

PORCELAIN WAR

A FILM BY BRENDAN BELLOMO AND SLAVA LEONTYEV



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE





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Film Summary



As war ravages their homeland, three artists choose to stay in their native Ukraine, armed with their art, their cameras, and for the first time in their lives, their guns. A stunning tribute to the resilience of the human spirit, embodying the enduring hope and passion of ordinary people living through extraordinary circumstances.

Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Porcelain War* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

A NOTE TO FACILITATORS

Dear POV Community,

We are so glad you have chosen to facilitate a discussion inspired by the film *Porcelain War*. Before you facilitate, please prepare for the conversation, as this film invites you and your community to discuss the experiences of Ukrainian civilians, the devastation and moral weight of war, the role of creative resistance, emotional and psychological resilience, and the broader political landscapes in which these struggles unfold. These conversations require learning truths about society, culture, and political motivations that typically have not been taught in schools. We urge you, as a facilitator, to take the necessary steps to ensure that you are prepared to guide a conversation that prioritizes the well-being and safety of people affected by armed conflict, artists, and youth in your community. Importantly, this film shares experiences through a lens of joy and resilience, rather than focusing on trauma, and we hope this guide will aid you in conversations that expand understanding while maximizing care, critical curiosity, transformation, and connection.

Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

Share Community Agreements

Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. [Here is a model](#) of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- Pass around sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- Allow time for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- Go around in a circle and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- Go around two to three times to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- Read the list aloud.
- Invite questions or revisions.
- Ask if all are satisfied with the list.

COMMON CONCEPTS & LANGUAGE

Russification

Russification is a policy of forced cultural assimilation, where non-Russian communities are compelled to adopt the Russian language, culture, and identity. This practice has historically been used to erase indigenous and minority identities and cultures in and around Russia to subjugate and dominate the local populations.

Colonialism

Colonialism is the invasion, dispossession, and subjugation of a people. It often involves the extraction of resources and exploitation of labor while imposing the colonizer's cultural, political, and economic systems. This systemic domination results in long-term institutional inequalities that perpetuate disparities in power, wealth, and social status.

Volya

Volya is a Ukrainian word that can mean freedom, willpower, or strength. Ukrainian Scholars Tetyana Ogarkova and Volodymyr Yermolenko argue it can best be understood as “freedom despite.” In this sense, it helps us understand the Ukrainian mentality of persistently holding dual states—freedom despite bondage, life despite death, and beauty despite the grotesque.

Frontline Areas

Frontline areas are the cities, towns, and villages along the frontline of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These settlements are constantly bombarded by both missile and drone attacks. Liberated cities are often lined with anti-personnel mines that leave civilians at risk long after occupation.

Displacement

Displacement is when individuals or communities are forced to leave their homes due to conflict, natural disasters, persecution, or systemic oppression. This disruption often leads to loss of social ties, economic instability, and long-term challenges in rebuilding lives.

Participants

Slava

Slava is a first-time director and one of the film's main subjects. He creates porcelain figurines with his wife and longtime collaborator Anya. He is a former soldier and weapons instructor.

Anya

Anya is a ceramics artist who was an associate producer of the film. She has spent her life closely connected with the fine arts, focusing on nature photography and creating porcelain sculptures with her husband and longtime collaborator, Slava.

Andrey

Andrey is a painter originally from Crimea and is credited as the film's director of photography. He has extensive experience in fine art photography, landscape paintings, and still lifes. In response to the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he decided to pick up a camera with his friend Slava.

Frodo

Frodo is a terrier who stays behind with Slava and Anya in Kharkiv. He continues to enjoy nature, including accompanying Slava's unit, Saigon, into the forests of the Kharkiv region.

Key Issues

Porcelain War is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Ukraine
- War
- Russification
- Art as Resistance
- Resilience
- Cultural Erasure
- Civilians at War
- Trauma

Background Information

Understanding *Porcelain War* requires consideration of the reality faced by Ukrainian artists, writers, journalists, and documentarians: when an author publishes a long-form work documenting life in frontline cities and villages, their narrative has already become a historical artifact reflecting an earlier phase of the war. While the scenes and sounds of destruction in Kharkiv and the Kharkiv region that dominate the film stop for viewers when the credits roll, they have become permanent fixtures for the people who live there.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine is often presented in abstract terms of territorial gains or losses. However, each piece of territory occupied by Russia represents loss to those who call that territory home. Subsequently, each time a village or city is liberated by Ukraine, those same people often rush back home the next day.

Life on the Edge

Porcelain War invites viewers to consider the extreme juxtapositions of hand-painted porcelain figurines with the sheer magnitude of the destruction inflicted by Russia on the frontline areas of Ukraine. In their book *Life on the Edge*, Ukrainian journalist and literary scholar Tetyana Ogarkova and Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko explain that as one approaches Ukrainian frontline cities, towns, and villages, reality itself becomes increasingly distorted. There are fewer people, and there is less life. They wrote their book after dozens of volunteer trips

delivering books, aid, and cars to frontline areas. They explain that, upon reaching the edge, people find themselves navigating the dissolving reality around them at an ever faster pace. But increased speed will not save them, because death approaches faster than they can move.

This distortion of reality is not only philosophical. The city of Kherson was occupied by Russia from March 2022 until its liberation in November of the same year. During the occupation, Russia formally changed its constitution to claim the city and the surrounding region as Russian territory. Even still, Russia bombards civilian areas of the city regularly — in 2025, Ukrainian journalist Olga Tokariuk reported that citizens are subjected to hundreds of drone attacks daily. Corresponding air raid sirens can last for hours. For this reason, the people in Kherson — and in other frontline cities and towns — are now accustomed to living part-time underground. In the frontline city of Zaporizhzhia, which the Russian constitution also claims, schoolchildren were elated to learn that, at the beginning of the 2025 school year, they would be allowed to attend school in person twice a week. The catch is that they must study in underground shelters equipped with classrooms.

When visiting the front, locals can point out how their homes have been physically distorted by Russian missiles. In 2025, a man in Kherson brought Ukrainian writer Myroslav Laiuk to the bombed-out shell of his former home. He described how it now more closely resembles a twisted plastic bottle. Laiuk was told to watch not only for missiles and drones in the air but also on the ground. It is often lined with insidious anti-personnel mines that hide gently beneath the fall leaves. Known as “petals” because of their distinctive shape, these mines, designed to blow off a person’s heels, are why many people along the front now walk with crutches.

People on the Edge

When trying to grasp what life is like in these Ukrainian towns on the edge of reality, it is important not to romanticize or intellectualize the almost tangible atmosphere of death in the air. Nor should attention be paid only when that death manifests in its most cruel and tragic ways. Ukrainian writer and poet Anna Gruver laments how Western audiences so often only pay attention to her colleagues after Russia's war has taken their lives. She asks us to "remember the dead, but read the living. While they are alive."

This holds true for the Ukrainians in the areas explored by *Porcelain War*. Their lived experiences consist of more than the horrific news stories of double-tap strikes on railway stations or the destruction of entire apartment blocks. Everyday realities that might be taken for granted elsewhere become acts of resistance near the frontlines in Ukraine.

In Kherson, flower sellers have remained in business. If you visit, you can buy entire rose bushes. The locals who plant them dream that, eventually, the "petal" mines that have maimed their neighbors will be replaced with the petals of their roses and other blooming flowers.

The frontline city of Bakhmut was effectively annihilated, and Russia occupied its remains in early 2023. Even as the city barely resembled a city, its residents continued their daily lives. An 86-year-old woman named Oleksandra would sweep the entrance of her apartment building entrance, which was regularly cluttered with pieces of brick and glass. She shares her story in Laiuk's book, *Bakhmut*. While cleaning her own apartment building from the mess the Russian shelling had caused, she herself was hit in the back by shrapnel. She now lives in Kyiv, insisting that Russia's invasion of Ukraine will ultimately prove meaningless, because, in her words, "evil never prevails."

While women like Oleksandra were keeping their entryways tidy, Laiuk came across children in the city who remained despite a state-mandated evacuation of children from the conflict zone. He tells the story of two boys, Illia and Bohdan, who he found sitting atop anti-tank obstacles, watching a man pull a part out of a destroyed car in a pit. They excitedly told Laiuk about a large landmine they had recently found.

This rapid maturation of children is also explored by Ukrainian writer and soldier Oleksandr Mykhed in his book *The Language of War*. He shares the story of a Ukrainian child who made a donation to the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo. The boy brought a large piece of a casing from a shell that had landed in his home garden. His sister warned him against taking it because, allegedly, their neighbor tore his finger off trying to do the same. Still, the boy took the shell. Mykhed explains he felt it was important to overcome his fears.

Breaking on the Edge

These stories serve to both horrify and inspire. Audiences often struggle to comprehend the story of a boy who was forced to grow up so quickly that his version of overcoming his fears was donating a sharp scrap of metal that nearly killed him and his loved ones. Many might instinctively imagine him as superhuman for his ability to compartmentalize and overcome an unfathomable situation. However, when drawing inspiration from such stories, it is important not to mythologize Ukrainians who continue to live near the front. It is easy to slip into using the convenient framing of Ukrainians as “unbreakable,” when, in reality, they are just as breakable as anyone else.

The Ukrainian concept of *volya* typically translates to “freedom,” “willpower,” or “strength.” However, Ogarkova and Yermolenko define it in starker terms. They argue that *volya* is not simply freedom, which exists as a separate word in Ukrainian. *Volya* is freedom *despite*. Under this framework, the reality of Ukraine can be understood as life despite death, as freedom despite bondage.

When Ukrainians accept and endorse the framing of being called unbreakable in response to Russian aggression, they are often doing so with this implicit understanding. Mykhed describes the phenomenon as an inner core transforming into an emotional spring. He explains that, in order to survive, Ukrainians have realized “we have to accept there is no other destiny for us. We are doomed to become the mincemeat of history.”

Ukrainian resilience should be celebrated, but it must be contextualized against a backdrop of unthinkable sacrifice and indescribable pain. This framing is essential because so many Ukrainians themselves use the word “unbreakable” with a hidden suffix. They are unbreakable *despite*.

Defenders on the Edge

Porcelain War documents the personal transition from artist to soldier. Often, films and stories that outline this kind of journey can feel unsettling to audiences outside Ukraine. It is important to distinguish between uncritically glorifying any institution — including the military — and celebrating the stories of citizens who take a stand to defend their homes.

This distinction can look different for Ukrainians, who do not share the same history as the United States or the former empires in Western and Central Europe. One of the most popular Ukrainian books of 2025 was a collection of short prose by Ukrainian writer and soldier Artur Dron called *Hemingway Knows Nothing*. The book's titular essay contrasts Ernest Hemingway's choice to travel to Italy during World War I to participate in a conflict that would not otherwise touch him or his family with Ukrainians who did not choose for war to come to them. Whereas Hemingway *wanted* to go to the front, Ukrainians *must* go to the front, because, as Dron writes, fleeing or surrendering means the end of the Ukrainian people. And this is not hyperbole — legal scholars and historians have written extensively about Russia's genocidal intent in Ukraine.

In *Porcelain War*, Slava echoes this sentiment, insisting that if freedom is valued, personal freedom must sometimes be sacrificed to preserve it. For him, his service in the army is not about uncritical glorification. It is about defending his right and the rights of those around him to continue to produce Ukrainian culture. Dron shares how this realization helps Ukrainians compartmentalize while under bombardment; his choice to go to the front to defend his people, his language, and his culture gives him strength and a sense of freedom in the moments he believes he will die. Even when the opponent is an oncoming tank, he writes, "Even if it kills me now, it will not win." This is the lens through which Ukrainian attitudes toward and portrayals of their military must be understood.

For these reasons, the Ukrainian concept of *volya* is the most appropriate frame through which to understand *Porcelain War*: freedom despite bondage, life despite death, victory despite defeat, and art despite war. Under this framework, *Porcelain War* — and works like it — are stories of beauty despite the grotesque. They are stories of persisting in the creation of beauty while being compelled by an invader to defend that beauty with a weapon of war.

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DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Starting The Conversation

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (see examples below) and give people time to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- What emotions are you feeling right now? Where do you feel them in your body?
- Which image or scene from the film has stayed with you the most vividly?
- If you could speak with someone from the film, who would you speak with? What would you say?
- In what ways did the film challenge any of your pre-existing ideas about the kinds of people fighting in Ukraine?

Art Despite War

In the film, Slava, Anya, and Andrey make a conscious choice to stay in a war zone, continuing to create beautiful art despite the grotesqueness of the destruction and explosions around them. Slava, in particular, serves as both a weapons instructor and an artist. The film can be seen as an exploration of art despite war, of beauty despite the grotesque.

- Why do you think the filmmakers chose to animate the porcelain figurines? How did they help you process the internal feelings of the artists?
- How did the juxtaposition of the figurines against the backdrop of full-scale war make you feel? How does it help you conceptualize the human aspect of war?
- Consider the role of Ukrainian artists in the full-scale invasion. Many struggle to continue to create. They might begin documenting atrocity crimes or join the military. But others continue to produce art. How do you interpret their decision? Is it escape? An act of resistance? Something else?

Life Despite Death

Porcelain War shows us how everyday people are forced to respond to war. It is a challenging thing to comprehend— continuing life despite death and destruction all around you. The film implicitly challenges us to reflect on the human cost of resilience.

- Frodo, the small terrier that accompanies Slava and Anya around Kharkiv provides a cheerful contrast in mood. Consider the importance of pets to people living under constant shelling. How important do you think it is for people like Slava and Anya to have Frodo with them? How do you think years of shelling impact the lives of the pets in frontline areas?
- How do you think Slava emotionally processes painting a delicate porcelain snail in one moment, then training people to use assault rifles the next? Do you think he wanted this kind of extreme duality in his life? Would you?

- When Andrey greets his daughters, we are nearly immediately reminded that the city is unsafe for them to stay long. What kind of impact does this have on their development? What about the impact on the development of children across Ukraine?

Freedom Despite Bombs

Ukrainian writer and soldier Artur Dron argues that, while American or European audiences might see war as a choice, Ukrainian citizens who find themselves defending their homes on the front are given no such choice. In the film, Slava describes the paradox of sacrificing your own freedom to defend freedom.

- People sometimes feel uneasy when the celebration of Ukraine's self-defence is presented as an uncritical endorsement of the military as an institution. How do you think the film addresses it? Why do you think people feel that way? How did the film navigate these questions?
- The film's subjects are not what most people imagine when they think of a professional soldier. How does this challenge your perception of what a soldier is supposed to look like? Does it change how you see the struggle in Ukraine?
- Much of Ukraine's contemporary art and literature addresses questions of war, and many of its emerging writers are current soldiers or veterans. How do you think Ukraine's war literature might differ from war literature from American, British, French, or German authors? Why?

OPENING/CLOSING ACTIVITY

Before the film

Once you welcome community members, acknowledge that the film may trigger difficult emotions and that this is normal. Invite them to take a moment to participate in a deep breathing or grounding exercise. This allows everyone to clear their minds and feel connected to the experience of being with others in this space.

Reflection Questions:

Take a moment to notice your breath, your body, and the emotions you may be experiencing before the film begins. Are you feeling anticipation, excitement, or dread? Write them down.

What interests you most about *Porcelain War*? What are you hoping to learn or understand by watching the film?

Write down any questions you currently have about Ukraine, war, or trauma.

After the film

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions:

- What moment in the film had the biggest impact on you? Why?
- If you could make one person watch this film to better understand what's happening in Ukraine, who would it be and why?
- What did you learn from this film that you wish you could immediately teach others?

TAKING ACTION

Engage in the Civic Process in Support of Ukraine

Every citizen has a right and a duty to engage in the civic process. You can join protests, contact Congressional representatives, and write letters to the editor to ensure that the kinds of people showcased in the film are not abandoned. You can even organize events in your local community.

OPENING/CLOSING ACTIVITY (cont.)

Volunteer with a Nonprofit

Find an organization that supports Ukraine or displaced Ukrainians and ask for ways to help. This could be an organization in your city or an organization in Ukraine. If you don't have time to volunteer but can afford it, consider a donation.

Learn More About Ukraine and the History of Russian Aggression in Ukraine

Learning more about a situation is the first step towards educating others about it. You can organize a small group to read books or watch documentaries about Ukraine. PEN Ukraine's list of [100 books to Help Understand Ukraine](#) is a good place to start. A few particularly relevant books from the list (plus a few additions):

Bakhmut by Myroslav Laiuk

The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine by Serhii Plokhy

The Russo-Ukrainian War by Serhii Plokhy

I Will Mix Your Blood with Coal: Snapshots from the East of Ukraine by Oleksandr Mykhed

The Language of War by Oleksandr Mykhed

Survival as Victory: Ukrainian Women in the Gulag, Oksana Kis

Cecil the Lion Had to Die by Olena Stiazhkina

Ukraine in Histories and Stories by Volodymyr Yermolenko (Editor) ([Available for free](#))

Nobody Knows Us Here & We Don't Know Anyone by Kateryna Kalytko

Courage and Fear by Ola Hnatiuk

Resources

[PEN Ukraine](#)

Ukraine's leading association of writers, journalists, human rights activists, and civil society figures

[Porcelain War](#)

The official website for the film

[Souspilnist Foundation](#)

One of Ukraine's oldest NGOs championing independent journalism and media literacy

[The Kyiv Independent](#)

Ukraine's leading and most trustworthy English-language news source

[Ukraïner International](#)

The international edition of one of Ukraine's most celebrated publications that seeks to capture the soul of the country

[UkraineWorld](#)

A Ukrainian organization dedicated to high-quality analysis to explain Ukraine

Credits & Acknowledgments

About the Author

Christopher Atwood is the Editor-in-Chief of *Ukrainian International*. A human rights defender, genocide expert, and journalist, his work often explores the intersection of identity, colonial violence, and atrocity crimes. He serves as Head of the Advisory Board at the Sospilnist Foundation in Kyiv, Ukraine, and as Advisor to the President of PEN Ukraine. He was an advisor and contributor to the independent reports *An Independent Legal Analysis of the Russian Federation's Breaches of the Genocide Convention and the Duty to Prevent* and *The Russian Federation's Escalating Commission of Genocide in Ukraine: A Legal Analysis*. These analyses have played a key role in advancing legal accountability for Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

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