



RUSSIA'S GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

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Of all the countries Adolf Hitler invaded, none was able to muster a sustained and successful military counterattack, except one – Russia. When the Nazis launched Operation Barbarossa on June 22, 1941, it was a massive three-pronged invasion from the North (to capture Leningrad), from the South (to take the Ukraine), and through the center (to seize Moscow).



The Germans and their allies came in great force – with 3.75 million troops, along with 4,000 tanks, and 750,000 horses (we must bear in mind that the German military was only partially mechanized in 1941). It is also well known that the Russians were not ready, to say the least, largely because Hitler was the only man Stalin truly trusted and could not bring himself to believe that the Nazi leader had ordered the attack. Stalin kept insisting that the onslaught was the action of rogue German generals, and Hitler would put a stop to it all, when he found out what was being done to his friend, Stalin. In fact, the reality of Hitler's betrayal hit Stalin very hard, and he disappeared to his dacha, in a rare fit of uncertainty, leaving the country leaderless during a crucial time.

The Germans likewise squandered any advantages they might have had because of their ideology, for the invasion was at first seen by some (especially in the Ukraine) as a liberation from Stalinism. But when the reality of the true purpose of the invasion began very quickly to be implemented – the clearing out of the land of all its inhabitants, for eventual settlement by Germans – resolve toughened and military resistance began in earnest.

Hitler had come not simply to take control and include Russia in his “empire” – rather, he had come to clear the land of its native inhabitants so that he might settle it with Germans. Faced with the prospect of annihilation in their own country, how could the Russians not know the war foisted upon them as anything other than “patriotic?” Hence, the Russian term for the Second World War (a rather banal designation) is the Great Patriotic War. It was a fight to the death for the Russian homeland – for the Rodina, that emotion-laden term, which means so much more than “motherland” or “fatherland,” for it means all that binds one to family and individual purpose.

Despite early successes, by December 1941, the Germans knew they had begun what they had never wanted – a war on two fronts. The next four years were grim and bloody on the Eastern Front, with unimaginable casualty rates on both sides.

The total war dead for Russia is estimated to be between 26 to 42 million, both civilians and military. For the Germans, losses on the Eastern Front are estimated to be about 2.7 million. The immense Russian sacrifice finally led to victory, when the Red Army took Berlin on May 2, 1945 (Hitler had committed suicide a few days earlier, on April 30th).

What was the nature of the Russian resolve? What inner strength did the Russians living and fighting through those fateful years draw upon? In the grand sweep of history, the sacrifice, the courage, the suffering of individuals is often little remembered. The millions slaughtered were ordinary human beings forced into the maw of a war, from which there was no escape.

These questions of the resolve and strength of the Russians to drive back the Nazi invaders is superbly explored and elaborated by Maria Bloshteyn in her latest book, [*Russia is Burning. Poems of the Great Patriotic War*](#), which is an anthology of Russian poetry from 1939 to 1945. Bloshteyn is a talented and gifted scholar and translator, whose work has [appeared in the pages](#) of the *Postil*, and who has previously published a collection of early [short stories of Chekhov](#), and the work of [Alexander Galich](#). Her translations have also appeared in [The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry](#). And [her study](#) of Dostoevsky is not only immensely erudite, but delightfully readable (qualities rarely found together in what often passes for scholarship).

This combination of readability and scholarship continues in *Russia is Burning*. The anthology is a dual-text, Russian and facing-page translations, with two essays, at the beginning and end, both of which contextualize the role and purpose of poetry within the broader extent of the Great Patriotic War. The selections are placed into four categories: "Seven Poets Killed," that is, poems of those killed in the war; "Voice Heard," which include poems and trench-songs that were widely known and loved by the ordinary fighting man or woman (the Red Army had 800,000 women); "Muted Voice," which presents poems written by emigres, by prisoners in the Gulags, and verses that were never meant to be published, that is, written "for the desk-drawer;" and lastly, "The War Remembered," which traces the years after 1945, during which poetry took on the task of healing the Russian soul, by leading it out of its trauma and into the promise of peace.

All the poems in the anthology have head-notes that give historical and thematic context to each poet and his/her poems. This is a very helpful and rather elegant way to handle the necessary job of informing the reader, while deftly avoiding the trap of information-density that is often found in such endeavors, and which break-up the reading-flow. These head-notes also serve to stress what should

be stressed – the poem itself. All-too-often, translators do not know how to wear their learning lightly and opt for intrusive footnotes, or worse, endnotes. This anthology overcomes this wonkiness by including all the pertinent information needed right in the head-notes, so that the reading experience is unobtrusive of academic paraphernalia.

Though the poems in the three sections are a wide assortment of style, sensibility and perspective, all of them nevertheless are united by a common theme – that of Russia as the Motherland, the Rodina, upon whose breast is cast all the suffering, the tragedy, the bloodshed. This means that individualized instances of courage, of sacrifice, of struggle, of disappointment, of helplessness, of loneliness, but also of hope for an end to all cruel things – all these are given meaning within the embrace of the Motherland.

These poems speak not to so much of soil and of the people, concerns that marked so much of earlier Russian literary expression, but of invoking that final reserve of resolve which might lead to overcoming the enemy. In the swirl of the Great Patriotic War, there is only Russia itself – bereft of everything. It is now the task of her sons and daughters to return what was always rightfully hers – peace, happiness, and fulfillment. But it is a giving back that can only come about one hand at a time, for a hand is both limited in action but limitless in the results of that action:

Under a hillock, in a field,
a stern young boy from Moscow fell
and quietly, his cap slid off
his bullet-riddled head.

...

Departing for another world.
not very far from that in which he grew,
he clutched his warm, native earth
in his already stiffening hand.

...

The highest criterion
by which we can possibly be judged
will be that handful of earth
clutched in that young grey palm.
(Yaroslav Smelyakov, "The Judge")

The "highest criterion" is not found in the death of young soldier, but in his clutched hand, which cannot be loosened – for he grips not agony, but the fruit of his sacrifice, and his burial therefore looks forward to resurrection which will be peace. Such is the holy wisdom that cruelty oft-times brings.

The Great Patriotic War became a grand shout of defiance by patriots, who knew just enough to never accept defeat, because a quality that inhabited each of them, their Russianness, could never be quiet because it had been betrayed:

We know what's at stake and how great the foe's power,
And what now is coming to pass.
Every clock shows the same time – it's courage hour!
And our courage will hold to the last.
The bullets can kill us, but cannot deter;
Though our houses fall, yet we will stand –
Through it all we will keep you alive, Russian word,
Mighty language of our Russian land.
Your sounds will remain pure and free on our tongues,
To be passed on unfettered through ages to come.
Forever!
(Anna Akhmatova, "Courage," 23 February 1942, Tashkent)

And it this wisdom which shall free Russia – a wisdom that can never come cheaply, as Olga Berggolts pointed out in 1941:

Just as you are now: emaciated, dauntless,
in a hastily tied kerchief,
holding a purse as you go out
under the bombardment.

Daria Vlashevna, the whole land
will be renewed by your strength.
The name of this strength of yours is "Russia."
Like Russia, stand and take heart!
("Conversation with a Neighbour")

This wisdom Elena Shirman, who died early in the conflict, in 1942, also knew: "...A boom - /and shards of broken streets come tumbling./... Someone will raise me from the pavement and kindly say,/ "You must have stumbled." Such is the Rodina, the Motherland, which the community, and the family.

A helping hand, kindness, while a world shatters is the embodiment of what an earlier poet, in an earlier world conflict, called, "the pity of war," because the 20th-century invented warfare that was scientific and industrialized, which therefore concerned itself with precision barrages, shock-and-awe, genocide, carpet-bombing, scorched earth, total war, and the headlong rush of the displaced, running away from death and often straight into death. The older message is now commonplace, and hardly ever brings comment – kill to build a better world:

All the world is going to wrack and ruin.
What, you've lost your nerve? Oh don't be shy!
Come and crush it all in one fell stroke,
Pulverize, make stardust in the sky!

Poison it with mustard gas or, better,
Bomb the whole damn thing to smithereens.
Do away at once with all this art and
Anguish of our planet – by all means!
(Georgy Ivanov, "All the World is Going to Wrack and Ruin")

It is also important to bear in mind that poetry no longer had a purpose or function among soldiers of other Allied nations by the time the Second World War came around. Certainly, there were soldier-poets (John Gillespie Magee, John Jarman, Keith Douglas, Alun Lewis, John Ciardi, Henry Lee, Drummond Allison), but in the English-speaking world, whatever energy poetry once possessed now yielded to the urgent immediacy of film and photography. World War Two is known for its images; not its verse – and so unlike the First World War, where the entire experience of the trenches is still today seen through the poet's eye; for who can imagine that earlier war without evoking the lines of John McCrae, Wilfrid Owen, Julian Grenfell, Siegfried Sassoon, and Isaac Rosenberg? Within a generation, sensibilities had changed so much.

For Russians, however, poetry and song retained what the English-speaking world had lost - words spun into meter and rhyme and often carried along with music bore meaning deeper into the soul than

any image possibly could. The Nazi invasion was devastating, but not because it was murderous (for the Russian people had already endured Stalin's purges) – for it denied the surety of community. Though Stalin killed very effectively, there yet remained for people the strength of community, a bond that can sustain no matter how bleak the reality beyond. But when a community is shattered, there is only flotsam of individual lives, seeking nothing more than survival.

It is this ruination that Arseny Tarkovsky understood only too well in 1942:

Say a German gunner will get me in the back,
or a piece of shrapnel will take out both my legs,

or a teenaged SS trooper will shoot me in the gut –
anyway, I'm done for, there is no way out.

I won't go down to glory – I'll be unshod, unknown,
Looking through my frozen eyes at the bloodied snow.

Thus, when the Nazis smashed their way nearly to Moscow, they came stirring a witches' cauldron of cruelty and annihilation. Despite outward differences, both Hitler and Stalin were driven by ideology. At first their ideology coalesced (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), but in 1941 it fell apart with Operation Barbarossa. In the millstones of Nazism and Stalinism, what could the Russian people use to rally the will to survive, live, and then overcome? Poetry alone was the answer, for it provided purpose, and grim determination.

But in the meantime, there was only the business of endless brutality, so chillingly captured by Nikolai Panchenko in "The Girl Worked in our Unit as a Barber," written years later in 1961, a memory seared into the minds of those who were there and saw a young woman raped to death by men of a unit that had sided with the Germans against the Communists. It is a brutal poem that says so much, with just a few words: "They gagged her with their fetid footcloths... Our unit used to call her 'babyface.' And then comes the revenge of finding the rapists and methodically killing them: "...we burst into that village in tight fistfuls.... Explosions, howls, shots.... My bayonet was bent,/ my bullets lost./ We got in the hollow of the banya,/ each of us fought to kill as many as we could./ With these white teeth/ I bit through Adam's apples.... The girl dozed off under a greatcoat.... As if she could see anything at all.... The HQ sent

us medals, one and all... We dug them down into a hillock/ right beside her."

Stalin understood the problem of morale well, and very quickly set up an entire "industry" of poetry, which could be fed to the people to give them the will and strength to fight and survive. Bloshteyn, in her excellent end essay, therefore observes: "War poems were published both in the civilian press...and the military press... by 1944 there were about 800 military newspapers with an output of three million issues in all... there were poems in the informational leaflets... poems on propaganda posters... Poems were read on the radio... in concert halls... poems were put to music, performed by... popular singers... sung in dugouts and trenches... All these platforms created a demand for wartime poetry that was unprecedented and unparalleled not only in the Soviet Union but in any other country."

Even in the territory held by the Germans, there was poetry published in "270 [partisan newspapers] by 1944." It must be borne in mind that Soviet rule was not a grassroots demand – but rather imposed upon the Russian people after a long drawn-out, bloody Civil War, in which slaughter-exhaustion alone led to any sort of peace. Thus, as mentioned already, the Germans were initially welcomed by many who hoped that they had come to throw off the Communist yoke. This is the larger reason behind what is known as the "collaborators" – those who helped the Germans against the Communists. But such collaboration was a stillborn dream, as Boris Filippov came to understand too late, in 1945:

Town after town after town,
just houses of cards bunched together.
There's nothing I want out of life...
No one... Nowhere... Never...

I'm pushing my rickety cart,
on the road across German land,
clover stems nod as I pass,
mosquitoes keen a lament.

There is nothing I want out of life –
Never... Nowhere... No one...
Angry villages bunched up together.
Town after town after town...

And when the Germans were pushed back, all the way deep inside their own homeland; and when Berlin fell, Hitler killed himself and the war ended, what then? Shakespeare was right to speak of the dogs of war let loose, for the ravaging of humanity that must come with industrialized slaughter can bear little healing. Torn flesh can at best become a scar, which is nothing other than a constant reminder of the snapping jaws of savagery – perhaps because the many and various masters of war will always hold the leashes of their dogs lightly.

Once courage is shown, the sacrifice made, there can only remain the silence of incomprehensibility, for who can clearly say what wars achieve? There is certainly a just war, and the Second World War certainly qualifies as one. And yet, there remains the question of the price paid to achieve such justice – and whether those who survive, and the dwarfish generations that come after, no longer give thanks to the giants on whose shoulders they and their world stands:

I was there, where mines exploded,
sending howling shrapnel past.
I was fighting on the frontlines
honestly and to the last.

I'd be glad not to remember
but I live with what I saw:
crusty skin crawling with lice,
blood and corpses in the snow,

the med units where I rotted
with their disinfected grace,
the open, snarling jaws
of the hastily dug graves,

and the minutes before battle...
so that you can take my word –
I know well how much it cost us,
the salute we all just heard.

And it still feels much too early
to draw up the final bill,
when the world spreads out before us
like a wound that will not heal.
(Vladimir Bobrov, "Victory," 1945)

But the price that all war demands of peace is also revenge and settling of scores, just a little bit more bloodshed, before the dogs can be once again firmly leashed awhile, inside the foul warehouse of politics; revenge that casts humans into roles from which they cannot emerge unscathed, or even alive. Here is David Samoilov, about a captive "bandit" women (a "bandit" was one who sided with the Germans in the hope of throwing off the Communist yoke):

I led a bandit out, to shoot her.
She didn't beg, she didn't plead –
Just glared at me with pride and anger,
And bit her shawl in agony.
And then she said, "Now listen, fella,
You're gonna shoot me anyway.
Before you lay me down forever,'
Just let me look at my Ukraine.

...

Let the potato-eaters [Russians] flee,
Their bridles jangling loud, like coins!
Let Commies realize their ideals
The way they want to back at home...

It's them that came up with the kolkhoz
Where all the bums can eat for free.
For us Ukrainians, what's the difference –
Gestapo or NKVD?

...

I led a bandit out to shoot her.
She didn't beg, she didn't plead.
("The Bandit Woman," 1946)

There was a greater tragedy awaiting the Russians who heard these poems, sang these songs, and believed in what they said. The strength these words in meter had provided were not able to sustain them beyond the war. Victory is bittersweet; and Soviet society after 1945 had little use for those who had paid a grim toll with their maimed and disfigured bodies, as they "stirred the ash in [their] hearts," as Olga Berggolts observes in "I Spent all Day at the Meeting."

And Anna Barkova provides a monument of another sort, of whatever glory that may be garnered by a generation that once saved Russia from the Nazis:

The roads and the fields were aflood
with Russian blood, our bright blood,
with our own blood and that of our foes.
The tale must be told, but how, no one knows!

We were filthy, grimy, the worst off –
but we took Prague, Berlin and Warsaw.

...

We came back home with no eyes,
we came back home with no arms

...

and a strange foreign pain in our hearts.

...

- Spare some change for us, amputees,
we're all war cripples, as you can see,
for the sake of your departed parents,
take pity on us, conquering heroes!
("Victory Song," 1945, 1953, Kaluga)

This [anthology](#) is filled with much emotion, much insight, much anguish, but also much hope and charity. Maria Bloshteyn has carefully and meticulously built a fitting monument to the Great Patriotic War. It should be widely read. Her translations are smooth, highly crafted and therefore well-fitted to the grand topic that is Russia in the Second World War. Buy it and read right through. You will not be disappointed.

The image shows, "For the Motherland," a World War Two Poster from 1941.

