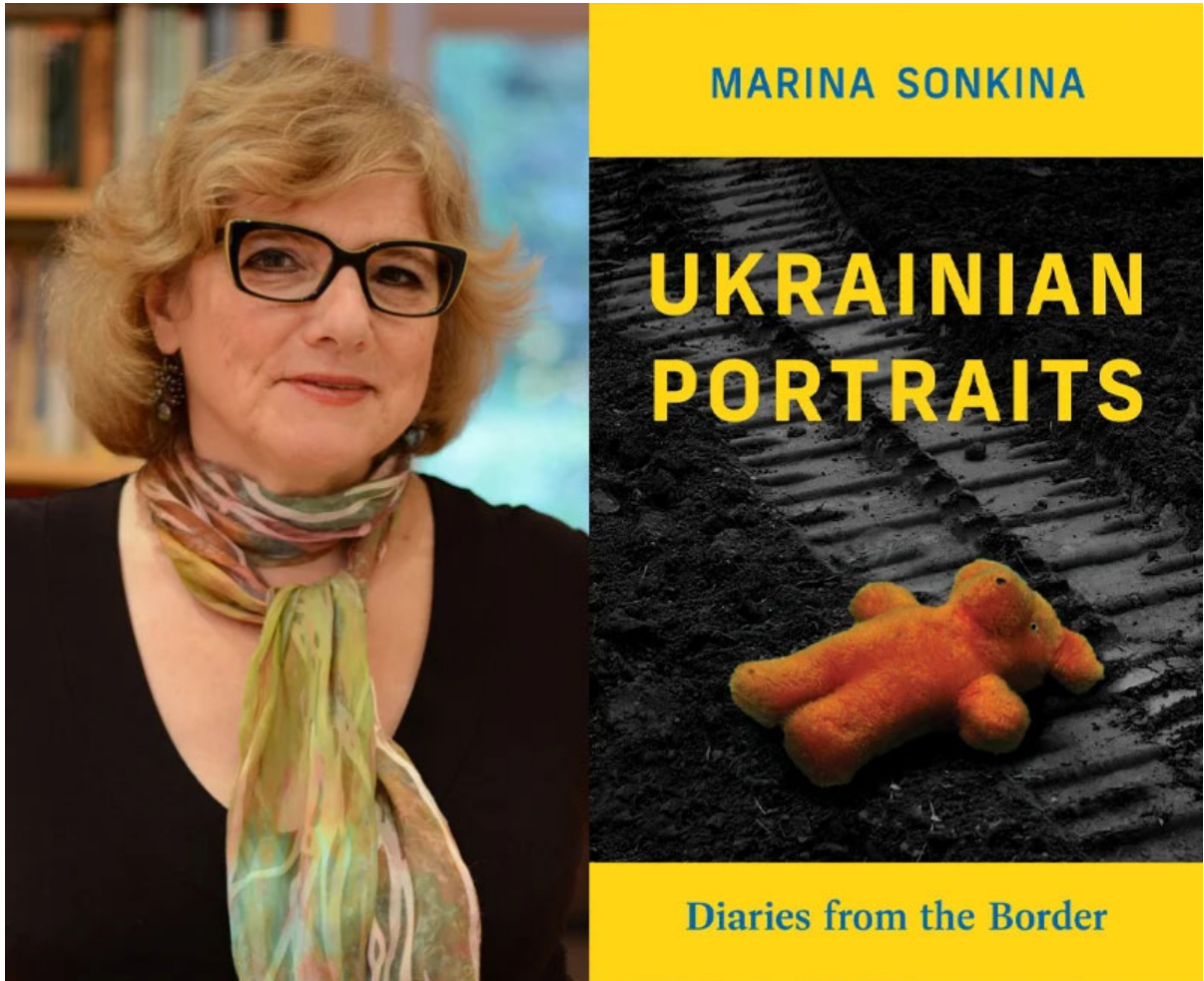


Ukrainian Portraits: Diaries from the Border

by Marina Sonkina



Marina Sonkina

In *Ukrainian Portraits: Diaries from the Border*, Marina Sonkina renders the impact of Russia's attack on Ukraine in startling, intimate details: the toothless woman who spent her savings on a pair of dentures, only to flee Kharkiv before she could collect them; the bedridden dog breeder who escaped Mykolaiv with her family and five puppies; and the tubercular man – whose face reminds her of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* – who cannot access the medication he needs.

They may sound like characters plucked from the pages of an absurdist novel, but these are real people Sonkina met in the chaos of the Korczowa refugee transition centre on the Ukrainian-Polish border, where she volunteered with the Jewish Distribution Committee for three weeks in 2022.

Sonkina did not intend to report on the war from the front lines. Bewildered, numb, and unable to think of anything other than the war in Ukraine, she volunteered to go to Poland to serve as an interpreter – and with the intention to hand out envelopes stuffed with money she had raised in Canada to the refugees who needed it most.

Once there, she realized “the war had laid bare what was usually concealed from the eyes of a stranger: human attachments and loves, support for one another and acts of kindness. But also, the seismic faults running through so many families; their discontents, their arguments, and the way they deal with them in the time of crisis.”

Sonkina is not a historian or political scientist. She is a writer, former CBC producer, and scholar who has family in Russia and Ukraine. For years, she has taught Russian literature – first in Moscow, where she was born and raised, and now at Simon Fraser University in B.C. Her encounters with the refugees (the majority of whom are women and children) were fleeting and intense, much like the 12 chapters in *Ukrainian Portraits*. Sonkina’s focus in these dialogue-filled portraits is to record and witness people whose lives have been disrupted and shattered by brutal war, even as she situates their intimate stories within the complex history and geopolitics of the region.

In *Ukrainian Portraits*, Sonkina asks the questions that classic Russian writers have engaged with. Who is to blame? What is to be done?

In response to the first question, Sonkina is unwavering. She places responsibility for the ongoing war in Ukraine on Russian President Vladimir Putin and his “Neo-Nazi regime.” Moving forward, she argues, “Russia will have to travel the same path as Germany did: it has to pay full reparations to Ukraine and to acknowledge its crimes.”

While her analysis lacks the nuance and objectivity some readers may seek, *Ukrainian Portraits* is a vivid, well-crafted narrative that takes us beyond the headlines into the heart of an ongoing humanitarian crisis.

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