CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Szczepan Twardoch

Null

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Null by Szczepan Twardoch is a contemporary novel about the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the experience of soldiers fighting on the Ukrainian front. The book presents the war from the perspective of an individual soldier rather than through military or political reports. Twardoch combines fictional characters and events with real experiences of the war. The novel is based partly on what the author personally witnessed during his visits to Ukraine and what he heard from Ukrainian soldiers. The author wanted to show the war as realistically as possible without turning it into a heroic or romantic story.

The main character is a Polish man known by the nickname Koń (Horse), a forty-five-year-old historian who decides to join the Ukrainian army as a volunteer. He leaves his former life in Poland behind and goes to the front, where he becomes a drone operator. The action takes place on the so-called "null", the frontline position separating Ukrainian soldiers from Russian forces. Koń and his fellow soldiers live in difficult conditions, surrounded by mud, explosions, drones and the constant threat of death. Their everyday life consists of waiting, fighting, fear and attempts to survive. The novel also introduces Zuja, a woman who brings back emotions that Koń believed had disappeared from his life. His memories and personal past gradually become an important part of the story. The narrative combines scenes from the battlefield with reflections on his earlier life, his family and his reasons for joining the war.

The novel deals with one of the most important political conflicts of contemporary Europe – Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It presents the war as a struggle for the independence and sovereignty of a country. Through the experiences of Ukrainian soldiers, Twardoch shows what it means to defend one's homeland against an invading power. The book also raises questions about freedom, national identity, responsibility and the right of nations to decide their own future. The conflict is not presented only as a military confrontation but also as a struggle over the existence and independence of Ukrainian society. It also explores the portrayal of the Ukrainian army and the people who serve in it. Twardoch presents people from different social backgrounds, with different motivations and attitudes towards the war. Some are volunteers who consciously decide to defend Ukraine, while others are mobilised soldiers who do not want to fight. The novel describes their fears, conflicts, exhaustion and doubts. It also shows problems connected with the organisation of the army, corruption and the unequal access to military equipment. In this way, the author avoids presenting war through simple propaganda and shows the complicated reality of a country at war.

The political meaning of the book is also connected with the relationship between Poland, Ukraine and Russia. The main character is Polish, but he decides to fight on the Ukrainian side. His decision raises questions about solidarity between nations, historical relationships and moral responsibility. The novel suggests that the war in Ukraine is not only a local conflict but also an issue connected with the security and freedom of other European countries. Twardoch presents Ukrainian independence as a value that goes beyond national borders.

It is also a story about the psychological and physical consequences of war. The author describes

fear, violence, death, loneliness and the destruction of ordinary human relationships. The soldiers are forced to live in conditions where death can come at any moment. Their understanding of courage, friendship and responsibility changes. The novel also shows that returning to normal life after experiencing war can be extremely difficult. War affects not only those who fight but also their families, memories and ideas about the future.

The book can also be understood in the wider context of anti-war literature. Twardoch shows that even when people believe in the importance of their cause, they still experience suffering, fear and moral uncertainty. The novel therefore explores the contradiction between the political necessity of defending freedom and the terrible personal consequences of war.

Null was first published in Poland in 2025 by Marginesy publishing house. It has also been translated into four languages: German (Die Nulllinie, 2025), Belarusian (Нуль, 2025), Slovak (Null, 2025) and Italian (La linea zero, 2026).

LANGUAGE: Polish/Polski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: