

## Alexander Korotko. *War Poems*.

Trans. Andrew Sheppard, Olha Ilchuk. London: Glagoslav Publications, 2022. 218 pp. Notes. \$27.99, paper.

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Alexander Korotko's *War Poems* is a collection of eighty-eight poems, originally written in Russian and translated into English by Andrew Sheppard and into Ukrainian by Olha Ilchuk. According to the author, who currently resides in Ukraine's capital Kyiv, he wrote them during an approximately three-month creative burst in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

A Jewish Ukrainian Russophone writer, Korotko started writing poetry in the late 1980s and won acclaim as the author of song lyrics performed by famous Russian and Ukrainian singers. Although he works in different genres, he prefers poetry and has authored multiple collections, some of which have been translated into Ukrainian, English, French, Italian, and Hebrew, among other languages. As Russia's genocide against Ukraine continues, Korotko, along with other fellow Ukrainian Russophone writers (such as, for example, Boris Khersonsky, Andrey Kurkov or Alexandr Kabanov), takes a pro-Ukrainian stance, articulated both in his creative work and public engagements.

The information about the two translators who made this collection possible is regrettably very limited, and—unless it is their own preference—more visibility would have been appreciated. The English translator Andrew Sheppard is the editor of *East-West Review*, the journal of the Britain-Russia Society, and his interest in and familiarity with Ukraine go back to the late 1990s. The Ukrainian translator Olha Ilchuk, a professional philologist by training, practices law in Kyiv and describes this project as her passion. In one interview, Korotko expressed admiration for his Ukrainian translator, adding that she feels his poetry with her soul.

As a distinct genre, contemporary Ukrainian war poetry goes back to 2014, when Russia first invaded Ukraine and annexed the Crimean Peninsula. More than nine years into the war, most Ukrainian writers have addressed Russia's aggression in their work, and several excellent translated anthologies have since become available in English (*Words for War*, *In the Hour of War*, *The Frontier*, to mention but a few). What makes this collection stand out, besides the fact that it's a single-authored volume, is its trilingual mode, whereby each original poem in Russian is accompanied by its Ukrainian and English translations. This is clearly a political statement, rather than merely a multilingual feature, as prior to the war the side-by-side Russian-Ukrainian-English format would have been considered not only unnecessary, but strange. As such, Korotko's refined Russian offers yet another reminder that Russian-speaking Ukrainians never needed (or asked for) "protection," as Russian propaganda still desperately tries to make us believe.

Korotko's poetry is that of a witness, and although most poems depict the horrors of war and convey the immense suffering it has brought about, thematically the collection is rather diverse. Korotko writes about the sleepless nights pierced by air raid sirens ("We swallowed the bait," 29) and the silence that "is more frightful / than the explosions" ("Do not die," 87). He portrays the devastated cities: the erased Mariupol where "[t]he theatre of war / remains, but / the theater is NO MORE" ("Mariupol"); Kyiv, where "pain, like salt, whiter than the truth, / sounds like a heartbeat / on the anvil of silence" ("Kyiv," 91); and the "furious grief" of Irpin, a small town near Kyiv where hundreds of innocent civilians were mercilessly executed ("Irpin," 57). In his polemical poems, Korotko appeals both to "tin / soldiers of / Europe" (47), allegedly indifferent to the war, asking them to protect the Ukrainian sky, as

well as to Russian soldiers, who apparently “forgot” something “in [his] land” (43). While the author’s distress and frustration are clearly understandable, his philosophical and lyrical poems are much more compelling and stand a better chance of surviving the war.

Both the Ukrainian and English translations are masterful and generally do justice not only to Korotko’s emphatic messages but, even more importantly, to his peculiar soundscapes (marked by short, punctuated lines, often consisting of only one or two words). Naturally, Sheppard’s and Ilchuk’s approaches differ. Whereas Sheppard tries to stay “close” on the level of denotation and abandons rhyming in an attempt to capture the subtleties of meaning, Ilchuk (working with a cognate language) allows herself more poetic license in order to recreate Korotko’s rhymes and cadences. Despite occasional minor infelicities, both translations read well and are works of art in their own right. *War Poems* will be appreciated by anyone interested in contemporary Ukrainian literature and may also serve as an excellent educational resource for students of Slavic languages.

## **Stanislav Aseyev. *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street.***

**Trans. Zenia Tompkins and Nina Murray. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2023; 281 pp. Illustrations. Photographs. \$39.95, hard bound.**

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Stanislav Aseyev’s memoir denies us the luxury of thinking that concentration camps and the torture of prisoners are a matter of the past. Atrocities repeat, not as farce but again as atrocities.

In 2014 pro-Russian separatists proclaimed the independence of the districts of Donetsk and Luhansk, as People’s Republics. Aseyev, a Ukrainian journalist, stayed in his native Donetsk and sent reportage to the Ukrainian *Mirror Weekly* and Radio Liberty, under the pen name Stanislav Vasin. In June 2017 he was arrested, beaten at interrogation, kept for six weeks in a sickening basement of the State Security Office, tortured, and then transferred to a secret prison called *Izoliatsiia*, in the building of a defunct factory that used to produce isolation materials (after the factory closed, the building had housed an arts foundation, but in June 2014 it was taken over by separatist militants). This is the torture house of the title: Aseyev focuses on this makeshift penal colony reigned by terror, electric-shock torture, beatings, psychological abuse, semi-starvation, constant humiliations, and rape or sexual coercion of women prisoners. He was happy to be transferred to a regular bed-bug infested jail. In November 2019 he was liberated through a prisoner exchange. The book ends with some fictional and reflexive texts, confiscated but purchased back, that Aseyev had composed in captivity.

The memoir is divided into relatively brief thematic chapters, as if in an attempt to control the material. There are occasional blank spots: Aseyev is less concerned with his own ordeal than with the collective suffering. Minor self-contradictions in his account are probably associated with the nature of the institution—its combining solid personal entrapment with the general sense of fluidity. The first concentration camps in Russia (starting with 1918) were likewise in makeshift facilities and seemed temporary; ironically, their very cheapness granted them permanence. *Izoliatsiia* is cheap too; being secret, it probably fails to get sufficient funding, and the prisoners are held on a semi-starvation diet. This, however,