

TDR Comment

Letter from Moscow,
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Theatre Scholar

In Moscow they pretend that nothing is happening. The city is not saturated by military symbols, the main institutions are functioning, you can still leave the country, and there is no mobilization. The new cage is being built smoothly and gradually. If you don't read the news you may not even get the answer to why exactly the atmosphere of the city, recently considered to be one of three most comfortable in the world to live in according to the UN (*Moscow Times* 2022a), resembles a space filled with artificial air. Moscow continues to be the country inside the country and the mass psychological defense starts to reduce the initial shock and apocalyptic mood, as people here get used to their new existence and self-destruction.

For the first month and a half, we all relied on the experience of the past, expecting an immediate Iron Curtain and mass repressions. This turned out to be a false understanding of reality. What is happening now does not resemble either Tsarist Russia or the USSR.

Today is already the 143rd day of what is ordered to be called a “special operation.”¹ If you call it a “war,” they can put you in prison. If you go to a public protest or a one-person picket, they can arrest you. If you repost documentary filming or an article describing what is happening in Ukraine, you will be accused of discrediting the Russian armed forces, which is punishable by a fine or up to 15 years in prison (Article 207.3 or 280.3, Criminal Code of Russia).

No antiwar exhibitions, no protest actions, no theatre performances by those who oppose the war. Human rights centers are closed, the authorities hide the number of coffins returning or not returning to Russia. Still the antiwar position is predictably very popular among intellectuals and youth. The banned but accessible by VPN (Facebook and opposition media) become the territory of a relative freedom of speech, especially if you are already out of the country. It is unclear finally what part of the population really supports the current invasion, although the propaganda works great. No one expected the war, and no one who is able to think understands why it is happening.

Turgenev's famous conflict of “fathers and sons” has a new connotation. The so-called old generation believes the television propaganda,² the young can't stand it and make a scandal. Many family ties are dramatically crumbling. Both in Moscow and in Kyiv there are a lot of mixed marriages; a third of my friends are of Ukrainian origin. The war is not only a catastrophe, but a huge Slavic drama.

In Soviet times, there was a joke among dissidents that all the decent people are already in prison; now there is a similar joke about the status of “foreign agents.” Every month, the authorities replenish the official register of who is a foreign agent. In Moscow, the State Duma, which issues these laws, is called the “enraged printer.”³ This nickname was given to the 6th State Duma after it passed several high-profile laws without any discussion. Among the hastily passed laws are a ban on foreign adoption, laws forbidding rallies, laws against “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations,” laws allowing pretrial blocking of websites, a “gay propaganda” law, and a law supporting the annexation of Crimea.

A media outlet, an organization, and an individual engaged in public activities can each be given the status of “foreign agent.” Scientists and artists are not yet named foreign agents, but some poets have already been “awarded” this designation. The numbers are always increasing. Among the foreign agents are about 73 nonprofit organizations, 8 public associations, 47 mass media outlets, and 128 individuals, mostly journalists, human rights activists, LGBTQ+ activists,

1. 160 days by 3 August 2022, as *TDR* goes to press. — Ed.

2. The propaganda mainly reports the “demilitarization” and “denazification” of Ukraine as well as promoting a hostile image of the West.

3. The lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia.

writers, and poets. Some of the foreign agents found the letter Z drawn on the doors of their apartments. Truly to say, no one has figured out who was that genius who created this symbol of the new war, the meaning of which is incomprehensible to any citizen of the Russian Federation.

Life has changed. But not quite yet.

On the one hand, sanctions are imposed, Russia is excluded from the SWIFT banking system, the import of Russian gold is banned, global corporations and brands have left Russia, many international cultural ties were cut, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to find vital medicines. The country was expelled from the Bologna Process⁴ and left the United Nations Human Rights Council. Isolation is becoming more and more prevalent.

On the other hand, there is no big inflation. The income from the sale of oil and gas doubled during the war. This amounts to billions of dollars every day. The dollar costs less than before the war and can still be bought. The unauthorized importing of goods is increasing. It is assumed that the impact of the sanctions and the economic crash will be evident no sooner than in a year or two. Moreover, on 28 June Iran and Argentina applied to join BRICS.⁵

The new cultural policy seems not to be decided yet, but the processes are symptomatic and the mechanisms are well known.

As our government loves not only to declare wars at 5:00 a.m., but also to ban things at night or impose sentences surreptitiously: yesterday in the evening they announced the closure of the famous Gogol Center theatre and leadership changes in two other theatres and several dance companies. Director Kirill Serebrennikov considers this “murder” of the theatre a response to its antiwar position. The last performance at the Gogol Center was called *I do not participate in the war*; the previous one was called *Take care of your faces*, based on the poetry of Andrei Voznesensky. “The titles of the performances are messages to you, the audience, this is a request from all of us, the Gogol Center team, to remain human,” Serebrennikov writes (*The Insider* 2022). “While there is a war going on in Ukraine, a ‘cultural revolution’ is taking place in Russia,” summed up the editor-in-chief of the *Teatral* magazine after having calculated the increasing number of directors and actors who are not working in Russian theatres anymore. Luckily, they still haven’t touched the Moscow Conservatory and Philharmonic orchestras.

The director of the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg distinguished himself last week. Among the incredible quotes from his interview that blew up on the Russian internet: “On the one hand, war is blood and murder, and on the other hand, the self-affirmation of people, the self-affirmation of the nation.” And “we are all militarists and imperialists. [...] Our country is making great global transformations.” Finally, “We are Europe and at some points more Europe than many of its classical countries. And certainly, than the EU, which is now turning into the Soviet Union.” In addition, the museum introduced a moratorium on exhibitions going to the US and Europe for the first time since the 1990s.

Around the same time, the Russian journalist and editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, Dmitry Muratov, sold his Nobel Peace Prize medal, donating the proceeds to UNICEF for the benefit of refugee kids from Ukraine. The medal went for US\$103.5 million, the highest price ever recorded for a Nobel medal.

Arrests continue, but not massively and not too loud. They are still nonsystematic and illogical. One of the main symbols of the modern antiwar protest movement is a 76-year-old woman from Saint Petersburg, the artist Yelena Osipova (see Sozankova 2022). She is a third-generation Petersburger, called “the conscience of the city” and “a grandmother for peace.” She was arrested regularly for single-person pickets and political posters against Putin and Russian invasion of

4. The Bologna Process, higher education reform in 49 European countries, aims to enhance the quality and recognition of European higher education and to improve exchange and collaboration within and beyond Europe.

5. Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—an association of emerging economies.

Ukraine. I'm sure that in a couple of decades, her posters will be presented in museums and at auctions. Her grandfather died in the blockade of Petersburg (1941–44) from dystrophy; her mother fought in the Second World War. She has a low pension but refuses to sell her works or accept financial assistance because she does not want to sell her beliefs.

Young people are put in prison more often. The 31-year-old Alexandra Skochilenko was detained on 11 April for posting fakes about the Russian army; she faces 5 to 10 years. She made an antiwar action in a supermarket by replacing the price tags with stickers about the invasion of Ukraine. She was put in the city psychiatric hospital for an “examination.” Artist and LGBTQ+ activist Yulia Tsvetkova, another “foreign agent,” was charged under the law against the distribution of pornography for her cartoonish drawings of vaginas. The prosecutor wanted a sentence of 3 years and 2 months, but the outcome of her case was unexpected and surprising: she was acquitted. Another artist, who poured yellow and blue paint on a city government building, was included in the list of extremists and terrorists.

On 12 June, Moscow's human rights project Open Space opened an exhibition with the works of those who were in prisons and pretrial detention centers on political charges in 2021 and 2022. On 19 June, the project suspended its activities.

A more resonant and incomprehensible criminal case was initiated against the famous contemporary artist Oleg Kulik. A Duma member came to the 2022 Art Moscow fair in the city center, saw Kulik's sculpture “The Big Mother,” and disliked it terribly. Now the Investigative Committee of Russia has opened a “rehabilitation of Nazism” case against the artist for this work he made in 2018—a work dedicated to the breakup with his wife (Kishkovsky 2022).

Two Russian artists representing the country at the 2022 Venice Biennale have withdrawn in response to the invasion and thousands of Russian cultural figures (*New Politics* 2022), curators, critics, architects (Crook 2022), scientists (Brussels Correspondent 2022), and medical and IT professionals are signing antiwar petitions and open letters. Some artistic groups publicly refuse to participate in any local art event organized by state institutions; the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art announced that it would “stop work on all exhibitions until the human and political tragedy that is unfolding in Ukraine has ceased” (Garage 2022). Still the response of visual artists is weak. Russia continues to be a country of literature. The impact returns to texts. Against the backdrop of the destruction of the film industry and film distribution, Moscow citizens buy many more books. Bookstores were the only tenants of shopping centers that did not lose attendance. Facebook became the territory of written debates, memoirs, and nonfiction; the amount and quality of independent media, antiwar initiatives, and newly relocated journalists increases; many new volumes of poems are published. Of undoubtedly great importance is the *Russian Opposition Art Review (ROAR)* (*Moscow Times* 2022b) issued online in Russian, English (*ROAR* 2022), and Japanese.

A certain tendency of European civilization to “cancel” Russian culture not only makes intellectuals and artists feel betrayed on both sides, but becomes a valuable contribution to official anti-Western propaganda, bringing great joy to the authorities. The United States contributed to this by publishing, for example, an article entitled “Should we send borrowed art back to Russia?” (Dalley 2022). I refrain from commenting on this as well as on the decades of Western involvement in stabilizing the figure of Putin and using the money and patronage of Russian oligarchs.

Russia has withdrawn from the 1998 Memorandum of Understanding between the United States and Russia on the principles of cooperation in the fields of culture, the humanities, the social sciences, education, and mass media.⁶ The Minister of Culture announced changes in the cultural map of the country and proclaimed the upcoming cooperation with the Middle East. It is supposed to strengthen the national ideology through “patriotic” cultural projects. The main hero of recent cultural events was Peter the Great. Thank God, not Lenin. On 10 June, a multimedia exhibition

6. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/memorandum-understanding-between-the-united-states-america-and-russian-federation-the>

celebrating the first Russian emperor's 350th birthday, *Peter the Great: The Birth of the Empire*, opened in Moscow. Putin spoke, comparing himself with Peter and extolling the new tasks of returning territories to Russia (Roth 2022). At about the same time, *Gifts to Peter the Great* opened in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Three similar exhibitions are scheduled to open in Moscow and four others in St. Petersburg, as well as in a dozen smaller cities throughout the country. In total, there are more than 150 Peter the Great events.

Plans include increasing the contribution to creative industries to 6% of the GDP and allocating 500 million rubles to support 86 enterprises of folk arts and crafts. School history textbooks are being edited so that they are filled with "bright, emotional figurative examples of true service to the motherland, courage, and heroism." Two days ago, the Chairman of the State Duma urged faculty, department chairs, and deans opposed to the Russian invasion of Ukraine to resign. Yesterday Boris Johnson urged Russian scientists to move to the UK. I would do the same.

The first wave of mass emigration is almost over, the second, third, and fourth may come soon. Some have already returned. Many people want to leave, but have no possibility. Most of them are not afraid, but ashamed and disappointed. This emigration does not resemble either the 1922 "Philosopher's Ships" that transported intellectuals expelled from Soviet Russia (Gregory 2009) or the Cold War emigration of Soviet dissidents, although bright minds and talents are leaving again. Spears directed at these people come from two sides: for the Russian government they are betrayers, for the Western world they are people with the mark of the passport and the language of the aggressor. Add to this the pain for the country, feelings of guilt, ruined biographies, lost homes, careers, culture, and identity. This is George Orwell, and Boris Vian, and John Milton. My teachers are leaving, my students are leaving, my friends and I myself are leaving. We of the new emigration help Ukrainian refugees and Russians who have left, but have very little understanding of who we are now. Both hatred and love multiply. The Henley and Partners migration experts expect that by the end of the year 15,000 millionaires will leave Russia and about 2,800 millionaires will leave Ukraine (Neate 2022). Wealthy emigrants leave for the UAE; journalists and human rights activists go to Europe; IT specialists, artists, and intellectuals to Georgia or Armenia. From this ancient corner, the current state of the world becomes clearly visible.

During these two years, I have lived through two wars, in the torn Nagorno-Karabakh region,⁷ an "invisible republic," and in Ukraine. And I learned firsthand about the famous double standards of the West and how dubious Russia's alliance can be. Now I often say that I will have to explain to my children what war is when you are attacked and what war is when you attack. And what your country is at these times.

I know from my own experience what oppresses you most in wartime is not even the level of injustice, but the silence of your friends. If one really wants to do something for those who are going through the ongoing war, write a human letter to your acquaintances, your friends, your exes. "Manuscripts don't burn" (Bulgakov [1928–40] 1967).

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7. "Nagorno-Karabakh conflict," *BBC News*. www.bbc.com/news/topics/cw24m3ex3nyt. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war between Azerbaijan and Armenia took place with the indirect participation of Russia and Turkey. Civilian towns and villages were bombarded, Syrian ISIS mercenaries fought, hundreds of Armenians are still in captivity. The conflict that led to two wars, mass ethnic displacement, and a humanitarian crisis, has its origins in the late Soviet era, when residents of the ethnically Armenian autonomous region requested that Moscow sever the enclave from the Azerbaijani SSR and attach it to the Armenian SSR. Some associated Turkey's current restraint in the war in Ukraine and its refusal to impose sanctions against Russia as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh war.

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