

THE WILL TO FREEDOM: A UKRAINIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE ISSUE OF WILL

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DOI: 10.36169/2227-6068.2025.01.00009

Abstract. *By analyzing prevalent Ukrainian conceptions of will and freedom, which, in the Ukrainian language, are united under a single notion of “volia,” this article proposes adding to the existing approaches that explain the resilience of Ukrainians in the Russo-Ukrainian War. The paper examines the interpretations of volia found in Ukrainian culture and philosophy, systematizing them by introducing the concept of “the will to freedom.” This concept represents a worldview conviction that integrates three key ideas: first, that freedom is directly linked to the will to freedom; second, that the loss of the will to freedom leads not only to the loss of freedom itself but also to devastating tragedies; third, that only the simultaneous presence of both the will to freedom and freedom itself among a nation’s people can ensure the preservation of that nation’s cultural identity and, at the same time, bring the nation closer to fully realizing universal values such as justice, truth, and prosperity. As demonstrated, the concept of the will to freedom significantly differs from ideas about will expressed by A. Schopenhauer, F. Nietzsche, V. Lypynskyi, H. Bergson, P. Ricoeur, G. Strawson, A. Mele, and others, aligning more closely with the thoughts on will articulated by H. Skovoroda, T. Shevchenko, and contemporary 21st century Ukrainian thinkers. The ideas presented in this study offer insights into the worldview foundations of the resilience that has enabled Ukrainians to endure three years of full-scale war against an adversary that vastly outmatches their country in terms of population, weaponry, and material resources.*

Keywords: *The will, freedom, Ukraine, Russo-Ukrainian war, war, Ukrainian philosophy*

The article **received:** April 5, 2025; **approved:** June 29, 2025.

1. Introduction

For many analysts, the events that have occurred over three years of full-scale war, during which the people of Ukraine have shown steadfast resistance against the superior forces of Russian invaders, seem incomprehensible. At the beginning of 2022, many analysts claimed that Ukraine was fundamentally incapable of resisting a full-scale invasion by such a powerful state as Russia (Jones et al. 2021; Kagan 2022; Kofman et al. 2022). A similar view was shared by numerous politicians who, based on this false belief, made erroneous decisions (Braun 2024: 26). Later, both analysts and politicians were genuinely surprised that Ukrainian resistance to the invader endured for years.

The fact is that these researchers and politicians were primarily focused on the balance of weapons and resources between the warring sides, neglecting another crucial question or relying on misleading information regarding the issue. This question is, how do Ukrainians perceive their freedom? As Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has shown, the resilience of a country resisting military aggression is determined not only by its weaponry and material resources but also by the beliefs held by its citizens who wield those weapons—particularly, the extent of their willingness to fight for their freedom and ideals. If one were to examine Ukrainian history, philosophy, and culture, as well as the values that Ukrainians consider vital, the resilience of Ukraine in its war against foreign invaders becomes far more comprehensible.

In this article, we will explore a crucial component of the perceptions that Ukrainians have regarding this war—we will systematize and analyze the thoughts of Ukrainian philosophers, thinkers, and scholars concerning the concept of *volia* (the term used to translate the English notion of “the will” into Ukrainian).

Structurally, our article consists of three main sections. First, we will examine the meaning of the Ukrainian word *volia*, revealing that it encompasses not only the notion of “the will” but also that of “freedom.” We will also clarify how these different meanings are interconnected and represented in Ukrainian culture and historical memory.

Then we will investigate the ideas and perceptions of *volia* that contemporary Ukrainian philosophers and scholars invoke to explain Ukrainians' resistance to Russia's full-scale invasion. This article was written in March 2025, reflecting on the events of this war that have unfolded over the three years since Russia's full-scale invasion began in February 2022.

In the next section of our article, we will synthesize the findings from the previous sections to construct a comprehensive understanding of Ukrainians' conception of *volia* (which we will designate with the term “the will to freedom”) and refine it by comparing it with well-known philosophical approaches to the question of will.

We hope our study will help illuminate the unyielding defiance shown by the citizens of Ukraine during three years of continuous struggle against an adversary that significantly surpasses them in military strength, human resources, and economic capacity.

2. The Word “*Volia*” in Ukrainian Language and Culture

The Britannica Dictionary defines “will” as a noun with three meanings:

- 1) “a legal document in which a person states who should receive his or her possessions after he or she dies,”
- 2) “a strong desire or determination to do something,” and
- 3) “a person’s choice or desire in a particular situation.”

However, in the Ukrainian language, the word *volia* carries significantly different semantic weight. In the context of philosophical reflection on this word, what is particularly important is that *volia* is not only “the will” but also “freedom” (Ушкалов 2024: 141).

In fact, the word *volia* in Ukrainian has three primary meanings: “desire,” “strength,” and “freedom.” Researcher Yatskevych clarifies these meanings as follows:

Volia-desire is qualified as a mental state of the willing subject, characterized by the presence of a consciously recognized need and an intention to act according to a chosen course of action to achieve a goal valuable to the willing subject, as well as the external signs (manifestation) of this state observed by an external observer. *Volia*-strength is the fact of the willing subject possessing strength, power, influence, ability, or possibility to control someone or oneself, to influence or control the situation, or the dominance of the willing subject in subject-recipient relations as a result of this fact. *Volia*-freedom is the presence of favorable conditions, sufficient space for realizing the intentions of the willing subject, or the absence of tangible restrictive factors negatively affecting the subject’s well-being. (Яцкевич 2009: 12)

Moreover, as researchers note, in modern Ukrainian, the lexeme *volia* is increasingly used to denote the idea of freedom and has become less common to represent strength or desire. Therefore, while Ukrainian contains the antinomy *volia-bezwillia* (“the will–willpowerlessness”), indicating the presence or absence of strength and desire to act, the more prevalent antinomy is *volia-nevolia* (“freedom–slavery”), highlighting *volia* as freedom. Importantly, the meanings of “strength” and “desire” have not disappeared from the concept of *volia*—though they have moved to the background, *volia* (as freedom), *volia* (as desire), and *volia* (as strength) are conceived as an interconnected complex. Notably, this is evident in the persistent conviction that, to avoid *nevolia*, one must 1) have *volia* as the will to be free and 2) have *volia* as the strength to fight for one’s *volia* as freedom. Such beliefs are not theoretical constructs but rather precede any theoretical framework—they reflect how the Ukrainian language itself imposes a model for perceiving realities such as freedom, the struggle for freedom, and the desire for freedom. In Ukrainian, the idea of the will for freedom and the struggle for freedom is embedded in the very concept of freedom—it is conceived as something that requires the will for freedom and the strength to struggle for it.

The Ukrainian philosopher Myroslav Popovych wrote that in Ukrainian culture, the understanding of the concept of *volia* is dominated by the aspect of “independence from the master and mastery,” as “*volia* first and foremost opposes serfdom-slavery (*nevolia*)” (Попович 2018: 418). In this context, it should be added that the historical memory of

the Ukrainian people retains vivid recollections of how the seizure of Ukrainian lands by foreign powers led to the enslavement of Ukrainians. This occurred not only in ancient times but even in the 20th century when, after the Russians seized the lands of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR), there was an analog to serfdom—the collectivization of Ukrainian peasants. In other words, Ukrainians have a deep-rooted memory that the loss of *volia* due to foreign conquest leads not only to the loss of statehood attributes but also to social enslavement.

Ukrainians have a long history of Russian domination over their lands. Historical memory shows that Russian actions to deprive Ukrainians of *volia* resulted in different dimensions of *nevolia*: from the loss of state attributes to cultural subjugation (for example, the bans imposed by the Russian Empire on the Ukrainian language or the Soviet government's portrayal of Ukrainian culture as underdeveloped and rural). But these are not the only consequences of losing *volia*. Ukrainians also remember well that the *nevolia* brought by the Russians to Ukrainian lands led to terrible tragedies, such as a vast number of Ukrainians being sent to prisons and forced labor camps in Siberia, where they were killed and maimed under Russian and Soviet rule, and the death of Ukrainians during the Holodomor.

For instance, the memory of the Holodomor remains vivid in the families of many Ukrainians, where adults have passed down stories to their children about the horrific famine that once devastated their relatives. Ukrainian historians have compiled extensive volumes of documentary evidence (Борисенко 2008; Гриневич 2012; Пиріг 2007), which provide clear and unequivocal testimony to the scale, tragic nature, and underlying causes of the Holodomor. These documents are so compelling and harrowing that numerous countries and international organizations have officially recognized the Holodomor as an act of genocide. To illustrate, we may cite the European Parliament's *Resolution on 90 Years After the Holodomor: Recognizing the Mass Killing Through Starvation as Genocide* (15 December 2022):

The Holodomor famine of 1932–1933, which caused the deaths of millions of Ukrainians, was cynically planned and cruelly implemented by the Soviet regime in order to force through the Soviet Union's policy of collectivization of agriculture and to suppress the Ukrainian people and their national identity.

Furthermore, in Ukrainian culture, the image of "*nevolia*" is closely linked with the image of "falsehood." The direct connection between "*nevolia*" and "falsehood" was, for instance, written about by the most famous Ukrainian artist, Taras Shevchenko, who called for a struggle against both. For Shevchenko and the Ukrainian people, these themes were not merely theoretical musings, but something they encountered directly in their lives. Recall that Taras Shevchenko was born into a family of serfs and remained one himself until his friends literally bought his freedom. When he wrote his famous lines, "Truth will rise! *Volia* will rise!" (Шевченко 2003c), Shevchenko knew exactly what he was talking about. As Ukrainian philosopher Dmytro Chyzhevskyi wrote,

'*Nevolia*,' 'falsehood'—against which Shevchenko fought—are not abstract ethical concepts but human *nevolia* (the *nevolia* of the Ukrainian people, Ukrainian

peasants) and human falsehood (of tsars, priests, masters). (Чижевський 2005: 180)

At the same time, Ukrainians have historical memory of free life—especially of the Cossack era and the times of struggle for independence in the late 1910s. Moreover, in the years of independent Ukraine after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Ukrainians grew accustomed to free life—finally, a generation grew up that heard about foreign domination only as a historical fact. For members of this generation, *volia* is perceived as something inseparable from their lives, and any encroachment on this *volia* is utterly unacceptable. The history of independent Ukraine has shown that Ukrainians are a freedom-loving people who have repeatedly demonstrated (e.g., during the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity) that they refuse to tolerate what they perceive as falsehood. In addition, this generation of Ukrainians, who grew up in a free Ukraine, has no memories of relatively peaceful coexistence with Russians in the late USSR. For them, Russia’s attack on Ukraine is an unjust attempt by a foreign state to take away their freedom.

For a nation that has constantly had to fight for its existence amidst powerful and belligerent neighbors, it is no surprise that the primary embodiments of Ukrainian identity in historical memory are of those who fought for *volia*. For example, there were the Zaporizhian Cossacks—many of whom fled their oppressors to settle in free lands, where they ensured their freedom with weapons in hand. Another example is one of figures such as Bohdan Khmelnytsky, the leaders of the Ukrainian People’s Republic, and other Ukrainian state formations of the 20th century, who fought for the liberation of Ukrainian lands from foreign invaders. The images of these figures and their struggle for Ukraine’s *volia* are essential components of how Ukrainians perceive their national identity.

It is also worth noting that Ukrainian thought has a long-standing tradition of considering the love of *volia* as one of the fundamental traits of the Ukrainian national character. This idea was first expressed in 1861 by the Ukrainian thinker Mykola Kostomarov (Костомаров, 1920). In contemporary Ukrainian philosophical thought, authors such as Serhiy Proleyev (2017) and Vakhtang Kebuladze (2022) continue to explore it. Some researchers, analyzing the Ukrainian resistance in the Russo-Ukrainian war, have concluded that Ukrainian resilience is grounded, in particular, in “the value of freedom, which helped Ukraine’s diverse society to speak with one voice in the times of crisis” (Kudlenko 2023: 514).

In conclusion, this section reveals two clear understandings present in Ukrainian language and culture: first, that *volia* (as freedom) is directly connected to *volia* (as desire and strength), and second, for a nation, the loss of the will for freedom leads to devastating tragedies.

3. The War Against *Nevolia*

In 2023, Ukrainian psychologist Pavlo Hornostai wrote the following words in his monograph:

The meaning of the Ukrainian nation's existence (one could say—Ukraine's national idea) has always been the pursuit of *volia*. During the war, a new meaning (a new idea) became acutely relevant—to win, to defend freedom, to preserve independence, to survive as a nation. These two ideas didn't just merge, they multiplied each other. Because of this, Ukrainians gained an immense spiritual strength that, at that moment, had virtually no equivalent in the world. This fusion was so powerful that there was no doubt: this nation would endure everything. (Горноста́й 2023: 172)

Pavlo Hornostai wrote these words after his son had been killed in this war. His son, like thousands of other Ukrainians, volunteered to fight on the front lines to defend his country from Russia's invasion, and the horrific trials did not stop Ukrainians in their struggle. Ukrainian soldiers put up desperate resistance against the enemy because they knew what they were defending—their own *volia* and the *volia* of their people against an invader that had taken it away before and had now returned to commit the same crime once again.

It wasn't just Ukrainian soldiers who resisted heroically. The civilian population of Ukraine mobilized in a massive volunteer movement—millions of Ukrainians sought to do something to help their country endure. They donated personal funds for military needs, organized charity events to support the front lines, wove camouflage nets for soldiers, and contributed in numerous other ways.

In May 2022, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology conducted a public survey in Ukraine regarding potential compromises to achieve peace with Russia. In this survey, 82% of respondents chose the following option:

Under no circumstances should Ukraine give up any of its territories, even if it means the war will last longer and the country's independence will be at risk. (Головаха 2022: 270)

A few months later, sociologists repeated the survey, and this figure rose to 84%. As Ukrainian sociologists wrote in 2022,

These months are crystallizing the country's identity. Today, for the majority of the population, the issue of national independence is not something abstract—it has become existential. After all, by fighting for the country's independence, society is defending its right to live, its future, its right to freedom, and the ability to live on its land under its own flag. With the start of the full-scale war, personal, civic, and national dimensions have become tightly intertwined. (Головаха 2022: 329)

As mentioned earlier, the concept of *nevolia* is closely associated in the Ukrainian consciousness with the notion of "falsehood." The statements made by the Russian leadership to justify the actions of its troops and the attack on Ukraine were seen by Ukrainians as a blatant manifestation of falsehood, one whose nature was clear not only to Ukrainians but also to many people around the world.

As leading international experts wrote in March 2022,

A lawful justification for Russia's military invasion of—or 'special military operation' in—Ukraine does not exist; the various claims advanced by Russia not only all fail, but most of them fail on multiple grounds. The invasion of Ukraine

constitutes an unlawful use of force, an act of aggression and an egregious violation of a rule of *jus cogens*. (Green et al. 2022: 28)

Numerous foreign researchers noted that Russians were committing horrific crimes in Ukraine:

Three months into this war, there appears to be evidence of Russia inciting genocide in Ukraine by committing atrocities intended to destroy the Ukrainian people. Such evidence includes examples of mass killings of civilians, forced deportations, dehumanizing anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, and denying the existence of a Ukrainian identity. (Bufacchi 2022: 1)

Ukrainians witnessed all this with their own eyes. They saw Russians destroying their cities, they saw civilians killed in their homes at night by Russian missiles, and at the same time, they heard Russian politicians and propagandists claiming that Russia was “liberating” Ukraine and bringing peace. All this created a clear and unequivocal understanding among Ukrainians that they were resisting falsehood and evil. This understanding gave their fight for *volia* extraordinary strength and resilience.

Over the last three years, many Ukrainians perceived this war as existential—they believed that Ukrainians were fighting for their very existence as a nation. This conviction arose not only because of the brutal military actions of the Russians but also due to official statements from the leadership of the aggressor state claiming that the Ukrainian people allegedly did not exist as a separate nation and that Ukraine was supposedly some kind of “artificial creation.” Ukrainian towns reduced to dust by Russian shells and bombs left no doubt among Ukrainians about the invaders’ ruthless intentions, nor about the fact that Russian forces aimed to erase Ukrainian identity. Even Ukrainian children found in occupied territories were subjected to enforced assimilation. Notably, Russians imposed foreign heroes, projects, and dreams to instill a Russian identity in the children.

In 2022, Ukrainian philosopher Yevhen Bystrytskyi wrote,

Fundamental disagreement lies at the heart of this war—disagreement with the fact of Ukraine’s independent existence as a nation, as an autonomous world of history and culture. In this sense, it is rightly called a war for the existential choice of a community... If we translate our patriotism and our unconditional disagreement with Putin’s war into the language of philosophy, they appear as questions of ontology, the study of being and care for it. (Бистрицький 2022)

Ukrainian thinker Tamara Hundorova said in one of her interviews after the full-scale invasion from Russia,

Putin declares that Ukraine has no territory, no history, and that it is incapable of creating its own culture. By declaring the so-called ‘special operation,’ he cynically attempts to erase my people, my country, and myself from the face of the earth, because I am Ukrainian, and I will never cease to be one. (Гундорова 2022)

This interview with Hundorova has a telling title: “For the right to be visible, the right to speak, and the right to exist—this is what my Ukraine is fighting for today” (Гундорова 2022).

Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz wrote in the 19th century that in war, physical violence is a means, while the goal of war is to impose one's will. In Ukraine, Russian forces use violence, killings, and terror as means of imposing Putin's will. In his book *On War*, Clausewitz stated that if the attacker wants to force his opponent to submit to his will, he must put him in a situation more oppressive than the sacrifice being demanded; moreover, the disadvantages of this situation must not be temporary; otherwise, the enemy, instead of yielding, will hold out, hoping for a change for the better (Clausewitz 1984). This is precisely how Russian forces acted. What could be worse than resigning oneself to violence against oneself? What could be worse than obeying the will of an arrogant and cruel oppressor? The Russians sought to do something extraordinarily horrific so that Ukrainians would agree to give up what is truly valuable to them—their dreams, their historical memory, their thoughts about themselves, their Ukrainian identity, and their *volia*. Thus, the Russians tried to turn the everyday lives of Ukrainians into a prolonged nightmare from which there would be no escape except through unconditional submission to Russia's will.

These brutal actions have their sad consequences. Ukrainian religious thinker Ihor Kozlovskiy, who spent a long time in captivity during this war, said,

Our society is greatly traumatized both collectively and individually—at the level of those who are currently at the front and those who have undergone rape, destruction of property, forced flight, loss of loved ones, and captivity. (Козловський 2022)

However, these bodily and spiritual traumas did not stop the Ukrainian resistance. For three long years, Ukrainians have continued their resistance, their fight for *volia*.

It is necessary to understand that in this war, Ukrainians are fighting not only for their own freedom but also for the right to be who they wish to be. When considering the question of *volia* (as freedom, as strength, and as desire), the question arises: Is *volia* an ultimate value, something valuable in itself, or merely a means of acquiring or securing other values? On the one hand, having *volia* is indeed a prerequisite for acquiring other values. Without *volia*, it is difficult to achieve any significant goal. On the other hand, *volia* itself can be seen as a value if an individual or a people truly aspire to it. Here, we again see the multidimensionality of the concept of *volia*—it is important not only because it opens up the possibility of ensuring or acquiring other values, but because possessing this possibility is itself valuable.

However, if we focus on that dimension of *volia* that pertains not to *volia* as a goal but as a means, we can see that Ukrainians need *volia*, among other things, to guarantee and develop something no less important. Firstly, they need *volia* to preserve themselves, their lives, and what makes Ukrainians Ukrainian—their culture, their hopes and dreams, their memories of their heroes, and the trials that they have endured in the past. This reflects the desire to preserve the Ukrainian as something unique, specific among other nations. Secondly, Ukrainians need *volia* to achieve something universal to different peoples—the realization of the values of justice, truth, and prosperity.

In 2012, a group of Ukrainian intellectuals published a document titled “The Ukrainian Charter of the *Vilna* Person” (Брюховецький et al. 2012), in which they linked

the idea of *volia* with universal ethical questions—those of goodness, responsibility, and more. Before quoting this text, let us recall that the word *vilnyi* and its various forms—such as *vilna*, *vilnymi*, etc.—are adjectives derived from the noun *volia*. They all denote the same feature, namely the possession of *volia*, differing only in grammatical case and gender. The word *nevilna*, which denotes the absence of this feature, is the antonym of *vilnyi*. Thus, “The Ukrainian Charter of the *Vilna* Person” states the following:

All people are created *vilnymi*. This most significant human right, granted to everyone from birth, defines the essence of our civilization. To be a *vilna* person is not only an external trait that unites all of us by rights but also an internal spiritual choice. A *nevilna* person can be neither happy nor protected nor confident in their future. To be a *vilna* person means, first and foremost, to take responsibility. One cannot demand that others fulfill their duties without fulfilling one’s own. One should not live with a constant sense of grievance and self-pity. To be a *vilna* person means to believe in one’s strength. To be a *vilna* person means to be aware of one’s uniqueness, yet by no means to nurture a sense of superiority. To be a *vilna* person means to always and everywhere independently adhere to the principle of our equality with one another, as well as equality before the law. And most importantly: to be a *vilna* person means to do good. This is the deepest meaning of the freedom of a *vilna* person.

As we can see from the lines above, for Ukrainian thought, it is important to link the concept of *volia* with moral questions and values. Therefore, for a Ukrainian, the struggle for *volia* is not some Nietzschean competition of wills; it is the pursuit of good in its various manifestations—justice, truth, prosperity, and more. This point is crucial for understanding the attitude of Ukrainians toward the struggle for *volia*. One of the reasons why Ukrainians have bravely and steadfastly fought for the last three years is because they clearly know that in this war, they are on the side of good, while their opponent commits evil.

In this context, it is telling to compare the Ukrainian perception of the meaning of the term *volia* with the way Russians perceive the meaning of their word *volia*, which also exists in the Russian language and culture. Let us recall that the word *volia* is present not only in Ukrainian but also in other Slavic languages, although in each language it has its own specific nuances. We propose to consider how this word functions in the Russian language and culture.

In the Russian national anthem, there is a line that describes the country as possessing “a mighty *volia*, great glory.” If we recall the three main meanings of the Ukrainian word *volia* (freedom, desire, strength), which we discussed in the previous section of this article, the Russian word *volia* in this line most closely aligns with the meaning of strength. It should be emphasized that strength is the primary meaning of the Russian word *volia*. At the same time, the Russian word *volia* also includes other meanings such as power, command, and so on. We will not focus on those here, but rather on the meaning most relevant to our research. Russian explanatory dictionaries traditionally conclude the list of meanings for the word *volia* with the sense of “absence of restrictions.” It should be immediately stressed that the meaning “absence of restrictions” is not identical to freedom, which is the primary meaning of the Ukrainian word *volia*.

Incidentally, the fact that “absence of restrictions” is not synonymous with freedom is noted not only by Ukrainian authors—who point out the semantic differences between the Ukrainian *volia* and the Russian *volia* (Васильченко 2024: 154–157)—but also by Russian scholars. For instance, the Russian researcher Katayeva writes:

In the Russian consciousness, *volia*, being directly connected to freedom, is almost always opposed to it. (Катаева 2004: 4)

So what exactly distinguishes Russian *volia* from freedom? In her well-known story that explores the Russian understanding of *volia*, writer N. Teffi describes people who reject social norms, surrendering instead to unconscious instinctual impulses:

They are drawn, like migratory birds are drawn in the spring. A pull. An incomprehensible force. (Тэффи 2011: 194)

Katayeva elaborates:

For Russians, *volia* is the absolute of freedom, based solely on a person's desire, their wanting; whereas freedom implies uniqueness, individuality, separateness, and independence of the person within society or a community, with full recognition of the laws governing the life of that society (or community). (Катаева 2004: 6)

Other researchers also note that the Russian word *volia* is not the same as freedom. For example, the Russian scholar Krasilnikova emphasizes that the specifics of how *volia* functions in the Russian language are defined by meanings such as “the complete absence of restraints/limitations,” and “to act solely in accordance with one's desires” (Красильникова 2010: 10). Meanwhile, the Russian researcher Aleksei Lisitsyn identifies in the Russian understanding of *volia* semantic shades such as “wild abandon, an unrestrained destructive force,” and “signs of a social life of fugitives, bandits.” Lisitsyn draws attention to the fact that Russian culture holds a wary attitude toward *volia*, as choosing it may be associated with material hardship and moral abandonment:

Going into *volia* can be associated with the loss of one's livelihood, with the loss of a secure piece of bread. The people sensed and understood the destructiveness of *volia*—its destructiveness both for those against whom its force was directed, and for those who lived in it—that is, fugitives, bandits, all who longed for it, the free people. *Nevolia* (captivity) is the effect of external prohibitions; *volia* is the absence of any boundaries, including internal moral ones. (Лисицын 1995)

In contrast, the Ukrainian understanding of *volia* paints a completely different picture. To summarize, the distinctions important for our study are as follows. First, in modern Ukrainian, the main meaning of the word *volia* is freedom, while in modern Russian, the main meaning of *volia* is strength. Second, although the Russian word *volia* includes the meaning “absence of restrictions,” this is not equivalent to the meaning of freedom in the Ukrainian word *volia*. Third, Russian culture interprets the meaning of “absence of restrictions” in *volia* as the rejection of all limitations, including moral ones, and suggests that this leads to life beyond morality. In contrast, Ukrainian culture views *volia* as something inherently tied to morality, seeing its attainment as a pathway to realizing various expressions of the moral good, such as justice, truth, and prosperity.

Thus, in Ukrainian culture, the discussion of *volia* is inextricably linked to moral reflection. In our previous research, we have shown that for Ukrainians in this war, it is important to understand that they are fighting against injustice (Кулик 2022) and resisting evil (Kulyk 2023), but no less important in the perception that Ukrainians have of this war is that they see their struggle as a fight for the possibility of achieving certain good for their people. *Volia* is seen in Ukrainian thought as what allows good to be realized. *Nevolia* suppresses the inherent possibilities for development in a person or people, preventing the gifts of God or Fate, embedded in them from the beginning, from being realized. But gaining *volia* allows people or nations to bring this good to life.

In this regard, one can recall the archetypal image for Ukraine—the fate of the most famous artist of the Ukrainian people, Taras Shevchenko. He was born a serf, and only when he gained freedom was he able to realize what had been inherent in him from birth—he became a renowned painter and poet.

In the public consciousness of contemporary Ukrainians, there are certain images that serve as reference points for societal development under conditions where Ukrainians have *volia*. Chronologically, the first such image was that of a *volia* during the Cossack era. Over the past three centuries, this image has symbolized for Ukrainians the realization of *volia* in life. In the works of thinkers, writers, historians, and poets, as well as in the paintings of artists and folk songs, the Cossack times are portrayed as an era when Ukrainians truly had *volia*. Almost all of the most well-known and prominent Ukrainian authors worked on reproducing this image in their works and passing it down from generation to generation. Let us name just a few and refer to one of their many works on this theme: Taras Shevchenko (2003b), Mykola Kostomarov (1920), Lesia Ukrainka (1892), Mykhailo Hrushevsky (1919), Dmytro Yavornytsky (1990), and others. These thinkers and artists developed this image on the basis of real historical events, the memory of which was preserved by Ukrainians. This image became so deeply embedded in Ukrainian culture that it turned into one of its most important components. It was reproduced time and again, not only in culture but also in numerous political attempts by Ukrainians to restore their independence.

At the same time, it should be noted that although the image of Cossack *volia* is dear to Ukrainians, it is also painful for them. The point is that this image contains two components—first, pride in the fact that Ukrainians once had *volia*, and second, longing for that *volia*, as it was forcibly taken from the Cossacks by foreign conquerors. In the historical memory of Ukrainians, there are vivid recollections of the Ruin (*Ruyina*)—that tragic historical period following the death of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, when Ukrainian hopes for a free life were being destroyed.

At the end of the 20th century, another image began to gain increasing strength in the consciousness of Ukrainians—the image of Europe or, more broadly, the West, as a place of the real embodiment of *volia*. This image initially carried only an optimistic component, promising Ukrainians the prospect of a peaceful path to the *volia* that the free peoples of the West had already attained. Ukrainians perceive their relationship to the image of Cossack *volia* through the lens of historical continuity—modern Ukrainians

are the descendants of the Cossacks. Their relationship to the image of European *volia* is understood through the idea of a shared geographical and value space with Europe.

From the perspective of most Ukrainians, the countries of Europe and the West, in general, embody more fully than Ukraine the values that are important to its people—*volia*, justice, truth, prosperity, and more. This belief was widespread even during the late USSR, when many Ukrainians believed that their will should be directed toward moving along the path of Europe and the West. It cannot be said that these ideas were solely the product of Ukrainian consciousness—the West itself supported this belief:

Presenting themselves as the champions of freedom, with the United States in the lead role as a ‘beacon’ to the world, Western political leaders castigated the communist world in general, and the Soviet Union in particular, as bastions of oppression. (Hedlund 2023: 9)

Despite the painful experience of World War II and earlier historical events when the Ukrainian people encountered not only good, fair, and dignified treatment from certain Western nations, after the collapse of the USSR, the vast majority of Ukrainians believed that “the West” and “Europe” embodied the realization of the most important universal values for Ukrainians—*volia*, goodness, justice, truth, prosperity, and more. Notably, the image of Europe was particularly significant in this context. The Ukrainian language acquired a stable expression of “European values” to denote what Ukrainians aspire to, while corresponding stable expressions like “Western values” or “American values” did not form in Ukrainian.

Most Ukrainian thinkers of the 21st century have stated that Ukrainians strive for a deeper embodiment of European and Western values in their country, noting at the same time that Ukraine is geographically and historically an integral part of Europe and the West and that Ukrainians share the same values as the peoples of Europe.

It is worth noting that the question of the proximity between European values and the values prevalent in Ukrainian society remains a matter of debate. A significant number of authors take an optimistic view on this issue, emphasizing the increasingly widespread adoption of European values in Ukraine (Minesashvili 2022; Olzacka 2023; Pesenti 2021). At the same time, there are also authors who are more skeptical about the closeness between Ukrainian and European values (Akaliyski & Reeskens 2024; Kappeler 2014). It is worth noting that the presence of a skeptical position is often attributable to differences in the definitions of what constitutes “values” as well as in the understanding of what exactly are considered European values and the values prevalent in Ukrainian society. However, among Ukrainian thinkers, we can see a clear and unambiguous position: Ukraine is part of Europe not only geographically but also in terms of the values that its people share.

For example, in 2000, Ukrainian philosopher Vilen Horskyi wrote,

Among the symbols born of the mythological consciousness of modern Ukrainian culture, perhaps the most prominent is the image of the lost Europe. Similar to the heroes of the ancient Greek myth—the brothers of the beautiful Phoenician princess Europa—we feel ourselves in an eternal journey searching for the path to that mysterious island of Crete, where treacherous Zeus hid the enchanting

beauty, abducting the girl from her father. Calls for ‘rapprochement’ with Europe, for ‘returning’ to Europe, and ‘integration’ into European culture are heard everywhere. (Горський 2000)

When asked what exactly Ukrainians see in the image of Europe, he replied,

Europe lies not only now but from the beginning in the affirmation of pluralism, tolerance, and dialogue. (Горський 2000)

In 2015, Mykhailo Minakov, studying the beliefs of people actively involved in the events related to the Revolution of Dignity, wrote that “to members of the nonviolent majority on both sides of the confrontation, Europe appears as a place that is close to the ideal of personal freedom, democratic governance, and prosperity” (Minakov 2015: 78).

In 2017, Ukrainian philosopher Serhiy Proleyev noted that the European values to which Ukrainians aspire are not only the values of people from a particular region of the world but those of humanity as a whole. He wrote,

What were initially designated as values must be revealed as the fundamental principles of life activity and instances of normativity, in which, we add, the possibility of the human as such is embodied. That is, these are principles and instances of normativity that are important not only for the meaningful structure of Europe’s life as a certain socio-cultural historical body. They are simultaneously discoveries of humanity and humanness. Only through the success of these discoveries for humanity as a whole does Europe gain itself, becoming itself. (Пролєєв 2017)

Clarifying which principles he means, Proleyev primarily refers to freedom.

During the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian philosophers also wrote extensively about Europe and the West as entities that share the same values as Ukrainians, emphasizing that Russians hold different values. For example, Ukrainian philosopher Taras Lyutyi wrote that in the process of historical development,

Ukraine and Russia created not just dissimilar but fundamentally different projects of social, political, and overall cultural life, associated with entirely opposite choices of civilizational direction. The first project is associated with values that... shaped the Western world. (Лютій 2022)

Another Ukrainian philosopher, Vakhtang Kebuladze, wrote during the war,

I hope we are finally and definitively becoming a country of Western civilization, a free world. For such people, values—freedom and dignity—are important. In Ukraine, people are ready to give their lives for them. These are supposedly European values. (Кебуладзе 2022)

During the war, Ukrainian philosophers often emphasized that the other side in this war—Russia—demonstrates a perspective on values that is fundamentally opposed to that of Ukraine, showcasing “firstly, expansiveness as a willful expansion outward, secondly, desubjectification as a refusal of responsibility, and thirdly, deaxiologization as devaluation” (Шевцов 2023: 51). Ukrainian philosophers stressed the importance of avoiding this path. Thus, when we speak of *volia* as a means of achieving certain goals by

a nation, Ukrainian thought refers not only to what should be aspired to but also to what should be avoided.

From the perspective of many Ukrainians, the question of values is key to this war. It is not only an existential war but also a war of values. It is no coincidence that in relations with the international community, Ukrainian politicians, thinkers, and cultural figures have appealed primarily to spiritual values over the past three years, sincerely believing that representatives of other nations must feel that Russia's actions in Ukraine are destroying not only Ukrainian national interests but also what is valuable for different peoples of the West and the world as a whole—freedom, justice, goodness, and more.

Ukrainian writer and public figure Lyubko Deresh describes this practice of argumentation by Ukrainian representatives as “the power of ethical influence” or “gentle power”:

Gentle power is the ability to influence others with your moral arguments. Gentle power comes to the one who has paid the right price for his right to appeal to moral values and not seem like a demagogue and a hypocrite. From the first days of the full-scale invasion, Ukraine began to appeal to the morality of the West, and its arguments were heard because Ukraine paid for them with death and blood. (Deresh 2023)

In conclusion, this section of our article has demonstrated the presence of a certain notion, both in the worldview of many Ukrainians resisting Russia's war against Ukraine and in the Ukrainian philosophical thought of the 21st century. Specifically, only the simultaneous presence of a will for freedom that people have, and freedom itself, can ensure, on the one hand, the preservation of their national identity and, on the other, the nation's movement toward a fuller realization of such universal values as justice, truth, and prosperity. This idea has helped Ukrainians remain resilient throughout the three years of Russia's full-scale invasion, seeing this resilience not only as a condition for their survival and a morally right choice but also as a guarantee of the desired trajectory for their country's development after the war.

4. The Will to Freedom in the Context of Philosophy

The perception that Ukrainians have of the Russo-Ukrainian war involves a complex set of ideas with many components. However, in our view, these ideas have a certain core—a central element that gives them form and stability. We will describe this central element as “the will to freedom.” Notably, this notion is not our invention; it has been used by other authors, including the 20th-century Ukrainian thinker Orest Zybachynskyi (Зибачинський 1988). The specificity of our understanding of this idea lies in the fact that we use it to denote the set of ideas that we identified in the sections “The Word ‘*Volia*’ in Ukrainian Language and Culture” and “The War against *Nevolia*.” We conceptualize these ideas through the notion of “the will to freedom,” imbuing it with the following meaning: The concept of “the will to freedom” signifies a worldview conviction that unites three key beliefs. First, freedom is directly linked to the will to freedom; second, the loss of the will to freedom leads not only to the loss of freedom but also to terrible tragedies; third,

only the simultaneous presence of both the will to freedom and freedom itself among a people can ensure, on the one hand, the preservation of their national identity and, on the other, the approach that they have toward a fuller realization of such universal values as justice, truth, and prosperity.

Having proposed this concept, we will, in this section of our article, compare it with existing theories in the history of philosophy that deal with the question of will.

First of all, let us pay attention to the theories that philosophers from antiquity to the present day articulated within philosophical discussions about “free will.” For instance, Galen Strawson began one of his books with the question, “Are we free agents?” (Strawson 2010: 1); Alfred Mele asked:

Is it true that at least some human beings sometimes act freely and are morally responsible for some of what they do? (Mele 2006: 3)

Here, Strawson and Mele considered whether free will is possible in principle—whether humans can freely control their will or if their actions are determined. Similar questions can be found among many thinkers, such as Henri Bergson (Bergson 2001) and Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 1986: 34). However, within the framework of the concept of “the will to freedom,” such questions are not posed—people who hold the worldview conviction that we label “the will to freedom” do not doubt that it is entirely possible for humans to have will and to be subjects of their actions. Therefore, we believe that philosophical discussions about “free will” are not directly related to the concept of “the will to freedom.”

We argue that there are two approaches to the question of will that are presented in the history of philosophy and can be considered conceptually close to “the will to freedom”: 1) the views of philosophers from *Lebensphilosophie* and their followers and 2) the ideas of the Ukrainian philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda and thinkers close to him. As we will show, however, only the proximity of the first approach is apparent.

Let us begin by comparing the concept of “the will to freedom” with the views of *Lebensphilosophie* proponents. Arthur Schopenhauer wrote about a will that permeates everything that exists:

What appears in clouds, streams and crystals is the weakest echo of the will that emerges more perfectly in plants, still more perfectly in animals, and most perfectly of all in human beings. (Schopenhauer 2010: 205)

Developing these ideas about the will, Schopenhauer created a gloomy, pessimistic philosophy in which different carriers of this will constantly destroy each other and themselves, making life a continuous horror filled with endless suffering.

Does Schopenhauer’s approach have any direct relation to the concept of “the will to freedom”? Certainly not. The Ukrainian idea, first, does not refer to some metaphysical force of cosmic scale that permeates everything, from clouds to animals. Instead, Ukrainian thinkers of the 21st century, in their reflections on *volia*, focus on the issues of political philosophy, ethics, and the philosophy of history—that is, they speak only of the *volia* of people and nations. Secondly, the concept of “the will to freedom,” despite acknowledging the importance of struggle, does not consider struggle an end in itself but

rather a necessary and temporary means for defending freedom. Ukrainian thinkers view *volia* not as a path to destruction but, on the contrary, as a path to life, justice, truth, and prosperity.

Another philosopher of *Lebensphilosophie*, Friedrich Nietzsche, wrote the following:

Wherever I found the living, there I found the will to power; and even in the will of the serving I found the will to be master. (Nietzsche 2006: 89)

He described life as filled with the struggle of strong-willed people for dominance. However, as can be seen from the content of the concept of “the will to freedom,” it does not concern a desire for power and domination. On the contrary, it contains the aspiration to preserve oneself from other nations’ claims to dominance. Ukrainians, throughout their history, have suffered too much from the ambitions of other peoples to rule over them not to understand that the will to power over others leads to suffering and injustice. The idea arising from Ukrainians’ understanding of *volia* is not the will to power but the will to freedom.

At the same time, it is worth noting that Ukrainian thought has seen thinkers who developed ideas related to *Lebensphilosophie*. For instance, at the beginning of the 20th century, Viacheslav Lypynskyi wrote about the “unconscious, mystical, irrational will of the people for free, independent existence” (Липинський 1926: 84), noting that it is precisely “in our eternal, undying will to live, and not in the often-changing party or theoretical doctrines, that we find the strength and justification for our struggle for a better fate for Ukraine” (Липинський 1994: 255).

What sets Lypynskyi’s ideas apart from Schopenhauer’s theories is, above all, the Ukrainian thinker’s optimistic stance on the will. Lypynskyi believed that its embodiment in life would lead to the freedom and prosperity of the Ukrainian people. His views are closer to those of Nietzsche, as evidenced by the statement,

The first fact: in every nation, there are politically passive elements and politically active elements, or, in other words: there are people of a militant, chivalrous nature and people of a pacific, bourgeois nature. The second fact: without the elemental will to power, to strength, to risk, to self-sacrifice, to domination—a national aristocracy cannot arise within a nation. (Липинський 1926: 137)

However, despite Lypynskyi being a Ukrainian thinker, his ideas about the will are not identical to the concept of the will to freedom. Three arguments support this thesis. First, Viacheslav Lypynskyi was a monarchist, and his ideas never gained wide support in Ukraine, which had exhibited a tendency toward popular rule and democracy since medieval times. With his Polish origins, Lypynskyi’s ideas about aristocracy may have resonated to some extent in Poland. However, in Ukraine—where many national heroes and cultural figures came from simple, peasant backgrounds, some even having been serfs—his calls for aristocracy had little chance of playing a significant role in public consciousness.

Second, the real experience of Ukrainians resisting Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022 demonstrated a massive, nationwide resistance movement, where a vast number of

them actively contributed to countering the enemy. This fact does not align with Lypynskiy's views on the special role of the national aristocracy in the struggle for freedom.

Third, Lypynskiy's ideas about the unconscious nature of the will contradict the very semantics of the Ukrainian word *volia*. The point is that, according to the functioning of this word in the Ukrainian language, *volia* cannot, in principle, be unconscious:

Volia-desire is qualified as the mental state of the subject of willing, characterized by the presence of a conscious need and the intention to act according to a chosen course of action to achieve a goal valued by the subject of willing. (Яцкевич 2009: 12)

According to the norms of the Ukrainian language, if *volia* becomes unconscious, then it is no longer *volia*.

Thus, although the ideas about the will expressed by representatives of *Lebensphilosophie* and their Ukrainian followers may resemble the concept of the will to freedom that we propose in certain aspects, they nevertheless differ significantly.

Let us now turn to the second approach to the philosophical comprehension of the question of will, which can be found in the works of the most renowned Ukrainian philosopher, Hryhorii Skovoroda. Recall that Hryhorii Skovoroda lived in the 18th century and that his philosophy is characterized by the development of Christian and Platonic ideas, primarily in the direction of exploring moral philosophical questions. He had many interesting ideas that profoundly influenced Ukrainian philosophy and Ukrainian culture as a whole.

Before delving into Hryhorii Skovoroda's thoughts on will, let us recall another of his ideas, which is crucial in this context—the idea of “affinity” (*srodnost*). Hryhorii Skovoroda taught that for any person to realize their inherent potential and become happy, they must become what they were “born to be,” choosing the type of activity that is “affined” with them, the one predestined for them by God. A person's choice of what is “affined” with them is interpreted by the philosopher as an expression of goodness and as that which leads to goodness. Accordingly, the philosopher interprets coercion to abandon what a person was born for as something that prevents goodness from manifesting. After these preliminary remarks, let us directly consider Skovoroda's ideas about will.

Developing the ideas of Saint Augustine (Augustine 2010), Skovoroda wrote,

Human *volia* and God's *volia* are two gates: Hellish and Heavenly. He who finds God's *volia* in the midst of the sea of his own *volia* finds the cephias, which is the harbor... If someone transforms his *volia* into God's *volia*, singing thus: ‘Struck like the herb and withered is my heart,’ and so forth, to him God Himself becomes the heart. *Volia*, heart, love, God, spirit, paradise, haven, bliss, and eternity are one and the same. (Сковорода 2011b: 83)

Skovoroda believed that people should listen to God to understand what would bring them goodness and well-being. This would be the embodiment of God's will in a person's life because God wishes goodness for humans and arranged things so that a

person has the opportunity to attain this goodness already in this life. Thus, God's will foresees the best destiny for each person if they choose what is predestined for them by God—that is, what is “affined” with them. Skovoroda also writes that this can be hindered by an evil will—the will of those people who follow a path that does not lead to goodness.

There is one important question here that needs to be considered separately—namely, the question of the “heart.” It should be noted that the metaphor of the heart is frequently encountered in Ukrainian philosophy (Гнатенко 2002); Ukrainian philosophers (H. Skovoroda, P. Yurkevych, D. Chyzhevskiy, among others) use this metaphor to denote the part of human personality that grasps values, choosing between good and evil, right and wrong, justice and injustice, between what leads to happiness and what diverts from it. As Skovoroda sees it, for a person who stands on the side of goodness, the heart is, in a sense, the dwelling place of God within a them—for such a person, “listening to the heart” means listening to God, making choices in favor of goodness, justice, truth, well-being, and more.

Skovoroda's contemporary, the German philosopher Kant, also wrote about the necessity for humans to make the right choice by following a certain law. However, Kant does not mention God in this context and addresses the issue of will by referring to adherence to the dictates of reason:

Only a rational being has the capacity to act in accordance with the representation of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or has a will. Since reason is required for the derivation of actions from laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason. (Kant 1999: 66)

It should be noted that among Ukrainian thinkers as well, there were philosophers who emphasized the central role of reason in matters of will—for example, in 1873, the Ukrainian philosopher Klymentii Hankevych wrote,

A human expresses his reason through his will, through the freedom in his actions. (Hankiewicz 1873: 48)

However, in the context of *volia*, Hryhorii Skovoroda spoke specifically about the heart. A misunderstanding may arise among those who are not well acquainted with his philosophy. Upon hearing about Skovoroda's proposed choice by the heart, they might think that this philosopher refers to a choice that is unconscious and unreflective. However, this is not the case. A person who chooses between two alternatives, not based on calculating the benefits of one choice over another but instead relying on their notions of what is morally right, is fully aware of what they are doing and understands the potentially unfavorable practical consequences of their actions. This person acts not because it is advantageous or convenient but because it is morally right.

Skovoroda opposes relying on reason alone in the most important matters, as reason is limited to calculation and assessment. Instead, he advocates relying on the “heart,” which he understands as being guided by spiritual values such as goodness, duty, and righteousness. Reason, after weighing all the pros and cons, may determine that a particular action is undesirable because it is disadvantageous or does not conform to popular behavioral patterns within a given social group. However, in many situations,

acting morally right means rejecting notions of benefit and popular social behavior patterns, choosing instead to act according to higher ideals.

In Western philosophy, many authors have discussed substantial dualism, contrasting the divine substance with material substance and asserting that the mind is a fragment of the divine substance within humans. Skovoroda also spoke of two substances, which he called the “invisible nature” and the “visible nature,” the latter being understood as matter. However, Skovoroda identified the heart, rather than the mind, as the fragment of invisible divine substance within humans. Skovoroda believed that a person is capable of sensing what is right if they listen to what their “heart” – that is, their soul, which is a part of God – tells them:

Look, perhaps, within yourself!
You will find a friend inside you.
You will find another *volia* there,
You will find in evil – blessed fate.
In your prison, there is light,
In your filth, there is a flower.
(Сковорода 2011b: 82).

Let us recall that Hryhorii Skovoroda’s role in Ukrainian culture is truly significant. Numerous researchers emphasize that, first, Skovoroda expressed views deeply rooted in Ukrainian culture, and second, he made a substantial contribution to its development. As Ukrainian scholar Leonid Ushkalov rightly wrote, Skovoroda is a key figure “in our entire spiritual tradition from antiquity to the present day” (Ушкалов 2011: 48). As we can see, Skovoroda linked the issue of *volia* with moral questions, noting that the choice of the right *volia* leads to the realization of such universal values as justice, truth, and well-being in a person’s life. Comparing these thoughts of Skovoroda with the concept of the will to freedom mentioned earlier, it becomes evident that they directly resonate with the third component of this idea.

As for the first and second components of the concept of the will to freedom – the notion that freedom is directly connected to the will to freedom and the idea that losing the will to freedom leads not only to the loss of freedom but also to terrible tragedies – this issue requires separate consideration. The fact is that certain researchers believe that Hryhorii Skovoroda taught a more contemplative attitude toward *volia*, refraining from addressing this issue in social or political terms and speaking of inner *volia* rather than *volia* in the social or political sense. Based on this criterion, the Ukrainian thinker Mykola Shlemkevych contrasted the “Skovorodian person” with the “Shevchenkovian person.” According to him, the “Skovorodian person” does not accept the encroachments of foreign invaders and embodies spiritual purity and depth. However, rather than actively resisting foreign will, they focus solely on the self-perfection of their soul (Шлемкевич 1954: 20). In Shlemkevych’s view, only the “Shevchenkoan person” is ready to actively fight for their people’s *volia*.

Firstly, we would like to disagree with Shlemkevych’s opinion that Skovoroda’s worldview is distant from considering *volia* in the context of social and political issues. It is enough to recall the poem *De libertate*, where Skovoroda not only stated that *volia* is

incomparably more valuable than gold and emphasized the importance of not losing it but also concluded with the following phrase:

Glory always to you, o chosen man,
Father of *volia*, Hero Bohdan!
(Сковорода 2011а: 116)

Let us recall that Bohdan Khmelnytsky, to whom Skovoroda referred in this poem, led a military uprising of the Ukrainian people against foreign oppressors, fighting for *volia* primarily with arms. Thus, as we can see, all three notions represented in the concept of the will to freedom that we formulated earlier are present in Skovoroda's work.

However, we agree with Shlemkevych and many other researchers on the particular importance of Taras Shevchenko's ideas in shaping the Ukrainian people's views on the issue of *volia*. The social and political contexts of *volia* are expressed much more powerfully in Shevchenko's work than in that of Skovoroda. We believe that the thoughts of Skovoroda and Shevchenko on *volia* complement each other. Shevchenko was not a philosopher—he was a poet and a public figure—but the vividness of the images he proposed in his works, the power of his talent, his personal experience of slavery, and his passionate calls for political and social struggle for freedom have all contributed immensely to clarifying Ukrainian perspectives on the issue of *volia*.

Let us recall, for example, these lines, which many Ukrainians know by heart:

Fight—and you shall overcome,
God will help you!
Truth is on your side, and strength,
And sacred *volia*!
(Шевченко 2003с)

Or, let us recall these lines:

Ukraine will rise,
And the darkness of bondage will be dispelled,
The light of truth will shine,
And the children of *nevolia* will pray
In *volia*!
(Шевченко 2003а)

Volia is one of the most important concepts in Shevchenko's work. Shevchenko used this word to show the interconnection of all three of its aspects (desire, strength, freedom), as well as to demonstrate that in the totality of these aspects, *volia* will lead the Ukrainian people to justice, truth, and prosperity. As the Ukrainian scholar Ivan Dziuba wrote,

In Shevchenko's inseparable existential chain—*volia*, fate, word, truth, glory, happiness—*volia* is the primary stimulus, giving life to the entire system of values. *Volia* is either synonymous with fate or it is the condition of fate, as well as the condition of happiness; truth and *volia* are the moral absolute and indisputable argument in assessing human actions; the word, inspired by *volia*, can transform human souls or even an entire nation. (Дзюба 2008: 651)

As can be seen, there are many similarities between the ideas that Skovoroda and Shevchenko expressed about *volia*. For example, Taras Shevchenko also conceptualized *volia* not in the context of destruction or power, as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche did, but in the context of manifestations of goodness and morality, as Skovoroda did. Taras Shevchenko, for example, wrote the following:

Where there is no sacred *volia*,
There will never be goodness.
(Шевченко 2003d)

In their works, both Skovoroda and Shevchenko devote significant attention to the image of the heart, attributing an important role to the heart in a person's volitional choices. As researchers note, similar to Skovoroda, "Shevchenko treats 'the heart' primarily as a synonym for the soul" (Ушкалов 2012: 18). Certain authors argue that Taras Shevchenko directly continued Skovoroda's ideas (Дзюба 2008), noting that Shevchenko read Skovoroda's works. However, we would avoid seeking simple answers in this matter. In our opinion, the similarities in the ideas of Skovoroda and Shevchenko regarding the question of *volia* are more likely explained by the fact that they both expressed ideas deeply rooted in Ukrainian culture. Since their thoughts share a common foundation—the Ukrainian cultural attitude toward *volia*—the views of these two outstanding representatives of Ukrainian culture exhibit common features. In fact, one can observe similarities in the understanding of *volia* among many other Ukrainian authors. In this section of the article, the examination of these two particular figures—Skovoroda and Shevchenko—is primarily attributed to the significant roles that they played in expressing and shaping Ukrainian culture.

Thus, as we have argued, all three components of what we previously designated as the concept of the will to freedom are fully reflected in the positions of Hryhorii Skovoroda and Taras Shevchenko. As we can see, the core approach to the question of *volia* in Ukrainian thought has remained unchanged from the time of Hryhorii Skovoroda to the present day—and we can see its direct manifestation in how Ukrainians interpreted the question of *volia* during their struggle against Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine from 2022 to 2025. However, it is necessary to note certain conceptual transformations. For example, initially, the approach to *volia* in Ukrainian thought was directly associated with religious connotations (this can be seen not only in the works of Skovoroda and Shevchenko but also in those of other authors, such as Yurkevych), but over time, the religious component of the idea of *volia* almost entirely gave way to a non-religious moral philosophy during the secularization of Ukrainian social and philosophical thought in the 20th century.

Another transformation is the strengthening in Ukrainian public consciousness of the images of "Europe" and "the West" as places where *volia*, justice, truth, and prosperity are most fully realized. This shift occurred in the 20th century and continues to play a significant role in contemporary Ukrainian notions of the will to freedom, in many ways replacing the previously idealized image of a free life in the Cossack era.

However, we emphasize that the changes that have occurred in Ukrainian perceptions of *volia* over the past three centuries have not affected its core meaning,

ensuring the stability of these ideas and their profound impact on the consciousness of Ukrainians and their actions during the Russo-Ukrainian War.

6. Conclusion

As demonstrated in this article, during wartime, what matters is not only the availability of material resources and the quantity of weapons but also the beliefs held by those who wield them, as well as by civilian citizens.

We have argued that the concept of *volia*, embedded in Ukrainian culture, philosophy, and contemporary Ukrainian thought of the 21st century, is a crucial component of the perspective that Ukrainians have on the struggle that they have waged over the three years since Russia's full-scale invasion of their country. We believe that these Ukrainian notions of *volia* provided a sense of purpose to their fight and fueled their resilience. We proposed the concept of the "will to freedom," which, in our view, helps explain the essence of Ukrainians' understanding of *volia* and highlights the uniqueness of these ideas compared to other perspectives on the concept of will.

In this article, we have substantiated the idea that the beliefs shaping the Ukrainian will to freedom are deeply rooted in Ukrainian culture. This implies that the will to freedom will continue to show its strength in Ukrainian history time and again.

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