice tells a story, and every story is a thread in the grand tapestry of our existence.

Ukraine, where finding a community means salvation. Where being visibly queer is an act of rebellion. Where underground nightclubs become a bastion of solidarity. Where LGBTQI+ artists find ways to express themselves against all odds, to create beyond all constraints. Ukraine, our homeland; our beautiful, beautiful country. We've always been a part of you, and we'll always keep fighting for your freedom – no matter if our fight is twice as hard.

Ukraine, this is a love letter to you.

From the Editors

Both historically and in modern times queerness in Ukraine has meant resistance. Resistance to direct queerphobic repression and condemnation from the metropole. Resistance to its gruesome after-effects, on both a collective and individual level, on the (post)colony. Resistance against the erasure of your whole being.

If history has shown us anything, it's that during wartime, queer people are exceedingly vulnerable to persecution, scapegoating and censorship. Against the backdrop of a brutal invasion, it is much easier for conservative groups to target marginalised communities and paint them as the enemy, as a hindrance to the development of a country, completely disregarding the rich history of the LGBTQI+ community on Ukrainian soil, which stretches back to antiquity. Our enduring contributions to cultural growth and our commitment to fighting for liberation cannot be ignored.

Recent years have seen the emergence of Ukrainian Queer theory, and we urge readers to get hold of Anton Shebetko's *A Very Brief and Subjective Queer History of Ukraine* and Nataliya Gurba's *Queer Joy, Ukrainian Liberation*. Much like anywhere else, the LGBTQI+ community in Ukraine

is far from being a homogeneous entity, and engaging with a vast array of diverse perspectives is vital for developing a nuanced understanding of our past and present.

This anthology is not only a platform for sharing our experiences, it is an archive of our existence and a testament to our permanence. We hope it will contribute to the visibility of queer Ukrainians and inspire more works like it to be produced in the coming years. It's time for us to tell our stories on our own terms – and for you, dear reader, to listen and stand in solidarity with us.

– DViJKA

About DViJKA and Rebel Queers

The DViJKA collective consists of a Kyiv-born, London-based duo of artist-researchers working in the fields of performance, film, writing and archiving. Their work revolves around spotlighting the experiences of LGBTQI+ Ukrainians and documenting the history of queerness on their land.

Rebel Queers is a group of queer activists who work to reclaim their right to the city of Kyiv. Their protests do not define themselves as being against anything, but rather honouring queer people and realising their liberation. Their actions are conscious of transphobia and queerphobia, and how they intersect with other forms of oppression.

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MAKSYM ERISTAVI

Ukrainian Queerness

Before drafting this essay, I chatted with a passionate western volunteer who has been helping Ukrainians. The person was frustrated that their family wouldn't understand or share their enthusiasm, but said that finding support within the 'chosen family' of Ukrainians is uplifting.

As a queer Ukrainian, I cannot relate more to the 'chosen family' experience – it is remarkable how this sentiment has become part of the anti-colonial solidarity around Ukraine. It is no coincidence – it was easier for me to come out as queer than as Ukrainian – but after I did both, only then did the queerness of being Ukrainian become so apparent.

The resistance of it: the resistance to the attempts to erase your identity, gaslight, dehumanise, exploit and dominate you.

The survival of it: forging community links in your darkest hour, nurturing the sense of collective care and responsibility for each other, and reclaiming the language and culture codes that were used to oppress you.

The love of it: harbouring faith and hope despite facing the most unspeakable evil humanity is capable of; dreaming and envisioning a world that is more just; preserving devotion to the idea of equality and freedom and liberty; relentlessly trying to reject hate; not losing your ability to love.

These qualities are not only quintessentially queer, but also very anti-colonial.

I want to take a moment during the genocide that my people are enduring to reflect on the colonial nature of homophobia under Russian colonial rule, the everyday manifestation of it, and how the Ukrainian decolonisation struggle is fundamentally queer, because I am sure it is integral to understanding today's Ukrainians' fight, too.

If you knew me as a kid, you would not be surprised to learn that I was more ashamed of coming across as Ukrainian than as gay. I was bullied for my queerness and femininity; but my father's very Ukrainian surname and my Ukrainian accent got me into much more trouble, and I started using my mother's maiden name as an alias.

Growing up in Eastern Ukraine in the 1990s, homophobia was part of my everyday experience, but I'd say this was less a conscious choice to dehumanise and oppress people, and more a lack of education. Moreover, back then, queer acceptance was on the rise across former Russian colonies in Eastern Europe. Belarus¹ and Moldova² hosted their first

1 Izabelė Švaraitė, 'Minsk Replaced Its Pride Parade with a Festival – and it Worked', LGL: National LGBT Rights Organization (17 December 2017). <https://www.lgl.lt/en/?p=19308>

2 'Lesbian and Gay Moldova', *Gay Times* (2006). <https://web.archive.org/web/20060929204304/http://www.gaytimes.co.uk/gt/listings.asp?action=ShowCountry&CID=656>

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Proceeds from the sales of this book go to a selection of charities supporting LGBTQI+ people in Ukraine. The list of recipients is periodically reviewed, so that funds go to where they're most sorely needed, but at the time of writing includes:

TU PLATFORM MARIUPOL

(Supporting queer youth)

QUEERS FOR UKRAINE

(Supporting people with HIV in Ukraine and delivering much-needed hormones for the trans community)

INSIGHT NGO

(Humanitarian aid for the LGBTQI+ community in Ukraine)

For more information, links and the most up-to-date list of charities sales of this book support, please visit:

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