

Book Review: Vitaliy Zapeka, *Bravado! Volunteer Canadian and Ukrainian Soldiers in Stories*. Translated by Jeffrey Stephaniuk. Regina: Benchmark Press, 2022

By Glen Miller.¹ Edited by Edward Tick

This book is a picaresque novel, a parody. Picaresque is an early fictional genre that presents the adventures of a rogue, someone common and low-born, as he drifts from place to place and adventure to adventure, struggling to survive. *Don Quixote* is a famous example.

Bravado brings the picaresque to Ukraine to mock high command and military tactics with stories filled with absurd anecdotes. But that's what war becomes for the combat soldier. One follows commands to their illogical and often surreal conclusion.

Shramko is the hero. He is a citizen of Ukraine, an accountant who volunteers for combat duty. His training amounts to painting trees white with lime. It prepared him for nothing. He has no military or fighting skills. So, as the story goes, he is assigned more and more combat leadership roles.

The book reads like a series of short stories. Shramko wanders and stumbles through one misadventure into another. Here is one episode that illuminates the absurd context of his many adventures. The mission to find Russians encamped with the outhouse nearby presents Shramko as the lead of a special operations reconnaissance team. He and two other special operators are sent out to recon Russian troops reported to be encamped in a specific area. They only find an outhouse. Before they call in their findings a bombardment blows up nothing except the outhouse:

"A blanket destruction!" Shramko replied, looking directly at the fragments that remained of the outhouse, as if he needed proof for his statement.

"You think there's no need to repeat the bombardment?" asked the very, very, very high-ranking officer. Shramko could hear the tone of satisfaction in his voice. "Tell me honestly. Be objective, Shramko."

"There's definitely no need for that!" the scout reported. "Everything has been blown to smithereens on the first attempt."

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“Way to go, boys!” the unknown but very, very, very important commander said in praise of his artillerymen. Then the phone call was disconnected.

This illustrates Shramko, our volunteer soldier and prime character, describing the success of an artillery mission. The Ukrainian Artillery unit wastes a lot of expensive artillery shells on it. Since military intelligence said there were Russians encamped there, after three days high command decided to attack with artillery. The absurdity is that high command took so long to order this artillery bombardment so that the only thing left to hit and destroy was this outhouse. The Russians had days ago left the position; none were even in the outhouse. Military score: success.

Shramko’s story provides ample evidence of the absurdity of war. Shramko is always falling into trouble and emerging unscathed. His first assignment when arriving in a special operations unit is to become a sniper. The absurdity is that Shramko has never even shot a rifle. His two-weeks of war training consisted of painting trees white with lime. Readers are never told why. The story lets us know that Shramko has no preparation for battle. Further, the snipers’ rifle has only 22 bullets. Shramko never gets to use the sniper rifle but he does learn to throw a grenade. Of course, his first attempt is rife with difficulty. No one is hurt and the grenade eventually gets to the practice target.

The book chronicles many of Shramko’s exploits. All are absurd, but somehow as real as fate and luck can be in any war. They point to the overall confusion and disarray of war. The tension between real soldiers and volunteers is part of the story. When a volunteer gets a *nom de guerre*, he is now part of special operations. In short, he is now a real soldier. He has a war nickname. He is in the tribe of Soldier.

The disconnect between civilian life and direct participation in a war is also parodied. Lys is another soldier. His wife calls from the relatively safe Western part of Ukraine and accuses him of sleeping with other women. She is adamant that he is off womanizing. But the truth is there are no, or at least very few, women in the arena of war. This emphasizes that no one, including the soldiers, know what is really going on.

The violence is dwarfed by the absurdity of the war conditions. For one thing, it is very hard in the Ukraine to determine who is Russian, who a collaborator, or who a patriotic Ukrainian. Russians, collaborators, and Ukrainian’s speak basically the same language, and all can speak the same language as required by circumstances when in danger. The side you are

fighting for is demonstrated by the color of the duct tape worn on your sleeve. Clearly, duct tape can become confusing – sometimes there is no tape, others change the color of their tape, and so on.

Some of the parody and exaggeration may be missed by those who have no military experience as a “grunt”. Grunt is the endearing term used by American soldiers to establish their lowly, front-line worker-like status in the American Army. Shramko and his fellow volunteer soldiers know they are the lowest of the low. They are also the only ones that actually engage in battle. They are grunts and heroes at the same time.

Another part of this story is about Turvey, a Canadian volunteer of WWII depicted by Earle Birney in his novel of 1949 *Turvey: A Military Picaresque*. Turvey stories are injected into the narrative in the beginning and at the end of the book. Turvey is not part of the war in Ukraine. He served in a different war. In *Bravado* the different war settings serve to compare Turvey the Canadian and Shramko the Ukrainian. Both the Canadian and the Ukrainian have no skills. Both have a large capacity for bumbling through war without any damage to their bodies. Both wander into various dilemmas and either stumble on out, get drunk with the enemy, or miss the action entirely by pure luck or institutionalized military stupidity.

This is a good read. As a combat veteran, decades afterwards, I am still mystified at how I lived through the Vietnam War. This book declares that other soldiers see it the same way. War, its conditions, and survival are mysterious and absurd.