

WHY UKRAINE CANNOT LOSE THE WAR WITH RUSSIA

In Conversation with the writer **Jonas Ohman**, co-founder of the Ukrainian Aid Organization Blue/Yellow

This is **part two** of a conversation with Jonas Ohman, co-founder of the Ukrainian Aid Organization Blue/Yellow. Part one was published in *Draugas News* in January 2024.

LAIMA VINČĖ

Jonas Ohman, a filmmaker, writer, journalist, translator, and language teacher, was born in Sweden in 1965. In the early 1990s, he developed a keen interest in Lithuania's independence movement against the Soviet Union, which took him to Vilnius. Since then, he has made Lithuania his home. In 2014, at the beginning of the war in Ukraine, he teamed up with Lithuanian partners to establish the NGO Blue/Yellow to support Ukraine's Armed Forces.

In the second part of the conversation, Jonas Ohman discusses the threats the Baltic States face from Russia. He also shares his perspective on the Russian character, the characteristics of a just war, and the response of the West to the war in Ukraine.

Laima Vincė: The narrative emerges that some nations are entitled to a peaceful, prosperous, enjoyable life, and others are destined to suffer. How much danger do you think the Baltic States are in?

Jonas Ohman: At this point, physically speaking, the danger for the Baltics is small because Russia's resources are based in Ukraine. We must understand that the Ukrainian adventure takes a significant toll on Russian security resources. So, at this point, for example, the warehouses of ammunition in Kaliningrad are almost empty. We also see the low number of Russian active units. Relatively speaking, the Baltics are safe.

However, Russia is reshaping and rebuilding its military capacity in the region long-term. They are talking about setting up military headquarters in the western regions. They are preparing for a much heavier military presence in the area. Mind you, when this happens, in about five years, depending on Ukraine obviously, maybe 10 years, with the enormous experience and understanding of modern warfare that Russia gains from Ukraine, the situation will be dangerous. In the long term, there is a slowly increasing risk. The mindset of Russia is that they are setting us up for the future. We must admit this. We must react domestically but also in the Western security framework. In the short term, we are pretty safe, but I have no illusions for the future. We can laugh at the Germans, but if we could figure out how to have them here, kindergartens or not, it would be a good thing.

Demographics play a role in the Baltics. There is a large percentage of elderly and children within that small population demographic.

Demographics play a pressing role over time. The Baltics are declining, all three, and especially Lithuania. That's due to migration and other factors. Ironically, the influx of Ukrainian refugees, and to some extent refugees from other countries in the region, has been helpful for Lithuania.

What about Russian soft propaganda in the Baltics?

We can see the same people using the same messaging against Lithuania and the Baltic states more generally: "It's a rotten state. The government is corrupt. The true values are family values." I see a danger with these movements. Russians use them to identify potential collaborators. Undoubtedly, an occupation plan for the Baltics includes collaborators, local stakeholders, and local decision-makers. That's a given. We saw that in Ukraine. I have examples from the Kharkiv region about how the Russians prepared the occupation one and a half years ahead of the full assault. They planted people and positions.

Again, for now, we are fairly safe, but in the fu-



Jonas Ohman with one of his panda stuffies poses by a destroyed Russian tank.

ture, they will come back at us over and over again. They will come back in different shapes and forms because it's in their blood if you want to use that term. It's in the Russian narrative. We should have no illusions about this. That's another reason why we need to win in Ukraine. If we don't win in Ukraine and we are made to accept some lousy solution, say, for instance, that Ukraine is forced to give Russia parts of its territory, that's a big win for Russia. We've seen the standard Russian tactics in Moldova, Georgia, and elsewhere. They do the same thing over and over again.

In your memoir *Donbaso džiasas (Donbas Jazz)*, you write with honesty about your bout with depression while in the war zone. How do you and the soldiers you meet cope with depression?

It's easier when the pressure is on and when you're stressed. Tomorrow morning, I've got to deal with some hard decisions about the distribution of drones. We can't provide drones to everyone, so we must make some tough calls. It's very stressful. However, as long as the pressure is on and you're in the game, it's quite easy. But, when you find yourself reflecting on past events or facing dilemmas, depression may start to set in. It can happen at any time, even at 3 o'clock in the morning. Depression is similar to the waves of the sea slowly eroding the sand, wave by wave. In my case, I have experience, so I have a couple of ways to deal with it. They are clever ways. For example, I have some friends, some bears, some pandas. I make up a story or fairy tale, and I imagine the bears are wiser than I am. I hand over the problem to the bears. I tell them to solve it for me.

Are these bears physical people, or are they something you imagine?

Just a moment... (Jonas brings a panda stuffie and shows it to me on the screen).

That's your bear?!

The Ukrainians discovered that I am fond of pandas, so I now own bears of various sizes, including larger ones. Bears are fascinating creatures. They possess wisdom and have a deep understanding of life. They can see beyond the surface and into the mythical dimension. They enjoy honey cakes and have a unique perspective on the world around them. For me, as a tool for therapy, it helps. I have two cats now. My cats help me to go beyond the human.

You also write in your book about household pets and animals abandoned by war and how the soldiers take them in.

It has been said that there are three ways to measure a person's decency: how they treat women, how they treat children, and how they treat animals. It's a male thing, but it's important to defend women and children. It's genetic. It's nature. Very simple. You treat them with respect. When it comes to animals, building a bond, petting, and caring for them is a sign of empathy and kindness. However, some Russians have a different attitude. There are some terrible stories about how they treat animals, which is concerning.

Are the Russians mistreating the animals on the front lines?

They are mining them.

What?!

They are mining the animals. We have several examples. They have mined hedgehogs. They have mined cats. They have mined other animals. They attach the mine with duct tape to the animal. Who does things like that? We have a story of a Ukrainian soldier who managed to de-mine a cat. They hung raccoons in Kherson. They were strangling and stringing up animals. It shows something about their mental state. Well, if you're going to do things like that, then you are going to pay for it. Then, they are raping, molesting, and abusing women and girls. I had a partner in Poland who brought out vans filled with raped underage girls from Ukraine to Poland. Some of these girls had been raped dozens of times. They had been held captive for weeks. Some of them were pregnant.

I've heard from Ukrainian sources that rape is a massive problem with this war.

In the Russian-occupied zones, one of the major problems is that girls and women just disappear. We suspect that they've let out criminals from the prisons to join the Russian army. This is another dimension to this war: You've got to defend the women, children, animals – all those who can't protect themselves. That is another motivation. It is a source of anger. Also, it motivates you, let's put it that way.

In your book, you write about the women volunteers who work for Blue/Yellow. There is a feminist aspect to your book because you give generous credit to the work of these women.

The women are obviously strong. They are unique individuals. I am a type of entrepreneur, and the women keep me grounded. That's very important. They all have experience as freedom fighters or fighting for Ukraine. They have strong values and beliefs in their families. In addition to Lithuanian women volunteers, a number of Ukrainian women are cooperating with us. They are highly efficient and accurate. When I talk to the soldiers, man to man, we skirt around issues. Then, it's good to have a woman as an intermediary because it makes discussing difficult things easier.

Too often, there is a tendency to push the women into the background as nameless helpers. What I enjoyed in your book is how you write about each of these brave women individually.

I've seen many strong and amazing women during this war. Of course, that's a crucial part of this story. I'm a progressive modern person, but we're talking about Russia, a country where, according to the law, it is okay to beat your wife. We are talking about a society that, in so many ways, lacks freedom of speech, tolerance, and whatnot. The Russia of today is everything that I am not. That also applies to women and feminist ideas. It's part of the anti-Russian stance to be supportive of feminist women.

How would you describe the Russia of today?

Russia, first of all, is a country of lies; it is an illusion. Russia is about deception, diversions, about trying to deceive you. Russia is also the cult of power – the cult of the strong. For instance, we have received patches from dead Russian soldiers. These patches have slogans written on them that pretty much say: "I don't give a s-h-t about anything, I'm just here for the violence."

For Russians, strong is right. Russia is a cult of lies, a cult of power, but also, deep down, Russians are highly disillusioned. That is one of the biggest problems for Russia: they have no alternative. They basically have nowhere to go. Ukraine is different. They have alternatives. They have freedom, ties to Western Europe, and a Ukrainian identity. Ukraine has an alternative. Russia does not. So, lies, cult of power, and disillusionment define Russia.

So many Russians have emigrated abroad to escape the draft.

They are escaping. They are looking for an alternative. As we know, every ordinary Russian has left Russia years ago.

Why haven't those Russians abroad protested this war?

Because they are still Russians. To some extent, they still keep to the ideology of being Russian. You may have noticed that Russians are two-faced. On the one hand, they understand the good things about Western life and democracy, but on the other hand, they are very proud to be Russians. What does that actually mean? They take Pushkin and play into this greatness narrative. But take Chekhov. His plays are about lies and deception. Those plays are a miniature version of Russia, as I can see. Russia is a sad paradox. Russia has everything: resources, potential, and whatnot, but at the same time, it has nothing.

Recently, I was invited to present my research and translations of the work of the poet Matilda Olkinaitė at the European Literature Night at the Ukrainian Institute in New York. My co-presenter was the writer Andrej Kurkov from Ukraine. He read from his book "Grey Bees" about people living in the Donbas region at the beginning of the war. He talked about how, to this day, in Eastern Ukraine, the so-called separatists believe that they are fighting to get the old Soviet Union back. They even have a Russian television channel called Nostalgia, which plays into this fantasy of the old Soviet Union.

Another interesting feature is Russian anti-Americanism. They have this idea that the U.S. is rotten and deceptive. They push the narrative that the Soviet Union won the Vietnam War.

We are looking at a very complex situation. I see the same thing playing out with Palestine, playing into a narrative from the 70s. People don't want to understand or admit that things are changing. Another culprit is Iran. Nobody talks about Iran. They are the biggest hub of terrorism in the world. They are

active in Ukraine via Russia, and they are active in the Middle East, but nobody really talks about them.

Nobody is talking about how Wagner trained Hamas in the attacks against Israel, which Ukrainian sources have documented.

We are looking at Russia, Iran, North Korea, China, and Cuba, but nobody wants to analyze geopolitics in a complex way. Who is the opponent? Nobody wants to bring this up. I am really disappointed with intellectuals because they don't want to see the complexity of the big picture. They prefer to stick with their comfortable, outworn beliefs. If you're going to get into the nuts and bolts of this war, you must deal with a far more complex picture.

Society does not want to deal with the complex picture. They just want simple black-and-white answers.

The end to intellectualism in the U.S. is just stunning. There are people around who are not stupid, who have read their books, but the general debate is not happening. Let's talk about Afghanistan. That was a horrible war for 20 years that led to nothing. Where is the discussion? I mean, you have this major undertaking based on the fury and anger after 9/11, and then it's just, whatever.

When you look at the debate in the U.S., more generally speaking, it's always about rights for everybody, but the discussion is never about any obligations. People are very aware of their rights.

As a European, I have another mindset and live in another system. Take, for instance, the way we pay taxes in Europe. It's a clear and distinct part of our social contract. In the U.S., it's different. As a European, I see filthy rich Americans getting another tax break. It makes no sense. I can't grasp it. Why is this even happening?

I understand that the U.S. system is fundamentally different. For a sound debate to take place in society, you must consider your obligations. One thing that I'm learning about the U.S. is that they have these buzzwords, like freedom, and they are being hijacked and filled with whatever content is convenient. The freedom to carry a weapon... Come on? It's just business. They take these concepts and fill them with whatever they want, and people accept it.

We were talking about how Russian propaganda infiltrates the Baltic States and Ukraine to shape people's thinking. Do you think Russian propaganda is shaping American mentalities as well?

Every day. They are working on it every day and have been doing so for decades. They know the geography, the terrain, the topography. They know how to push the right buttons and create divisions in any conflict. Take the division between Democrats and Republicans; well, somebody did a good job there. Russia will pick up a trend and endorse it. The Rus-

sians know this narrative. Every Russian carries the insignia of Russia wherever they go. They look for opportunities to confirm their narrative.

You write in your book that you met with some French dignitaries and diplomats, and you were outraged over how clueless they were. We were all furious at the beginning of the war, with Macron calling Putin as though he were calling a human who could change his mind about his intentions.

That's another example of Western European complacency. They want to finish the war so they can return to business as usual with Russia.

But the ordinary person can make a difference by contributing to Blue/Yellow.

It's not just about one organization. Many people pulling in the same direction makes a difference. It's more important how the difference that is made affects you. Ukrainian poetry wasn't even on the agenda a couple of years ago, and now it is. These things trickle up. These little things, over time, contribute to policy shifts. Russia has no interest in letting Ukraine enter the world stage. Ironically, the West doesn't either. But they let it happen because they can't pass them over right now. So you have to grab the moment. For the Baltics and me, a secure, prosperous, friendly Ukraine is a bigger security guarantor than even NATO.

Yes, that's true. I think that the Scandinavian countries, the Baltics, Poland, and Ukraine should keep their defense resources in the region as a security block.

They kind of are. The seismic shifts in security structures are huge. We are part of it. We have to do what we have to do. I was writing in 2014 that a war was coming. I was saying in 2021 that we should get weapons to Ukraine.

I thought it was interesting in your book when you describe the first time you went to the front lines in Eastern Ukraine in 2014; the Russians were looping American horror movies on local television.

I will never forget that moment. They showed propaganda news 24/7, along with instructions on how to behave during artillery shelling. They played American horror movies repeatedly, and these movies were extremely violent and gruesome. Even the Ukrainian soldiers had to watch these films as no other options were available. This experience was terrifying and created an immense amount of stress and horror for everyone.

Also, those films send the message that Americans are violent and are the enemy.

Yes.

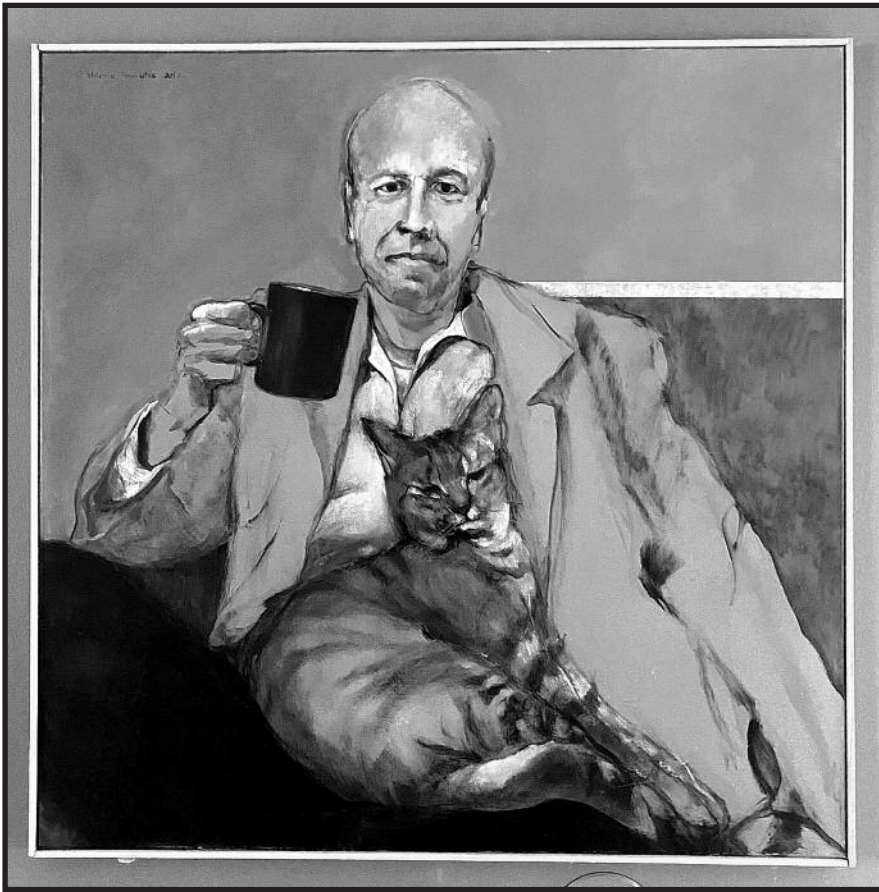
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Jonas makes a delivery to Ukraine. The moment is fixed with unfurling the Lithuanian flag and taking a photo.

Jonas Ohman

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Jonas Ohman by Aldona Simutis, 2010, oil on canvas

I found that scene in your book weirdly interesting because I'm struggling this semester teaching a first-year academic writing class, and according to my students, the only things that they have watched or read are horror books and films.

It's a social thing. Horror films, with their brutal message about how bad things can get, create a culture. If you don't know any alternatives, then fair enough, that's all you know. It means everyone around me is doing the same thing and has the same references. It plays well if you only have one set of references.

I think the way you interpreted the use of American horror films as a Russian propaganda tool in your book was interesting because another person would dismiss the constant airing of horror films as, "Oh well, that's what people like to watch for entertainment." But you argue that these films are creating anxiety and stress and that, psychologically, they are bringing the local population to this fever pitch. At the same time that these people are absorbing horror, they are receiving warnings about artillery shelling. So, what does that do to a person's psyche? It's psychological warfare.

Yes, very much so.

The people in Eastern Ukraine are exposed to constant death and killing on the screen and in their daily lives.

Somebody asked me if I was willing to die for democracy. I responded, "I will try not to, but I am very willing to kill for it." And I am killing for it. We have helped to kill so many Russians, thousands.

But you are killing indirectly by bringing in non-lethal aid. You're not picking up a gun yourself.

At the beginning of the Russian assault, I was asked to finance the Ukrainian IED (Improvised Explosive Devices) program. I did it. I saw the results of what I financed. I saw what happened as a result of my decision. Yes, I am definitely killing, not directly with my own hands, but in the way that states kill. It's one of the problems with Western civilization or in-

tellectuals. You must be ready to kill sometimes for what you believe in if it comes to that. You must be ready, willing, and able to kill. It's how life and the world sometimes work.

We are squeamish about defending our democracy. We want it all, but we don't want to accept that it's being threatened.

That brings me back to the Greatest Generation. I now understand that expression much better than I did before. These guys paved the way for decades of prosperity, peace, and democracy. Of course, we get to the point where all these things start to get weaker, and then you need to fight for it. There is this story about how the tree of freedom must be watered with the blood of patriots. It's valid. From time to time, you have to water the tree of freedom. That's just how things work.

Look at the sacrifices the Ukrainian people are making for freedom and democracy. They don't even question it. You've been there on the ground since day one, and you can say to yourself that you have contributed to the fact that Ukraine has not fallen.

Definitely.

How much money has Blue/Yellow collected up until now?

Roughly 70 million U.S. dollars.

That's impressive.

I'm going for a billion dollars. We are trying to show that the ordinary person can make a difference in geopolitics.

Laima Vincė's most recent book, **Vanished Lands: Memory and Postmemory in North American Lithuanian Diaspora Literature**, was published by Peter Lang Publishers in December 2023. She earned a PhD in Humanities from Vilnius University in 2022. For more about Laima Vincė's work, please see: www.Laimavince.com

In Defense of Ukrainian Culture

Lithuanian museums to the rescue



Lithuanian Museum workers packed much needed art restoration supplies to war torn Ukraine.

In December last year, the National Museum of Lithuania initiated a joint campaign with the Ukrainian support group Strong Together, the Lithuanian Museums Association, and the Lithuanian news portal LRT. The initiative, "Ukrainian Culture Can't Defend Itself," aimed to raise funds for the preservation of Ukraine's cultural heritage, which has been severely damaged or looted due to the Russian invasion.

According to UNESCO, the impact of Russian aggression on Ukraine's cultural heritage has been devastating, with 329 cultural heritage sites having been significantly damaged since February 2022. The destruction includes religious buildings, museums, historical sites, monuments, libraries, and archives. The St. Sophia Cathedral and monastery complex in Kyiv, the historical centers of Odesa and Lviv, the Odesa Archaeological Museum, and the Maritime Museum have all suffered damage. Artworks and archival materials have also been damaged or stolen.

The "Ukrainian Culture Can't Defend Itself" campaign sought donations from visitors to museums in Lithuania. The response was overwhelming, with over 10,000 euros donated in just three months.

"The donations were used to purchase much needed restoration and

conservation supplies for Ukrainian museums," said Ruta Kačkutė, the director of the Lithuanian National Museum.

The museum purchased special detergents, fixing polymers, glues, watercolors and tinctures, and fine Japanese paper for restoration work. It also procured equipment such as microscopes with cameras, magnifying glasses, ultrasonic baths, and special ultraviolet lamps. According to the museum director, restoration supplies and equipment are difficult to obtain in Ukraine and are very expensive.

"We have been cooperating with Ukrainian institutions to learn about their needs," said the director.

The supplies were delivered on February 20 to the National History Museum of Ukraine, which will distribute the support to other Ukrainian museums as needed.



Baltic Conference at Yale

The 29th Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies (AABS) conference will be held at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, June 13-16, 2024. The biennial event brings together scholars and enthusiasts from around the world interested in Baltic studies. The three-day program will include panels, roundtable discussions, and workshops on various fields of study, such as history, sociology, anthropology, politics, the arts, literature, and cinema. The conference will also feature keynote talks by leading Baltic scholars, film screenings, musical performances, and exhibits, providing a platform for exchanging ideas and knowledge.

Register early

You can now register for the conference at <https://aabs-balticstudies.org/aabs-2024/registration/>.

The entire conference program will be released in May.

Become a member of AABS

AABS membership is open to all, regardless of involvement in scholarly work. You can sign up by visiting <https://aabs-balticstudies.org/membership/>.

By joining AABS, you contribute to the association's academic objectives and gain access to exclusive benefits. These include discounted conference fees, a subscription to the quarterly *Journal of Baltic Studies*, an annual print newsletter, and quarterly e-newsletters, all designed to keep you updated with the latest developments in Baltic studies.