# Poetry Against Fascism


Listen to Symphony No. 7 in C Major - Dmitri Shostakovich

[**Listen** to Dmitry Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 in C Major, Op. 60 'Leningrad': I. Allegretto, composed in December 1941, initially as a dedication to Lenin and later in homage to the besieged city of Leningrad.]

## Stand and Be Bold Then, Even as She

She stands on the summit of Mamayev Kurgan overlooking Stalingrad (today's Volgograd), wielding a massive sword to the open sky. Her mouth ajar and her left hand outstretched, she is calling the Soviet people to battle. *Rodina-mat' zovyot!* ('The Motherland Calls!') is an 85-metre figure designed by Yevgeny Vuchetich to commemorate the historic victory at Stalingrad, built in 1967 as the world's tallest statue at the time. Mother Russia personified, she represents the 27 million Soviet lives lost to defeat fascism 80 years ago this month, perhaps the true *Statue of Liberty* for the oppressed of the world. During the Second World War, or the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) as it was known in the Soviet Union, the voice of the 'Mother' and the 'Motherland' was amplified through poetry, paintings, posters, and song, giving courage to the soldiers on the frontline and awakening the nation.

*The Motherland Calls* statue and Eternal Flame at Mamayev Kurgan, Volgograd.

One such voice was poet Olga Bergholz, known as the 'Voice of Leningrad', who read poems on the radio during Nazi Germany's Operation Barbarossa, its nearly 900-day siege of Leningrad, which claimed the lives of a third of that city's population. Six months into the occupation, amid air-raids wailing twelve hours a day and surviving on a daily ration of half a loaf of bread, Bergholz wrote the poem, 'Conversation with a Neighbour' (1941):

> Dariya Vlasievna, my next-door neighbour,
> Let us sit down and talk, we two,
> Let's talk about the days of peace,
> The peace that we all long for so…
>
> To have survived this blockade's fetters,
> Death daily hovering above,
> What strength we all have needed, neighbour,
> What hate we've needed – and what love!…
>
> The day will come…
>
> And we'll be drinking in slow sips

> Glasses of glowing, crimson wine.
> And to you – to you they'll build a statue
> And place on the Bolshoi Square;
> In firm imperishable steel,
> Your homely form they'll fashion there.
>
> Just as you were – ill-fed, undaunted,
> In quickly gathered clothes arrayed;
> Just as you were when under shell fire
> You did your duties undismayed.
>
> Dariya Vlasievna, by your spirit
> The whole world renewed shall be.
> The name of that spirit is Russia.
> Stand and be bold then, even as She.

Despite the siege, according to one **account**, people sought solace in poetry: 'hungry for culture, the workers attend a hastily arranged literary evening; they sit motionless and enrapt, ignoring the bombs falling outside'. As with the work of countless poets, Bergholz's words aimed to fulfil her promise that 'No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten'. Perhaps the statue in Stalingrad is Dariya Vlasienva herself, or any one of the millions of Soviet women who resisted fascism – mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, Red Army soldiers and commanders, factory workers and frontline scientists, nurses and doctors, and journalists and poets – not to be forgotten.

Left: Soviet cultural brigades at Evacuation Hospital No. 2386. Right: On the frontlines, ca. 1940s.

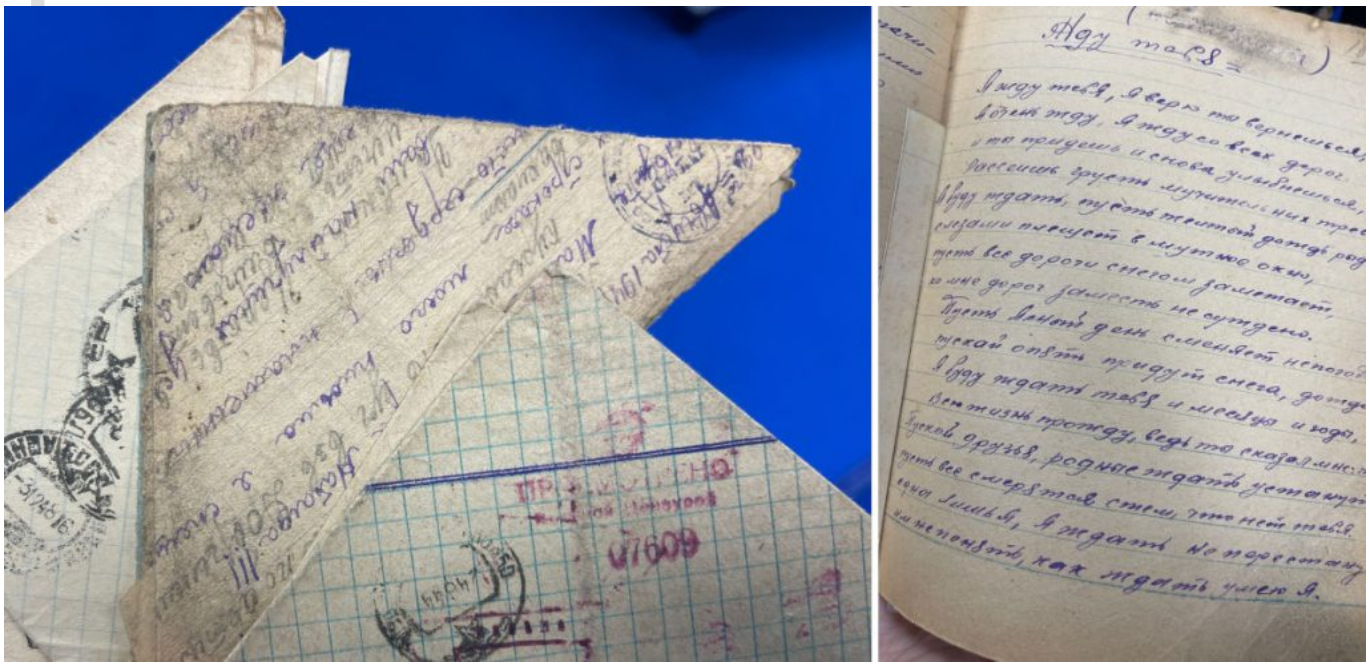
When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union mobilised not only soldiers but literary workers. Words in wartime became weapons as much as tanks and machine guns to maintain the morale of soldiers, to honour the dead, to raise political consciousness, to transform anger into resistance, and to preserve hope. Responding to this urgency were Soviet poets of diverse nationalities, from famed literary workers to mothers in the rear guard to young soldiers scribbling on scraps

of paper in the trenches. Soviet Writers' Union members were assigned as frontline correspondents, producing poems and reportage that appeared daily in Red Army newspapers, while poetry brigades toured trenches, factories, and hospitals. For the renowned **composer** Dmitry Shostakovich, the war gave rise to 'a colossal rise in national creativity. The art of the Great Patriotic War was an aesthetic and social phenomenon, one that had never happened before!'

## For Every Child Burned in the Flames, for Every City Razed – There Will Be Retribution

Among the most prolific Soviet wartime writers was Ilya Ehrenburg. Already an internationally renowned writer, he served as a frontline correspondent for the Red Army newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* ('Red Star') and composed over 1,000 articles, in addition to being the vice-chair of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. In the first weeks of the war, he wrote 'Freedom or Death' (5 July 1941) in which he observed that the resistance against fascism was a defence of culture:

> Soviet people value culture. For them, books, paintings, and songs are the air they breathe. Access to our schools is open to all. Among us, knowledge is for everyone, just as the sun is for everyone. We are proud of Tolstoy. We cherish our children for they are the Pushkins and Tolstoys of tomorrow… We know what is at stake now: our freedom, our life, our future. We are defending the right to breathe freely. We are defending the peace and happiness of our children.



Left: Red Army soldiers' letters. Right: 'I'm Waiting for You' in Pyotr Yakovlevich Nosov's diary.

The writings of Ilya and many others were widely circulated across the frontlines, giving courage and hope to the Red Army soldiers. One such soldier was Sergeant Pyotr Yakovlevich Nosov from Mordovia, who kept a detailed **diary** totalling 590 pages during his five years in active duty. He commented on the contemporary

writings of Ehrenburg, and in one entry, he copied in his neat cursive handwriting a poem written as a response to one of the most famous wartime poems – 'Wait for me!' (1941) by Konstantin Simonov. Dedicated to Valentina Serova, Simonov writes:

> Wait for me and I'll come back!
> Wait with all your might!
> Wait when dreary yellow rains
> Tell you nothing's right;
> Wait when snow is falling fast;
> Wait when summer's hot;
> When no one waits for other men
> And all the past's forgot!

In Nosov's diaries, he copied the lines from 'I'm Waiting for You', the anonymous response to Simonov, which was later turned into a song by well-known Russian singer Alsou, who sang, 'I'm waiting for you, I believe you will return! I'm waiting for you from everywhere'. Eight decades later, soldiers' writings, especially the 6 billion letters sent during the war, have become important historical documents. Letters were characteristically folded into small triangles and were posted free-of-charge from the frontlines.

## We, Who Are Not Free Yet, Salute You Who Vanquished the Tyrant

The Soviet Union's defeat of the Nazis was not only their victory but shared by all humanity. Countless poems around the world were written to praise the Soviet resistance, which was intimately connected to the liberation struggles around the world. Perhaps no single battle captured the hearts and minds of the people of the Third World more than the Battle of Stalingrad. On 17 July 1942, the Nazi army broke the Soviet defence and crossed the Don River, determined to capture Stalingrad in one week. Their blitzkrieg method that worked in so many European capitals failed to defeat the Soviet Army, which, following the 'Not a step back!' directive, held strong for 200 days and nights. This bloody and decisive battle, leading to the ultimate defeat of the Nazis, cost the lives of 1 million Soviet soldiers, hundreds of thousands of civilians, and 1.5 million Nazi soldiers.

Left: 'The Motherland is Calling!' poster with a military oath. Right: Victory Banner over Fallen Fighters Square in Stalingrad, 1943.

Peter Blackman was one of the writers moved by Soviet heroism in Stalingrad. Hailing from Barbados and settled in Britain, Blackman was actively involved in the Negro Welfare Association and the League of Coloured Peoples before joining the Communist Party of Britain, working closely with Pan-African and working-class movements. In his poem 'Stalingrad', he wrote about the news of the battle mobilising people across the world – 'the gaucho spread his riot in the pampas', 'the English housewife stopped her housework', and 'from Good Hope, black miners answered'. For Blackman, the survival of Stalingrad, 'the star of hope… spread[ing] its flame', held world-historical significance for oppressed people:

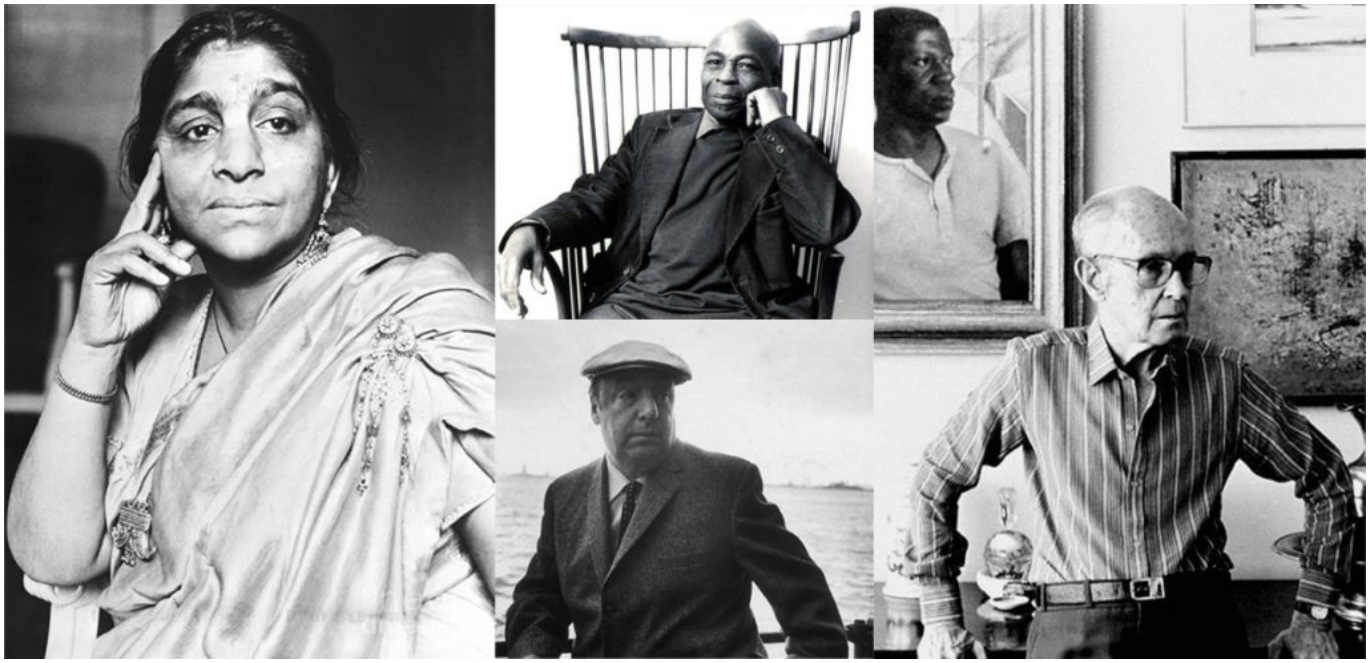
> Now life was certain
> Soon all men would be free
> New light broke upon Africa
> New strength for her peoples
> New strength poured upon Asia
> New hope for her peoples.

This poem was distributed through anti-fascist, trade union, and Pan-African networks of the time, and was featured by the Progressive Writers' Association and Colonial Information Bureau, which translated it for French and Arabic newsletters in the colonies. Decades later, it gained a second life when Robert Wyatt recorded a song in 1981 featuring Blackman reciting the poem.

Meanwhile, while living in semi-exile as Chile's consul in Mexico City, renowned communist poet Pablo Neruda penned 'Canto de amor a Stalingrado' ('Song of Love for Stalingrad') (1943) while the battle was underway:

> Save me a fragment of violent foam
> save me a rifle, save a plow for me
> and let them place it at my grave
> with a red ear of grain from your soil,
> that it be known, if there be any doubt,
> that I died loving you and you loved me,
> and if I did not fight in your waist
> I leave in your honour this dark grenade,
> this song of love for Stalingrad.

This poem was published in newspapers from Buenos Aires to Mexico City, where it was plastered as posters on city walls. It was also translated by Ilya Ehrenburg into Russian as a symbol of international solidarity offered to the Soviet people.



Poets Sarojini Naidu, Sean Blackman, Pablo Neruda, and Carlos Drummond de Andrade.

Beyond communists, Soviet resistance captured the imaginations of a broad range of writers. Carlos Drummond de Andrade, one of Brazil's most beloved poets though not known for his political writings, wrote the poem, 'Carta a Stalingrado' ('Letter to Stalingrad').

> The poetry escaped from the books, they are now in newspapers.
> The telegrams from Moscow repeat Homer.
> But Homer is old. The telegrams sing a new world
> which we, in the darkness, ignored. …
> I feel you like a human creature, and what are you, Stalingrad, but that?
> A creature that will not die, that will fight,
> against the sky, the water, the metal, the creature fights,
> against millions of arms and mechanical devices the creature fights,
> against cold, hunger, night, against death the creature fights,
> and wins.

Likewise, Sarojini Naidu, poet and Indian National Congress leader who worked closely with Mahatma Gandhi, wrote the poem 'To the Soviet Union' (1941). Though not a leftist, she saw the Soviet war efforts as deeply connected to the anti-colonial nationalist struggle. In her poem she praised the Soviet resistance, writing, 'Brave land of Russia – hail! / Hearts of our hearts, your sorrows we have borne in pain, your victories we embrace in pride' and offered solidarity – 'We, who are not free yet, salute you who vanquished the tyrant'.

## History Teaches Us that Light Will Always Overcome Darkness

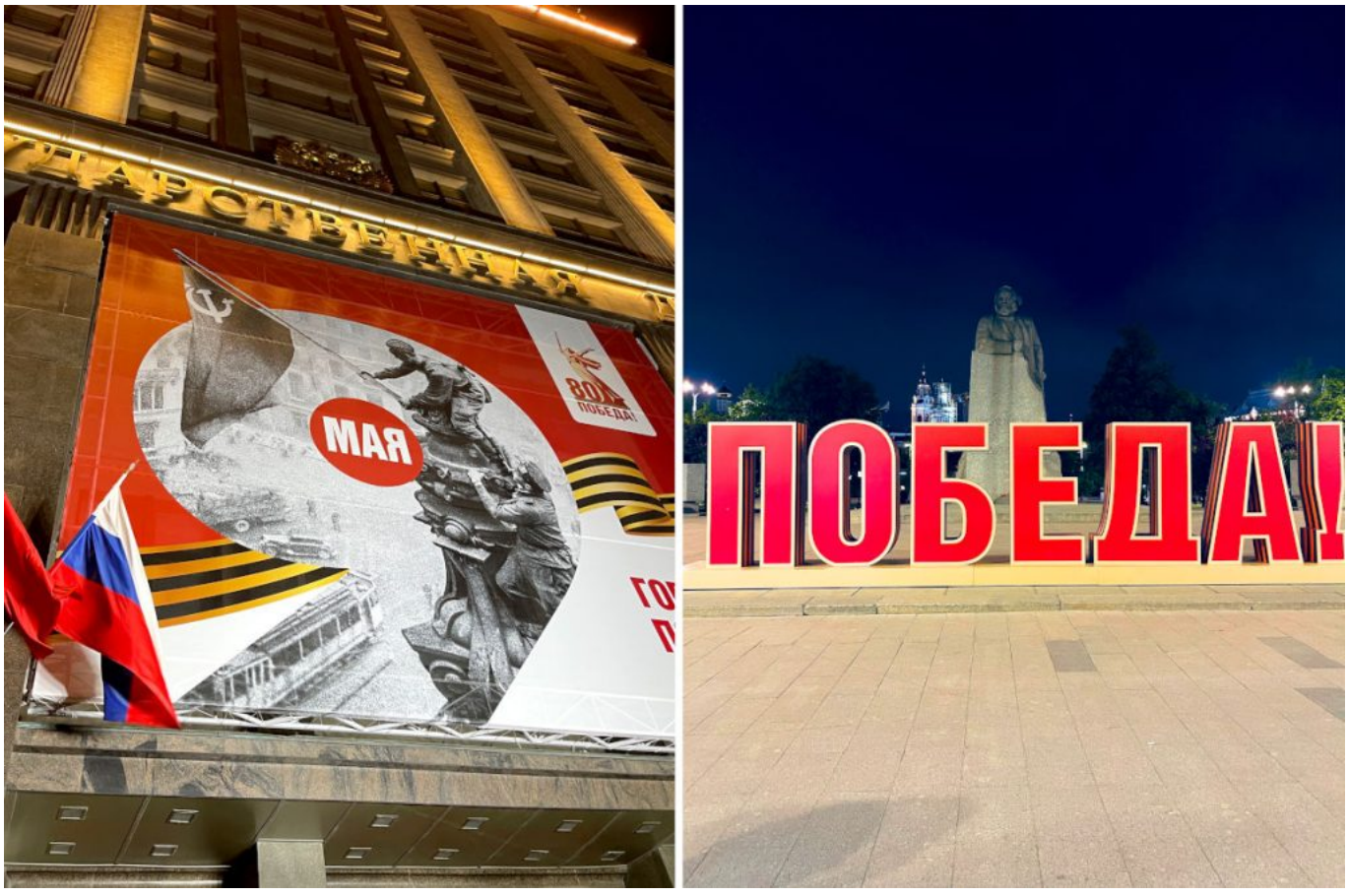
Today, eighty years after the 150th Guards Motor Rifle Division raised the flag of the Soviet Union over the

Reichstag and the German Instrument of Surrender was signed, there is a battle being waged over the memory of this history. Chinese president Xi Jinping echoed this point in his **article** for the anniversary:

> We must uphold a correct historical perspective on WWII. China and the Soviet Union were the principal theatres of that war in Asia and Europe respectively. The two countries served as the mainstay of resistance against Japanese militarism and German Nazism, making pivotal contribution to the victory of the World Anti-Fascist War… History teaches us that light will always overcome darkness, and that justice will ultimately prevail over evil.

The international anti-fascist war was won by many and at an unimaginable human cost – in particular, the 27 million Soviet lives and 20 million Chinese people who died resisting Nazism and Japanese aggression. However, today especially in Global North countries, this history is being rewritten as increasingly more people **believe** that it was the United States, with 418,000 soldiers who died, that played the most vital role in defeating Nazism.

Just as wartime poets wielded words as weapons against historical erasure, may we use the written word to preserve the legacies of these millions of lives alive, today and for future generations. As Nikolai Mayarov, student poet turned Red Army propaganda officer killed near Smolensk at the age of 22, wrote: 'And let them not think that the dead do not hear / When their descendants speak of them'. Let us continue to speak of them.



Left: 9 May poster. Right: Karl Marx statue at Teatralnaya Square, Moscow.

For this month's **portraits** honouring revolutionaries around the world, we pay homage to Karl Marx who was born this month in 1818. In Moscow's Teatralnaya Square, the statue of Marx still stands, though no longer illuminated as he was during the Soviet days. However, for the eightieth anniversary of Victory Day Against Fascism, a giant sign was erected in front of him with a single word: 'Pobeda!' ('Victory!').

Warmly,

Tings Chak
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