



**Il'ya Kukulin**

## The regulation of pain

*The Great Patriotic War in Russian literature from the 1940s to the 1970s*

After 1945, the trauma of war introduced themes into Soviet literature that would have been unthinkable during the 1930s. However, the censors of the Brezhnev regime put an end to the unofficial literature that explored existential doubt; instead, wartime experiences were exploited to legitimize the Soviet myth. Thus, the potential for an aesthetic–ethical literary corpus to match that of the west was extinguished. During the 1970s and '80s, rock lyrics became the medium for the existential questions, until, in the 1990s, war literature was able to treat its subject matter without euphemism.

### The unreadable war

For a number of reasons, the question I explore here has largely been ignored by students of literary and cultural history. It may be formulated as such: How was the traumatic and almost indescribable experience of the Great Patriotic War (World War II) interpreted in Russian literature, both censored and uncensored; how was it interpreted in the postwar decades; and how did it return to become a vital element of Russian literature in the 1990s?

In what follows, "uncensored" and "unofficial" literature are used as closely related, but not synonymous, terms. By "unofficial literature", I understand works intended for publication in the Soviet Union; these works expressed integrated personal or collective experience, without their main aim being to adapt their subject–matter to social and ideological requirements. "Uncensored literature" denotes a body of texts whose authors consciously abandoned the Soviet frame of aesthetic reference, in other words, texts which transgress the fundamentals of Soviet aesthetics; in some cases these may have been submitted for publication, though to print them would have been impossible.

Paradoxically, in the USSR, censored literature was the basis not only of official, but also of unofficial memory. Since officially unsanctioned sources of information about the past were prohibited, literature — as personal expression — inevitably became an indirect means of legitimating private biographical memory. What was required was not an Aesopian language but a system of preterition, which, by endowing fictional characters with certain traits, and arranging semantic accents in a certain way, allowed the reader to finish the thought. Even works about the war that were published (including those that became part of the official Soviet canon), in many ways either referred directly to or alluded to many readers' private experience. Readers would extract from those texts things never mentioned in the papers or on the radio.<sup>1</sup> This habit was part of the unwritten contract between readers, author, and authorities that was fundamental to Soviet culture — a contract which, I

suggest, emerged in its definitive form in the first half of the 1940s.

My intention is not to review the non-canonical or innovative conceptions of World War II proposed in Soviet literature between the 1940s and the 1990s. I am interested in Soviet writers' philosophy of history only inasmuch as it was shaped by a literary anthropology which at first emerged spontaneously, but was later consciously developed: unconventional, often un-heroic and even anti-historical images of "man at war". This is why I am omitting Vassily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate*, Vyacheslav Ivanov's poetic cycle *Rome Diary, 1944*, and many other significant works.

### The stratification of literature

A number of historically sensitive observers expected a war on the territory of the USSR (instead of "a war on foreign soil with few casualties") as early as the late 1930s.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, like the entire Soviet propaganda machine, Soviet literature was entirely unprepared for a defensive war. In 1941–45, Soviet literature was faced with the need to process, explain, and contextualize a multitude of psychological collisions never anticipated by Soviet ideology. Soviet literature, as it had developed by the second half of the 1930s, was a stable system that served the needs of both propaganda and social and cultural adaptation.<sup>3</sup> It had been purged of references to state terror or to facts that were uncomfortable from the point of view of Soviet ideology and re-coded any kind of unpleasant experience. In mainstream Soviet literature, death was described chiefly as sacrifice; illness as a trial which had to be undergone in order to "join the ranks" (eg in Nikolai Ostrovsky's works;<sup>4</sup>) love could be unreciprocated, but it must not bring loneliness. Bodily experience could result from injury or illness, but it could not be a background to people's everyday existence. This is why the classics of socialist realism usually associated the everyday life of the body with negative characters (eg Alexander Fadeev's pseudo-Tolstoyan descriptions of the dirty body of Corporal Fenbong in his novel *Molodaya gvardiya* [The Young Guard]). Equally unacceptable were descriptions or analyses of unconventional, inarticulate fears, and, as a consequence, the literary characters' subjectivity was ignored.

Instead of trying to grasp the contemporary human condition, Soviet literature engaged in a rhetoric-ideological project to shape and maintain a new, specifically Soviet collective identity. This projective and at the same time psychologically restricting function of Soviet literature may be called a rhetorical reduction of the subject. The aim of this reduction has been analysed by Yevgeny Dobrenko: it served the suppression of personal variety in cultural production and the reduction of the possibilities of culture as an independent field of communication and reflection.<sup>5</sup> It is of fundamental importance that this reduction concerned not only the subject, but also the writing subject: writers had to learn not to see, or to analyse a whole range of phenomena within themselves.

Two important ranges of issues that had initially (in pre-war Soviet literature) been tabooed stand out in Russian literature about the war. The first may be called anthropological, and the second social. The first includes, above all, uncontrollable and unpredictable feelings: fear; physical and psychological discomfort (pain, hunger, and cold); the feeling of a collapse of one's entire pre-war worldview; and aggressive manifestations of the "bestial" side of human beings under extreme conditions (which were as frequent as heroic behaviour). A special anthropology of war also emerges out of a new sense of the body — at war or on the home front, the human body becomes painful and

wearisome, while at the same time it may be perceived as part of a single suffering collective body.

The dominant issue within the social range is the state's pressure upon all segments of society, which intensifies the burden of the war itself. At the front, this took the form of terror and coercion by the *politotdely* (political or ideology departments — trans.), and the *zagradostryady* [special battalions whose task was to shoot Red Army soldiers deserting from the front—line — trans.]. In the rear, terror took the form of ethnic deportations, "preventive arrests", arrests for "defeatist conversations", and punishment of former prisoners of war, soldiers who had lost contact with their brigades, or even people who lived on partly occupied territory.

The anthropological issues are the most interesting for the present analysis, even though they are inseparable from their social context. Literary attempts to understand the new feelings, thoughts, and emotions — attempts that, consciously or unconsciously, almost always took into account the social context — made writers abandon ideological schemes. Doing so was liable to lead them to reflect upon Soviet identity and, with the more attentive readers, to depart from the reductive system of Soviet literature. Whether the work inquired into the subject's identity as Soviet Man, or as New European Man, discussion of identity as such was destructive to Soviet propaganda.

Literary descriptions of uncomfortable, shocking experiences may be subdivided into two types, depending on whether the uncomfortable experience depicted was emotional (fear, pain, hatred, ethical conflict) or existential (identity problems, a sense of collapse and the subsequent discovery of the meaning of life, a sense of irreplaceable loss). In wartime Soviet literature, these two types of experience are usually found within one and the same work, or in the works of the same author, and are extremely difficult to separate. Nevertheless, it is possible through an analysis of the mechanisms of censorship (and self-censorship) and of the artificially organized interaction between literature and society.

The central hypothesis of this article is that the history of the subject of war in Soviet literature up to Perestroika was the history of the incorporation and assimilation of emotional trauma, whereby Soviet identity was to be given a foundation. Simultaneously, it was the history of the repression of existential trauma; it was this theme that kept returning to literary consciousness. In the 1990s, it was subtly rehabilitated, but remains to be reflected upon and identified. The two types of descriptions of the suffering and horrors of war differ not in their subject—matter, but in their point of view and their attitude towards that subject—matter. In Soviet censorial and editorial practice, both were qualified as "Remarquism" and "naturalism"; however, the existential type of writing provoked much harsher reactions.

### **The birth of a new subject**

Uneasy and even catastrophic experience entered the cultural consciousness in the very first months of the war, without any separation between emotionally and existentially uncomfortable experience. More importantly, it was identified and described as an inalienable element of a person's everyday life, rather than as something that affects characters fighting a war in some abstract space created by propaganda.

The Russian literary tradition knew descriptions of uncontrollable feelings of wartime fear and confusion, above all in Leo Tolstoy's *Sevastopolskie rasskazy* [Sevastopol Stories] and partly in the prose of Vsevolod Garshin. The senseless cruelty and raging bestial instincts of the Civil War had been depicted and aesthetically processed in the prose of Artem Vesoly, Isaak Babel, and Boris Pil'nyak. But for authors of both censored and uncensored literature dealt with here, reflecting upon the *new* sense of self generated in *those* years and by *that* war was much more important. The inclusion of this type of reflection into literature led to a discovery of paramount aesthetic and philosophical importance, which can be defined as the discovery of Man's illogical (or absurd) psychology. Both on the frontline and on the home front, in the panic of retreat or evacuation, people discovered within themselves a multitude of uncontrollable feelings that did not at all always obey obvious causal relations. Wartime experience led to the emergence of a new understanding of death. To frontline soldiers or civilians suffering the privations of war, human existence looked fragile and ephemeral; death, which could come at any time, became arbitrary. As a result, attention to subjectivity was no longer defined by certain traits the subject may or may not have possessed, but by the constant prospect of death, as recorded in the following lines of a poem by Yan Satunovsky:

How much I love them all  
 (and they will all be killed  
 All of them —  
 The company commanders  
 'Companeee, forward, follow the  
 co...'  
 (Their mouths will grow  
 numb).  
 These here, in the earth.

Yan Satunovsky  
*Kak ya ikh vsekh lyublyu* [How Much I Love Them All... trans  
 M. G.], 1942

Satunovsky's poetry is a rare example of a direct, unmitigated description of the new perception of death. Satunovsky's unpublished poems were not published; it is this withdrawal from normative aesthetics that allowed him to formulate most sharply and precisely the new type of feelings that was also the subject-matter of censored literature.

From this new perspective, it was fundamentally important to record "little" everyday sensations, the very texture of the everyday perception of the world. One of the most vivid examples of this kind of writing about the war is Viktor Nekrasov's story *V okopakh Stalingrada* (1944):

Slowly, solemnly, as if at a parade, aeroplanes are coming out from behind the station. I have never seen them in such numbers. There are so many of them that it is hard to discern where they are coming from. They are flying in flocks, black, disgusting, tranquil, at different heights. The whole sky is littered with the spittle of the anti-aircraft guns. We are standing on the balcony and looking at the sky. Me, Igor, Valega, Sedykh. It is impossible to turn away [...]<sup>6</sup>

During the war, there was a radical reassessment of the pre-war life that

served as the background for what was happening. It was discovered anew, and was present as an evident (or else hardly discernible) "second voice" in the majority of works on the war.

Having gone through blood and suffering,  
We shall approach the past with our gaze once again,  
But at that distant meeting  
We shall not abase ourselves to our former blindness.

There are too many friends who will give no reply  
To the generation that has seen death  
And not everything will be magnified back  
In our vision tried by sorrow.

Konstantin Simonov  
*Budto smotrish' v binokl' perevernuty* [As If Looking Through  
an Inverted Telescope — trans. M. G.], 1941

In this and other wartime works, a newly created image of an irrevocably lost type of existence was more important than memories of actual pre-war life. The new hero constantly compared his wartime experience with that abstract image, his perception of the war inevitably evolved, as it were, in a parallel plane: one axis was a perception of reality from the point of view of a pre-war observer, a person from a different life; the other was a wartime experience that was difficult to make sense of and was being put into words for the first time. Probably the most vivid and capacious example of this dual vision is provided in a poem by Ion Degen. Degen was a doctor who wrote poetry and prose during the war; he ceased his literary activities in the late 1940s, when he realized it was impossible to publish what he wrote. This poem became well-known as an anonymous piece (Degen's authorship only became known at the beginning of the 1990s). Numerous hand-written copies circulated on all fronts.

My comrade, in your death-agony  
Don't call your friends in vain!  
Instead let me warm my palms  
Over your steaming blood.

Don't you weep, don't moan,  
You are no small child  
You are not hurt, you have simply been killed.  
Let me take off your boots as a keepsake,  
For we shall yet have to advance.

Ion Degen  
*Moj tovarishtsch, v smertel'noj agonii...*

The poem cannot be called un-heroic or defeatist: the line "For we shall yet have to advance" shows that the poem's persona is self-disciplined and prepared to keep fighting. What is shocking is the direct reference to the extreme reduction and pragmatization of the ethical sense of self in a situation where death has become a "working" element of everyday life.

Degen's is a persona poem: it is written from the point of view of one of the many surviving fighters and is addressed to one of those who has died. Degen's aesthetic method is close to Brecht's "estrangement", which aims to provoke

the addressee to reflect critically on society.<sup>7</sup> However, Degen is more radical than Brecht: his reflection forces readers not simply to sympathize with a character, but to discover similar thoughts and feelings in their own intimate experience. Of course, many felt sincere grief for their fallen friends, and poems that expressed people's perception of a close person's death as a unique event were not hypocritical. But the aim of Degen's poem was not just to express grief, but also to make the reader aware of a new attitude towards life and death in himself, and thereby legitimize it without explanation or justification. For those soldiers who had a penchant for psychological reflection, this "non-justifying" legitimization, which didn't minimize the significance of the humanist stance, was truly cathartic.

For many people there were two models of comprehending their own experience of catastrophe (in some cases these models could be mutually complementary, in others they were in sharp conflict). The first developed under the impact of the propagandistic motto that all suffering was justified or at least repaid by the coming victory. This watchword responded to the sincere conviction of hundreds of thousands of people: they wanted to believe that their suffering and that of others was justified in advance by future victory. The second model was based on the idea that both positive and terrible wartime experience had a value of its own. It is the second that generated a fundamentally new aesthetics for the depiction of war. These models are based, respectively, on the idea of emotionally-uncomfortable and existentially-uneasy writing.

A special view of the war was developed by those authors who had not waited until 1941 to take on the task of reflecting the new everyday psychological reality and the thinking of subjects who exist in a world of constant, everyday nightmare. Describing such people presupposed a certain degree of estrangement (though these authors probably brought it about in different ways than Degen). The most important names in this respect are Yan Satunovsky, Georgy Obolduyev, and Lidiya Ginzburg. Here is how Satunovsky's persona observes himself in a poem written in 1939:

Yesterday while I was running late for work  
I met a woman who was crawling over the ice  
and lifted her up,  
and then I thought: Sil-  
ly, what if she is an enemy of the people?

What if? But what if she isn't?  
What if she is a friend? Or, how shall I say, an average person?  
A common wadded old woman,  
deuce knows.

Yan Satunovsky  
*Vchera, opazdyvaya na rabotu* [Yesterday while I was running  
late for work — trans. M. G.], 1939

Satunovsky's innovation in his mature poems (he considered himself a mature poet from his 1938 poem *U chasovogo ya sprosil...* [I Asked the Sentinel...] onwards) consisted of indicating that poetry crystallizes not around some marked or strong feelings, but around any feelings, especially those which cause people to break free from ideologically ordained or socially habitual structures of existence. It is clear that describing the experience of war gave such an author unique opportunities.

Probably the highest level of reflection in formulating the rejection of the rhetoric of struggle and victory in literature about the war was reached in Lidiya Ginzburg's *Blockade Diary*. Ginzburg was one of the most non-utopian and non-rhetorical authors in twentieth-century literature. She was the only one to clearly have set herself the task of a detailed description of the emotional shifts and changes in the entire system of human relations in a country at war and a city under siege:

For many, a working regime had always been an unattainable dream. They were unable to muster the effort required to rid their lives of obstacles. Now life was cleared of all sorts of idle talk, of various substitutes and mystifications, of amorous discrepancies or the claims of second and third professions, of wearisome vanity [...]. Having lost so much time, we suddenly obtained a time that was empty, though not free.<sup>8</sup>

An important trait that is common to Satunovsky and Ginzburg is their perception of everyday personal reflection as a micro-historical event. Ginzburg thought that this kind of self-perception was more common during the war than in the 1930s, which is probably why Ginzburg's *Diary* is "social", and appeals to a collective sense of self much more than her "introverted" notes and essays of the 1930s.

### Humanization and the crisis of ideology<sup>9</sup>

The effectiveness of the official rhetoric in mobilizing the population to continue in its drudgery and incite individuals to extraordinary feats of personal heroism was above all due to its being superimposed upon people's natural striving for survival, victory, and revenge. The contextualization of new psychological models in censored literature took place in the framework of appeals for an intense struggle in the name of victory and vengeance and was appropriated by official propaganda, which had equated society, Stalinist Russia, and pre-revolutionary or "eternal" Russia.<sup>10</sup> The spontaneous, fierce patriotism that was born in the first months of the war ("Russia, my mother! My boundless light, / How should I avenge you!" — Sergei Narovchatov, *V te gody* [In Those Years], 1942) was all the more easy to exploit because pre-war Soviet propaganda was "recoded" imperialist and nationalist ideology that had reached its definitive shape after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. An illustration of the propagandistic use of this spontaneous patriotism may be found in the journalism of Alexey Tolstoy:

The force of the people's war has stood up to meet total war. The self-disciplined moral force of the Soviet people, inspired by love for the motherland and truth, has stood up to face the unchained beast. The organization of the freely given and infinitely powerful labour of the entire people has stood up against the terrorist organization of slavish and coercive labour. I am sitting on the high and steep bank of the Volga, at the feet of the monument to Valery Chkalov [...] To its right is the ancient white Kremlin [of Nizhny Novgorod — I.K.] with its stocky towers. In times of greatest hardship the people rose up hence to protect the state.<sup>11</sup>

People at the front and behind the lines working to save their country, their children, and the state elite needed moral support;<sup>12</sup> this included a space of meaning where their suffering was explained. This space was provided by



cinema and literature. However, despite the huge popularity of cinema during the war years, literature played the leading role.<sup>13</sup> Compared to cinema, symphonic music, or opera, reading literary works required no significant material resources (poetry was literally written "on the knee"). Literature functioned in a much more private and spontaneous way than cinema, which is why it was more suitable for developing ways of assimilating the experience of those years.

In the censored press of the war years, the Soviet ideologues permitted certain "sublimated substitutes" for uncomfortable experience. Above all, these were descriptions of intimate private life that had been uncommon in pre-war literary practice (this was crucial for men and women who were yearning for their families). These could now be found in wartime songs and in Konstantin Simonov's poems.<sup>14</sup> Tvardovsky's poem on Vassily Tyorkin, who was always ready to drink and jest, and who did not live "according to the rules", could be published only because of changes in the system of censorship.

Unlike the poems of Satunovsky and Degen, those of Mikhail Lukonin, Semyon Gudzenko, Mikhail Kul'chitsky, and certain others were a printable form of rough, "bodily" poetry ("...and I picked out other people's blood / With my bayonet" — from Semyon Gudzenko's poem *Kogda na smert' idut* — *pyut* [You Sing When You Go to Meet Death]). As an alternative to the subject depicted in Soviet propaganda, they confirmed an "unofficial" private person who was Soviet. This was a display of poetry produced through suffering that withstood the empty demagoguery of the literary "bosses" (from Alexander Korneychuk to Pyotr Pavlenko, the author of the script for *Padenie Berlina* [The Battle of Berlin]). They saw the war as a sort of initiation that had a general validity which could serve at least as a partial compensation for the national catastrophe. "Partial" needs to be stressed here: these poets understood well that the dead could not be brought back.

Your crutches and your lethal perforating wound,  
and the tombs over the Volga, where thousands of  
young ones are lying, —  
all this is our fate, she is what we argued and sang with...  
[...]

But when we come back — and we will come back victorious,  
all of us, stubborn as devils and tenacious and spiteful as men,  
let them brew beer for us and fry meat for lunch,  
to make the tables on oaken legs burst far and wide.

We shall bow low to our weary own people,  
we shall smother our mothers and girlfriends with  
kisses for having waited for us and kept their love,  
when we come back, having obtained victory with our  
bayonets,  
then we shall love everything to the end, my coeval,  
and find ourselves trades.

Semyon Gudzenko  
*Nas ne nuzhno zhalet'* [No Need to Pity Us — trans. M. G.],  
1945

Gudzenko's description of the cruelty of war was counterbalanced by this utopia of victory which anticipated postwar Stalinist art. A poem by Nikolai Panchenko may be quoted to illustrate the stark contrast between the two



types. Anticipating the end of combat, he wrote in 1944:

And somewhere,  
in a strange apartment,  
someone will say to me:  
"Darling, miracles don't exist:  
in the stingy post-war world  
everyone is given just barely enough heart".

*Ballada o rasstrelyannom serdce* [The Ballad of the Executed  
Heart — trans. M. G.]

### After the war: the battle for memory

The history of the comprehension and adaptation of the "subject of war" in literature may be described as a longstanding tug-of-war between non-conformist writers and party ideologues. The elites accepted the new "rules of the game" that had developed during the war and supported those authors who adapted traumatic memories to the Soviet rhetorical models. More conscientious writers, who were prepared to engage in an aesthetic and ethical search, strove during the postwar decades to write about an experience stifled by rhetorical reductivism, only to be subjected to brutal criticism and see the experience they had described tabooed. Crucially, this exclusion was supported by readers accustomed to hypocrisy, who thought that literature should serve to assert an ideal, especially under "difficult circumstances".

The war induced a transformation of Soviet literature and brought about a regeneration of its rhetorical-projective component. Soon after the war, this component was revived and intensified. In the early postwar years, existential problems first became an object of literary examination in their own right. The authorities reacted all the more toughly.

A characteristic example of such a literary search eventually cut short by criticism is the story of Emmanuil Kazakevich's narrative "Dvoe v stepi" [Two Men in the Steppe] published in *Znamya*, 5/1948. A young lieutenant strays from his unit during a disorderly retreat; he is arrested and tried as a deserter (although the young man desperately wants to keep fighting). In the main part of the story he is convoyed by a Cossack soldier, who tries with all his might to feel hatred for his "ward", yet can't help feeling sympathetic. In the end, the lieutenant is miraculously saved from execution (by a German attack) and courageously continues fighting.

The story was met with devastating criticism. Above all, the attacks on Kazakevich were provoked by the subject matter: it was unmentionable that during the war, and generally in the USSR, innocent people were sentenced to death (albeit by mistake rather than by malicious intent). As a result, the idea of describing the existential weariness of a person expecting death at the hands of "his own people" was repressed and forcibly forgotten, along with the story.

Another example is provided by Andrei Platonov's story *Vozvrashchenie (Sem'ya Ivanova)* [The Return (Ivanov's Family)] on the break-up of families during and after the war, when men were separated from their wives for long periods of time. During the war, Konstantin Simonov had written "comforting" poems about separation, but even in the work of such a well-known poet, references to this painful topic provoked anger and bewilderment from

"vigilant" readers who didn't understand how such things could have been allowed to be printed.<sup>15</sup> Platonov's blow was all the more crushing: while sympathizing with his heroes, he had, unlike Simonov, provided a direct, non-euphemistic description.

During the war the topic of family break-up became a subject of folklore. Thus the lyrics of the well-known song *Tyomnaya noch'* [Dark Night] were turned into: "You are waiting for me, / but in fact you sleep with a lieutenant / and secretly take Sulfidine / by our child's little bed".<sup>16</sup> (Sulfidine was used as a contraceptive.) As always in folklore, and especially in parody, an important fact of social psychology was pointed out but not analyzed, while the aesthetic reflection (including a reflection on identity) of the kind undertaken by Platonov was prohibited.

The battle between, on one hand, authors, critics, and censors, and on the other, readers who wanted to forget all that was terrible in war, resulted in the experience of catastrophe failing to be integrated into social consciousness. Instead, it acquired the traits of unresolved, collective trauma. This trauma was not fully made sense of even in the "lieutenants' prose" of the 1950s and '60s (for example, in the work of Yury Bondarev, Vasil Bykov, Grigory Baklanov, and Boris Balter; Bulat Okudzhava's story *Bud' zdorov, shkolyar!* [Good Luck, Schoolboy!]). The scope of this article does not allow for an exploration of such an important literary movement as the lieutenants' prose, which still remains to be thoroughly studied and contextualized. It is vital to note, however, that in it, accounts of terrible experiences and the acknowledgement of one's own or others' guilt were usually counterbalanced by the heroes' experience of maturing:

The central character of the lyrical front-line story is either a former student or a recent schoolboy [...] In the stories of Baklanov, Bondarev, and their like-minded coevals, war is perceived with the fresh and excited gaze of youth. This lends a dramatic contradictoriness to the level of narration itself, which is constituted by a complex alloy of naturalistic and lyrical poetry.<sup>17</sup>

This tendency localized the authors' idea of trauma: it introduced emotionally uncomfortable experience into literature, but left out existentially uneasy experience.

An alternative perspective of meaning could have been provided by those rare works that did not maintain the balance between the naturalist and lyrical principles described by Leyderman and Lipovetsky, and where the war made characters discover their own illogicality and mortality, which neither maturity nor victory could abolish (Konstantin Vorobyev's story *Ubity pod Moskvoy* [Killed Near Moscow], 1961; the other insoluble conflict in the story has to do with the involuntary compassion the hero feels for a German he killed). Sometimes, characters realized that the social cleavages brought about by the war did not heal (Viktor Astafyev's short story *Soldat i mat'* [The Soldier and the Mother], 1959). However, such works were viewed in the general context of 1960s prose, and the most radical among them, which examined the concept of Soviet subjectivity (Vorobyev's stories) were subjected to devastating criticism.<sup>18</sup> The experience they reflected was once more "repressed".<sup>19</sup>

From the point of view of social psychology, the strategy of the authors of lieutenants' prose was virtually the only one possible; they deserve credit for

having done more than anyone else to legitimize an unofficial view of the experience of the front–lines in readers' minds. They were facing powerful resistance: for years, some Soviet critics specialized in fulminating against lieutenants' prose, accusing it of "abstract humanism", "Remarquism" and cultivating a "view from a hammock". It is thanks to the lieutenants' prose and camp prose of the 1960s that the idea of a traumatic memory as a constitutive part of life was re–substantiated in Soviet literature.

Prose and poetry that raise the issue of existential discontent are usually spontaneously rejected by any readership (not only in the Soviet Union), and can only be integrated into the mainstream through the efforts of critics and philosophers (such as Jean–Paul Sartre's support for Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger* and the prose and drama of Jean Genet). Such works are well received only when and where a society is going through an identity crisis and needs cultural tools to master that crisis: in Germany and Japan after their defeat, in the United States in the 1960s, and so on. In the Soviet Union of the 1950s and '60s, there was undoubtedly an identity crisis engendered by the shock of the war, but in censored literature it was largely suppressed and repressed: the very participants of the cultural process refused to reflect it. Thus, it was also expressed in a concealed and unconscious way in most works of the lieutenants' prose. Evidence of this crisis is circumstantial: it can be seen from the popularity among intellectuals in the 1960s for foreign books and films about postwar crises of public ideology, personal identity, and the meaning of life: Andrzej Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds*, Heinrich Böll's novels, Remarque and Hemingway, or Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse–Five*, or *The Children's Crusade*.

### The 1970s: "Little Land"<sup>20</sup> and the Partisans' Woods

The social context of the assimilation of the war experience underwent a fundamental change in the late 1960s and early 1970s, after Brezhnev and a new generation of the Soviet party elite came to power. On average, the new leaders (bar such "eternal" figures as Anastas Mikoyan) were younger than Khrushchev's elite. During the war they had not usually occupied leading positions (Khrushchev, by contrast, had been First Secretary of the Central Committee of the All–Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine as well as a member of the war councils of the South–Western Sector and the South–Western, Stalingrad, Southern, Voronezh, and First Ukrainian Fronts). Even if these people had been working in the rear during the war, they had still known that their contemporaries were dying on the front–lines. For the new Soviet leadership, the extreme experience of war was the most important emotional value they could share with the majority of people of their generation.

Soviet ideology was undergoing a suppressed but perceptible crisis in the 1970s, and only the myth of war and victory could unite society.<sup>21</sup> In order to unite the elite with the rest of society, the Soviet leaders implicitly justified their ideology through the idea of generational solidarity. Increasing conservative tendencies made that myth distinctly retrospective: victory became an apologia for a generation that had found genuine values through wartime suffering. At the same time, this myth became an effective means of suppressing the consequences of the youth unrest of the 1960s: the desire for modernization, psychological renewal, and rapprochement with the West. This ideological manoeuvre is carried out explicitly in Sergei Mikhalkov's play *Zabyty blindazh* [The Forgotten Dug–Out] (1962): a young admirer of all things western (he even reads the name of his radio set as HEBA instead of

NEVA), without a conscious ethical stance, is disgraced by a morally mature boy of the same age during a conversation in a wartime dug-out that they accidentally discover during a tour in the forest.

It is obvious that, in this context, there was a great demand for works dealing with the emotionally difficult experience of war. Any mention of the existentially difficult remained dangerous (or became even more dangerous than it had been in Khrushchev's times). The war became a legitimizing "founding myth" of Soviet identity. Official propaganda, which was supported in this by a majority of the population of the USSR, asserted that the Main Tragedy — the war — had remained in the past, and that the older generation was always right by virtue of having lived through the hardship of the war.

In 1979, the literary journal *Yunost'* [Youth] published a story by Galina Shcherbakova called *Vam i ne snilos'* [You Don't Know Anything About It], which had been submitted several years earlier. It was a latter-day *Romeo and Juliet*, a protest against the hypocrisy of a society that denied teenagers the right to a private life and to private tragedy. A canting teacher confronts the young heroine with the phrase which, in a shortened form, gives the story its title: "You know nothing about grief!" "You" denotes the late-Soviet (and, as it turned out, the last Soviet) generation of the 1970s. "Grief", as would have been obvious to the readers, stood for the Great Patriotic War. Both Shcherbakova and her readers knew that the writer had encroached upon one of the pillars of late Soviet ideology: the *a priori* rightness of everything that the old generation said.

The elites of the "Brezhnev draft" needed a new literature about the war which would legitimize their own experience of catastrophe and allow them to structure the solidarity of the war generation as the one that had "saved the country". This required rehabilitating the war theme in literature and cinema to remind people once more of its extreme brutality. However, this return to the subject had unintended consequences. The main unexpected effect of the propagandists' attention to the tragedy of the war (an effect hardly noticed by the censors) was that the topics imposed by the ideological hierarchy were turned upside down: if the experience of the Great Patriotic War was the only extreme experience one could write about, then the war could be a metaphor for any extreme experience, any situation of risk, desperation, and tragedy. The use of war as material for constructing a total metaphor of existential experience can be seen in Vasil Bykov's prose or Vladimir Vyssotsky's "war" songs.<sup>22</sup>

Bykov's and Vyssotsky's treatment of war appears ideologically irreproachable (Vyssotsky's only text officially published during his lifetime was the song "Na bratskikh mogilakh ne stavyat krestov..." [They Don't Put Up Crosses On Communal Graves...]). But their works legitimize the contemporary experience rather than that of the past. Commenting on his own songs during one of his concerts,<sup>23</sup> Vyssotsky said he was interested in war because during war people are always in a situation of risk and trial. Paradoxically, and very productively, Vyssotsky's songs combine two traits: stress on impending personal or collective doom ("Yak-istrebitel" [The Fighter Plane's Song], "Spasite nashi dushi" [Save Our Souls], also typical of Vyssotsky's "non-war" songs "Okhota na volkov" [The Wolf Hunt]) and a readiness for desperate personal action, which is the only way secretly to make the world shift a little ("My tolkaem zemlyu" [We Are Pushing the Earth]). The need to explain states of doom and absurd fervour, as well as ways to transcend everyday morality, led Vyssotsky to write a song from the perspective of a Nazi soldier — a song that sounds

aloof yet involves psychological analysis ("Over the Scorched Plane / Metre after metre / The soldiers of the *Mitte* army group / Are marching through Ukraine").

The next step after Vyssotsky was taken by Yegor Letov, some of whose song lyrics quote literary works and wartime songs, which serve as a metaphor for an existential experience that has nothing to do with the historical war: "They fought for the Motherland / And kissed publicly before the eyes of the whole Universe [...]" ("Oni srazhalis' za Rodinu" [They Fought for the Motherland])

"V. Bykov is more consistent in his interest in the topic of war than anyone else, not only in Belarusian, but in all of Soviet literature", wrote the critic Dmitry Bugaev.<sup>24</sup> The reason was that Bykov used the history of the war as subject-matter for metaphysical parables. Bykov's most impressive works were written in the late 1960s and in the 1970s: *Kruglyansky most* [The Kruhlanski Bridge] in 1968 and *Sotnikov* in 1970. In the 1960s, Bykov made the transition from merely reflecting existentially uncomfortable experience, to turning it into parable. The main character in his early story *Zapadnya* [The Trap] (1963), Lieutenant Klimchenko, is taken captive by the Nazis; the central theme of the story is the despair of a person who remains faithful to his principles but whose faithfulness doesn't save anyone and can't be confirmed by anyone.

Bykov's poetics reached a definitive form in the 1970s, which probably has to do not only with the renewed interest in the war but also with the fact that the genre of the metaphysical parable was highly popular in Soviet literature, especially in unofficial literature, during that particular decade. Bykov took advantage of the official fashion in order to express the unofficial. Bykov was probably Soviet literature's only existentialist writer in the exact sense of the word.<sup>25</sup> The point of *Sotnikov*, Bykov's best-known story (for which he was awarded the Lenin Prize) may be summarized as follows: the strong man who trusts in his own strength (Rybak) is always unreliable, while the weak man, since he has no hope or support, is ready to do anything.

In Bykov's mature works, severe physical discomfort often becomes a metonymy for existentially desperate situations: in *The Kruhlanski Bridge*, Steпка's foot hurts because his boot is torn; *Sotnikov* is ill and has a high fever; he finds it hard not only to fulfil his mission (which in the end remains unfulfilled), but even to walk from village to village. Both characters, who Bykov sympathized with, always lag behind resolute and confident partisans (Britvin and Rybak). Under the veneer of assimilating emotionally uncomfortable experience, Bykov and Vyssotsky rehabilitated the existentially uneasy experience, not only of the war, but also of life in the 1970s.

### The 1990s: the vitalizing pain of history

In the 1990s, a number of writers abandoned the Soviet paradigm of describing war (nevertheless, this paradigm remains important for many readers). Young poets, who, one may think, required neither ideological nor allegorical cover to describe extreme experience, unexpectedly turned their attention to the subject. In the poetry of Yelena Fanailova, Linor Goralik, Igor' Vishnevetsky, and Arseny Rovinsky, the war was turned upside down to become the most significant and capacious metaphor for existential unease. In the 1970s, the war had been perceived as a source of Soviet identity; in the 1990s it came to stand for any identity crisis or even as a way of describing any such crisis. Bykov's and Vyssotsky's works of the 1970s (and, for some of the youngest authors,

Letov's songs of the early 1990s) are the obvious antecedents of this new conception of the war. Among works of older writers based on these principles, Vasil Bykov's story *Stuzha* [Cold] (1992) and especially Viktor Astafyev's novel *Proklyaty i ubity* [Cursed and Killed] (1990–1994) should be noted. Bykov's story illustrates the link between the new paradigm and a Perestroika-type reflection on Soviet identity: a member of a diversionary group on a mission in the Nazi rear who miraculously remains alive though he is badly wounded finds shelter in a peasant's barn. Alone and on the threshold of life and death, he remembers his pre-war life and participation in the collectivization that destroyed the Belarusian countryside.

Astafyev's novel *Cursed and Killed* should be seen in the context of his later prose, which also includes the stories *Tak khochetsya zhit'* [Such a Desire to Stay Alive] (1995), *Oberton* [Overtone] (1996), and *Vesyoly soldat* [The Cheerful Soldier] (1998). In all these works, Astafyev radicalized his own style and reconsidered both the traditions of recreating traumatic memory and the methods he had himself developed in his earlier work. I believe the description of the experience of war in *Cursed and Killed* was reinvented in the context of "the twilight of the idols" and the formation of new boundaries for literature. Astafyev not only wrote things that earlier would have been censored, but also included different mechanisms of memory and remembering. Though he had made periodic attempts to expand the scope of literature about the war and overcome the taboos of censorship since the 1950s, he succeeded in the 1990s in finding a new aesthetics.

In *Cursed and Damned*, great importance is attached to the experience of mass illness, of the psychologically and physically painful co-existence of different people in military barracks, and of the wartime sense of death as a pointless nightmare (the execution of the Snegiryov brothers). The moralizing part in this novel is split into two voices: the voice of the judge/ideologist/narrator, and the voice of Ashot Vaskonyan, a hard-boiled, Armenian Jew, who perceives the war as humanity's common sin and as an infinite and desperate absurdity. (The fact that the most uncompromising pacifist remarks are put in Vaskonyan's mouth, although the narrator seems entirely to agree with them, deserves a separate discussion.)

In the literature of the 1990s, family memories are consistently perceived as anti-state and anti-ideological, and family archives as depositories of unconventional identities. In uncensored literature or in post-Soviet society, identity is always unconventional, does not follow the rules: it gives the individual a feeling of having found their own way, of the historicity of their own existence, and thereby wrests them from society and even sets them off against society. In Yelena Fanailova's poem *Pamyati deda* [To the Memory of My Grandfather], this dropping out of society is testified by a deformation of language, and the return from the war (not war in general, but the Great Patriotic War) is pictured as an event recurrent in its universality: the perplexity and tenderness of a home-coming soldier metaphorically serves to describe the perplexity and tenderness of his granddaughter, which occurs for different reasons and on different occasions. But it is this painful, non-obvious relationship that engenders history.

I am as a soldier coming back from war, say wives:  
 Check me pockets stuffed with rust  
 Serve us full glasses filled with rye  
 And don't vanish again



[...]

They stood their ground, they were visible so clearly  
I remember the bones compressed till white  
I know what I'm talking about, having shat my trousers  
While others were celebrating Berlin,

I rode as a godfather and a king, and we will pour a third  
round,  
To all those who have turned into rot.  
As to the one who will come here later with a child --- chase  
her away,  
But don't bear down on her with abuse and don't tell me  
anything,  
For the struggle was not only for the harvest.

As a soldier I am coming back home and for god's  
sake, no  
There is such an over-earthly silence...

Yelena Fanailova  
*Pamyati deda* [To the Memory of My Grandfather --- trans. M.  
G.]

A central idea of the young literature of the 1990s was overcoming people's alienation from each other and from history, which is now perceived as "a bustle / of state insects with flabby probosces / smeared with the pollen of war, fear, phallogentrism" (Stanislav Lvovsky, 1996). For the poets of the 1990s, the experience of war became a metaphor for breaking through the barrier of alienation into history: "The soldiers are sleeping and seeing Stalingrad, / and Stalin, flying in a rocket, / and they are glad and are reviving / and suffering as sick children" (Arseny Rovinsky, *soldaty spyat i vidyat Stalingrad* [The Soldiers are Sleeping and Seeing Stalingrad]).

For Astafyev, a non-propagandistic, unreduced reduction of war was the aim. For the young authors of the 1990s, the imaginary unreduced war becomes a measure of the authenticity of experience, since the genuine experience of war is hidden and unbearable, since it requires first a search for, and then internal assent to the illogicality of the world and of one's personal mental life.

What exactly is coming back? Well, some kind of machines, a girl who is weeping on a bale of rags, a plica in long hair (which I never had), an eye on a potato, "Marina, dogs!", a few brittle German phrases and a few Russian phrases --- not "mleko-jajki", but something else, something like "Achtung", "das maschinen", "open ze mous". A plane is flying, the engine is droning inside it, oooo! --- but it's not a bomb shelter --- a rick? I don't even know what a "rick" is, Seryozha. You see, this is a strange memory inside me --- not a genetic memory or an incarnational one, --- probably not even a memory at all, but a kind of internal store of information --- about the destiny I passed by --- accidentally, by such a pure accident that I was as it were trained and prepared, had been taught those few German words, trained for work with these das maschinen, --- but something budged and unwedged in the heavenly spheres, and my soul missed it by forty or fifty years, and I was not in



Ukraine the moment I should have been driven off to toil in  
Germany, — I wasn't anywhere yet at that moment, — but my  
soul, my soul, it was there, I'm telling you, it was trained,  
schooling, driven off and driven on, and how should it live here,  
where there's nowhere a sign saying which side is most  
dangerous during bombardment?

Linor Goralik

From the *Elektrifikaciya* [The Electrification Cycle 6 — trans  
M. G.].

In the literature of the 1990s, overcoming of alienation appears as an infinite process accomplished by means of a struggle for wholeness, non-alienation, and historical life. The hero of 1990s poetry struggles to perceive his or her most concrete, auto-psychological "I" as part of a constantly changing multilingual world and as part of history. This enables him or her to love, since overcoming self-alienation creates the possibility of memory and affection.<sup>26</sup>

### What we have lost

The history of the assimilation and repression of traumatic experience in the "literature about the war" includes not only discoveries and revelations, but also losses. The part of this experience that was not integrated into public memory, not discussed by journalists and scholars, is lost forever, even if the texts have been physically preserved. Russian literature has irrevocably missed its opportunity to generate works that could have been the aesthetic and ethical equivalent to *Slaughterhouse Five* or *Adam, Where Art Thou?* And, although the creation of the "lieutenants' prose" was a collective exploit, the rules of the game of the Soviet literary field were so strictly defined that many aspects of the changes in human psychology under conditions of war have remained repressed and aesthetically and ethically unrealized.

This repression returned to the well-lit area of cultural consciousness in the 1990s; in psychoanalytical terms, this could be described as partial catharsis. Authors of different generations came to see the task of attaining an unalienated memory of the war as one that had to be attempted anew and under new conditions. This task was made more difficult by the fact that the absence of a tradition of reflecting upon subjectivity was particularly marked in literature about the war. The tools used for this reflection about subjectivity are an interpretation of family memories as a basis for an unofficial (or anti-official) identity, and an aspiration for personal historicity.

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail see: Igor' Vishnevetsky, "Chastnaya voyna: golosa, kotorye ya slyshu" [The Private War: Voices I Hear], *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* [The New Literary Review], 55/2002, 249–257.

<sup>2</sup> See Alexander Rivin's poem written in 1940: "Soon there will come a great war / We will hide out in the basement. / Mixing silence with our souls, / We will lie down on the floor..." (Rivin went missing during the first months of the war). In 1941, Daniil Kharmis implored a friend, the artist Natalia Gernet, to leave Leningrad because the city was "headed for the same fate as Coventry". See: N.V. Gernet, "O Kharmse" [On Kharmis], *Neva*, 2/1988, 204.

<sup>3</sup> This thesis is substantiated in Yevgeny Dobrenko's *Metafora vlasti. Literatura stalinskoy epokhi v istoricheskom osveshchenii* [The Metaphor of Power. The Literature of the Stalin Era Seen Through the Prism of History], Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner 1993. It is also central in Dobrenko's other works. See also Boris Dubin's *Slovo — pis'mo — literatura* [Word, Writing, and Literature], Moscow 2001, 135–154, and *ibid.*, *Intellektual'nye gruppy i simvolicheskie formy* [Intellectual Groups and Symbolic Forms], Moscow 2004, 59–132.

<sup>4</sup> As analyzed by David Feldman and others.

- 5 Yevgeny Dobrenko, *Grammatika boya -- yazyk batarey* [The Grammar of Combat is the Language of the Batteries]; *ibid.*, *Metafora vlasti* (op. cit.), 212.
- 6 Viktor Nekrasov, *V okopakh Stalingrada* [In the Trenches of Stalingrad — trans. M. G.], Moscow: Russkaya kniga 1995, 59–60.
- 7 Bertolt Brecht, "Kleines Organon für das Theater", in: *Ausgewählte Werke in sechs Bänden. Vol. 6: Schriften*, Frankfurt/Main 1997, 519–552.
- 8 Quoted from Lidiya Ginzburg, "Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka", in: *Chelovek za pis'mennym stolom* [Woman at Her Desk], Leningrad 1990, 529.
- 9 "The humanization of ideology" is a term coined by Yevgeny Dobrenko in "Metaphor of Power" op. cit.
- 10 For a detailed analysis of this process see: Yevgeny Dobrenko, *Grammatika...*, 210–312.
- 11 Alexey Tolstoy, "Nas ne odoleesh!" [We won't be defeated! — trans. M. G.], in *Sobranie sochineniy* [Collected Works], 10 vols., Moscow 1961, 492.
- 12 Marietta Chudakova has compared the legalization of love poems during the war to the "one hundred grams" [of vodka — translator's note] that were given out to soldiers before attacks (Marietta Chudakova, "Voennoe' stikhotvorenie Simonova 'Zhdi menya (iyul) 1941 g.) v literaturnom processe sovetskogo vremeni" [Simonov's War Poem "Wait for Me" (July 1941) in the Soviet Literary Process], *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 58/2002, 239.
- 13 For more detail see: O. Bulgakova, *Fabrika zhestov* [The Gesture Factory], Moscow 2005, 205.
- 14 For more detail see: Marietta Chudakova, op. cit., 235–241.
- 15 Chudakova, op. cit., 240 (note 47) and, 241–244.
- 16 Alexander Chudakov, *Lozhitsya mgla na starye stupeni. Roman–idilliya* [Darkness is Descending on the Old Steps. An Idyllic Novel], Moscow 2001, 262. [The lyrics are: "In the dark night, I know, my darling, you are not sleeping / Secretly wiping off a tear by our child's little bed" – translator's note].
- 17 Naum Leyderman, Mark Lipovetsky, *Sovremennaya russkaya literature* [Contemporary Russian Literature], 3 vols. Moscow: Editorial URSS 2001, i, 113–115.
- 18 The critic G. Brovman accused Vorobyev's story of pacifism and a pointless over-statement of the horrors of war (Moscow, 1/1964).
- 19 Another topic that was virtually prohibited in Soviet literature was the Holocaust (*Shoah*), the extermination of the Jews. Attempts to mention it publicly — Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poetic cycle *Baby Yar*, Shostakovich's 13<sup>th</sup> symphony based on that cycle, Anatoly Rybakov's novel *Tyazhely Pesok* [Heavy Sand], invariably turned into public events, and those works became scarce and difficult-to-obtain commodities.
- 20 *Malaya Zemlya* [Little Land] was the title of an autobiographical book about the war by Leonid Brezhnev that came out in 1980 and became compulsory reading in all Soviet schools. [Translator's note]
- 21 The basic study of this process is Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia*, New York 1994. The most important historical events from the point of view of contemporary post-Soviet society are the war and victory, seen as one single event that legitimates society as a whole. See: Denis Dragunsky, "Naciya i vojna" [The Nation and the War], *Druzha Narodov* [Friendship of the Peoples], 10/1992, 177; Alexey Levinson, "Lyudi Molodye za Istoriyu Bez Travm" [Young People for a Non-Traumatic History], *Neprikosnovenny Zapas*, 36/2004, 64; Lev Gudkov, "Pobeda v voyne: k sociologii odnogo nacional'nogo simbola", *ibid.*, "Negativnaya identichnost" [Negative Identity], in: *Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2004, 20–58.
- 22 Another kind of generalization can be found in Bulat Okudzhava's songs: he keeps returning to the thought that war can intrude into any manifestation of peaceful life, that it is always close by. This was also at variance with the ideology of the 1970s, which relegated the war to an absolute mythological past and used it to legitimate the current regime.
- 23 These words are spoken in the opening sequence of the first disc in Vyssotsky's vinyl double album *Synov'ya ukhodyat v boy* [Our Sons Are Leaving for the War] (1987).
- 24 D. Bugaev, "Glubina I moshch' pravdy" [The Depth and Force of Truth], in Vasil' Bykov, *Povesti* [Stories], Leningrad 1987, 602.
- 25 Bykov's closeness to existentialism was mentioned by Galina Belaya in her lectures at Moscow State University's Department of Journalism as early as the beginning of the 1980s. As Naum Leyderman and Mark Lipovetsky have stressed, what's most important in the actions of Bykov's characters is the process of choice "under conditions which would seem [...] to exclude the very possibility of choice". (Leyderman and Lipovetsky, op. cit., Vol. 2, 176).

For more detail see: Il'ya Kukul'in, "Proryv k nevozmozhnoy svyazi" [Break-through to an Impossible Connection], *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 50/2001, 453–457.

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