

Moscow, Russia. A single demonstrator holds a "No war" sign in protest against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. (February 24, 2022).
Source: NickolayV/Shutterstock.com

Pleading for Peace: Collective Letters from Russia

By **Kathleen E. Smith**

A video shot just outside of Red Square on March 13, 2022 shows policemen seizing a woman who holds a tiny sign reading "two words" in Russian. Her slogan alluded to a new law banning the use of the words "war" and "invasion" to describe Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Police have also detained citizens who used asterisks to suggest the letters in the phrase "No War!" and who held up blank placards.¹ A new law imposing huge fines and imprisonment up to 15 years for spreading "fake" information about the war² has made the price of protest unbearably high for most of those in Russia who condemn Vladimir Putin's decision to invade their neighboring country. The rapid

formulation and implementation of severe penalties, outlawing of independent media outlets, and blockage of Facebook and Instagram, however, came too late to hide the fact that many Russians wanted their government to halt its attack on Ukraine.

Besides individual anti-war statements and protests, the two weeks following the February 24 invasion were marked by a cascade of open letters and petitions. By March 3, human rights activist Lev Ponomarev's Change.org petition against the war had amassed over a million signatures. Organized by representatives of professions ranging from IT workers to poets, joint

letters condemning the invasion proliferated. Often shared via Google Docs, these texts garnered hundreds or even thousands of signatures before the new laws made the whole enterprise startlingly dangerous.³

While Putin is not known to be particularly responsive to public opinion, organizers of these letters clearly found merit in publicly opposing the war and doing so in groups. The content and style of their texts, now largely removed from the internet, reveal how well-informed Russians were processing the news of Putin's fateful decision and why they were ready to risk taking a moral stand against the war.⁴ Moreover, the decision to write as members of various professions shows an attempt to array themselves as virtuous groups bound by common values against the narrow political elite.

Letters to the Tsar

Writing letters to the authorities has a long tradition in Russia. Over the course of centuries of autocratic and authoritarian rule, direct pleas to the tsar, the general secretary, or the president were a common form of interacting with the state. Given that the top leader had the power to grant mercy or overturn decisions by subordinates, such appeals offered individuals in need a last hope for attracting sympathetic attention.

The anti-war letters of 2022, however, align with a subset of the genre: the open appeals of the late Soviet period, when intellectuals and dissidents began to address fellow citizens and even "world opinion." Starting in the 1960s, collective letters became a means for asking for mercy for individuals who had run afoul of the system, as when the writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Iulii

Today's anti-war missives represent a burst of conscience.

Daniel were prosecuted for publishing their works abroad. Open letters by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov as well as collective letters from writers, scientists, and human rights activists also increasingly broached complex ideas about censorship, universal rights, and peace.

As during Soviet times, the act of writing or signing anti-war letters is not necessarily motivated by an expectation that words will persuade the authorities to change their policies. In the face of unaccountable leaders who despise criticism, reasoned appeals convey a desire—whether from hope or despair—to stand on the side of deeply held values. As was the case when Soviet citizens reacted with shame at their country's intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, today's anti-war missives represent a burst of conscience.⁵ For instance, people from the restaurant business admitted that they were apolitical and preferred to concentrate on bringing joy to diners, but said they could not stand by silently and begged those who were "responsible for taking the decisions to end the fratricidal war as soon as possible."

Yet most of the letters also strive to make a persuasive case. Hence, they should be read as political as well as symbolic documents. Moreover, the collective nature of the enterprise reflects not only a quest for authority in terms of numbers of signatures collected or the accrued status of the signatories but also a display of solidarity based on an invocation of shared ideals. Signing such letters simultaneously addresses a specific issue and defends a larger system of values in opposition to Putin's.

Finding a Format

A fundamental choice for letter writers is to whom to address one's missive and what to call it. Human rights activists labeled their recent missive a "declaration." Aiming their words at a broad audience, they averred that: "Having attacked Ukraine, the Russian authorities have committed a crime not just against the Ukrainian people but against all of humankind. They violated the right of each of us to live in peace, not afraid for our future." They also promised to "do everything possible so that this crime is not forgotten."⁶ Their text invited readers to think about whether they would be on the side of the victims or the aggressors and to weigh how their moral choice might be viewed in the future.

A second petition that explicitly addressed "fellow citizens" came from elected city officials, a level of politics where some individual voices have managed to persist despite "filters" designed to block their candidacies. Municipal deputies invoked their authority as elected representatives while impugning Putin's rule as arbitrary and unaccountable. They wrote: "The decision to invade was taken personally by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin. We are convinced that the citizens of Russia did not give him such a mandate."

The far more common choice—one taken by NGO leaders, comedians, psychologists, and university students, among others—was to address their appeal directly to the Russian president. Such letters identified Putin as the person who had the power to grant their requests. Typically, petitioners beseeched to him to halt the fighting, to withdraw Russian forces from Ukrainian territory, and to commit to resolve all conflicts by peaceful negotiation.

Other letter writers made similar requests, but delicately avoided addressing any person or institution directly. Orthodox clergymen appealed to "all those on whom depends the end of this fratricidal war." Representatives of the fashion and beauty industry wrote: "We call on all those on whom this nightmare depends, to quickly stop the military conflict and to return to peaceful regulation of the issue. No to war." Such formulas avoided an accusatory tone while conforming to the reality that decision-making power lies with a select elite few.

Calling Out the War

Obviously, the point of anti-war letters was to criticize the invasion but doing so in the Russian context involved certain choices. Even before the March law threatened anyone who spoke negatively about the "special military operation" in Ukraine, media outlets had been warned by Russian state communications watchdog Roskomnadzor not to use the terms "assault, invasion, or declaration of war."⁷ Russian poets pushed back, asserting, "We have dedicated ourselves to the service of the Russian word, and the Russian armed forces' special operation cannot be called anything other than a war." Taking a different tack, screenwriters observed: "We're forbidden to use the word 'war.' But we can use the word 'peace.' Peace in Ukraine is being destroyed."

Numerous letters insisted on calling out obfuscation and deceptive arguments by the government and state media. Music journalists wrote: "On February 24, 2022, the troops of the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine." They cited as confirmation reports from "living people, our friends, relatives and colleagues throughout Ukraine with whom we communicate, and who are now being

shelled.”⁸ Describing the destruction of residential buildings, they went on to assert that “this is no ‘peacekeeping special operation’ but war in the realest sense. A war against our closest neighbors. Death, grief and destruction.”

Many letter writers chose emotional language both in the adverbs applied to their requests—they demanded “decisively” and condemned “categorically”—and in the intense descriptive words selected to convey the horror of war. Numerous texts dubbed the conflict a “catastrophe” and focused on the pain and loss inevitable in war. A letter from Russian doctors and nurses vividly evoked human suffering. It bemoaned that “any projectile or bullet, even if it does not reach its target and does not take someone’s life, still brings with it fear, panic and pain. Pain with which the heart contracts.” Citing the heartache of peaceful civilians, soldiers and their families, and children, the medical professionals averred that “Nobody deserves this fear. Nobody deserves to be killed or maimed. Accidentally or intentionally.”

Other letters called out the illogic of the invasion and placed the blame squarely on the Russian state. As a collective letter of scientists put it: “Responsibility for unleashing a new war in Europe lies entirely on Russia.” They went on to dispute efforts to use conflict in the Donbas as an excuse, writing that “There are no reasonable justifications for this war. It is completely obvious that Ukraine presents no threat to the security of our country.”⁹ Another group of well-known intellectuals, including recent Nobel Prize winning editor Dmitrii Muratov, added that they did not believe Putin’s claim that Nazis controlled the Ukrainian government or that Ukrainians therefore needed to be “liberated.”¹⁰

Describing the destruction of residential buildings, they went on to assert that “this is no ‘peacekeeping special operation’ but war in the realest sense. A war against our closest neighbors. Death, grief and destruction.”

Laying out the Consequences

Part of the rhetoric of persuasion rests on moral precepts, but part draws on an analysis of consequences. Anti-war collective letters repeatedly cited the negative effects that the war was bound to bring to Ukraine and Russia.

Academic economists deployed their training to “predict with complete certainty the most serious negative consequences for the Russian economy—rising prices, falling incomes and investments, depreciation of savings, further cuts in social spending, and the accelerating loss of human capital due to emigration.”¹¹ Scientists envisioned that the country would become a “pariah” and warned policymakers that Russia’s isolation would lead to its economic and intellectual decline. Historians anticipated the destruction of historical sites and monuments. Academics lamented the loss of international cooperation that would set back research and undermine education.¹² Music journalists predicted “long years of cultural, economic and political isolation” as well as a deepening of the processes of “degradation of branches of the economy, impoverishment of the population and a tightening of the political regime.”



Thousands of residents of Irpin have to abandon their homes and evacuate as Russian troops are bombing a peaceful city.
Source: Drop of Light/shutterstock.com

But most importantly, they insisted that “ordinary Ukrainians will never forgive us for or forget this war.”¹³ Other cultural figures echoed the idea that shame for having initiated war would not only haunt today’s Russians but pass down to future generations as well.¹⁴

A few petition writers tried to foretell the consequences for the ruling regime. Ponomarev’s Change.org petition took Putin to task for initiating war “despite the terrible price, which undoubtedly Ukraine and Russia will pay for this war, despite all the voices of reason that sounded inside and outside of Russia.” Repudiating the claim that Russia acted in “self-defense,” Ponomarev declared: “You cannot deceive history. The burning of the Reichstag was unmasked, and today unmasking isn’t even necessary—it’s all been evident from the start.”¹⁵

A single appeal addressed to “all reasonable countrymen and responsible citizens of Russia” called on the Russian president to resign. In unusually scathing language, a group of “Russian artists, architects, designers, art historians, historians, workers of museums, archives and libraries, and art collectors” blamed the war on Putin’s “geopolitical delirium and excessive pride.” Arguing that while other political figures who supported the war should also be considered legally responsible, they had acted out of “cowardice, servility, timidity or indifference” whereas Putin initiated the war of his own free will. The solution then was for him to resign and they urged their fellow citizens to join them in this demand.¹⁶

Overall, however, the anti-war letters written in the moment of shock generated by the war’s sudden start did not threaten Putin, but tried to impress upon him the national costs for Russian

development. The disruption of social media services and rising legal stakes for frank speech about the war prevent us from seeing how the rising civilian and military death tolls might be influencing public opinion toward Putin's viability as Russia's leader, but, notably, none of the anti-war letters tried to curry favor by citing the President's wisdom or patriotism.

A letter from employees of Putin's alma mater, St. Petersburg University, however, expressed "sincere support" and empathized with his "difficult and fateful decision."¹⁷ It represents a different genre—letters in support of the government's actions. Few in number, these tended to be rejoinders to texts by members of the same field. Members of the Executive Committee of the Russian Association of Anthropologists and Ethnographers responded to a Change.org petition from anthropologists by calling out signatories who lived outside of Russia. They put a loyal spin on views toward the conflict, writing, "We are resolute champions of peace and cooperation, against the revival of Nazism and all types of discrimination and violence, including informational and economic."¹⁸ A small group of scientists who acted to show that not all scientists opposed the "special operation" similarly positioned itself as against war, but against "the war of the Ukrainian Nazis with the people of Donbas." This war, they asserted, "was unleashed not by Russia, but by the leadership of Ukraine under the auspices of Western countries, by Ukrainian Nazis and their accomplices."¹⁹

Finding Grounds for Solidarity

Nearly all the collective anti-war letters were composed on the basis of professional affiliation.²⁰ Even among university alumni, graduates tended to

organize around their fields of study. Scholars and experts, including city planners, psychologists, and environmentalists, as well as creative professions—animators, podcasters, and game designers—figured heavily. These were not general appeals shared via convenient professional networks, but letters specifically composed in the name of people of the same field, sometimes with signatories' credentials vetted.

Many authors invoked the nature of their professional activities as providing a defining ethical foundation incompatible with the invasion. Legal professionals, for example, connected their norms and their daily work with a rejection of arbitrariness and violence. They wrote, "As part of our professional activities, we apply the law every day and protect the interests of citizens and legal entities so that justice prevails. But we defend these rights, guided by written rules and procedures; we protect them in a civilized manner, based on the law." Rejecting the vision of a society governed by the principle might makes right, they argued that the same held true for international relations. "You cannot demand that the population follow one model and the state another."

Moscow State University students, teachers, employees, and alumni rallied around their training, writing, "Russia and our parents gave us a strong education, the true value of which lies in being able to critically evaluate what is going on around us, to weigh arguments, to listen to each other, and be dedicated to the truth—both scientific and humanistic. We know how to call things by their proper names, and we cannot stand aside."²¹ Chess players similarly drew on the skills gained through their common activity: "Chess teaches responsibility for one's actions; every step counts,

and a mistake can lead to a fatal point of no return. And if this has always been about sports, now people's lives, basic rights and freedoms, human dignity, the present and future of our countries are at stake."²²

Overall, letter writers cited core values, including honesty and a commitment to peace. They also constructed dichotomies based on their professional identities: creation (not destruction), saving lives (not taking them), communication (not isolation), uniting people (not dividing them). Comedians could not find humor in the war. Instead, they asserted that "man learned to speak so as to converse and to come to agreements." Creators of computer games admitted that they sometimes made games about combat, but protested that they did not support real-life conflicts. And clergymen cited the gospels: "Blessed are the peacemakers."

Conclusion

Even before Putin's March 16 speech about need to cleanse the nation of its Westward leaning fifth column, an atmosphere of fear had gripped liberal Russians. With the new law against disseminating false or degrading information about Russian military operations, individuals scrambled to remove their anti-war texts from the internet.²³ In recognition of the danger facing any Russian critics of the war, even Change.org recently made signatures on petitions from Russia confidential.²⁴ But the erasure of evidence of dissent is not the same as a retraction of heartfelt sentiments. As Russian writers put it, "Our main words today are "no to war." No to shelling, killing, and destruction. No to the invasion of the territory of Ukraine."

In the brief window when a fragment of free speech remained in Russia, 1,000 writers, 7,500 alumni of Moscow State University, 11,000 designers and illustrators, 14,000 scientists, and 33,000 IT workers signed collective letters. Hundreds of teachers attested, "this is not our war."

The appeals for peace have not influenced Putin. His army has increased its attacks on Ukrainian civilians while his repressive machine punishes protesters at home. Words have not been enough. But they represent a fierce longing for peace and an assertion of values counter to those embodied in the invasion. We should think about the conclusions of the cinematographers who expressed their shame, accepted global reproach, and who tried to explain that "we did not do enough to prevent this war, but we don't want it."²⁵

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.

Endnotes

- 1 “Sud nad antivoennymi aktivistkami,” <https://activatica.org/content/b7ede79d-604e-4e96-b7ec-52e956a0408e/sud-nad-antivoennymi-aktivistkami> (last accessed 4/8/2022); “V Moskve sud oshtrafoval piketchika s plakatom ‘*** *****’ na 50 tysiach rublei po stat’ie o diskreditatsii rossiiskikh voisk,” *Novaia gazeta* (March, 22, 2022), <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2022/03/22/v-moskve-sud-oshtrafoval-piketchika-s-plakatom-na-50-tysiach-rublei-po-state-o-diskreditatsii-rossiiskikh-voisk-news> (last accessed 4/8/2022); Isabel Van Brugen, “Russia Arrests Multiple People for Holding Up Blank Signs,” *Newsweek* (March 14, 2022), <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-war-invasion-protests-police-arrest-activists-holding-blank-signs-paper-1687603> (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 2 “Zakon ob ugovennom nakazanii za feiki. Kak on izmenil rabotu zhurnalistov,” RBC https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/05/03/2022/6223325d9a7947835d28df5d (last accessed 4/8/2022). “Federal’nyi zakon O vnesenii izmenenii v Ugolovnyi kodeks Rossiiskoi Federatsii i stat’i 31 i 151 Ugolovno-protsessual’nogo kodeksa Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, no. 49, March 9, 2022.
- 3 The letter from scientists and science journalists gathered over 8,000 signatures, according to one of its initiators. Boris Shtern, “‘Voina protiv Ukrainy nespravedliva i bessmyslenna’. Rossiiskie uchenye ne poboialis’ vystupit protiv vtorzheniia,” *The Insider*, March 16, 2022, https://theins.ru/opinions/stern/249307?fbclid=IwAR2vC3LKJctou9s_UnwqBrxB3kd1YTiVkPGGftcMDmVumyflTxc-2xr_jok (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 4 This article is based on 45 full-text letters in the author’s possession.
- 5 For a sampling of open letters and appeals from Soviet citizens in response to the invasion of Czechoslovakia, see *In Quest of Justice: Protest and Dissent in the Soviet Union Today*, ed. Abraham Brumberg (NY: Praeger, 1970), 295–312.
- 6 “Net voine! Zaiavlenie pravozashchitnikov,” <https://dept.one/ukraine> (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 7 “Russia Bans Media Outlets from Using Words ‘War’ ‘Invasion,’” *The Moscow Times* (February 26, 2022), <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/26/russia-bans-media-outlets-from-using-words-war-invasion-a76605> (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 8 “My, muzykal’nye zhurnalisty Rossii, protiv voiny s Ukrainoi,” <https://www.zvuki.ru/R/P/82589/> (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 9 “Rossiiskie uchenye i nauchnye zhurnalisty vystupili protiv voiny s Ukrainoi,” *Colta* (February 24, 2022) <https://www.colta.ru/news/29610-rossiyskie-uchenye-i-nauchnye-zhurnalisty-vystupili-protiv-voyny-s-ukrainoy> (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 10 “‘Eto nash pozor’. Rossiiskie pisateli, zhurnalisty i rezhissery prizvali ostanovit’ voinu s Ukrainoi,” *Meduza* (February 24, 2022), <https://meduza.io/news/2022/02/24/eto-nash-pozor-rossiyskie-pisateli-zhurnalisty-i-rezhissery-prizvali-ostanovit-voynu-s-ukrainoy> (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 11 “Open Letter by Russian-speaking Academic Economists. STOP THE WAR,” <https://sites.google.com/view/netvoine-en> (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 12 “Rossiiskie istoriki vystupili protiv voiny s Ukrainoi” *Postimees* (March 2, 2022) <https://rus.postimees.ee/7467265/rossiyskie-istoriki-vystupili-protiv-voyny-s-ukrainoy> (last accessed 4/8/2022); “Zaiavlenie po Ukraine ot issledovatel’skikh, ekspertnykh i prosvetitel’skikh organizatsii,” <https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTc9vu2ld4Qdml-blpoYLxBhg9gCyHmc8wv4RatxTh1aAE1Skx1LUCYGWpX-dE-f4noBk9PdZ1BnAO6/pub> (last accessed 4/8/2022).





- 13 “My, muzykal’nye zhurnalisty Rossii, protiv voiny s Ukrainoi,” <https://www.zvuki.ru/R/P/82589/> (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 14 “‘Eto nash pozor’. Rossiiskie pisateli, zhurnalisty i rezhissery prizvali ostanovit’ voynu s Ukrainoi,” Meduza (February 24, 2022), <https://meduza.io/news/2022/02/24/eto-nash-pozor-rossiiskie-pisateli-zhurnalisty-i-rezhissery-prizvali-ostanovit-voynu-s-ukrainoi> (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 15 www.change.org/netvoyne.
- 16 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/freemarhi/posts/5347540795258035/>
- 17 While the Google Doc for the St. Petersburg University letter is no longer available, the text is quoted at length in “‘Drugogo vybora u Vas ne ostavalos’.” Sotrudniki SPbGU podpisali obrashchenie v podderzhku Putina.” Bumaga (March 5, 2022) <https://paperpaper.ru/papernews/2022/3/5/drugogo-vybora-u-vas-ne-ostavalos-/> (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 18 The counter letter can be found at <https://aaer.co/>; the original petition is available at https://www.change.org/p/russian-president-and-russian-government-stop-the-war-in-ukraine?fbclid=IwAR3JnStzAXLu-75Pb6BIs1qdhWy781kf_OuxqmeIKnB4KCxZHtkXnUU9jl
- 19 “Rossiiskie uchenye napisali otkrytoe pis’mo v podderzhku spetsoperatsii na Ukraine,” *Moskovskii komsomolets* (March 11, 2022), <https://www.mk.ru/science/2022/03/11/rossiiskie-uchenye-napisali-otkrytoe-pismo-v-podderzhku-specoperacii-na-ukraine.html> (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 20 I found only one example of a geographically based letter from Sakhalin residents. See “Zhiteli Sakhalina napisali Putinu pis’mo s prizyvom ostanovit’ voynu v Ukraine,” *Sibir’.Realii* (March 3, 2022), https://www.sibreal.org/a/zhiteli-sahalina-napisali-putinu-pismo-s-prizyvom-ostanovit-voynu-v-ukraine/31733877.html?fbclid=IwAR13QWPpr5z84-S9pkBZCSzO-gLfhSlN4886Izw0s0gZhN6iDjsMLs_57ig (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 21 “Soobshchestvo MGU imeni M.V. Lomonosova protiv voiny,” <https://msualumniagainstwar.notion.site/0378ab0a0719486181781e8e2b360180> (last accessed 4/8/2022).
- 22 Sam Copeland, “Ostanovite voynu! Otkrytoe pis’mo 44 rossiiskikh shakhmatistov,” <https://www.chess.com/ru/news/view/ostanovite-voynu-otkrytoe-pismo-44-rossiiskikh-shakhmatistov> (last accessed 4/8/2022)
- 23 Interestingly, the website that hosted a petition by teachers now offers visitors reassurance that the law about denigrating the army is not retroactive and promises legal advice for those fired for their previous anti-war statements. See <https://www.teachnotwar.org/>
- 24 “Net ***! Za mir!” <https://www.yabloko.ru/stop-war> (last accessed 4/8/2022)
- 25 “Otkrytoe pis’mo kinooperatorov Rossii protiv voiny s Ukrainoi,” <https://t.me/meduzalive/52378> (last accessed 4/8/2022)




Kathleen E. Smith is Professor of Teaching at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027

The Wilson Center

 wilsoncenter.org
 facebook.com/WoodrowWilsonCenter
 [@TheWilsonCenter](https://twitter.com/TheWilsonCenter)
 202.691.4000

The Kennan Institute

 wilsoncenter.org/kennan
 kennan@wilsoncenter.org
 facebook.com/Kennan.Institute
 [@kennaninstitute](https://twitter.com/kennaninstitute)
 202.691.4100