Book Review: Illya Titko, *Blood Formula*, translated by Jeffrey Stephaniuk, Regina, Benchmark Press, 2021, 210 p.

By Gianluca Cinelli

> Senior Lieutenant Illya Titko is a combat veteran from Kalush, Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast, Ukraine. He was drafted in September 2015, or rather, he volunteered for the mobilization that was underway. Mr. Titko writes his book from the perspective of a citizen-soldier, as a man who continued to maintain one foot firmly in the civilian world, even though his new environment was a war zone, and "war is when your entire world is turned upside down."

Jeffrey Stephaniuk, the excellent translator of this book, introduces with these words the author (at p. 6), highlighting the perspective from which the whole story is told: that of a "citizen in arms", a man who has answered the impellent call of duty when his country was in dire danger. Titko himself adds some remarks a few pages later:

> It was not an easy task for me to write this book. It was a real inner struggle, for over a year, on whether I should write it or not. But I was pre-occupied with those past events, mulling that chaotic time over and over in my mind, conscious of the fact that it really wasn't that long ago when I lived through them. There were nights when I couldn't even sleep. I'd argue with myself: Should I or should I not write this book?
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> I clearly understood that not only should I write this book, but it was necessary for this book be written. First, it was necessary so that everything I experienced would have its place and not become lost in the subsequent living of my everyday life. I needed to write this book so that those who hadn't been there personally could know about these events. I wanted them to know what happened and how they happened to those involved, with the people, with the country, and of course all those individuals who resolved to walk this same path, namely soldiers defending their country.
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> I realized that such a book would be necessary for children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, so that they would have access to first-hand accounts about these difficult and stormy days and nights in the history of our nation. (12)

Explaining the authorial intentions and why a memoir exists is typical of veteran testimonies. Titko is aware that going through the memories of his past – the good and the bad – does not concern himself alone but rather involves his

whole community, present and future. Thus, the story of one single individual can partially represent – symbolically and metonymically – the broader experience of the many. Titko has no delusions of grandeur and does not aim to be a chronicler of the Donbas war. He offers his experience as a middle-aged citizen who decided in 2015 to volunteer to contribute to a conflict that was threatening to tear apart his nation:

> This narrative includes many imaginative and creative descriptions acceptable for the genre. And it goes without saying that by training I am not a philologist or literary figure. I am a man who has experienced first-hand what is described here. I have wrestled internally with the memories of these events, and after a great deal of angst and torment I have expressed on paper this great mix of subjects, thoughts, and impressions. (13)

Blood Formula is the story of a man who could not bear to stay apart and watch other men being conscripted and sent to war. Aged 53, Illya enlisted despite being aware of the blow it would mean for his family:

> I informed my family what I had decided only two days before my departure. Until then I was conflicted and suffered a silent torture. Not that I was second-guessing my decision, but that I could already feel the emotion of my family's response when I told them. I anticipated it and palpably felt their fear and despair. […] My family carried this burden too, in more ways than one, throughout those fifteen never-ending, drawn-out months, and especially those four hundred days and nights at "Zero", the very front of the very front lines. (16)

These lines remind the readers that war affects everybody, not only those who fight at the front. Families also struggle and suffer as they try and support their relatives in arms, which makes war a pervasive and invasive experience that changes lives radically. Titko may have no literary expertise, nonetheless, he demonstrates to have talent and sensibility as he addresses one of the main difficulties of storytelling about war, namely making sense of the gap existing between assumptions and reality:

> Last stop, the front. That was our preferred designation for our destination. "ATO" or zone of the Anti-Terrorist Operation, was too cryptic and oblique, and it didn't fit naturally into our lexicon. To be sure, even the word "front" only really had an academic meaning for us until recently. It was the stuff of movies and fiction. Our war was just

> beginning now, although we'd been well into our second year of war as a country, and the first and second "waves" had already been demobilized. (18)

What does it mean to be in a war? How does it feel to be in the combat zone? Titko seems quite reactive to this aesthetic aspect of storytelling because he was baffled too, as he came across the uncanny experience of being caught under fire:

> A machine gun suddenly opened fire. It was very close by and the sound was very harsh. We were unfamiliar with the noise and recoiled, turning our heads in the direction we thought would help us pinpoint the action. [...] Was this our weaponry? Or maybe not. There soon followed the deeper sound of larger explosions. We watched where the shooting could be heard and noticed that something was on fire. We were in the middle of a firefight. Everything was new to us, bystanders to the confusion surrounding us from all sides. We had no armour with which to protect ourselves. We had no battle experience. A slight chill descended through my spine. Then came a piercing and painful realization: "I was in a war." (29)

Initiation is a typical pattern of war memoirs: the baptism of fire is only one particularly intense rite of passage among many others that forge the combatant out of the civilian. As time goes by, everything changes, even the usual perception of simple things like seasons: "Spring is a time full of activity. For some it means planting a garden or tending to an orchard; for others, anticipating the renewal of nature and all that is associated with it. But for those at war, spring begins incredibly dull and muddy" (120). Being at war means forsaking almost all civilian habits and comforts to learn how to sleep on the ground, In the cold, to endure the rain as well as the sun, while discovering an unprecedented – for the city-dweller – primitive relationship with the land:

> When it [the land] raised itself in a cloud of dust, it blanketed the enemy, blinding him to our whereabouts. It would make from itself incredibly strong currents of spring runoff and mud. The ensuing torrent would flood the enemy trenches and shelters, miring the free movement of his battle equipment along the pathways and roads. Of course, we also became blanketed in dust. Our protective shelters were flooded too. But the land wasn't gratuitously harsh on us. Rather, she was like a worried mother, teaching us a valuable lesson: "Children, be vigilant. Don't fall asleep! Learn from experience, grow in wisdom, be ready for any trial." In places the land was pale, like a widow overburdened by grief. In other places, a reddish-brown, like caked and dried blood. Sometimes it was good, and it was soft; other times it was hard as rock and arid. Good or bad, this is our land! (142)

Titko's remarks are sometimes able to expand suddenly into an epic narrative that embraces the universal experiences of war, life, time, and space. The "own" of the story is also the secret legacy of an entire community. And yet, Titko just feels these things in his bones, as it were, for he does not utter such ideas with the rhetorical emphasis of the prophet. He does not aim to impress, he just wants to tell his story and share his wisdom:

> You'll find out everything you need to know when the time comes. Accept the facts calmly, approach your tasks methodically, and keep your emotions under control. Try not to be distracted by complicated external conditions and situations. Do not pass judgment if there is any doubt about your conclusions. Guard your own heart, as much as possible, from negative thoughts and despair. After all, you are at war. Do what you've been told. Don't go looking for adventures and do not go charging into hell ahead of the Battalion Commander. (34)

Titko knows how to diffuse the tension by interspersing irony here and there. In the above-reported breviary of the wise soldier, the last spot – the honour spot – is left for the most important lesson: do not play the hero as in the movies. It is already heroic to endure all the rest. And one striking thing is Titko's acute awareness of emotions. This may be depending on the acquaintance that we have nowadays with cognitive studies – even without being scientists. At any standard, Titko elaborated his original view of the role that emotions play in war:

> It is a monumental task to reign in one's fear and place boundaries around it. Only then can you continue to think and act. And only the experience of those first visceral moments of fear can teach you how to handle it. The sensation of fear within your own body allows you to understand your reaction to it; how fear, as with all heightened experiences of stress, initiates very specific physiological responses within your body.
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> The human brain is at work here, issuing commands prepared by one's genetic constitution. Some organs are instructed to work more intensely, while other parts of the body shut down. Simultaneously, the composition of biochemical matter changes, influencing how your body will react in any given circumstance. In other words, we can say there is a change to one's "blood formula".
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> However, not all of this occurs automatically. You have a degree of control over a majority of these processes, and you must learn to control them. We call this will power, or the strength of one's spirit. Its success and function depend on a person's moral character. More precisely, it means the willingness and ability to retain control over one's

> physiological reactions. Professionals spend a lot of time teaching us how to regulate our psychological disposition, especially within the military.
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> If you can master your perceptions, you'll have one more defence in the form of a firm response of your total being. Otherwise, you'll soon prove to be an imbecile. (27)

The "blood formula", hence the title of the book, is the unfathomable compound of body and mind that makes each individual unique. War affects the "blood formula", which means that it changes the person, in the body as well as in the spirit. Reason and intellect must more than ever combine with emotions and feelings if the combatant is to endure the harshness of the war and the moments of doubt and moral insecurity:

> I put up a good fight against a difficult and ugly feeling of my own inability to face reality head-on. However, it wasn't long before minor things that once were comical had become downright annoying. Not everything was as it seemed, and not everyone was who they made themselves out to be. It was a very dangerous state to be in, one that could sabotage my best efforts. Intellectually, I admittedly knew it represented a definite barrier, making the adjustment to an unfamiliar environment more difficult. It's just that the mind is one thing, and the physical experience quite another. (39)

One of the fiercest emotional moments for a combatant is the sight of blood:

> Of course, the sight of blood is a source of serious stress for an overwhelmed civilian. That's understandable. The sight of someone bleeding is genetically associated in human consciousness with life-threatening harm. They lie hidden somewhere deep within our nervous system, the result of thousands of years of struggle for survival, those tiny threads developed over time to associate "blood-pain-death". Consequently, at the sight of blood, a person involuntarily braces in expectation of harm.
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> The brain functions in such a manner as to assess the situation quickly, even before one consciously understands the threat. The body automatically releases a certain enzyme that facilitates particular reactions. These enzymes are received as a warning: "Danger is nearby". Then a unique "emotional connection" is made: at the "sight and smell of blood – the brain (assessment of the situation) and then begins an internal secretion, a reaction of the nervous system, stimulating the muscles and internal organs, then the brain again (awareness of the situation).
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> Everyone will display external signs of the process differently. Some get nauseous, some faint. Others get paralyzed, frozen with fear. Similarly, or better analogously, is what we faced that day. One's blood formula had been dramatically changed. (124)

The witness speaks here like a scientist who explains the complex cognitive reactions of the brain at the sight of blood. Titko's stylistic ability is remarkable and makes his book interesting as a document of self-reflective and self-conscientious writing. Titko's stand in the face of the war is, in fact, two-faceted: on the one hand, he accepts it as a significant experience of his life, perhaps the most intense and transformative; on the other hand, however, he is constantly aware of the danger that such experience encompasses, not only of being killed or wounded during the service but of being harmed afterwards. His reflections about trauma and its effects are remarkable because Titko explores this aspect of war experience with his usual attitude to combine analysis with emotional awareness. The first effect that he notes is that the war tears the individual personality in two:

> Success depends on the ability of a person to accommodate such changes to his station in life. This ability is ingrained deep inside one's genetics. The circle thereby completes itself. If a person could tap into his subconscious experience, then the adjustments happen quickly and surely. However, in the event you cannot reach into this source, the resulting moral crisis might be catastrophic. Unfortunately, such occurrences are not rare when an army is deployed.
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> There is one more important consideration. For the past twenty years prior to mobilization, I had a professional career with a certain degree of responsibility. I was a manager of people and I did so competently and confidently. I was a known commodity and I was respected.
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> But now, I have now found myself in an environment in which those around me disparage my former work life and experience. They only care about who I am now. They are looking to see how I will conduct myself now and in these very specific and stressful situations. (41)

Wearing the uniform becomes the metaphor for living a second life as a soldier that conflicts with that of the civilian. Those who have been conscripted and sent to war are familiar with this feeling of displacement and its toll, which Titko, first of all, acknowledges in alcohol abuse:

> Drinking occurred in the army in earlier times. It went on, is happening, and will happen, and not just in the military. It is true, however, that under the stress of combat its exposure is most greatly evident and contrasted. Besides, it has some acceptance or is tolerated, and its serious consequences are unavoidable.
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> Why is there alcohol consumption in the army? The most common explanation is to dull the experience of intense stress. Well, yes, that's true.

> [...] After a difficult day, filled with danger, a shot of vodka helped me relax and settle down, reduced stress, and calmed my nerves. I would be a liar if I said otherwise. I'll leave that to someone else, to deny that about themselves.
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> The danger is not in the consumption of alcohol per se, but from the fact that the line between "moderate" and "excessive" is very thin and aggressive. It is in its nature to cross imperceptibly into over-consumption. It is no easy task to hold that line, recognize it, and compel yourself to stop drinking in a timely manner, let me tell you. To avoid the scenario completely depends on the individual, and on one's life-governing principles, motivation, experience, and strength of will.
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> Unfortunately, during the mobilization campaigns, in the rush for numbers and to fulfill the plan, the need for quality and a targeted intake went by the wayside. Consequently, all sorts of individuals joined the army, including the sick and psychologically unstable, drunkards, alcoholics, and drug addicts.
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> In theory, it would have been the primary obligation of the doctors and Military Commissariat to screen them out during the medical examinations. However, often the authorities' own rules were simply ignored, which meant that individuals were given weapons who had no business having access to them. They should not have qualified, and the fact is they created the potential for great danger. (55-56)

Titko openly criticises the military authorities for the lack of screening to select the people fit to go to war. He does not claim that the medical commissions should assess the "resilience" and psychological soundness of the recruits, rather does capsize the argument: they should consider their fragilities to spare them the dangerous exposure to such an experience they hardly would endure. Titko accounts for grave incidents involving drunk soldiers, which makes him aware of the need to prevent this dangerous combination:

> Our life experience in the military had already taught us that the utmost of caution was required in moments like these. The stress of what is already a dangerous situation because of the undisciplined actions of one soldier is heightened by the unique fact that these men are also carrying combat weapons. There had already been incidents in which strong physical intervention was required to protect oneself and others from the threat posed by someone on the verge of losing all self-control. (57)

Substance abuse has been a major problem since ever: drunkenness was common among soldiery of ancient times, and drug addiction has piled up over the twentieth century. Seeking refuge in alcohol or drugs does not help the combatants to deal with stress but exposes them to further risks than those implied by being at war:

> It didn't help them much to reform their ways, drinking themselves into oblivion, smoking all kinds of garbage, like pigs wallowing in a pigsty, traumatizing themselves.
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> One such character accidentally cut off half his foot striking an axe into it. Another broke several ribs stumbling into a hole that had been dug for a new underground shelter. A third blew off a finger with a grenade launcher.
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> In other cases, they died from bouts of epilepsy or when their hearts stopped beating. They died from the careless handling of their own grenades, or when their weapons accidentally discharged. Enemy bombardments led to their deaths when, in their drunken state, they couldn't think fast enough to save their own life. In some instances, they died; in some, they were badly maimed. (60)

Titko exposes the true ugliness of war: its indifference – embodied in the casual way death reaps, as well as in the dull and depersonalising attitude of military bureaucracy, cruelty, and painful legacy. Experiencing war opens our eyes to how wrong and fake our idea of war is:

> War is not the "ra-ra" excitement of fiction and movies.
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> War is when the entire world as you have known it is turned upside down.
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> War is dirt and pain and suffering and death.
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> War is unavoidable and horrible losses.
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> War is work, all day, every hour, every minute, even exhausting work.
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> War reveals and brings to the surface all human virtues or vices. It becomes the context within which your sense of what is right becomes your inescapable and absolute victory. (61)

In the face of such a conclusive and dried-off description, Titko claims that finding some balance is necessary to make meaning out of war and, above all, to deal with its traumatic effects:

> Fatigue layered upon exhaustion and made for an instability like a volcano in imminent danger of erupting. Occasionally I experienced that overwhelming feeling that I had reached my wits' end and might explode at any moment. Thankfully, even a short rest would take the edge off the fatigue. It would oscillate like waves on the sea, and after a brief reprieve, its oppressive and smothering current would once again threaten to overwhelm me. (203)

The pages about trauma are among the best of the book:

> Deep, deep within my subconscious a secret chest lies buried, a container of specific memories of the war; securely fastened. It is closed, and just to be sure it stays closed, there is also a heavy stone braced against it to prevent it from opening by itself. I found that rock in my thoughts, and it has a connection with me. I wrought that rock over a long period of time, painfully, insistently. Why? Certain thoughts are a source of incredible pain and despair for a person. Memories of events that have occurred in the not-so-recent past evoke this pain over and over again. Their unique trait is that the passage of time cannot restrain them. If that dam breaks, then the trauma is equivalent in intensity to that moment they were first experienced. Possibly more painful. (189)

The metaphor of the chest preserving the most dangerous and painful memories is iconic of how trauma seems to work: as a frozen memory, a secluded set of memories that cannot be revived and re-experienced among the others. Of course, not all war memories are traumatic:

> I'm not saying that all my memories of the war are stored in that chest. Far from it! It is true, however, that the most painful, the most unbearable, are there. These, in particular, are held within this imaginative chest even to this day. That's not to say I don't occasionally open this locked box myself. I re-visit these images, interpret them, categorize them. And in those moments, I grit my teeth to restrain the pain, break out in a cold sweat, and feel the pressure of a pining and melancholy stress well up within me. I am conscious, too, of a feeling of regret when I return there in memory. Such is the reality of my past and my life going forward. For as long as I shall live, for as long as I shall breathe, for as long as I shall think and reflect. (189)

The metaphor of the chest should suggest an idea of awareness rather than oblivion or denial: the memories preserved in the box can be harmful and may spread unhappiness and despair if unchecked. The war changes those who experience it and what is done cannot be undone: "I cannot imagine this wound ever healing. Or that the vivid emotion-filled dreams will ever end. Or that the images of my friends will ever be erased from memory. I am certain that to my dying day I will harbour this grief. My 'blood formula' has been altered. Forever" (209).

These are the last words of an excellent book that deserves attentive and empathic reading. The author is crystal clear about what he thinks of war, as far as he has seen and endured it. He writes about it in a way that makes the reader

"sadder and wiser" but not laden with sorrow and bitterness, for Titko also knows how to be ironic as he reveals the secret of his "blood formula".