The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

'No Country for Love': Yaroslav Trofimov's Novel of Survival and Identity

By Andrei Muchnik

February 16, 2025



Author Yaroslav Trofimov **Marcus Yam**

"No Country for Love," Yaroslav Trofimov's new book and his first work of fiction, is a family saga like no other. And it is, in part, non-fiction: In the preface, the author notes that although fictional, the novel is based on true stories of his family in Ukraine.

The novel follows a Ukrainian Jewish family through the turmoil of the 1930s-1950s in the Soviet Union. In less than two decades Debora, the protagonist, is transformed from naive student to wife of a high-ranking NKVD officer to murderer as Trofimov plots her life against the backdrop of historical signposts.

Trofimov, an award-winning journalist who was twice a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize for coverage of Ukraine and Afghanistan, is also an author of three books of nonfiction, including "Our Enemies Will Vanish," chronicling the first 12 months of Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine.

Trofimov writes that he first conceived of this novel in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea. In that period he was spending a lot of time explaining to his colleagues "the tragic and complex history" of his home country and "the reason why it yearned so much to finally get rid of the Soviet legacy."

Ukrainian identity is a central theme throughout the book, first emerging as Debora arrives in Kharkiv, which had just been designated the capital of Soviet Ukraine (1929–1934). At the time, the city was not only a cultural and economic hub but also a focal point of the Soviet policy of Ukrainization, which sought to promote the Ukrainian language and national identity.

Debora gets a glimpse of this vibrant intellectual scene through a literary party at Slovo, a residential building for writers designed in the shape of the letter "C." Through her eyes we also get to see other cultural landmarks such as Derzhprom, the first constructivist skyscraper in the USSR.

The plot quickly becomes focused on Debora's blossoming affair with Samuel, a young military pilot. But reality intervenes, and readers get a glimpse into the horrors of Holodomor, the famine that killed millions of Ukrainians, when Debora travels to the countryside to visit a friend.

She then joins her family in Kyiv, which has just become the capital of Ukraine once again. Samuel gets swept up in Stalin's Great Purge just as Debora gives birth to her firstborn. She stays in Kyiv until the city is attacked by the Germans and is evacuated to Stalingrad.

Antisemitism is another theme explored throughout the novel. Debora's father tried to raise his children as secular Jews, hoping for them to assimilate. He would say "We are not narrow-minded provincial Jews, we are educated Russian intellectuals... No more Pale of Settlement, no more antisemitism."

However, the future proved him wrong. Later in the novel, Debora's mother laments her husband's death: "Yes, your father raised you the way he did because he thought that if he stopped behaving like a Jew, he would no longer be considered a Jew. See how that worked out."

Debora first experiences widespread antisemitism among Russians after her evacuation to Stalingrad: "There weren't many Jews in Stalingrad, but its citizens, she found out quickly, were a lot less shy than the Kyivans about throwing a casual 'Yid' into their speech."

Debora's second husband, an NKVD officer, suggests she change her name to Darya to avoid complications. Her son, Pasha, distances himself from his heritage, even joining in the bullying of Jewish classmates. Confronted by his mother he responds: "I am not a Yid. I am a Soviet man."

Fast-paced and rich in historical detail, "No Country for Love" vividly portrays its era but is more reticent about its heroes' internal lives. Deborah's most consequential choices—marrying an NKVD officer, committing murder—are revealed primarily through dialogue. When Debora's mother asks about her decision to get married, she replies: "This is not a country for love. This is not the time for love. I will probably never love anyone again,

but I will marry Maslov if he asks."

Is this the author's belief that other people's internal lives will always remain something of a mystery? Perhaps. But thanks to Trofimov, readers will leave with a better understanding of the "tragic and complex history" of Ukraine that shaped those internal lives.

From Chapter 13

Pisky, February 1933

In their pointed hats bearing red stars, soldiers patrolled the Kharkiv train station, the bayonets on their rifles gleaming in the sun. They looked amused when Debora walked in with a suitcase in one hand and a pink stuffed dog with droopy ears in the other. The dog was for Taras, and she had spent an entire afternoon choosing the oversize toy in the city's Central Department Store. Her just-issued transfer papers for Kyiv were in her coat's inside pocket. Olena's village was more or less on the way, and Debora had arranged the railway tickets so that she could spend a night in Pisky. It had been a while since she'd last received a letter from her friend, and she was worried.

She sat down on the bench next to a table occupied by the station clerk. A train rolled by quickly, without stopping. It was made of rough cattle cars. Inside she could see people, far too many to fit comfortably. One man, without any inhibition, urinated through the side. Another, behind, emitted a mad laugh.

'Who are those people?' she asked.

'Kurkuls. Saboteurs. Hoarders,' the clerk answered without looking up. 'Going east. Every day these trains go east and mess up our schedules. Your train will be half an hour late – apologies, comrade.'

'That's fine, I can wait.'

Once on board, Debora settled by the window to watch the countryside. It was odd. In the past, peasant women would come to the tracks at every rural station, offering pickles, lard, boiled eggs and cheese pies for sale. But nobody approached the train this time. Every platform crawled with troops, and hardly anyone got on or off. The few villagers she saw had sunken, spent eyes. And there was a stench, an unfamiliar stench that she couldn't quite recognise.

She reached Pisky in the late afternoon. Though she had received no reply to her telegram, she still half expected Olena to be there to greet her.

The platform was empty, except for a dozen uninterested soldiers. Their job was to prevent people from leaving, not arriving. Debora left her suitcase at the station and, clutching the toy, walked into the snow-covered road outside. She scanned it for horse carts, looking for a villager who could give her a ride to Olena's home. She hoped she still remembered the way.

But there were no villagers or carts. The streets were deserted. Only the former church appeared inhabited, its chimney spewing out thin smoke. It should be warm inside, she figured as she headed to the building, trying not to slip on ice.

As she pushed open the front door, the reek of diarrhoea and rot punched her in the face. A short, bald man sat by the entrance, behind a scratched wooden desk. ‘Good morning, I’ve just arrived on the train from Kharkiv,’ Debora said by way of introduction.

‘From the inspection commission?’ the man asked. He stared at the pink dog, bewildered.

‘From the university,’ she replied confidently.

‘Ah.’ The man clicked his tongue. City women didn’t come often to Pisky. He had been told that important guests from Kharkiv would arrive this week. He didn’t quite know whether this was one of them, but decided to be helpful just in case.

‘What can I do for you, comrade?’

‘I’m here for the Tkach family.’

A shrill sound from the depths of the building eclipsed their conversation. Then there was banging and more wailing, this time in a different pitch.

‘What is that?’ Debora asked, her eyes wide.

‘That’s what you came for. Tkach.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Tkach?’

‘Yes . . .’

‘Come with me.’ The man got up. Debora followed him into what used to be the priest’s quarters behind the altar. A bored soldier sat on a stool. Behind him, she spotted four women chained to a bench. The youngest had her hair covered with a shawl. She seemed bloated, with round cheeks and a cracked lip. Her eyes were closed.

Debora gasped.

‘This one is Tkach.’ The man pointed.

Olena sensed Debora’s presence and opened her eyes. They were glazed over, the eyes of a different person. Her mouth slowly widened in a grin, the same slightly crooked teeth, but now unfamiliar and frightening. She sized up Debora, examined the toy dog, and then cackled in a long, hoarse bout of laughter.

‘You, you!’ she bawled. ‘You’ve come to me after all. You did. With a gift, a real big-city gift! From the Central Department Store?’

She tried to get up and come closer, to offer a hug, but the soldier sprang to his feet and hit her in the stomach with his rifle butt. ‘Get back, you murderous cow.’ He spat on the ground.

Olena stumbled, fell and curled up in pain, whimpering. The other women broke out in loud, satisfied laughter. ‘And who is this tasty bird?’ one of them shouted, staring at Debora.

Another yanked Olena's chain.

'Why are you beating her?' was the only thing Debora could say to the guard. The words came out so softly it was as if she hadn't said them at all.

'Who is she?' the soldier asked the bald attendant, glaring at Debora. 'She's not supposed to be here. Get her out, now.'

'She said she is from the committee sent by Kharkiv,' the attendant replied.

'I *am* from Kharkiv,' she insisted.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Olena bounced up with unexpected energy and spat into the soldier's face. He hit her again, harder, and she fell down once more. 'You can keep hitting me, I don't care,' she muttered. 'I am no longer a person. I am unbreakable. I don't feel pain. Nobody can hurt me.'

The attendant squeezed Debora's elbow. 'We'd better go back, comrade,' he whispered. 'We don't want any trouble.'

Debora followed him obediently back to the entrance.

'What is this?' she asked, the toy still in her hands, the only hint of colour in the dark church. 'What is happening?'

'You mean Tkach? You don't know? She made soup. Soup. From her own son,' the man said.

Debora didn't understand. 'What soup?'

'Soup. First she hacked her mother to pieces to feed herself and her son. There wasn't much flesh left to eat by then. Only the organs remained juicy – the heart, the liver. Then, when the mother ran out, she smothered her child and made soup out of him. Taras, that was his name. Nice little boy.'

Debora leaned against the wall.

'Fourth such case in recent weeks. Nobody lets their kids outside any more. I certainly don't,' the man continued. Unlike ordinary villagers, he could count on official rations because of his job. They were meagre but – if supplemented by snails and bony fish from the pond – would be sufficient to get him through the winter. 'Funny thing, now that they've been arrested and are awaiting their trains to the prison, they will actually be fed. They'll get more bread than the rest of them. Where's justice?'

'How long ago did this happen?'

'Oh, a week or so. They're holding them here until the commission arrives,' the man went on. He paused. 'You're not from the commission, are you?'

'Not really,' Debora admitted.

'You'd better not stay. Get the first train out,' he said, suddenly alarmed. 'Yes, better not

linger here much longer. Problems for both of us.' His eyes narrowed with fear as he thought about being stripped of his rations.

Excerpted from "No Country For Love," written by Yaroslav Trofimov and published in Great Britain and the US by Abacus. Copyright © Yaroslav Trofimov 2024. Used by permission. All rights reserved. For more information about Yaroslav Trofimov and his book, see the author's site here.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/02/16/no-country-for-love-yaroslav-trofimovs-novel-of-survival-and-identity-a88031