

## What Ukraine's Soldiers Say They're Fighting For

At cultural events to boost morale on the front lines, wounded fighters open up about their motivation as a counteroffensive against Russia looms.



A singer performs at a Cultural Forces event for Ukrainian soldiers at a school near the front.

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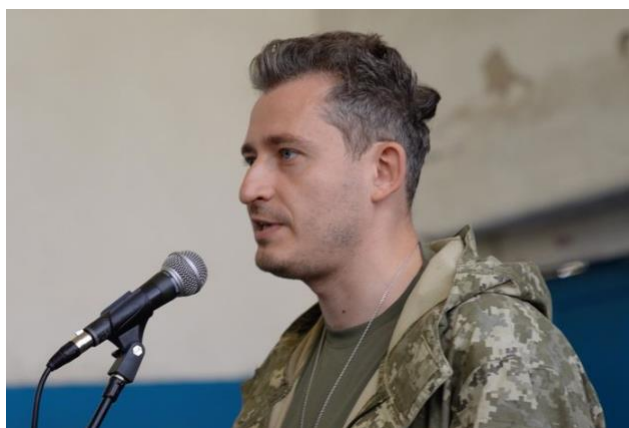
It was an unmarked, unprepossessing building on the outskirts of Zaporizhzhia, a dusty industrial city in the heart of Ukraine that is all but sure to see intensified fighting when Kyiv's anticipated counteroffensive begins. The wounded soldiers were crammed into a warren of tiny rooms, but the trio of musicians, also fighting-age men in fatigues, found places to stand between beds and began playing—first a rousing song with dirty lyrics making fun of Russians, then a string of haunting ballads full of melancholy and longing.

The hospital was the first stop on a two-day trip I took earlier this month with Cultural Forces, a collective of Ukrainian entertainers now devoting themselves full-time to boosting morale on the front lines. A world away from the Hollywood stars who entertained mass rallies in World War II Europe and Vietnam, Cultural Forces sends a handful of soloists—on my trip, an acoustic guitarist, a violinist and a keyboard player, plus two amateur poets—to play in gritty, intimate settings like hospitals and mess halls.

Co-founder Kolya Serga—formerly host of a popular TV travel show—calls it “art therapy.” But you wouldn't know this from the laughter and applause of the men. The songs and jokes helped

the soldiers to relax, and it put some of them in the mood to talk about their feelings on the eve of combat: what they're fighting for, their hopes for the counteroffensive.

Oleksandr Rotman, 46, has had a lot of time to think about his weeks in Bakhmut, where he was injured in a firefight in mid-August. He inhabited a very small world on the front—just the two or three tree lines he defended. From his six months of combat, he has vivid memories of just three days: when advancing Russians set fire to the wheat fields around his position, the afternoon he drove into town to buy provisions with bulletproof vests taped to the windows of the car, and the morning he was wounded by a piece of shrapnel, now permanently embedded in his upper arm.



Cultural Forces co-founder Kolya Serga calls the group's work 'art therapy.'

Searching for words to describe combat, he and several other soldiers home in on endurance—simply finding the will to go on. The day of the fire in the wheat fields, Rotman and his comrades struggled to break through a wall of advancing flames and smoke. They tried and failed and tried again, and he remembers his “body going on autopilot.” “You knew you couldn’t stop because if you stopped, you’d suffocate,” he recalls. “No matter how exhausted you were, no matter how scared, you just had to push yourself to move forward.”

Many soldiers speak about the horrors of war: “the mud, the noise, the blood,” as one man puts it, dragging comrades from no man’s land and the stench of unburied Russian corpses. But in the end, almost everyone comes back to fear. “We all feel it, constantly,” policeman Volodymyr Horodetsky, 49, tells me. Vitalii, 25, a construction worker, makes fun of comrades who pretended they weren’t frightened. “They’re lying,” he scoffs, “100%.” “But of course,” Horodetsky adds, “people handle it differently. We’re all fighting our own battles inside.”

Soldiers say the Cultural Forces concerts help them to escape their fear momentarily or put it in perspective. The performances mix humor and high-mindedness—part entertainment, part morale-boosting, part heart-rending music that co-founder Serga says helps the fighters get in touch with “feelings they don’t know they have.”

The jokes break the ice. The MC asks the audience to shout out their combat names and then makes fun of them. “Your call name is ‘Little Pony’?” he teases one man, feigning incredulity. “Why ‘Little’?” “Russians don’t go to hell, they just go back to Russia,” Serga quips in a song about Ukrainian soldiers learning to swear in Ukrainian rather than in the Russian many were brought up speaking. It’s a hilarious but half serious idea in a young country struggling to break free from its domineering neighbor, and the men crack up.

Then the show pivots back and forth between laughter and melancholy—solo violin ballads, traditional Ukrainian folk songs, an instrumental piano piece full of fear and loneliness written by a soldier during his first week in Bakhmut. “No one who hasn’t been in battle can write about facing battle,” Serga says disdainfully, and he often invites fighters in the audience to play or sing with the group.



Ukrainian soldiers watch a Cultural Forces concert.

Some men gave personal reasons for fighting—protecting their homes and families. “I don’t want to go home to another Bucha,” Vitalii the construction worker says. Others evoke history—Ukraine’s centuries-long fight against its imperial neighbors, the Soviet Union, the Russian Empire and, even further back, the Mongol armies that Ukraine stopped from advancing into Europe in the 13th century. “Ukraine has done this before, and we’ll do it again,” former prosecutor Bohdan Yakovyna, 60, tells me, “protecting Europe from darkness and savagery.” Rotman, wounded in Bakhmut, talks about an “epic battle,” totalitarianism versus democracy. “This isn’t just a war between countries,” he explains. “The world is watching. Is democracy strong enough to defend itself?”

Serga distills all this into simple terms—what he calls a “fight between good and evil.” “We all enlisted or volunteered for the same reason,” he says onstage, “because we don’t want to be slaves.” Horodetsky the policeman tells me he is fighting “for the future,” and Serga strives to paint a hopeful picture of what lies ahead. “You need to come back alive,” he tells the men at every stop. “Ukraine needs you. We still have a lot of work to do, after the victory, building the better country we’ve always dreamed of—and we can’t do it without you.”

No one thinks the counteroffensive will be easy. “Offense is harder than defense,” one commander tells me, “and much more costly. Many people will die.” But several men stationed behind the lines to recover from wounds and shell shock were worried that they might not be

allowed to take part. Other wounded men, including Rotman, were counting the days until they could get back to the front.



Cultural Forces performances are designed to be part entertainment, part morale-boosting.

The last concert of the week took place in a village school just 15 miles from the front. Some 50 uniformed men—fresh recruits, seasoned fighters, grizzled commanders—sat on wooden benches in a sunlit, high-ceilinged gym. “The acoustics here remind me of a church,” the keyboard player tells the men. “But the fact that it’s an abandoned school gives us another reason to fight.” He and the solo violinist work their magic. Serga flashes a smile and rattles off a litany of jokes. The soldiers laugh boisterously and film with their cellphones. Then the concert, like the others, ends with Serga’s haunting ballad, “Dodomu”—“Back Home.”

“Right now,” he sings softly, “the bullets are louder than words. You push yourself to go on...But remember, one day, we’ll come home alive and well. Back home, back home, back home to our loved ones.”

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