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# Protesting through music: Five of the best Russian anti-war songs

Tuesday 26 September 2023, by [SHENKMAN Yan](#) (Date first published: 30 August 2023).

## **A few Russian musicians - most of them now forced to live abroad - are using songs to stand against the war in Ukraine**

While the Russian invasion of February 2022 sparked a burst of anti-war musical creativity in Ukraine, it's been a different story in Russia, where musical output criticising the war has been meagre.

"There is no comparison with what is happening in Ukraine," said Russian music critic Artemy Troitsky. "Hundreds of songs have been created there, in genres ranging from folk-patriotic to the most fashionable ones, such as electronic, industrial or indie pop. Despite the fact that rockets are flying and bombs are falling, the surge of inspiration is huge!"

Explaining why musicians in Ukraine have produced many more songs about the war than their counterparts in Russia, Troitsky said: "I think the point is that a just war inspires creative people, while a vile, dirty, predatory one inspires a depressing feeling."

Russian songs protesting the war mostly avoid directly referring to Ukraine, instead mentioning peace and war in the abstract - "We need peace!" or "We don't want war!" - and serving more as a reflection than a call for resistance. Artists don't show listeners a way out of a situation they lament, but experience it with them, leaving listeners to draw their own conclusions.

Yet many musicians are still being persecuted by the Russian authorities. This is usually not because of their songs but their statements - with most well-known independent musicians having spoken out strongly and uncompromisingly against the war in Ukraine immediately after Russia's invasion on 24 February 2022.

In a video shared to social media at the time, Boris Grebenshchikov, a founding father of Russian rock music, declared: "The people who unleashed this war have gone mad. They are a disgrace to Russia."

Similarly, songwriter and activist Vasya Oblomov said: "The war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine is a horror, shame and disgrace." Other artists simply posted a black square to their social media pages as a sign of mourning, or wrote "No to war!".

Threats and harassment soon followed. The artists were blacklisted, their concerts banned in the Russian Federation. And so the mass emigration of musicians began - in Russia, there are two options: stay silent or leave. The pressure was so great that rapper Lugalize, a trailblazer of Russian hip-hop, did not dare to release the pacifist video to his song, 'Mir Vachemu Domu' ('[Peace to your home](#)'), until he'd left the country.

The result is that a whole layer of national musical culture – artists, promoters, journalists and, most importantly, the audience – have fled the country. It’s reminiscent of the scenes a hundred years ago, when hundreds of thousands of representatives of the aristocracy, clergy and intelligentsia left after the revolution.

Below are five of the biggest anti-war songs released by Russian artists over the past 18 months. Their lyrics don’t attempt to solve the question of how to stop the war – instead they ask how and why it was allowed to happen, and how Russian society should live now.

### **‘Vorozhba’ (‘Divination’), Boris Grebenshchikov**

Boris Grebenshchikov, the lead singer of rock band Aquarium, started his career in the early 1970s, taking inspiration from hippie rock and the Woodstock generation.

He has been a vocal pacifist since the Soviet military campaign in Afghanistan in the 1980s, writing many anti-war songs over the past 40 years. Among them is [‘Slova Rastamana’](#) (‘Words of a Rastaman’), which was released in 2005 but was much discussed and quoted after Russia invaded Ukraine. Its lyrics go:

“If you don’t know why you live

This is no reason to shoot explosives

You can shoot right into the heart of your soulmate.”

In 2014, during the Russian Federation’s aggression in Crimea and Donbas, Grebenshchikov made an anti-war appeal and recorded [‘Lyubov vo Vremya Voyny’](#) (‘Love in times of War’), a poignant song dedicated to the events in those regions of Ukraine.

Immediately after 24 February 2022, Grebenshchikov, who was already living abroad at the time, cancelled his upcoming concerts in Russia. Months later, [he took part in a large concert](#) in support of Ukraine at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, along with [Russian rapper Oxxxymiron](#). The event raised €12m. That summer, the Russian authorities cancelled his educational radio programme, Aerostat.

In September, his band released a new album, [‘Dom Vsex Svyatix’](#) (‘House of All Saints’). Only one of the songs on the album was written after the war started – [‘Vorozhba’](#) (‘Divination’) – a folk rock track that describes the war as “black magic” and speaks of a lost future (“There is no more tomorrow”), while criticising the justifications for the invasion:

“Fires are burning in an open field

We didn’t do it, they did.”

In [an interview](#) for an independent Russian publication last year, Grebenshchikov told me: “People are tortured and killed because someone enjoys it, someone benefits from it. Cruelty cannot be justified by anything, by any reasoning.”

### **‘Pokhorony voyny’ (‘Funeral of war’), Yuri Shevchuk and Dmitry Emelyanov**

Yuri Shevchuk, the frontman of DDT, one of Russia's most popular rock bands, wrote the best-known Russian pacifist anthem, '[Ne streliaj!](#)' ('Don't Shoot!'), during the Soviet-Afghanistan war.

Shevchuk has never publicly taken a conservative or a liberal position, instead calling himself a humanist and saying his are universal human values, regardless of politics. Despite this, he is claimed by both liberals and conservatives as one their own - kind of a Russian Bruce Springsteen - with both groups making up his huge audiences in stadiums, the kind of national unity the Kremlin propagandists love to talk about so much.

Shevchuk is such a big lover of his homeland that it is hard to imagine him anywhere else, and unlike many other musicians, he categorically refused to leave the country after it invaded Ukraine last year. But this does not mean he supports the war - in fact, in August 2022, Shevchuk was fined for 'discrediting' the Russian armed forces on stage. He'd told crowds: "The motherland, my friends, is not the president's arse that has to be slobbered and kissed all the time. The motherland is an impoverished old woman at the railway station selling potatoes."

He then published a statement: "I have always been against wars, in any country and at any time. I opposed the wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Abkhazia, Georgia, Ossetia, Karabakh and Iraq. I am also against the ongoing eight-year war in Donbas and the current military operation in Ukraine."

Since then, DDT has been effectively banned from performing. But Shevchuk hasn't stopped making music, recently releasing '[Volki v tire](#)' ('Wolves in the Shooting Range'). The album includes '[Pokhorony voyny](#)' ('Funeral of War'), an unexpectedly positive and bright song with straightforward lyrics and a harmonious tune that is clearly written to be sung in unison in a stadium - although that's currently not an option for Shechuk. It goes:

"When trouble comes to your house  
Don't cry, don't be afraid, don't beg.  
My midnight star  
Shine on the sick world (...)  
Sing a bright song, man  
Sing about love - and it will happen  
With all the land at war  
We'll arrange a funeral."

Through that song, Shevchuk has decided to symbolically bury the war.

### **'Myaso' ('Meat'), Zemfira**

Zemfira became a megastar in the late 1990s, in the era of Russian glam rock then known as rockapops. She never sang about politics but focused on emotions, and the anti-war stance revealed in her music is based on feelings too - an emotional reaction to pain, death and injustice.

Zemfira left Russia almost immediately after 24 February. Her first release after the invasion was a new video for her song '[Ne strelyayte!](#)' ('Don't shoot!'), with footage of the rocket attacks in Ukraine. She then released '[Myaso](#)' ('Meat'), a song about Russia's war in Ukraine that chronicles the transformation of a person into an inhuman substance – meat, or fodder for war. Filled with fear and pain, its lyrics are completely different from the playful music she was making 20 years ago:

“Spring is on the calendar, but in reality

Trenches and long-range high-precision missiles

It's midnight in Mariupol.”

In October 2022, Zemfira's album 'Ot Luki' ('From Luke') came out. It also has plenty of references to the war: a red button, a clip of cartridges, trains from Kyiv to Poland.

The listener feels that a catastrophe has occurred, but fear is missing from the album. Instead, Zemfira's resists war through hedonism, dancing on the edge of the abyss, with – ultimately – the belief that love conquers death. Her sound, which had become quite experimental, returns to pop-rock, which is exactly where she started.

### **'Bezvremene' ('Timelessness'), Vladi**

Rostov rapper Vladi, the lead singer of Kasta, has managed what hardened rockers of the previous generation failed to do. His album, released in December 2022 and immediately banned in Russia, is a large-scale depiction of the disaster of the war, and how it affects Russians emotionally.

In the song 'Burying Ourselves', Vladi reflects on those who support the war. In 'Picture of the World', he describes the colonial past and present of Russia. The line “How the fuck could this happen?” captured the incredulity many Russians felt in the wake of the invasion.

The song 'Timelessness', meanwhile, consists almost entirely of questions that many in Russia are afraid to ask themselves:

“We've crossed a threshold

Which requires a revision of everything along and across:

How to build respect and trust in life?

Why teach children by example?

Humans are the worst animals

(...)

We've crossed the threshold, we have to reconsider

The fact that life is a game, the fact that you're a player

What's a 'people'? What is 'we'?

| Who are 'our people'? It's all outdated now."

### **'Nazad, Rossiya!' ('Back off, Russia!'), Nogu Svelo!**

Few people expected the frontman of rock band Nogu Svelo, Maxim Pokrovsky, known for his fun pop songs with a punk edge, to be an anti-war singer.

In the first months after Russia's invasion, he released a series of songs calling for direct action, devoid of allusions or complicated images: ['Nazad, Rossiya!'](#) ('Back off Russia!'), ['Nam ne nuzhna voina'](#) ('We don't need war!'), ['Pokolenie Z'](#) ('Generation Z'), ['Ukraina!'](#).

'Back off, Russia!' is written in the style of a football chant, but it's a call to Russians to stop the slaughter. The song has an English version - ['Russia, Go Home!'](#). Critics have accused Pokrovsky of creating songs that are too militant and will be quickly forgotten, but he's unfazed - and will continue to include satire, direct accusations against the Kremlin, and words of support for the Ukrainian people in his lyrics. "100% of my musical output is about [the war] Pokrovsky told me in a previous interview. "It's not my main topic but my only one."

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### **Yan Shenkman**

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