

*James Mackenzie*

## **Invasion**

I started this ramble with the two verses below on the date mentioned. I thought then they would need some explanation. I realise now that it's almost all about books and writers. If it does no more than whet someone's appetite to read one or more of them, that's good. Books not bombs...

27<sup>th</sup> February 2022

1. In the 1960s, two young Soviet Union poets achieved almost celebrity status in the West: Andrei Voznesensky and Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the former even appearing at the Royal Albert Hall International Poetry Festival in 1965\*. It was during the "Khrushchev era", when there was a liberalisation of culture, that these two poets were able to have their work published in the USSR. "Babi Yar" is perhaps the most famous of Yevtushenko's work, and laments the official refusal to acknowledge that this 1941 Nazi massacre, near Kyiv in Ukraine, was of Jews (over 33,000 of them), not Communists (although the site was used for further massacres of non-Jews). "I am Goya" is an early Voznesensky anti-war poem whose subject is the 1941 invasion by Nazi forces. Francisco Goya's etchings, *The Disasters of War*, are uncompromising in their depiction of brutality. This is one of the tamer ones, *Sad presentiments of what is to come*:



Hey Yevgeny!  
 Andrei hallo!  
 Where are you now?  
 Why do your red voices  
 Not ring in the snow?  
 Have we done with your Goya,  
 Buried so deep Babi Yar,  
 Quite forsaken  
 The plough for the sword?  
 O Yevtushenko,  
 Ay Voznesensky,  
 What would you sing now  
 In the reddening snow?

\*This was actually entitled the “International Poetry Incarnation”, which was held at the Royal Albert Hall, London, in June 1965, and some of which is documented in the film “Wholly Communion”, directed by Peter Whitehead. Contemporary literary luminaries such as American “beat poets” Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and from Britain, Christopher Logue, Adrian Mitchell, and Tom McGrath (both the latter two wrote for “Peace News”) were present. Mitchell’s filmed reading of “To Whom it may Concern (Tell me lies about Vietnam)” is still spell-binding in its intense and graphic anti-war sentiment. The poetry event was celebratory, and celebrated, as is implied by the descriptive words incarnation and communion. I recall at the time feelings of optimism and hope – that a better, more peaceful and just, world was being born (and with it of course, came “Better Books”!). You don’t have to be a cynic, no, just be a trifle sceptical, to note that not a single woman took the stage at the festival. Yes it was an all-man peace offering. So on to the next piece...

\*\*\*\*\*

2. I first read Leo Tolstoy’s short story “Master and Man” in a wonderful book by George Saunders, “A Swim in a Pond in the Rain”, in which he analyses the way seven 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russian short stories are worked by their authors (Gogol,

Turgenev, Chekhov and Tolstoy) to the extent that they can be regarded as masterpieces. This one is outstandingly powerful, but as Saunders points out in an afterword, has a shortcoming, relating to Tolstoy's view of Russian peasantry...I have to say I clutched Saunders' book to my breast after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, as if it were some kind of comfort toy – a feeble reminder of humanity.

There's a storm out there  
 The wormwood's  
 Whipped by the wind  
 Going round and round  
 And back and forth  
 Just like the sledge  
 And that poor pony...  
 God, Tolstoy  
 It makes me feel sad  
 Thinking of  
 Master and man  
 And what we've to learn

N.B. There are actually three ponies in the story, one of which is sorely mistreated, and two of which are evidently loved and cared for - but the "poor" one of those is also exploited, and finally neglected.

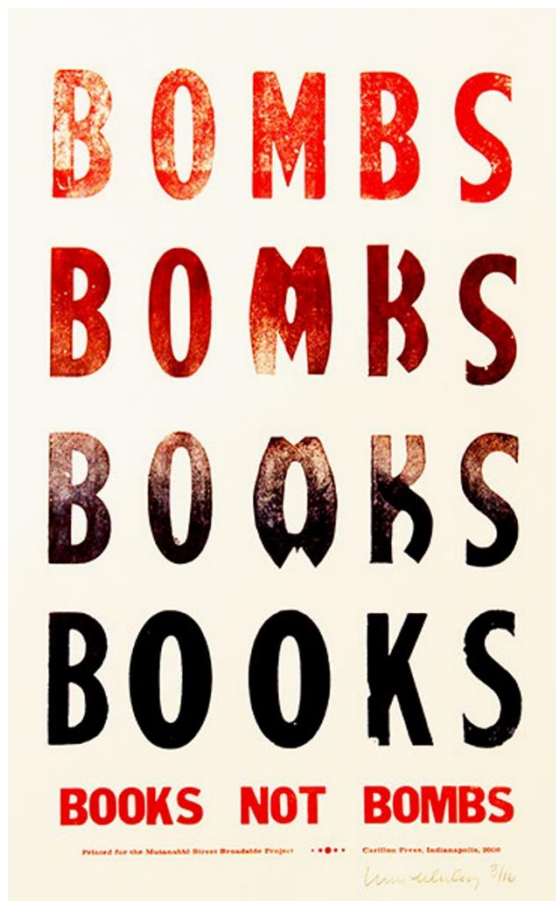
\*\*\*\*\*

3. There's a scene in "The Little Red Chairs" by Edna O'Brien, who in this book doesn't shrink from exposing brutality, nor from seeking redemption. The chairs in the title refer to a memorial to the siege of Sarajevo by Bosnian Serb forces begun in 1992. Hotel workers (most of them immigrants to Ireland, refugees) gather on the veranda after work. This is what Ivan the pastry chef (from Czechoslovakia) says:

"My friends I tell you we are a jolly group but put us in uniform and all that change. In war I don't know who my brother. In war I don't know who my friend. War make

everybody savage. Who can say what lies inside the heart of each one of us when everything is taken away?”

\*\*\*\*\*



### References:

O'Brien, Edna. *The Little Red Chairs* (UK: Faber & Faber, 2015).

Saunders, George. *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain* (USA: Bloomsbury, 2021).

Voznesensky, Andrei. 'I am Goya', *Los Angeles Times*, 9 August 1998.

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-aug-09-bk-11334-story.html> [Accessed 5 September 2023].

Yevtushenko, Yevgeny. 'Babi Yar', *Surprising Beginnings* Reading 1.4 (2004-2005),

<https://www-tc.pbs.org/auschwitz/learning/guides/reading1.4.pdf> [Accessed 1 September 2023].

**James Mackenzie** was born in 1948. Since 1976 he has shared his life with gardener and writer Rosa Stepanova, creating an oasis in the wet, windy desert of Shetland, bringing up a daughter, and tending a small flock of sheep along with dogs, cats, and numerous birds and other fauna and flora.

They now live with two border collies in that more temperate corner of Scotland called Fife.

James occasionally finds the need to put pen to paper or to stab at a keyboard. This can occur at moments of grief and pain. For example, what Palestinians refer to as the Day of Nakbar is one day before his birthday, and still, after 75 years, words are used by the rich and powerful to justify oppression and cruelty.

Nature is a great solace and can stir him to write, but he recognises that even that can hurt sometimes.