Post-Soviet science fiction and the war in Ukraine

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Today's mass-produced Russian science fiction is brimming with motifs of imperial revenge, the "rewriting of history" and a cult of military aggression. Moreover, writes Konstantin Skorkin, the imperial visions of science fiction authors have turned into a guide to action.

From humanism to militarism

Contemporary Russian science fiction has emerged from under the Strugatsky brothers’ "overcoat". The veteran science fiction writers’ oeuvre was imbued with a humanistic zeal and the worlds they created were based on ideas of reason and progress, while the plots of their novels featured a clash between those who promoted these values and those who opposed them. In this respect the early works by the Strugatsky brothers were grounded in a positive modernist response to the communist project: unable to see much progress or reason in the real-life practices of the communist regime, the authors depicted an ideal world of “proper communism”.

This contradiction gradually drove the authors to create powerful anti-totalitarian narratives. For example, Inhabited Island is a novel about any dictatorship, regardless of its ideological hue or how it oppresses the individual. And in Hard To Be a God, a scholar from planet Earth, guided by noble humanist ideals, tries to salvage the remaining islands of enlightenment on a planet gripped by medieval fanaticism and obscurantism.

Continuing the Strugatsky brothers’ humanist tradition by inertia, post-Soviet Russian science fiction, in turn, started to pivot towards the empire as a positive ideal. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the traumatic experience of losing world power status, which many of the authors experienced as a major personal trauma, played a key role in this turn.

Russian science fiction author Ilya Te writes in the journal Mir fantastiki:

What we see here is the effect of a compressed coil. The country was humiliated after perestroika and people wiped their boots with patriotic feelings. That is to
say, the coil was compressed to the extreme. But pride in one’s country and love of the Motherland are the most powerful of social emotions. [1]

This was especially typical of those authors writing in Russian who woke up as citizens of new countries after the collapse of the empire. For example, master of Russian science fiction Sergei Lukyanenko, in thrall to imperial ideas, began his writing career in Kazakhstan. In February 2014, Lukyanenko banned the translation of his work into Ukrainian and announced he would not visit Ukraine because of Maidan. The trauma of separation proved even more bruising for Ukraine-based authors. They have found the emergence of this new country on the world map particularly traumatic. They perceive the Ukrainian reality as full of malicious nationalism and have sought its antithesis in an imperialistic “universal humanity”.

Lev Vershinin, who was born in Odessa and later emigrated to Spain, rose to fame not only as a writer of “alternative history” and social science fiction, but also as the author of defamatory anti-Ukrainian articles. Ukrainophobia is also characteristic of Lukyanenko’s political commentaries, although both authors had previously been happy to make regular appearances in the Zvezdny most [“Bridge to the stars”] science fiction festival in Kharkiv, and to receive awards from its sponsor Arsen Avakov, the present-day “blood-stained executioner of the junta”.

“Accidental time travellers” on the attack

Whereas authors striving for a certain degree of literary quality reflected the imperial theme within the bounds of decency, mass science fiction in the noughties responded to a growing demand for imperial revenge, albeit virtual.

This motif has flourished in two subgenres in particular – alternative history fiction and books on “accidental time travellers” (popadantsy).

Creating alternative versions of historical developments and narratives featuring our contemporaries travelling to the past or the future is quite common worldwide but nowhere outside Russian science fiction are these works likely to be so deeply steeped in reactionary ideas.

Take, for example, the plethora of books featuring “accidental time travellers”. They are typically based on the following narrative device: a contemporary hero, who has either a science background or is trained in martial arts, or is simply equipped with a “correct understanding of history”, is transported into another era and transplanted into the body of a historical figure. The new arrivals may travel through time individually, in groups or as entire armies. Travel can also happen in the other direction - figures from the past set out to shape the future as they see fit.

All these expeditions share the same goal – to destroy the enemies of Russia, create an empire, and subjugate neighbouring nations. In fact, this range of activities forms the toolkit of a “correct understanding of history”.

The most popular character to whose aid accidental time travellers tend to rush (or who
rushes to help us, turning himself into an “accidental time traveller”) is Stalin.

For example, in Artyom Rybakov’s novel *Sudoplatov’s Pilgrims: Time Travellers On the Attack* (EKSMO, 2012), people arriving from present-day Russia help Stalin win the war as early as 1941. And in the novel *Save the Future! The Leader’s “Time Traveller”* by Viktor Poberezhnykh (EKSMO/Yauza, 2013), Stalin gets in touch with Putin so that he can bring him back on to the right track, by declaring martial law and going to war with the United States.

Most of these time travellers are retired military or special forces officers; other popular tropes include time-travelling veterans of the Chechen wars who inject their present-day wartime experience into past military action, or computer game players and system administrators who travel to the past with their notebook computers.

The choice of protagonists reflects a simplified sample of the future reader target group. Russian writer and reviewer Mariya Galina says: “Run-of-the-mill science fiction is escapist literature, often written by infantile individuals who feel uncomfortable in this world and would like to feel a part of something big and important, a part of history. And their readers are just like them.”

Not only does this literature offer an escape from grey reality to a world of grand achievements, it also proposes ways of rectifying a traumatic past. Its readers are convinced that present-day Russia has been humiliated and deprived of its rightly deserved place in history, and that it is therefore necessary to go back to the past and make some corrections or, conversely, to summon the heroic past to the aid of the present.

The “Soviet” legacy forms a central component of the construction of these worlds and even if the protagonists find themselves in Tsarist Russia, they invariably imbue the past with some aspects of “the heavenly USSR”. And lo and behold, Tsar Nicholas II acquires Stalin’s features, cracks down on the “fifth column”, and fights America.

German-Ukrainian scholar Oleksandr Zabirko of the University of Münster, who has studied the “retro motifs” in post-Soviet science fiction, believes that this “nostalgia for the USSR does not represent a yearning for a return to the past but is rather an attempt to inject the Soviet past into a new imperial patriotism. The Soviet past becomes Russia’s ‘golden age’. The authors worship a pantheon of Soviet heroes, the imperial grandeur and technocratic might of the Soviet military industry.” [2]

The comical aggression and idiocy of its narrative devices have resulted in the genre totally undermining itself. The Internet is awash with the insane graphomaniac writings of Oleg Rybachenko, a Belarusian who churns out endless incoherent works featuring “accidental time travellers” who end up inside a bee or even inside a microbe.

Rybachenko’s protagonists also include real-life characters from a more recent past, such as Strelkov and Motorola, Russian mercenaries who fought in Donbas and who, in his books, go back to World War I to unleash Grad missiles on the Teutons.

Another characteristic feature of this alternative history subgenre is the glorification of
the empire and totalitarian system. Particularly indicative in this respect is *Boldly We March Into Battle* (Yu.A. Bystrov publishers, 2006), a novel co-written by Orlov, Koshelev and Avramenko. In its alternative reality, the 1917 October Revolution did not happen, Lenin was killed by drunken proletarians and the corrupt bourgeois republic (whose depiction is, of course, based on present-day Russia) was swept aside by generals Kornilov, Kutepov and others.

As it happens, the generals don’t discover an alternative way. Instead, they set out to transform the country in the spirit of the idol of Russian reactionary science fiction, Stalin: industrialization, prison camps, terror, the only difference being that the NKVD is replaced by a Russian Orthodox inquisition – all this presented in a positive light.

Moreover, the authors equip the new Russian rulers with the toolkit of another totalitarian dictator - Adolf Hitler: Jews are driven into a ghetto, deprived of all rights and gradually annihilated. Russia forms an alliance with Nazi Germany and starts a war with the hated Anglo-Saxons. The novel abounds in graphic sadistic scenes and fervid accounts of war crimes of every kind committed by the Russians and their German allies. It is astonishing that this kind of book could have been published at all.

Typically, the authors themselves don’t see anything wrong in such fantasies. Indeed, they justify them on ideological grounds:

> Totalitarianism is the most striking, easily comprehensible and, most importantly, historically tried and tested antithesis to Anglo-Saxon and French liberalism. All those who are not happy with the present-day world order, which contains ever less order and ever more impulsive barbarism, have tried to find an alternative [...] The apologias of totalitarianism, Stalinism and Hitlerism (an enemy of western democracies and a failed ally of Stalinism) show that a semblance of freedom of expression has been preserved in Russia”,

said Kharkiv authors Dmitry Gordevsky and Yana Botsman, who publish under the pseudonym “Aleksandr Zorich”, during a round table discussion in *Mir fantastiki* (11/2001).

It is hard to say if the demand for this kind of literature is being generated artificially (with the authorities’ approval) or whether the publishers actually reflect demand from the reading public.

The lion’s share of “accidental traveller” books are published by Yauza, an imprint of the Russian EKSMO publishing group. A staff member of another major Russian publishing house says:

> The “social demand” [for these books] is basically dictated by the taste of their target audience and their money-making potential. Adherents of the conspiracy theory whereby “the hand of the Kremlin” is behind all of this simply refuse to take into account the fact that in Russia there is a genuine demand for this kind of literature. Unlike the mass media, the book market is not driven by “social demand” or *tyomniki* [pre-packaged news stories prepared by the Kremlin –
trans.]. Ministerial grants do exist but they are just a drop in the ocean, and they are generally not given to fiction.

Mariya Galina believes that we are witnessing two parallel processes: “The ‘accidental time travellers’ represent a commercially successful trend that is being exploited not only by EKSMO and Yauza. By contrast, the novels that depict various versions of wars on Ukrainian territory, which emerged a few years ago, were mostly published by Yauza. Judging by the dynamic of their print runs and the frequent renaming of the series (titles of popular brands tend to endure) they are unlikely to have sold well but the publishers rarely make the figures available.”

Either way, science fiction produced on such a mass scale can’t have failed to leave a mark on popular consciousness. And having openly embarked on a course of militarist policies and imperial revanchism, Putin’s Russia has issued a call to arms to both science fiction authors themselves and their particularly fanatical readers.

**Science fiction authors’ march to the front**

The number of science fiction authors who have “joined the army” in the course of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is certainly impressive.

One of the main instigators of the war and organizer of the separatist insurrection in Slavyansk, Igor Strelkov-Girkin is, in fact, himself an author of children’s science fiction. The man who was Strelkov’s right hand in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic, holding the post of “minister of defence”, was the Donetsk writer Fedor Berezin, author of numerous “alternative novels” that depict NATO aggression against Russia and Russian patriots in Crimea battling NATO occupiers, and so forth.

Gleb Bobrov is the author of *The Era of the Stillborn*, whose vivid depiction of a war between Ukraine’s East and West caused a sensation some time ago. Bobrov works for the propaganda office of the self-proclaimed Lugansk People’s Republic (his and Berezin’s books have been energetically promoted by EKSMO / Yauza). Vladimir Sverzhin, a science fiction author from Kharkiv who was actively involved in illegal paramilitary activities, recently participated in a roundtable meeting of global separatist movements, where he represented the “Commonwealth of Donbas Territorial Army Veterans”.

Other science fiction authors who have actively taken part in the war propaganda effort include Lev Vershinin. This “alternative history” author from Odessa has been involved in propaganda activities ever since Maidan and extracts from his blog posts were used in manuals for paid Internet trolls.

His comrades-in-arms on the information front – the bloggers El Murid (Anatoly Nesmiyan) and Colonel Cassad (Boris Rozhin, who lives in the annexed city of Sevastopol and is the author of the “courteous people” meme, applied to Crimea’s Russian occupiers) – are also great fans of science fiction. They took their respective pseudonyms from characters created by science fiction writers Glen Cook and Dan Simmons. It is indicative that the majority of these people are one way or another linked with Ukraine.
There is nothing surprising about this “mobilization”: the war has opened up a great many opportunities for giving free vent to the chauvinism troubling individuals driven by revanchist ideas. This chauvinism has at last found a channel outside literary production. This applies both to the authors and their readers.

I dare suggest that most separatist militia fighters, if they have read anything at all, will have read “alternative history”, “accidental time travel” and “martial arts fantasy” fiction. As an anonymous Russian political scientist specializing in Ukraine issues notes:

This is a very active subculture that had previously not been visible to the outside world. It has been generated by the following types of people: former military personnel, “not soldiers but dreamers” and the like, people who regularly play (often secret) computer war games, fans of apocalyptic literature, people preparing for a future war and learning to use firearms (99 per cent of these activities are wholly clandestine), plus some significant public figures around whom the rest of them gather (in this case, openly).

Oleksandr Zabirko believes that reactionary Russian science fiction has provided the “heroes of Novorossiya” with an ideal role model:

We must not forget that the “accidental time traveller” books are not just stories of time travel; they are also accounts of vertical social mobility and the personal reincarnation of a typical loser as an epic hero. These are stories of people such as Arseny Pavlov, aka “Motorola” who, after struggling to make ends meet at a car wash near Rostov, was suddenly transformed into a famous field commander, an invincible warrior against Ukrainian fascists; stories in which ex-bricklayer Pavel Dremov turns into a brave and noble Kozak ataman and leader of the self-proclaimed Soviet Socialist Kozak Republic in the city of Stakhanov.

It is time to think again about the responsibility of writers to society and about the kind of soil on which such escapist bloodthirsty fantasies might fall, where they will turn into real blood and real deaths. The dragon’s teeth have been planted and started to grow.

Footnotes


2. This and the other citation from Oleksandr Zabirko draw on a personal exchange between him and the author.

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