

Rother Baron:  
**Russian Anti-War Songs**  
*from Different Musical Genres*

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In Russia, too, there is a strong tradition of anti-militarist thinking and poetry. In music, this is reflected in folk and art songs as well as in the singer-songwriter scene, in rock music and not least in guitar poetry.

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**Cover picture:** Viktor Vasnyetsov (1848 – 1926): Angel hurling lightning bolts in the Apocalypse; sketch for a painting in Kiev's Vladimir Cathedral (1887); Wikimedia Commons

## Preface

### Problematization of War in Folk and Art Songs



In view of the brutal, merciless actions of the Russian army in Ukraine, it is hard to believe – but there is also a rich tradition of anti-war songs in Russia.

Even among Russian folk songs, many focus on the suffering of soldiers during and after the war. It is true that quite a few of them have a patriotic undertone, which implicitly glorifies the suffering of the individual as

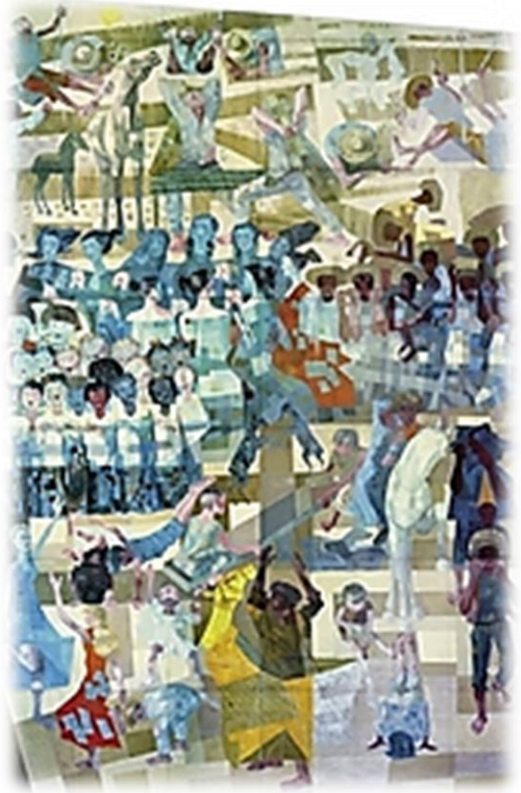
a sacrifice for his nation. Nevertheless, the songs also express the emotional wounds caused by war – even if the impact of the songs is always a question of perspective (see below).

This aspect of folk songs has also been taken up in Russian art songs. For example, a piece from Modest Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death* (to poems by Arseni Golenishchev-Kutuzov) is dedicated to the senselessness of war. The great commander who steps onto the battlefield here as the triumphant victor at the end is none other than – Death.

## Guitar Poetry against the War

In the Soviet Union, anti-war songs first emerged in the so-called "guitar poetry" – as for example in the works of Bulat Okudzhava, Vladimir Vysotsky, Mikhail Antsharov and Alexander Galich.

Since the Soviet regime also derived its legitimacy from the country's military strength, especially the victory over Nazi Germany, most of these songs could for a long time only be distributed on self-copied cassettes, in "magnitisdats" (self-publishing). Nevertheless – or perhaps precisely because of this – the songs achieved such great popularity that some of them are sung like folk songs today.



## Rock Musicians and Singer-Songwriters for Peace

Finally, anti-war songs also exist in Russian rock music, which stepped out of its previous underground existence into the public sphere around the time of perestroika. The songs that critically deal with the current Russian aggression against Ukraine are also rooted in this tradition.

However, the transition from rock music to the singer-songwriter scene is fluid. It is true that musicians like Andrey Makarevich from the cult band *Mashina Vremeni* and Boris Grebenshchikov (with his band *Aquarium*) emerged from the rock scene. But since they write most of their songs themselves, they are also in the tradition of the so-called "avtorskiye pjesni" ( authors' songs).

### Nucleus of a Russia Beyond Putin

In view of the crimes currently committed by the Russian army in Ukraine, the reference to Russian anti-war songs may seem somewhat inopportune to some. However, it should be noted that quite a few major figures in the Russian music scene have come out with songs specifically directed against the war in Ukraine.

In addition, some of the older songs against war and totalitarianism contain surprisingly clear-sighted prognoses about the development of Russia in the post-Soviet era. Again and again, they warn of new authoritarian tendencies and a violent imperialism.

Above all, however, it seems important to focus on that other Russia which longs for a peaceful coexistence of nations just as much as people elsewhere in the world. For without this Russia, there will be no Russian society beyond Putin.

To conclude, a note about the links: The original lyrics of the songs and sound recordings available on the internet are linked after the English adaptation. To make it easier to find



alternatives in the case of deleted videos, song titles and author names are also given in Cyrillic script.

***Pictures:***

*Candido Portinari (1903 – 1962): War and Peace (Dptych); Mural, United Nations, New York (1952 – 1956); Wikimedia Commons*

## 1. A Ballad in Folk Song Style



*Philip Alexius de László (1869 – 1937):  
Falling Leaves (1895)  
Wikimedia Commons*

In a song by Konstantin Simonov, a soldier returns home after twenty years of military service. There, the seemingly familiar proves to be infinitely strange.

**Konstantin Simonov / Zhanna Bichewskaya:**

### **Old Soldier's Song**

For twenty years the soldier had served,  
twenty hard and painful years.  
And since another five long years  
were still ahead of him, his general decided  
to grant him home leave.

So he walked back to his native village,  
his chest glistening with medals, his head grey  
like the plumage of the meadow harrier.  
At the doorstep he caught sight  
of a young woman, barely twenty years old,

her cheeks without a wrinkle,  
her hair unclouded by any grey streak.  
His gaze fixed on the woman,  
the soldier spoke bitterly:

"Apparently you, my wife,  
had a good time –  
you haven't aged at all!"  
Said the young woman,  
crying bitter tears:

"By no means am I your wife!  
I am your daughter, your orphaned daughter.  
For five years my mother,  
your wife, has been lying  
under that birch tree in the damp earth."

So the soldier went into the hut,  
sat down and asked for some wine.  
And when, trembling, he raised the glass  
to his lips, the drops shone  
like tears on his face.

Константин Симонов (Konstantin Simonov):  
[Старая солдатская](#) (Staraya soldatskaya, 1943)

[Song](#), performed by Zhanna Bichevskaya (Жанна Бичевская)

### A Pacifist Song?

A soldier is granted home leave after 20 years of service in the army. Arriving in his home village, he mistakes his daughter, who has grown up in the meantime, for his wife. When he learns that the latter has in fact long since died, he becomes aware of the lost years, and his tears mix with the wine in which he tries to drown his sorrow.

Is it possible that someone who writes, sets to music or sings such a heartbreaking war anecdote would support war and

other forms of violent conflict resolution? Yes, it is – as a closer look at poet and singer will show.

### About Konstantin Simonov

Konstantin Simonov (1915 – 1979), who wrote the song in 1943 to the music of Matwyey Blantyer (Matwei Blanter), worked as an officer in the propaganda department of the Red Army during the Second World War and became a celebrated war correspondent there.

After the war, as editor-in-chief of the journals *Novy Mir* (New World) and *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Literary Gazette) and as vice-president of the Soviet Writers' Union, he ensured that literature remained entirely on the ground of socialist realism and party doctrine. He sharply criticised dissidents. For example, he was one of the co-signers of a defamatory letter against Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 1973.

### About Zhanna Bichevskaya

Zhanna Bichevskaya, born in 1944 and probably the best-known interpreter of the song, advocates not only Pan-Slavism under Russian leadership, but even a missionisation of the whole world by the Russian Orthodox Church. Homosexuality is condemned by her as an attempt by the West to destroy the glorious Russian nation.

The singer is thus completely in line with Putin's pseudo-religious patriotism and imperialism. For this, too, glorifies itself as a crusade against the decadent West.

### Interdependence of Interpretation and Perspective

The biographies of poet and singer hardly serve to authenticate the song's seemingly anti-war message. This, by the way, also applies to the composer: he had written a hymn to Stalin in 1938, at the bloody height of the Stalinist Purges (Chistka).

This shows that the mere description of the suffering that war inflicts on people does not automatically make a song or poem a message of peace. As long as there are people who approve of this suffering as a necessary sacrifice for higher goals, the compassion can always be accompanied by admiration for the martyrdom of the soldier. This is all the more true when war is addressed in such a sentimental way as in Simonov's song.

The question of what conclusions are drawn from a folksong or a folksong-like ballad about war is thus often a matter of perspective. The impact here depends entirely on the respective mindset.

This is also an important consideration for those who explicitly want to advocate for peace with their songs. Unfortunately, a pacifist attitude alone is not enough to convey a clear message of peace with an artistic work. In order to prevent misunderstandings and misuse, the pacifist stance must also be reflected in a correspondingly unambiguous choice of words and artistic design.

For Zhanna Bitchhevskaya's statements on homosexuality, cf. her [appearance on Russian television](#) on July 14, 2011 (*Три веселых буквы. Пусть говорят*), from minute 12.25); on her conviction of the blessed triumphal march of the Russian people, cf. her [Русский марш](#) (*Russian March*).

## 2. Art Song



*Edgar Bundy (1862 – 1922):  
Death, Riding as a General on a Battlefield (1911)  
Wikimedia Commons*



One of the pieces from the cycle *Songs and Dances of Death* by Modest Mussorgsky (1839 – 1881) draws an apocalyptic vision of war. Here, the sole triumphator after a bloody battle is – Death.

**Modest Mussorgsky / Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov:  
The Field Marshal**

The battle rages, the armour gleams,  
greedily howls the ocean of arms.  
Soldiers rush, horses plunge  
into a lava lake of blood.

Noon burns, the battle blazes.  
And even the pale sunset  
is lit by the fire of the fighting,  
fanned by blind rage.

At last the mantle of stars sinks onto the field,  
and the battle spook is swallowed by the night.  
Everything falls silent. Only a single moan  
rises harshly up into the gloomy haze.

In the laurel wreath of the moon  
the goddess of death rides onto the field.  
Her bony garment shines all white  
in the sallow glow of her nocturnal companion.

Proudly she rides across the field,  
like a field marshal after a victorious battle,  
devoutly listening to silent cries  
and speechless prayers.

At the top of the hill she pauses,  
looks around – and smiles.  
Then she raises her fateful voice  
above the plain of blood:

"The battle is over – and I am the victress!  
Fighting, all of you have knelt before me.  
Life has drawn you apart – I have reconciled you.  
So come on, you dead warriors, line up peacefully before me!

Solemnly you shall march past me,  
so that I may count my armies.  
Then your bones can recover  
from the struggle of life in the lap of the earth.

Year after year will pass over you,  
all memory of you will fade away –  
only I will not forget! Eternally I shall  
celebrate a feast on your bones at midnight!

Stomping I will dance on the damp earth.  
Your bones shall never leave  
the shadow of the grave! Forever you shall rest  
in the earth as my retinue!"



Модест  
Мусоргский  
(Modest Mus-  
sorgsky) /  
Арсений  
Голенищев-  
Кутузов (Arseny  
Golenishchew-  
Kutuzov):



[Полководец](#) (Polkovodyets); 1875 (poem) und 1877 (song)

In the [poem version](#) (*Торжество смерти / Torzhestvo smyerti* – The Triumph / Celebration of Death), instead of the first two stanzas of the song, the following verses are at the beginning:

The battle rages all day long.  
The sunlight blurs in the battle haze,  
dust and groaning fill the air,  
echoing from every hill. No one is victorious.

[Performance of the song](#) by Galina Vishnevskaya (Галина Вишневская; vocals) and Mstislav Rostropovich (Мстислав Ростропович; piano); Paris, January 20, 1970

## A Russian Dance of Death

The cycle *Songs and Dances of Death* by the Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky (1839 – 1881) consists of four songs, the first three of which were created in 1875 and the fourth in 1877. The texts were provided by Mussorgsky's friend Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov (1848 – 1913).

All the songs testify to the unrestricted power of death. The title was added only after the composer's death. Mussorgsky himself grouped the songs under the term "Death Dance Songs". They were not premiered until 1962, after an arrangement by Dmitri Shostakovich.

As in the medieval Dances of Death, Death macabrely dresses itself in the garments of the living in the songs. Its ambush-like, insidious power and the amorality resulting from the absence of any distinction between its victims are thus brought to the fore in a particularly drastic way.

It is important to note that "death" is feminine in Russian – which is why Mussorgsky initially wanted to call the cycle simply "She". In this way, the painful dissonance between the reality of death and faithfully caring, helping figures – as whose macabre caricature Death appears – becomes even more evident.

## The Single Songs of the Cycle

In the opening piece (*Колыбельная/Kolybelnaja* – Lullaby), Death sings a lullaby to a dying child. In a duet with Death, the mother tries in vain to stop Death from his ominous song.

In the second song (*Серенада/Serenada* – Little Serenade), Death slips into the guise of a knight who promises salvation to a young woman suffering from fever. Of course, in the arms of Death, this rescue is tantamount to her end.

In the third song of the cycle – *Trepak* –, Death encourages a tired peasant, lost in the forest during a snowstorm, to dance. When he gets tired of this, Death prepares a bed of snow for him.

The final piece of the cycle (*Полководец/Polkowodjets* – The Field Marshal) shows Death as the victorious commander after a battle: he is the real winner, no matter which secular army commander proclaims himself the victor after the battle. And like a commander – it can be concluded –, Death also rides through history sweeping away peoples and cultures.

## Structure of the Poem *The Field Marshal*

The text first paints the battle itself in gloomy colours. At the same time, the fighting is deliberately depicted in an impersonal way. The focus is not on the individual soldiers, but on the wave of violence that drives them forward.

This description logically leads to the appearance of Death – as the actual ruler over the entire event. All combatants have served him equally, no matter what uniform they wear.

Thus he – or, taking into account the feminine genus of "death" in Russian, she – praises the soldiers for bowing down before him/her while fighting. As a result of their actions, they must eternally serve their new master, who sees his new armies marching before him with satisfaction.

As in the other songs of the cycle, the special effect of the death figure here again results from the fact that it apes humanity. For Death, or the Goddess of Death, promises the fallen soldiers precisely what they will be denied by their fellow human beings: that they will not be forgotten.

What in the world of the living would be connected with the memory of concrete people, however, means the exact opposite in the logic of death: eternal damnation, in the sense of being irrevocably walled into the earth. Consequently, the Goddess of Death dances on the graves of the deceased in the end in order to fix the earth on them forever.

It is precisely this complete reversal of all norms, as the decisive characteristic of death, that is also the central feature of war. Thus the macabre imitation of human morality by Death is at the same time a radical rejection of all kinds of violent conflict resolution.

## Function of the Music in the Song

In the introductory description of the battle, the musical background is initially very vibrant. The more clearly the text emphasises the futility of the battle, however, the more the music shifts to subdued sounds.

This "Moderato assai" is suddenly interrupted by a more erratic rhythm. It heralds the approach of death on his warhorse.

The speech of Death is accompanied by a funeral march. Interestingly, Mussorgsky bases this on the Polish independence hymn *Z dymem pożarów* (With the Smoke of Fires). By presenting freedom as "liberation from life", Death's monologue thus takes on an ironic, almost sarcastic connotation.

The final dance of Death on the graves of the deceased, with which they are to be "stomped" into the earth forever, finds a musical equivalent in correspondingly violent piano chords played with both hands. The sinking of the dead soldiers into the earth is indicated by the change to a lower octave, in which the final fortissimo is played.

## About Galina Vishnevskaya and Mstislav Rostropovich

The soprano Galina Vishnevskaya (1926 – 2012) and her husband, the cellist, pianist, conductor and composer Mstislav Rostropovich (1927 – 2007), were among the most important representatives of the opposition in the Soviet Union. The couple not only hosted the ostracised Nobel Prize winner for literature Alexander Solzhenitsyn, but also defended this in public statements.



Both of them combined their musical activities with a committed advocacy of peace and international understanding. This was one of the reasons for her harassment by the authorities.

In 1962, for example, Vishnevskaya was banned from performing in Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*. Britten had invited three vocal soloists from warring nations of the Second World War to perform together as a sign of reconciliation. Rostropovich had to leave a recording of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Tosca* with the Moscow Bolshoi Ensemble unfinished in 1974 because the authorities withdrew his permission to conduct the orchestra.

In the face of these reprisals, the couple emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1974. Four years later, both were stripped of



their Soviet citizenship. In 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev offered them readmission to the Soviet Union, but they refused. They remained stateless, but lived in Russia again temporarily.

Both continued their careers in the West. Rostropovich was principal conductor of the Washington National Symphony Orchestra from 1977 to 1994. Legendary is his performance as a cellist at the Berlin Wall, where he gave a concert for reunification on November 11, 1989, shortly after the opening of the border.

*For the third song of the cycle (**Trepak**) a [separate article](#) can be found on LiteraturPlanet.*

## Links

Biography of Modest Mussorgsky by Steve Shelokhonov on [IMDb](#) (Internet Movie Database) and (in more detail) by Michael Ray on [Britannica.com](#).

[Biography of Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov](#) on persona.ru.

A detailed analysis of Mussorgsky's song cycle can be found in:

Fuh, Jason: [Musical Means in Mussorgsky's Songs and Dances of Death](#): A Singer's Study Guide. Ohio 2017: Ohio State University (D.M.A. Document); especially on *Polkowodjets / The Field Marshal* p. 66 – 75.

**Pictures:** 1. Modest Mussorgsky (photo, top left, 1865); 2. Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov (photo, top right, 1870s); 3. Stanley Wolfson: Galina Vishnevskaya and Mstislav Rostropovich; Washington, Library of Congress (all Wikimedia Commons).

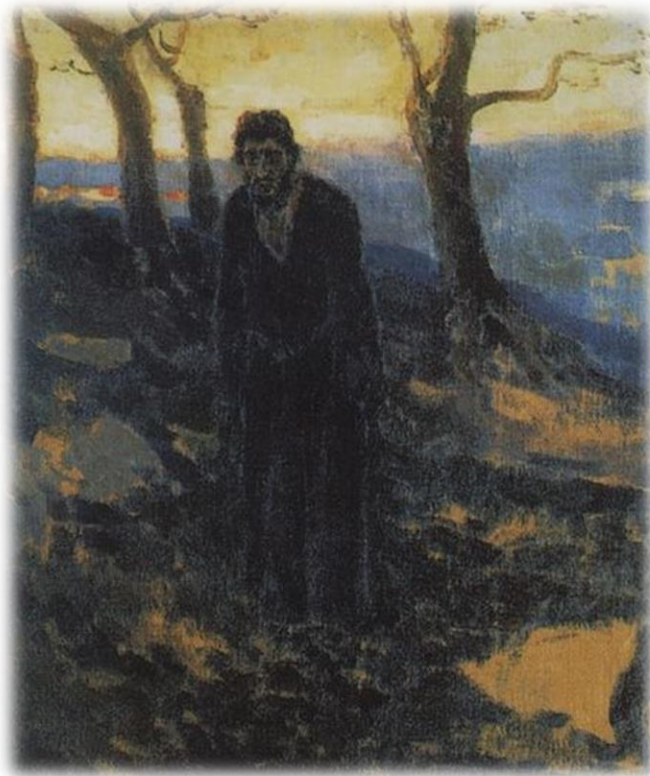
### 3. Guitar Poetry



*Music close to the people: Bulat Okudzhava (playing guitar)  
and Vladimir Vysotsky (in the back on the left)*

## Self-Deception as a Seed of War

In just a few words, the Russian poet Bulat Okudzhava outlines in one of his most famous songs how blindness can end in deadly self-deception. The song can also be related to the current war in Ukraine.



*Nikolai Nikolayevich Ge (1831 – 1894): Judas (ca. 1880)*  
*Wikimedia Commons*

**Bulat Okudzhava:**  
**Little Song About My Life [And the First Love ...]**

And the first love – it burns the heart.  
And the second love – it snuggles up to the first one.  
Well, and the third love – the key trembles in the lock,  
the key trembles in the lock, the suitcase is in the hand.

And the first war – it is nobody's fault.  
And the second war – it is somebody's fault.  
And the third war – it is all my fault,  
and my fault – it is plain for all to see.

And the first betrayal – fog in the twilight.  
And the second betrayal – drunken staggering.  
And the third betrayal – it is darker than the night,  
it is darker than the night, it is worse than war.

Булат Окуджава (Bulat Okudzhava):  
[Песенка о моей жизни](#) (Pyesyenka o moyey zhizni: Little Song  
about my life) / А как первая любовь (A kak pyervaya lyubov:  
Und die erste Liebe ...); 1957 – 1961

[Sound recording](#)

## Russian Guitar Poetry as Sung Resistance



Bulat Okudzhava (1924 – 1997) is considered one of the most important representatives of Russian guitar poetry. As he himself explains, guitar poetry was "born in Moscow kitchens" in the 1950s and 1960s, where it was performed "in a close circle of like-minded people".

With its "claim to (...) think independently and openly express rejection of orthodox ideology," guitar poetry, according to Okudzhava, has unleashed an "explosive charge of civil courage."

For this reason, it was "persecuted by power, but revered by the persecuted".

According to Okudzhava, the "avtorskiye pyesni" (authors' songs) performed to the guitar were not songs in the usual sense, but rather "a method of reciting poetry, a means of making one's commitment accessible".

In addition, the presentation of the texts in the form of songs also facilitated the dissemination of critical ideas. This was done through "magnitizdat", the independent copying of music on tapes – as a counterpart to "samizdat", the informal printing of literary works.

Beyond that, the songs could also be spread simply by singing together. Here, the guitar poets benefited from the fact that singing together is a much more natural part of the social cul-

ture in Russia than in other countries, where singing culture is more associated with karaoke or fan and party songs.

### **Juxtaposition of the Frenzy of Love and the Frenzy of War**

Okudzhava's short text has become known both untitled and under the title *Pyessenka o moyey Zhizni* (Little Song about my life). This underlines the author's special relationship to the text. After all, he had to witness at the age of just 14 how his (Georgian) father was shot as a Trotskyist renegade despite being actively engaged in the Communist Party, and how his (Armenian) mother was sent to a labour prison camp.

Okudzhava, who was sent to the front four years later at the age of 18, thus experienced the deadly potential of betrayal first-hand. This is also the focus of the *Song about my Life*.

The text is based on a juxtaposition of the frenzy of love and the frenzy of war: Just like some people rush headlong into the first love, we may also initially affirm war out of an adolescent-passionate heroism. In this sense, the "first war", like the "first love," simply 'happens' without anyone being to blame for it.

### **When Blind Frenzy Results in Self-Delusion**

If, however, the war continues, if the first act of war leads to further acts of war so that the war becomes a permanent state of being, this can no longer be downplayed as a short upsurge of emotions in a quarrel between friends. Since the war must then be deliberately fuelled, concrete culprits can be identified.

If this does not happen and the war nevertheless continues or establishes itself as a belligerent attitude on the part of the state, it is the fault of each individual if they do not oppose it.

These reflections are directly linked to the third stanza, which is about "obman". Literally, this means "fraud". In the context of the poem, however, it is more likely to be understood in the sense of self-deception, which leads to betrayal of oneself and one's own ideals. Again, parallels can be drawn to love: A love that does not become aware of itself – and thus does not mean the concrete other on whom it ignites – becomes self-love and thus self-deception or betrayal of oneself and others.

The same applies to an approach to war that remains on an emotional-pubescent level and does not realise the long-term consequences of the spiral of violence. This, too, appears as a betrayal of oneself and of the ideal of humanity. In the beginning, this self-deception may be due to a small, excusable weakness, an inebriated state and the resulting "drunken staggering". As a permanent state, however, it is "more terrible than war", since it makes its domination possible in the first place.

### **On the Topicality of the Song 1: the Inner-Russian Perspective**

The song can be applied both to the situation in Russia itself and to the West's way of dealing with the current Kremlin regime.

As far as the internal Russian perspective is concerned, we must first of all bear in mind that the Putinists have been pursuing a bellicose policy for a very long time. Already in the Chechen war

in the 1990s, this was accompanied by an explicit devaluation of other peoples – in this case the "Caucasian" peoples. The main legitimising narrative here, however, was the alleged fight against terror.

With the war against Georgia in 2008 and especially with the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of the Donbass, the motive of defence against terror was increasingly replaced by a pan-Slavic narrative. Along with this, the focus was increasingly on restoring Russia's imperial greatness, which had been lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Judging from Okudzava's song, an initially approving attitude to the bellicose policy might be, if not excusable, at least understandable. Disillusioned with Western predatory capitalism, many in Russia were looking for a new national orientation point in the late 1990s. It was therefore comprehensible that some sought refuge in the imperial castle in the air built by Putin.

But the more external aggression went hand in hand with internal oppression, the more dangerous it became to agree to the new tsar's policies. Those who did not open their eyes now were harming themselves and others.

This is all the more true against the backdrop of the current invasion of Ukraine. Whoever continues to deny or even approve of the violent consequences of the Kremlin's policies is complicit in the crimes of the regime.

## **On the Topicality of the Song 2: the Extra-Russian Perspective**



With regard to the West's attitude towards Putin's policy, a similar three-stage development can be identified.

In the beginning, there was the honeymoon with the new Russian leader. Western countries were only too willing to believe that the Kremlin ruler, who still seemed young and dynamic at the beginning of the millennium, wanted to fight against Islamist terrorists like themselves. Thus, his secret service background was benevolently ignored.

It is true that the increasingly aggressive behaviour of the Kremlin regime towards neighbouring states and the ever more repressive policies within the country led to a gradual alienation from the supposed new ally in the East. It was not until the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, though, that a substantial rethink took place.

However, during the honeymoon period with the current autocrat, close economic and, in particular, energy supply ties had developed with Russia. Until the current escalation of violence, this made many hesitant to distance themselves from the Kremlin's authoritarian-imperial policies.

Here, too, it can be stated unequivocally: The initial blindness to the true intentions of the new Kremlin leadership may have been understandable against the background of the desire for peaceful relations with the powerful neighbour in the East. However, anyone who still did not take a firm stand against the aggressive policies of the Kremlin regime after 2014 and tried to oppose it became complicit in the war that the autocrat and his henchmen – documented in detail by Western intelligence services – were preparing.

As in Okudzhava's song, the Western states can thus say that this war is "all their fault" – and that this "fault is plain for all to see". What is more, their fault is tantamount to a betrayal of everything on which Western democracies are theoretically based – especially the idea of universal, indivisible human rights.

***Okudzhava quotes taken from:***

*Okudzhava, Bulat: Geleitwort. In: Lebedewa, Katja: Komm Gitarre, mach mich frei! Russische Gitarrenlyrik in der Opposition, p. 7 f. Berlin 1992: edition q.*

*[Foreword. In: Lebedeva, Katya: Come on, Guitar, Set Me Free! Russian Guitar Poetry in Resistance, p. 7 f. Berlin 1992: edition q.]*

***Picture:*** Hartmut Reiche: Bulat Okudzhava on December 2, 1976 during a performance in the (East) Berlin Palace of the Republic (Federal Archive / Wikimedia Commons)

## The Transformation of the Tank

Mikhail Antcharov's *Ballad about the T-34 Tank* describes a miraculous transformation from the tank's perspective: a killing machine suddenly stops in its actions after an ostensible banality has made it realise the value of life.



*Kei: War memorial in Pavlodar, Kazakhstan.  
(Wikimedia Commons, modified)*

**Mikhail Ancharov:**  
**Ballad about the T-34 Tank Standing on a Beautiful High  
Pedestal in a Foreign City**

Ahead of the columns  
I stormed into the battles.  
An elephant of steel,  
I cut my own way  
through the thick of battle.

Like rolling thunder I moved ahead,  
transforming the rage in my slit of vision  
into a blow of fate.  
Highways turned to ashes,  
tracks writhed like bloody bandages  
under my caterpillar vortex.

Every dungeon I blew up,  
I was stronger than all the headquarters,  
I, an empty room, deserted  
like a forgotten coffin.

Mines I crushed like lice,  
bunkers like turtle shells.  
Like pus bags they burst open.  
Shattering skulls trembled on my way,  
as I penetrated the deepest caves.

But then I saw, amidst all the rubble  
and the broken buildings,

a doll, arms outstretched,  
calling out for a hug,  
for the love of another  
who was loved by others.

My hatch cap quivered,  
the oil boiled like blood in my belly –  
but a doll I could not overrun.  
That's when they killed me.

Now I sit enthroned  
among the rustling grasses  
high above the city,  
like Christ  
conquering death in death.

Blood drips from my sides,  
I am frozen  
like a battle from whose night  
a light emerges – the light  
that the doll has revealed to me.

Михаил Анчаров (Mikhail Ancharov): [Баллада о танке Т-34, который стоит в чужом городе на высоком красивом постаменте](#) (Ballada o tankye T-34, kotory stoít v chuzhom gorodye na vyssokom krassivom postamyentye; 1965)

[Sound recording](#)

## An Author with a Penchant for the Fantastic



Like Bulat Okudzhava, Mikhail Ancharov (1923 – 1990) also knew the war from his own experience. In July 1941, after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, he volunteered to defend his country. However, he was not deployed to the Western Front, but – after studying Japanese and Chinese at the Red Army's Foreign

Language Institute – was sent to Manchuria as an interpreter in the war against Japan.

After the war, Ancharov once again devoted more time to his artistic interests. He studied painting at the Surikov State Art Institute in Moscow and attended a course for scriptwriters.

Ancharov not only wrote numerous scripts for film and television, but also gained a reputation as an author of literary works. His works often had a surrealist-fantastic tendency. This is reflected in his novels as well as in his songs, which also often contain fantastic elements.

## A Tank Tells of Its Awakening

Ancharov's penchant for the fantastic is also evident in his *Ballad about the tanker T-34* – for it is the tank itself from whose perspective the events are described here. Discarded, a

memorial of a bygone era, it stands on a pedestal above the hills of an unknown city and thinks back to its active time.

At first, the tank's memories are anything but peaceful. He recalls the days when he rolled over everything in his path like a "steel elephant". Nothing could stop him, everything was crushed indiscriminately by him.

But then he came across something quite banal, ordinary, which suddenly made him realise the power of love. This brought him to his senses and made him stop in his actions.

### **Love is Stronger than Hate – but Only if Everyone Follows It**

The fact that the tank is itself destroyed as a result of his sudden refusal to destroy gives the song a double punch line. On the one hand, it can be read as proof that the power of love can stop even the most merciless killing machinery at any time.

On the other hand, however, the fate of the tank also suggests that it is not enough if only a few individuals recognise the senselessness and godlessness of bellicose murder – because they themselves can then be overrun by others who ensure that the slaughter continues.

In this case, the sudden sense of compassion, as in the case of the scrapped tank, is nothing but a memorial for a different world and a different way of dealing with each other.

#### ***Picture:***

*Mikhail Ancharov (screenshot from a Youtube video)*

## When Tears No Longer Quench the Grief

The poem *Mass Graves* by Vladimir Vysotsky, written in 1963, referred at the time to Russian victims in the Second World War. Today, however, we associate it with mass graves caused by Russia itself.



*Adrian Hill (1895 – 1977):  
Ruins between Bernafay Wood and Maricourt (1918)  
London, Imperial War Museums (Wikimedia Commons)*



Vladimir Vysotsky:  
Mass Graves

No crosses can be seen on mass graves,  
here you don't hear widows crying.  
Only flower bunches wither in the sun,  
a grave light tells lies of eternity.

The earth, once a cornucopia of life,  
is smothered here by slabs of stone.  
The single lives, colourful and unbound –  
**one** fate binds them to this place.

Immersed in the flickering grave light,  
you stare at burning cities,  
burning houses and parliaments,  
burning soldiers' hearts.

No, there are no widows crying here.  
Hardened are the hearts of those  
who stand here in silence. No cross  
breaks through this desert of death.

Владимир Высоцкий (Vladimir Vysotsky):  
[Братские могилы](#) (Bratskiye Mogily)

[Album version](#) on useraudio.net

[Live recording](#) on YouTube

## A Strange Birthday Serenade



Moscow, June 22, 1963: Birthday party for Semyon Vysotsky, the father of Vladimir Vysotsky. The "zakuski", the sumptuous appetiser buffet, has long since been cleared, even the second dish is coming to an end. Before the birthday cake is served, Vladimir Vysotsky, then 25 years old, stands up and serenates his father with the song "Bratskiye Mogily" (Mass Graves, literally "Brotherly Graves"), which he has just written.

A mood killer? Didn't his father, a Red Army officer, have to take the song as an insult?

The answer is a double "Nyet". In Russia it is quite common to stir a good dash of sentimentality into the party soup at an advanced hour with appropriate songs. And of course, those present at the performance were not thinking of the mass graves resulting from the Stalinist terror at the time of the "Great Purge" in the 1930s.

Likewise, the mass graves in other countries will not have been high on the list of associations – as for example the mass graves in Ukraine that followed the ruthlessly enforced collectivisation in agriculture in the early 1930s. The Ukrainian trauma of the "Holodomor" (death/extermination by hunger), which is being

terribly continued in the current mass murder in Ukraine, was probably not present in the minds of the celebrating community back then.

No, those present at the time will have been thinking above all of their own sacrifices, the victims the Russian people had to mourn in the "Great Patriotic War" against Nazi Germany. Vysotsky's father was thus indirectly honoured by the song as a hero who had been prepared to defend his homeland even by sacrificing his own life if necessary.

### **A Song between War Commemoration and Militaristic Patriotism**

However, the fact that the song was well received at a birthday party did not mean that it could also pass Soviet censorship. The reason for this was the official party doctrine, which did not focus on the suffering of the fallen and their survivors, but on the triumphant frenzy following the victory in the war. Against this backdrop, Vysotsky's song came under suspicion of undermining military morale.

Nevertheless, the song soon found its way into the public domain thanks to the film *Я родом из детства* (Ja rodom s djetsvo – I come from childhood, 1966). This was a kind of Soviet coming-of-age film: two boys living in a town near the front have to face the suffering of war while at the same time searching for their own place in life.

Vysotsky's song about the mass graves suited this film so well that the director, Viktor Turov, wanted to integrate it into the

plot. This was initially forbidden by the censorship authorities, but in the end a compromise was found. The director was given permission to include the last two strophes of the song in the film, albeit in the version of a different performer.

In this way, the song gained great popularity, unlike most of Vysotsky's other songs, was subsequently allowed to be performed and distributed in public.

### Vysotsky's Ambivalent Attitude Towards War

With its integration into a patriotic film, the song testifies to Vysotsky's ambivalent attitude towards war. Although he certainly was not a supporter of Soviet militarism, he was not a pacifist either. This is also expressed in the different versions of *Bratskije Mogily*. Some emphasise more the patriotic aspect of sacrificing one's own life, others rather the suffering of those left behind.

In view of the current situation, in which the Russian army itself is sowing mass graves in a neighbouring country, any patriotic undertone is, of course, out of the question. The English adaptation of the text therefore focuses generally on the horror of the mass graves, which is beyond the capacity of human suffering.

### Short Biography of Vysotsky

Vladimir Vysotsky attended the acting school of the Moscow Art Theatre after leaving school. From 1964 he worked at the

Taganka Theatre in Moscow and at the same time began a career as a film actor.

Vysotsky also used the popularity he gained in this way to disseminate his poems. Set to music, some of them found their way into films in which the author took part.

Of course, there were also songs that Vysotsky – like other guitar poets – could only perform in small circles. His works were not consistently critical of the regime, but they repeatedly put their finger in the wound of social taboos. One example of this was Soviet anti-Semitism, which the singer – as the son of a Jewish father – probably knew from his own experience.

As an actor, Vysotsky's star role was Hamlet. In his view, the tragedy of Hamlet consisted in the compulsion to follow a course of action that is rejected in one's innermost being. This includes not being able to break away from conventions that, for example, make violent forms of conflict resolution acceptable.

Far from being averse to alcohol and cigarettes, Vysotsky died at the early age of 42. Although not reported in the state media, his death provoked a nationwide wave of mourning.

The [\*history of the song Bratskiye Mogily\*](#) is documented on ***song-story.ru*** (Russian). The website also provides links to the different versions of the song, including the version from the film *Ja rodom s djetsvo* (I come from childhood).

**Picture:**

*Igor Palmin: Vladimir Vysotsky, April 1979 (Wikimedia Commons)*

## 4. Rock Music



*Reactor 691: The band Mashina Vremeni performing at the Moscow Ice Palace, 2018 (on the video cube: band leader Andrey Makarevich)*  
*Wikimedia Commons*

## The Self-Feeding War

A song by the Russian cult band Mashina Vremeni revolves around the difficulty of stopping the machinery of war once it has been set in motion.



*Josef Mandl: Triumphator (1916)*  
*Wikimedia Commons*

**Mashina Vremeni:  
I am so Tired of War!**

Marching, we trample down the paths,  
our souls attuned to battle.  
Awakening, I listen for gunshots –  
and am alarmed when none is heard.  
A false peace in a fragile world:  
Time to take off my boots and rest!  
But some smug son of a bitch  
calls me to arms again on TV.

I am so tired of war!  
I long for home, for my wife and children!  
But my house is burnt down,  
and war doesn't give birth to children.  
Everything has been buried by war,  
long since the true commander.

Every morning, tidings of victory,  
every evening a salute to heaven.  
But where do those children come from  
with the wolfish lead in their eyes?  
As soon as you've had enough  
of the collapsing skies  
and the exploding earth,  
the next horde is already rolling towards you,  
headed by a new leader's lance.

I am so tired of war ...



Машина Времени (Mashina Vremeni): [Я так устал на войне](#)

Lyrics: Andrey Makarevich and Alexander Kutikov

Music: Andrey Makarevich

Album: Часы и Знаки (Hours and Signs, 1999)

[Album version](#)

[Live recording](#) (1999)

## Rebellious Rock Music

Moscow 1968: While the Western youth celebrate their freedom at festivals like the legendary mega-party in Woodstock and also express it politically in the student movement, in Russia the brief thaw period at the beginning of the Khrushchev era has long since been displaced by the leaden Brezhnev era. Those who now still stand up for freedom rights suffer the same fate as the people in Czechoslovakia, where the Prague Spring is crushed by Soviet tanks.

However, Russian youths at that time had the same needs as their peers in the West. They too wanted to try out their strengths, push their limits, oppose their parents' generation. Given the lack of opportunities for political protest, music played a key role in this.

It is true that rock music was considered an expression of Western decadence in the Soviet Union. But unlike political activity, music could only be banned and controlled to a limited

extent. As a result, at least in small circles, experimenting with Western music styles was possible. The aura of the proscribed and disreputable made it all the more attractive for young people.

## The Nucleus of Russian Rock Music

This is also the background to the founding of the band with the telling name *The Kids*, which the then 15-year-old Andrey Makarevich founded in 1968 with a few other young people from his school. A year later, the band *Mashina Vremeni* (Time Machine) emerged from this – initially in the plural form (*The Time Machines*), inspired by bands like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.

In the beginning, the band mainly recorded cover versions of English songs. But after a while, they also wrote their own songs. In the process, the music project increasingly developed into a catalyst for Soviet underground music. Thus, it also became a nucleus for other bands. The equally legendary music group *Voskreseniye* (Resurrection), for instance, was founded by musicians who had initially worked with *Mashina Vremeni*.

In the course of the 1970s, the band's popularity grew rapidly. A first peak of fame was reached in 1980, when their song *Povorot* (bend/turn) became one of the biggest successes in Russian music history.

For 13 months – from November 1979 to November 1980 – the song was on the Russian charts, including seven months at No. 1. The song encouraged listeners to fearlessly face the "new

turn", understood in the sense of a turning point in their lives. In retrospect, it thus appears as a kind of prelude to perestroika, the foreshadowing of which it conclusively captured.

### Symbol for the Pursuit of Freedom

However, the wind of freedom that the Kremlin had allowed to blow through the country in the context of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow soon proved to be nothing but a lukewarm breeze. *Mashina Vremeni* had to continue to struggle along as an underground band. It was not until 1987, 18 years after their foundation, that the band was permitted to release their first album, *Reki i Mosty* (Rivers and Bridges).

On the other hand, it was precisely because of their long underground history that the band became a symbol of the striving for freedom for many in the Soviet Union. Accordingly, the group remained popular even after the collapse of the USSR. In 1994 and 2004, they celebrated both their 25th and 35th anniversaries with large concerts on Moscow's Red Square. Even Dmitry Medvedyev, later Putin's placeholder president, outed himself as a fan of the band at the time.

The turning point came in 2014, when the band gave a concert for Ukrainian internally displaced persons after the annexation of Crimea and the de facto occupation of parts of eastern Ukraine in the Donbass. As a result, the band members were heavily attacked by Kremlin-affiliated media and politicians. Makarevich's portrait – like that of Yuri Shevchuk, the founder of the rock band DDT – appeared on posters defaming oppo-

nents of the regime, in reference to a Putin speech, with the words: "Fifth column! Strangers among us! They support the junta in Ukraine!"

In this context, the subliminal antisemitism in Russian Society may also have played a role: Makarevich's mother has Jewish roots. This, however, also made it easier for him to emigrate to Israel, where he lives today – together with his Ukrainian-born wife.

### Prophetic Warning of a New Bellicose Leader

In 1999, *Mashina Vremeni* published the song *Я так устал на войне* (Ja tak ustal na woinje: I am so tired of war). Against the background of the Russian army's war against Ukraine, the song has acquired new relevance in several respects.

Written from the perspective of a simple soldier, the text describes the difficulty of stopping the machinery of war once it has been set in motion. Not only do those who are caught up in the harness of war eventually get so entangled in it that they can no longer help but think in terms of violence and counter-violence. The growing generation, too, is infected with the logic of hatred, violence and revenge.

Both create the breeding ground for more and more new "smug bastards" who propagate the dirty craft of war in their dapper business suits.

Published a year before the beginning of Vladimir Putin's presidency, the song cannot be directly related to him. Nevertheless, it points in an almost prophetic way to Putin's authori-

tarian rule. Thus, at the end, the lyrics explicitly warn of a new "Lenin", as a symbol for a leader who will awaken the violent potential of the people and build a new war regime on it.

## An Anthem of the Russian Peace Movement

Yuri Shevchuk's song *Nye strelyaj* (Don't shoot!) was originally a musical protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Today it is generally a symbol of commitment against the war.



*Fortepan.hu: Boy with slingshot*  
*Wikimedia Commons*

**Yuri Shewchuk and the Band DDT:**  
**Don't shoot!**

"Don't shoot at sparrows just for fun,  
Do not point your slingshot  
at innocent pigeons!  
It's no good boasting  
of hitting living targets flawlessly!"

On countless shooting galleries  
you demonstrated your shooting skills  
and won each and every prize.  
Smiling, you hit the target,  
almost without looking,  
as a radiant child of fortune.

Don't shoot!  
Don't shoot!  
Don't shoot!  
Don't shoot!  
Don't shoot!

And then his dream came true:  
He rode into the eye of the hurricane,  
his playful shooting turned serious.  
But after the hurricane spat him out,  
he avoided the shooting galleries.

When he heard people talking  
of shooting and of war,  
he drowned his memories in wine.  
And always he saw before him that boy  
who had once begged him so fervently:

Don't shoot!  
Don't shoot!  
Don't shoot!  
Don't shoot!  
Don't shoot!

Юрий Шевчук (Yuri Shewchuk) and DDT:  
[Не стреляй](#) (Nye strelyaj)

[Live in Moscow](#), 2003





## "Jesus was a Hippie"

Born in 1957 in Magadan in the Far East, Yuri Shevchuk spent his childhood and youth in three different provinces of the former Soviet Union. The family moved from Magadan to the Caucasian region of Kabardino-Balkaria in 1964 and finally to Ufa, the capital of Bashkortostan (Bashkiria), in 1970.

After studying at the local teacher training college, Shevchuk first taught art at a village school for three years. Back in Ufa, he founded the band DDT in 1981, with which he has recorded his songs in different formations to this day.

Even during his school years, the musician displayed a rebellious spirit. As an eighth-grader, he had to undergo police interrogation after he, a committed Christian, had added the words "Jesus was a hippie" to a drawing during painting lessons. This is in line with his later public outrage about the Russian Orthodox Church's support for the Putin regime [1].

## Fearless Critic of the Putin Regime

After the turn of the millennium, Shevchuk became one of Vladimir Putin's most prominent and fearless critics. As early as 2004, he released a song satirising Putin's self-stylisation as a sort of macho saviour.

The song picks up on Putin's quirk of presenting himself in photos as a Russian version of the lonesome cowboy: on the hunt, with a motorbike gang or bare-chested on a horse. This is

linked to the narrative of the holy saviour of the fatherland, put into the world by Putin with the blessing of the Moscow Patriarchate.

In the song, Putin rides through the country "on a silver steed" as a cross between Superman and Father Christmas. Heroically, he destroys "all the bandits" and pours plenty of vodka for all the workers. Like any true saint, he hardly sleeps – and when he does, it's only to mortify himself on a board of nails. In a sarcastic reversal of the Kremlin kleptocracy, the Saviour Tsar is praised for feeding only on bread and water so as not to deprive anyone of anything [2].

Shevchuk was also at the forefront of demonstrations during the March of Dissidents or "Non-Consenters" (Nyesoglasnikh), which briefly turned into mass protests against the regime in 2008. In May 2010, he stood up to Putin in a televised debate and publicly criticised the prevailing political conditions [3].

After Shevchuk had also taken a stand against the annexation of Crimea in 2014, his portrait appeared on posters with the signature "Fifth Column! Strangers among us! They support the junta in Ukraine!" [4]

### **"Home is not the President's Ass"**

However, this public stigmatisation as an enemy of the people could not stop the artist from clearly speaking out against the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. During a performance with his band DDT in Ufa, he called out to the audience, accompanied by loud applause:

*"People are being killed in Ukraine, our boys are dying there too. For what? What are the goals, my friends? Again, young people are being killed – Russia's youth as well as Ukraine's. Old people, women and children are also dying. For what? For some Napoleonic plans of the next Caesar? Is that what it's all about?"*

And after a short pause:

*"Home, my friends, is not the president's ass that you have to kiss all the time. Home – that's the poor grandmother at the station selling potatoes." [5]*

It is probably only thanks to Shevchuk's great popularity in Russia that he was not immediately sent to a penal camp for these remarks. However, they did earn him a fine and a permanent ban on performances in Russia [6].

### **Musical Protest against the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan**

The song *Nye strelyaj* (Don't shoot!) was written by Shevchuk in 1980 as a reaction to the invasion of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. As he himself reports, a friend who had taken part in the military intervention had opened his eyes to the brutal reality of this war, which was presented in the Soviet media as a purely humanitarian mission [7].

The contrast between objective reality and medial or subjective perception is also reflected in the song. It is about a boy who is admonished by a comrade not to aim at helpless birds with his slingshot just for fun. Only when the supposed fun turns serious

and the boy has to shoot at other people in war does he realise that his comrade was right.

First released in 1982 – as part of a handmade cassette album – the song was initially received controversially in the Soviet Union. Although it won an award at the *Golden Tuning Fork* music festival, it was cut from the associated television recording.

### A Song as a Symbol of Peace



However, the partial censorship of the song could not prevent it from becoming a kind of anthem of the Russian peace movement. Shevchuk himself sang the song repeatedly at concerts he gave with his band in war zones – in Chechnya as well as in South Ossetia or in Serbia, where he performed to protest against the

NATO bombing in 1999. Most of the proceeds from the concerts were donated to the victims of the armed conflicts.

The meaning of the song thus goes beyond its lyrics. Its symbolic power derives precisely from the personal commitment to peace that the artist associates with his song. This is also evident from Shevchuk's own words. Thus, he once stated that the song had grown closer and closer to his heart by using it to sing against "the evil and the hatred of war" [8].

The song's peace-promoting effect is also reflected in the enthusiasm that Shevchuk still generates with it at concerts today. Because of its history, the song specifically encourages people to oppose the patriotic mass hysteria in times of war with the autonomy of their own person – and thus to counteract what Shevchuk sees as the greatest danger of war:

*"The first thing killed by war is personality."* [9]

## References

- [1] [Interview with Yuri Shevtchuk](#) in the series *Swoimi Glazami* (With Their Own Eyes) by *Ekho Moskvy* (Moscow Echo), March 22, 2012.
- [2] Yuri Shevchuk: Putin rides through the country ([Путин едет по стране](#); 2004). The music accompanying the text picks up on the galloping of the beneficent ruler in an ironic way (cf. the [live recording](#) of the song). Shevchuk later released another, [longer version of the song](#). Here, too, the ironic effect of the song unfolds particularly impressively in the [live version](#).
- [3] Cf. Schwirtz, Michael: [Break in Protocol for a Rock Star with Putin](#). In: *New York Times*, May 31, 2010.
- [4] Lipman, Maria: [Putin's Enemy Within: Demonising the "Fifth Column"](#). European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), March 26, 2015.
- [5] Yuri Shevchuk at a [Concert with his band DDT in Ufa](#), Mai 18, 2022 (from minute 1:28:20).
- [6] Cf. Herrmann, Klaus Joachim: [Der Herbst des russischen Rockpoeten Schewtschuk](#) (The Autumn of the Russian Rock Poet Shevchuk). In: *Das Blättchen*, September 16, 2022; linksnet.de.
- [7] The history of the song's creation and dissemination is documented in detail on wikipedia.ru: [Не стреляй!](#)

[8] Makhmutov, Nail': Following in the Footsteps of Rock'n'Roll Legends from Ufa (Махмутов, Наиль: По "следам" легенд уфимского рок-н-ролла), p. 180. Ufa 2015.

[9] Ibid.

***Pictures: 1. Levg: The band DDT at a concert in Caesarea, Israel, 2012 (Yuri Shevchuk in the middle); 2. Putnik: Yuri Shevchuk, 2013 (both Wikimedia Commons)***

## Earth's Revolt Against War

In the song *Shar tsvyeta khaki* (The Khaki Globe) by the band *Nautilus Pompilius*, it is the earth itself that complains about being all drenched in the colour of war.



*Henri Rousseau (1844 – 1910): War, or The Ride of Discord (1894)*  
*Paris, Musée d'Orsay (Wikimedia commons)*

## Nautilus Pompilius: The Khaki Globe

Once I was without any colour,  
of immaculate purity,  
with a shining skin.  
Then I suddenly turned completely white.  
Obviously someone had proclaimed winter  
and painted me with chalk.

Even if I had remained white,  
I would still have retained my purity.  
Even if I had been freezing cold,  
I would still have retained my clear vision.  
But someone proclaimed war  
and shrouded me in a black dress.

Now I see yet another colour,  
one I've never worn before.  
I hear the colour, I feel the colour,  
even the sky is bathed in it.  
Nothing do I want to know of those  
who give this colour to the sky.

A song wafts at me from afar,  
but all I hear is:  
"Left Flank, MARCH!  
Right Flank, MARCH!"  
Never have I seen more frightening figures  
than those who dress in khaki.



Even if the devil himself  
had coated me with black paint –  
I would have preferred it to khaki.  
But someone from the very top,  
yelling " Attack!" all the time.  
ordered me to assault the summer,  
and forced me into a khaki dress.

Smoke wafts at me from afar,  
from a place I have never been to before.  
The smell of fire hits my nostrils.  
Nothing do I want to know of those  
who set the sky on fire.

Hands off the sky!

Nothing do I want to know of those  
who blare that khaki song:  
"Left Flank, MARCH!  
Right Flank, MARCH!"  
Is there a more ridiculous image  
than that of a globe in khaki colours?

"Left Flank, MARCH!  
Right Flank, MARCH!  
Left Flank, MARCH!  
Right Flank, MARCH!"

Наутилус Помпилиус (Nautilus Pompilius): [Шар цвета хаки](#) from: *Разлука* (Razluka: Parting/Separation), 1986; also included in *Князь тишины* (Knjaz' Tischiny: The Prince of Silence), 1989)

[Live performance](#)

[Album version](#)



### **A Rock Band as a Gang of Robbers**

In 1982, Vyacheslav Butussov and his fellow student Dmitri Umyetski – both of whom were studying at the College of Architecture in Sverdlovsk, now Yekaterinburg – founded a rock band called *Ali Baba and the 40 Robbers*. Shortly afterwards the project was renamed *Nautilus* and finally – to avoid confusion

with other, eponymous Russian bands – named after the cephalopod *Nautilus Pompilius*.

With the echoes of punk, to which the band referred both in their music and in their outward appearance, the group brought a new, anarchic sound to the Russian music scene of the time. This was also reflected in the innovative lyrics of the band, which was active until 1997. In many cases, they broke with taboos and addressed social grievances. Today, the songs are considered a kind of musical manifesto of perestroika.

### **Musical Manifesto of Perestroika**

This is especially true of the song *Скованные одной цепью* (Skowannyje odnoi tsepyu). The title refers to the core of all totalitarian regimes – namely the fact that in them all people are "bound together by one single chain".

The image thus connects the lack of freedom in a totalitarian state with the negation of individuality in favour of a corset of norms that overarches and permeates all social relations. At the same time, it refers to the social control that results from the measurement of good behaviour and work performance on the basis of the respective collective's achievements – which inevitably leads to everyone in a group exerting pressure on each member to ensure compliance with the standards.

The song – written by the poet and translator Ilya Kormiltsev, also from Sverdlovsk, to the music of Vyacheslav Butusov – contains numerous allusions to problems and contradictions in Soviet society that were unambiguous for listeners at the time.

For instance, it refers to the abstract labour standards, the impossibility of free speech or the frozen visions of Soviet society ("We believe that we don't believe in anything").

### **"There's a Brown Sunset Lurking Behind the Red Sunrise."**

It testifies to the spirit of renewal in the Soviet Union during perestroika that a song like this could be released on an album and performed at a festival. However, there were also limits to this. Thus, the very sentence that sounds prophetic in view of today's renaissance of totalitarianism in Russia had to be altered for the early versions of the song. It reads: "There's a brown sunset lurking behind the red sunrise."

The suggestion that the communist utopia, implemented in a totalitarian way, could ultimately lead to a new fascism was considered intolerable even in times of perestroika. Therefore, in the first versions of the song, the "brown" sunset had to turn into a meaningless "pink" sunset.

This, however, could not prevent the song from quickly becoming extremely popular. Thus, a book of poems by Kormiltsev published in 1990 – with illustrations by Butussov – bears the same title as the song.

In 2008, the song was taken up in the Russian music film *Стилляги* (Stiljagi: Hipsters). The film revolves around the spiritual narrowness of Soviet society from the perspective of adolescents who, under the difficult conditions of total control and standardisation, search for their own paths into life.

In the film, the song *Skowannyje odnoi tsepyu* is quoted in a scene during which a lecturer reprimands a student. The image of a chain that binds all members of society together into a forced unity is congenially reproduced here: While the majority of the students, seated in narrow rows of benches, sway back and forth to the beat of the music like a human chain, the criticised student remains standing calmly. At the end, he places his student ID on the lectern and wordlessly leaves the lecture hall.

### Khaki Destructiveness

Like *Skowannyje odnoi tsepyu*, *Шар цвѣта хаку* (Schar tswjeta chaki: The Khaki Globe) was first released in 1986 on the album *Разлука* (Razluka: Parting/Separation). With its clearly anti-militarist message, this song was also a real taboo-breaker in militarised Soviet society.

The song, written by Vyacheslav Butussov, takes up the topic of the originally peaceful earth that becomes a battlefield with the appearance of man. In this context, colour symbols play a major role.

A time before all colours is followed by a time of innocent genesis of life, in which the earth is dressed entirely in white. This dress, however, turns black with the onset of discord, until it finally – as an extreme sign of bellicose destructiveness – becomes khaki.

## "Hands Off the Sky!"

The special appeal of the text stems from the fact that this development is described from the perspective of the planet on which it takes place. It is Mother Earth herself who tells of the colour changes – and who expresses her disgust at the khaki colour and the symbolism it implies.

Particularly emphatically, she opposes the fact that along with her, the sky is also being destroyed. For the sky, too, is set on fire by those who cover the world with their war paint – which points to the fact that war destroys not only material but also spiritual life.

The music takes up the steady pace of the soldier's march, but at the same time exaggerates it to a frenzied tremolo. In this way, it reflects not only the military boot step, but also the downward spiral it imposes on life.

## No Clear Position on the War against Ukraine

Contrary to what the songs of Nautilus Pompilius suggest, frontman Vyacheslav Butusov has not taken a clear position against the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Back in 2017, he had already justified a performance in Crimea, annexed by Russia in violation of international law, by saying that he wanted to stay out of politics and just sing. So he also circumvented the Ukrainian authorities for his concert. His reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is in line with this.

In Butussov's eyes, the war is "a conspiracy against humanity", launched by an "act of the devil". For the singer, who has been honoured with a religious medal by the Russian Patriarch Cyril, this is by no means an allusion to Vladimir Putin. Instead, he advises people who feel troubled by the bloody events in the Donbass to seek the "support of God".

Such a shift of events to the transcendental level is entirely in the Kremlin's interest – after all, it is an excellent way to conceal the true background and chains of responsibility for the crimes committed in Ukraine. Butussov's ostensibly apolitical stance thus turns out to be highly political.

It is hardly conceivable that an artist whose band was known for its dissident and pacifist lyrics during the perestroika era does not notice this. Maybe Butussov is just afraid of the consequences that a more clear-cut position on the war against Ukraine would entail for him: public defamation, a ban on performing – and in the end the choice between a penal camp and exile.

Obviously, it is easier to sing against the war in a noncommittal way than to commit oneself unequivocally against it in case of real war, even at the cost of personal disadvantages.

**Butussov quotes taken from:**

*Fakty Ukraina: [Вячеслав Бутусов внесен в базу данных «Миротворца»](#) (Vyacheslav Butussov added to Peacekeeper database); fakty.ua, February 4, 2017.*

*RIA Nowosti: [Бутусов назвал конфликт на Украине заговором дьявола против человечества](#) Butussov calls the conflict in Ukraine*

*a conspiracy of the devil against humanity); ПИА Новосту (ria. ru), November 3, 2022 (with a link to the [full Interview](#)).*

**Links for the Song Скованные одной цепью** (Skowannyje odnoj zepju: Bound Together by One Chain):

The [lyrics and a link to the song](#) can be found on [reproduktor.net](#).

[Live performance](#) from 1987

[Version from the film Стилягу](#) (Stiljagi: Hipsters; 2008)

**Picture:**

*Mal4ikZima: The band Nautilus Pompilius during a performance at the end of the 1980 (Wikimedia Commons)*



## 5. Singer-Songwriters



*Marina Zakharova: Zemfira at a performance in Moscow, 2013*  
*Wikimedia Commons*

## A Peace Prayer Against the Witchcraft of War

In his song *Vorozhba* (Magic Powers), Boris Grebenshchikov contrasts the evil magic of war with the healing magic of a life based on striving for harmony with oneself and the world.



*Leon Bakst: Sorcerer; costume sketch for Igor Stravinsky's ballet  
**The Firebird** (Wikimedia Commons)*

**Boris Grebenshchikov:**  
**Magic Powers**

Do you see, grandfather, the trace of decay  
in our sky? And you, grandmother:  
Do you feel the putrid fog?  
Oh, conjure, conjure it away,  
or else there will be no tomorrow!

Do you see, warrior, the useless sky?  
Do you feel, Yogi, how we are drowning  
in the stream of our own life?  
Oh, call, call with all your might  
for Him who has forgotten us!

Now the volcanoes have erupted.  
The firestorm devours us all,  
even if we didn't start it.  
He, who lives by his lust for murder,  
has put a curse on our world.

This witchcraft has walled up our hearts  
in coffins of icy iron.  
How brightly they once shone!  
How tightly they are now enclosed  
by the darkness of the demon's tomb!

Please, grandfather, and you, grandmother:  
Conjure it up, the redeeming light!

Let it illuminate our hearts  
with its shining writing!  
As long as I breathe  
I will wait and pray for it.

Борис Гребенщиков (Boris Grebenshchikov):  
[Ворожба](#) (Vorozhba)

Song, [unplugged](#)

[Live](#), with the band Aquarium



## Grebenshchikov's "No to War"

With Boris Grebenshchikov, another legendary figure of the Russian singer-songwriter scene vehemently condemned the war right at the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In a Facebook post, he called it "madness" and a "disgrace for Russia": "Эта война – безумие и позор России."

Some time after that, Grebenshchikov also responded musically to the war – with the song *Vorozhba* (Magic Powers). In it, he contrasts two forms of magic: destructive dark magic and redemptive light magic.

## Dark and Light Magic

Dark magic envelops the world in a poisonous mist and destroys it in a violent firestorm. At the same time, its dazzling light leads to blindness, so that those affected do not or only too late realise what is happening to them.

Bright magic, by contrast, can save the world. It stands for the wisdom of experience of the ancients and the religious wisdom of spiritualised people. The fact that Grebenshchikov portrays the latter as yogis refers to his Buddhist background.

Apart from that, Buddhism also emphasises the interconnectedness of all living things more than any other religion. This makes it particularly clear that any partial destruction of life also affects all other forms of life.

## No Inner Peace Without Outer Peace

In terms of spiritual life, this means that inner harmony is dependent on outer harmony, and that war and inner peace are incompatible.

This insight is, of course, valid independently of the Buddhist faith. The allusion to the yogi merely sums it up in a coherent image. The same applies to the old people mentioned by Grebenshchikov in the song.

Here, too, it is not a question of asking one's grandparents concretely to conjure away the war with a few magic tricks. The reference to the experiential knowledge of the ancients is rather an appeal to all of us to act wisely and do everything possible to put an end to a war that violently ignores the spiritual possibilities of human beings.

## About Boris Grebenshchikov

Born in 1952, the artist founded the band Aquarium together with Anatoly Gunitsky during his studies of mathematics in St. Petersburg. While he began to work scientifically, he performed in parallel with the band, which still exists to this day in changing line-ups, and founded the rock magazine Roksi.

Although the band was banned in 1981 and Grebenshchikov was additionally dismissed, he became a central figure in the oppositional music scene. For example, he helped the legendary Viktor Tsoj (Tsoi) and his band Kino produce their first album and also worked with the cult band Mashina

Vremeni. In the course of perestroika, Grebenshchikov became an idol of Russian youth.

After intensively studying Buddhism since the early 1990s, Grebenshchikov met the Indian-born spiritual savant Sri Chinmoy in 2006, with whose disciples he gave a concert at London's Royal Albert Hall, among others. He has also translated writings by the Tibetan lama Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche into Russian.

***More posts on Boris Grebenshchikov:***

[\*The Dream of the Simple Life\*](#) (about the song *Kostroma, mon amour*)

[\*The Hungry Spirits and the Liberated Spirit\*](#) (about the song *Kladbishche / Graveyard*)

**Picture:**

*Iwan Martschyk: Boris Grebenshchikov at the Atlas Festival (Atlas Weekend) in Kiev (Wikimedia Commons)*

## The Lie of the Just War

With the song *Soldier, you have been betrayed*, Andrey Makarevich reacted to the Russian war against Ukraine. The song is an almost imploring plea to Russian soldiers not to blindly obey criminal orders.



*Albert Anker (1831 – 1910): Wounded Soldier, 1870s*  
*Swiss Institute for Cultural Studies / Wikimedia Commons*



**Andrey Makarevich:**  
**Soldier, You Have Been Betrayed!**

So where did you march to, soldier?  
What place did they send you to?

Did they shoot over there?  
"Sure, there was shooting!"

Who did you swear an oath to?  
"To the Tsar and the Fatherland."

What were you fighting for, soldier?  
"For your freedom."

Where did you end up, soldier?  
In a hail of bombs.

You didn't realise, did you, soldier?  
You who have been swallowed up by war  
and forgotten by paradise:  
You have been betrayed!

Андрей Макаревич (Andrey Makarevich):  
[Солдат, тебя обманули!](#)

(The translation is based on the sung version, which differs from the published text at the beginning.)

[Live performance](#)

## The War against Ukraine as an Unprecedented Catastrophe



Andrey Makarevich, frontman of the Russian cult band *Mashina Vremeni* (Time Machine; see above), describes his emotional state after the Russian invasion of Ukraine as "disgusted". Since the beginning of the war, he has avoided all contact with people who advocate the

killing with the infamous "Z" (for "Za"/3a: to be in favour of something).

The artist explicitly accepts "that there can be different opinions on the same things". But he emphasises that this only applies as long as a persuasion is not intended to kill people by putting it into practice.

For Makarevich, the Russian intervention in Ukraine is unprecedented. In his view, it can only be compared to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops to end the Prague Spring. But according to him, this only concerns the motivation, not the extent of the crimes:

*"Today it is much worse. If we consider the scale of the disaster, what is happening in Ukraine is much worse than what happened in Prague back then."*

## The Propaganda Machine and the Conscience of the Soldier

Makarevich believes that the current polarisation of Russian society has been deliberately fuelled by the Kremlin's "propaganda machine". For him, the long period of accustoming people to the mendacity of the state-affiliated media is also the reason why a large part of the population uncritically accepts the immense "amount of lies that are spread there".

This also applies to war propaganda – which, as we all know, must not even be called such. As a result, it is also difficult for those who have been drafted into the army to comprehend the actual reasons for the war. However, according to Makarevich, even then a soldier has to listen to his conscience and should under no circumstances "carry out criminal orders".

## Cheated out of Paradise

The song with which Makarevich reacted to the Russian invasion of Ukraine can also be seen against this background. It is conceived as an imaginary dialogue with a soldier who went to war believing in the superior aims of his mission

The short text is written in retrospective, i.e. as a dialogue with a fallen soldier. By sacrificing his life, he has by no means reached the heaven of heroes, but has in fact forfeited paradise by acting unscrupulously. His death was therefore completely senseless: he was lured into the hail of bombs under false pretences, he was deceived.

Makarevich presents the song, which he has only published on social media channels for the time being, without any instrumentation. It is precisely through the acapella singing that it unfolds a particularly haunting effect. Not only does the musician thus consciously oppose the propaganda bluster of the Kremlin. In combination with the imploring way in which he performs the song, it is almost reminiscent of a prayer.

*Quotes from Makarevich taken from an [interview at currenttime.tv](https://currenttime.tv) on May 28, 2022 (Interviewer: Andrey Tsiganov)*

***Picture:***

*Wadim Kondratjew: Andrey Makarevich at the Rock on the Volga Festival in Samara, 2010 (Wikimedia Commons)*

## War as a Delirious Flood of Images

In her song *Мясо* (Myassa: Flesh), the Russian singer-songwriter Zemfira addresses the horror of war from the perspective of a Russian soldier who loses his mind in a hail of bombs.



*Franz Marc: Fighting Forms (1914)*  
*Wikimedia Commons*

Zemfira:  
Flesh

Meat, meat, mountains of meat  
"Serve them to me on a silver platter!"  
Everything spins, everything screams  
ever louder, ever shriller  
the world bursts before my eyes.

Here, take my lungs,  
my lungs full of lead,  
full of tar and empty words,  
full of unbearable gasping.

Roads, roads, dead roads  
over bits of corpses, piles of corpses,  
blood rush, rushing blood  
in my head, before my eyes  
"Cigarette break!" – " Carry on!"

My face in the mirror: "Surrender!  
Stay humane or die!"  
My wife's eyes: "Come home!  
The baby's coming, get us something warm!"

Rockets whistling, screeching, blazing,  
spring is on fire,  
burning, exploding, collapsing.  
Eternal night buries Mariupol.

Mountains of flesh, mountains of corpses, dead roads  
in my dreams, every night,  
hunger on deserted graves:  
"Our life – give it back to us!"

This is how far we have come!  
This is how far it has come!  
Why? For what purpose? To what end?  
My life will not give me any answer.  
Pray for me, for me  
and my lost soul!

Земфира (Zemfira): [Мясо](#) (Myassa)

[Video clip](#)



## Unagitated Thematisation of Social Taboos

Zemfira Ramazanova (stage name simply "Zemfira") is in many respects an unusual phenomenon in the Russian music world.

This is not only true because the singer-songwriter, born in 1976 in the Republic of Bashkortostan, with her Bashkir and Tatar roots, purely outwardly does not correspond to the cliché image of a Russian pop starlet. Rather, the artist has gone her own way from the very beginning.

Already on her debut album, released in 1999, the singer opposed the prevailing norms with two songs. In the song SPIDA, she openly addresses the dangers of AIDS. In another song (Snyeg/Snow), she sings quite naturally about lesbian love – so naturally that only the feminine verb form reveals what kind of love is being sung about.

## An Artist Who Goes Her Own Way

This silent as well as self-confident commitment to her own way of life has remained a constant for the artist later on. She lives her life without hiding, but at the same time refuses to make herself an object for the yellow press – which of course spurs the tabloids even more to speculate about the musician's private life.

In the distribution of her songs, Zemfira also prefers to be independent. She renounces being bound to labels or concert agencies and instead distributes her music on her own.



Independence is also an accurate description of her attitude towards the policies of the Russian government. For example, she has publicly distanced herself from the Kremlin-affiliated youth organisation *Naschi* (Our People), even though she knew that this would alienate some of her young fans.

### Protest against Russian Attacks on Ukraine

Already after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in eastern Ukraine at that time, the artist took the side of Ukraine. Following the beginning of the new war against Ukraine in February 2022, she also spoke out unequivocally against the Kremlin's aggression. On her website she only displayed the words "Нет Войне!" (No to war). Furthermore, she has left the country and moved to Paris.

In May, Zemfira released a protest song against the war. In it, she addresses the horror of war in the light of the bombardment of the southern Ukrainian city of Mariupol that took place back then.

The song is written from the perspective of a Russian soldier who loses his mind in the hail of bombs. This is reflected in an associative language, in which the images diverge and slide into each other like an uncontrollable stream of consciousness. To underline this, Zemfira uses haunting vocals that gradually increase in intensity.

In the video clip for the song, expressive images reminiscent of expressionism reinforce the disturbing message. They were

drawn by Renata Litvinova, Zemfira's partner, who also directed the short film.

All in all, this results in a synthesis of the arts that impressively holds up a mirror to the madness of war.

***Picture:***

*Marina Zakharova: Zemfira at a concert in Moscow, 2016 (Wikimedia Commons)*

## Don't Shoot! Don't Be Silent!

Zemfira's song *Nje streljaitje* (Don't shoot) dates from the year 2005. In a video clip from 2022, she explicitly refers the song to the Russian army's attacks against Ukraine.



*Francisco de Goya (1746 – 1826): Episode from the Spanish War of Independence (between 1808 and 1812)*  
*Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (Wikimedia Commons)*

**Zemfira:**  
**Don't Shoot!**

No, don't shoot!  
I am just a timid whisper,  
a faint, almost faded sigh.

No, don't look at me!  
My scars are none of your business,  
Avert your pitiful eyes from me,  
they do me harm.

But please don't be silent  
in this eloquent silence  
that buries me beneath it!  
No, don't be silent!

No, don't shoot!  
Don't you see the love in this room,  
this exposed love that you break apart  
with your thoughtless hands?

No, don't ask me any questions!  
I'm afraid of losing my grip.  
And your hands won't be able to hold  
me and my burdening answers.

But please don't be silent  
in this eloquent silence

that buries me beneath it!  
No, don't be silent!

Земфира (Zemfira): [Не стреляйте](#) (Nye strelyaitye)

[Video clip](#)

[Live in London](#), November 3, 2022



**A**

### **Singer in the Sights of the Media**

In 2007, Zemfira commented in interviews on her "relationship crises", which had been speculated about in the Russian media for some time. According to her, some of the songs on her new album *Spassibo* (Thank You) were an attempt to come to terms with her personal crisis.

With this, the singer tried to put an end to the rumours about her private life. These had previously taken on increasingly

unpleasant forms. Among other things, the artist had been associated with drug excesses and a pathological anorexia.

Against this background, Zemfira's song *Nye strelyaitye* (Don't shoot), written in 2005, can be understood as a kind of musical resistance against the voyeurism of the media. The plea expressed by the person in the song not to target her vulnerable psyche, her scars and her private life would then be an almost imploring appeal to also grant a person in public life a right to privacy.

### *Nye strelyaitye* as an Anti-War Song

After the Russian army invaded Ukraine, Zemfira released a new video clip for the song. At the end, images of the destruction caused by the war are superimposed. In this way, the artist herself opens up another possible interpretation for her song.

For this purpose, the people addressed by the person in the song must be divided into two groups. The first group consists of those to whom the person is concretely exposed in war. These people can kill her directly with their weapons.

The second group comprises those to whom the person turns for help. On the one hand, they are explicitly asked not to remain silent in the face of the violence to which the individual is exposed. On the other hand, however, the latter also rejects a look at war in which the victims become the objects of sensationalist voyeurism.

## Compassion and Voyeurism

From this arises the appeal not to feign compassion in the cosy TV room, as this cannot meet the concrete suffering of the people affected by the war.

Instead, those who witness the violence from afar should do everything they can to put an end to it. The first step towards this is to amplify the cry of the tortured and raped, persecuted and maimed again and again by the echo of one's own voice. This is exactly what the refrain of the song says:

***"Don't be silent!"***

*The quoted interview with Zemfira can be found on [livejournal.com](http://livejournal.com), October 28, 2007.*

***Picture:***

*Denhud: Zemfira at the Park Live Festival in Moscow, 2013 (Wikimedia Commons)*