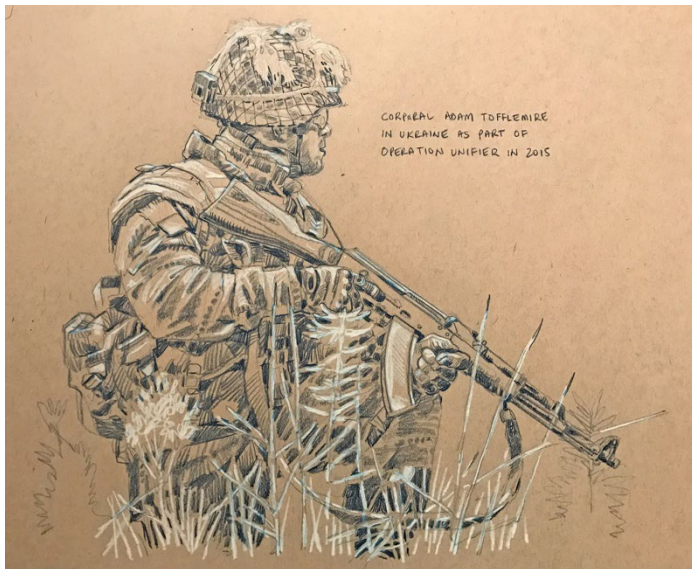


**On Guard for Thee:  
Canada's Military Training Mission to Ukraine, 2015  
and the Drawings of Canadian War Artist Richard Johnson**

**Bohdan S. Kordan**

*Six months after Canada's military training mission to Ukraine was placed on hold with Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, the Canadian defence minister, Anita Anand, announced the operation's resumption. The decision to reactivate the mission highlighted its importance and value, one that from the beginning looked to bolster and enhance Ukraine's defences. However, given the odds, it was unclear at the start of the mission whether this was even possible. At the University of Saskatchewan, the drawings of Richard Johnson were recently exhibited – a war artist accompanying the Canadian military mission to Ukraine in 2015. His illustrations capture the uncertainty of that moment, but also much more.*



ON 13 MARCH 2022, Russian aircraft launched thirty rockets at the sprawling Yavoriv military base, ten kilometres from the Polish-Ukrainian border. Eight of the missiles were able to penetrate Ukraine's meagre air defences, destroying the intended target – the International Centre for Peacekeeping and

Security. The Centre, operating under a long-standing NATO mandate, provided training for Ukrainian international peacekeeping operations. It also supported periodic joint NATO-Ukrainian exercises. More immediately, from 2015, when Russia's war against Ukraine began, until weeks

before the February 2022 full-scale invasion, the Centre hosted an eight-nation task force, the purpose of which was to increase the defensive capabilities of the Ukrainian military. Canada's contribution – Canadian Armed Forces Joint Task Force-Ukraine or Operation UNIFIER – included a rotating pool of some 200-armed forces personnel.

The Canadian mission focused on tactical training delivered in quick succession to individual groups of one hundred or so Ukrainian servicemembers. Instruction was provided to both soldiers taken directly off the line of contact in the Donbas and new recruits as part of an intensive 55-day course. The instruction was principally geared toward the practical importance of surviving combat. Nothing was assumed. Thus, rudimentary skills were reinforced as were unit maneuvering techniques under fire. So too were the basics of casualty care – an ominous reminder of what potentially awaited them on the frontline.

Gradually, Canadian confidence in the ability of their counterparts led to the training of Ukrainian soldiers and junior officers in leadership roles. This followed an earlier decision made by Ukraine's political leadership to reform and strengthen the country's military. Ukraine's Armed Forces had inherited a centralized, Soviet-style command structure that impeded its operational effectiveness. Russia's speedy annexation of Crimea in 2014 and incursion into the Donbas underscored the need to break with the country's Soviet military past and its hold over doctrine and practice. Technical military assistance to Ukraine also required that NATO's standards be met. As a practical matter, this meant creating a strong non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps, the 'backbone' of NATO militaries.



A professionally developed leadership force capable of making intent-driven decisions and executing complex tactical operations was vital to success, especially where strategic advantage in an asymmetrical environment lay with the Russians who outmanned and outgunned the Ukrainians. Thus, fostering disciplined initiative among an emerging professional NCO corps became an important training objective at Yavoriv. So too was the need to identify and train Ukrainian instructors to serve as force multipliers in preparing others for combat. This new force would be the lead instrument in strengthening Ukraine's military, gradually infusing it with a new vitality and dynamism.

These changes were welcomed but also expected by Ukrainian society. The spirit of Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity slowly purged the country of the vestiges of the old regime, reinvigorating civil society. Emerging civic organizations and a vigorous public increasingly insisted on a responsible and accountable military that took seriously its duty to defend the country. The professionalization of Ukraine's Armed Forces complemented this process, increasing the public's perception of the military as a guarantor and pillar of Ukrainian society as it fended off Russia's ongoing aggression to the east.

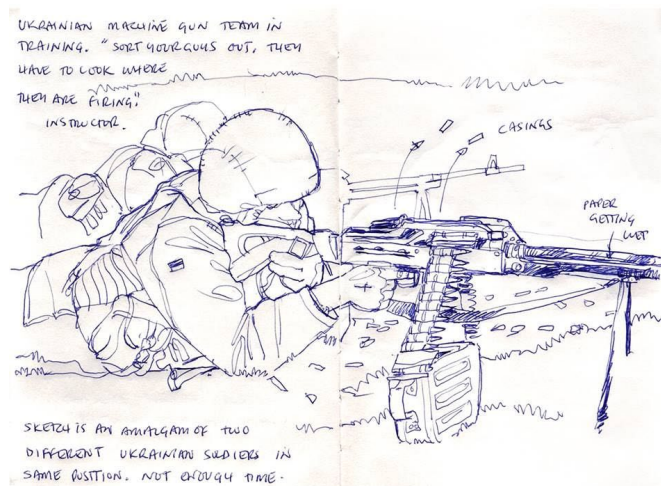
\*\*\*\*\*

THE GOAL OF THE task force, all along, was to train Ukrainian service men and women. It was never designed, however, for combat. So, when tensions escalated in the lead up to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the multinational force evacuated Yavoriv. With the mission's departure, the International Centre for Peacekeeping and Security was repurposed as a staging area for foreign volunteers hoping to join the newly organized International Legion. The fight in Ukraine, cast as an epic struggle between democracy and autocracy, attracted thousands wanting to participate in



the training conducted at Yavoriv basically reinforced what was already present in the Ukrainian spirit – a willingness to fight.

Ukrainian resistance followed from an intense desire to be free. Training simply provided the practical means to achieve this. But it did much more. Training fortified the Ukrainian military's sense of purpose, laying a foundation for the future. It bolstered the idea that Ukrainians could shape their own destiny. With newly acquired skills and confidence, every combatant that went to the front was equipped with this idea as was every Ukrainian instructor tasked with mentoring others who would be no less committed.



The buildings at Yavoriv were destroyed during the missile attack. Yet the spirit of resoluteness and assuredness that the training promoted remained. That spirit was the force which liberated Bucha, Irpin and Trostyanets and repulsed the Russian invader at the gates of Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Chernihiv. The same indomitable spirit would continue to guide Ukraine in the fight. In this effort, through Operation UNIFIER, Canada's Armed Forces contributed – training and mentoring Ukrainian service men and women under its watch.

\*\*\*\*\*

OPERATION UNIFIER – CANADA'S MILITARY training mission to Ukraine – initially took place at the International Centre for Peacekeeping and Security, Yavoriv, 25 April 2015 – 13 February 2022. Canadian troops involved in the mission were drawn from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the

Royal Canadian Regiment and later the 3<sup>ième</sup> Battalion, Royal 22e Régiment from Québec. Under their tutelage, a total of 33,346 Ukrainian soldiers were mentored.



In 2015, Richard Johnson, a field illustrator attached to Canada's Armed Forces as part of the Canadian Forces Art Program, chronicled the life and routine of soldiering during the inaugural phase of Canada's military mission to Ukraine. His poignant illustrations of vigilant Canadian instructors are matched by studied depictions of attentive Ukrainian volunteers – the two working in balance – each

aware of their respective roles – each dutifully undertaking their responsibilities.

Documenting the teaching and learning, Johnson focused on the shared urgency of the moment, especially the effort to impart and acquire knowledge in the basics: weapons handling, tactical manoeuvres, combat medicine. The array of assorted uniforms with which the Ukrainian combatants were attired, and the variety of weapons, point to the hurried and improvised nature of their supply and deployment. Johnson reminds us that this is what invention in a moment of crisis looks like. Still, his drawings manage to capture the seriousness of the enterprise. The training was an exercise in both life and death, the mechanics of which are described in discerning detail, and the volunteers at Yavoriv would accept as normal. Even in the quickly composed sketches, a sense of the dedication and commitment among the soldiers is palpable, reflecting the danger of the task at hand and the importance of the mission to both Ukraine and its people.

No less significant is the meaning of the experience that Johnson's images convey. The mission represents Canada's contribution to Ukraine during a time of great need. In this regard, his work is an account of Canada's commitment to a values-based foreign policy: freedom, democracy, rule of law. The policy goal, of course, was to preserve Ukraine's independence and sovereignty in the face of Russia's aggression. In 2015,



when these drawings were created, whether Ukraine could prevail was unclear. This without question depended on the courage and resolve of each Ukrainian combatant. But it also depended on the acquisition of military skills and instilling in them confidence in the strength of arms. The training received from Canadian instructors helped promote the latter. Putting pen to paper, Johnson would meticulously record Canada's role at this critical juncture. In doing so, he gives meaning to the idea of Canada in this world, and with this world.

*Bohdan Kordan is Professor Emeritus of International Relations, Dept of Political Studies, St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan. He is the author of **Strategic Friends: Canada-Ukraine Relations from Independence to the Euromaidan** (MQUP, 2018) and **Canada and the Ukrainian Crisis** [with Mitch Dowie] (MQUP, 2020).*

*Field illustrator and journalist, Richard Johnson has worked for the Globe and Mail, National Post, Washington Post, Detroit Free Press, and with the United Nations as a photographer/ videographer. In his role as a war artist, he accompanied Canadian and US militaries to Iraq, Afghanistan, and north Africa. Johnson's work is held by the Canadian War Museum (Ottawa), Smithsonian National Museum of American History (Washington, DC), and US National Museum of the Marine Corps (Washington, DC). He continues to work with the US Marine Corps Museum as a visual documentary artist and was last deployed to Iraq in 2019.*

*The exhibition **On Guard for Thee** consists of fifty-eight drawings from a body work produced by Johnson while observing the Canadian training mission to Ukraine in 2015. The exhibit is organized by the Prairie Centre for the Study of Ukrainian Heritage (PCUH) in association with the St. Thomas More Art Gallery, University of Saskatchewan. It is scheduled to run November 1 – December 16, 2022.*

*Proceeds from the sale of the artwork will be directed toward support of humanitarian relief efforts undertaken by the Canada-Ukraine Foundation, specifically the Canada-Ukraine Surgical Aid program that supports volunteer Canadian surgeons performing reconstructive surgeries on civilian victims of Russia's war in Ukraine.*