

CRITICAL FORUM: POETRY AND AESTHETICS IN A TIME OF WAR

VIEWPOINT

Poets, Resistance, Translation, and Ethics in a Time of War

Stephanie Sandler

Harvard University
Email: ssandler@fas.harvard.edu

Abstract

Poetry has proven a productive aesthetic discourse for those working in Russian and in Ukrainian, documented by a huge outpouring of verse and by both the articles in this forum. This viewpoint piece zeroes in on the ways in which poems have become a means of resistance, particularly for those writing in Russian, and on the roles played by translation as its own ethical act and as a form of further resistance. It ends with the example of Igor' Bulatovskii's poetry and his broader actions as translator and editor.

Poetry has turned out to be a canary in the coal mine during the Russia-Ukraine war.¹ Poems short and long, traditional and formally radical, in Russian and in Ukrainian are registering the harms and risks of all utterance with astonishing speed and vividness. Reactions to the poems are an early measure of the war's effect on Slavic studies, too. The war has sped up processes of decolonization in academic departments, editorial boards, and prize juries; it has revealed obstacles to genuine dialogue but also forged some provisional pathways toward needed conversations. The material in these two important essays presses us to think about what poetry can do and why it matters, and about the implications of our own scholarship as well.

The essays prove, if we needed proof, that the war has stimulated poetry writing and sharing. The numbers alone should get our attention: Lyudmila Parts refers to a corpus that is hundreds of poems, and Amelia Glaser and Paige Lee work with a data set encompassing more than 1000 poems. It may surprise those who associate poetry with private emotions and rarified aesthetic expression that it would have so risen to this occasion. But in the Slavic world, poetry has a well-known tradition of cultural prestige, so perhaps we should not be surprised. The means of production and distribution are just as important here. Poetry does not have the costly, cumbersome infrastructure of theater or filmmaking and it does not require the longer temporal view of the novel. Sir Walter Scott recommended two generations' distance for historical novels, and while our own era has sped up our reaction time, Scott's appreciation for the value of looking back dispassionately still rings true. So, poetry may lose its priority over time: fiction and memoir will give us new ways to think about our nightmarish present, surely sooner than Scott predicted.²

¹ Nothing I write here refers to or is meant to include what has become known as Z-poetry, the verse published in support of Russia's war on Ukraine.

² We already have considerable journalistic writing, though, as Jonathan Bolton reminded me when he kindly read a draft of this essay. And poetry might well be taking on some reportage-like functions, as he put it. A

But for now, poetry is what we have, and this forum assesses its immediate impact. Those caught up in this war can begin to understand their disorientation and rage as a shared experience: as Ilya Kukulkin put it, writing about Russian-language poets, “poetry helps opponents of the war weave their individual painful experience into a larger historical narrative.”³ And understanding the present as history in the making is clearly one of poetry’s affordances.⁴ Amelia Glaser and Paige Lee demonstrate via word frequency patterns that probing the meanings of history is a self-conscious task undertaken by Ukrainian poets, whether they write in Ukrainian or in Russian.

In the age of the internet, poetry has a further advantage in being so immediately available—no need to wait for editors to accept or promote the work. Of course earlier poets circulated their work through private letters or samizdat, but the internet’s dispersal is wider and quicker. Poets are reaching readers directly across social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Telegram, the apps most used in Slavic literary communities.⁵ Both essays here analyze work from these platforms, and Glaser and Lee argue convincingly that using Facebook posts long before a “test of time” standard can be applied shows us the contours of emergent canons.⁶

Facebook has another affordance, since users can also post more formal statements that show the community of poetry readers, including us as scholars, new ways to assess the poem’s responsibilities and potential in wartime. It was on Facebook in March 2022 that Dmitrii Kuz’min and Evgenii Nikitin posted two statements, each signed by nearly 100 Russian poets. The first addressed the people of Ukraine, wishing them victory. The second spoke to Russians, advising them to read Ukrainian poetry: “Right on our doorstep, another nation at this very moment is demonstrating the kind of courage, fortitude, and unity of political leaders with poets, intellectuals, and the military, with public figures and the most ordinary of people—the very qualities that we can only dream of for our own nation.”⁷

Kuz’min, Nikitin, and their signatories were saying two things here, one about the ethical responsibility of poetry, the other about the exemplary writing by Ukrainian poets. Disseminating that poetry further is work that Russians can and are doing, and translating Ukrainian poetry into Russian is its own form of ethical act.⁸ Kuz’min himself has long

fascinating instance of prose reportage is Yevgenia Belorusets’s posts in spring 2022, written and first published in German and immediately translated into English by Greg Nissan as “Kyiv,” at www.isolarii.com/kyiv (accessed July 30, 2024), then published in 2022 by isolarii press as *In the Face of War* and by New Directions as *War Diary* (New York, 2023).

³ Ilya Kukulkin, “New Languages of Hostility and Resistance: Politicizing Russophone Poetry, Part I,” *Jordan Center Blog*, May 14, 2024, at jordanrussiaincenter.org/blog/new-languages-of-hostility-and-resistance-politicizing-russophone-poetry (accessed July 30, 2024).

⁴ This is another way that poetry of this war resembles journalism, which the journalists like to say is the first draft of history.

⁵ LiveJournal was essentially replaced for most Slavic poets by Facebook, but a few still have active LiveJournal accounts. Glaser and Lee do not include it as part of their database, however, which tells us something about the drop in usage.

⁶ The dissertation in progress by Anna Ivanov (Harvard University), “Network(ed) Russian Literature: 1820s–2020s,” also includes a chapter that analyzes the nodes and clusters of contemporary Russian poets largely on Facebook, with some attention to Telegram as well. One of her research questions is how these interactions might change our notion of a cultural community.

⁷ The statements were posted to Kuz’min’s Facebook page, March 5, 2022, at www.facebook.com/dmitry.kuzmin.566/posts/5159281400800884 and www.facebook.com/dmitry.kuzmin.566/posts/5159289247466766 (accessed July 30, 2024).

⁸ But not an uncomplicated one. After the tragic death of Ukrainian poet Victoria Amelina, instantaneous translations of her poetry into Belarusian and Russian shared on social media drew swift criticism by fellow writers and friends. For a report on some aspects of this controversy, see “Belorusskii poet perevel stikhotvorenie ubitoi ukrainiskoi pisatel’nitsy. Rodstvenniki protiv,” *Nasha Niva*, July 6, 2023, at nashaniva.com/ru/320982 (accessed July 30, 2024). My thanks to Vitaly Chernetsky, who kindly read an earlier version of this essay, for reminding me of this history.

engaged in that translation work, as have others, with the results posted to social media and published in book form.⁹ Particularly notable is the Telegram channel *Metazhurnal*, with extensive translation work by Stanislav Bel'skii, who lives in Ukraine and also publishes on his own Telegram channel. Another striking example was posted on Facebook by Ol'ga Sedakova. She translates from many languages but not usually Ukrainian, yet she translated the gut-wrenching poem by Maksym Kryvtsov about the mass killings in Bucha quickly when it appeared; her translation reached several thousand Facebook readers within days.¹⁰

Translation of Ukrainian poetry has gone far beyond these examples and far beyond Russian versions. Glaser and Lee assess the rapid sharing of Ukrainian poetry in translation between 2014 and 2022, finding that both the number of translations and the number of languages into which poems were translated grew. The translations became a way of expressing "solidarity across borders and languages," they write.¹¹ And under the circumstances, translation into Russian carries a special affective charge.

As Gayatri Spivak observed, there is no more intimate form of reading than translation.¹² And for now, intimacy on the page may need to stand in for connections person-to-person. To judge from public statements and actions, Ukrainian poets and other public figures are finding in-person encounters with Russians highly objectionable. There have been high-profile refusals to appear in any event that lists Russians elsewhere on the program.¹³ Pulling back from mixing or comparing work by poets of Russian and Ukrainian nationality feels like an extreme conclusion to draw from these refusals, but proceeding with caution is surely in order. It is too early to say what the rules of engagement should be for the Slavic community in analyzing cultural production arising during this war. Or perhaps it is not for me, as a scholar of Russian poetry, to set out such rules at any time. The key thing, to say the obvious, is to keep exchanging work, learning from one another as we find our ways forward. I admire those who are intrepidly and provisionally forging pathways for the scholarship we all very much need.¹⁴ These two articles are modeling that for us.

Both press us to ask challenging questions, particularly across two kinds of boundaries, one geographic, one linguistic: how to compare the writings of those who live on the territory of Ukraine, which is to say, in the zone of war, with those who are in Russia or who have emigrated? And how to compare the work of poets living in Ukraine who write in Ukrainian with those writing in Russian? Perhaps few of us would say that the work of people in any of

⁹ Kuz'min also published a book of his own translations of Yuriy Tarnawsky's poetry, *U rany est' imia* (Ozolnieki, Latvia, 2024); Kuz'min's series featuring the poets of Ukraine now includes the work of Lviv poet Sergiy Mushtatov, who writes in Russian and Ukrainian: *List pered travoi* (Ozolnieki, Latvia, 2024).

¹⁰ Ol'ga Sedakova, Facebook, August 13, 2022, at www.facebook.com/osedakova/posts/5752873934745443 (accessed July 30, 2024). Kryvtsov was killed in an artillery strike in January 2024. For the report of his death and some of his work in English translation, see Amos Chapple, "Machine-Gun Poet: The Work and Untimely Death of Maksym Kryvtsov," *Radio Free Europe*, January 11, 2024, www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-war-poet-maksym-kryvtsov-death/32769907.html (accessed July 30, 2024).

¹¹ Amelia Glaser and Paige Lee, "Archive of the Contemporary: Ukrainian Poetry and Digital Solidarity on Facebook," in this forum, 459-80.

¹² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York, 1993), 180.

¹³ A telling example involved the poet and writer Linor Goralik, who occasioned a boycott in the run-up to a festival in Tartu, Estonia. For reports on these controversies, see Kate Tsurkan, "Why Ukrainian Authors Refuse to Share Stages with Russian Authors at Festivals," *Kyiv Independent*, May 19, 2023, at kyivindependent.com/why-ukrainian-writers-refuse-to-share-stage-with-russian-authors-at-festivals/ (accessed July 30, 2024); and Cathy Young, "Does Opposing Putin's War Mean Opposing All Russians?" *The Bulwark*, May 23, 2023, at www.thebulwark.com/p/does-opposing-russias-war-mean-opposing-russians (accessed July 30, 2024). The decisions have been a matter of principle, rather than targeting specific poets, but the broad definition of "Russian" was striking in the case of Goralik (born in Dnipro, Goralik worked in Moscow; she is a citizen of Israel, where she has lived since 2014).

¹⁴ See also the courageous analysis of the curation of Russian-language projects by the poet and critic Vitalii Lekhtsier, which examines projects across a range of political positions and uses willingness to cooperate with the state as one of his measures. See Lekhtsier, "Kuratorstvo russkoiazychnykh literaturnykh proektov vo vremia voennykh deistvii," *Laboratorium* 16, no. 1 (2024): 100-117.

these groups could only be studied on its own terms, but which comparisons are we ready to make with any confidence? And there are bigger questions that will take longer to resolve: what is the relationship between Ukrainian and Russian poetry, given the longer history of colonialist violence we are still needing to document fully and analyze? How to untangle the threads of poets' identifications as Russian or Ukrainian, or the ways in which bilingual poets choose a language of expression?

As both essays demonstrate, none of these questions is answered simply. Yes, some formerly Russian-language poets, particularly those living in Ukraine, are now writing in Ukrainian, rejecting the language of the aggressor.¹⁵ Mariia Galina's 2024 Ukrainian-language book of poems *Nineviia* stands as a signal example, coming as it does after her many books of poetry and prose in Russian. But Galina published a version of the book in Russian within months. Those, and they are many, who continue to write in Russian act on a strong ethical impulse not to cede the language to a tyrannical, evil regime. A strong assertion of that logic opened the 2024 book *Post Printum* by Boris Khersonskii, like Galina a poet who identifies as Ukrainian (and who lived in Odesa until 2022). He wrote:

Russia's aggression has changed my relationship to my native language. For a short time, I moved entirely into Ukrainian. I wrote experimental poems in both languages, and sometimes even adding in a third or fourth language. But in the end, I made a firm decision: neither Putin nor the Putinists hold a monopoly on my first language, my native language. I understood that the enemies of the regime are my allies and my friends.

Concluding that *Post Printum* was therefore written in Russian, Khersonskii added, "I remain a citizen and patriot of my country"—his country being Ukraine.¹⁶ A prolific poet (he appears in Glaser and Lee's essay), and one whose investigations of ethics and religion make him an especially important exemplar of contemporary Russian-language poetry, Khersonskii shows in such gestures as his refusal to use a capital letter for the authoritarian ruler's name that a political stand can underlay all aspects of one's work.

Khersonskii's position is one way to understand the outpouring of poetry in Russian, as a reclamation of authority and of a shared mission of resistance. Lyudmila Parts tells us that "anti-war poets assert that they, too, are victimized by the war" and, although I do not read Khersonskii and other like-minded poets as taking up the position of victim, I do see the wisdom in her observation that Russian poets "attempt to establish solidarity with the Ukrainian victims of Russian aggression."¹⁷ Yet it is not clear that many Ukrainians are ready to welcome gestures of solidarity, and perhaps we should not call this poetry of war a "unified artistic discourse." But surely it is a single discursive field, albeit vast and variegated, populated by poets in disparate positions and facing different physical and psychological risks. And by poets working in a wide range of genres and styles.

None of these distinctions, my own especially, feel quite right to me, I confess, and perhaps no set of terms can be final or fully clarifying so long as the war goes on. What we can see are the workings of this discourse of poetry and war as it evolves, and Parts presses us to notice one of its vivid aspects when she traces the ambiguous subject positions of Russian poets writing in opposition to the violence in Ukraine. She wisely keeps her gaze steadily on the material itself, citing the lines of famous and little-known poets, treating them all as

¹⁵ An eloquent poetic representation of this switch is Anastasiia Afanas'ieva's "Nova pisnia tyshi" (New Song of Silence), which begins in Russian and ends in Ukrainian, published by *Soloneba*, April 9, 2022, at soloneba.com/anastasia-afanasieva/ (accessed July 30, 2024). For a translation into English by Katie Faris and Ilya Kaminsky, see Carolyn Forché and Ilya Kaminsky, eds., *In the Hour of War: Poetry from Ukraine* (Medford, 2023), 91–93.

¹⁶ Translated from Boris Khersonskii, *Post Printum* (London, 2024), 11.

¹⁷ Lyudmila Parts, "In the Language of the Aggressor, I Cry for its Victims': Russophone Anti-War Poetry of Witnessing," in this forum, 485–503.

legible signs of the moment in which we find ourselves. Her readings direct our attention to “pronouns of responsibility,” using the critical tools of rhetorical analysis to recognize the underlying ethical principles of poetry written during this war. The first-person pronoun, when it turns up, is seen as denoting resistance, and there are more possibilities besides. It can signify grief—think of the eruption of the first-person in Aleksandr Skidan’s poem which begins with the word “pozдно” (it’s too late, 2022), with its endless string of impersonal infinitives transforming themselves into a stirring declaration: “verni nam nashikh mertvykh / ia khochu ikh oplakat” (return our dead / I want to mourn them).¹⁸ The jarring rhetorical shifts in Skidan’s poem demonstrate another of poetry’s affordances: a readiness to weave conflicting strands of emotion into a single verbal fabric, to jolt us as readers with emotions that do not go together easily.

The potential for resistance in the poetry goes beyond its rhetorical elements, although that is an effective place to start, as Parts shows us. Glaser and Lee, amid their canny analysis of social media practices, focus on the language and thematics of the poetry. They observe that in Ukraine, “poetry became a way of amplifying the cultural values behind the protest movement,” and something similar happened in the Russian context, for example in the critical poetry practice of the [Translit] group, with which Skidan was affiliated, and in the work of a broader circle of feminist and queer poets.¹⁹ Such movements did more than teach poets to use poems as mobilizing forces against oppression (no small matter, actually): they also learned to embed political argument into their diction and syntax. It is not so much a matter of writing programmatic poems as enacting a search for the language of politics. That search—that desire, like Skidan’s saying that he “wants” to mourn—holds a recognition that even a provisional poetics can be effectively political and salient ethically.

A final thought. In, one hopes, a not-so-distant future, when Ukraine is at peace and a more objective assessment of how poetry responded to this war can commence, we may want to shift our gaze beyond those who wrote about the war directly. In poems where the theme of war’s violence barely flickers if it appears at all, the consequences for language and for poetry itself will be registered just as indelibly. One place to begin will be the poetry of Igor’ Bulatovskii. An outstanding example of his work is discussed in Lyudmila Parts’s essay, two passages from the 43-poem cycle “Na kontse iazyka” (At the End of Language, or On the Tip of the Tongue). The cycle appears in full in his book *Avram-trava* (Hedge Hyssop). That book includes work from 2018 to 2023, which is to say before the full-scale invasion but when creeping authoritarian rule in Russia and the hybrid war on Ukraine were already keenly felt. Some poems, including those cited by Parts, write directly about language and its ruptures, its failures. The poet can seem repelled by his own utterances, and more than any poet since Osip Mandel’shtam, Bulatovskii presents the imagery of lips and mouth as laden with emotion, including an uncomfortable sense of the way words feel in the mouth. He registers the physical sensation of what it means to make the sounds of Russian words, which struggle to form in the poet’s mouth. A heavy judgment hangs on every utterance. The final poem in the cycle “Na kontse iazyka” begins: “ia khoroshii russkii / u menia vo rtu slova” (I am a good

¹⁸ Skidan’s poem first appeared on Facebook on March 1, 2022, at www.facebook.com/alexander.skidan.33/posts/5543530532342201 (accessed July 30, 2024), as did the nearly immediate translation by Kevin Platt, in the comments to Skidan’s post. The Russian original is included in several anthologies, among them Iurii Leving, ed., *Poeziia poslednego vremeni* (St. Petersburg, 2022), 50–51. The translation was also published in a post by Ivan Sokolov on Olga Zilberbourg’s blog, *Punctured Lines*, April 5, 2022, at puncturedlines.wordpress.com/2022/04/05/new-world-new-plane-a-letter-by-ivan-sokolov/ (accessed July 30, 2024).

¹⁹ Glaser and Lee, “Archive of the Contemporary,” in this forum, pp. 459–480 in *Word*. On [Translit], see the excellent new study by Marijeta Bozovic, *Avant-Garde Post—: Radical Poetics after the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass., 2023), which also includes attention to feminist poetics. For a bilingual collection of feminist and queer poets, see Ainsley Morse, Eugene Ostashevsky, and Galina Rymbu, eds., *F Letter: New Russian Feminist Poetry* (New York, 2020). I treat the topic in “The Body Returns: Recent Poems by Russian Women,” in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Kulturkomparatistik: Poetics and Politics by Women in the Post-Soviet Space*, 6 (2022): 261–300. And Skidan wrote a signal essay on the importance of women poets nearly two decades ago: “Sil’nee urana,” *Vozdukh* 3 (2006): 153–69.

Russian / with words in my mouth)—but the words are gnawed bits of a primer, as if the punishment for thinking of oneself as a “good” Russian is to have to eat words.²⁰ And the words are associated with decay and death. As Bulatovskii writes in another poem:

что-то нас заглинило	something turns us into clay
что-то высушило рот	something dries out the mouth
что-то стало именем	something becomes a name
но из горла не идет. ²¹	but it can't get out of the throat

The power of Bulatovskii's poetry rests in its combination of revolting imagery and breathtaking formal dexterity.²² The smooth rhythms, syntactic patterns, and often glowing rhymes clash with the poems' grotesque mental pictures, so that the reader's affective state is a kind of nauseated attraction to poem after poem after poem. Repeatedly, the poems record a barrier to enunciation or testify to a sense of linguistic blockage, but the poetry itself seems to gush forth compulsively to enact historical catastrophe at the level of emotion.

Bulatovskii's every poem is worth our close attention, and his overall poetic practice also feels like an exemplary model of what poets can do in a time of war. In his poems, in his extensive work as a translator, in his steadfast presence on Facebook (where, as I was writing this essay, he was posting his remarkable remixes of Paul Celan's Mandel'shtam translations), and as the editor and publisher of Jaromír Hladík Press, Bulatovskii unites the themes of ethics, resistance, and translation found across the many texts treated in this forum.²³ In Petersburg, unbowed, he is doing the work of resistance—which, in the end, is what we can most hope for from poets in a time of war. Can they stop a war? Bulatovskii, a peerless ironist on top of all else, has an answer for that: Jaromír Hladík Press takes its name from the hero of a Borges short story, a Czech Jewish writer condemned to death by the Nazis.²⁴ In Borges's story, Hladík dreams that God might redeem him, might save him from death just long enough to finish his last work, a play. The story ends in an unreal execution scene. The writer finishes his play, but only in his head—between the time that the executioner's bullet left its gun and the moment, which seems to him the year granted by God, when the bullet kills him. To create art is to stop time, but the creative act cannot stop a bullet. Still, if what you are writing tells the truth—and the play Hladík is writing is called *The Enemies*—then your story will be told.

Stephanie Sandler is Ernest E. Monrad Professor in the Slavic Department at Harvard University. She is the author of *The Freest Speech in Russia: Poetry Unbound 1989-2022* (Princeton University Press, 2024). She is co-editing, with Catherine Ciepiela and Luba Golburt, the *Oxford Handbook of Russian Poetry*, due out in 2025.

²⁰ Igor' Bulatovskii, *Avram-trava* (Moscow, 2023), 271.

²¹ Bulatovskii, *Avram-trava*, 192.

²² For a compelling discussion *Avram-trava* which includes readings by the poet of select texts, listen to the podcast “Chto izuchaiut gumanitarii” (season 4, episode 2, aired June 6, 2024, 48 minutes), hosted by Aleksandr Skidan, in conversation with Bulatovskii and with Polina Barskova, <https://nlo.media/catalog/chto-izuchayut-gumanitarii/uchastie-vo-vremeni-avram-trava-igorya-bulatovskogo/> (accessed August 30, 2024). Barskova also wrote the introduction, “Slova vrazlom,” to Bulatovskii, *Avram-trava*, 5–12.

²³ Bulatovskii's translations from Yiddish are especially highly regarded. His Jaromír Hladík Press is known for its mix of translations, philosophy, aesthetics, poetry, and experimental writing, and, as the press's statement about its own goals reads, for its aim of promoting its readers' free thought: jaromirhladik.com/about (accessed July 22, 2024).

²⁴ The story is “El milagro secreto” (The Secret Miracle, 1943). For an English translation, see Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald Yates and James E. Irby (New York, 1964), 88–94.