

ANNALS OF WAR

# THE SILENCING OF RUSSIAN ART

*Vladimir Putin views his country's cultural sphere like any other sector: a subordinate dominion, which should submit to the state's needs and interests. What's been lost?*

**By Joshua Yaffa**

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Illustration by Adam Maida

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**W**hen Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in the winter of 2022, the rock group Bi-2 was on a nationwide tour. The group, a stalwart of the Russian music scene for more than two decades, is known for its nostalgia-drenched sing-along anthems, whose lyrics are often both rebellious and literary. At a concert in Yekaterinburg in March its two front men, Shura and Lyova, who are both in their fifties, had proclaimed “No to

war!” “We thought we could affect the process,” Lyova said.

A few weeks later, in the Siberian city of Omsk, Shura and Lyova walked into the concert hall to find a large banner with a capital “Z,” the symbol of support for Vladimir Putin and the invasion, hanging on the wall behind the stage. “This is fucked up,” Lyova recalled thinking. The musicians draped a black cloth over the banner, but the venue’s director demanded that they take it down. Officials from the regional administration warned that if they didn’t comply the concert wouldn’t happen. Fifteen minutes before showtime, the event was cancelled.

Other venues began cancelling Bi-2’s shows. One was suddenly undergoing renovation. Another said that it was reimposing pandemic-era restrictions. Concert venues blamed local authorities; local authorities pointed to officials in Moscow. The musicians had connections in the government—at one point, Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for the foreign ministry, expressed her support—but they couldn’t track down the person or office with the authority to lift the shadow ban. Igor Rubinstein, the band’s media manager, told me, “Every person would say, ‘It’s not me, try this other guy.’ No one wanted to take responsibility.”

Bi-2’s members soon learned that they had landed on a list of undesirable artists, which had circulated among regional administrations and cultural departments. “Officially these lists don’t exist,” a concert promoter, who was forced to remove Bi-2 and a half dozen other bands from the lineup of a rock festival that summer, said. “They don’t have any legalistic basis.” Rather, he went on, they functioned as “indications of undesirability.” A producer described seeing a color-coded list—black, yellow, and red—with dozens of musicians and other performers on it. “It was like an intern prepared it,” the producer said. In some cases, first and last names were mixed up; other entries listed band members who had left their groups years earlier. “The whole thing looked awfully unserious,” the producer told me. “But the consequences were as serious as it gets.”

Bi-2 was facing the prospect of several million dollars of lost revenue and was edging close to bankruptcy. The band couldn't pay its roadies and technicians. It had to get back out on tour. "Eventually it became clear that all roads lead to one office," Rubinstein said.

That office belonged to Sergei Novikov, whose formal job title in the Putin administration is head of social projects. Novikov is in his late forties, with a soft, boyish face and a thinning wave of brown hair swept to one side. He began his government career as a loyal aide to Sergei Kiriyenko, a political operative who, in 2016, was appointed first deputy chief of staff to Putin, taking on responsibility for domestic politics and state ideology. The invasion saw Kiriyenko assume the portfolio of Russia's newly annexed territories. A source told *Meduza*, an independent Russian news site based abroad, that his powers made him "Viceroy of the Donbas"—the region in eastern Ukraine at the locus of Russia's war aims. Novikov became, according to *Meduza*, the "chief censor of cinema, theatre, and music."

Novikov is known to be a lover of classical music. He plays the cello and has directed several operas, including a 2016 production of "Rusalka," the story of a scorned maiden and the daughter she protects, which Novikov presented as an anti-abortion allegory. ("Love, betrayal, repentance—these are themes that everyone can understand," he said at the time.) In 2021, his interpretation of Tchaikovsky's "Iolanta" played at the Royal Swedish Opera. The concert promoter had heard that Novikov aspired to one day take over as the director of the Bolshoi Theatre. "He was not so much driven by a simple love for music," the promoter told me, "but rather a desire to be close to the powerful and mighty."

In the meantime, Novikov's wartime tasks included editing the script of a television pilot to soften the implicitly gay identity of one of the characters. Novikov also insisted that the character's name be changed; the show's writers had unintentionally given the character the same name and

patronymic—Sergei Vladilenovich—as Novikov’s boss, Kiriyenko. Novikov found time for more ambitious endeavors as well. According to internal Kremlin documents obtained by the investigative outlet the Dossier Center, Novikov proposed making a Marvel-style action movie based on the life of an especially vicious Russia-backed militant commander in the Donbas. Novikov also had an idea for a comedic series set among the personnel of a hotel in Donetsk, an eastern Ukrainian city that has been occupied by Russia since 2014. An acquaintance of Novikov’s told *Meduza* that he exemplified a “managerial style of art criticism. . . . ‘I’m at the top, so I understand what’s good and what’s bad.’ ”

A director told me about an hour-long presentation that Novikov had given to members of Moscow’s theatre élite, during which he showed slides that included the flight times of missiles from NATO bases to Moscow and charts on levels of public support for Putin and the so-called special military operation in Ukraine. The message, the director said, was, “Keep your opinion to yourselves. No one’s asking for it.” The promoter said, “Like with many people in power, the war allowed him to take off his mask.” Or, this person went on, “maybe to put one on. It’s hard to tell the difference.”

Shura and Lyova arranged a meeting with Novikov. “We wanted to clear up the uncertainty,” Lyova said. Shura went alone to see Novikov at his office in the Presidential Administration Building. A couple of hours later, he called Lyova. “It was like looking at a person with empty eyes, without any emotion or empathy,” Lyova recalled Shura telling him. Shura said that Novikov treated him with disgust, carrying himself like a *kham*—a jackass. “So, you want to play concerts in Russia again?” Novikov asked. He offered a menu of penance: “Go and perform in the Donbas or visit hospitals with war-wounded.”

Whatever the band did, it should be public. The Kremlin needed the image of Bi-2, a beloved rock group with millions of fans, supporting the war effort more than it cared about an actual Bi-2 concert for troops stationed in

Donetsk. (In an interview with *Meduza*, another musician who spoke out against the war described being told by authorities that, if he wanted to tour again, he should make a public donation to an N.G.O. working in occupied Ukraine. “The punishment is not that I have to help the children,” he said. “The punishment is that I have to publish it on social media.”) Shura left the meeting with Novikov stunned and disappointed. The next thing he did, Lyova told me, was buy a bottle of Cognac to “disinfect” himself.

During the next few months, each time Lyova flew in or out of Russia he was detained and questioned for hours. Eventually, in late 2022, he left the country for good. “People close to the state told me it was time,” Lyova said. Shura followed soon after. They became part of an exodus of Russian artists who were unable or unwilling to accommodate themselves to the new climate of censorship and state control. But many more stayed. “I knew that in Europe I’d soon find myself washing dishes,” one successful director told me. Countless cultural figures made visits to Novikov’s office or cut deals with the Kremlin to keep working. “Before the war, artists of all kinds made compromises as a way of securing fame, riches, success,” a prominent cultural critic in Moscow told me. “Now you make compromises simply in order to do your work at all.”

**I**n Russia, state power and high culture have long existed in a pained, but seemingly inexorable, symbiosis. Stalin willed into being socialist realism, a hagiographic style that crept into art forms like music and painting. Its loyal practitioners were rewarded with apartments and food parcels; those who veered from the official aesthetic line faced ostracization, public condemnation, arrest, or even execution. Stalin, who personally approved many of the arrest lists, kept up with poetry and opera. His distaste for Dmitri Shostakovich’s “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk”—“Muddle instead of music,” *Pravda* declared, in a hit piece rumored to be written by Stalin himself—put Shostakovich in a state of yearslong terror, waiting for an imminent arrest that never came.

Putin's ruling system, with far less artistic or intellectual pretense, views the cultural sphere as it does any other sector: a subordinate dominion, which should submit to the state's needs and interests. The economics of cultural production make it so artists of all genres often have little choice; public theatres in Russia, for example, rely on state funding for two-thirds or more of their operating budgets. "Theatres are big organizations, with large buildings and troupes, that simply can't be profitable," the director told me. "If you want to stage just about anything, that means immediately confronting the dilemma of state funding."

These days, it's easier to know what isn't allowed than what is. Topics understood to be delicate include, according to one influential figure in the Moscow museum world, "anything about the war—this war, or really war in general." (The exception is heroic narratives about the Second World War which glorify Soviet victory.) In 2023, as part of the Kremlin's effort to present the war in Ukraine as a front in a broader struggle against Western degeneracy, the country's Supreme Court designated the "international L.G.B.T. movement" as an "extremist organization," effectively criminalizing any mention or portrayal of gay people or subjects. Last year, the Duma outlawed so-called propaganda of drugs—meaning any references to drugs are out, too. "Nudity, the Orthodox Church," the museum source said, continuing the list of things understood to be banned. Beyond that, it gets murky. "We somehow feel that we should avoid subject matter that is deflating to morale," the museum source said.

In Moscow, the city's cultural department signs off on all proposed exhibits. The museum source told me of one planned exhibition that wasn't approved because its subject matter was deemed, in the words of one municipal bureaucrat, "too depressing." In the end, the exhibition's organizers were able to persuade city officials that the show was not a political risk, and it ultimately went ahead. But more often cultural directors nix questionable ideas before they even reach that stage. "Officially we don't have censorship," the head of a regional cultural space told me. "And that's true—there's no

actual code of what you can or cannot do.” Instead, the person said, “we have self-censorship.”

A gallerist in Moscow told me of an exhibit that would have featured paintings of human-like puppets, with some limbs missing. The artist didn’t mean to imply anything about war or violence, but in the run-up to the opening the gallerist reconsidered. “Someone could see this as a statement about the war,” the gallerist said. “Or maybe someone would get triggered by such content and complain to the authorities, accusing me of offending their feelings.” Days before the planned opening, the gallerist called it off: “With no clear guidelines, and thus no sure idea of when you’re violating them, of course it’s simpler just not to show something.”

Since the start of the invasion, Garage, which, for many years, was Moscow’s most popular contemporary art space, has paused putting on new exhibitions. “The museum’s staff didn’t want to participate in this charade that everything is fine and life goes on as before,” a person familiar with Garage’s operations told me. Its library remains open, with visitors able to browse an extensive collection of art books, though Garage staff have quietly removed almost one thousand titles from the collection, fearing that they might touch on L.G.B.T.Q. themes or be seen as connected to drugs or other illicit subjects.

Cinema is particularly susceptible to de-facto censorship. As foreign studios have left the Russian market, producers have become increasingly reliant on the Kremlin to make their movies—as much as seventy per cent of a film’s budget might come from state funds. Filmmakers must also obtain distribution licenses from the ministry of culture in order to release their movies in theatres—otherwise, the producers might be required to pay back the initial investment. “That’s a big risk,” Anton Dolin, a prominent Russian film critic who opposed the invasion and has since left Moscow, said.

Dolin recalled the example of “Fairytale,” a film by the acclaimed director

Alexander Sokurov, which uses animation and old newsreel footage to create a fantastical portrait of the chief leaders of the Second World War—Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and Churchill—stuck in purgatory together and engaging in conversation about the nature of power. It was scheduled to be released in October, 2023, but that same month, the culture ministry refused to issue a distribution license. “Naturally there was no real explanation,” Dolin said. “One person you talk to says it was because the movie contains an anti-tyranny message. A second says no, it was because of Sokurov’s public appeals to free political prisoners. And a third says none of that matters—it’s merely that the war made his film irrelevant and unnecessary.”

“Captain Volkonogov Escaped,” a dystopian thriller set during the Stalin purges, received funding from the Russian culture ministry, and was screened at the Venice Film Festival in 2021. It was supposed to premiere in Russia the following year, but it was never released. “Is it because of the subject of the terror?” Dolin asked. “Or maybe because Putin felt somehow implicated or insulted? We don’t know. We have no answers. No one will explain themselves.” For the Kremlin, unpredictability is a method of censorship. “In this climate of fear,” Dolin said, “most producers simply choose to play it safe.”

One feature that distinguishes the current wartime censorship from the censorship of the Soviet era is that the Putin state is often less interested in the content of a particular work than in its author. “We were used to a fight with the work itself,” the owner of an independent bookstore in Moscow told me. “Now we have a fight with individuals.”

The bookseller brought up a high-profile example: Boris Akunin, a best-selling author of historical detective fiction, who has faced nearly every type of opprobrium for his criticism of Putin and the war. After Akunin, who lives abroad, participated in a fund-raiser to support Ukraine, Russian authorities added him to an official terrorist list and labelled him a “foreign

agent.” “No one is hounding Akunin because of what he writes in his books,” the bookseller said. Stores are required to conceal the covers of books written by “foreign agents” and to mark them “18+,” a practice that the bookseller called “unpleasant and humiliating.” But at this point, as Akunin’s former Russian publisher told me, “it’s effectively impossible to distribute Akunin’s books.”

In cinema, it has become standard practice for producers to include a clause in contracts that forbids actors and other performers to comment on political matters, including the war. I recently spoke with a film director who had signed such a contract. It was the only way to insure the survival of a film project that was many months in the making. But, as the director put it, “I made a terrible deal with myself.” The director explained, “You agree to remain silent at the precise moment when many words are required. On the one hand, it’s not like I committed an act of outright treachery, but on the other this silence does make me feel like an accomplice.”

Dmitry Krymov, a seventy-year-old theatre director, is widely beloved for his poetic, often melancholic productions that update classic Russian storytelling with a contemporary aesthetic. He is a five-time laureate of the Golden Mask awards, Russia’s highest theatre prize. The day after the war began, he flew to Philadelphia, where his production of Chekhov’s “The Cherry Orchard” was about to début. He signed an open letter protesting the invasion and decided to skip his flight back to Moscow.

From the U.S., he gave an interview in which he invoked Chekhov as a metaphor to describe the crackdown in Russia’s cultural sphere. “This is the sound of an axe hitting a cherry orchard,” he said. “This is the end.” Soon afterward, five theatres in Moscow cancelled his plays. The heads of two other storied theatres, Moscow Art Theatre and Theatre of Nations, called him with a proposal: Would he be willing to take his name off the productions so they can keep playing? “They were embarrassed,” Krymov told me. “These are otherwise decent, normal people.” They didn’t mention

Krymov's opposition to the war, but that wasn't necessary. "We knew each other too well for them to do any explaining," he said. His first response was to laugh, but he quickly agreed—he cared more about the survival of the works than about his own name being attached to them. He found the whole thing tragicomic, he told me. In his view, he wasn't the one suffering. "Who does this whole story injure the most?" he asked. "Me or the people who made such a proposal?"

Five months into Russia's invasion, a group of Duma deputies announced that they were creating a body called the Anti-Russian Cultural Activities Investigation Group, or GRAD. The word means "hail" in Russian and is also the name of Russian rocket launchers widely used in Ukraine. They drew up a list of more than a hundred cultural figures who had either spoken out against the invasion or who were suspected of harboring liberal views. (The members of Bi-2 were among those singled out for their antiwar statements.) "When culture turns against its own people, there is something wrong with culture," Zakhar Prilepin, one of GRAD's founding members, who began his career as a countercultural novelist and has since become a pro-war politician, said.

Among those on GRAD's list of disloyal artists was Alexander Molochnikov, a film and theater director, who remained in Russia for several months after the invasion, even as he posted thinly veiled antiwar content on social media. Vladimir Urin, the director of the Bolshoi, called Molochnikov to say that his upcoming production of Rachmaninoff's "Francesca da Rimini" was cancelled and that his two existing productions would be removed from the theatre's repertoire. Urin cited numerous letters that concerned citizens had sent to the Ministry of Culture about Molochnikov's antiwar positions. "It wasn't clear if these letters really existed or who wrote them," Molochnikov told me. "Not that it made any difference."

That September, Molochnikov moved to New York, where he enrolled in a graduate film program at Columbia. "I see him as a tragic figure," he said of

Urin. “Compared with many others, he didn’t do anything monstrous.” In fact, Urin had signed an open letter against the war in the early days of the invasion. As in any purge, the executives often find themselves in the crosshairs. Ten months into the war, Urin was removed as head of the Bolshoi and replaced by Valery Gergiev, the director of the Mariinsky Theatre, in St. Petersburg, and a longtime Putin loyalist.

**N**ovikov, the Kremlin official with artistic ambitions, has taken it upon himself to foster a new cultural aesthetic. According to internal Kremlin documents obtained by the Dossier Center, he is acutely aware of the inherent dangers of his project. “Culture, free from external control, develops in one direction: protest,” he wrote in an internal memorandum in 2023. Some rules are required. “There should be no final triumph of evil in art,” he argued. Narratives about the virtue of the state and the necessity of the war should be clear, legible, obvious. Writers and artists should fan out to Russia’s newly annexed territories and create works that espouse the virtues of Russian rule. (Novikov also called for the creation of a “fashionable literary magazine” akin to *The New Yorker*.)

Last December, Olga Lubimova, the country’s culture minister, unveiled a number of themes that would be prioritized for state financing of the film industry, including “preserving and strengthening traditional Russian spiritual and moral values” and “the heroism and dedication of soldiers during the special military operation.” Konstantin Remchukov, a newspaper publisher and a fixture in the country’s political establishment, spoke of an emerging school of “patriotic realism.” Much like socialist realism, he told me, patriotic realism “shows a person not how he is but how he should be.” Russian fighters returning from war, for example, are portrayed as transformed, even elevated, by their time at the front.

I spoke with a screenwriter who was invited to participate in a handful of pro-war projects. One was being directed by a colleague who, to the writer,

had not seemed particularly political in the past. “This is a person with big ambitions, who previously only had rather niche, limited opportunities,” the writer told me. “But here he was, being trusted with a big project with a big budget.” According to the writer, the director argued, “The war is a given, it’s our new reality. There’s no point in hiding from it. We might as well make a film about it.” The writer ultimately declined the job, which would pay up front, rather than after the treatment was delivered, as is usually the case in the Russian market.

Such projects, however, have largely proved to be flops. The first big-budget Russian movie about the war, “The Witness,” which centers on a Belgian violinist who, while trapped in Kyiv, witnesses all manner of atrocities committed by Ukrainians, played to empty theatres and lost more than a million dollars. Meanwhile, the animated film “Cheburashka,” based on the beloved Russian children’s character, which was released in 2023, grossed more than seven billion rubles, becoming the highest-earning film ever in Russia. “It turns out what the Russian viewer really wants is an escape,” Ivan Philippov, a writer and TV critic who is now based in Berlin, said. “If you make a film unconnected to current reality that offers pure entertainment, such as light comedies or fairy tales, you can make the kind of money you’ve never seen before.”

A similar tendency has played out in the art world. “The market is better than ever,” the Moscow gallerist told me. Between 2021 and 2023, sales at the gallery doubled, and they remain strong today. Many Russian collectors are now unable to spend money as freely in the West; at the same time, the war has minted a whole new class of nouveaux riches, especially in armaments, plastic and textile manufacturing, real estate, and construction. (The ranks of social-media influencers with large sponsorship contracts have also increased in recent years.) “Clients are wound up, emotionally charged, full of adrenaline,” the gallerist said. “They’re asking what to buy, where to spend, what to invest in.” The answer, typically, is unchallenging, decorative art. The gallerist described the aesthetic: “No deep questions, nothing

provocative, a pretty picture to hang on the wall.”

The state’s security services are watching closely for anything else. The source familiar with the operations of Garage, the contemporary art space, told me of witnessing a scene at a popular art fair, in which officers dressed in civilian clothes approached a gallery’s stand and asked its employees to remove certain works from its display. An image of a fallen angel, they said, was a potential violation of the law against “offending the feelings of religious believers.”

Last April, law-enforcement officers conducted a search at Garage, claiming that they were investigating a criminal case against a dissident artist. But the Garage source said the real reason remained opaque and uncertain. “Was it part of a broader campaign of suspicion and harassment of all institutions seen as somehow liberal or Western?” the person wondered. “Or was it a more specific message?” The source went on, “It feels like, one institution at a time, the entire cultural landscape is being subject to a *zachistka*,” a word borrowed from military lexicon, which describes a final sweep of enemy fighters.

Still, efforts to create a new cultural movement have largely failed. GRAD, for instance, has mostly abandoned its hunt for enemies. Prilepin, the group’s chief ideologue, regularly expresses frustration at what he sees as a failed revolution. In a column for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, a populist newspaper with a wide circulation, he lamented that most of the country’s theatre directors “either mope around or quietly root for Kyiv.”

The prominent Moscow critic told me that “people like Novikov”—the culture apparatchik in the Kremlin—“are smarter than Prilepin and his allies.” Russian audiences don’t want an exclusive diet of heavy, morose, emotionally draining art on themes of war and sacrifice. Retaining a sense of normalcy, and even of fun and entertainment, in Russia’s big cities is among the Kremlin’s chief political goals. One film-industry professional told me

that, during a recent meeting at the Russian state's film fund, officials encouraged a colleague to bring more comedic projects for their consideration. "The more we spend on comedies," one of the bureaucrats said, "the fewer war films we'll have to do."

As the critic put it, "The public is already under great stress and looking to relax however they can, whether at a restaurant"—Moscow's dining scene is booming, with dozens of stylish, high-priced destinations opening in the past few years—"or at the theatre or museum or by watching television." The critic went on, "If you ban everything, and hand things over to Prilepin and his friends, you'll only cause great frustration and annoyance."

The Moscow bookseller mentioned a handful of contemporary Russian authors who explore themes of violence and personal trauma in a masked attempt to interrogate the war, but he implored me not to name them or their books. "They are allowed this space only because no one has noticed—at least for now," the bookseller said. The same is true of small-scale theatre. The critic told me of one venue, literally underground, that continued to stage plays by Evgenia Berkovich, a playwright sentenced to six years in prison for so-called extremist content in her works, and an adaptation of John Hersey's "Hiroshima." "This play is about people living through the aftermath of a very different catastrophe," the critic said, "but for those in the audience the themes were very clear: how to continue on after your previous life has been broken."

Even in the smallest spaces, the state is often paying attention. Alexander Dashevsky runs a one-room museum near the Fontanka River, in St. Petersburg. One recent exhibit displayed a series of rough-hewn public fountains that evoked post-apocalyptic decay. "It was a kind of visual game about catastrophe and ruin," Dashevsky said. Another artist covered metal bars, reminiscent of a cell or cage, in porcelain. "We work at the margin of what is allowed," Dashevsky told me. "Obviously such things would not get exhibited at a state museum."

In the summer of 2022, an ordinary-looking man came to one of the gallery's openings and asked Dashevsky to step outside. "You're a curator, I'm a curator," the man said. "Do you know what's happening in the country?" Dashevsky assumed that the man was from the F.S.B. Before leaving, the man pointed out that the gallery's curatorial text used the word "war" five times—even though the "war," in this case, related to ancient Greece. Dashevsky took the man to be saying, "Just because we're in a small space doesn't mean that we can do whatever we want."

But, as Dashevsky has seen, the unwritten rules are always changing. "It's a common Russian skill," he said. "You walk outside and smell the air, and somehow you understand the whole situation, what you can say and to whom." Now, for example, Dashevsky regularly uses the word "war" in curatorial texts. "In 2022, this would have been impossible," he said. "But now it's allowed. It's become accepted that we live in an era of war."

**A**fter leaving Russia, Bi-2 embarked on a worldwide tour, playing in cities with sizable Russian communities—Istanbul, Tel Aviv, Los Angeles. Last January, during a stop in Phuket, Thailand—a resort destination popular with Russian tourists—Shura and Lyova, along with five other band members, were detained by Thai police for performing without the necessary permit. They were brought to a cell in Bangkok, where their troubles grew into a diplomatic scandal. Rubinstein, the band's media manager, called contacts in Thailand and learned that the Russian consul in Phuket was likely behind their detention. Back in Moscow, Zakharova, Russia's foreign-ministry spokesperson, who once expressed her support for the band, equated their condemnation of the war with sponsoring terrorism; Shura and Lyova feared that the group's members could be extradited to Russia. After a week, they were released. "We just sing songs," Shura said. "Why are you fucking with us like this?"

Some months later, they released a new single, "Don't Anger My Angels."

The song is a paean to honesty and virtue in the face of dark and powerful forces. Lyova sings of responding with “merciless kindness” to petty tyrants who seek to subordinate freedom.

I saw Bi-2 perform this fall in Berlin. It played at the Tempodrom, a venue that can hold three thousand people—a sizable crowd, but not the ten or fifteen thousand who regularly came to its concerts in Russia’s biggest cities. The band earns about twenty per cent of its previous revenue, a loss of millions of dollars each year. In Berlin, Bi-2’s old classics, such as “Homeland,” carried a new resonance. “I am tired of wandering,” Lyova sang, dressed in a slim black suit, with the crowd joining him for the chorus. “Home,” they sang together, “an abandoned railroad car in a field.” Love for Russia, never named but understood all the same, is the one thing that “cannot be banned.”

Backstage after the show, I had a drink with Shura and Lyova and the rest of the band. Lyova spoke of Bi-2’s success in Russia over the past decades. “We were rockers,” he said. “Politics were not the highest priority.” Over time, as Russia changed, so, too, did Bi-2. “As things got more difficult, we spoke about them in metaphor, a kind of Aesopian language”—a Russian term for cryptic speech used to mask transgressive or subversive content. Now, Lyova said, he and his bandmates don’t have to rely on codes and winks, though they still prefer allegory to, as he put it, “bashing you over the head.”

I asked about their separation from Russia, the context and audience that shaped them as musicians. “I don’t like this term: ‘I’m free,’ ” Lyova said. Freedom, he went on, is when you get to choose for yourself the responsibilities that you are willing to bear, and the people you surround yourself with as you carry them out. But whatever they had lost, he said, was outweighed by what they had left behind: caution, paranoia, editing themselves before someone in power attempted to do it for them. “When you sell your soul to the Devil,” he said, “the first thing the Devil takes is your creativity.” ♦



*Joshua Yaffa is a contributing writer at The New Yorker and the author of “Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin’s Russia,” which won the Orwell Prize in 2021. He is currently the inaugural writer-in-residence at Bard College Berlin.*