

'Disbelief' Opens a Treasure Trove of Russophone Anti-War Poetry to Readers

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Artyom Kamardin **SOTA**

Since Putin's invasion of Ukraine, a tsunami of protest poems has swept over many countries. Absurd, nightmarish, horrifyingly humorous, they bear testament and evoke empathy in readers and listeners. In Russia they are written, but almost never recited publicly. The danger is too great.

People get fined and arrested for antiwar statements in cafés or on the metro, often denounced by friends and neighbors. A young poet, Artyom Kamardin, was tortured and jailed for anti-mobilization poems he read at a street poetry reading in Moscow in September 2022. He and two other poets, Yegor Shtovba and Alexander Daineko, are still behind bars in pretrial detention.

But on the other side of the world another poet, Julia Nemirovskaya, born in Moscow and living in the U.S. for many years, did something visionary. After Putin started the war with Ukraine, she started a Google Doc archives called Kopilka ("a piggybank" in Russian) that would be a safe place to gather and protect Russophone protest poems from around the world.

It is the largest verse project so far, with more than a thousand poems by more than three hundred authors – including Ukrainians, like Boris Khersonsky from Odesa and Alexander Kabanov from Kyiv. And it is still growing. Members of Kopilka compare their poetry with solo picketers in Russia's current voiceless civil society.

This piggybank is a treasure trove for translators and publishers. Julia Nemeriovsky chose 100 anti-war poems and collected them in a bilingual anthology called "Disbelief," published by Smokestack books. The poems were all written originally in Russian, not only by Russian poets in Russia or abroad, but also by Russophone Ukrainian poets, whose choice to write in Russian was also a form of protest. As one bilingual poet said, "I refuse to abandon the language to the Putinites!"

U.K. publisher Andy Croft told *The Moscow Times*, "I think of 'Disbelief' as a book about all stupid and illegal wars of this century – most of which have involved the U.K. – the civilian deaths, the refugees, the dishonest justifications, the media manipulations, the silences, the white noise, and the absurd propaganda."

"Many of the poets in 'Disbelief,' he continued, "have been able to tap into the surreal and nightmarish barbarism of trying to resolve political problems in the twenty-first century with violence in ways that are difficult for British poets. They have been notably quiet about this war."

Reading "Disbelief," poem after poem or by choosing a poem at random, is a deeply cathartic experience. The poets find words for the unspeakable, mend holes in a soul resisting evil, and help readers connect to others in a leap of empathy. One feels alive again.

Julia Nemirovskaya compares "Disbelief" to the chorus in the Greek tragedy. Voices speak out one by one – the brainwashed, propagandists, victims, soldiers, refugees, war criminals, defenders, bystanders, hostages, parents, children, volunteers... Some lines are impossible to forget. "The blame is on me, ...For failing to curb the mad colonels, to call them off" (Herman Lukomnikov, translated by Dmitri Manin). "Beddy-bye, my child, lie still!/Russian tales come out to kill" (Olga Andreeva, translated by Anna Krushelnitskaya). "One must keep in mind that the government of hell calls the work of angels an extremist act" (Ivan Davydov, translated by Anna Krushelnitskaya). "I'm your lie/you have nothing/but me...if you want/you are allowed/to call me truth" (Gali-Dana Singer, translated by Dmitri Manin). "Enter a louse./You wince, but what could happen, at any rate?" (Tatiana Voltskaya, translated by Andrei Burago). "We've clearly reached the time/when gentlemen you can cry for your mum/and no one will come" (Serge Shestakov, translated by Richard Coombes).

The anthology has already received much praise for the high quality of translations. Nemirovskaya thanks the five gifted translators working on the book. Maria Bloshteyn (Canada), Andrei Burago, Anna Krushelnitskaya, Dmitri Manin (U.S.) and Richard Coombs (U.K.) each chose poems they liked most from Kopilka and then discussed and edited translations collectively. "We had only two criteria when choosing poems: the quality of the poem and the quality of the translation," Nemirovskaya told *The Moscow Times*.

In one case the poet and translator are one person: Anna Krushelnitskaya translated many poems, including one by Julia Nemirovskaya, and she published her own poem in 'Disbelief,' too.

Not all the poems in the anthology were written after the start of the recent war. These poems are dated — 2014, 2012, and so on. The earliest was written in 1988. Nemirovskaya says many poets became mute, unable to write a line after the start of the war. But their older poems turned out to be strikingly prophetic, so the team decided to include them.

Anna Krushelnitskaya, who has explored the phenomenon of propaganda in the Cold War, reflected on whether poetry can serve as an antidote to propaganda. “I would not dismiss this possibility entirely, but I would not overestimate it, either. Poetry only affects people who read poetry; propaganda affects anyone walking past it, albeit to varying degrees...All propaganda encourages people to get up and feel; certain poems do, too, but not all. Many poems are not quite as rousing; they ask their readers to sit down and think instead.”

Nemirovskaya in turn believes that, “poetry is like ancient magic, it conjures something. One voice is good, but a chorus of voices is better. Maybe the anthology is now the language that people are looking for to express the pain and absurdity of what is happening, the rescue language.”

Moscow Times asked three members of the ‘Disbelief’ team to choose the poems that spoke most strongly to them.

Julia Nemirovskaya, editor, chose this poem by Maria Remizova, translated by Dmitri Manin

Вот дом,
Который разрушил Джек.
А это те из жильцов, что остались,
Которые в темном подвале спасались
В доме,
Который разрушил Джек.

А это веселая птица-синица,
Которая больше не веселится.
В доме,
Который разрушил Джек.

Вот кот,
Который пугается взрывов и плачет,
И не понимает, что все это значит,
В доме,
Который разрушил Джек.

Вот пес без хвоста,
Без глаз, головы, живота и хребта.
Возможно, в раю он увидит Христа
В доме,
Который разрушил Джек.

А это корова безрогая,
Мычит и мычит, горемыка убогая.
И каплями кровь с молоком на дорогу

К дому,
Который разрушил Джек.

This is the house
That Jack wrecked.
And these are the tenants who went to hide
In the dark basement and so survived
In the house
that Jack wrecked.

This is the merry titmouse
That flies no longer about the house,
The house
that Jack wrecked.

This is the cat
That cowers and whimpers and doesn't get
What's going on with the bombs and all that
In the house
That Jack wrecked.

This is the tailless dog,
Toothless, gutless, beheaded, declawed.
Maybe up in heaven it will meet God
In the house
That Jack wrecked.

This is the cow with the crumpled horn,
Mooring, its udder tattered and torn,
Dripping blood and milk in the morn
On the road to the house
That Jack wrecked.

Andy Croft, publisher, chose this poem by Yulia Fridman, translated by Maria Bloshteyn

Когда мы освободили Украину от нацистов,
Финляндию от собакоголовых, Польшу от марсиан,
Земля зацвела кокаиновым цветом душистым
И каждый танкист был магическим воздухом пьян.

В Литве окопались улитки с планетной системы
Холодной и красной звезды ипсилон Андромеды:
Скрывались на листьях салата и прочих растений,
Пришлось разбомбить все в лепешку, ведь выхода нету,

Эстонию тоже снесли с политической карты,
Поскольку в ней подняли головы ихтиозавры,

Адепты кровавого культа богини Астарты,
Приплывшие к нам по орбите от альфа Центавры.

И в Латвии мы не оставили признаков жизни,
А что было делать, ведь Запад нам выкрутил руки:
Он там расплодил вредоносно микроорганизмы,
Согласно сигналам экспертов от криптонауки.

И вот все народы свободны, нам пишут из рая,
И звери, и птицы, и разные меньшие твари,
Москва простирается в мире от края до края,
От смерча до смерча песчаного в Новой Сахаре.

When we had liberated Ukraine from the Nazis,
Poland from Martians, Finland from dog-headed men,
the Earth sprouted fragrant cocaine-smelling blossoms,
and our tankmen got high on their magical scent.

Lithuania became a hotbed for galactic snails
from Epsilon of Andromeda, that cold crimson star;
they hid among salad greens and other plants,
we bombed it flat – no choice but go that far.

We were compelled to raze Estonia from the map,
since the ichthyosaurs took over step by step,
they arrived from Alfa Centaurus, on an orbital lap,
all of them devotees of Astarte's gory sect.

In Latvia too, we destroyed all signs of life,
we had no choice – the West forced our hand!
It propagated noxious microbes there,
as the crypto-science gurus let us understand.

Now all nations are free, they write us from Eden,
and all sundry creatures, both furred and feathered –
and Moscow extends from horizon to distant horizon,
from sandstorm to sandstorm in the new global desert.

Richard Coombes, translator, chose this poem by Tatiana Voltskaya, translated by Dmitri Manin, saying:

“When it comes to the war itself, the suffering endured by Ukrainians at the hands of Russians is the top priority for my emotions. Within the "Disbelief" collection, it is this Russian poem that I want to highlight, for the magical translation by Dmitri Manin of the original's beautifully-charged understatement. It is a poem by a Russian mother about the Russian army going to war taking mobile crematoria with them. Dmitri's translation is a model of choosing exactly the right words in the right order and with the right rhythms and

sounds. It creates the same impression on me in English as the original does in Russian, and I find it impossible to read it without weeping.”

Гробов не будет. Наших детей сожгут
В походной печке, а дым развеют
Над украинским полем, и чёрный жгут
Сольётся с дымом пожара – вон там, левее.

Вместо тела вежливый капитан,
Позвонив в квартиру, доставит пепел
В аккуратном пакете и молча положит там,
Под фотографией, где заливчатский дембель

Перерос в контракт. Расстегнув портфель,
Вынет бумагу и, дёрнув шей,
Будто что-то мешает, усядется, как на мель,
На табурет: подпишите неразглашение.

Она подпишет. И он поспешит назад
Мимо телека с Басковым недопетым
И двухъярусной койкой, где младший брат,
Девятиклассник, с него не спускает взгляд,
Свесившись – будто ждет своего пакета.

There will be no coffins. Our children will burn to ashes
In a mobile oven, and the smoke will swirl and waft
Over the fields of Ukraine where the black plume meshes
With the smoke of wildfire – up there, on the left.

Instead of the body, the doorbell will ring, a polite
Army captain will bring the ashes in a neat package
And place it silently on the bookshelf, right
By the photo of a brave soldier with demob patches,

Turned a contractnik. The captain will open his briefcase,
With a jerk of his head, as if something bothered
Him, he'll fish out a paper, establish a base
On the stool, hold it out: sign here for non-disclosure.

She'll sign. He'll pick up his briefcase and hustle on
Past the TV with a crooning pop singer clown
And a bunk bed where on top the younger son,
A ninth-grade student leans over and stares down
At him as intensely as if waiting for a box of his own.

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