

Chapter Title: AFTERWORD: Poetry and Freedom after February 24, 2022

Book Title: *The Freest Speech in Russia*

Book Subtitle: *Poetry Unbound, 1989–2022*

Book Author(s): STEPHANIE SANDLER

Published by: Princeton University Press. (2024)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.14769800.14>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Princeton University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Freest Speech in Russia*

AFTERWORD

Poetry and Freedom after February 24, 2022

NEVER HAS a preposition felt more freighted: after February 24, 2022, it seemed as if there would always only be a sense of *after*, of a world in which the destruction Russia was wreaking on Ukraine changed everything. For the rest of 2022, the horror only intensified, leading to attacks on civilians, mass graves and war crimes, and cities deprived of heat and light. The image of a young woman carrying a sign predicting that Russia will be free, featured in the introduction to this book, now looms up as if from some distant past, one whose confidence in future freedom feels unreal.

Like all hybrid wars, Russia's all-out assault on Ukraine has also been an assault on language, when even the word for war (*voina*) became illegal speech, and when accurate reporting about casualties or equipment failures were denounced as fake news, also potentially a criminal act. Russian speakers of conscience naturally want to wrest back ownership of their language. Whole communities of poets and readers, of citizens and activists, felt themselves in tatters, as repressions of free speech and free assembly were everywhere in evidence, particularly in cities. Holding up a sign protesting war or advocating for peace would have been entirely acceptable in Soviet parades, but it became an act of outsized bravado, epitomized by Marina Ovsyannikova's interruption of a Channel One news broadcast on March 14, 2022.¹ Her "no to war" (*net voine*) was already a slogan to protest Russia's invasion. Protesters are nothing if not resourceful, and a woman in Nizhny Novgorod arrested for holding a blank piece of paper was not the only person to go straight for the symbolism, without any words to get in the way.² That gesture spread, and an instance in Rostov-na-Donu was widely shared on Twitter (figure 29).³ Other images of



FIGURE 29. Anastasia Nikolaeva, photographed in Rostov-na-Donu;
OVD-Info, Twitter (February 25, 2022)

this protest shared on social media feature the moment of arrest, which makes it an even more striking counterpart to the young woman whose sign announced “Russia Will Be Free.” That both are women is a meaningful coincidence: the Feminist Antiwar Resistance (FAS) quickly became the best organized antiwar movement on the ground within Russia.

Is it deliriously optimistic to imagine that the prophecy of future freedom persists, that the will to live one’s own life cannot be squelched? If the page is blank, the force of the protest is no less and may in fact be even more poetic. It is as if the blank page of the Futurist Vasilisk Gnedov’s “Poem of the End” (“Poema kontsa,” 1913) were transformed into a defiant gesture of protest. Wordless space can be maximally expressive, as the journal *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* proved in its three pages of blacked-out space at the start of the first issue to appear after February 24.⁴ Those are the pages where the journal had been publishing new poems for many years under the heading “New Social Poetry” (“Novaia sotsial’naia poeziia”), and the black rectangular shapes suggested a raw, dark site of mourning and protest.

Large public protest gatherings became impossible in Russia after February 2022, and the aggressive arrests carried out by state security forces on the streets and the disproportionate criminal judgments within the courts had their effect. Hundreds of thousands of people who oppose the war—including many poets—fled Russia, fearful that the borders would close, and the mobilization in September 2022 produced another huge wave of departures. The last free media outlets were shut down, and people began to lock down social media accounts. As of late 2022, some accounts remained wiped clean or were confined to smaller groups of friends, but others slowly came back or moved to Telegram channels. The free news media has continued its work from the relative safety of locations outside Russia.⁵ The persistence of individual voices of dissent, some safely abroad but a remarkably courageous few still speaking out within Russia, shows that the free speech created after the fall of the USSR has not been destroyed, even if persistence now comes at a very high price.

It was by no means obvious at first that poetry could continue to flourish, both because the social media crucial to sharing new work seemed under threat (especially Facebook, declared an extremist organization by the Russian state) and because of a widening sense of shame at the fact of being Russian and, for many, being a citizen of an authoritarian if not terrorist state. Immediately after February 24, the influential poet, translator, and editor Dmitry Kuz’min posted two eloquent statements, co-authored with Evgeny Nikitin.⁶ Each was signed by nearly one hundred poets. The first statement addressed

the people of Ukraine and ended by wishing them victory. The second, directed toward all readers of poetry and in a sense to all Russians, concluded by advising people to read Ukrainian poetry. As the statement put it, "Right on our doorstep, another nation at this very moment is demonstrating the kind of courage, fortitude, and unity of political leaders with poets, intellectuals, and the military, with public figures and the most ordinary of people—the very qualities that we can only dream of for our own nation."⁷

In effect, readers of Russian poetry were being told that if they wanted to learn about freedom, the place to look was in the poetry of Ukraine. Kuz'min has made good on that intention by regularly posting his own translations of Ukrainian poets, something he had long been doing in his publications and social media posts. Others have joined in that work of bringing ever more Ukrainian poetry into Russian. The Telegram channel *Metazhurnal* has published many translations from Ukrainian, with extensive work by Stanislav Belsky, who lives in Ukraine. To name only one other example, Olga Sedakova, who translates from many languages but not usually Ukrainian, took up the gut-wrenching poem Maxim Krivtsov wrote about the mass killings in Bucha, and her translation reached several thousand readers via Facebook within days.⁸

The sentiment that space should be cleared for Ukrainian voices persists within the ever-widening circles of those who oppose the war. And no one should underestimate just how much poetry is being written in Ukraine by Ukrainians during this war, poetry that is also being translated into English with fresh intensity.⁹ Striking new work is also appearing at the border zones between languages, inspired perhaps by the surge of multilingual poetry but also by how the online environment makes it so easy to cross linguistic and geographic borders.¹⁰

It is too soon to know how this engagement will affect Russian poetry, and too soon to know what poetry will look like in the face of authoritarian crack-down at home and brutal, unthinkable war in Ukraine. At first, it was vexed question whether poetry-related events should go on, and there was no single uniform answer. One of *Colta's* last publications, in March 2022, before it temporarily froze its web page was a survey asking whether poems, concerts, and events should continue and whether it mattered if they were explicitly anti-war.¹¹ The answers included assertions that being together as a community and hearing poems or listening to music was needed more than ever and equally emphatic claims that anything that looked like business as usual was tantamount to collaboration with the Russian state. The most interesting responses were somewhere in between, including Sedakova's two-sentence

answer that she would not read her own work in public but very much wanted to hear others—this seemed the clearest demonstration that assembling as a community was still needed. Gali-Dana Singer, calling on her experience of living through wars in Israel when some soldiers carried volumes of Silver Age poetry with them, said that poetry in and of itself could be the strongest anti-war statement, no matter its topic. Evgenia Lavut's nuanced and empathetic response took a different direction: to assemble anthologies of poems or to gather people to read isn't a form of deluded self-comfort, she said, but a form of prayer. One of Lavut's own poems written in March 2022 was about as far from a prayerful intonation as one can get—it played directly off the inspiring moment on February 24, 2022, when Ukrainian border guards on Snake Island transmitted as their final communication that an encroaching Russian warship could go fuck itself.¹²

The ambivalence about events persisted, but Russian poets came to respond to repression at home and destruction in Ukraine in a flood of new work. Lavut's defiance, alongside intonations of prayer, lament, irony, anger, hope, indignation, determination, and compassion, is amply present in the enormous outpouring of poetry that came to define the year 2022. It may have been slow to start, but by the end of the year, the volume of new work was nearly overwhelming, and virtually every poet who had been stunned into silence at first and even those who urged silence on others found their voice. Ilya Kukulin, in the first assessment of this work, has compared the scale of new work to responses to the Second World War, and he argued that one reason for the sheer number of new poems was a desire to reclaim some sense of agency in the very act of speaking out.¹³ In my terms, that amounts to an affirmation of free speech, to a demonstration of independent thinking and creative autonomy. These poems show poets as refusing to concede to the state's censorship or to its falsified narrative of the "special military operation."

Social media platforms have allowed this work to be widely shared, some of it on Facebook (which some in Russia continued to access via VPN), but even more on Telegram channels that have taken advantage of more secure encryption. It can be harder at first to find those Telegram channels unless you already know their names (a search of Telegram with the key word "poeziia" turns up none of them), yet page views prove that new work is reaching readers, if far fewer than had been the case with Facebook. But the readership may yet rise, and searches were eased when *Metazhurnal* asked which channels its readers relied on, and lists emerged. Reader comments are sparser than on Facebook, too, and the platform seems not to offer the same prompt for lively

debate. The community's sense of being embattled may also have reduced the propensity for argument, although some sparks of disagreement have arisen, a good sign for things to come.

The work on Telegram channels, individual blogs, and other social media sites has begun to be aggregated. Linor Goralik created an online platform for poetry, prose, essays, and artwork produced by those opposing the war, *ROAR*, or *Resistance and Opposition Arts Review*.¹⁴ By the end of 2022, it had posted five substantial issues in Russian, English, Japanese, and French versions, made possible by a worldwide team of volunteer translators and editors working behind the scenes. Also significant are five poetry anthologies that appeared in print in 2022.¹⁵ Two of them were careful to foreground poets living in Ukraine or born there, tacitly following the recommendation in Kuz'min and Nikitin's statement. Taking a chronological approach allowed some anthologies to preserve for the future a kind of snapshot of the war's impact as if in real time. Because these books were rushed into print (understandably, and two were set up as fundraising projects), they are a place to start rather than anything definitive, and they largely reflect the first six months of 2022. None includes very much of the poetry from fall 2022, when the possibility that the war would continue for a long time began to set in. Rage at war crimes and atrocities was felt early on, as was the enduring hope for Ukrainian victory and Russian defeat. The poetry represented in these anthologies impressively captures the emotional as well as political responses of hundreds of poets, and absorbing this work will give future readers a way to comprehend the turning point that came to constitute the year 2022 for Russian poetry.

The most substantial anthology is *Poetry of the Recent Past (Poeziia poslednego vremeni)*, which presented poems from March to July 2022 in the order in which they were written. Yuri Leving's in-depth introduction compared the volume to a minefield, a perhaps unfortunate metaphor since Russian forces were leaving mines in the Ukrainian territory they abandoned, but the metaphor aptly suggested that Leving knew that this project could be risky. It did engender intense and, in some cases, negative responses.¹⁶ He also compared the project to an x-ray photograph, suggesting the diagnostic potential of what he had assembled. While he eschewed the poems written by triumphant pro-Russian poets, known as Z poets, there is something of the medical profession's neutrality in trying to lay out the situation of harm in all its particulars. The volume's range left it open to criticism on political grounds, but it makes the collection a more accurate snapshot of the war's impact.¹⁷

The metaphor of air, a marker of freedom and free speech in many of the poems treated in this book, can also be found in this anthology's texts. Leving's introduction cites lines from more than a dozen poems in which the dominant metaphor is atmospheric change, a sense that the air has thickened, become impossible to breathe.¹⁸ The extended series of quotations shows that the metaphor of air has retained its salience at a moment when free speech has become riskier for some, extremely dangerous for others. The air brought not oxygen but menace, as in a poem by Alexandra Tsibulya: "Every scrap of air wants / to have power over me" (*Kazhdyi klochok vozdukha khochet / imet' nado mnoi vlast'*).¹⁹ Her expressive poem includes the sight of flags flying over a Petersburg bridge that produce the sensation of sand flying into the mouth. The flag as a symbol of the state's power is grotesquely suffocating, and air, rather than a medium on which words can sail, becomes a vehicle for pushing sand into the mouth and making speech impossible.

In a similar way, the air is turned into the earth's dirt and filth in a poem by Irina Kotova, posted to Facebook on November 7, 2022, and then circulated via Telegram. Kotova gave the poem the title "Air" ("Vozdukh"). It began:

at night the air
 puts on its helmet of invisibility
 blown out to the horizon

so as not to smell the war
 I walk out to the dark street
 but the war
 like a positive test for syphilis
 leaves its trace everywhere and always

ночью воздух
 надевает шапку-невидимку
 прибитую к горизонту

чтобы не чуют запахов войны
 я выхожу на улицу в темноте
 но война
 как положительная реакция на сифилис—
 остается везде и всегда²⁰

Kotova, an endocrinologist and surgeon, knowledgeably pegs syphilis as a disease that can persist even after supposedly successful treatment.²¹ Just as

syphilis can disfigure the body, so the war's maiming injuries will produce the crowd of invalids in the poem's conclusion:

is resurrection possible
 if now
 all the invalids
 from world wars
 gather in my bedroom
 uninvited
 replacing the air—
 with earth

November 7, 2022

возможно ли воскресение
 если теперь
 все калеки
 мировых войн
 без спроса
 собираются в моей спальне
 замещая воздух—
 землёй

07.11.2022

Syphilis again seems a ghastly and appropriate choice, as the invasion of the intimate spaces of the poet's bedroom bring war's victims nightmarishly close. What was earlier in the poem cool night air is now unbreathable, thick with dirt.

I doubt that Kotova had in mind the poem by Grigory Dashevsky discussed in the introduction, "No self, no people," but comparing those two poems shows us where poetry has shifted in the nearly two decades between them (his poem appeared first in 2003, hers in 2022). The motif of invisibility connects them. Kotova's "helmet of invisibility" recalls magical fairy tales, but rather than having the poem's speaker put it on and observe the world unseen, Kotova makes the air itself invisible. In Dashevsky's poem, invisibility attaches to the gnats, felt as whining sounds and sawing actions. In both poems, invisible forces suggest an atmosphere thick with dread. His poem never drops down to specifics, staying with a metaphysical investigation of fear's deserted landscape; hers evokes public and intimate spaces, from street

to bedroom, but also names all wars as a source of harm even as she responds to a specific, ongoing war in Ukraine. The innocents who suffer in Dashevsky's poem become maimed war veterans in Kotova's. We can sense her reaching for the metaphysical, abstract level of his poem in her metaphor of air, so many times in this book seen as the air of freedom, as in that huge sky suggested by Bulatov's poster, here clotted with choking particles of earth by poem's end. Any "helmet of invisibility" has lost its magic powers.

Kotova's poem reads as an intense lyric statement, but much of the poetry since February 24 grapples with the discomforts of first-person utterance and even more so with the sense of being part of a collective *we*. Among the most telling is a poem by Alexander Skidan that appeared in two of the new anthologies. It was first posted on March 1, 2022, and immediately translated into English, reaching a wide readership even before the anthologies further disseminated it.²² It remains one of the most searing poems of a horror-filled year, and I cite it here in full. It transformed the shock of the preposition "after" into an adverb and filled it with the despair of realizing that all poems, whatever else they might achieve, will feel too "late." Belatedness was no longer the existential ennui of the modernists, but rather the rage-filled recognition of a generation that seems to have squandered its freedom. Formally, the poem demonstrates the continuing power of free verse and the ways in which anaphora and other repetitions create strong rhetorical patterns. The result is at once incantation and lament.

too late to scroll through news and facebook too late to write on
personal and collective guilt

too late to read hannah arendt and carl schmitt both in love with
schwarzwald too late to become provost of the state of emergency

too late to stand on the troitsky bridge and gaze at the most beautiful
city in the world too late to gaze at the ice of the most beautiful river in
the world

too late to go out on the ice of the most beautiful river in the world
and write fuck war on it too late to raise and lower bridges

too late to cry over bridges too late to build bridges too late to say too
late to loved ones too late to embrace them

too late to rename the troitsky bridge as the trotsky bridge too late to
say neither peace nor war

too late to say my grandma was born in poltava in 1909 too late to say
her name was trepke von trepke

too late to say we are pissing our pants

too late to remember valery podoroga in 2001 after getting the bely
prize in that café on leteiny and him saying who have we elected not
only elected but with these very hands helped gleb pavlovsky and his
media outlets

too late to say blockade patriotic war lydia ginzburg

too late to say i warned you in 2003 caution religion caution

too late to say genocide wwi turn the bayonets against imperialism as
bakunin kropotkin taught and bruno schulz dreaming of maggots
when he went down vinnysia's streets to drink with arkady

too late to say dehumanization

mobile crematoria

special operation

it remains to be said

reread antigone give us back our dead

i want to mourn them

this precedes the polis precedes its violence and the law the law-as-
violence this is sister this is brother becoming a bottomless grave and
the promise of love

it's still maybe not too late to stop the mobile crematoria
to bury our children²³

поздно листать новости и фейсбук поздно писать о личной и
коллективной вине

поздно читать ханну арендт и карла шмитта влюбленных в
шварцвальд поздно становиться ректором чрезвычайного
положения

поздно стоять на троическом мосту и смотреть на самый прекрасный город в мире
поздно смотреть на лед самой прекрасной реки в мире

поздно выходить на лед самой прекрасной реки в мире и писать на нем хуй войне
поздно поднимать и разводить мосты

поздно оплакивать мосты
поздно строить мосты
поздно говорить
поздно любимым
поздно их обнимать

поздно переименовывать троцкий мост в мост имени троцкого
поздно говорить ни мира ни войны

поздно говорить моя бабушка родилась в полтаве в 1909 году
поздно говорить ее фамилия была трепке фон трепке

поздно говорить что мы ссым

поздно вспоминать 2001 год валерия подорогу после вручения премии белого в кафе на литейном и его слова кого мы выбрали и не просто выбрали а вот этими вот руками и помогли глебу павловскому и его медиа

поздно говорить блокада отечественная война лидия гинзбург

поздно говорить я предупреждал в 2003 году осторожно религия
осторожно

поздно говорить геноцид первая мировая обратим штыки против империализма как учили бакунин кропоткин и опарыши в снах бруно шульца когда он шел по улицам винницы чтобы выпить с аркадием

поздно говорить расчеловечивание

мобильные крематории

спецоперация

остается говорить

перечитай антигону верни нам наших мертвых

я хочу их оплакать

это раньше полиса раньше его насилия и закона закона-как-насилия это сестра это брат ставшие бездонной могилой и обещаьем любви

ВОТ ЭТО ЕЩЕ НЕ ПОЗДНО МОЖЕТ БЫТЬ ОСТАНОВИТЬ МОБИЛЬНЫЕ
крематории

похоронить наших детей²⁴

Skidan's poem ends in a place that pulls back from the rueful sense that it is too late to do anything with one's freedom, and it does that in its last seven lines that pose instead the possibility that there are things left to say. And left to do. His mythological model for that action is Antigone, the quintessential courageous sibling who refuses to comply with a king's orders and who insists on mourning the dead. Skidan is doing something not entirely unlike Elena Fanailova's *Lysistrata* poems (and she posted ever more anguished *Lysistrata* poems in 2022, some in Ukrainian and Russian). But his rhetoric is more broken, his emotions rawer. Rather than a heroine from antiquity whose resistance hopes to stop a war, and rather than a source, Aristophanes's comedy, that can mix jest and joy, Skidan goes straight for the tragedy that is Sophocles's *Antigone*, and for its tragic ending with the bodies of the dead piling up.

The poem also goes back to a moment before there is law, as it puts it, before there is even the polis in which free speech feels so urgent, goes back to an insistence on the humane impulse to mourn the dead as kin. If one could go back to that primal and humane impulse, the poem argues, then perhaps it would be possible to bury those already sacrificed, perhaps possible to prevent more deaths. It is a tiny hope, made smaller by the poem's magnitude. Skidan's work over the preceding several years had often yielded relatively short, wry texts.²⁵ But here he plays out the logic seen in chapter 3, where an interplay between long and short forms proves paradoxical: this long, repetitive text leads to the smallest scrap of hope.

One source of that hope is the way the poem finds its voice as first-person lyric, a process that seems impossible after the long litany of impersonal, flat statements of all the things that it is too late to do. But five lines from the end, Skidan writes, "i want to mourn them," a short utterance that pulls the singular voice of the poet out of the impersonal syntax and out of the collective *we* expected in war poetry. Other poets have pushed back against the undifferentiated mass of who "we" are at such a moment, including Kira Freger, whose poem from December, 2022 unites under one *we* all who oppose Russia's assault on Ukraine but then asks about the divisions between those of "us" who have fled Russia, and those who have stayed behind.²⁶ A similar rhetorical move is found in a short poem by Maria Stepanova that begins "while we slept, we bombed Kharkiv" (*poka my spali, my bombili Khar'kov*).²⁷ The "we" who sleep are as if

at some distance from the “we” who drop bombs, but Stepanova’s point is to close that distance. Skidan instead finds a way to speak in the first person, a rhetorical gesture that ought to come easily to a lyric poem but here is fraught with tension. Nor does Skidan perform the expected act of mourning, the gesture so desired by Antigone. For that, it is not too late, but too early. No elegy can yet be written, he says: now, one can but record the desire to mourn the dead.

Skidan’s poem captures the temporality of Russian poetry in 2022 so perfectly—the sense that it is not yet possible to do many things, but that the groundwork for future freedoms can yet be laid—that I should probably end this afterword on his poem. But I want to add one more text, which is already able to show us concretely what that future will require. It is by the critic and writer Maria Boteva. It demonstrates in its very diction that Russians should know where to look for the lessons of the future: to Germany, a country whose reckoning with its Nazi past, as Kuz’min and Nikitin said of Ukraine, is marked by a courage that Russia has yet to muster. Boteva lets the German language do that work in her poem. It does nothing more than point the way forward, but that is quite a lot. Once again, I quote the poem in full.

jeden Tag—says the German dictionary—
every day read out these words:

I
don’t want
to conquer
anyone
I
don’t want
to battle
anyone
jeden Tag jedes Mal
every day every time
open the dictionary
and repeat
head doesn’t hurt
from endless repetition
that’s how you learn this language of peace
I
don’t want
to battle
anyone

I
 don't want
 to conquer
 anyone
 I
 never
 again

еден таг—говорит немецко-русский словарь—
 каждый день читай эти слова:

я
 никого
 не хочу
 победить
 я
 ни с кем
 не хочу
 воевать
 еден таг едес маль
 каждый день каждый раз
 открывая словарь
 повторяй
 не болит голова
 от бескрайнего повторения
 так и выучишь этот язык мира
 я
 ни с кем
 не хочу воевать
 я
 никого
 не хочу
 победить
 я
 никогда
 больше²⁸

Here the first-person pronoun is assured and repeated, heard almost from the start and five times given its own line. Boteva is writing against the same pressures as Skidan and Kotova but resisting them by emphatic assertions. That German-Russian dictionary (a wordbook, if we hear in our heads the German term for

dictionary, *Wörterbuch*) sets her on that path. Finding the confident equivalent of the phrase “jeden Tag” puts her poem in a different temporality as well: it’s not too late, it’s a repeating present, something like the everyday that marked poems treated in chapter 3 (by Daria Sukhovei or Ekaterina Simonova) or chapter 6 (by Sergei Kruglov and Olga Sedakova). Boteva takes up the hard work, the headache-producing work, of learning a new language, a language of peace.²⁹

What Boteva’s poem does by placing that work not in the future but in the everyday is to acknowledge how long and hard the work will be. She has pointed toward the German example by including German words, and by the poem’s last two lines, the phrase “never / again.” That is the familiar slogan from the Holocaust, the vow to resist genocide. Her resonant ending links Russia’s war on Ukraine and genocide and suggests that the work to come may involve naming it as such. And it will surely require finding a whole new lexicon with which to forge, through repentance, genuine peace.

It is on that hopeful note that I want to end, fully realizing that the possibility for hope and for repentance is but a shadow flickering through Boteva’s poem. The most striking poems of the months in late 2022 were filled with other, darker shadows, from the grotesquely dead soldiers of Daria Serenko’s “The Bridegrooms” to Eugene Ostashevsky’s English-language poem that calls Petersburg the “eater of Mariupol.”³⁰ The tonalities of contemporary poetry in Russian cannot but reflect the horror of the war, but poets remain determined to use their talents and their inspiration to respond to the world in which they are living. Free speech is not happening widely in public in Russia as of this writing, but it is persisting, not least in Russian poetry. It will do what it can to ready its readers for the moment of their freedom.