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Russia/Ukraine

Raging Against Vladimir Putin's War Machine

- Features -

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The editor Simon Pirani presents [*Voices Against Putin's War*](#), published by Resistance Books, London 2025.

In Russia and occupied Ukraine, many thousands of civilians have been jailed or forcibly disappeared for speaking out against the invasion. The numbers reflect a crackdown on dissent worse than at any point since the 1950s.

On May 16, 2022, the Ukrainian artist Bohdan Ziza poured blue and yellow paint — the colors of his country's flag — onto a municipal administration building in his hometown, Yevpatoria, in Crimea.

Ziza posted a video of the action online, with a call to "adherents of graffiti culture, all the vandals of Crimea, Russia and Belarus" to protest against "the most horrific war" unleashed by "[Vladimir] Putin and the machine of state." He was soon arrested and charged with "committing a terrorist act" and "incitement to terrorism."

In June 2023, Ziza used his [final statement](#) to the Russian military court that sentenced him to fifteen years' imprisonment to denounce the war again: "My action was a cry from the heart, from my conscience, to those who were and are afraid — just as I was afraid — but who also did not want this war."

Ziza is one of ten antiwar protesters whose speeches are [published](#) this month, in English translation, in *Voices Against Putin's War: protesters' defiant speeches in Russian courts*. The collection also includes two statements made outside court, related interviews and letters, a summary of seventeen other antiwar speeches in court, and a survey of the antiwar protest movement and the repression against it.

In Russia, dissenters since the Populist rebels of the 1870s have used their final statement in court to urge resistance to power. The tradition flourished in the workers' movements that preceded the 1917 revolution, was broken by the 1930s Stalinist show trials with their formulaic confessions, and reborn after the 1950s "thaw," with dissidents such as the writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel.

In 2022, Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine was followed by a brutal crackdown on civil society in occupied territory, Crimea included, as well as repression of domestic dissent. Protest was driven off the streets. Individual nonviolent direct actions like Ziza's, or writing or speaking against the war, were punished with long jail sentences, such as those now being served by most of the protagonists in *Voices Against Putin's War*.

[Ruslan Siddiqi](#), the Russian-Italian anarchist, went further: he is serving twenty-nine years' imprisonment for derailing a train that was carrying munitions to Russian army units in Ukraine. In court, he declared himself a prisoner of war, rather than a political prisoner: "My targets were Russian military equipment and the logistical chains used to transport military hardware and fuel. I wanted to impede military operations against Ukraine."

Acting according to one's conscience, in a dystopian world of militarism and big lies, was a central consideration for many of the protagonists.

[Alexei Rozhkov](#), who firebombed a military recruitment center in Sverdlovsk region, fled to Kyrgyzstan while on bail before he was kidnapped by Russian special forces and returned to be put on trial. He told the court that sentenced him to sixteen years: "Although I have never been a politician or a statesman, I could not remain indifferent when the

war began. I have a conscience, and I preferred to hold on to it."

The book's protagonists oppose the war from a wide range of political viewpoints. On one hand, there are pacifists such as Sasha Skochilenko, the artist jailed for seven years for replacing labels in a supermarket with handwritten antiwar messages (and later freed in a prisoner swap between Russia and Western countries), who told the court: "Wars don't end thanks to warriors — they end thanks to pacifists."

On the other hand, there are political activists who spoke of Ukraine's right to resist Russia militarily. [Aleksandr Skobov](#), sixty-seven, the oldest protagonist, first jailed for activity in the socialist wing of the Soviet dissident movement in 1978, refused to stand when the judge came into court. He wished death on the "murderer, tyrant and scoundrel Putin." He said he would never stop calling on honest Russians to join the Ukrainian armed forces and for air strikes on Russia's military facilities.

No less adamant in support of Ukraine was the youngest protagonist, [Darya Kozyreva](#), nineteen, sentenced to two years and eight months' imprisonment for laying flowers and a poem at the statue of Ukraine's national poet, Taras Shevchenko, in Saint Petersburg.

In court, Ziza denounced not only the 2022 invasion but also the frenzied assault on Crimean Tatar organisations that preceded it in Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014. "Those who so passionately seek 'Nazis' in Ukraine have not opened their eyes to the Nazism in Russia, with its ephemeral 'Russian world,'" with which the armed forces have "tried to extirpate Ukrainian identity." (Last month, Ziza, on his own demand, had the Russian citizenship that was imposed on him along with all Crimean residents revoked. He is today in Vladimir Central Prison, where "politicals" have been incarcerated since the nineteenth century.)

Voices Against Putin's War results from the work of a small volunteer group of translators supporting Russian antiwar organizations, of which I was part of, and is [supported by](#) the European Network for Solidarity With Ukraine. On top of the speeches published, we have summarized seventeen more from the wonderful [Poslednee Slovo](#) ("last word") website.

The trials highlighted in the book also provide a snapshot of Russia's wartime lurch toward a form of fascism. Against those who take nonviolent direct action, charges under terrorism laws were standardized in 2022, with jail sentences of between ten and twenty years. Torture of detainees is routine.

Long sentences are designed to terrorize people into silence: Andrei Trofimov got ten years for social media posts justifying Ukrainian military actions against Russia. For his two-minute speech in the military court, which ended "Glory to Ukraine! Putin is a dickhead," he was charged with "condoning terrorism" and "defaming the army": a further three years were added to his sentence.

The monstrosity of Russia's domestic repression may properly be understood in the context of the bloodbath it has visited on Ukraine, and especially on the occupied territories. Hundreds of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian soldiers have been killed and wounded in action, and millions of Ukrainian civilians have been uprooted from their homes by bombing. Added to that, people in the occupied areas have faced enforced imposition of Russian citizenship, mass deportations including of children (the basis of a case against Putin in the International Criminal Court), judicial nihilism, and an economic slump.

The primary instrument of social discipline in the occupied areas is enforced disappearances, including imprisonment. In September 2024, Ukraine's register of persons "missing under special circumstances" counted some 48,324 names, of which 4,700 were confirmed by the Ukrainian government to be in captivity, although the true

number may be far higher.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe estimated that 16,000 people on the register were adult civilians. The Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group [identified](#) 5,000 victims of enforced disappearances while preparing material for the International Criminal Court, and the Ukrainian ombudsman is working on 1,700 such cases. (All these numbers relate to civilians detained or missing, as distinct from Ukrainian prisoners of war, of which there are some 8,000–10,000.)

In short, Russia has taken many thousands of civilian prisoners in the occupied territories, whose fates often remain unknown. Many are political prisoners: 585 journalists, community leaders, and activists from newly occupied territories identified by human rights organizations, 265 counted by the [Crimean Human Rights Group](#) and others. Furthermore, there are the thousands of civilian prisoners jailed by the so-called “People’s Republics” in Donetsk and Luhansk between 2014 and 2022, including for political offenses, who have been transferred to prisons in Russia.

Alongside this orgy of violence, Russia’s machine of domestic repression has gone into overdrive. A swathe of new censorious laws — for instance, penalizing “disseminating knowingly false information about the Russian military” (which includes calling the war a war) — have been added to the preexisting laws on “foreign agents,” “undesirable organizations,” and “extremism” from the last decade. Deranged police sweeps of people whose critical comments are harvested from social media have intensified.

The leading [human rights organization](#) Political Prisoners Support: Memorial, now based abroad, lists over 3,000 political detainees today, compared to just fifty in 2015 and 420 in 2021. After the post-Stalin “thaw,” historians reckon the number of political detainees in the Soviet Union fell to 5,000–10,000 in the 1970s (in the fifteen-republic union, with a population nearly twice that of Russia alone). The trend reflected in these numbers justifies the term we have used in Voices Against Putin’s War: a “twenty-first-century gulag.”

Amid an international tide of rising right-wing authoritarianism and militarism, culminating in the genocide in Gaza, the speeches in the book are significant far beyond Russia. In his foreword, John McDonnell, a left-wing Labour MP in Britain, calls them “an inspiration to all those across the globe who see an injustice, and who refuse to passively comply,” from Israeli draft refuseniks and Palestine Action supporters in Britain to women demonstrating for life and liberty in Iran. That is where hope lies in our dark times.

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Source: [Jacobin](#).

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