



DROKACADEMY · Thank You / Dyakuju Edition



War Carols of Ukraine

Songs of Resilience and Resistance

First Edition, revised October 2026

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sasha@drokacademy.ca. The author takes no income from this book. Proceeds after production costs support students. The author supports student caregivers and those who stand with Ukraine.

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The first edition remains the author's edition and will keep being updated. Second editions are written with co-authors who have lived experience; where they see a matter differently, each view is shown with its sources.

Songs and poems still under copyright are described, not reproduced; links to performances and lyrics are in the references.

AI tools supported the research and drafting of this book. That support was substantial and I am grateful for it. I read and proofread the book myself, and every idea and every decision in it remains my responsibility.

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Introduction: War Carols, Songs of Resilience and Resistance

In this chapter

- The Evolution of Sacred Song
- Themes and Transformations
- Musical and Linguistic Innovation
- The Role of Technology and Transmission
- Cultural Resistance and Spiritual Resilience
- Historical Context and Contemporary Relevance
- Looking Forward

In the depths of winter, when darkness comes early and bitter winds sweep across Ukraine's vast steppes, the sound of carols has traditionally brought warmth and light to homes across the nation. These kolyadky (колядки, Christmas carols), passed down through generations, have long served as vessels of faith, culture, and community. Yet war transforms everything it touches, including these sacred songs. The collection "War Carols" documents an extraordinary cultural phenomenon: how a nation adapts its most cherished spiritual traditions to express both its suffering and its indomitable spirit.

The Evolution of Sacred Song

Ukrainian Christmas carols traditionally served multiple functions in society. Beyond their primary religious purpose of celebrating Christ's birth, they strengthened community bonds through the practice of carol singing (kolyaduvannya), preserved ancient melodies and linguistic forms, and passed down cultural values through their lyrics. During periods of foreign domination, these carols often became repositories of

national memory and identity, their seemingly innocent religious verses carrying deeper meanings of resistance and cultural preservation.

The transformation of these carols during wartime represents a remarkable example of cultural resilience. Rather than abandoning tradition in the face of conflict, Ukrainians have consistently adapted their carols to address contemporary reality while maintaining their spiritual core. This adaptation takes various forms: sometimes subtle changes in terminology, sometimes complete rewrites of verses while maintaining traditional melodies, and sometimes entirely new compositions that use the carol form to address current events.

Themes and Transformations

Several distinct patterns emerge in how these carols evolve to address wartime experience. The most striking is the transformation of traditional Christian imagery into metaphors for current struggle. The Star of Bethlehem becomes a flare illuminating defenders' positions; the Holy Family's flight to Egypt parallels the displacement of millions of Ukrainians; the humble manger becomes a battlefield trench where soldiers celebrate Christmas between firefights.

Another notable pattern is the expansion of the carol's traditional blessing function. Where carols once asked for divine protection for a household, they now seek shelter for soldiers, victory for the nation, and the safe return of loved ones from the front. The traditional carol's focus on one holy night expands to encompass a nation's yearning for peace and freedom.

The collection also demonstrates how carols serve as historical documents. From World War II resistance fighters to modern defenders of Bakhmut, these songs record specific battles, military units, and historical figures. They capture not just events but emotions, the ache of separation, the pride in resistance, the hope for reunion. Through their evolution, we can trace Ukraine's journey from insurgent warfare against Soviet occupation to its current battle for survival against Russian aggression.

Musical and Linguistic Innovation

The wartime transformation of these carols extends beyond their lyrics to their musical structure and performance context. Traditional carol singing involved groups going house to house, but war has created new venues: trenches, bomb shelters, military hospitals. The musical arrangements often reflect this changed reality, sometimes stripped down to what can be performed in a bunker, sometimes expanded to incorporate military themes in their orchestration.

Linguistically, these carols demonstrate remarkable innovation. They seamlessly blend traditional Church Slavonic phrases with modern military terminology, creating a unique fusion of sacred and martial language. This linguistic adaptation helps bridge Ukraine's ancient Christian heritage with its current struggle for survival, making both more immediate and meaningful to contemporary audiences.

The Role of Technology and Transmission

Modern technology has added new dimensions to how these carols spread and evolve. Social media platforms allow defenders to share their versions from the front lines, leading to rapid adoption of new variants across the country. Professional musicians collaborate with soldiers to create polished recordings of frontline carols, while traditional carolers incorporate these new versions into their repertoire. This dynamic interaction between professional artists, soldiers, and ordinary citizens has accelerated the evolution of the carol tradition while expanding its reach.

Cultural Resistance and Spiritual Resilience

These war carols demonstrate how cultural resistance often operates through the transformation of existing traditions rather than their abandonment. By maintaining the formal structures and spiritual essence of Christmas carols while adapting their content to address current struggles, Ukrainians assert both their cultural continuity and their right to self-determination. The carols become acts of resistance precisely

because they refuse to let war destroy tradition, instead transforming tradition into a weapon of hope.

The spiritual dimension of these carols remains paramount. Even as they address military themes, they maintain their function as prayers and expressions of faith. This spiritual core gives them particular power in sustaining morale, as they place current struggles within a larger narrative of good triumphing over evil, light overcoming darkness.

Historical Context and Contemporary Relevance

The collection spans multiple periods of conflict, from World War II through the Soviet period to the current war, demonstrating remarkable continuity in how Ukrainians use carols to process and resist occupation. Yet each period brings its own innovations.

World War II era carols often focus on partisan warfare and survival; Soviet-era carols emphasize cultural preservation and coded resistance; contemporary carols directly address the experience of conventional warfare, air raids, and technological combat.

What makes these carols particularly powerful is how they collapse time, drawing parallels between ancient biblical events, historical struggles, and current experiences. A carol about Christ's birth becomes simultaneously a song about a soldier defending Bakhmut, a remembrance of past resistance, and a prayer for future liberation. This temporal fusion helps create meaning from suffering by placing it within a larger narrative of struggle and redemption.

Looking Forward

As Ukraine continues its fight for survival, these carols serve multiple crucial functions: they preserve cultural memory, strengthen social bonds, express grief and hope, and maintain spiritual connection. They demonstrate how a living tradition can adapt to meet current needs while maintaining its essential character. Most importantly, they

show how art can help a nation process trauma while maintaining its cultural identity and spiritual values.

This collection, therefore, represents more than just a set of adapted Christmas songs. It is a testament to the resilience of Ukrainian culture, the power of spiritual tradition to address contemporary crises, and the unbreakable connection between religious faith and national identity. Through these carols, we witness how a nation refuses to let war steal its traditions, instead transforming those very traditions into instruments of survival, resistance, and hope.

The War Carol of Bakhmut: Preserving History Through Song

The winter sun cast long shadows through the windows of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Kamloops as Sasha's Ukrainian Diaspora Language Class gathered for their afternoon lesson. Today, the usual warmth in his smile carried a touch of solemnity as he welcomed his students.

"Today," Sasha began, carefully arranging some printed sheets on his desk, "we're going to learn a very special carol, 'Там во Бакхмути' (There in Bakhmut). It's different from our traditional carols, but equally important for our heritage."

Olivia and Yuriy exchanged glances, having heard about Bakhmut in the news. A new student, Sofia, whose family had recently arrived from Ukraine, sat up straighter in her chair.

"Our people have always used carols to tell our stories," Sasha explained, his voice gentle but firm. "Just as our ancestors sang about historical events, today's Ukrainians create new carols to document our current history. This carol, written by Oleh Vitvitsky, shows how our Christmas traditions continue even in the most difficult times."

He began writing the first verse on the board, pronunciation guides carefully noted beneath each line.

Sofia translated the opening quietly, her voice barely a whisper: the carol begins in Bakhmut, where shots are heard and so many have fallen.

Sasha nodded encouragingly. "Yes, Sofia. The carol uses our traditional imagery, flowers representing lives, but tells a contemporary story. But notice what happens next in the carol..."

He wrote the response lines.

"Even there, they still celebrate Christmas," Yuriy realized aloud. "They're still singing 'Christ is Born, Let us glorify Him.'"

"Exactly," Sasha smiled, his eyes bright with emotion. "This carol shows us something very important about Ukrainian culture, how we maintain our traditions even in the hardest times. Each verse takes us to a different place: Bakhmut, Huliaipole, Mariupol..."

The class worked through each verse carefully, Sasha explaining the significance of each location, teaching new vocabulary, and helping them understand the deeper meanings. When they reached the verse about little Olia in Ternopil waiting for her father to return from the front, Sofia wiped away a tear.

"But notice," Sasha said gently, "how the final verse brings hope: it calls the whole of Ukraine one family, marching under God's banner toward victory. This carol isn't just about documenting hardship, it's about preserving hope and unity."

As they practiced singing together, Sasha taught them about the carol's structure, how it followed traditional Ukrainian carol patterns while incorporating modern elements. They learned new words: "окопна свічка" (okopna svichka, trench candle), "звитяга" (zvytiaga, victory), "промінь надії" (promin nadii, ray of hope).

"Why is it important for us to learn these songs here in Canada?" Sasha asked as they finished singing.

Olivia raised her hand. "Because we're part of the story too. The verse about people singing in Rome shows that Ukrainians everywhere are connected."

"And," Yuriy added, "if we don't remember and share these stories, who will?"

Sasha beamed at his students. "Exactly. As Ukrainian-Canadians, we have a responsibility to preserve and pass on not just our ancient traditions, but also the continuing story of our people. These new carols show that our culture is alive and evolving, not just preserved in museums."

As the class ended, the students gathered their things, still humming the melody. Sofia approached Sasha with tears in her eyes but a smile on her face. "Дякую" (Diakuiu, "thank you"), she said softly. "Thank you for helping us remember."

"Next week," Sasha announced as they left, "we'll learn another new carol. Remember, every song we learn is another thread connecting us to our heritage, both past and present."

The winter sun was setting as they left the church, but the warmth of their shared cultural connection lingered, bridging the distance between their Canadian home and their Ukrainian heritage, between past traditions and present realities.

Song page: Там во Бахмуті (Tam vo Bakhmuti, "There in Bakhmut")

Who and when

An original carol by Oleh Vitvitskyi (Авторська колядка Олега Вітвіцького). The book names one performance by Father Oleksiy Filyuk, Petro Hajala, the Hrebeniak and Parnosov families, "Easter Grains" (Великодні зернятка), Yulia and Sviatoslav Stasyshyn, and Oleh and Nastia Vitvitsky, recorded in a church in Ternopil (Цвик, 2022). A second recording is linked below. The book gives no year.

About the song

This contemporary carol opens the collection. It was born from one of the war's most intense battles and takes the singer to the front lines, where defenders hold their positions in the ruins of Bakhmut. In place of the peaceful manger scene, soldiers in the trenches are lit by a trench candle.

Each verse moves to a new place: Bakhmut, Huliaipole, Mariupol, the military cemetery in Lviv, displaced people from Crimea and Luhansk, and a verse about people singing in Rome. The most touching verse is about little Olia in Ternopil, who waits for her father to come home from the front. Through every verse runs the old Christmas

greeting, Христос Родився! Славимо Його! (Khrystos Rodyvsia! Slavimo Yoho!, "Christ is born! Let us glorify Him!"). The last verse turns to the whole of Ukraine as one family marching toward victory.

For this book, the carol shows what the stories in Kamloops keep saying: Ukrainians still make new carols to document their history, and they keep the Christmas greeting even in the hardest times.

Words and phrases to learn

- окопна свічка (okopna svichka): trench candle
- звияга (zvytiaha): victory
- промінь надії (promin nadii): ray of hope
- Христос Родився! (Khrystos Rodyvsia!): Christ is born!
- Славимо Його! (Slavimo Yoho!): Let us glorify Him!
- маленька Оля (malenka Olia): little Olia
- кутя (kutia): kutia, the Christmas wheat dish

Listen and read

- Там во Бахмуті. Колядка для ЗСУ (ВІТВИЦЬКИЙ): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfH_A83HxI8
- Там во Бахмуті (Андрій Гаманюк): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVufDjbqDek>
- Lyrics: Колядка: Там во Бахмуті (Ukrainian Folk), LyricsTranslate: <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/ukrainian-folk-kolyadka-tam-vo-bahmuti-lyrics.html>

The full words are not reproduced here, because the song is still under copyright.

Listen to the recordings above and read the words at the lyrics link; the references at the end of the book list them.

Розвеселімся: One Melody, Two Stories of Ukrainian Resilience

In this chapter

- The carol: Розвеселімся (Rozveselimsia, "Let Us Rejoice")
- Song page: Не плач, народе (Ne plach, narode, "Don't Weep, People")

Snow was falling gently outside the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Kamloops as Sasha's Ukrainian Diaspora Language Class gathered for their next lesson. The previous week's powerful lesson about "Там во Бахмуті" had left a lasting impression on the students, and today's warm smile from Sasha promised another meaningful session.

"Today," Sasha began, writing "Розвеселімся" on the board, "we're going to learn something fascinating about how our carols evolve to tell our story through different times."

Sofia, who had been quiet since sharing her family's recent journey from Ukraine, perked up as she recognized the title. Olivia noticed her reaction and smiled encouragingly.

"This carol is special," Sasha continued, his eyes twinkling with enthusiasm, "because it has two sets of lyrics for the same melody. Both tell the story of Ukrainian resistance, but from different periods. Both show how our people have always found strength in our faith and culture."

He began with the first version, writing carefully:

Розвеселімся всі разом нині – Христос родився в бідній яскині

"Let us all rejoice together now, Christ is born in a poor cave," Yuriy translated, his pronunciation improving with each lesson.

"Yes," Sasha nodded approvingly. "But notice how quickly it moves from the traditional Christmas theme to our national struggle." He wrote the next verses, teaching new vocabulary as he went: "румовища" (rumovyshcha, ruins), "попелища" (popelyshcha, ashes), "змагання" (zmahannia, struggle).

"This version speaks of Kyiv in ruins," Sofia said softly, "just like..." She trailed off, but her classmates understood.

"Exactly," Sasha said gently. "Our carols have always documented our history. But now, listen to the alternative lyrics that emerged." He began writing the second version.

He translated the opening for them. "Notice how it transforms from a lament into a call to action."

The class worked through both versions, comparing the imagery and messages. Sasha helped them understand the deeper meanings: how "кайдани" (kaidany, chains) represented both literal and metaphorical bondage, how "зброя гожа" (zbroia hozha, worthy weapons) spoke to both physical and spiritual resistance.

"What strikes you about these two versions?" Sasha asked, looking around the room.

"They're both sad but hopeful," Olivia observed. "Both talk about suffering but end with determination."

"And both connect our struggle to Christmas," added Yuriy. "Like we're never alone in our fight."

Sofia raised her hand hesitantly. "In Ukraine, we sang this at Christmas last year. Both versions. It felt... it felt like our ancestors were singing with us."

Sasha's smile grew warmer. "That's exactly it, Sofia. These carols are a bridge, between past and present, between Ukraine and our diaspora communities, between generations of Ukrainians who have fought for freedom."

They practiced singing both versions, their voices growing stronger with each repetition. Sasha taught them about the musical structure, how the melody's minor key carried both sorrow and strength, how the rhythm marched forward like hope itself.

"Watch this," he said, writing the endings of both versions side by side:

Original: "Допоможи її сиnam!" (Dopomozhy yii synam!, Help her sons!) Alternative: a prayer that God lead the singers, who are already on their way.

"See how both end with a prayer, but also with determination? This is why we preserve these songs," Sasha explained. "They remind us that every generation of Ukrainians has faced challenges, and every generation has found the strength to continue."

As the class drew to a close, the students gathered their things, the melody still humming in their thoughts. The snow outside had stopped, and the late afternoon sun broke through the clouds, casting long shadows across their notebooks filled with newly learned words and centuries of preserved history.

"Next week," Sasha called out as they prepared to leave, "we'll learn more carols. Remember, every time you sing these songs, you're not just practicing Ukrainian, you're keeping our story alive."

Sofia lingered behind, touching the words written on the board. "My grandmother used to sing this," she said quietly.

"And now you'll teach it to your children someday," Sasha replied gently. "That's how we survive, one song, one story, one lesson at a time."

As they left the church, their footprints in the fresh snow marked a path forward, while the ancient melody of "Розвеселімся" carried their voices back through time, connecting them to all who had sung these words before, all who had hoped, all who had resisted.

The carol: Розвеселімся (Rozveselimsia, "Let Us Rejoice")

Table 2.1

Ukrainian	English translation
Розвеселімся всі разом нині – Христос родився в бідній яскині Хвалу віддамо І заспіваймо Хай пісня лине до небес.	Let's all be merry now Christ was born in a poor manger Let's give Him the glory And let us sing Let the song go to heaven.
Хай пісня лине до Бога-Сина, Нехай розкаже, як Україна Цілі століття Ріжні страхіття Рабства проклятого терпить.	Let the song go to God the Son, Let him tell us how Ukraine Through the centuries All sorts of horrors Has endured the slavery of the cursed.
Столиця Київ у румовищах, А з наших сіл лиш попелища, Та без вагання, Знов до змагання Засвою волю ми встаємо!	The capital Kyiv is in ruins, And our villages are but ashes, But without hesitation, We're going to fight again We will rise up to win our freedom!
Великий Христе – Боже єдиний Над безталанням зглянься Вкраїни В борці за волю За кращу долю Допоможи її синам!	Great Christ - God is one Have mercy on the poor of our land In the struggle for freedom For a better life Help her sons!

Listen and read

- Lyrics: Розвеселімся, text printed in Скоростецький (2021), АрміяInform:
<https://armyinform.com.ua/2021/01/08/unikalni-rizdvyani-kolyadky-yaki-spivaly-ukrayinski-zahysnyky-ponad-piv-stolittya-tomu/>

Song page: Не плач, народе (Ne plach, narode, "Don't Weep, People")

Who and when

The alternative words to Розвеселімся. The book names no author and gives no year. The link below opens the traditional carol Возвеселімся всі разом нині, not these words.

About the song

The second set of words for the same melody turns the lament into a call to action. It tells the people not to weep over their grief, promises that God, newly born, will stand with them and help them throw off their chains, and ends with a prayer that God lead the singers, who are already on their way.

Words and phrases to learn

- кайдани (kaidany): chains
- зброя гожа (zbroia hozha): worthy weapons
- до бою (do boiu): into battle
- слава (slava): glory
- воля (volia): freedom

Listen and read

- Christmas carols. Колядки: Возвеселімся всі разом нині (Yurii Shabanov):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W54gIaE2Cvc>

The full words are not reproduced here, because the age and author of these words could not be confirmed. Listen to the recordings above; the references at the end of the book list them.

Enjoyed this sample?

The full book is available at krasun.ca.

Teachers and community groups can request a review copy:
sasha@drokacademy.ca

Sing along with the performances linked in the book



Songs 1 to 19

29 videos