

‘My country has fallen out of time.’

Russian author Mikhail Shishkin’s letter to an unknown Ukrainian



A Russian soldier lies dead by the roadside on the outskirts of Kharkiv, 26 February, 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

A year after Putin’s invasion, the award-winning novelist reflects on the silence of his compatriots, the betrayal of his mother tongue, and his hopes for the future.



Mikhail Shishkin

My dearest one,

They stole the language from us. We spoke and corresponded with you in the language of great Russian literature. Now, for the whole world, Russian is the language of those who bomb Ukrainian cities and kill children, the language of war criminals, the language of murderers. They will be tried for crimes against humanity. I would like to believe that all those who prepared and participated in this war, who supported it in one way or another, will be put in the dock. But how can one go to trial for a crime against language?

My father went to the front when he was 17 to avenge his brother who was killed by the Germans. After the war, he hated Germans and everything German all his life. I tried to explain to him: “But Dad, there is great German literature! German is a beautiful language!” These words had no effect on him. What will we be able to say after the war to the Ukrainians whose homes were bombed and looted by the Russians, whose families were killed? That the great Russian literature is beautiful? And that the Russian language is so wonderful?

Do dictators and dictatorships breed slave populations or do slave populations breed dictators? Ukraine was able to escape from this hellish circle, to escape from our common, monstrous, bloody past. For this reason it is hated by Russian impostors. **A free and democratic Ukraine can serve as an example for the Russian population, which is why it is so important for Putin to destroy you.**

In Russia, we had neither de-Stalinisation, nor the Nuremberg trials of the Communist party of the Soviet Union. The result we see: a new dictatorship. A dictatorship, by its very nature, cannot exist without enemies, which means war.

The plans of the general staff included the refusal of Nato to defend you with its armed forces, and Nato fulfilled this plan of Putin in the first days of the war. You Ukrainians did not agree to Putin’s plans. You did not surrender, you did not greet his tanks with flowers.

You are not only defending your freedom and human dignity; now you are defending the freedom and human dignity of all humanity. You cannot be defeated because the war is not decided by the number of tanks and missiles, but by the power of love for freedom. You are free men, and those who carry out the criminal orders of the Russian generals are slaves.

Silence is a Russian survival strategy. Those who protested a year ago were put in jail

A year ago, when Russian tanks were already marching toward Kyiv, the whole world wondered why there were no mass anti-war protests in Russia, why only loners took to the streets. I attributed it to fear. Silence is a Russian survival strategy. Those who protested back then were in jail. This is how Russians have survived by silence for generations. Pushkin formulated this Russian way of life in the last line of his historical drama Boris Godunov: “The people are silent.” And with the beginning of the aggression against Ukraine, the people were “keeping silent”. But then mass mobilisation began

in the autumn, and it is no longer possible to explain away the fact that hundreds of thousands of Russians obediently went to kill Ukrainians and be killed. This is something else, something deeper, something scarier.

I see only one explanation: **my country has fallen out of time.** In the 21st century, the modern man himself is responsible for deciding what is good and what is evil. And if he sees that his country and his people are waging a despicable shameful war, he will be against his country and against his people.

But most Russians mentally live in the past, when people associated themselves with their tribe. Our tribe is always right, and the other tribes are our enemies and want to destroy us. We are not responsible, we don’t decide anything, the chief/khan/king decides everything for us. This is how they think: if our enemies, the fascists from Ukraine and Nato, attack our homeland, we go to defend it, just as our grandfathers defended it from the German fascists.

The feeling of love for the homeland, the beautiful sense of patriotism, was used by all dictators for their own purposes. My father thought he was defending his homeland from Hitler’s regime, but he was defending the same fascist regime of Stalin. Russians are now going to war, as Putin’s propaganda explained to them, to defend their homeland against “European and American nazism”, and **they don’t realize that they are protecting the power of a criminal gang in the Kremlin, which has taken the entire country hostage.**

The only way out is to inflict a military defeat on the Putin regime. Therefore, democratic countries must help the Ukrainians with everything they can, and above all with weapons. After the war, the whole world will come to your aid to reconstruct what has been destroyed, and the country will be able to rebuild itself.

And Russia will lie in the ruins of economy and in the ruins of consciousness. A new birth of my country is possible only through the complete destruction of the Putin regime. The empire must be amputated from the Russian person, like a malignant cancer. This “hour zero” is vital for Russia. My country will have a future only if it passes through total defeat, as happened with Germany.

Glory to Ukraine!
Mikhail

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