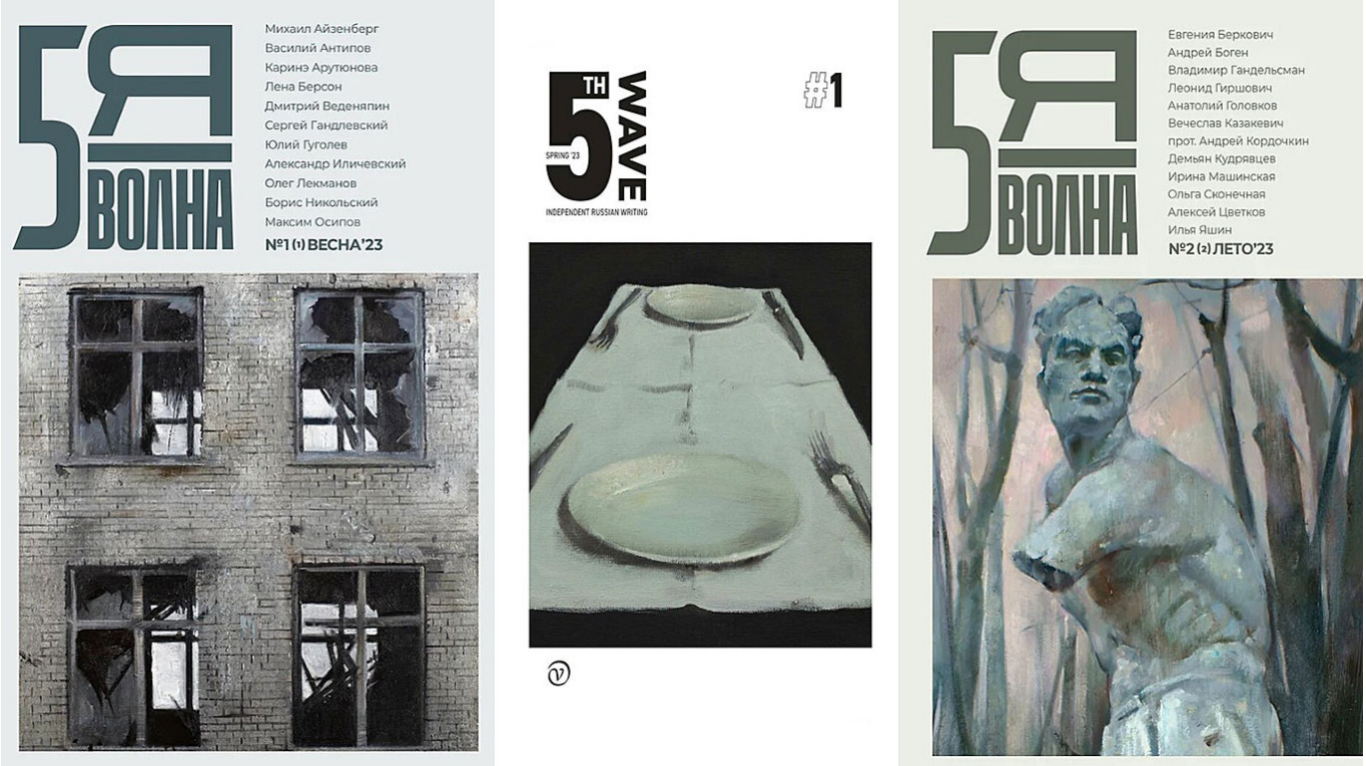
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Maxim Osipov's Fifth Wave of Independent Russian Writing

By Cameron Manley

October 15, 2023



In March 2022, Russian writer and cardiologist, Maxim Osipov, left his home country, flying first to Armenia before settling in Germany. He now resides with his wife in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Osipov is the well-known author of "Rock, Paper, Scissors" (2019), which was praised by the Belarussian Nobel-prize laureate Svetlana Alexievich as being "an accurate, unforgiving diagnosis of Russian life." In October of last year, he published his second collection of essays and short stories, "Kilometer-101."

Last year he inaugurated a new journal of independent Russian writing entitled The Fifth Wave and teaches Russian literature at Leiden University. Osipov sat down with The Moscow Times to discuss his life as an emigré, his new journal, and his broader fears and hopes for Russia's future.

MT: In May last year you wrote an essay for The Atlantic detailing your feelings and

impressions after leaving Russia. You described your three main emotions as "coldness, shame and relief." How have those feelings changed over the past year?

MO: I'm still incredibly relieved, and I feel very lucky to have had the means to get out. Although when you live in a free country — an almost utopian place compared to where I was before — for over year and a half, you become accustomed to the everyday freedoms and you begin to forget your gratitude. The relief becomes less strong.

But my family are all here. My youngest grandchild was born in Germany, but my elder two were four and two when we left, and of course I am very happy that they will be able to live in a healthier environment — they have a future which is free. Although, of course, they won't have Pushkin or Gogol at school, but I hope they will still grow up to be cultured people...

But the shame will never go away. The longer this war lasts the more shame I will feel. Even when it ends, it won't fade, it will likely last for the rest of my life.

There was a feeling when I left Russia that something had happened that should never have happened. I mean like the Holocaust should never have happened, or the Armenian or Rwandan genocides. This was one of those unspeakable things. And I think we're all still coming to terms with that.

I think the coldness has subsided a little. When I left Russia I only had one suitcase and now I have a huge collection of books, pictures and a clock that I have lived with my whole life. A few friends helped me to get these things out of Russia, and so now this feels a little more homely.

MT: How has the war affected your writing?

MO: It has totally prevented me from writing. I have written almost nothing since the war broke out. Not that I was a particularly prolific writer before then.

But it's not just the war. I used to get inspiration from the outside, from conversations with patients and neighbours and people around me. But now I'm living in a foreign country, and I struggle to do the same. I don't know Dutch, and although I do know English, noticing small details is more difficult when you don't know the local language. My observations are less keen and I trust them less.

I think I will try and write about immigration. Well, I suppose I'll write, and have always written, about human beings, but I need understanding to do that. I envy writers like Kafka who didn't need to see things first hand...In his novel *Amerika*, he depicts a bridge between New York and Boston, despite never having visited it. For me I need to know where the bridge starts and where it ends.

MT: This year you began publishing a new Russian-language journal, The Fifth Wave (Пятая волна), could you tell us a bit about how the idea for the journal came about?

MO: Immigrants have a tendency to say yes to everything. And I am no exception. So at my first meeting in Amsterdam with my Dutch publishers (Van Oorschot, who have had a history of supporting Russian dissidents in the past) they said: "How about we do a Russian magazine?" and I said yes immediately. I was a publisher in my previous life and I enjoy designing and think I have a bit of a knack for it. I'm designing the journal myself.

Van Oorschot are doing the English version of the journal twice a year and I am doing the Russian quarterly.

MT: The journal's name refers to the fifth wave of Russian immigration that has taken place in the last 100 years. Is immigration at the heart of the journal?

No, it is not really an immigrant journal. In fact, my thought process has changed since we began producing the journal. Since then, my attitude to the Russian language has changed because I realized that the Russian language doesn't belong to the Russia state or the country. It doesn't even belong exclusively to the Russian people. It belongs to anyone who thinks, writes, speaks, dreams, reads in Russian.

The third issue of the journal has just been released. We have three authors from Ukraine: one from Kyiv, one from Odessa, and third from Kropivnitskiy. I am very grateful to them for their artistic talents and for the fact that they agreed, in spite of the war, to participate in a Russian-language magazine. Many Ukrainians these days, and very understandably so, avoid the Russian language. But the writers are Russian-speaking Ukrainians and it's right that they can express themselves how they wish. We also have three authors from Russia, one from Portugal, two from Germany, one from Paris and another from New York. The geography is immense.

This is testament to the cohesion in the international Russian-speaking community around confronting the war in Ukraine. We are united by the dream of having Russia free and peaceful.

MT: You wrote in your editorial remarks to the first issue of the journal that you and your co-writers felt a "sense of personal involvement in and responsibility for what is happening" in Russia at the moment. What responsibility do you feel for the war, from a personal perspective?

MO: I think about the mistakes I made. Even though I'm not a politician, my attitude to Russia and Russian history has certainly changed after this war began. What's going on affects not only the present but the past as well, and so I often think about missed opportunities, lost relationships... people, mainly.

Let me give you an example. In "The Cry of the Domestic Fowl" I write: "My father and I [...] are in the countryside, and I am desperate for a drink. My father knocks at a stranger's house, asks for some water. The woman says there is none, but she brings us some cold milk. We drink and we drink a lot. Probably three pints. My father offers her some money, but she just shrugs and asks, straight-faced: 'Are you out of your mind, dear?'"

I really liked this woman's attitude, this brusque selflessness. But now, when I think about this woman, she is most likely watching TV, she probably supports the war, is probably even encouraging her son or grandson to go and fight. It really makes the past feel rotten.

And so I am forced to reassess my view of Russian history. Like some of us used to celebrate and sing songs on Victory Day. We would never do that now. Singing those songs now would be wrong.

MT: How would you assess the current state of Russian literature under Putin?

MO: Stalin, who was of course a terrible dictator, perhaps the most terrible dictator who ever lived, was still interested in developing "great style." But Putin is a totally uncultured person, he's not interested in any kind of arts. He doesn't care about cultivating a flourishing Russian culture.

For example, the letter signed by many writers and artists on the sixth day of the war, supporting Putin's decision to invade Ukraine, is a farce. Nobody recognises any of these names — I don't even know who they are. They are not great literary or artistic figures.

There are, however, a number of great poets appearing at the moment. Anti-war poetry I think can be very productive. Because poetry is emotive. And at the moment we want to cry all the time and crying can be turned into something lyrical. Prose, I think, should be written after the war. Prose requires reflection, we need to know how this war will end.

If I had one word for the role of the writer in the present context it is humility. The artist, the writer is not important at the moment. Because it is not us on whom the destiny of this war and Europe depends, but on the Ukrainian people, the Ukrainian army, on support from the west: these are the key factors, not literature.

MT: Your literature is often very critical of the state, do you ever fear the consequences of speaking out?

MO: I don't think about fear. I didn't leave Russia to be silent. You cannot fear everything. You have to choose your fears. For me, Putin is not one of them.

MT: In "My Native Land" (2007) you write that "In a single decade Russia changes a lot, but in two centuries – not at all." Do you look at Russia's future with optimism or pessimism?

MO: I have never been as pessimistic about the future as I am now. Of course, every war ends with peace, but will I see it? What will Russia be like after the war? I don't see hope in this regard.

There are nice people in Russia, of course. But what is nice? Nice does not represent any force. That's the problem. In Poland in the 1980s, there was the trade union "Solidarity" the anti-authoritarian, anti-communist social movement. They represented force, future for Poland. But in Russia at the moment, I don't see anything of the sort.

I think Putin is the main problem. This is not to say that the next leader will be a nice person, of course not. But they at least won't have the same semi-divine mysticism about them.

Vasily Antipov, a Russian composer and musician, was arrested on a drug charge in Belarus. This is an excerpt from "Incarcerated: An Account of a Belarusian Prison and Mental Hospital," translated from Russian by Reuben Woolley

The beginning of the special military operation

It was announced on the radio on the 24th of February. Although, true, the Union Resolve exercises [of Russian and Belarusian troops - MT] had happened in advance. From the look of

those exercises, we all suspected that something serious was in the works. Plus, some recent arrivals told us that a huge amount of military equipment was arriving in Belarus.

So when they announced the special military operation, no one was particularly surprised. The cell was divided into those who didn't care, those who relished the news and were clearly in favour of Putin, and those who were outraged — they were in the minority. They consisted of Aliaksandr Velesnitski, Dmytro Zhunusov (the Ukrainian from the AFU) and myself.

One of the prisoners, Sergey Lukashyk, started questioning everyone in detail about their stance; during that period he was summoned for interrogations more often than usual. When Lukashik conducted his formal discussions, he listened to his interlocutors with a kind of faux-serious attention, but struggled to keep his own personal convictions regarding the conflict from bubbling to the surface. For example, one evening after just such a conversation with Dmytro Zhunusov, he turned to him and said: 'So you reckon that Zelensky of yours won't pussy out of fighting Putin? Hee-hee-hee!'.

He made the worst impression of any of the prisoners. Both for his sycophancy around the servants and for being phenomenally obnoxious to his fellow inmates. But it was tricky to catch him out on 'cell rules': he was constantly causing intrigue, turning others against each other. He was always on the lookout for stool pigeons, pointing the finger first here, then there, even though he himself was the cell's main snitch. Generally speaking, in prison anyone who complains to the staff about a cellmate in the middle of any conflict is a snitch. And Lukashik would snitch on anyone, even people he had no conflict with at all, just for a love of the art. I once tried my best to put his back against the wall by providing him with some evidence that he was informing on his cellmates, and got this as a response: 'You lot aren't human beings to me at all, you're animals. You're criminals, biowaste. And you – you're a fucking junkie. I'm not like you.'

Lukashik's diligence did not go unnoticed: first he got transferred to a nicer cell (we all breathed a sigh of relief), then he got released altogether.

For the first few days of the special military operation the radio reported cheerfully, in one way or another, on the successes of the Russian army. And then suddenly — silence. The news went straight back to talking about how you could now get discount beds at Pinskdrev. Or very local news: what was going on in which micro-district. That's when we knew there'd been a breakdown at the front.

After the start of the special operation, the prison food sharply deteriorated. Prices in the prison shop crept upwards, but the quality of food coming out of the hatch went down. Then they started talking about sanctions on the radio. We learned what was really going on in the world by sifting particles of truth from the stream of lies.

Many prisoners asked their relatives to write and tell them what was happening, but postal delivery suddenly became very patchy.

Prison paperwork

In prison, if there's anything you want to get, you have to fill out a slip. Even getting your bread sliced every morning requires an application: 'To the administrative office of Pre-Trial

Detention Centre 7, from so-and-so, an application: please provide me with a knife and a board to cut bread. ID number, signature'. And repeat, every day. The same goes for personal belongings: please give me my electric razor, toothbrush, soap, and so on. The amount of paperwork a prisoner has to fill out while serving time is indescribable. It should be noted that all these scribblings become dejecting, because when a person is forced to do all of this they come to understand, on a subconscious level, that they're being drawn into a meaningless game; and no matter how badly you'd like not to play, the game is already afoot. Prison paperwork is the embodiment of Kafka, his novel *The Castle*.

The Island of Doctor Moreau and the 'Sayers of the Law'

In the prison library I found Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. I once read that Wells' contemporaries were offended by the 'abominable caricature of humanity' and demanded that the book be banned and the author punished. When I sat down to read it, I was astounded: I finally got what H.G. Wells was writing about.

Everything he described was happening around me, right down to the notorious Sayer of the Law: the role of Sayer in our prison was performed by the servants, who would read out, once or twice a week, over the local radio, a list of things that the prisoners were forbidden from doing, followed each time by the penalty for violation: 'Government representatives will subject those who break these rules to physical measures, up to the use of nonlethal weapons…'. All this is recited to death with a kind of unhealthy pathos in Levitanian voices and intonations, and they call it the RIR (Rules for Internal Regulation). It's impossible to listen to them read the rules all day, because after several hours it all just starts to sound like 'blah-blah, up to the use of nonlethal weapons, blah-blah, up to the use of nonlethal weapons'.

I read *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and shared my findings with my cellmates, even trying to read the most vivid and characteristic moments out loud. I realized very quickly that modern humans differ little from Wells' contemporaries.

In response to my reading, people began breathing heavily, sniffling, sweating, and after a while they broke out into a shout — that's how hard they found the realisation that man, in some of his aspects, is not far from wild animals. In prison one must never talk of such things as the origin of species, natural selection, evolution; the appearances of homo sapiens and homo erectus; what this planet had on it a million, or a million and a half years ago; paleontology, the genome. A human that has found itself in conditions of incarceration has a particular need to feel his communion with the divine, to feel he is a descendant of beautiful white Adam and Eve, reproduced from oblivion by the gesture of a beautiful hand, in its image and likeness.

'You, descendant of the beautiful Adam and Eve, how do you reconcile the fact that you were created in His image and likeness with the fact that, while in a prison camp, you shoved your member into the rectum of your fellow man? Were you not disgusted to scrape from it the frozen faeces?'

'Well yeah, there's that I guess, but who's f*cking surprised? You live with the wolves, you start to howl.'

‘Wait, what does that have to do with wolves? That’s more common among apes, not wolf packs.’

‘Agh, shut the f*ck up!’

I tried reading excerpts from *The Island of Dr. Moreau* to the servants, and even to the detention centre’s most important ‘Citizen Warden’ [the way prisoners must address the prison warden – MT].

‘Any questions?’

‘None!’

‘Wait, Citizen Warden, I have a question for you: have you read this book?’

‘???’

‘Please, read it, it’s about prison, about all of us.’

‘Tee-hee-hee,’ laughed the cell.

‘Heeeeh…’ smiled the warden’s entourage, while the warden himself, screwing his face up contemptuously, walked silently out of the cell, with a parting hand gesture to imply: ‘What a fool, we’ve never seen anything like that’.

But at that moment, for some reason, I believed that the authorities would read the book and it would penetrate them deeply enough that they would finally wake up from the viscous sleep that the prison system had put them in, and grow more conscious and humane. Under the influence of *The Island*…, I wrote the head of the Detention Centre a letter: ‘Dear Warden of the PTDC, we are here with you, in a detention centre that houses those whose guilt has not yet been proven, as well as those whose guilt will one day no longer be considered guilt. But despite this, every person held here is already subject to the system’s oppression as if they were already guilty, their health squeezed out of them a drop at a time. The prison doctor, in theory, is required to help suspects stave off the harsh consequences of imprisonment.’ This was followed by several ruminations on how good it would be if the doctor would actually take care of her prisoners’ health, in order that they could then return to their loved ones healthy and intact, rather than as deeply maimed invalids.

Summing up this rumination was a carefully measured line: ‘And when the prison doctor dances with a half-crazed grin atop the stone press of the prison system, intoxicated by the sound of crunching bone beneath them, the ghost of Dr. Mengele looms large behind.’

This was followed by a description of Miss Mengele’s finest works [the prison doctor – MT]. The letter ended with the sentence: ‘I am writing this letter with the faint hope that the thoughts I have expressed will help the presiding warden to reconsider this woman’s current post, but that hope is small, because acknowledging one’s mistakes and changing for the better requires courage, honour and dignity, all of which are incompatible with the attitude to other human beings that have been shown. Hoping for such a thing is almost akin to hoping for a miracle. Of course, I am unable to change the current arrangement, unable to make any impact, but I have at least tried to do so, the thought of which may comfort me at some point

in the future.'

The miracle did not occur. I handed this letter to the warden personally during one of his rounds.

'Deaaaa-a-a-r? Who on f*cking earth do you think you're calling Dear? Have you gone f*cking loopy, got f*cking mixed up? What the f*ck do you take me for, your f*cking brother-in-law? I'm your f*cking – and you best f*cking remember this – f*cking CIVILIAN, CIVILIAN-F*CKING-WARDEN, understand?!'

And, as he left the cell, he turned to his entourage and blurted: 'Talk to the psychiatrists, they can have their fill of him'.

I felt my insides churn: I'd seen examples of people the psychiatrists had 'had their fill of'. One blue pill plus one black pill and a man spends all day sat in the corner, drooling on his collar, his visage dulled and thoughtless.

Thankfully the psychiatrists did not have their fill of me, because at just that point the paperwork from my new lawyer arrived, confirming my epilepsy and that I was legally entitled to a three-week psychiatric evaluation in a special institution. I started getting ready for my transportation.

Excerpted from The Fifth Wave of Russian Independent Writing #1, edited by Maxim Osipov and published in English by Uitgeverij Van Oorschot, Amsterdam. Used by permission. All rights reserved. For more information about the magazine in Russian and English and to purchase copies, see the site here.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/10/15/maxim-osipovs-fifth-wave-of-independent-russian-writing-a82738