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VIEWPOINT

Ukrainian and Russian Wartime Poetry in the Age of Social Media: Challenges and Lessons

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Abstract

This essay argues for considering wartime Ukrainian poetry in the broader context of Ukrainian artistic projects investigating the relationship between observation, agency, and responsibility. It highlights the profoundly democratic features of this process that explores the ways art can help one process trauma and engage in difficult but necessary conversations. It argues that Ukrainian poetic activity can be viewed as a unified corpus across multiple languages, while problematizing approaches to Russophone Ukrainian poetry that treat is as part of an allegedly unified Russophone discursive space. It also emphasizes the ethical imperative for greater scholarly engagement with Ukrainian literary texts.

Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity of the winter of 2013–14, originally referred to as the Euromaidan, or simply Maidan, after Kyiv's Independence Square, its central site, and Ukrainian resistance to the war Russia unleashed against it shortly afterwards, generated a massive cultural response both within and outside Ukraine. This response has engaged a wide variety of art forms and genres, both traditional and recent in development. Maidan has been described as the first livestreamed revolution,[1] but side-by-side with new forms and genres that developed thanks to the latest technological innovations, poetry and diary writing have been both prominent and prolific. In fact, over the course of the twenty-first century, both poetry and life writing practices in Ukraine and the surrounding region transformed in important new ways due to the impact of the Internet, and a discussion of them that does not consider this impact would be fundamentally incomplete.

The boom of the LiveJournal platform in the early 2000s resulted in a development of a vibrant literature-related blogosphere across many countries of the post-Soviet region. By the 2010s, as Amelia Glaser and Paige Lee note, activity mostly shifted to other platforms. In Ukraine, Facebook became especially prominent, and for all its problems as a commercial platform, it became an important community-building tool on the local and national level, as well as a crucial site for international engagement. In contrast to the almost entirely verbally oriented LiveJournal era, it also brought a closer interaction between verbal and visual art forms.

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[1] See Oleksandr Mykhed, *Bachyty, shchob buty pobachenym: Realiti-shou, realiti-roman ta revoliutsiia onlain* (Kyiv, 2016).
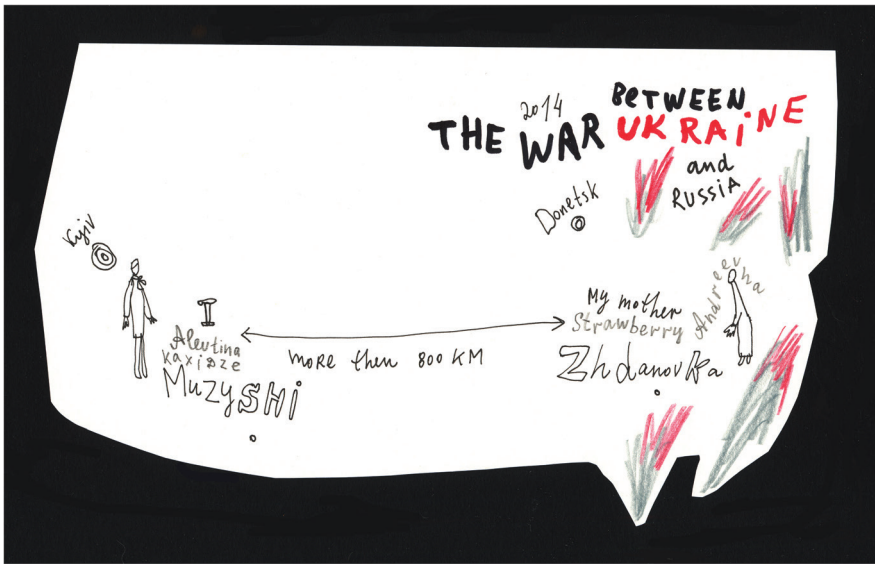
Figure 1. profile picture of the Facebook page of the Strawberry Andreevna project, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=406456025004816&set=a.406455991671486.

In fact, in Ukrainian contexts, I would argue it would be helpful for understanding the poetic and other verbal responses to the war to also engage with the visual ones, as the networks of their distribution and impact strongly overlap. A crucial example can be found in the work of Alevtina Kakhidze, a visual, multimedia, and performance artist originally from the Donbas and since 2008 based in Muzychi, a village outside Kyiv. From 2014 to 2019, Kakhidze's visual diary project, documented and disseminated on Facebook, provided an insight into the experiences of Ukrainian families separated by the war and of the daily lives of those who for a variety of reasons stayed in the Russian-occupied area. This diary, focusing on the experiences of the artist's mother Liudmyla, who felt she could not abandon her home and garden and therefore stayed in her native town, used the nickname local children used for her, Strawberry Andreevna (Klubnika Andreevna). Based on the cell phone conversations Kakhidze was able to have with her mother, it only stopped with her mother's untimely death from a heart attack while waiting in line at a checkpoint to cross into Ukrainian government controlled territory.[2] (Fig. 1; Fig. 2)

The Strawberry Andreevna project brought Kakhidze a wide following within Ukraine; it was, however, just one of her projects of artistic witnessing and testifying. One of the crucial aspects of Kakhidze's artistic project more broadly is an investigation of the relationship between observation, agency, and responsibility within artistic practice. It is also a profoundly democratic, community engaging, and ethically charged process, in the context of which Kakhidze explores the ways that art can help one process trauma and engage in difficult but necessary conversations (through practices ranging from teaching art to elementary school children to gardening to bold public performance projects at major international events). As her visual art also frequently includes text, it also documents both the changes in Ukraine (the Strawberry Andreevna project was almost entirely in Russian, quoting Kakhidze's mother speech; in later projects, Ukrainian and English are the primary languages used) and the ways in which the artist envisions and seeks to address diverse audiences, often calling out Russian and western artists and intellectuals for their statements and stances. Ultimately, it provides an ethical anchor that cuts through whataboutism and obfuscation. (Fig. 3)

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[2] The project in its entirety is available at www.facebook.com/truealevtina (accessed August 6, 2024).

Figure 2. one of the drawings from the November 13, 2015 post in the Strawberry Andreevna project, https://www.facebook.com/truealevtina/photos/pb.100069212646514.-2207520000/520225008150854/?type=3.

Looking at Ukrainian poetry's war responses in social media feeds as part of a polyphonic multimedia interaction provides a highly important contextualization, but precisely because of the ephemeral nature of social media this context is difficult to document and reconstruct. Often, one needs to rely on projects beyond social media for a synthesizing perspective. Thus, Boris Khersonsky's (Borys Khersons'kyi's) social media feed as a literary project (begun on LiveJournal and continued on Facebook) is one of the best-known and longest-lasting ones in the Ukrainian context. Its texts elicit different appreciation when collected in book form, however; in many cases, until the untimely passing of the artist Oleksandr Roitburd, Khersonsky's books also contained many images by Roitburd in direct and explicit dialogue with the poet's texts.[3] Similarly, anthologies like *Litopys samovydtsiv: Dev'iat' misiatsiv ukraïns'koho sprotyvu* (Chronicle of Witnesses: Nine Months of Ukrainian Resistance), published in late 2014, was an ambitious and transformative presentation of social media posts, from brief observations to poetic and essayistic texts of varying length, which reflected both the revolution as it unfolded and the editors' perspective on its textual (and visual) representation.

The archival project Glaser and Lee present in their article is a pioneering tool for corpus analysis of Ukrainian poetry since the Revolution of Dignity on social media. It aims to minimize editorial intrusion, even though it is inevitably present in separating poetic from non-poetic texts to include the former and exclude the latter from the corpus (as those distinctions may not always be clear-cut, especially in contemporary writing). Glaser and Lee are upfront and lucid about the criteria that guided them in selecting texts for analysis; it is far less clear in the case of Lyudmila Parts's article. One can argue that her article

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[3] For more on Khersonsky, his poetry, and his social media presence, see Dirk Uffelmann's articles "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, and "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.

Figure 3. Alevtina Kakhidze's drawing posted on Instagram, April 3, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb5MkBTNlhL/.

demonstrates precisely the obverse of her argument that Russian-language poetry (by those poets who oppose Russia's war against Ukraine) is a unified artistic discourse—poets who identify as Ukrainians in terms of civic belonging, whether they write in Ukrainian or in Russian, demonstrate a clarity of vision and a sense of civic responsibility unmatched in the examples from the texts of their peers from Russia or from the early post-Soviet-era genera-tion of the Russophone diaspora. Among the few crucial exceptions from the latter tendency is Mariia Stepanova, with her searing opening line of a remarkable poem, "Poka my spali, my bombili Khar'kov" (While we slept, we bombed Kharkiv), quoted by Parts—a rare example of a Russian poet emphasizing collective responsibility. In the work of many others, including those quoted by Parts, impersonal constructions predominate, exemplified by "Tam bom-biat Ukrainu" (Over there they are bombing Ukraine) from a poem by Ivan Klinovoi. The inability to say who is bombing Ukraine is highly symptomatic here.

Whether they write in Ukrainian or in Russian, Ukrainian poets are clear in their iden-tities as participant observers in their texts, even if they are witnesses working through inability to participate directly due to displacement, while many Russian poets enact a ges-ture separating themselves from the war and its horrors, witnessing at a certain remove. A powerful example of the Ukrainian approach can be found in Iryna Shuvalova's 2022 poems written in Nanjing, especially in the poem *poetka ne mozhe pysaty pro viinu* [a woman poet cannot write about war].[4] Therefore, I cannot see how, for example, the searing poems from Stanislav Bel'skii's (Biel's'kyi) 2023 book *Teksty iz shkol'nogo podvala* (Texts from a School Basement) could be seen as not belonging to a unified Ukrainian poetic corpus and instead as part of a unified discourse with that of Russian poets.[5]

There are, of course, dozens of Russophone poets from all over the world speaking strongly against the war and expressing solidarity with Ukraine—as exemplified, among others, by Vera Pavlova, from whose poem Parts took the title for her article. An interest-ing phenomenon in this respect is the *God poezii* annual Russian-language anthology, edited in the US by Victor Fet and published in Ukraine by Oleh Fedoriv's press, which showcases mostly authors with a more traditional poetics, including Pavlova, but includes in its dialogic

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[4] For a selection in English translation by Amelia Glaser and Yuliya Ilchuk, see lithub.com/i-pretend-death-doesnt-exist-new-poetry-from-ukraine-by-iryna-shuvalova/ (accessed August 6, 2024); the finalized cycle is available online at www.irynashuvalova.com/war-poems (accessed August 6, 2024); see Glaser and Lee's archive project at ukrpoetry.org/ (accessed August 6, 2024) for more.

[5] Stanislav Bel'skii, *Teksty iz shkol'nogo podvala: Stikhi pervykh voennykh mesiatsev* (Dnipro, 2023); only the first poem from the book, dated February 24, 2022, is currently included in Glaser and Lee's archive project. Bel'skii, with his extensive knowledge of current Ukrainian poetry, is also a leading translator of contemporary Ukrainian-language poets into Russian.

space Russophone poets from Ukraine. In his editorial preface to the first, 2022 volume, Fet appealed to choosing freedom by earlier waves of Russian emigration and thus advocated, similarly to Parts, a vision of a unified free Russophone discursive space. In the preface to the second, 2023 volume, however, he notes emphatically, "The shared past in this language does not exist anymore: it disintegrated and crumbled."[6]

Current Russian-language poetry is characterized by a sense of catastrophe; it is therefore quite logical that a number of poets reached out to an earlier (post-)catastrophic poetics, associated with the Holocaust and its aftermath, exemplified most clearly by Paul Celan. Poems by Aleksandr Skidan and German Lukomnikov, among others, present really important and powerful examples of this kind. As Parts notes, however, "Russian anti-war poets are less concerned with the Ukrainian Other, and even less so with the amorphous yet hostile western Other of Russian propaganda, than they are with witnessing and narrating the process of becoming the Other in their own country."[7] While commenting on and engaging more with the catastrophe of repressive authoritarian rule in Russia, within which the war against Ukraine is a highly visible manifestation, but not the central problem, and by not making effort to address and, even more importantly, listen to the Ukrainian Other, they are unwittingly continuing imperial discursive practices. Just like the Russian literary discourse on the war in the Caucasus two hundred years ago, overall, this discourse is, in Susan Layton's apt formulation, "essentially a cultural monologue."[8] And in striving to be recognized and heard not only within the Russophone literary space but globally, and indeed in what Parts has described as "broadening the parameters of victimhood" and claiming victim status, such Russian cultural voices partake of the privilege stemming from established and enduring access to resources and attention, siphoning them off from their Ukrainian peers.

This is why reading and engaging with Ukrainian literature past and present is not only an urgent ethical imperative stemming from solidarity with those resisting a brutal and unjust war of aggression but is also crucial intellectually for critically analyzing and interpreting Russian literature and culture past and present. The corpus collected and presented by Glaser and Lee is a highly useful resource in this respect. However, we are also fortunate that there is now a robust wave of translations of Ukrainian literature, including contemporary poetry, but also reaching into the past and into other genres and forms of writing. Ukrainian culture has been developing prodigiously since the Revolution of Dignity, and this certainly includes poetry, with a remarkable diversity of voices addressing the traumas, horrors, and challenges of Russia's war against Ukraine, now in its eleventh year. In English, we have a comprehensive snapshot of the initial stage of Ukrainian poetry's responses to the war through two anthologies, the 2016 *Letters from Ukraine* and the 2017 *Words for War: New Poetry from Ukraine*; the latter is also available online as an interactive website, https://www.wordsforwar.com/. More recently, we have the robust Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry Series from the Pacific northwest-based Lost Horse Press, which to date has already released fifteen titles, as well as a number of volumes from the Boston-based Arrowsmith Press. These two publishers are now the unquestionable leaders in bringing contemporary Ukrainian poetry to English-language readers.[9] Since the war's escalation in February 2022, even as Russia has directly targeted Ukrainian book printing facilities, Ukrainian book publishing has maintained remarkable resilience and creativity. We have had a number of new anthologies of war

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[6] Victor Fet, "Ot sostavitelia," *God poezii 2023* (Kyiv, 2023), 10.

[7] Lyudmila Parts, "'In the Language of the Aggressor, I Cry for its Victims': Russophone Anti-War Poetry of Witnessing," in this forum, p. 12.

[8] Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (New York, 1995), 8.

[9] Hryhorii Semenchuk, comp.; Iurii Izdryk and Vitaly Chernetsky, eds., *Lysty z Ukraïni: Poetychna antolohiia* (Letters from Ukraine: Poetry Anthology) (Ternopil, 2016); Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky, eds., *Words for War: New Poems from Ukraine* (Boston, 2017). For the lists of Ukrainian poetry titles from Lost Horse Press and Arrowsmith Press, see losthorsepress.org/contemporary-ukrainian-poetry-series/ (accessed August 6, 2024) and www.arrowsmithpress.com/ (accessed August 6, 2024) respectively.

responses, including *Voiennyi stan/State of War,* released in separate Ukrainian-language and English language versions; for poetry, we now have a comprehensive new anthology compiled by Ostap Slyvyns'kyi on behalf of PEN Ukraine, *Pomizh syren: Novi virshy viiny* (Amidst the Sirens: New Poems of War).[10] I encourage *Slavic Review* readers to pick up and read, and hopefully seriously engage with, more works of Ukrainian literature; this will be a crucial step in confronting and addressing epistemic injustice, both past and present, and will make us an interpretive community that is both intellectually stronger and more nuanced in its knowledge and practices.

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[10] Ievheniia Lopata and Andrii Liubka, eds., *Voiennyi stan* (Chernivtsi, 2023) and *State of War* (Chernivtsi, 2023); Ostap Slyvyns'kyi, ed., *Pomizh syren: Novi virshy viiny* (Kharkiv, 2023).