



The Literary Response to the Russia Ukraine Crisis: Perspectives from Contemporary Ukrainian and Russophone Writers.

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Abstract: *The Russia-Ukraine conflict has created not just a political but also a cultural divide, especially in literature, between shared heritage and national identity. Historical ties and linguistic affinities between Russia and Ukraine have been negatively affected, leading Ukrainian writers to renounce the Russian language and literature. This shift reflects a broader movement towards reclaiming cultural independence from the dominance of Russian culture. However, challenges persist as writers grapple with losing their language of expression and fear backlash for their choices. This conflict necessitates a re-evaluation of identity, language, and allegiance in the literary landscape of Ukraine.*

Keywords: *Russia-Ukraine conflict, cultural divide, Ukrainian literature, linguistic affinities, Russophone writers*

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has put the entire world into a dilemma of taking positions and it's grappling with how to respond to this crisis diplomatically. It has created divisions and sparked debates not only in the political sphere but also within the cultural and literary communities. Since the beginning of the war, which was announced by the President of the Russian Federation as "a special operation" to "denazify" the Ukraine, several thousands of civilians, and army men have died. Of course, this has created an uproar in world politics.

The Western world; Europe, the US and other countries have taken a clear stand against the Russian government and called Russian aggression "an invasion" of a sovereign country. The Europe and US have taken Ukraine's side and have been providing military and humanitarian aid to the Ukrainian army and its people. As per the UNHCR data on Ukrainian refugees, millions of Ukrainians have fled their homeland and sought refuge in neighbouring European countries, such as Poland, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, the Republic of Moldova, Germany etc. As of February 14, 2024, 6 million refugees have been received in European countries since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war. This explains the gravity of the situation and the call for taking a stand for or against war.

Almost, all the countries of the world have taken their political sides, keeping in view their domestic and international political gains and losses. Amidst all these responses to the Russia- Ukraine conflict, the literary world found itself in a very tricky position; as they say that literature has no bound, no nation and it belongs to all humankind but in this situation, the Russian language and the literature written in it have faced one of the harshest reactions from the literary world of Ukraine.

Russia and Ukraine have a shared past which makes their cultural interactions so deeply rooted and intertwined with shared sensibilities. The shared past of Russia and Ukraine dates back to the Empire of Kyiv Rus. Not just Russia and Ukraine, Belarus also claims its origin from Kievan Rus. Kyiv, the now capital of Ukraine was the political and cultural centre of the empire of the Kyivan Rus. These shared historical ties between both countries

led to the shared cultural ties and heritage that continue to influence their sociopolitical and cultural landscapes. During the Soviet era, Ukraine was one of the republics in the United Soviet Socialist Republics from 1922 to 1991.

The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic were two of the strongest republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Even though they were part of the same political entity they shared very complex relations, as the power was more concentrated towards Moscow, which was also the capital of the USSR. The political dynamics favoured Moscow and that led to tensions between the two republics, as Moscow has more political influence. The centralization of power and enforcement of a unified soviet identity resulted in the marginalization of linguistically and culturally diverse republics of the USSR and the dominance of the Russian language and Russian Culture. However, the influence of the Russian language on Ukraine traces back to the era of Kievan Rus', where Old East Slavic, a predecessor to both Russian and Ukrainian, was spoken. The education policies of the USSR emphasized the study of Russian language and literature as part of the school curriculum in all the soviet republics. Works of the stalwarts of Russian literature such as Alexander Pushkin, Lev Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov and others were taught in schools and universities.

The work of Russian writers was widely translated into Russian and made available in bookshops, libraries and cultural institutions. Along with the growing popularity of Russian literature, Ukrainian literature also flourished and was shared and distributed in Russia. Despite the long prevailing political tension The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic of the USSR shared cultural and linguistic affinity. Ukrainian and Russian readers embraced each other's literature as an integral part of their shared literary heritage and cultural identity.

Russian and Ukrainian languages belong to the East Slavic Language family and have a common linguistic heritage. The Soviet era was a complex chapter in the shared history of both countries. But even before the creation of the USSR Ukrainian and Russian literature actively interacted with each other. Writers from both sides drew inspiration from each other's cultural traditions. Many Ukrainian writers such as Nikolai Gogol and Taras Shevchenko greatly contributed to Russian literature and Russian writers; Alexander Pushkin and Lev Tolstoy were influenced by Ukraine's cultural traditions.

After the fall of the USSR, the cultural affinity and exchange between both countries persisted unaffectedly. The deep-rooted historical connection, enriched by centuries of shared cultural traditions and linguistic similarities, served as a strong foundation for the cultural interactions to continue. Familial ties were formed. Cultural institutions and organizations of both countries continued to provide platforms for continued cultural and people-to-people interactions. Many Ukrainian writers preferred to write in Russian as it was their first language during the USSR and it came to them naturally as their native tongue.

Before the Ukraine-Russia war in 2022, despite the continued political tension since 2014, Ukraine was the biggest market for Russian books. Most of the prominent publishing houses in Ukraine focused on Russian literature. The war has created a great divide between the people of both countries. The president of Ukraine passed a law against the import and distribution of Belarussian and Russian books in Ukraine. Due to the conflict and escalated political and military tension, the Ukrainian readers are distancing themselves from the Russian literature and books, as an emotional response to the Russian aggression. More than 15 new publishing companies have been established in the past two years since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. These publishers are mainly focusing on works in the Ukrainian language.

Ukrainian writers who wrote in the Russian language earlier, are now withdrawing from Russian and choosing to write in the Ukrainian language. However, not all the Russophone Ukrainian writers have withdrawn from the Russian language, some are still willing to continue writing in the Russian language as the Russian language is their first language and it comes to them "naturally". There is a clear-cut division of two groups of writers one who has completely resigned from the Russian language and another who cannot leave the Russian language, which is their language of creativity. They are unable to leave the language which is the medium of their creative expression. The writers, and poets who are withdrawing from the Russian language are doing so because they are feeling morally compelled to dissociate themselves from the language of an oppressive power, which waged war on their country and made millions of people homeless and refugees. A celebrated literary

critic of Ukraine Tamara Hundarova very harshly criticises not just the Russian government and army but also Russian literature, which she sees as an important tool for the oppression of the Ukrainian people. She completely rejects the influence of Russian culture on her country and despises Russian literature and culture as it is filled with “hubris and arrogance”. Hundarova believes that “this war of Putin’s has made Ukrainians into real Ukrainians”. She is not alone in having this opinion of Russian culture. This disillusionment is developing in the hearts of the common public too, which is why several monuments of the Russian writers were removed and destroyed in Ukraine since the beginning of the war. The war has sparked the debate on the need to rebuild their culture, language, and institutions free of the domination of the Russian language and culture. Ukrainian writers such as Afanasieva and Hundarova stressed the need to abandon the Russian culture completely, by linguistically and culturally disassociating from Russia.

Ukrainian poet Anastasiia Afanasieva wrote in Russian language but the war of 2022 made her withdraw from the Russian language and write in Ukrainian. In her poem “The New Songs of Silence” she declares her decision not to write in Russian any further. This poem was written when she had to leave Kharkiv when it was under bombardment. She starts the poem in Russian and finishes it in Ukraine. She writes:

“.....With every step of time
 With its every drop, Our land is purified
 Our memory is purified Our will is purified [. . .]
 And we build internal fences
 Against everything hostile
 Even against the language we used to speak,
 But which is now stained with our blood
 Our hatred is deeper than the bowels of the earth
 Than the longest memory
 It is so deep
 That I am forever glad to forget the language
 in which all my poems were written”¹

Russian was her language of expression. Her works were published in the reputed literary journals of Russia such as “Novyi Mir”. Her collection of poetry “To Those Who Live” was shortlisted for the Debut Prize in 2003. In 2006 she won the “Russian Prize”. The experiences of war have affected the linguistic and cultural affinities between both countries. Afanasieva in her interview with Alex Averbuch stated that switching from Russian to Ukrainian is crucial so that the future generation is completely put away from Russia and Russian culture in order to “build a new statehood and to look in a different direction and be part of another space”. She declared that “my loyalty and thoughts about the identity of a Russian-speaking Ukrainian ended with the first bomb.”² Her poem “The New Songs of Silence” has become like a manifesto for the Ukrainian writers and poets in Russian who are now switching to Ukrainian in an emotional response to the Russia- Ukraine war. Many other Ukrainian writers and poets such as Iya Kiva, Boris Khersonsky, and Volodymyr Rafeyenko have renounced to Russian language and writing only in Ukrainian. At present the issue of the Ukrainian and Russian languages has become highly politicised. More than 13 million Ukrainian people speak Russian as their first language. In such a situation, calling Russian a language of “oppressor” makes the situation even more complicated.

Ukrainian writers who have been writing in Russian and finding it difficult to abandon their language of creativity which also happens to be their first language. Russian is the language in which they “naturally” write. In the high-on-sentiment situation, some Russophone writers are finding it hard to take a side and choose Ukrainian over Russian. There is a fear and concern over condemnation and narrowed publication opportunities post-war for writers in Russian, many have not faced personal backlash but there is an increased recognition for works in Ukrainian and a negative attitude exists towards Russian.

Andrey Kurakov continues to write in Russian but translation into Ukrainian sells more:

¹ Translation by Kattie Farris and Ilya Kaminsky [New Song of Silence: A Poet Remembers Leaving Ukraine | Atmos](#)

² [Interview with Poet Anastassia Afanasyeva – Poetry International Online](#)

“I started using Ukrainian to write non-fiction some years ago, but I continue to write fiction in Russian. My books are published in Russian and in Ukrainian translations, but I know that my books in Ukrainian sell better. Ukrainian speakers read much more than Russian speakers in Ukraine. This is a new reality that no one can ignore. And the state buys only books in Ukrainian for libraries.”³

Writers Aleksandr Kabanov and Yuriy Serebriansky continue to write in Russian and they believe that Russia does not own the Russian language. Kurakov finds it hard to renounce Russian as it is his mother tongue.

However, Kurakov is also contemplating not writing in Russian till the war ends.

“...And lately I have been thinking that I should not publish books in Russian at all, at least not until the end of the war. Later, once Russia has left Ukraine in peace and Ukraine can follow its chosen European path, we will be able to think again about the language question and make a final decision.”⁴

An internal conflict is felt which reflects the tensions within the Ukrainian writers. Some believe that writing in Russian is an integral part of the Ukrainian culture a sudden detachment is technically not possible. However, they all believe that due to the war, there is an aversion towards the Russian language and literature. Some writers are hoping for the reformation of Ukrainian culture and have high hopes with the growing appreciation for Ukrainian writing, as the interest in the literature written in Ukrainian is growing and well-known, recognised authors are switching from Russian to Ukrainian. However, some are concerned about the declining quality due to opportunism and politicisation of artistic expression.

Around 40% of Ukrainians speak Russian as their mother tongue, and ostracizing Russian language and literature could potentially lead to future linguistic conflicts and harm social harmony. Given Ukraine's deep historical and cultural ties with Russia, promoting multiculturalism and multilingualism could enrich Ukraine's cultural landscape. But as of now the emotions are high and the renouncement of the Russian language and literature is, in Kurakov's words, “an emotional reaction.. a social phenomenon in times of war”⁵

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has not only ignited political tensions but has deeply affected cultural and literary landscapes as well. The historical ties between Russia and Ukraine, rooted in shared traditions and language, have faced a significant rupture amidst the ongoing crisis. The once flourishing exchange of literature and cultural affinity has been marred by the conflict, leading to a division within the literary community. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has forced the literary world to confront complex questions of identity, language, and allegiance. As writers navigate this turbulent landscape, the future of Ukrainian literature remains uncertain, shaped by both the trauma of war and the resilience of cultural heritage.

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⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid