

Lev Rubinstein: The Death of a Poet in Russia Today

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In January 2024, the Russian-Jewish poet and essayist Lev Rubinstein was killed by a car that “did not slow down” at a deserted pedestrian crossing in Moscow. One of the most unique artistic voices in modern Russia, he had belonged to the artistic underground during communism. Rubinstein had long been publicly critical of Putin’s government, notably signing a letter against the war in Chechnya, supporting the targeted LGBT community, and taking part in a series of pickets for the release of Pussy Riot members. He opposed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and in 2020 signed a letter in support of protest actions in Belarus. He was also one of the few intellectuals claiming personal responsibility for the devastation that Russia inflicted upon Ukraine. Though an enemy in the eyes of Kremlin, many saw him as a symbol of human decency and artistic resistance against political repression. Among the Russian intelligentsia, his death was a symbolic blow.

After 24 February 2022, Rubinstein, remaining in Russia, publicly condemned the invasion of Ukraine. This was a display of civic courage. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, by August 2023 Russia had arrested nearly 20,000 people for protesting the war in Ukraine, while 7,000 people have been arrested for actions that allegedly “discredited” the Russian Armed Forces. Many public figures who spoke against the invasion were also targeted, including Oleg Orlov—who received the Nobel Prize in 2022 on behalf of the international human rights organization “Memorial.”

In this atmosphere, Rubinstein’s longtime defiance of censorship had become a source of moral support and hope for like-minded people who also opposed Putin’s rule from within Russia. All the more distressing, then, was his sudden death. That he was becoming a thorn in the side of the authorities could be gleaned from a shameful article on his funeral that appeared briefly on the pro-government tabloid site *Express-Gazeta*. Laced with hatred, glee, and unadulterated antisemitism, it was later removed from the site. Yet the leniency of the suspended sentence of one year and eight months that a Moscow court later issued the driver responsible for Rubinstein’s death left no doubt about the official sympathies in matters of crime and punishment when compared to the draconian sentences meted out to the oppositionists.

Rubinstein was born in 1947 into a Jewish family in Moscow, then the capital of the Stalinist Soviet Union. The years 1948 to 1953 coincided with several waves of state-sponsored anti-Semitic campaigns intended to prepare the ground for a mass deportation of Jews to remote regions of Siberia, prevented only by the sudden death of the totalitarian ruler in 1953. During the brief period of partial liberalization that occurred shortly afterward, poetry became a catalyst for cultural change and civil disobedience in the Soviet Union. The preceding generation of poets, born between 1935 and 1941 and including the Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996), led the revival of Russian poetry after Stalin.

Rubinstein's artistic maturity coincided instead with the last decades of Soviet rule under Brezhnev – the grey, hopeless years of so-called stagnation. The Soviet public sphere was dominated by ubiquitous, meaningless ideological slogans, which most people no longer believed in. Rubinstein's fine-tuned ear for absurdity, cliché, and colloquial speech, and his keen sense of humor, led him to develop a technique in poetry comparable to American pop-art. By altering the context of everyday propaganda slogans—communist partyspeak—and including random bits from Soviet conversation, his poems exposed the stark disconnect between the lofty proclamations and the abject backwardness of daily Soviet life.

During perestroika Rubinstein witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union. He noted that in 1991, for the first time in his life, he briefly felt proud of his fellow countrymen: in January 1991, when he joined the mass protests in Moscow in favor of Lithuanian independence and against the last Soviet attempt to violently stop Lithuania achieving it; and in August 1991, when he joined the massive protests in Moscow against the failed coup by communist hardliners to restore the Soviet regime. He observed that this period, when Russians acted like citizens rather than as a subservient and obedient mass, was rare and shortlived, lasting just until 1993.

With the lifting of censorship in 1991, Rubinstein became a leading artistic presence in Russia, especially during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, embracing new genres such as opinion journalism and occasional political commentary. Always centered around language, his essays chronicled the gradual erosion of freedom of speech and the creeping restoration of authoritarianism in Putin's Russia. There was often a sense of a déjà vu as the familiar Soviet rhetorical tropes returned to public discourse under a new guise.

The Soviet regime had always demanded complicity, expressions of consent, and acquiescence. A nonpolitical stance, Rubinstein explained, signaled opposition: the person who kept silent was already under suspicion. In contrast, Putin's authoritarian rule over the last two decades has demanded non-participation: relax, sit back, watch television, do whatever you like, but do not challenge the authorities. Rubenstein characterized this type of apoliticism as one of the most widespread and dangerous forms of conformism today.

By the same token, the persecution of artists in Russia following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, such as the arrest and pre-trial detention in May 2023 of the theater director and poet Zhenya Berkovich and of the playwright Svetlana Petriychuk, signals a reversion of Russia's current regime to its earlier, sinister totalitarian incarnation. The recent crackdown, as the country's secret services raided the homes and studios of more than 30 independent artists across Russia in the run-up to the election in March 2024 (which secured Putin a fifth term as president, an election later condemned by the European Parliament as illegitimate), confirms the chilling déjà vu impression of Soviet times.

Rubinstein's death came just a month before the assassination of Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny. For many among the westward-looking Russian intelligentsia, the loss of the two figures in such close succession was a stunning blow, as each sought to help others overcome the paralysis of fear. This confirms not only that in contrast to Russia's historically weak social and political institutions, the figure of the poet is still endowed with significant moral authority, but also that poetry, as during the Soviet era, still opens a space for freedom in an unfree country.



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