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9 Russian Cultural and Sporting Figures Who Emigrated in a Year of War

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine sparked an exodus of cultural and sporting stars, many of whom publicly stated their opposition to the war.

From pop legend Alla Pugacheva to five-time Olympic gold medalist and synchronized swimming champion Anastasia Davydova, there has been a steady emigration of the country's luminaries in the year since Russian tanks rolled across the border.

These emigrés have fled to destinations ranging from Turkey and Latvia to the U.S. and Israel. Few look likely to return as long as the war rages.

In the wake of their departure, many have been designated "foreign agents" by the Russian authorities or had criminal cases opened against them.

The Moscow Times has compiled a list of nine major sporting and cultural figures who have left the country over the past year in protest of the war:

Rapper Oxxxymiron

Miron Fydorov, 37, better known by his moniker Oxxxymiron, is one of Russia's most popular rappers. Shortly after the start of the war, he canceled his Russian tour and left his home country, calling the invasion a "catastrophe and a crime."

The musician is no stranger to relocating — he moved to Germany with his father at age 9, and then to the U.K. at 15 where he completed school and went on to study English language and literature at Oxford University. Since leaving Russia, he has performed anti-war concerts in cities across Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Oxxxymiron was investigated by Russian police last year for "extremist" lyrics and designated a "foreign agent" in October. He was ordered to pay a fine of 70,000 rubles ($941) by a Russian court last month for songs containing "separatist" sentiments that "discredit the Russian army."

Ballerina Olga Smirnova

Prima Ballerina Olga Smirnova, 31, quit Russia's Bolshoi Ballet company in March, saying she was "against this war with every fiber of my soul."

Following her exit from Russia, she quickly joined the Dutch National Ballet, where she made her debut in Marius Petipa's Raymonda in Amsterdam in April.

Born and raised in St. Petersburg, Smirnova studied at the Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet under Lyudmila Kovaleva. She became a prima ballerina at the Bolshoi in 2016.

Smirnova is set to perform the principal role of Nikiya in La Bayadere in Rome on Feb. 25, a day after the anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Singer Alla Pugacheva and comedian Maxim Galkin

After the invasion of Ukraine, Soviet pop legend Alla Pugacheva, 73, and her husband, comedian and television host Maxim Galkin, 46, left for Israel with their nine-year-old twins.

Throughout 2022, Galkin toured Israel and Europe with stand-up shows that criticized the war; he was eventually designated a "foreign agent" by his home country. Pugacheva briefly returned to Russia in the fall, but soon went back to Israel after publicly criticizing the war and her husband's "foreign agent" designation.

With a music career spanning nearly six decades, Pugacheva is one of the most famous people in the Russian-speaking world. Galkin started his career as an impersonator, even occasionally performing an imitation of President Vladimir Putin.

The couple has left behind a big hole in Russian pop culture. This was particularly noticeable on New Year's Eve, when many Russians would expect to see both Galkin and Pugacheva performing on their TV screens as part of state television's build-up to midnight.

Olympian Anastasia Davydova

Five-time Olympic gold medalist and Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) secretary general Anastasia Davydova, 40, announced in late September that she was leaving Russia.

While she has not explicitly condemned the war, Russian media reports of her departure suggested she was not intending to return home.

Following a star-studded career as a synchronized swimmer, Davydova moved to coaching and joined the ROC after her last professional competition at the 2012 Olympic Games in London. She coached the Russian synchronized swimming team for the 2016 Rio Olympics.

ROC President Stanislav Pozdnyakov has spoken out in support of Russia's war in Ukraine, saying days before Davydova's departure that athletes should feel honored if they are conscripted to fight for the Russian Armed Forces.

Davydova continues to coach synchronized swimming in her new city of residence, Dubai.

Punk-rave group Little Big

Little Big, a popular punk band led by vocalists Ilya Prusikin, 37, and Sonya Tayurskaya, 31, left Russia in protest of the war within a week of the invasion.

Four months later, they released their anti-war song "Generation Cancellation" which featured the lyrics "die or leave, die or leave / I've got no choice." The music video shows symbolic imagery of political villains playing chess, TV anchors brainwashing viewers with "fake news," and a soldier in a church blessing a man with a crucifix-shaped weapon.

The band, known for their viral music videos, had been set to represent Russia at Eurovision 2020 before the competition was canceled due to the pandemic. Since leaving Russia, they have been based in Los Angeles. Their next concert is scheduled for March 8 in Phuket, Thailand.

Pussy Riot's Maria Alyokhina

Maria Alyokina, 33, one of the public faces of the punk protest group Pussy Riot, made the decision to leave Russia in May after a court ordered her effective house arrest to be converted into jail time. To leave Moscow, she disguised herself as a food courier and got a lift to the Belarusian border with a friend.

Following two unsuccessful attempts to cross from Belarus to neighboring Lithuania, she finally made it over the border using a European Union identity document that an acquaintance in the West managed to smuggle to her in Minsk.

While Alyokhina had spent two years in jail for Pussy Riot's 2012 anti-Kremlin performance in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral, she stayed in Russia and continued her activism in the years after her release. The war in Ukraine proved to be the final straw, however, prompting her decision to leave.

"I understand there was a big noise about my so-called escape, but I don't have any plans for

emigration. I just want to help Ukraine and that's it," she said in a subsequent interview.

Alyokhina has toured widely with Pussy Riot since leaving Russia, with proceeds from ticket sales going to support Ukraine. They performed shows in the U.K. in November and are set to travel to venues in the United States, Mexico, Germany and Sweden this year.

Film critic Anton Dolin

Within two weeks of the start of the Ukraine war, prominent film critic Anton Dolin had moved to Riga, the capital of neighboring Latvia.

In a lengthy Facebook post on March 6, Dolin denounced the "criminal war in Ukraine," censorship and the complicity of Russians who went about their daily lives as if a war wasn't going on. He also posted a photo of his apartment door in Moscow which had been vandalized with the letter "Z" — a symbol used by the Russian army in Ukraine.

Since his departure, Dolin has been added to Russia's growing list of "foreign agents."

Actor Artur Smolyaninov

Russian actor Artur Smolyaninov, 39, who is known for starring in action movies loved by Putin himself, publicly stated his opposition to the war in an interview in April — a move that led to him being dropped from several state-funded projects. He left Russia shortly after.

Last month, he was bitterly criticized by many in Russia for his interview with the independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta in which he said he would fight on the Ukrainian side against the Russians if he had to go to war. Shortly after, he was designated a "foreign agent" and the head of Russia's Investigative Committee, Alexander Bastrykin, ordered that a criminal case should be opened against him.

Smolyaninov is often referred to as "Russia's Rambo" for his action-hero roles. Since leaving Russia, he has taken part in the "Citizen Poet" project and starred alongside actor Chulpan Khamatova in an anti-war video by rock group Nogu Svelo.

Figure skater Mikhail Nazarychev

Top figure skater Mikhail Nazarychev, 21, left Russia for the U.S. in June. He won bronze together with his former partner Yulia Artemeva at the 2020 World Junior Figure Skating Championship and was crowned Russian Junior Champion in 2021.

His emigration meant parting ways with Artemeva, his decade-long skating partner, who has since teamed up with a new partner, Alexei Briukhanov.

Commenting on his departure, he said that he no longer felt "safe" in Russia and that the invasion was a "point of no return."

Now based in Miami, Nazarychev performs in U.S. ice dancing shows. In a September Instagram post, he lamented the effect of the war on his chances of sporting success.

"It's very sad that the war coincided with my career," he said.

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