

Writing within the Pain: Russophone Anti-War Poetry Of 2022

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In memory of Ilya Rissenberg

The new stage of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, created a fundamentally new, unprecedented situation in Russian culture.¹ Those within Russia who refused to support Russia's political establishment and the actions of the Russian army not only put themselves at personal risk, but also experienced an acute loss of agency. Poets, like many other Russian intellectuals, have found themselves in a situation in which, as citizens of an aggressor country, they feel responsibility for "their" state's actions, distinguished by rare cruelty and cynicism, and, simultaneously, an inability to stop the violence.

Undermining, and even ridiculing, the normative ways that the war is discussed in Russian culture has become critically important. The reason for this shift is that anti-war poets need to overtly call into question post-Soviet cultural and political mythology of World War II.² Until 2022, for Soviet and post-Soviet culture, in its various iterations, there remained the vitally important conception of fascism/Nazism as an absolute evil and of art as an important tool to counter this evil. These days, however, media outlets and social media users have begun to associate the violation of all standards of humanity and the demonstrative cynicism expressed by the Russian army and leadership with the actions of the Wehrmacht, the SS, and the leadership of Nazi Germany. This association is not entirely accurate, but, psychologically, it is almost inevitable. Therefore, the interpretive "framework" used for understanding current events is provided by a poem of activist and poet Daria Serenko:

I would like to thank Yuri Leving for providing me with materials from the anthology he was preparing at the moment when I wrote this essay: Yuri Leving, ed., *Poeziia poslednego vremeni: Khronika* (St. Petersburg, 2022), and for valuable discussions of the works included in this anthology. Some works I took from the reviews of the Israel-based poet and critic Yevgenii Nikitin in the Metajournal Telegram channel, published between March and May of 2022. Nikitin's reviews were the first attempt to systematically analyze Russian poetry during the Russo-Ukrainian war. I relied on some of his ideas in my work.

1. The first stage of the current war began in February of 2014 with the annexation of Crimea.

2. On this cult in Putin's Russia see, for example: Maria Domańska, "The Myth of the Great Patriotic War and Russia's Foreign Policy," in: Agnieszka Legucka, Robert Kupiecki, eds., *Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus* (New York, 2022); Kristin Bakke, Kit Rickard and John O'Loughlin, "Perceptions of the Past in the Post-Soviet space," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39, no. 4, (2023), 223–56.

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смерть, конечно, лучше жизни	death, of course, is better than life
свет, конечно, хуже тьмы	light, of course, is worse than darkness
с днём победы над фашизмом	congratulations on our victory over fascism
но фашисты—это мы	but the fascists—they're us. ³

That is why in the new (anti-)war poetry, the foundations of all the cultural conventions developed in Soviet society since the WWII era, and even, to some extent, in Russia's society since the turn of the twentieth century, are now under scrutiny. Poetry has turned out to be vitally important for this scrutiny, as it is distinguished by two distinctive features: a poem can be written relatively quickly, published easily on social media (that is, it does not require a special room for its exhibition, as does visual art), and spread with the help of the same social media channels (during a time of war and increased censorship in Russia, the speed of publication and distribution becomes crucial). Therefore, it can reflect changes in cultural self-consciousness “in real time” and possibly play a role in guiding the direction of such changes.

The current situation is also made exceptional by the volume of poetic works written in light of the new war. In the post-war period, the Soviet Union invaded at least Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan. The post-Soviet Russian army fought in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, and, since 2014, in Ukraine. As a rule, the poetic response to these wars was small in scope. In the Soviet era, authors understood that poems criticizing the actions of the army or of the country's leadership could not be published in the USSR. The invasion of the countries of the Warsaw Pact, like Czechoslovakia in 1968 was written about only by a few dissidents.⁴

The single important exception to this rule was the First and Second Chechen Wars in 1994–1996 and 1999–2000, respectively (although armed clashes occurred in the Northern Caucasus until approximately 2009). These events triggered the creation of dozens of anti-war poems that sought to reflect the violence carried out by the Russian army and special services in Chechnya, where, throughout the 1990s, leaders had struggled to transform it into an independent state. The poetic responses to the First and Second Chechen Wars resisting the state-backed jingoistic propaganda were so numerous that in 2001, poet Nikolai Vinnik published them in an anthology titled *The Time of Ch: Poetry of Chechnya and Beyond*.⁵ However, the number of poems produced in response to the Russian-Ukrainian war and resisting the Kremlin's aggression and its ideological justifications is even greater than those produced in the late 1990s-early 2000s.

3. “Stand, children, in ‘Z’ letter . . .,” 2022, cit. from <https://syg.ma/@daria-sierienko/stikhi-nie-o-voinie>.

4. See, for example, Natalya Gorbanevskaya's poem “Eto ia ne spasla ni Varshavu togda i ni Pragu potom . . .” (It was I who did not save Warsaw then and Prague later, 1973).

5. *Vremya Ch: Stikhi o Chechne i ne tol'ko*. Nikolai Vinnik, ed. (Moscow, 2001).

Today's events are perhaps the first large-scale war in the history of Europe during which the atrocities of the aggressor army, the mass killings of the civilian population, and the mass looting are continuously broadcast through social networks and Telegram—and these atrocities are presented not so much through television reports as through personal videos taken on phones. The socio-aesthetic effect of the relentless onslaught of “living within the pain of others” (to paraphrase Susan Sontag) might most accurately be described in the words of Nikitin, who writes, “. . . the concept of ‘anti-war poetry’ loses its meaning because no other poetry is possible right now. Rather, it is possible, but it is perceived as skullduggery.”⁶

2

Russophone poets living and working in other countries (not as emigres but belonging to the multilingual literatures of these countries) are also involved in this process of radical political self-determination. For example, Igor Kotyukh, who lives in Estonia, wrote a poem in which he declares himself to be a multilingual state in which all languages, including Russian, are equal. Thus, he responds simultaneously to the stigmatization of Russians in Estonia and to political repressions in Russia and Belorussia:

я хочу говорить на русском ровно то и ровно столько
 сколько хочу и могу говорить на других близких мне языках
 < . . . >
 в государстве «Игорь Котюх»
 между собой равны:
 эстонский, вырусский, украинский, белорусский и русский

I want to say in Russian exactly what and exactly as much
 as I can and want to say in the other languages dear to me

< . . . >
 in the state of “Igor Kotyukh”
 they stand equal:
 Estonian, Võro,⁷ Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Russian

(“Don’t take my tongue full . . .,” March 23).⁸

Whether it is possible to speak of Russophone Ukrainian poetry in the same context is a complicated question. Certainly, Ukrainian literature contains literatures written in the different languages of the country’s people—Ukrainian,

6. From an essay in the “Metajournal” Telegram channel: <https://t.me/metajournal/2325>.

7. The Võro language belongs to the Finno-Ugric languages and is spoken in southeastern Estonia.

8. *Poeziia poslednego vremeni: Khronika*, 103–104.

Russian, Crimean Tatar. Some Ukrainian poets who wrote in two languages before the war (Ilya Kiva) or only in Russian (Dmitry Kazakov) have switched to using Ukrainian during the war. Nevertheless, Ukrainian Russophone poetry continues to exist and, in my opinion, can be read both in the context of Ukraine's multilingual literature and in juxtaposition with the Russophone works of authors affiliated with Russia. Here, I will discuss only the latter of the aforementioned contexts.

On the one hand, Ukrainian Russophone poets regularly depict the whole of Ukrainian society as patriotically mobilizing in the name of a military struggle with the enemy. On the other, in addition to describing this mobilization, they also attempt to portray the state of society on the other side of the front lines. Boris Khersonskii, who, in his poetry, even in the first stage of the war between 2014 and 2022, sharply criticized the Kremlin's war machine,⁹ writes today about the social catastrophe of a Russian society that agrees to take part in the militaristic "rallying around the flag":

Военные ждали тирана. Дождались. Теперь воюют.
 Писака ждал госзаказ. Дождался. Строчит строку за строкою.
 Людям был нужен порядок. Получили и не бунтуют.
 Что, страна жестковата? Вы хотели ее—такую.

Вам казалось—свобода—опасная, ненадежная штука.
 Благо, нашлись ярмо и бич—подставляйте спину и шею.
 Рабства хватит на сына и, возможно, для внука.
 Будущее—на ладони. Не стоит звать ворожею.

The soldiers awaited a tyrant. The wait is over at last. Now they fight.
 The scribbler awaited state orders. The wait is over at last.
 Now he scribbles scribble after scribble.
 The people needed order. They received it and do not rebel.
 What, is your country a bit harsh? You want it—that way.

9. Ilya Kukulín, "The Long-Legged Time Is Forging the War: The Postcolonial Condition of the Russian-Language Poetry of Ukraine" in "Postcolonial Slavic Literatures After Communism," ed. Klavdia Smola and Dirk Uffelmann, special issue, *Postcolonial Perspectives on Eastern Europe*, no. 4. (2017): 161–90; Dirk Uffelmann, "Is There Any Such Thing as 'Russophone Russophobia'? When Russian Speakers Speak out against Russia(n) in the Ukrainian Internet," in Kevin M. F. Platt, ed., *Global Russian Cultures* (Madison, 2019), 207–29; Dirk Uffelmann, "iRhetoric: Metonymie als generative Trope von Selbstperformance im Social Web—mit Boris Chersonskijs Facebook als Testfall, in "Ich-Splitter. (Cross-)Mediale Selbstentwürfe in den Slawischen Kulturen," Gernot Howanitz and Ingeborg Jandl, eds., *Wiener Slavistischer Almanach*, Sonderband 96 (2019): 333–71; Dirk Uffelmann, "Self-Translation – The Looming End of Russophone Literature in the CIS? Boris Khersonskii's Anti-Hegemonic Code-Switching," *Russian Literature* 127 (January-February 2022), 99–126.

You thought that freedom was a dangerous, unreliable thing.

Fortunately, they've found the yoke and scourge—so hold out your back and your neck.

There's enough slavery to go around for your son, and, possibly, your grandson.

Your future's in the palm of your hand. No need to call a fortune-teller.

("The soldiers awaited a tyrant. The wait is over at last.
Now they fight . . .," August 7)¹⁰

Ukrainian Russophone poetry spreads through Facebook and Telegram and can therefore be read by Russophone authors living in Russia and in the diaspora. Consequently, even under wartime conditions, a space for dialogue, or polylogue, between the Russophone poetry of different nations still exists—however, it is deeply charged with psychological tension, often hostility, and Ukrainian poets' aspiration to defend their separate cultural space.

3

Making sense of the war significantly reduced the distance between the two different types of poetry that have developed in Russia in the 2000s–20s. Oddly enough, they are still not exactly defined, so I will have to provide brief descriptions. The first type of poetry (though I do not mean to indicate its primacy; the order of the list is interchangeable) consists of works that are addressed to the widest possible audience, and which tend to use idioms that the audience recognizes as "its own" and understands implicitly. The second type consists of works addressed to a primed audience and problematizes existing poetic discourses. Let's call them Poetry-1 and Poetry-2. Generally speaking, this distinction between "ideal types" exists in any national literature, but in the Russophone literature of Russia at the start of the twenty-first century, there was a particular rift between them, as each had a different aesthetic origin. Poetry-2 was founded on the traditions of the radical, uncensored poetry of the Soviet period (the "Lianozovo school," the Leningrad underground, conceptualism. . .) and their synthesis with the foreign, primarily Anglophone style of postmodern poetry. Poetry-1 was founded on the tradition of loyal but unofficial Soviet poetry of the 1940s–70s (from David Samoilov to the children's poetry of Yunna Moritz), with small "grafts" taken from Poetry-2 that gave—and continue to give—these poems a new look.

In contemporary Russian poetry, the question of gender also takes on great political importance. A notable element of media propaganda is the valorization of a hegemonic masculinity, consisting of a set of qualities—which now necessarily includes a willingness to go to war—that make a "real man."

10. Boris Khersonskii, Facebook post, August 7, 2022: <https://www.facebook.com/borkhers/posts/5726703337364445> (accessed September 12, 2023).

Ukraine, on the contrary, has been repeatedly portrayed in Russian propaganda as an “errant woman.”¹¹

In response to the propaganda situating aggression as a manifestation of “real” masculinity, a lot of anti-war poetry is not only written by women but opposes violence from the point of view of those who defend the weak and vulnerable, which can be associated with “feminine” in patriarchal society. Its authors, or heroines, appear as mourners for the dead and helpers of the living, opposing the killing wrought by maddened men.

The tradition of condemning senseless (from the author’s perspective) violence through this lens has been around in literature from the time of Aristophanes’ comedies *Lysistrata* (Λυσιστράτη, 411 BCE) and *Assemblywomen* (Ἐκκλησιάζουσαι, 392 BCE). However, it was updated in different eras in accordance with different tasks, sometimes with a direct eye toward the examples set by the ancients. Thus, soon after the start of the war’s first stage in 2014, the poet Elena Fanailova began writing a monumental, still ongoing cycle of poems called *Troy vs. Lysistrata*,¹² and today publishes new poetry on Facebook under the hashtag #LysistrataWrites (#Лисистрататапишет).¹³

Все мое терпение лопнуло в Ирпени < . . . > под русскими бомбами нету сердца у меня менее и более я тряусь от ужаса я тряусь от паники как вы мои любоньки как дома порушены где лежат убитые анонимы неотпетые нету мне ответа-то, только люди в крошево нету мне прощения нету мне молчания есть одно мычание мертвое упертое только вой по зверскому, речи не останется только ор животного черный голос пьяницы черный голос плакальщиц над могилой милою как же ты любил меня да и я любила я

Встаньте мои тленные до земли зашитые, до самого копчика от бедра последнего от земли рассеянья до небес раскаяния Богом незабвенные Накажите адское Поменяйте пленное И для парамедиков подвезите нужное И закройте небо нам, суко, безоружное.¹⁴

My patience snapped at Irpin [. . .] under Russian bombs i have no heart less or more i am shaking with fear i am shaking with panic how are you my dears how are your destroyed houses where do the anonymous unburied dead lie i don’t get a reply, just scattered human for me there is no forgiveness for me there is no silence there is only mooing still and stubborn only howling like an animal, no speech left only animal wailing the black voice of a drunkard the black voice of the mourners over the grave of the beloved how you loved me and how i loved, i

11. On the Soviet roots of this androcentrism see: Igor’ Kon, “Muskulistaia maskulinnost’: Atletizm ili militarizm?” *Gendernye issledovaniia* 6, (2001): 114–27.

12. One of the first publications of this cycle’s fragments on the internet portal *Snob* on June 12, 2017: <https://snob.ru/selected/entry/125462/> (accessed September 12, 2023).

13. Fanailova uses some other hashtags for identifying publications of the poems from this huge project on social media. There are dozens of Fanailova’s poems published in a framework of this project.

14. *Poeziia poslednego vremeni: Khronika*, 448.

Rise, my vulnerable ones, sutured up to the soil, up to your very coccyx from your last rib from the scattering of the land to the repentance of the skies Unforgotten by God Punish the infernal exchange the captive And bring the paramedics all they need And close the skies for us fucking unarmed.¹⁵

(June 12, 2022)

4

Elena Fanailova belongs to Poetry-2. However, the strategy of describing war in terms of protecting all the weak and vulnerable is even more characteristic of Poetry-1. One of the most acknowledged authors of contemporary Russophone social media is Alia (short for “Alina”) Khaitlina currently living in Germany. Khaitlina has long been a popular author, mostly thanks to the Internet: in the 2000s, her blog, where she published new poems, had several thousand subscribers. Since the start of the war, she has begun working as a volunteer helping Ukrainian refugees who have recently arrived in Germany and has written poetry every day. Beginning in March of 2022, each of her poems is titled with a number and the word “day” (such-and-such day of the war).

Khaitlina’s current poems have two major motivations (to introduce an oversimplified dichotomy): to record a diary of the work of a volunteer and to describe, to use the expression of Spanish painter Francisco Goya, the “disasters of war,” such as looting, violence, and the killing of civilians, through a markedly feminine lens. The following poem, in which the soldiers of the Russian army are depicted primarily as sexually preoccupied rapists, provides an example of the “feminine”—and feminist—optics in poetry:

Это те, кого, если встретишь на улице, нужно скорее сваливать,
 Те незнакомцы, с которыми мамы запрещали нам разговаривать.
 Потные руки, в метро в час пик хватающие за колено,
 Подростки на даче, которые меня трёхлетнюю заставляли трогать их
 члены.
 < . . . >
 –Чего ты боишься, малыш?—Боюсь смерти на дне колодца,
 Что ты скажешь ему, человек со светлым лицом?
 Что споешь ему, лежащему перед крыльцом,
 Глядящему из-под длинных ресниц в пропавшее, неживое?
 Ничего я ему не спою.
 Я вою.

15. “Close the skies” is an appeal to NATO member countries by Ukrainian politicians in the first weeks of the war: in essence, they demanded that NATO ban Russian military aircraft from flying over Ukraine. The politicians of the NATO member countries refused, as they feared a direct military clash with Russia.

They're the type who, if you meet them on the street, you need to hightail it immediately,

Those strangers that your moms told you not to talk to,

Sweaty palms that grab you by the knee in the metro during rush hour

Teenagers at the *datcha* who made me, at three years old, touch their members.

< . . . >

"What are you scared of, baby?" I'm scared of death at the bottom of a well,

What will you say to him, the man with the bright face?

What will you sing to him as he lies by the front porch?

Looking out from under long eyelashes at the lost, the lifeless?

I won't sing him anything.

I'm howling.

("Day 43," April 8, 2022)¹⁶

Khaitlina is a significant author of anti-war "Poetry-1," but she is far from the only one. The poet and journalist Tatyana Voltskaya, for example, follows a quite similar strategy. The general premise of the abovementioned approach might be described as follows: the point of view marked as "feminine" is, together with the stable associations that surround it (that the woman is the one who takes on the emotional labor and supporting others) is perceived as a foundation for interpreting Russia's political and social order as absurd and dangerous to humanity. From this perspective, war is the collapse of a familiar life, while overcoming this horror necessitates a return to the "natural" order of things.

Such resistance to the absurdity of war from a "natural" point of view is a socially effective response to the current cultural and political situation, but it is not the only possible one. On February 14, ten days before the start of the current state of the war, during a period of intensive tightening of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border, the poet, critic, historian, and social analyst Stanislav Lvovsky posted a poem to his Facebook which offered an explication of the intentions behind the then-rhetoric of the Russian authorities:

нет, в итоге они вас не оккупируют
их войска могут даже войти в страну
но не могут остаться. в итоге они
ничего не оккупируют и не будет
ни гауляйтеров ни ночных патрулей
ни, скорее всего даже комендантского часа

16. *Poeziia poslednego vremeni. Khronika*, 188.

пострадавшие будут но они обещают
что пострадавших будет немного.

нет, оккупации, — они говорят, — не будет
вам просто придётся усвоить
какие-то ну необходимые вещи
ну вот например что

свобода есть сознанная необходимость.
доверять никому нельзя все хотят вас обмануть.
ничего не имеет значения кроме силы.

ничего не имеет ценности кроме силы
кроме некоторых высоколиквидных активов
и собственно денег.

no, in the end, they won't occupy your land
their troops may even enter the country
but they cannot remain. in the end
they will occupy nothing and there won't be
any gauleiters or night patrols
nor, most likely will there even be a curfew
there will be casualties but they promise
that there will be few casualties.
no, there won't be — they say— any occupation
you'll just have to internalize
a few necessary things
like for example that

freedom is the acknowledged necessity¹⁷
you can't trust anyone everyone wants to deceive you.
nothing matters but force

17. "Freedom is the acknowledged necessity" is a phrase taken from Soviet textbooks of philosophy, primarily authored by the Marxist philosopher Georgy Plekhanov (1856–1918).

nothing has value except power
 except for a few highly liquid assets
 and money as such

 (“no, in the end, they won’t occupy us”)¹⁸

In this poem, Russian authorities appear not so much as the bearers of hegemonic masculinity, but as complete cynics who deprive others of subjectivity simply because they have—they believe—sufficient military prowess and the conviction that they have the logic of events on their side. To agree with “them” (the Russian authorities) means to be convinced that their point of view is “natural,” and all others are illusory. Lvovsky’s poem exposes the illusion of this “naturalness.”

In their poetry, the authors of Poetry-2 present the moral and cultural catastrophe of Russian society as the basis for deconstructing any preconceived identity. Poetry-2 has its roots in the aesthetic traditions of the uncensored poetry of the Soviet age. Particularly important among these traditions is Moscow Conceptualism, which, as Dmitry Alexandrovich Prigov, a prominent representative of this movement, wrote and said many times, undermines any language’s claim to a coherent explanation of all reality. Today, post-conceptualist strategies turn out to be very politically significant.¹⁹ Here, I should first mention the names of such poets as Yuly Gugolev, Dmitry Gerchikov, and Alexander Skidan. In one way or another, they all demonstrate that both the discourse of military propaganda and the discourse of the Russian liberals and leftists that criticize it are not “blameless.” Any subsequent discourses, these authors show in their poems, are discourses of normalization, morally unacceptable in conditions when Russia continues its aggression. The ubiquity of war, mentioned above, and the moral crisis of Russian culture call into question all forms of self-perception, include those that were characteristic of Russian intellectuals before the war. Such questioning cannot be psychologically comfortable.

И футбольное поле Бухенвальда
 пригодно для голой жизни,
 и бизнес-зал аэропорта Шереметьево
 пригоден для разговоров о контингентности,
 и Кремлевский дворец съездов
 пригоден для цитирования «Деколониальных гендерных
 эпистемологий»,
 < . . . > потому что 24 февраля так интенсивно светит солнце,
 превозмогая точку слепоты и намекая на циклическое постоянство
 жизни:
 не реви, завтра снова наступит 24 февраля,

18. <https://www.facebook.com/stanislav.lvovsky/posts/10216375652583616>.

19. For more information about post-conceptualism, see: “Kuz’min K. Postkonceptualizm (Kak by nabroski k monografii),” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*. No. 50 (2001), 459–76.

и послезавтра наступит 24 февраля,
и 1 января наступит 24 февраля,
и 8 марта наступит 24 февраля,
и 1 апреля наступит 24 февраля...²⁰

(Дмитрий Герчиков, 18 марта 2022 года)

And the Buchenwald soccer field
is fit for bare life
and the business lounge at Sheremetyevo airport
is fit for conversations about contingency,
and the Kremlin Palace of Congresses
is suitable for quoting “Decolonial Gender Epistemologies”
< . . . > because on February 24 the sun shines so intensely,
overcoming the point of blindness and alluding to the cyclic permanence of
life:
don’t cry, tomorrow will also be February 24,
and the day after tomorrow will be February 24,
and January 1 will be February 24,
and March 8 will be February 24,
and April 1 will be February 24 ...

(Dmitri Gerchikov, March 18, 2022)

Russian anti-war poetry, it can be said, by its very formation realizes the end of the post-Soviet stage in the development of Russian culture but, at the same time, demonstrates how the languages of Soviet and post-Soviet literature survive and transform. In other words, works which protest the war of aggression launched by the Russian regime answer the question of how poetry in Russia may be possible after and during the collapse of the post-Soviet cultural order and the collapse of (post)-Soviet identities.

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20. *Poeziia poslednego vremeni. Khronika*, 89–90. *Dekolonial’nye gendernye epistemologii* (Moscow, 2009) is a book by a postcolonial theorist Madina Tlostanova.