

WAR POEMS

ALEXANDER
KOROTKO

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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Alexander Korotko

Translated from the Russian into English by Andrew Sheppard

Translated from the Russian into Ukrainian by Olha Ilchuk

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ALEXANDER KOROTKO

WAR POEMS

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN INTO ENGLISH BY ANDREW SHEPPARD

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN INTO UKRAINIAN BY OLHA ILCHUK

G L A G O S L A V P U B L I C A T I O N S

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INTRODUCTION

When I asked Alexander Korotko about the genesis of these *War Poems*, he told me that when Russia invaded Ukraine on 24th February 2022:

There was shock at the beginning. It was hard to come to terms with this tragedy. There was no question of any poetry at all. [However,] Gradually the soul came to life, and from 11th March I wrote in complete prostration, two or three poems each day. I wrote, as a rule, at night.

I had no thought of how many of them would be written, and whether they would be published in journals, still less of the publication of a separate book; there were no thoughts about that at all.

Alexander went on to say that he could not have imagined that there would soon be a total of 88 poems:

When I was about to put an end to it, about 50 poems had been written. But inspiration and the Creator did not agree with my decisions, and they forced me to sit down at the table and write under their dictation to the point of complete exhaustion.

It was in mid-June – 96 days after he began – that Alexander finally drew a line beneath what may yet prove to be only the first part of his poetic response to Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine.

He was aware of the dangers of jingoism, and took care that his patriotism did not fall into that:

Patriotism is a very intimate thing, but to convey it on paper without being fake, with the help of a word, is a practically impossible task. Moreover, [my] task was to avoid hysteria, pathos, and not turn poetry into pop music.

He concludes that it is for the reader to decide how well he succeeded in his objectives.

A particular characteristic of this war is the targeting of civilian infrastructure – apartment blocks, shopping malls, a theatre in which many children were sheltering, a maternity hospital, a crowded railway station.... We need not be surprised, then, that Alexander's poem no. 35, "Kyiv", references Guernica, a quiet village, ten miles from the front line of the Spanish Civil War, that was bombed in April 1937 on its market day by Nazi warplanes, essentially as an act of terrorism, rather than as a military objective.

Poem no. 52:

A girl in a modest
coat,
a red heart
leaves
for death, forever....
how to explain to her
the invaders are right:
girl,
you are just an enemy....

In poem no. 20, Alexander observes the death in a field hospital of a soldier, aged 45:

Here is the military
field hospital.
You understand the conditions?
So-so,
but human.
And he is one of them –
of the wounded, of course....

What of the Russian soldiers, sent to "liberate" Ukrainians from evils of which most of them seem completely unaware? Poem no. 23:

What a strange people.
We came on tanks
to save you,

but for some reason you
are not happy.

The same poem goes on to examine the response of “the West”:

They tremble like aspen
leaves in a breeze,
repeating like a mantra
“None of our soldiers
not one of our soldiers....”
We [the Russians] kill you with brotherly love,
and they kill you with
European
friendship.

Frustration with the West’s fastidious policy with respect to placing its forces on the ground, or in the air of Ukraine, also with the tardiness of delivery of promised aid, is a recurring theme throughout this collection. In poem no. 36, the poet seems to be getting towards the end of his tether:

what will happen
to us?
Is the world really
totally deaf?

Poem no. 60 evokes Ukraine’s nightmare past:

There was an order
for the roosters to scream
at the top of their lungs,
announcing the thirties
in grey uniforms,
and in the zone
the guard did not sleep at night....
Half the country
is in camps,

half the country
in interrogations....
The power of workers,
peasants and some
sailors....

There has of course been much more of that in the “Borderland”, the Old Slavonic word for which is held to give Ukraine its modern name. In whole or in part, Ukraine has so often been seen by belligerent empire-builders as ripe for invasion, annexation and plunder.

Is there still hope? Poem no. 88, “Motherland”:

The umbilical cord of love
is a Ukrainian field,
spacious and wide,
like the soul of summer
with a golden shimmer
of wheat.

Above the steppe at night are the “mosquito-bite stars”:

and breathing is so easy,
it seems that,
in one more moment,
the [Milky Way]
will spread
mother’s towel
with magical gifts
of heartbeats.

Andrew Sheppard
28th June 2022

WAR POEMS

ЛЕТОПИСЬ
(день первый)

Тревожная кардиограмма
молний
и звуковые сообщения
грома
впиваются в живую
мишень
иллюзорного полнолуния
мирной жизни.
Мы ещё спали,
а кандалы ночи
уже повисли на ногах
рассвета.

24.02.2022
Место событий –
УКРАИНА.

ЛІТОПИС
(день перший)

Тривожна кардіограма
блискавиць
і звукові повідомлення
грому
впинаються у живу
мішень
ілюзорної місячної повні
мирного життя.
Ми ще спали,
а кайдани ночі
вже висіли на ногах
світанку.

24.02.2022
Місце подій
УКРАЇНА.

CHRONICLE
(the first day)

An alarming cardiogram
of lightning
and audio messages
of thunder
bit the living target
of the illusory
full moon
of peaceful life.
We were still sleeping,
but the shackles of the night
were already clamped
on the legs of dawn.

24th February 2022
Place of events –
UKRAINE.

В крові
вышиванка,
и сонце
во мгле.
С ночі
до ранку
колоннами
танки
идут
по Земле.
И не смеются
больше дети,
и стонет поле,
стонет ветер,
и воздух
бомбами
прошит.
Нам жить
придётся
с этой болью
среди нашей
правды
и вашей лжи.

У крові
вишиванка,
і сонце
в імлі.
З ночі
до ранку
колонами
танки
йдуть
по Землі.
Не усміхаються
діти,
і стогне поле,
стогне вітер,
і бомбами
простір
прошито.
Нам жить
доведеться
з цим болем
посеред
правди нашої
та брехні вашої.

In the blood
embroidered shirt,
and the sun,
in the fog.
From night
until morning
columns of
tanks
churn
our Earth.
Children
no longer laugh,
the field groans,
the wind moans
and bombs
pierce
our air.
We have to live
with this pain –
will have to live
with our
truth
and your lies.

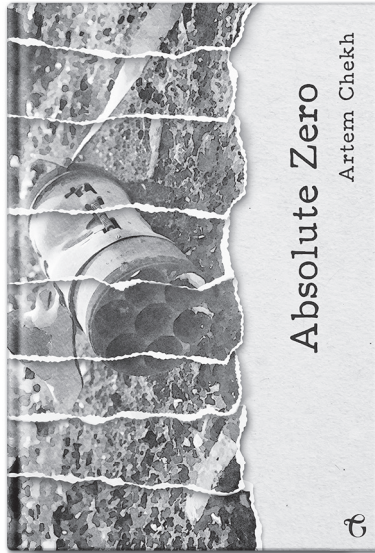
На плечи девичьи
весны,
на душу Родины
моей несломленной
страны
легла не просто
тень войны,
а смерть
с открытыми глазами.
Не спрашивайте
оккупанты,
что будет с вами,
когда взорвутся ваши
сны
от бомб, упавших
на города и сёла
наши.

На рамена дівочі
весни,
на нескорену душу
Вітчизни
лягла не просто
тінь війни,
а смерть
з розверстими очима.
І не питаєте,
окупанти,
що буде з вами,
як розірвуться ваші
сни
від бомб, упалих
на міста і села
наші.

On the gentle shoulders
of spring
on the soul of my motherland –
of my unbroken
country,
there was not just the
shadow of war
but death
with eyes wide open.
Do not ask,
occupiers,
what will happen to you
when your dreams
explode
from the bombs that fall
on our villages and
towns.

ABSOLUTE ZERO

by Artem Chekh

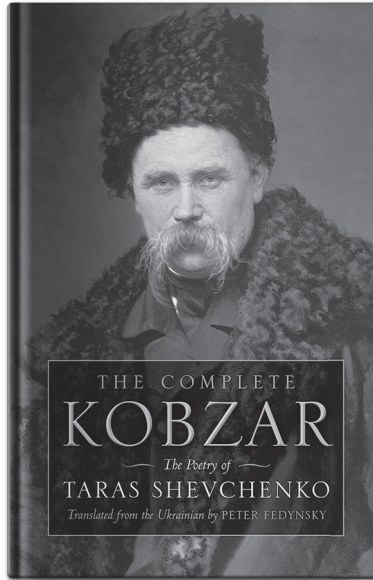


The book is a first person account of a soldier's journey, and is based on Artem Chekh's diary that he wrote while and after his service in the war in Donbas. One of the most important messages the book conveys is that war means pain. Chekh is not showing the reader any heroic combat, focusing instead on the quiet, mundane, and harsh soldier's life. Chekh masterfully selects the most poignant details of this kind of life.

Artem Chekh (1985) is a contemporary Ukrainian writer, author of more than ten books of fiction and essays. *Absolute Zero* (2017), an account of Chekh's service in the army in the war in Donbas, is one of his latest books, for which he became a recipient of several prestigious awards in Ukraine, such as the Joseph Conrad Prize (2019), the Gogol Prize (2018), the Voyin Svitla (2018), and the Litaktsent Prize (2017). This is his first book-length translation into English.

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**The Complete
KOBZAR**
by Taras Shevchenko



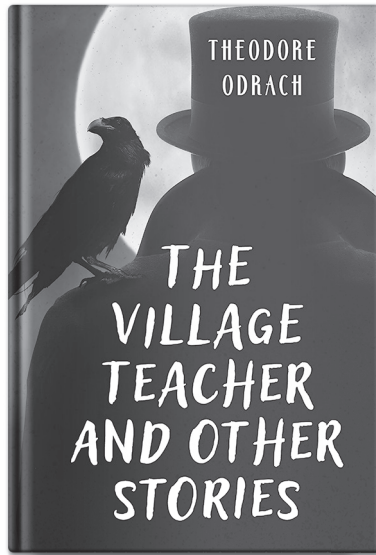
Masterfully fulfilled by Peter Fedynsky, Voice of America journalist and expert on Ukrainian studies, this first ever English translation of the complete *Kobzar* brings out Ukraine's rich cultural heritage.

As a foundational text, The *Kobzar* has played an important role in galvanizing the Ukrainian identity and in the development of Ukraine's written language and Ukrainian literature. The first editions had been censored by the Russian czar, but the book still made an enduring impact on Ukrainian culture. There is no reliable count of how many editions of the book have been published, but an official estimate made in 1976 put the figure in Ukraine at 110 during the Soviet period alone. That figure does not include Kobzars released before and after both in Ukraine and abroad. A multitude of translations of Shevchenko's verse into Slavic, Germanic and Romance languages, as well as Chinese, Japanese, Bengali, and many others attest to his impact on world culture as well.

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THE VILLAGE TEACHER AND OTHER STORIES

by Theodore Odrach



The twenty-two stories in this collection, set mostly in Eastern Europe during World War Two, depict a world fraught with conflict and chaos. Theodore Odrach is witness to the horrors that surround him, and as both an investigative journalist and a skilful storyteller, using humor and irony, he guides us through his remarkable narratives. His writing style is clean and spare, yet at the same time compelling and complex. There is no short supply of triumph and catastrophe, courage and cowardice, good and evil, as they impact the lives of ordinary people.

In “Benny’s Story”, a group of prisoners fight to survive despite horrific circumstances; in “Lickspittles”, the absurdity of an émigré writer’s life is highlighted; in “Blood”, a young man travels to a distant city in search of his lost love; in “Whistle Stop”, two German soldiers fight boredom in an out-of-the-way outpost, only to see their world crumble and fall.

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Soon after Russia invaded Ukraine on 24th February 2022, author and poet Alexander Korotko began to set down as poetry the turbulent responses at the emotional, philosophical and simply human levels evoked by the resulting war. Thus, we read in the 88 poems in this volume – completed in just less than 100 days – of the seemingly endless wail of sirens; of sheltering in cellars and tunnels; of the celebrated Ukrainian steppe, churned by tanks; the dead – “our killed, have become our Saviour Angels”; and whole poems devoted to Irpin and Mariupol as the atrocities there and elsewhere became known. Korotko is not without compassion for the Russian soldier – “Russian soldier, what did you forget in my land? We had grief enough without you.” – and the soldier’s mother when she receives his dead body as “cargo 200”. Neither does he conceal his frustration with Ukraine’s allies – “we pay the West for help with blood, but the West makes no haste to deliver.”



Alexander Korotko was born in Korosten, northern Ukraine, educated in Odesa, and now lives in Kyiv. A prolific writer of both poetry and prose, his work has been translated into numerous languages and he has received many honours and awards. The original language of the War Poems is Russian. As is typical of many

Russian speakers in Ukraine, however, Alexander Korotko intermingles some Ukrainian words with the Russian.

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