

Ukrainian nationalists refuse to speak at New York literary festival with Russian authors

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During the PEN America World Voices Festival of International Literature in New York City held earlier this month, three Ukrainian writers refused to appear at a scheduled event called “Ukrainian writers at war” moderated by the American author and Iraq War veteran, Phil Klay. Their reason? PEN had scheduled another panel at the same event including three Russian writers.

PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists) is a worldwide organization that purports to defend freedom of expression. The World Voices Festival is held annually in New York and Los Angeles.

Writers Artem Chapeye and Artem Chekh (both on active duty in the Ukrainian military), along with writer and filmmaker Iryna Tsilyk, claimed that PEN America had reneged on a promise to exclude Russian writers from the festival. At issue was a panel on “Escape from tyranny: Writing in Exile” (subsequently removed from the online program) moderated by PEN America’s vice-president, Masha Gessen, featuring two of Gessen’s colleagues, Anna Nemzer and Iliia Veniavkin (from a PEN-sponsored project, the Russian Independent Media Archive), as well as Chinese novelist Murong Xuecun.

In a statement, PEN America acknowledged that it had misunderstood the agreement with the Ukrainian writers and their sponsoring organization, PEN Ukraine, which mandated that no Russian writers appear at the festival at all, not simply on the same platform as the Ukrainian writers.

After attempting to work out a compromise which was not acceptable to the Ukrainian speakers, PEN cancelled the event with the Russians, apparently with the agreement of the participants.

The Ukrainians’ action is one with the general character of the US-NATO war: anti-democratic, chauvinist and reactionary to the core. Taking advantage of the Putin government’s reactionary invasion, the Biden administration is pursuing the long-range plans of American imperialism, directed against Russia and ultimately China. Pledging to fight to the last Ukrainian, Washington is risking World War III as part of its drive to dominate the globe.

The Ukrainian writers’ position is one of frothing nationalism, which has no base of popular support in the US or

anywhere else. They are so consumed with chauvinism, they are unable to recognize right-wing allies in PEN and Gessen. After all, Gessen and colleagues are not representatives or sympathizers of the Putin regime, but vocal opponents. They oppose the invasion of Ukraine, but from a right-wing, pro-imperialist stance.

Gessen, in fact, is a specialist in producing pro-war propaganda: in describing the history and progress of the Ukraine war, Gessen has demonstrated what information needs to be suppressed, what needs to be magnified and what emotions to stoke. Undoubtedly, Gessen was chosen for these skills when asked to head the venerable anti-communist propaganda outfit Voice of America in 2012.

Gessen published an article in the *New Yorker* earlier this year about the Director of the Literary Museum in Kharkiv, Tetyana Pylypchuk. Gessen builds the latter up as the guardian of Ukrainian culture against the onslaught of a Russian imperialism determined to exterminate it. Any causes of the Russian invasion, beyond the blackhearted hatred on the part of Putin (and undoubtedly millions of other Russians) for anything Ukrainian, is deliberately excluded.

When Pylypchuk’s child asks her about Stepan Bandera, “a Ukrainian nationalist who fought the Soviets, was incarcerated by the Nazis, and was finally murdered by the K.G.B.,” as Gessen describes him, Gessen, who lost grandparents in the Holocaust, reports that the “Kremlin, in both its Soviet and current incarnations, has branded Bandera and his supporters ... as Nazi collaborators.” Gessen then adds, without any comment as to why this is so and who is responsible, “in post-Soviet Ukraine, Bandera is hailed as a hero.”

This literary device at the service of political distortion might be called the “weaponized half-truth,” a statement which is true about what came from the Kremlin, but contains the fatal omission of the most important fact of all, that Bandera and his forces actually *were* Nazi collaborators who needed no goading to imprison, torture and exterminate Jews and Poles in Ukraine, along with Ukrainian communists. By limiting historical context, Gessen makes the half-truth into a lie.

Gessen’s pro-war propaganda promotes the same nationalist-racist assumptions that the Ukrainian speakers used for refusing to participate at the PEN festival with Russians.

In a statement, PEN Ukraine, which had selected the writers who participated in the PEN America panel, stated: “Our position since the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine is to avoid participating in events under the same umbrella as representatives of Russia. ...

“We find it immoral and contrary to our values to imagine that writers or cultural figures from Ukraine and Russia can take part in the same event or share a platform. Doing so would create the illusion of openness to a ‘dialogue’ between representatives of Ukraine and Russia before the Russian regime is defeated.”

This passage speaks for itself. Not only is there to be no dialogue with people who, because of the accident of birth, happen to be Russian, but Ukrainian writers are not even permitted to “take part in the same event or share a platform” with them regardless of their political views or actions.

According to an article on the affair in the *Atlantic*, “Chapeye said he couldn’t make distinctions between ‘good’ Russians and ‘bad’ Russians in this case. ‘Until the war ends ... a soldier cannot be seen with the ‘good Russians.’”

In other words, the “values” and “principles” that motivate PEN Ukraine and the panelists are those of race, blood, ethnicity.

The filmmaker and panel participant Iryna Tsilyk elaborated on this in a comment on Facebook explaining her opposition to appearing at the World Voices Festival with Russians: “Russian culture,” she says, “is all based on imperial constructs deeply sewn into the works of even the best writers, film directors, etc.

“Westerners often ask,” she continues, “what is the fault of Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and so on today? All these authors are talented, there is no doubt about it. But their works are products of their time, and they require a modern attentive rethinking, particularly from the point of view of consequences of Russia’s ongoing colonial and genocidal character of its policy towards Ukraine and other nations oppressed by Russia.” “Modern attentive rethinking” means, to the Ukrainian nationalist, banning these authors from Ukraine, and, if possible, everywhere else.

Tetyana Teren, the Executive Director of PEN Ukraine and the former head of the government-run Ukrainian Book Institute, speaks of “the imperial essence of their culture” on Facebook. Teren has played a leading role in expunging Russian works from Ukraine.

This view is deeply hostile to the very role that art plays in society, one in which historical conditions of authors’ times, including misconceptions and prejudices, live side-by-side with the most objective truths about society and even the human nature of our own time.

Russian literature has played an outsized role in this respect. In the words of the great Polish-German revolutionary leader, Rosa Luxemburg: “The chief characteristic of ... Russian literature is that it was born out of opposition to the Russian

regime, out of the spirit of struggle. ... It explains the richness and depth of its spiritual quality, the fullness and originality of its artistic form, above all, its creative and driving social force.”

Gessen has no principled differences with the Ukrainian chauvinists. In a *New Yorker* interview, Gessen says: “On the subject of cancelling operas and all that, I think I’m very much on the side of people who say, ‘Look, if we don’t hear Tchaikovsky for three years, even though Tchaikovsky really has no relationship to this war, but, if we don’t hear him for three years or whatever, it will not be a great loss to world culture.’”

But the fascist demon has come back to bite Gessen, who resigned as vice president of PEN America, not out of principled differences with keeping Russians and Ukrainians apart but because the manner in which the organization did so was “impolite” and that the organization did not have a clear policy on how it would censor participants.

PEN America poses as a champion of free speech. The organization, headed by Suzanne Nossel, has filed a lawsuit against Escambia County School District and its School Board in Florida for banning ten books, done as a part of the political climate of censorship created by the fascist Governor of Florida and recently announced presidential candidate, Ron DeSantis.

But PEN America’s real purpose, its important task on behalf of the ruling elite in general and the Democratic Party in particular, is not to protect the rights of children to read books in Florida, but to assiduously escalate anti-Russian sentiment and generally stigmatize all those regimes that stand in the way of US plans. Nossel, after all, is a former assistant to Richard Holbrooke in his capacity as UN Ambassador and a former deputy assistant to Hillary Clinton. She is a “human rights” imperialist in her own right.

PEN’s actions in cancelling a Russian panel, even one headed by one of its own, for the sake of right-wing cultural chauvinism, is not only cowardly and cynical, but predictable. Writers will not find the defense of their creative rights or anything else here.



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