

# CRITICAL FORUM: TRIAL BY FIRE—RUSSIAN MODERNIST POETRY AGAINST WAR

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## Introduction

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In his scathing anti-war manifesto, “Trial by Fire” (1917), Silver Age philosopher and literary scholar Ivanov-Razumnik exposes, with bitter wit and anger, all kinds of delusions of grandeur that his peers connected to the notion of the “value of war” that he appraises as a phenomenon of “national madness” that ends up devaluing the most fragile, irreparable phenomena: human life, human experience, and human expression.<sup>1</sup> While Russian literature in praise of war offers its reader voluminous, if ethically suspect, odic visions of imperial might, its antipode, anti-war writing that focuses on the destructive rather than constructive effects of military action is scattered across the centuries of Russian literature, with its uneasy and often submissive embrace of the state power. Assessing Russian war poetry beginning in the eighteenth century, we see that the tradition of praising the might of the Russian military develops systemically, in constant dialogue with institutions of power, while objections to war usually arise from individual circumstance, opinion, and experience. As Andrei Zorin shows in his seminal work “Feeding Zeus’s Eagle,”<sup>2</sup> Russian poetry serves to assimilate military campaigns within the culture to reveal the significance of enlightenment that the *politeia* strive to prioritize during wartime, be it Catherine II’s colonial campaigns in Crimea or Alexander I’s battles with Napoleon. Curiously, in the texts juxtaposing war and peace, the latter was predominantly affirmed as an interest and prerogative of the state, a matter belonging to the sovereign. Even in odic texts in praise of peace like, for example, Mikhail Lomonosov’s “Oda na den’ vosshestviia na Vserossiiskii prestol Ee Velichestvo Gosudaryni Imperatritsy Elisavety Petrovny 1747 goda” (Ode on to Ascension to the Russian Throne of her Majesty, Elizaveta Petrovna, 1747), peacemaking is conceived of as an achievement and will of the sovereign and the state, the result of victorious military maneuvering, and not as an absolute civil value as such.<sup>3</sup>

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the adulatory discourse around Russian military ambitions began to be challenged, albeit gradually

1. Ivanov-Razumnik, *Ispytanie ognem: Antivoennyi manifest* (Moscow, 2015).

2. Andrei Zorin, *Kormia dvuglavogo orla: Literatura i gosudarstvennaia ideologiia v Rossii poslednei treti XVIII—pervoi treti XIX veka* (Moscow, 2001).

3. Ода на день восшествия на Всероссийский престол Её Величества Государыни Императрицы Елисаветы Петровны 1747 года.

*Slavic Review* 82, no. 3 (Fall 2023)

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doi: 10.1017/slr.2023.283

and problematically, by literary texts, including the groundbreaking *Sebastopol Stories* (1855) by Lev Tolstoi and “Four Days” (1877) by Vsevolod Garshin, as well as poetry by Nikolai Nekrasov, Aleksei K. Tolstoi, Iakov Polonskii, naming only some, which opposed the idea of war as a common good, or, at least, as a common noble cause, highlighting instead the suffering that it causes to an individual.

The present cluster aims at highlighting (or rather, signaling to the necessity of highlighting) these blind spots, with special attention to the anti-war poetry that emerges as a reaction to wars, be it the Second World War or Russia’s present full scale war against Ukraine. To begin, what is to be understood as anti-war poetic utterance? With somewhat shocking directness, in his essay on the present state of affairs in the on-going crisis, Ilya Kukulin quotes poet and critic Evgeny Nikitin’s claim that “... the concept of anti-war poetry of loses its meaning because no other poetry is possible right now. Rather, it is possible, but it is perceived as skullduggery” (from an article in the “Metajournal” Telegram channel).<sup>4</sup> Whatever might be the historical situation that engenders and conditions a literarily utterance aimed against war, its general purpose is aptly formulated by Marat Grinberg as “to bear witness and respond to the ongoing atrocities and destruction.”<sup>5</sup>

The authors of these essays develop their inquiry through the following questions: How does the relationship with the notion of the enemy shape the war poetry of Boris Slutskii and Ian Satunovskii? To what extent can the war poetry of the latter be seen as a matrix of his biographic narrative construction, especially considering that Satunovskii’s lyrical subject is shattered, stuttering, and de-language/d? How does today’s popular poetry of protest differ from today’s avant-garde poetics? What are the differences between their means of expression, address, and foci?

In this array of questions, one can trace certain common threads. For starters, there is the question of influence and continuity: though the cluster abstains from claiming cohesive coverage, suggesting rather an assortment of representative problems, even within these thematics, we can see that the avant-garde stylistic choices is one of the centers of attention for these authors of the anti-war poetry. Stylistic and discursive experimentation becomes connected with the content that orients itself towards the individual experience of history and language: perhaps one of the original inspirations for my own consideration of anti-war poetry in Russian was the case of the Siege poetry by Gennady Gor, who wrote in 1942:

Эдгара По нелепая улыбка,	The uneasy smile of Poe,
Сервантеса неловкая походка,	The ungainly gait of Cervantes,
Ненужная, но золотая рыбка,	The unneeded but golden fish,
Тревожная, опасная находка.	The unsettling dangerous find.
Меня убьют, я знаю, в понедельник	They’ll kill me, I know, one Monday,
И бросят тут же, где и умывальник.	And bring me right here, by the washstand.

4. Ilya Kukulin, “Writing within the Pain: Russophone Anti-War Poetry Of 2022,” in this forum, 6.

5. Marat Grinberg, “Anecdote in the Vein of Herodotus”: Shuttling between Particulars and the Universal in Boris Slutskii’s and Ian Satunovskii’s War Poetry,” in this forum, 2.

И будет мой убийца умываться,	And my killer will stand washing
И удивляться там, где целоваться,	And marveling where it's for kissing
И умываясь, будет улыбаться.	And stand smiling while he washes.

(Translated by Eugene Ostashevsky and Ben Felker-Quinn)

The “I” of the Gor’s poem is shattered by the Siege violence (be it explosion or cannibalism or a random criminal act, one of many thousands that tortured the city throughout its duration). The brutal fact of the Siege every day is then metaphorically channeled into an existential condition: the subject of the disaster can only be in fragments. And this wounded individual produces wounded, inadequate speech that recalls aphasia: the gradual decay of speech production brought on by trauma. The encounter of the Siege subject with his unmaking causes anxiety and shame, yet also it causes the emergence of a new language in contact with violence marked by its system of silences and allegorical replacements. The poetics of shock and disgust in the face of violence was Gor’s striking achievement of the Siege moment that he hid for forty years in his writing desk, while Ian Satunovskii, though also not able to publish, gave his whole writing career to his exploration of the aversion to war.

In fact, the emergence of Satunovskii in two essays of the cluster should not strike the reader as coincidental, but rather symptomatic: his developing reputation among contemporary poets and their readers signals a growing attention to and appreciation of his shocking, disbalancing, and controversial constructions of identity, intonation, and stylistic allegiances. From his pointedly marginal position within the societal and literary processes of his time, Satunovskii depicts the Soviet Holocaust, the Soviet state, popular antisemitism, and various forms of defeatist subversive moods at a time when such things were utterly unpublishable (starting in the 1940s). His highly challenging, minimalistic, and broken form now make him a highly productive author for the generation in need of a language of protest against the new totalitarian war machine. From Satunovskii and Slutskii to Lvovsky and Stepanova, among others, this cluster prioritizes the anti-war modernist utterance as having an avant-garde nature that, according to Kukulin, “consists of works addressed to a primed audience and problematizes existing poetic discourses.”

Yet it would be wrong to just focus on marginal utterances not created for a wider readership. For example, Marat Grinberg’s parallel reading of Satunovskii and Slutskii reveals some of the most pressing issues in contemporary cultural studies of the Soviet century: the relationship between the publishable (*pechatabil’nyi*, per Lydiia Ginzburg’s apt definition) and the unpublishable, and the positionality of art as both propaganda and a subversion of propaganda, which Grinberg defines “as [an] intersection of published (and hence often censored) and unpublished realms.”<sup>6</sup>

Among the many influential texts that show us the disasters of war in the Soviet century, we could name such masterpieces as the Siege poems by Olga Berggolts or “Vasily Terkin” by Aleksandr Tvardovskii, which seem to

6. *Ibid.*; печатабельный.

have many features in common with the poetry of Slutskii and Satunovskii, yet which also differ in some crucial ways. They come up with a satisfying teleology of war, where any kind of human sacrifice is worth the resulting/inevitable victory, thus refocusing the ultimate utterance/voice/focus/attention from the individual towards the collective.

All the essays in the cluster look at texts dedicated to the individual experience, individual utterance, and individual disaster of war that fails to be summed up teleologically and, moreover, ideologically. Perhaps resistance to the ideology of the state is the main aspect uniting poets and poetics explored in these essays. In this respect, the cluster focuses on the power of poetry to resist and subvert propaganda, as we see bluntly stated in the poem by Slutskii discussed by Grinberg: “And do you believe me?” A moment of silence. “Sir Commissar, I don’t believe you. All—propaganda. The whole world—propaganda.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet, more problematically, in the context of the Soviet century, anti-war poetic utterance also sometimes plays the role of propaganda, as, for example, in Evgenii Evtushenko’s memeable Cold War text “Khotiat li russkie voiny?” (Do Russians Want War?, 1965) when the Soviet ideology took up the notion of a “peaceful struggle for peace.”<sup>8</sup> Whatever the message might be, the one-dimensionality, flatness, and overall smoothness of the propaganda message might be juxtaposed with the various destabilizing constructions of the poetry of anti-war and anti-state protest, as we see with Satunovskii, in what Golburt describes as a “deeply misaligned lyric subject [that] both channels and withdraws himself from public discourse.”<sup>9</sup>

Hopefully, sooner rather than later, there will emerge multiple studies, monographs, anthologies and readers dedicated to Russophone anti-war poetry—as well as to critical studies of Russian literature inspired by the Horatian slogan “Ave Caesar! Morituri Te Salutant.” The present situation, in which we start our day with news photos of the ruins of Mariupol’s theater decorated with Pushkin’s portrait and, at the same time, of monuments to Pushkin demolished in the Ukrainian cities freed from Russian occupation, calls for an urgent and multifaceted study of this plethora of authors, texts, intentions, and contextual situations.

POLINA BARSKOVA is a scholar and a poet, author of thirteen collections of poems and three books of prose in Russian. Her collection of creative non-fiction, *Living Pictures*, received the Andrey Bely Prize in 2015 and is forthcoming in German and English. She edited the Leningrad Siege poetry anthology *Written in the Dark* and has four collections of poetry published in English translation: *This Lamentable City*, *The Zoo in Winter*, *Relocations* and *AirRaid*. Barskova also authored a monograph, *Besieged Leningrad: Aesthetic Responses to Urban Disaster* and multiple edited volumes on the culture of besieged Leningrad. She teaches at UC Berkeley.

7. Grinberg, 4.

8. Evgenii Evtushenko, *Хотят ли русские войны?* (Moscow, 1965), online at [www.culture.ru/poems/26580/khotyat-li-russkie-voiny](http://www.culture.ru/poems/26580/khotyat-li-russkie-voiny).

9. Luba Golburt, “Ian Satunovskii: Identity and Biography, from the War to the Lyric,” this forum, 3.