

DIALOGUES ON WAR

“Sometimes the best defence is a book”

MYRNA KOSTASH

Author photo by Markian Lozowchuk/Redux

Only a month into a war that would consume many thousands of lives and obliterate theatres, concert halls, museums, galleries, libraries and archives, I read of how Ukrainian writers had already been invited to participate in Russian–Ukrainian discussions about (the eventuality of) peace. And how the invitations were being turned down.

Victoria Amelina, poet and human rights activist, working as a war crimes researcher, in March 2022, only a month into the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, wrote an essay in *Eurozine*: “Cancel culture vs. execute culture.” She described the eventuality that she feared for Ukraine’s cultural community, that they faced the same fate as the Executed Renaissance of the 1930s in Soviet Ukraine. She meant the loss of 80 per cent of the Ukrainian intelligentsia to the Great Purges, to arrests and executions, to the Gulag. Earlier, a friend and scholar of Ukrainian literature had written to me that it had been “the losing of Ukraine’s mind.”

A year later, in February 2023, Amelina is quoted in a *New Yorker* essay, “How Do Ukrainians Think About Russians Now?”, about incessant calls from writers and scholars outside the war zone for Ukrainians to “reconcile” with Russian writers. After all, Russian literature is “world literature” and its writers “world class.” As a Canadian writer, I recognized the trope: Canadian literature is an outpost of the world literatures of England and the United States. And when Ukrainian citizens began pulling down the ubiquitous statues in their squares and parks of the

canonized Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837) and were accused of enacting “cancel culture,” I felt another frisson of recognition.

“I’d rather postpone the discussion,” Amelina retorted, “until one side is not being bombed by the other.”

I listened to some of these calls for reconciliation on PEN Ukraine’s website, the videos of dialogues between Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian writers (all speaking in English, including one between Margaret Atwood and Ukrainian writer Nataalka Snyadanko). None of the interlocutors with the Ukrainians that I listened to was Russian; nevertheless, I heard in them, the non-Russians, the kind of “invitation” that had so aggrieved Amelina.

Recently, I listened again to a dialogue between the Ukrainian writer and translator, Ostap Slyvynsky, in conversation from Lviv (western Ukraine) with the Polish writer, Olga Tokarczuk, public intellectual and Nobel Laureate for Literature. They were speaking on the seventeenth day of the invasion, in early March 2022. Both spoke of their hope, and even expectation, that there would be an early end to the war, “much sooner than in three months,” Tokarczuk insisted. Yet here we were, on Day 887 [July 29, 2024], as I listened.

Both also spoke of the “inadequacy” of words in the situation of war, of how impossible it is to be “prepared” for war. But when Tokarczuk offered the metaphor of a dinner party, of people seated together presumably hospitably, when one guest suddenly turns to his neighbour (her word) and beats him up, I sensed a shift (between them and in me) in this dialogue of empathic

understanding. The idea of the nation is “symbolic,” Tokarczuk continued lyrically. “Human beings are real.” Before Ostap responds, I am myself fuming: *A symbolic nation* when real Ukrainians are fighting and dying for a real place called Ukraine? (Five months later, as a Canadian, I would be “invited” to consider my nation as a component state of the USA, and I’m fuming again.)

Now Slyvynsky speaks with increasing emphasis, even agitation, about the naiveté of some who claim to support Ukraine. “They express the hope that there can be negotiations with Russia, that we can make peace with Russia. They’ve never lived close to Russia, which understands only the language of power. ‘Peace’ in Russia’s terms is when they can dominate over the other.” (And, in a mute gesture of solidarity, each time that Ostap speaks of “Russia,” I substitute “America.”)

But Tokarczuk intervenes to speak of the “changed language of war” and how it is harmful to her as a writer; it’s too black and white, without nuance or “delicacy.... We writers should take care of our language.” Of course, she was speaking from a position of safety across the border from war and the Ukrainian language.

Slyvynsky: “So I’m suspicious of representatives of the Russian position who use the word ‘peace’ but do not speak of aggression or even war. They don’t say ‘we’re sorry’ or ‘we feel ashamed.’ ‘Peace’ is too weak, it’s too neutral. That is why I say that I hate the word ‘peace.’”

“Forgive us. Here is our X-ray.

Skeleton and skin. We carry nothing else at the moment.”

—Ostap Slyvynsky, “Between Hate & Love.” *In the Hour of War: Poetry From Ukraine*. Arrowsmith Press (May 2023).

Ostap had exclaimed: “It is stupid to be eager to die.” That was eons earlier, on Day 17 of the war.

Amelina now speaks to us from beyond the grave. She died July 2, 2023—murdered by a Russian missile that struck a popular restaurant in Kramatorsk, eastern Ukraine. She was 37 years old.

Her friend, the journalist Olga Tokariuk, wrote a remembrance. As with the many earlier generations of Ukrainian artists—black-listed and banned, executed or outright murdered, and, unlike Russian dissident writers, seldom exiled alive and well to end their days in Paris or New York—Victoria Amelina died with “so many books unwritten, stories untold, days unlived.” When she died, she had written 50,000 words of a nonfiction book, *War and Justice Diary: Looking at Women Looking at War*. Another friend, Ukrainian writer and PEN activist Andrey Kurkov (who in September 2023 would appear at Toronto’s International Festival of Authors at the PEN Canada/Graeme Gibson Talk, “Notes On an Invasion”) eulogized her: “Amelina now ... enters the history of Ukrainian literature—a tragic history filled with unfinished books.” (*Guardian* July 3, 2023)

Post Mortem: The work-in-progress was completed by a circle of colleagues and Amelina's widower, Oleksandr Amelin. *Looking at Women Looking at War: A War and Justice Diary*, foreword by Margaret Atwood, is published by St Martin's Publishing Group. February 2025.

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