

Three Pieces about war from a Russian perspective. Translated by Reuben Woolley.

Marina Tsvetaeva, 'To Germania'

These poems were written as Germany occupied Czechoslovakia, where the Moscow poet had spent some time writing on Czechoslovak government grants. The poem makes extensive use of the Russian word for 'Germany', which I have left in the original in order to save the rhythm and line weighting at what I felt to be important points in the poem. Original title: 'Германиу'

O most ruddy of all maidens,
Hiding in a green mountain range,
Germania!
Germania!
Germania!
For shame!

Empty maps are stowed away,
O, you ethereal soul!
Myths once clouded the traveller's way,
Now the tanks can roll.

Before the Czech peasantry —
Does your lowered gaze still gleam,
As you roll your tanks onward
Over the rye fields of their dreams?

Faced with the immeasurable sorrow
Of this *tiny* land
What do you think of yourself, Germans:
Sons of your German fatherland?

O mania! O mummified
Greatness!
You immolate,
Germania!
It is madness —
Madness —
You create!

With crushing embrace
You'll straighten out their strongest!
A toast to your health, Moravia!
Slovakia, *you mongrels!*

Retreat to the crystal caverns
Prepare — strike from afar
Bohemia!
Bohemia!
Bohemia!
*Nazdar!*¹

9-10 April, 1939

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O, eyes full of tears!
Cries of anger and love!
O, Czech fears!
O, Spanish blood!

O, dark climb,
Across the world your shade has poured!
It's time — it's time — it's time,
I return my ticket to the lord.

I refuse to be.
In this Bedlam of inhumanity
I refuse to live.
With the wolves in the square
I refuse to howl.
With the sharks roaming the plains
I refuse to swim —
Beneath — spun amongst the waves.

I need neither cavernous ears
Nor prophetic sight.
To the mad world you have made here
There is only one answer — denial.
15 March — 11 May 1939

*

You cannot die, my people!
God shall make you safe!
He gave you a heart of ruby,
Protected by a granite chest.

Blossom through this, my people, —
Hard, like a Roman table,
Warm, like Bohemian ruby,
Pure, like Czech crystal.

¹ Czech greeting

Paris, 21 May 1939

Yevgeny Yevtushenko, 'Do Russians want the war?'

This song, written in 1961 by Soviet poet Yevtushenko in response to a tour of Europe, on which he grew tired of people posing him the titular question, survived an attempt to ban it for 'pacifying our troops' by the Soviet Military and Naval Department. My translation focuses on the semantic meaning of the text, for the simple reason that if the reader wishes to get a feeling for the rhythm and emotive nature of the music, they can hear the song online. Original title: 'хотят ли русские война?'

Do the Russians want war?
Go and ask the silence
In the farmlands and the fields
And ask the birches and poplars.
You should ask the soldiers
That are laid under the birches,
And let their sons tell you
Whether the Russians want war.

Soldiers died in that war,
And not just for their country,
But so that people the world over
Could dream at night in peace
Under the whisper of leaves and banners
Sleep tight, New York, sleep tight, Paris.
And let your dreams tell you
Whether the Russians want war.

Yes, we are *able* to wage war,
But we don't want to, just so
Our soldiers can fall in battle
On their own sad earth.
Why don't you ask the mothers,
Why don't you ask my wife,
I think then you should understand
Whether the Russians want war.

1961

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChbmdTFiOjg>

Kirill Medvedev, 'history lies'

Medvedev is an important figure in the modern Russian left. A poet, activist and singer for the band 'Arkady Kots', Medvedev's most famous literary act was his public renunciation of all copyright to his works, published (like the rest of his writing) on his plaintext website. The link for this poem is <http://kirillmedvedev.narod.ru/history.html> original title: 'история врѐм'

history lies,
it's as if the fascists awoke in the earth and said:
it was them who wanted to make slaves of us,
and not the other way round,
we were just saving
the motherland from the enemies.

history lies,
it's as if the french soldier outside moscow said:
i wasn't going there for war,
i knew nothing about any war,
i was just tempted by the russian women and
the russian frost,
even managed to get one,
would've married her too,
if i hadn't frozen through.

history lies, because the soviet soldiers say:
it's not true that we just wanted someone to
wage a war on,
although that's now a little hard for us to prove;
don't worship us much, but don't throw us out
either —
remember without regret.
we freed everyone, but we didn't die for you,
we just did it for a good time.

the vietnamese soldier awakes and sings:
we needed their cattle,
their pomegranates and melons,
their skyscrapers,
deserts
and the vast frozen earth —
fields and snowdrifts
we wanted to make slaves of them

but it turned out the other way round,
and now lots of us are buried casketless —
and history lies.

history lies,
and there's nothing anybody can change —
'til the day they die,
there's nothing anybody can say.
only soldiers can wake in the earth and say such
things,
as if the earth itself is singing;
it's because history lives,
that history lies.

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