

CRITICAL FORUM: POETRY AND AESTHETICS IN A TIME OF WAR

VIEWPOINT

“Where Are Your Poets, the Monsters Ask”: Reading Verse in a Genocidal War

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Abstract

In this essay, Rory Finnin reviews the interventions of poetry in Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and argues for more intellectual engagement with the concept of Russian genocide in the field of Slavic studies.

Working in the field of Ukrainian Studies today is akin to trying to speak when you need to scream. It is to experience grief, guilt, and rage brought on by seeing colleagues and students killed for who they are, while you sit in your quaint Cambridge office. It is to encounter everyday heroism and sacrifice amid unimaginable extremes, while you moderate your words in the pursuit of sufficient academic “objectivity.” It is to fight off zombie narratives about the Ukrainian far right and the “provocations” of NATO enlargement, while you sense audiences seeking to find reasons to return to familiar islands of indifference.

But in the space between hope and despair, poems always seem to find you. In the beginning of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine, their opening lines appeared in WhatsApp notifications between air raid alerts. The work of Ukraine’s *shistdesiatnyky*, the path-breaking poets of the 1960s, was particularly popular. Vasyl’ Symonenko’s defiant taunt of 1962—“Where are you now, murderers of my people? Where is your greatness, where is your power?”—fought back against the effects of doomscrolling.¹ The verse of Lina Kostenko was in constant circulation, her name appended even to new poems that were not her own.² Vasyl’ Stus was read in trenches by flashlight, his prescient message of resistance transformed into dialogue by caesurae:

Сто чорних тіней довжаться, ростуть
і вже, як ліс соснової малечі,
устріч рушають. Вдатися до втечі?
Стежину власну, наче дріт, згорнуть?
Ні. Вистояти. Вистояти. Ні—
стояти. Тільки тут. У цьому полі. . .³

One hundred dark shadows loom, grow
And suddenly, like a forest of young pine,
Move toward you. Do you run?
Retreat to where you came from?
No. You hold on. Persevere. No—
You stand your ground. Right here.
In this field ...

¹ Vasyl’ Symonenko, “De zaraz vy, katy moho narodu?” in *Bereh chekan’* (Munich, 1973), 102.

² Olena Horhol’-Ihnat’ieva’s 2022 poem “Ukradena vesna” (“I bude myr . . . / I vyshni zatsvitut”), for instance, was widely distributed on instant messaging services and social media platforms under Kostenko’s name.

³ Vasyl’ Stus, “U ts’omu poli, syn’omu, iak l’on,” in *Vybrane* (Kharkiv, 2016), 79–81. The late poet Maksym Kryvtsov recited Stus’s poem from the front in 2023; see “Maksym Kryvtsov chytaie virsh Vasyliya Stusa,”

Fresh works by contemporary poets, from Oleh Kotsarev to Halyna Kruk, soon followed on social media feeds. But it took some time. “I struggled to communicate after 24 February,” Viktoriia Amelina said, “I forgot simple words.”⁴ Amelina debuted as a novelist in 2014, but her language after the full-scale invasion in 2022 shattered into *ulamky* (debris) of unpunctuated lines and uneven strophes.⁵ Her work as a humanitarian aid volunteer and chronicler of Russian war crimes only deepened and intensified the desperate struggle for expression. “Writing aesthetic texts is not so much about a special skill as it is about a special incompetence, an inability to express oneself directly like all other people,” she explained. “Poems emerged when I wanted to say something but could not.”⁶

Amelina was killed in July 2023 by a Russian strike on a restaurant in Kramatorsk. Before her death, she evoked the Stalinist decapitation of Ukraine’s cultural elite in the 1930s and warned of the coming of a new “Executed Renaissance,” of another generation of Ukrainian artists murdered by the Kremlin.⁷ We are in the midst of it now. Alongside Amelina, poets like Maksym Kryvtsov, Volodymyr Vakulenko, Hlib Babich, Artem Dovhopolyi, and Oleksandr Berezhnyi have become victims of Russian bullets, missiles, and drones. Upon learning of Kryvtsov’s death, Natali Bushkovska posted a chilling poem on Facebook that connected these losses to the longstanding poor visibility of Ukrainian culture on the global stage:

<p>Де ваші поети, питають потвори. Кого ви поставите на полицю у твердій обкладинці? Питають вони й спльовують кров.⁸</p>	<p>Where are your poets, The monsters ask. Who are you putting on the shelf in hardcover, They ask, spitting blood.</p>
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Many Ukrainian poets continue to fight and defend their country at the front, where, in words of poet and army medic Yara Chornohuz, “silence comes loud.”⁹ Dmytro Lazutkin, laureate of the prestigious Taras Shevchenko National Prize, has even become spokesperson of Ukraine’s Ministry of Defense.¹⁰ Farther from the contact line, their readers have navigated the tensions between silence and speech by writing poems of their own. Ukraine’s Ministry of Culture has responded to this public upswell by launching a website to gather tens of thousands of poems of resistance composed by citizens from all ages and all walks of life. Called “Poetry of the Free,” the online repository is today a kind of armory.¹¹

YouTube video, 1:25, posted by “Valeriy Puzik,” January 7, 2024, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Iv08EhKVMY (accessed July 30, 2024).

⁴ “Viktoriia Amelina: Pislia trahedii ne potribno sliv...,” *Chytomo*, September 7, 2022, at chytomo.com/viktoriia-amelina-pislia-trahedii-ne-potribno-sliv-usi-slova-skochuiutsia-u-vyrvu (accessed July 30, 2024).

⁵ Viktoriia Amelina, “Ne poeziia,” *PEN Ukraine*, June 10, 2022, at pen.org.ua/nache-u-movu-vluchyv-snaryad-dobirka-virshiv-viktorii-amelinoi-pro-vijnu (accessed July 30, 2024).

⁶ “Viktoriia Amelina: Pislia trahedii ne potribno sliv...”

⁷ Victoria Amelina, “Cancel Culture vs. Execute Culture,” *Eurozine*, March 31, 2022, at www.eurozine.com/cancel-culture-vs-execute-culture (accessed July 30, 2024).

⁸ Natali Bushkovska, “De vashi poety,” *Facebook*, January 7, 2024, at www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02QqZNe9Dyk84VwdB9DBjFTbBSPQWgoBLaP5cMNjgHX5Dwvu62sMqDQxMfADmSDsrol&id=100090240814463 (accessed July 30, 2024).

⁹ Her haunting meditation “Military Silence” (2020) foresees the ecocide unleashed by the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in 2023: “Silence comes loud, like a giant whose heavy steps fall in a desert of desiccated fish . . .” See Yara Chornohuz, “Voienna tysha,” *Twitter*, February 28, 2024, at x.com/BlackStork22/status/1762839558863913346 (accessed July 30, 2024).

¹⁰ Anastasiia Bol’shakova, “Laureat Shevchenkivs’koi premii stav rechnykom Minoborony,” *Ukrains’ka pravda*, April 10, 2024, at <https://life.prawda.com.ua/culture/dmitro-lazutkin-rechnik-minoboroni-300993/> (accessed July 30, 2024).

¹¹ The “Poetry of the Free” (*Poeziia Vil’nykh*) repository can be accessed at warpoetry.mkip.gov.ua (accessed July 30, 2024).

Given the profound interventions of poetry in this war, I am grateful that *Slavic Review* has not only foregrounded two provocative studies of poems written in the wake of Russia's aggression, but also offered us a forum to consider some of their implications. The attention to Ukrainian poetry is particularly welcome, given that *Slavic Review* has not featured an article devoted to the topic since 1979.¹² Amelia Glaser and Paige Lee and Lyudmila Parts all seek to understand fraught cultural expression amid ongoing, proliferating horrors, a task demanding of intellectual resilience as well as emotional sensitivity. Their work should inspire further research in this journal on the role of culture in wartime, with priority afforded to scholarly voices from Ukraine too often unheard and unheeded in the west.

In the background of both these articles is a question of time. It is perhaps not the one we might expect. Since Freud, our discussions of trauma and its representations have tended to center on asynchrony, on what Amelina would describe as *vyvykh chasu*, a dislocation of time, a temporal breach between event and experience.¹³ But what fascinates Glaser and Lee and Parts is, in various ways, synchrony. Parts focuses on a synchrony of composition, a "temporal proximity" of the poetic text to the events of war, and sees it as constitutive of a "poetry of witnessing." Such "speaking from within events" is tragically ubiquitous: from Zuzanna Ginczanka's "Non omnis moriar" to Refaat Alareer's "If I Must Die," poems across the globe all too frequently respond to the brutality of armed conflict from the inside in real time. What is more distinctive and novel, as Glaser and Lee imply, is a synchrony of reception in which social media platforms like Facebook accelerate and even collapse itineraries between poet, text, and reader.

This synchrony borne of our digital connectivity cuts another way, and it has implications not only for our academic understanding of the nature of this war, but for the field of "Slavic studies" as a whole. On any given day, we can cast even a cursory glance at Telegram posts and encounter an avalanche of Russian hate speech toward the Ukrainian people. In real time, we see this dehumanizing and eliminationist rhetoric from political and cultural elites being realized through the actions of the Russian military. Dmitrii Medvedev calls for Ukraine to be "destroyed completely"; on the same day, a Russian cruise missile strikes a theatre and a university in Chernihiv.¹⁴ Leonid Slutskii calls Ukrainians "non-humans"; on the same day, Russian artillery hits schools and medical facilities in Kherson.¹⁵ Vladimir Solov'ev threatens the citizens of Kyiv with a massive missile strike, calling their elected government "satanic"; the next day, Russian forces bomb patients and their caregivers at Kyiv's Okhmatdyt children's hospital.¹⁶ The interplay of this ghoulish chorus with Russian

¹² Danylo Husar Struk, "The Summing-up of Silence: The Poetry of Ihor Kalynets," *Slavic Review* 38, no. 1 (March 1979): 17–29.

¹³ "Viktoriiia Amelina: Pislia trahedii ne potribno sliv..."

¹⁴ Dmitrii Medvedev, "Porazhenie Zapada," *Telegram*, August 19, 2023, at t.me/medvedev_telegram/376 (accessed July 30, 2024). Dan Sabbagh, "At Least Seven Killed in Russian Strike on Theatre in Centre of Chernihiv," *Guardian*, August 20, 2023, at www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/19/russian-strike-on-chernihiv-ukraine (accessed July 30, 2024). For a more complete compilation of remarks from Russian political and media elites about Ukraine and Ukrainians, see Clara Apt, "Russia's Eliminationist Rhetoric against Ukraine: A Collection," *Just Security*, April 18, 2024, at www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection (accessed July 30, 2024).

¹⁵ Leonid Slutskii, "Grosh tsena..." *Telegram* (December 12, 2022) at t.me/slutsky_l/1507 (accessed July 30, 2024); Holly Ellyatt and Amanda Macias, "Kherson Comes under 'Massive Fire,'" *CNBC*, December 12, 2022, at www.cnbc.com/2022/12/12/russia-ukraine-live-updates.html (accessed July 30, 2024).

¹⁶ "Andrey Gurulyov and Vladimir Solovyov Want to Destroy Ukrainian Cities," YouTube video, 5:09, posted by "Russian Media Monitor," July 7, 2024, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=9krFyeKL5UY&list=PLWQyEN3YRo7bpdYpIWscpvx2O8qSu0T1 (accessed July 30, 2024). Pjotr Sauer, "'No Words for This': Horror over Russian Bombing of Kyiv Children's Hospital," *Guardian*, July 8, 2024, at www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/08/ukraine-horror-russian-bombing-kyiv-childrens-hospital (accessed July 30, 2024).

terrorism and military violence—a collusion of *mens rea* and *actus rei*—signifies a crime with an intent to destroy, in whole or in part, the Ukrainian nation as we know it.

Yet so many of us studiously avoid the term *genocide*. From where I sit, it has become a structuring absence in the field of Slavic studies. With one or two exceptions, it is missing from these featured articles; it appears nowhere in the Russian anti-war web portal nowarpoetry.com, for instance, which represents a key source in Parts's study. It menaces in the background of Glaser and Lee's brilliant and inventive work with the Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry Archive, which empowers us through textual collation and preservation to combat Russian attempts to destroy Ukrainian culture. But the future of Slavic studies as a field concerned with all Slavic cultures and societies will be determined by our ability to confront the fact of Russia's genocidal war against Ukraine and to speak of it clearly and urgently, without avoidant euphemism or understatement. It is simply not enough to restrict the term to a juridical finding or to discard it with complaints about its excessive politicization in public discourse or emotive currency in "competitive suffering." Rafael Lemkin formulated the concept of genocide to address a failure of our language, to classify and describe what Churchill once called "a crime without a name."¹⁷ It is all too pertinent now.¹⁸

To acknowledge the genocidal nature of Russia's war is to muster an intellectual clarity that makes demands on us. One involves understanding that, regardless of the common use of a language, a "unified artistic discourse" about this war among Ukrainians and Russians does not exist. The concept of a "unity" or coherence of expression between groups is not tenable when one group propounds the destruction of the other. Positing otherwise is to risk downplaying the specific unidirectionality and temporality of genocidal violence. It is to place Ukrainian poets alongside Russians at the festival dais, as it were, instead of affording them their own space to speak in voices threatened with annihilation. Parts writes that Russian anti-war poets, in foregrounding their own struggles with language, guilt, and complicity, "attempt to establish solidarity with Ukrainian victims of Russian aggression by broadening the parameters of victimhood." But at what point does "broadening the parameters of victimhood" to encompass both Ukrainians and Russians simply amount to a Russian decentering and appropriation of the experience of the Ukrainian victim?

To acknowledge the genocidal nature of Russia's war is also to begin to make amends for our collective failure to see it coming. Russia is the largest country on earth, and scholarly work oriented on Russian history and culture is bound to be dominant in the field of Slavic studies. What has undermined the field is less a practical emphasis on Russia than an intellectual Russocentrism that takes two primary forms: one that focuses disproportionately on a minority oppositional culture in the metropole that looks familiar and sympathetic to western eyes; the other that quietly absorbs and reproduces Russian epistemic imperialism, a chauvinistic logic relegating the cultures and historical experiences of non-Russians to subordinate status, intellectual niches, and far-flung peripheries.

In the wake of Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, this Russocentrism has left all too many scholars and analysts ill-equipped to understand Ukraine's history, culture, and civil society on their own terms. It has also led to a tragic underestimation of Russia's popular appetite for imperialist conquest and settler colonialism. As Parts makes clear in her

¹⁷ "Prime Minister Winston Churchill's Broadcast to the World about the Meeting with President Roosevelt," *Ibiblio*, August 24, 1941, at www.ibiblio.org/pha/timeline/410824awp.html (accessed July 30, 2024).

¹⁸ For more on Russia's genocide in Ukraine, see Kristina Hook et al, "The Russian Federation's Escalating Commission of Genocide in Ukraine: A Legal Analysis," *Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights and New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, July 2023, at newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/20230726-Genocide-Ukraine-Report-NISLAP.pdf (accessed July 30, 2024). See also the views of Ernesto Verdeja, executive director of the Institute for the Study of Genocide, in Dragan Stavljanin, "Genocide Scholar: 'I Do Think That Russia's Violence in Ukraine is Genocidal,'" *Radio Free Europe*, April 2, 2024, at www.rferl.org/a/russia-genocide-ukraine-scholar-war-crimes-prosecution-hague/32888386.html (accessed July 30, 2024).

conclusion, Russia's "oppositional anti-war artists" are not only in conflict with the Kremlin but also with "the vast majority of their own people."¹⁹ A task before us is the urgent study of cultural texts consumed by and circulated among this "vast majority." These texts might be called, borrowing from Margaret Cohen and Franco Moretti, the "great Russian unread."²⁰

Here Glaser and Lee's approach to "distant reading" provides a way forward. Resources from the digital humanities can be brought to bear, for instance, on the vast body of Russian pulp fiction and "military-historical fantasy" that notably takes off around the time of Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. It is only one corpus among many understudied corpora. As Jeffrey Brooks and Boris Dralyuk have explained in the pages of this journal, much of this "parahistorical" literature is "middle- and low-brow" fare published by such large presses as Iauza in Moscow.²¹ This writing does not reward close reading, but in the aggregate, it is ideal fodder for quantitative textual analysis. Gleb Bobrov's novel *Epokha mertvorozhdennykh* (Age of the Stillborn, 2008), for example, fantasizes about a war with fascist "Banderites" that leads to a bloody partition of Ukraine; it is in its eleventh edition and marketed today as a "dystopia made real."²² Georgii Savitskii's *Pole boia—Ukraina* (Battlefield: Ukraine, 2009) envisions "western Ukrainian" villains backed by US forces exterminating Ukraine's "Russian-speaking population"; it promises the reader "to show NATO 'hawks' what's what!" Read by millions, these titles are among hundreds of others that have dehumanized Ukrainians in the Putin era and helped condition Russian audiences to aggressive conquest and genocide in Ukraine. They give new meaning to what Moretti calls "the slaughterhouse of literature."²³ We need to account for them.

The poet and scholar Iryna Shuvalova characterizes our contemporary moment by way of a stunning metaphor: an epoch skinned alive. Deftly rendered into English by Uilleam Blacker, her poem "Cultural Stratum" (March 2022) evokes the naiveté of life before Russian aggression:

softer and pinker we would
explain to our children what war is the way you might explain
what the south pole or the planet mars are and not
like you might explain why you can't stick your fingers in the electric
socket or
climb onto the windowsill when the window is open we
didn't even know
in that past life so long ago
how many steel centimeters of pain
can be plunged so easily
into our soft, pink bodies²⁴

¹⁹ According to polling from the Levada Center released on July 4, 2024, 77% of Russian respondents indicated support for "the activities of Russian military forces in Ukraine." This strong majority support has been registered every month in Levada studies since the start of the full-scale war in February 2022. See "Konflikt s Ukrainoi," *Levada Tsentra*, July 4, 2024, at www.levada.ru/2024/07/04/konflikt-s-ukrainoi-osnovnye-indikatory-otvetstvennost-povody-dlya-bespokoystva-ugroza-stolknoveniya-s-nato-i-primeneniya-yadernogo-oruzhiya (accessed July 30, 2024).

²⁰ Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (January 2000): 55.

²¹ Jeffrey Brooks and Boris Dralyuk, "Parahistory: History at Play in Russia and Beyond," *Slavic Review* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 77–98.

²² See the presentation of the most recent edition at www.litres.ru/book/gleb-bobrov/epokha-mertvorozhdennykh-antiutopiya-stavshaya-realnostu-predisl-48850008 (accessed July 30, 2024).

²³ Franco Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (March 2000): 207–27.

²⁴ Iryna Shuvalova, "Cultural Stratum," *The White Review*, November 2022, at www.thewhitereview.org/poetry/three-poems-iryna-shuvalova (accessed July 30, 2024).

In February 2022 we were thrown across a threshold of knowledge. The field of Slavic studies is still reckoning with its meaning. No matter the differences and disagreements, we need to chart new directions forward, clear-eyed about past mistakes and sensitive to the needs of new voices.

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