

*Kateryna Nikolenko*

*Ivan Franko National University of Lviv*

### THE RECEPTION OF SERHIY ZHADAN IN EUROPE

*“Of course, books are not able to end the war.  
But books can help us stay ourselves during the war.  
And it is books that will prevent us from  
losing ourselves and disappearing.”*

Serhiy Zhadan is a famous Ukrainian writer, translator, musician and social activist. In today's Ukraine, he has become one of the most vocal opponents of war and supporters of Ukraine's independence. German newspaper “Die Zeit” called him a “poet against fear” (*German: „ein Dichter gegen die Angst“*). While Zhadan's poetry undoubtedly explores some heavy topics including death, loss of loved ones, loss of home, loneliness, despair, and abandon, it is still full of vivid energy, liveliness and hope for a better future.

His bestselling works include prose novels “Depeche Mode” (2004), “Voroshilovgrad” (2010), “Mesopotamia” (2014), “The Orphanage” (2017), and poetry collections “Life of Maria” (2015), “Templars” (2016), “Antenna” (2018) and others.

Originally from Starobilsk (Luhansk region), Zhadan has taken an unequivocal anti-war stance since 2014, when Donetsk and Luhansk regions were occupied by Russian troops. Marci Shore, who is an associate professor of intellectual history at Yale University, has referred to him as “the bard of Eastern Ukraine” in her 2016 *New Yorker* publication. According to Zhadan himself, “It is impossible not to write about the war. One must write about the war. The war doesn't need to be romanticized, but it needs to be documented. It needs witnesses who will speak less about themselves than they will about the war.”

In 1991, Zhadan moved to Kharkiv and became part of the neofuturist literary movement “Chervona Fira.” It was an important part of the Kharkiv literary underground of the early nineties.

Today, Zhadan's work is read all over the world. His novel “The Orphanage” (2017) has been translated into Polish, Italian, Danish, English, Romanian, Lithuanian ... Polish newspaper “Gazeta Wyborcza” included the Polish translation of the novel into their top 10 list of the best books published in 2019.

Other works by Zhadan (incl. “Antenna” (2018), “Depeche Mode” (2004), “Anthem of Democratic Youth” (2006)) have also been translated into different European languages (German, Polish, Estonian, French etc).

In 2019, a selection of Zhadan's poems was published in English under the title “What We Live For, What We Die For: Selected Poems.” Bob Holman states in his foreword, “Here in these poems is all that we've been waiting for: a voice that tells us everything we've never wanted to know. Even if we're not ready for it, we cannot refuse to understand. The job of the poet is to turn words into worlds. It is what we live for, what we die for. Welcome the work of a master poet, now in English, the poetry of Serhiy Zhadan.”

## CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

---

Tamara Hundorova views Zhadan's work in the context of punk culture, mentioning "a road leading to nowhere, homelessness, and fatherlessness" as the key spiritual coordinates prioritized by Serhiy Zhadan in his work. The writer himself is a big lover of rock and punk music. Among his sources of inspiration, he names artists like Pink Floyd, Oasis, AC/DC, The Stooges, Patti Smith, Depeche Mode... For his most recent birthday, punk legend Patti Smith even gifted him her book "Year of the Monkey" (2019).

Some 15 years ago, Serhiy Zhadan began collaborating with a ska-punk band from Kharkiv named "Dogs in Space" (*Ukrainian: Sobaky v Kosmosi*), which resulted in the subsequent name change to "Zhadan and the Dogs." Ska is a music genre that originated in Jamaica in the late 1950s and was the precursor to rocksteady and reggae. It combined elements of Caribbean mento and calypso with American jazz and rhythm and blues. Ska punk, being a synthetic genre, strives to combine the provocativeness of punk with an uplifting spirit of ska. It tends to feature brass instruments, especially horns such as trumpets, trombones and woodwind instruments like saxophones, making the genre distinct from other forms of punk rock.

Today, Zhadan and the Dogs' concerts sell out in hours – and not just in Ukraine, but in other European countries too (incl. Germany, Poland, France and others). It is not coincidental that The New York Times and Deutsche Welle have referred to Zhadan as a "rock star poet." His lyrics are angry and full of satire. In his mocking of social vices like bribery, vanity, greed, or bureaucracy, Zhadan is merciless. His music is for those who think critically, act decisively and are not afraid to voice their opinions. But at the same time, his lyrics are full of life, humour and love for his native country. By combining the rebellious punk spirit with upbeat ska melodies and discussions of contemporary Ukrainian realities, Zhadan has created a singular phenomenon in Ukrainian music.

During the horrible spring of 2022, Zhadan and the Dogs released two new songs. They are called "Children" and "The Subway." I translated a few lines from the latter:

*Angry and merry children of the Kharkiv basements,  
Children living in the depths of the subway.  
The world that has seen it all has grown gray and old.  
But love is work, and we have to do this work every day.*

When the war started, people in Kharkiv and other big cities fled to subway stations to hide during missile attacks. Compared to apartment buildings or parking lots, subway stations were a lot more secure. Because people were forced to stay there for many days, volunteers (including Serhiy Zhadan and his colleagues – artists, musicians, actors) brought food, medicine and blankets into the subway. Children studied there. Zhadan and the Dogs periodically came down into the subway and gave free concerts to cheer up the citizens of Kharkiv.

One of Serhiy Zhadan's most famous novels is "The Orphanage" (2017), which depicts the first weeks of the war in Eastern Ukraine. It tells the story of a teacher who sets out on a long and arduous journey to save his nephew, who is currently staying in an orphanage in an occupied town. Portraying the daily life of people amid the horrid realities of war, Zhadan exposes the wounds of our society. He discusses the problems of collective memory and personal responsibility, bravery and cowardice, patriotism and national consciousness.

In a German translation by Sabine Stöhr and Juri Durkot, this novel won the Leipzig Book Fair Prize (*German*: Preis der Leipziger Buchmesse) in 2018. It also received the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Literature Prize in 2022. As of right now, “Suhrkamp Verlag” has sold the translation rights for “The Orphanage” for 26 languages.

In 2022, Serhiy Zhadan was awarded with a number of literary prizes. One of these is the Hannah Arendt Award for Political Thought. This annual award was created to honor individuals who identify critical and unseen aspects of current political events and who are not afraid to enter the public realm by presenting their opinion in controversial political discussions. The Hannah Arendt Award is a public prize, and therefore not based solely on academic achievement. It is funded by both the state government of Bremen and the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Bremen. The prize is endowed with 10,000 Euros and is awarded by an international jury.

Today, the writer is in Kharkiv, and he is fighting against the full-scale Russian invasion. He gathers and distributes humanitarian aid, purchases cars and technical equipment for the Ukrainian military, gives literary readings and concerts for charity.

Zhadan’s Facebook posts constitute a truthful chronicle of war – a chronicle of struggle, courage and resilience. He traditionally concludes these posts with the words: “Our flags are flying over the city.” Or: “Tomorrow we will wake up one day closer to our victory.” A certain formulaic character of these endings actually has a powerful psychological effect: Zhadan’s supporters from Ukraine and other parts of the world, reading his posts, have the opportunity to see every day that the city is still standing, the city is fighting and is not giving up despite all the occupiers’ attempts. In the fall of 2022, these posts were used to create and publish the book “Sky Above Kharkiv: Dispatches from the Ukrainian Front” (*German*: “Himmel über Charkiw: Nachrichten vom Überleben im Krieg”). In her online review, one reader wrote, “I’m waiting for the sequel and I want to continue reading every evening that Ukrainian flags are flying over Kharkiv, just like in this book.”

We now have to live in a different world – a world with destroyed schools, burned books, and ruined human lives. This new reality, no matter how frightening it is, poses many complex and ambiguous questions that require reflection, discussion, and the search for new spiritual supports and life meanings.

In October 2022, Serhiy Zhadan received the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade (*German*: Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels) for his artistic and humanitarian work. In his acceptance speech, he formulated his own questions:

“How do we talk about the war? How do we cope with intonations that contain so much despair, rage, resentment, but at the same time – strength and readiness not to abandon our own, not to retreat? <...> In fact, war changes our memory, filling it with memories too painful, traumas too deep and conversations too bitter. You cannot get rid of these memories, you cannot fix the past. It will be a part of you from now on. And it probably won’t be the best part. <...> As long as we have our language, we have at least a vague chance to explain ourselves, to speak our truth, to put our memory in order. So let’s speak, let’s speak. Even when our words hurt our throats. Even when they make us feel lost and empty. Behind the voice is the possibility of truth. And it is worth using this possibility. Perhaps this is the most important thing that can happen to all of us.”

## CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

---

### References:

- Landsberg, T. (2022, October 23). Serhiy Zhadan: Ukraine's rock star poet. *Dw.Com*. <https://www.dw.com/en/peace-prize-winner-serhiy-zhadan-ukraines-rock-star-poet/a-63515644>
- Shore, M. (2016, November 28). The Bard of Eastern Ukraine, Where Things Are Falling Apart. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-bard-of-eastern-ukraine-where-things-are-falling-apart>
- Zhadan, S. (2021). *The Orphanage: A Novel*. Yale University Press.
- Zhadan, S., & Holman, B. (2019). *What We Live For, What We Die For*. Yale University Press.