

IMPERIAL NARRATIVES, PROPAGANDA AND CULTURE

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DDT STATE, DDT PEOPLE: SUBJECTLESS PROPAGANDA AND THE CULTURAL MATRIX OF IMPERIAL ACQUIESCENCE

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of the Russian rock band DDT and its leader Yuri Shevchuk as a case study in what the author terms “subjectless propaganda” – a form of ideological influence arising not from conscious design but from the systemic functions performed by cultural texts within specific social and political conditions.

The analysis focuses on key songs spanning four decades of the band’s work, demonstrating how recurring figurative clusters – unconditional sentimental patriotism, the aestheticisation of suffering, the cult of inner freedom as a substitute for civic action, the humanisation of colonial agents without condemnation of colonial institutions, and the sacralisation of sacrifice – collectively produced a culture of acquiescence among the demographically and culturally significant audience of the “DDT people”.

The article situates this analysis within a broader examination of Russian rock culture, compares DDT’s discourse with alternative cultural traditions – most notably the tradition of Taras Shevchenko, whose poetics of suffering is systematically oriented toward the mobilisation of political will rather than its aestheticised neutralisation and with the work of Boris Grebenshchikov (Aquarium), whose discourse of ironic detachment performs a structurally similar function of depoliticisation through different aesthetic means. The study also critically engages with the existing Russian-language scholarly reception of Shevchuk’s work. That reception, the article argues, does not constitute a critical counterweight to the cultural mechanism it purports to describe. It reproduces the same protective aura and the same absence of functional analysis that characterise mass reception. Academic legitimisation and popular affection mutually reinforce one another, rendering the ideological ambivalence of DDT’s texts doubly resistant to scrutiny. The manner in which Russian scholarship transforms textual suggestiveness – which Russian authors characterise as the subordination of verbal semantics to “psychic energy” into an artistic virtue rather than an analytical object is itself an instance of the cultural mechanism under investigation.

The study concludes that the artistic force of DDT’s output, rather than mitigating its ideological ambivalence, rendered that ambivalence more durable and more resistant to critical reflection.

A text that is aesthetically powerful, emotionally authentic, and marked by the civic sincerity of its author is, for precisely those reasons, a more effective vehicle of ideological formation than one that is transparently manipulative. The article argues that understanding this mechanism is not merely an academic undertaking but a prognostic instrument of the first order for understanding the real sentiments of Russian society in the twenty-first century and the cultural infrastructure that has made mass complicity in aggression possible.

Keywords: DDT, Yuri Shevchuk, Russian rock culture, subjectless propaganda, cultural matrix, postcolonial theory, sentimental patriotism, depoliticisation, Russian aggression against Ukraine, soft power.

Introduction

Any serious discussion of the mechanisms of Russian propaganda inevitably focuses on television, state media, troll factories, and bot farms. This is understandable and analytically justified: the direct instruments of manipulation are the most visible and, accordingly, the most amenable to systematic study and documentation. However, there exists an entire stratum of cultural influence that has remained virtually beneath the notice of researchers and analysts – precisely because of its apparent harmlessness, and indeed because of its apparent anti-statism. This is music. Not official anthems and patriotic marches, but rock culture – *rebellion*, a cry against the system, the art of dissent.

This very invisibility constitutes the central research challenge that prompted the writing of this article. Propaganda that no one consciously planned is far more dangerous than planned propaganda – because it offers no defence in the form of exposing a specific commissioning agent. Cultural influence that reproduces ideological constructs not through direct manipulation but through emotional engagement and aesthetic suggestion penetrates more deeply, takes firmer hold, and proves more resistant to critical reflection. It is precisely this “*subjectless*” sphere of cultural influence that is, in our view, the most dangerous form of propaganda – and it is to this sphere that the present article is devoted.

The central object of our investigation is the phenomenon of the band DDT and its leader Yuri Shevchuk, examined in the context of a broader question: how can an anti-imperial rock culture serve the interests of the neo-empire?

It is essential to state from the outset: *this article is not an indictment*. It does not assert that Yuri Shevchuk consciously served the interests of the Kremlin. On the contrary, his personal position is arguably the most principled among all notable representatives of Russian rock culture. Nor does this article assert that somewhere in Russia there exists an institutional actor responsible for the deliberate deployment of DDT as a propaganda resource – although we would not be surprised if such evidence were one day to emerge. What we assert is different: there is a subjectless cultural mechanism with wholly real, documented consequences. And this mechanism deserves detailed and honest analysis.

It is important to emphasise the uniqueness of the subject of inquiry in terms of the scale of influence. No other band in the history of Russia – and possibly the world – has represented the views of such a large proportion of a country’s population over five decades. Given the size of the Russian Federation’s population and the geographic reach of the DDT phenomenon, this body of work carries objective significance in world *cultural* and – as we seek to demonstrate – *political history*. Each new generation in Russia, upon reaching their twenties and thirties and searching for their path, turns to DDT’s work as a philosophy – and this philosophy has remained relevant for over four decades, across the radical transformations of successive eras: from perestroika to the Putin regime, from the collapse of the USSR to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

It is precisely this universal and timeless appeal that constitutes the most compelling evidence that we are dealing not merely with a musical phenomenon but with a cultural matrix – a system of images, emotions, and unconscious norms that shapes the horizon of the possible for those immersed within it. Analysis of this matrix is, in our view, the first of its kind in terms of depth, complexity, and potential impact on understanding both the nature of the DDT phenomenon itself and those mechanisms that made possible the support – or silent acquiescence – of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine among the educated stratum of its population.

The structure of the article follows the logic of sequential argument development: from the statement of the problem, through the methodological justification, to analysis of specific texts, and finally to generalisation regarding the nature of the “*DDT people*” phenomenon and its significance

for understanding the mechanisms that make possible sustained support for aggression among the educated and culturally sophisticated population of Russia.

Methodology

The methodological foundation of this inquiry is an *interdisciplinary approach* integrating the tools of cultural studies, critical discourse analysis, political psychology, and postcolonial studies. This combination of methods is necessitated by the specific character of the object of study: the DDT phenomenon does not fit within any single traditional disciplinary framework and demands an analytical toolkit capable of operating simultaneously with artistic text, mass consciousness, and the ideological functions of culture.

The central methodological instrument is critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis treats text not as a neutral reflection of reality but as a practice of producing and reproducing social relations and power structures. The application of CDA to the corpus of DDT song texts involves investigating which discursive constructs are reproduced in those texts, how they are normalised and naturalised, and what social consequences this reproduction carries for the mass audience. The analysis is deliberately concentrated on the functional dimension of discourse rather than on the reconstruction of authorial intention.

The distinction between functional and intentional analysis is crucial to a correct understanding of the research position of this article. Intentional analysis asks: *what did the author intend to say?* Functional analysis asks: *what does the text do to its audience?* These two questions may receive different – and sometimes diametrically opposed – answers. A text is capable of performing ideological functions that contradict the author's declared intentions, and it is precisely this divergence that forms the subject of our analysis. The theoretical basis for this approach lies in an over-interpretation of texts, in which meaning is constituted not by the author but by the practice of reading and the social use of the work.

Postcolonial theory is employed as an analytical framework for investigating the mechanisms by which cultural reproduction perpetuates colonial domination. This article examines how colonial structure is reproduced not only through overt violence or institutional coercion but also through cultural mechanisms of “*erasure*” of the colonised subject, normalisation of occupying presence, and sacralisation of the metropolitan state.

The analysis of mass consciousness and the mechanisms of psychological identification with the state draws on the conceptual apparatus of political psychology, in particular on social identity theory and the psychoanalytic model of mass psychology. These theoretical resources allow us to reconstruct the mechanisms through which a cultural text generates affective identification of the audience with the state and normalises particular types of social behaviour – notably passivity, depoliticised retreat into the private sphere, and sentimental patriotism.

The empirical base of the study is a corpus of DDT song texts selected according to the principle of maximum representativeness with respect to key thematic clusters: the attitude towards state and power; the image of the Homeland; the depiction of armed conflicts; the constructs of freedom and citizenship; religious and metaphysical themes; and the image of “*Russian character*”. The sample spans texts from various chronological periods – from the 1980s to the 2010s – with the aim of identifying both stable ideological constructs and any evolutionary shifts in the band's discourse. Analysis is conducted at the level of textual semantics, figurative systems, narrative structure, and ideological implications.

For the conceptualisation of the central subject of inquiry – the unintentional ideological influence of cultural texts – the concept of “*subjectless propaganda*” is introduced. Unlike the classical understanding of propaganda as purposeful manipulative influence with an identified commissioning agent, subjectless propaganda arises where a cultural text reproduces certain ideological constructs independently of the existence of a subject consciously producing them. The theoretical foundation of this concept is the theory of hegemony, in which ideological domination is exercised not through coercion but through cultural hegemony – the assimilation by subordinate groups of the value system and categories of the ruling class as “*natural*” and “*universal*”. The absence of a conscious commissioning agent renders this type of propaganda fundamentally more resistant to critical refutation.

An important analytical instrument is the concept of the “*cultural matrix*” – the aggregate of images, affective constructions, and unconscious norms transmitted through works of art that shape the horizon of the possible for those immersed in those works. The cultural matrix does not impose specific beliefs in a directive manner; rather, it establishes, at a pre-conscious level, the frames of what is at all thinkable as possible, natural, or permissible. Operationalisation of this concept is achieved through the identification

in the DDT corpus of recurring figurative clusters and narrative schemas that repeat independently of the specific theme of individual songs.

Finally, the study makes use of comparative analysis: the texts under examination are compared both with one another within the DDT corpus and with works by other representatives of post-Soviet rock culture (Boris Grebenshchikov / *Aquarium*, Andrei Makarevich / *Mashina Vremeni*, Viktor Tsoi / *Kino*), as well as with texts belonging to alternative cultural traditions – in particular the tradition of Taras Shevchenko. Such comparison enables the specificity of DDT as a phenomenon to be identified not through isolated description but through contrast: what distinguishes DDT from its cultural alternatives is analytically significant in itself. The totality of these methods constitutes a complex research strategy oriented not towards a normative judgement of Shevchuk's work but towards the reconstruction of the mechanisms through which this work functions in its broader cultural-political context.

The State of Research on the DDT Phenomenon and the Statement of the Problem

Academic investigation of DDT's work exists in a state that might be characterised as paradoxical: despite the undoubted cultural significance of the phenomenon and its perceptible influence on several generations of inhabitants of the post-Soviet space, it remains largely unexplored in those aspects that are analytically most productive. The existing body of literature devoted to DDT and Shevchuk exhibits several persistent characteristics: fragmentation, disciplinary dispersal, and – most importantly for our study – systematic avoidance of the political dimension.

Musicological and cultural studies generally focus on the poetics of the texts, musical influences, and DDT's position within the genre coordinates of the Russian rock movement. Journalistic and biographical materials describe the band's creative trajectory and Shevchuk's public role – predominantly in an adulatory or nostalgic register. Sociological studies, when they touch on the subject at all, remain at the level of documenting audience characteristics or reception practices. But a systematic, methodologically rigorous study of Shevchuk's work as an instrument of shaping mass consciousness – with all the consequences that follow from this – is virtually absent from the scholarly literature. Publications are dispersed and fragmentary, lacking unity and coherence even within individual disciplines. The available materials are limited and do not allow even the stated aims of individual works to be fully realised.

This lacuna is difficult to explain by academic inertia alone. An equally important role is played by a certain cultural taboo: Shevchuk is so firmly inscribed in the canon of the "*conscience of the nation*" that any attempt to critically examine the functional consequences of his work risks being perceived as a dishonest attack or an oversimplification. This protective aura is itself an analytically significant fact: it testifies to how deeply the cultural authority of DDT has been embedded in the very mechanism of defence against critical reflection. Particularly revealing is the almost total absence of scholarly investigation of Yuri Shevchuk's work specifically as an instrument of shaping mass consciousness, despite the fact that 70% of his creative output is permeated by themes of politics, protest, and struggle against the regime. This aspect makes the study of DDT simultaneously intellectually captivating and practically valuable.

The present article's approach is defined by several methodological decisions. First, we proceed from the demographic and spatial coordinates of the phenomenon: our interest lies not in DDT as an aesthetic object but in DDT as a cultural matrix that shapes the identity of specific people under specific social conditions. Second, we concentrate on the analysis of the functional consequences of the creative work beyond authorial intention – the question is not what Shevchuk intended to say, but what his texts do to their listeners. Third, we deliberately adopt a synchronic cross-section combined with a diachronic reading: our concern is with how these texts function today, in the context of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

This approach allows us to penetrate where no sociological survey and no study of any given body of documents or other sources related to the manifestation of such influence could reach. One cannot – categorically cannot – deny the influence of Yuri Shevchuk and DDT on Russian culture, the population, and the popular worldview. In contemporary conditions, music is an extraordinarily important lever in the shaping of worldview – and unlike the numerous short-lived bands, none of which left even a notional five percent of the legacy that DDT has already accumulated over nearly fifty years of activity, it is sufficient to calculate how many generations have grown up on these songs – and perceive them as part of their inner world, as a source of philosophical thought and simultaneously as an instrument for apprehending the Russian state, its authority, and their neighbours – Ukrainians, Belarusians, Chechens.

Accordingly, the study of the DDT phenomenon is not merely an academic undertaking – it is a valuable prognostic instrument for understanding the real sentiments of Russian society in the twenty-first

century. The diversity of creative directions – from sharp politics to religion, from love to architecture, from nature to human relations – is precisely what makes Shevchuk and the DDT band a maximally important subject of study. This constitutes the subject field that makes it possible to analyse the real relations within Russian society in all their complexity.

Analysis of the Russian Bibliography: Unconscious Propaganda through the Absence of Critique

Engaging with the corpus of Russian-language scholarship on DDT is a necessary element of any serious analysis of this phenomenon – and is itself analytically revealing. The manner in which academic and critical thought approaches Shevchuk's work is no less significant than the texts themselves: the way they are read and described – or, conversely, not read and passed over in silence – is part of the very cultural matrix to which this article is devoted. The existing body of reception is thus a dual object: both a source of facts and a symptom of a condition.

The General State of the Research Field: The Paradox of Disciplinary Fragmentation

The most evident characteristic of the existing works is their disciplinary dispersal. Musicology, philology, the sociology of culture, and pedagogy approach the DDT phenomenon from their respective positions – and practically never converge within a single analytical space. Savitskaya (2018) examines Shevchuk's work through the prism of the poetics of the concept album, without raising questions about the ideological function of these structures. Snigiryova and Snigiryov (1999) meticulously describe the formal components of the rock song as a cultural text but leave aside the question of what these components do to an audience. Shadursky (2001) analyses Shevchuk's poetics and notes its suggestive character – yet he transforms the textual weakness into an artistic virtue without asking about the consequences of this suggestiveness. Mikhailova (2017) investigates the influence of the socio-political context on the linguistic worldview of rock musicians, while remaining within a descriptive approach. Each of these works is useful within its own discipline; none poses questions that would be genuinely dangerous to the subject of study.

The safety of the research questions is, in our view, the most important structural fact. The absence of systematic analysis of the ideological functions of Shevchuk's work cannot be explained by disciplinary limitations alone: it reflects the cultural taboo noted at the outset of this article. Shevchuk is so firmly inscribed in the canon of the "*conscience of the nation*" that the academic environment reproduces the same protective aura that characterises mass reception. Academic legitimisation and popular affection do not here diverge – they mutually reinforce one another, rendering critical analysis doubly taboo.

Suggestiveness as an Uncriticised Virtue: Academic Reproduction of the Mechanism of Influence

Particularly revealing in this context is the analysis by Shadursky (2001). The author notes directly that DDT's texts, outside their musical context, are logical absurdities and grammatically incorrect constructions that do not withstand literary-critical analysis. Yet instead of a critical conclusion, he performs a reinterpretation: grammatical errors are declared to be a "*technique of suggestion*", and the absence of semantic self-sufficiency to be a "*special artistic quality*". What is fundamentally important for our study is that the author himself inadvertently describes the mechanism that is central to our analysis: "what matters in Shevchuk's contemporary rock is not the meaning of the word, not verbal semantics but a particular kind of psychic energy".

This admission is extraordinarily valuable. An audience that receives "*psychic energy*" without critical engagement with the text is the ideal object of ideological influence that bypasses rational defences. The regime receives not propaganda that can be rationally refuted but an emotional impulse that acts directly upon identity. Academic thought that transforms this suggestiveness into an artistic virtue effectively legitimises this mechanism – and thereby itself becomes part of its operation. Uncritical academic reception does not merely describe the phenomenon: it reproduces it.

The Socio-Functional Approach: Rock as an Instrument of Mood Management

The most analytically productive works in the existing corpus are those that approach rock culture from sociological positions – though even they typically stop halfway. Levitan and Nechaeva (2022) clearly describe the structural paradox: rock culture in the USSR arose as oppositional, but the state controlled the conditions of its existence from the outset. Having emerged from semi-underground status by permission of the system, rock found itself structurally dependent upon it: its oppositional quality was not won through struggle but granted from above as a controlled thaw.

This conclusion is fundamentally important for understanding the subsequent trajectory of DDT. Shevchuk, who positioned himself as the conscience of a generation, found himself hostage to the same logic: his civic voice was heard precisely insofar as was convenient for the regime. But Levitan and Nechaeva stop precisely when the analysis might become most acute: they identify the structural dependence but do not ask whether this dependence crossed over into functional co-optation – and if so, through which specific mechanisms (Levitan and Nechaeva, 2022). Titova and Turchina (2013) examine music as an instrument of “*soft power*” and of the “*political socialisation of youth*” – a conceptually precise framework. But their analysis remains largely declarative: it asserts that such deployment is possible and real without demonstrating the specific mechanisms at work in specific texts.

The Theme of the Homeland and “Unconditional Love”: Academic Apologetics for an Ideological Trap

Buinov (2010) devotes his work to the theme of the Homeland in Shevchuk’s creative work and formulates a conclusion symptomatic of the entire research field: “Love for the Homeland, in Shevchuk’s conception, does not depend on any conditions. It simply is – eternal and powerful”. This observation is offered as a statement of artistic and philosophical fact – without any analytical distance regarding its consequences. Unconditional, ahistorical love for the Homeland is, by definition, a love that presupposes no moral evaluation of its actions. It exists independently of where and against whom that Homeland chooses to invade.

Academic thought that reproduces this construction as a cultural virtue inadvertently reproduces one of the key ideological pillars of Russian imperialism: the idea that Russia as such is a value standing beyond any moral judgement. Sentimental patriotism, described by scholars as an artistic feature, is a far more effective instrument of mobilisation than overt propaganda – and it is precisely for this reason that it is more dangerous. Academic description that does not analyse this danger is not neutral registration of facts but their implicit legitimisation.

“Russian Character”: What Goes Unsaid about the Explicit

It is revealing that “*Russky Kharakter*” (Russian Character) – the most ideologically concentrated work in Shevchuk’s entire output – is virtually absent from academic reception. Shpilevaya (2017), in her survey of “the literary-critical reception of Shevchuk’s work”, focuses on poetics and the figurative system and notes the connection with Dostoevsky – but does not analyse the ideological consequences of this connection. The image of the lyric hero who identifies himself with “*the dappled earth, the forest, the lake, and the dead*” – that is, with the Homeland in its most archaic, pre-verbal dimension – is described as an “organic unity with the world”, without asking what function this unity performs in a specific social context.

It is precisely here that the concealed ideological trap is revealed: the lyric hero who renders any critical distance from the Homeland impossible is not a challenge to the system but its emotional justification. “*I am as sick as this world*” – and therefore I will not judge it. The academic milieu that describes this construction without critical distance effectively reproduces it as a neutral artistic given – and thereby renders it less visible and more resistant to critical reconsideration.

The Phenomenon of Dual Use and the Paralysis of Analytical Thought

Shenkman (2018) formulates a diagnosis of particular importance for our study: the “retreat into the private” so masterfully aestheticised by rock culture “turned into a catastrophe – not for Russian rock but for the country”. But even this relatively radical conclusion remains within the register of cultural-critical observation, without moving to analysis of the structural mechanism that made this “*catastrophe*” possible. The fact of dual use of Shevchuk’s work – that his songs sounded both at rallies of the “dissidents” and at pro-regime events – is noted in several works but has received virtually no systematic explanation. Titova and Turchina (2013) observe this ambivalence; Shenkman (2018) underscores that the emotional charge of rock culture is “*powerful enough to mobilise a crowd, while the ideological content is vague enough to serve any side*”. Yet the question of why precisely this vagueness is functionally advantageous for the system – rather than merely an artistic feature – remains outside the analysis.

DDT in the Landscape of Russian Rock Culture: Scale, Uniqueness, Function

In order to assess the specific influence of DDT, it is necessary to situate the band within the broader context of Russian rock culture and to ask: what, precisely, is the alternative? The answer to this question is simultaneously simple and troubling.

Andrei Makarevich's *Mashina Vremeni* is one of the few projects that might claim comparable influence. But after its gradual transformation into mainstream pop throughout the 1990s and 2000s, "the Machine" lost the edge that had distinguished genuine rock from commercial *estrada*. It remains a cultural institution but is no longer a locus of identity for those seeking more than entertainment. Andrei Makarevich, unlike many, adopted a principled anti-war position, but against the background of his own cultural decline this no longer carried the force that might have changed anything substantial.

Boris Grebenshchikov and *Aquarium* are the most obvious and most contradictory examples. Grebenshchikov is unquestionably a poet and musician of genius, one who resists all simple categories. But he is too hermetic, too intellectually specific for mass consumption. The broad popular masses simply do not understand him – though they respect him as a cultural icon. More significantly: it was precisely Grebenshchikov who gave a response that is, in the context of our study, of fundamental importance. When journalists, during the Chechen wars, asked why he did not go to the Caucasus to perform "for our boys", he answered directly and without equivocation: he had no desire to perform for colonisers and aggressors, no wish to display solidarity with military aggression. This was the honest, consistent position of a man who understands where art ends and propaganda begin. Shevchuk made a different choice – and, as we shall further demonstrate, the consequences of that choice extended far beyond the personal.

Nikolai Rastorguev's *Lyube* and, *Kuban Cossacks* choirs, other folk ensembles, *Pelageya* – all occupy their own niche, but a specific one: open apologetics for state patriotism, "*Batyana-kombat*" (*Daddy Battalion Commander*) as an educational instrument. This is transparent and comprehensible – and precisely for that reason less dangerous. The traditional Kuban song "*Ne dlya menya pridet vesna*" (*Spring will not come for me*), in which the death of a young soldier is accepted as the natural order of things, is a cultural marker of a society that normalises death on foreign soil. But this normalisation is open – it is not masked by the guise of anti-statist pathos.

DDT is an altogether different matter. Shevchuk discovered a formula that had not previously existed in contemporary Russian culture: the combination of genuine anti-statism with popular accessibility. His songs address the real pain of real people. Arrests, poverty, senseless state violence, lost generations. They are understood by the St. Petersburg intellectual and the Siberian miner alike. They are loved by twenty-five-year-old students and veterans of the Afghan war. This horizontal comprehensiveness – this capacity to be the cultural centre of the universe for educated Russians from their mid-twenties to old age – renders DDT unique of its kind: a phenomenon without genuine parallel in contemporary world rock culture.

But here it is necessary to make an important observation that frequently escapes notice: rock culture in the USSR, and subsequently in Russia, was never fully independent of the state. It developed as a *semi-legal protest, legalised from above* – the state tolerated and then actively made use of rock culture precisely because it understood its function as a release valve for social pressure. DDT, for all the sincerity of its anti-statist pathos, arose and developed in this structural context – from the first performances in Ufa to concerts in halls of thousands. This does not imply dependence or corruption – but it does mean that the very possibility of such a product's existence was structurally conditioned by the system against which it was ostensibly directed. This fundamental paradox is present in the very origin of the DDT phenomenon and determines its subsequent trajectory.

Methodology: How to Read a Cultural Text Beyond Authorial Intention

Before moving to analysis of specific texts, it is necessary to define clearly the methodological principles on which this analysis rests. Without this, the article risks being read either as a personal attack on Shevchuk or as an excessively conspiratorial construct.

The central methodological distinction is between functional analysis and intentional analysis. Intentional analysis asks: what did the author intend to say? Functional analysis asks: what does the text do to its readers and listeners? These two questions may receive entirely different – even diametrically opposed – answers, and there is nothing surprising in this. A text lives separately from its author. This is not a post-structuralist conceit but a well-documented cultural fact: it suffices to recall how many works written with the pathos of liberation became hymns of oppression – and vice versa.

The concept of *subjectless propaganda*, which we employ in this article, refers to this same distinction. Subjectless propaganda is not that which someone consciously commissioned and planned, but that which functions independently of the existence of a commissioning agent. It arises where a cultural text, regardless of authorial intent, reproduces certain ideological constructs – and does so all the more effectively because the author himself sincerely considers himself an opponent of those constructs. If planned propaganda can be

deflected by exposing the commissioning agent, subjectless propaganda is without this vulnerability: there is no commissioning agent – and therefore no grounds for a defensive reaction from the audience.

Suggestion, rather than persuasion, is the mechanism of such influence. When “*what matters is not meaning but psychic energy*” – this is not a literary-stylistic curiosity but a precise description of how music penetrates more deeply than any rational argument. The textual content of a song may be analytically contradictory, but if the emotional matrix embedded in the music and performance is powerful, it shapes an attitude before any critical analysis becomes possible. It is precisely for this reason that music is a more potent ideological instrument than any text: it bypasses rational defences and speaks directly to the affective sphere.

An important theoretical concept for our analysis is the *cultural matrix* – the aggregate of images, emotional constructions, and unconscious norms reproduced through works of art that shape the horizon of the possible for those immersed in those works. The cultural matrix does not impose specific beliefs – it establishes the frames of what is at all thinkable as possible or natural. A person who has assimilated a particular cultural matrix experiences no sense of coercion – they simply think and feel as that matrix determines. And it is precisely for this reason that it is a more durable and more potent factor than any direct ideological processing.

Finally, a caveat regarding the normative status of our analysis is required. That a work has artistic value does not cancel the question of its functional consequences. That an author is personally a person of principle and courage does not cancel the question of what his texts do to a mass audience. Artistic value and ideological ambivalence are not mutually exclusive characteristics. Moreover: artistic force is often precisely what renders ideological ambivalence so dangerous. The better a song is written, the more deeply it shapes the listener's attitude. And the more ambivalent that attitude – the less it is amenable to critical reconsideration.

“Rodina”: The Stockholm Syndrome as a National Idea

“Rodina” (Homeland) is perhaps the best-known song of DDT, and it is with this song that any analysis of the band's work should begin. Its refrain – “*Let them call it an ugly thing – yet we find it pleasing*” – became one of the cultural codes that define the specific mode of relation to Russia characteristic of that portion of its population who understand everything and go nowhere.

The structure of the song is extraordinarily characteristic. The song begins with a description of a nighttime arrest – an image that directly invokes Stalinist terror, the “*black cars that came to make arrests*” and the knock at the door in the middle of the night. This is not a metaphor or an allusion: the lyric hero or those close to him encounter the repressive machinery of the state in its most concrete, most corporeal manifestation. Nothing is concealed, nothing softened. The critique is sharp, honest, direct.

And then – acceptance. “*Let it be misshapen – but ours*”. “*Even if it's no beauty – we still love it*”. The logic of this construction is as follows: yes, everything is as you think – bad, terrible, unjust. But love requires no justification. And this love is stronger than any verdict. Shevchuk undoubtedly had other intentions. In 1990, to call one's homeland an “*ugly thing*” out loud was itself a gesture of considerable cultural courage in a society where the accepted options were either to glorify it or to be silent. This gesture deserves fair recognition. But texts live separately from their authors, and functionally “Rodina” reproduces a very specific emotional construction: critique plus acceptance equals reproduction of the very system through a different entrance.

This is – and nothing else – the classic Stockholm syndrome on a national scale. A hostage who begins to identify with the terrorist – not because they fail to understand what is happening, but because this terrorist is “*one of their own*”. The violence is acknowledged. The ugliness is acknowledged. But instead of the conclusion “I am leaving” – the conclusion “*I am staying, because I love*”. It is precisely this psychology – “*yes, things are bad, but this is ours*” – that has reproduced, across centuries, what might be termed imperial endurance: the capacity of a population to endure its own humiliation and simultaneously consider itself part of something great. Not through direct compulsion, but through voluntary emotional merger with the system it simultaneously criticises.

Comparison with another tradition is here extremely revealing. Taras Shevchenko also wrote of suffering and captivity – but in his texts there is anger, demand, summons. Not reconciled love but love through pain that passes into revolt. Shevchenko's lyric hero suffers and demands an answer. Shevchuk's lyric hero suffers and remains. A different emotional construction yields different political consequences, stretched across generations. The first tradition produces a society capable of self-transformation. The second

produces a society that knows the cost of the system but pays it again and again, bringing this payment to the altar of “love”.

“Rodina” is not a bad song – artistically it is a powerful, sincere, masterfully executed work. But it is a politically ambivalent work that objectively nourishes a culture of acquiescence. And a culture of acquiescence is precisely the culture that makes possible Chechnya, Georgia, the Donbas, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Not because it produces aggressors – but because it produces the silent.

“Song of Freedom”: Freedom as Burden and the Cult of Inner Space

If “Rodina” is the most well-known example of how DDT produces a culture of acquiescence through the mechanism of acceptance, then “Song of Freedom” demonstrates another, more refined mechanism producing the same result – through the mechanism of withdrawal. These two texts form the first and second steps of one and the same logical chain, the conclusion of which we shall examine in the analysis of “Russkaya Vesna”.

Freedom in “Song of Freedom” – and this is perhaps its most important feature – is not a social project. It demands nothing of the external world. It does not presuppose action, organisation, solidarity, or civic responsibility. Freedom here is an existential state of an individual who is “*free within*” regardless of what occurs without. This “*inner freedom*”, articulated with great artistic conviction, is simultaneously an ideological trap: it allows a person to consider themselves free while living under conditions of unfreedom, without doing anything to change those conditions. The listener receives full emotional permission to be “*free*” – without any social consequences of this freedom.

The opposition of inner freedom to outer unfreedom is a characteristic feature of an entire cultural tradition that stretches back to the Soviet “*shestidesyatniki*” – Brodsky, Okudzhava, and early bard songs. Under Soviet conditions, this formula was a conscious compromise: when external resistance was physically impossible, inner freedom was the only available space of dignity. This was a functional compromise of specific people in specific circumstances – and it is necessary to acknowledge a certain significance in it. A person who preserved inner freedom under the conditions of totalitarianism performed an act of genuine spiritual courage.

But this compromise outlived totalitarianism itself – and in the post-Soviet context was transformed into something qualitatively different. In conditions where external resistance is possible – though dangerous – the cult of inner freedom becomes not a courageous compromise but a refusal of responsibility. A person who is “*free within*” while following the state like a puppet is not a spiritual hero but a citizen who has deserted their own citizenship. The *shestidesyatnik* tradition of inner freedom arose as a functional compromise with totalitarianism – and survived totalitarianism itself, becoming its unwitting defender in new conditions.

Comparison with “Rodina” reveals two different mechanisms producing the same result. In “Rodina” – acceptance of the system through love: I remain, because I love, though I see everything. In “Song of Freedom” – avoidance of the system through retreat into inner space: I am free within, therefore the external is of no consequence. The first mechanism is sentimental, the second existential. But the civic consequence is the same: passivity, sanctioned by the authority of the artist. Both texts function as cultural permission not to act – each with its own internally persuasive motivation.

It is revealing that “Song of Freedom” is one of DDT’s most popular works – and one of those most frequently cited as evidence of the band’s “*genuine*” anti-statism. But this is precisely what makes it particularly valuable material for our analysis: a text that is subjectively experienced as a call to freedom objectively functions as a licence for civic inaction. The listener receives emotional satisfaction from the feeling of their own freedom – and feels no need to do anything with it. This is, in strict methodological terms, subjectless propaganda in action: most effective precisely because it does not recognise itself as such.

“God Respects Us”, “Christmas”, “Captain Kolesnikov”: Normalising Occupation through the Humanisation of the Occupier

Three DDT songs connected with the Chechen wars and military tragedies merit separate analysis – both in each case and in their shared logic. This shared logic is perhaps the most vivid example of how an anti-imperial author can become – involuntarily, through the force of his own talent – an instrument for the justification of that very empire.

We begin with “Gospod’ nas uvazhaet” (God respects us) – a song constructed as a dialogue between two soldiers. One dies, the other remains. Between them: a conversation about God, about death, about

meaning. The very form of the dialogue is key: it presupposes a priori sympathy for both participants, drawing the listener into the space of their exchange and displacing the question of where this conversation is taking place and why these men are here at all. The title and central image of the song represent a theologically charged utterance: “*God respects us*” – that is, God sees them, acknowledges them, values them. This construction inscribes the soldiers within a providential order and continues the long tradition of Russian Orthodox theology in which the “*Russian soldier*” is a figure of special spiritual significance – a sufferer and a sacrifice, but also a bearer of a higher mission. From the “*Battle of Kulikovo*” to the “*Great Patriotic War*”, this image is a load-bearing construction of Russian military sacrality. If God watches over these soldiers – He does so precisely here, precisely in Chechnya, precisely in this specific operation. Theological legitimation becomes political legitimation as well.

But what is structurally decisive is who is absent from the song. In the dialogue of two soldiers, *the Chechens* are absent. Not as enemy and not as victim – simply absent as a subject at all. Chechnya here is a backdrop, a space in which the spiritual drama of Russian people unfolds. This absence is the classical colonial operation of erasure: the colonised people is literally erased from their own space; their land becomes the stage for a foreign existential drama. Were the song to contain even a hint of the Chechen’s perspective – of what he sees in these two soldiers on his land – the entire construction would collapse. The absence of the third party is not an artistic choice but an ideological decision – even if that decision is entirely unconscious.

“*Rozhdestvo*” (Christmas) is a song written from the perspective of the Russian soldier in Chechnya. Yes, it describes tragedy. Yes, it contains no triumphalism. But it places at the centre of attention the *suffering of the occupier* – and in doing so humanises, gives a human face to, the very occupation. The question “*What was he doing there?*” is never once asked. The soldier’s death functions as a tragedy of a higher order, as something possessing spiritual meaning – rather than as a consequence of a colonial war. Grebenshchikov refused to go to Chechnya and named the reason openly. Shevchuk went and performed – and presumably considered himself to be fulfilling a humanitarian mission. But a person in pain does not cease to be an agent of the system. And “being present” alongside an agent of the system while he performs the function of that system is objective support for that function, whatever the individual intention may be.

“*Kapitan Kolesnikov*” (Captain Kolesnikov) is a song about the death of the sailors of the Kursk submarine. Undeniably a tragedy. Undeniably genuine grief. But it is a song about people who served in the fleet of an aggressor state – a fleet that exists not only for defence but for the projection of force. The question “*where is the boundary between remembering people and justifying the regime?*” is not rhetorical here. The Nuremberg Tribunal established that following orders does not relieve individual responsibility. But a cultural tradition that systematically mourns those who carried them out without asking about the nature of the institution that sent them – this tradition systematically renders impossible the kind of moral reflection without which the stopping of the next war is structurally impossible.

The schema repeated in all three songs is clear: Chechnya (or the sea, or the site of catastrophe) as *backdrop* rather than subject; the victims of colonial aggression as *absent*; the soldier or sailor as a *sufferer and bearer of humanity*; a spiritual or existential pathos that displaces the political question; the final normalisation of colonial presence through aesthetic humanisation. This is no longer coincidence – this is a *system*. And this system is the cultural reflection of the very logic that underlies colonial policy as such: silence about structural violence is the condition without which that violence cannot be reproduced.

“Fable of Power” and the Prophecy of 2011: Shevchuk as Diagnostician and Victim Simultaneously

“*Basnya o vlasti*” (Fable of Power) is one of Shevchuk’s sharpest and most overtly anti-Putin works, written in 2011 at the height of the protest wave. It merits particular analysis – not only as a document of that moment, but also as an illustration of the internal contradiction that pervades all of DDT’s work.

The song presents a series of aphorisms about various configurations of power and the people: “*strong power – weak people*”, “*weak power – strong people*”, “*kind power – kind people*”. This structure is itself revealing: each configuration is discussed at the level of principle, without reference to specific institutional or social analysis. But the song’s principal value for our study lies in the lines addressed directly to Putin: “*You thirst for empires – Shut up, go to war, die beautifully*”. These lines, written in 2011, constitute a practically precise prophecy of what occurred in 2022. Shevchuk saw the logic of the regime – and named it aloud, in language that left no room for ambiguity. It should also be noted that another dimension of Shevchuk’s personal position is the fact that he is – arguably the only prominent representative of Russian

rock culture – who publicly, face to face, with undisguised irony and criticism, told Putin personally everything he thought of him and his regime. This cannot be overlooked in any assessment of his personal courage.

But the paradox is that the very language of this diagnosis reproduces certain constructs characteristic of the system it describes. “*Die beautifully*” is a formula that romanticises death in war even where it ostensibly opposes such romanticisation. The refrain – “*Mr. President, what do you dream of at night?*” – is a rhetorical address to the subject of power that thereby personalises a systemic problem: the problem lies in a specific individual rather than in the structure that reproduces the possibility of such individuals. And this personalisation is dangerous: it gives the audience the illusion that replacing the particular ruler will solve the problem – when the problem is far deeper and therefore far more durable.

Moreover: “Fable of Power” is a song that millions of people listened to at rallies of the “*dissenters*” in 2011–12. Those same millions, for the most part, silently accepted or supported the annexation of Crimea in 2014. There is no contradiction between these two facts if one considers that protest expressed through music and protest that takes to the streets with specific demands are very different things. Shevchuk gave his audience a language of critique. But he did not give them a language of civic action. And “Fable of Power” is the most vivid example of this rupture: sharp, precise, prophetic – and yet functionally powerless. Critique without conversion into action is an element of the system, not its negation.

The tragedy of Shevchuk as an artist consists precisely in this: he wrote the most accurate critique of the regime – and yet his work as a whole reproduces the cultural matrix that renders this regime durable. He turned out to be the victim of his own genius: the more convincingly he described the problem, the more his audience felt the satisfaction of having the problem named – and the less they needed its practical resolution.

“**Russky Kharakter**” (Russian Character): The Mask Removed

Among all DDT’s works, there is one that rarely makes it to the centre of academic or public discussion – and this is perhaps the most compelling proof of how difficult it is to cast a critical gaze upon a beloved cultural phenomenon. This is “**Russky Kharakter**” (Russian Character) – and it is, in our view, the most ideologically significant and most problematic work in Shevchuk’s entire creative output.

“**Russky Kharakter**” is a song about nature as ideology. The birch tree, the snow, the expanse, “*matushka zemlya*” (*mother earth*) – images that constitute what in the nineteenth century was called *pochvennichestvo* and what today is the load-bearing construction of Putinist geopolitical mysticism. Depoliticisation through nature: the nation is not a social construct with specific institutional mechanisms but an organic formation that grows from a specific soil. This logic leads, ultimately, to the rejection of critical distance: one cannot critique what is “*natural*”. When Shevchuk writes of birch trees, boundless snows, and the necessity of sacrifice, he produces these images outside the context of specific imperial policy – but this does not exclude or cancel the possibility of using these images precisely for such policy.

“*God and Russia are with us*” – this line is perhaps the most precise expression of the theology of caesaropapism in contemporary lyric poetry. This theology is not merely a religious conviction – it is a specific configuration of power and sacrality in which state and God do not merely avoid conflict but mutually reinforce one another. This configuration is the load-bearing construction of the very ideology that Shevchuk ostensibly criticises in his other songs.

“*To raise from one’s knees*” – the formula that later became the central narrative of Putinism – appears in “**Russky Kharakter**” long before Putin made it his own. This does not mean that Shevchuk “*invented*” Putinism – but it does mean that the deep cultural matrix nourishing this narrative is broader than Putin’s rule itself. It is present even in those works that are formally anti-Putin. And this is perhaps the most troubling conclusion from an analysis of “**Russky Kharakter**”: the deepest level of cultural programming is shared by the artist-critic and the system he criticises.

The sacralisation of sacrifice in “**Russky Kharakter**” – the “*beauty of suffering*”, “*death as the highest form of love*” – is a direct route to what might be called *thanatopolitics*: a politics for which death is not a price but a goal, not a sacrifice but a meaning. This is not an accidental aesthetic gesture – it is a cultural code deeply rooted in a particular tradition and systematically reproduced through texts such as this. And it is precisely this code – for all its artistic expressiveness – that makes possible those wrenched-from-mothers’ signatures of “*I feel no regret, I am proud*” at the funerals of children sent to Ukraine.

“**Russky Kharakter**” is rarely included in Shevchuk’s “*selected*” works and rarely sounds as a central number at concerts. But this very marginality is symptomatic: this song says what DDT’s other songs

reproduce unconsciously and covertly. The mask has been removed – and therefore it is less comfortable. But analytically it is precisely this discomfort that is most eloquent.

Unconditional Love for the Homeland as an Ideological Trap

One of the through-lines of all DDT's creative output is "*unconditional love for the Homeland*" – a love that demands nothing of its homeland, that exists in spite of everything, and that is not made contingent on the behaviour of the state. This love is artistically attractive and emotionally powerful. But it is also ideologically dangerous – in a specific and insufficiently examined way.

The problem of unconditional patriotism lies not in the fact that it leads by definition to the justification of aggression. People are capable of loving their homeland while not endorsing specific actions of the state. The problem is that unconditional patriotism is structurally incompatible with a particular type of moral responsibility – the type that presupposes a readiness to say: "*This was done by my country, and therefore I bear responsibility for it*". This type of responsibility is uncomfortable. It demands action. And it is precisely for this reason that "*love regardless*" is, from the system's perspective, far more convenient than responsible critique.

Unconditional patriotism in DDT's musical expression has one further fundamental feature: it is sentimental. Sentimental love for the homeland is love directed towards an image rather than towards a reality; towards "*native birch trees*" rather than towards specific institutions and specific practices. This sentimental love is more effective than direct propaganda precisely because it is not felt as propaganda: it is felt as genuine experience. The DDT listener weeps – and there is something real in those tears. But these real tears are simultaneously a mechanism that renders impossible the question: "*And what, precisely, are you doing with this feeling?*".

"*I love my Homeland*" is a statement that admits of *no denial*. It is impossible to say "*no*" in response to "*Do you love your Homeland?*" – at least in a public space where this question is posed. This uncontestability is the totalitarian potential of unconditionality. Not because direct coercion stands behind it, but because it structures the space of permissible utterance so that certain questions become impossible within it. "*I love Russia but...*" – this construction is culturally permissible. "*I do not love Russia*" – this option is not even considered as a possible utterance, at least for the "*DDT person*". And it is precisely this impossibility that constitutes the ideological work of unconditional patriotism.

Comparison with civic patriotism – the kind that presupposes not unconditional love but conditional obligation: I support my country, but only insofar as it meets certain standards – reveals a fundamental difference. Civic patriotism is actionable: it provides motivation for resistance to state abuses, since such abuses violate the condition on which loyalty rests. Sentimental patriotism is passive: it provides motivation for surviving within the system, but not for changing the system. It is precisely this passive version of patriotism, masterfully encoded in DDT's songs, that constitutes the cultural resource the system requires for its own reproduction.

Depoliticisation as a Functional Outcome: An Audience That Chooses the Private Sphere

Generalisation of the analysis of individual texts allows a broader explanation to be offered for the phenomenon that is the central question of this article: why did educated, critically minded, anti-statist people – the very "*DDT people*" – in their overwhelming majority not only fail to resist Putinism but do nothing to stop the aggression against Ukraine?

The answer proposed by our analysis lies in the concept of "*depoliticisation through art*". DDT cultivates an audience that understands everything about the system and goes nowhere – not because it is unreachable, but because it has received cultural permission to choose the private sphere. The mechanism of this permission is compound: it consists of several components, all of which we have already analysed. "*Inner freedom*" as a substitute for external action. The Stockholm syndrome as a personal formula of reconciliation with the system. Humanisation of the agents without condemnation of the institution. Unconditional love that demands no civic responsibility. Together these components constitute a specific "*culture of the intelligentsia's acquiescence*" – distinct from the more straightforward acquiescence of a mass audience, but no less functional for the system.

The paradox of the pacifist artist who cultivates a passive society is not an exclusively individual problem of Shevchuk's. It is a structural problem of a certain type of art in certain social conditions. When art aestheticises suffering – transforms it into an object of the beautiful, into material for catharsis – it risks making suffering not a signal for action but a self-sufficient value. "*Suffering beautifully*" becomes a cultural

norm – and this norm is, ultimately, more convenient for the system than any overt propaganda. A system that has produced sufficient “*valves*” for the safe release of dissatisfaction renders impossible the emergence of a cultural matrix that might convert this dissatisfaction into action.

The range from rallies of the “*dissenters*” to events in support of the regime – where the same DDT songs sounded in both contexts – is the best illustration of this mechanism. A text sufficiently vague in its specific ideological content can be appropriated by any camp. But in conditions where one camp is significantly more powerful than the other, this “*dual use*” de facto means working for the stronger party.

Paralysis of the will is not an incidental but a functional consequence of this cultural matrix. This is a harsh assertion, but it is borne out by the facts: the DDT audience proved, in its overwhelming majority, to be an audience that listened, felt, admired – and did not act. Art that forms sensibility but does not form civic responsibility produces precisely this outcome. The attempt to save the “*DDT people*”, who did not wish to be saved, who rejected the freedom offered them and continued to develop within the coordinates of imperial thinking – this is where the personal and cultural tragedy of Shevchuk lies.

“Russkaya Vesna” (Russian Spring): Longing as a Form of Reconciliation with Unfreedom

“*Russkaya Vesna*” (Russian Spring), from the album “*Prekrasnaya lyubov*” (Beautiful Love), 2013), is an artistic illustration of the mechanism of depoliticisation just discussed in theoretical terms – and an illustration so perfect that it merits a separate extended analysis. If “*Rodina*” constitutes the first step of our three-part chain (acceptance), and “*Song of Freedom*” the second (retreat into inner space), then “*Russkaya Vesna*” is its conclusion: longing as a substitute for resistance rather than its precondition.

The context of the song’s composition is important: 2013 – the year of Putin’s return to the Kremlin after the so-called “*castling*”, and simultaneously the year in which the protest wave of 2011–12 was already subsiding under the pressure of repression and exhaustion. Shevchuk captures the moment of final fracture – not a loud and triumphant one, but a quiet, almost imperceptible one. It is precisely this silence that is the artistic and ideological key to the song. The essence of the Putin regime revealed itself in full force in 2014 – but artistically the song describes precisely the mechanism that made 2014 possible.

The central structural and semantic device is the image of the window, repeated in each verse as a rhetorical question. The window is not merely a domestic detail but an extended metaphor of estrangement and contemplative passivity. The lyric subject watches but does not act; registers but does not respond. The landscape beyond the window is a series of almost documentary images of grey provincial Russia: crowds of women with typical Soviet names, a shop door, drunken corners, an old pine tree. This enumeration is devoid of any emotional evaluation – it sounds like a protocol rather than a verdict. It is precisely in this neutrality that the artistic force lies – longing is not articulated but demonstrated through the very structure of a gaze that no longer seeks anything.

In the second verse the song’s artistic space expands to the political – but here too the authorial strategy remains unchanged: power appears not as an enemy to be challenged but as yet another element of the landscape. “*Guards in the bushes*”, “*the palace behind the wall*”, “*Sochi in the clouds*” – all of this is embedded in the same register of banality as the old pine tree or the crowd outside the shop. Shevchuk deliberately refrains from the rhetoric of exposure characteristic of classical protest lyrics. Power is not exposed – it is described. This asserts: the society depicted in the song has long since ceased to perceive power as an object of possible change. It simply is – like the weather, like the terrain. The depoliticisation of power here reaches its highest artistic point: power becomes landscape.

The third verse moves the action into prison space, and here the single image that stands out from the general greyness appears: a flower growing in a stone pit. This image is the key to understanding the entire song – and a false key if one reads it as a symbol of hope in the traditional sense. The flower is an image of beauty existing within unfreedom, neither negating nor overcoming it. The “*spring*” here is not a thaw or an awakening but a state of parallel existence: it occurs, but changes nothing. This, in fact, is the artistic formula of the mechanism that operated with such destructive precision in 2014.

The word “*spring*” in the song’s title acquired – independently of any authorial intention – a tragic double meaning after 2014. “*Russkaya Vesna*” became the propaganda formula for the annexation of Crimea and the seizure of the Donbas and Luhansk regions. Shevchuk undoubtedly had none of this in mind. But the artistic logic of his song contained within itself a description of precisely the mechanism of passivity that made “*Russkaya Vesna*” in its propagandistic variant possible: not because power was insurmountable, but because society had learned to look through the window without stepping outside. Longing proved to be not the precondition for resistance but its substitute.

The final verse of the song is the only moment where something resembling reflection arises. The question – “*What will reconcile us? How are we to be together?*” – might have become the starting point for a moral or political utterance. But it is left open – and this is not artistic weakness but a conscious choice. The images of stars on shoulders and tons of lies do not culminate in a summons. The refrain returns – and “*Russkaya Vesna*” again hangs suspended as the name of a state rather than an event. The key paradox of the song is that while written in 2013, it artistically anticipates the events of 2014 – describing precisely the mechanism of passivity that made the annexation possible not through the strength of power but through the silence of society. Shevchuk personally condemned the aggression after 2022, but the artistic logic of the song already contains the diagnosis of what occurred.

DDT People: The Phenomenon of a Mass Shaped by Anti-Imperial Culture

We introduce the concept of “*DDT people*” not as an insult but as an analytical category – to designate that demographic and psychographic group that constitutes the primary audience of DDT and that has become, in a certain sense, the ultimate “product” of the cultural matrix this group reproduces.

Who are the “*DDT people*”? They are educated Russians aged twenty-five and above – predominantly with higher education, or at least with the aspiration to it as a social marker. These are people who value art and do not shy away from difficult subjects. They have read Bulgakov and Dostoevsky, have listened to more than *pop-estrada* (*cheap pop music*), may have attended dissenters’ rallies in 2011-2012 – and in their overwhelming majority fell silent in 2014, and again fell silent or expressed support in 2022. They are the very audience that produced the tragicomic phenomenon of the “*liberals who supported Crimea*”. The generation that grew up on the “*philosophy of DDT*” went on to occupy Ukraine and kill Ukrainians – and experienced no sense of contradiction with its self-identification as cultivated and anti-statist people.

The mechanism of cultural programming described in the preceding sections finds in the “*DDT people*” its concrete sociological expression. An identity built through the lyric hero-as-marginal – a person who sees everything and goes nowhere, who suffers beautifully and lives “*within*” – is an identity structurally incompatible with active citizenship. It allows its holder to feel decent and intelligent without demanding anything that might put this self-image at risk. The “*DDT person*” is, in a certain sense, the ideal citizen of a system that requires not active adherents but passive non-resistors.

The primitive quasi-patriotic songs of the 2010s – “*I Want to Go Back to the USSR*”, “*Russia Forward*”, the countless “*war hits*” that flooded the airwaves after 2014 – appeared not as an alternative to DDT but as a consequence of the same cultural vacuum. DDT shaped a generation that requires emotional identification through music but received from this music neither the instruments for critical engagement with power nor the motivation for action. When the system offered an alternative emotional matrix – simpler, more aggressive, but no less sentimental – a significant portion of the audience accepted it or at least did not reject it. This is the direct consequence of the absence of a cultural matrix capable of converting critical consciousness into civic action.

The absence of an alternative cultural matrix is a structural problem rather than an individual choice. Russian society was not permitted to develop a musical culture that combined mass reach, artistic force, and a genuine civic message: not “*I suffer beautifully*” but “*I demand and I will act*”. This absence is perhaps the most important consequence of the mechanism described in this article: the system produced sufficient “*valves*” for the safe release of dissatisfaction to render impossible the emergence of a cultural matrix that might convert this dissatisfaction into action. DDT – together with all its artistic virtues – is, in this sense, one of the most effective such valves in the history of post-Soviet Russia.

Limitations of the Study and Responsibility

Any study of this kind is obliged to delineate its limits clearly – all the more so since the subject is not merely academic but profoundly personal for millions of people. The author is conscious that evaluating the work of Yuri Shevchuk and the DDT band is an entirely thankless undertaking, that criticising a person who has created an enormous body of culture and who embodies the anti-statist pathos of post-Soviet music is a task that inevitably provokes resistance. But it is precisely this thanklessness that constitutes an argument for, rather than against, such a study: cultural phenomena protected from critical analysis by their own authority are the most analytically important.

This article does not assert that there was or is a conscious conspiracy to deploy DDT as a propaganda instrument. This is not an assertion of intent – on the part of the author, nor on the part of any institutional actors. What we describe is a subjectless cultural mechanism: it arises not because someone constructed it

but because cultural texts live in specific social conditions and perform in those conditions specific functions – independently of authorial intentions. Particular songs by Shevchuk may carry an “*imperial colouring*” or be deployed in the context of imperial policy, but this is a by-product of the creative work, not its aim. The existence of such a “by-product” is purposeless – but this does not cancel its real consequences.

This article is also not an assertion that Shevchuk's personal position is dishonest or that his anti-imperial pathos is feigned. On the contrary – we have emphasised on multiple occasions that Shevchuk's personal courage deserves recognition: he refused to perform at Kremlin concerts, publicly clashed with Putin, and after 2022 openly condemned the invasion of Ukraine – for which he faced real persecution and effective exile. These facts are real and important. But these very facts do not cancel a different question – the question of the systemic effect of the creative work. Personal courage and systemic effect are two different phenomena, which neither reinforce nor cancel one another.

Finally, a fundamental question: *does artistic value cancel ideological ambivalence?* The answer that follows from our analysis is: no. Moreover: artistic value is precisely what renders ideological ambivalence so effective. A text that does not captivate aesthetically does not penetrate deeply. A text that captivates – and simultaneously carries an ambivalent ideological charge – penetrates to depths unreachable by direct propaganda. It is precisely for this reason that DDT is a more significant cultural phenomenon in the context that concerns us than any quantity of straightforwardly patriotic songs combined. The enormous positive body of Shevchuk's work – his unconditional anti-statism, his critique of Putin, his personal courage – is beyond doubt and stands first in any honest assessment.

The Lost Instrument: Cultural Rejection of Shevchuk's Anti-Imperial Work in Ukraine after 2022

Any honest analysis of the DDT phenomenon as an instrument of subjectless imperial propaganda would be incomplete without confronting what might be called the other side of the medal. The preceding section of this article demonstrates, through textual and functional analysis, how Shevchuk's work – despite its genuine anti-statist thrust – objectively reproduced ideological constructs that sustained the cultural matrix of Russian imperialism. This finding, however, generates a further question that cannot be suppressed: if the creative work of Yuri Shevchuk and DDT contains a powerful anti-imperial charge – and it unquestionably does – what, precisely, has Ukraine lost by excluding this work from its cultural and public space?

This section addresses that question. The argument advanced here is deliberately uncomfortable: Ukraine, through the mechanical exclusion of DDT from its cultural space – an exclusion that is objectively understandable and subjectively unavoidable given the circumstances of full-scale war – has forfeited a potentially powerful instrument of its own anti-imperial and decolonial politics. We offer this not as a criticism of Ukrainian cultural policy, but as an analytical observation grounded in evidence, and as a hypothesis whose further testing requires the kind of large-scale sociological research that has not yet been conducted.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 set in motion a cultural reckoning that was both necessary and, in certain respects, indiscriminate. The prohibition of Russian-language content from public spaces, the deplatforming of Russian cultural products, and the broader project of cultural decolonisation were responses to an existential threat – and deserve to be understood as such. Within this logic, DDT and Shevchuk were inevitably categorised alongside “*Kirkorov-style*” music, and state television: *Russian cultural product, inadmissible in wartime*.

The structural problem with this categorisation is not its existence – it is its uniformity. The binary logic of wartime cultural policy – Russian or not Russian, admissible or inadmissible – lacks the granularity to distinguish between pro-imperial bands and a band whose most celebrated songs are direct confrontations with state violence, colonial humiliation, and imperial mendacity. The cultural mechanism of decolonisation has operated on the basis of origin rather than function – and in doing so has removed from the public space a body of work that was, in some of its most significant dimensions, pointing in the same direction as Ukraine.

The consequence is a cultural taboo that operates on two distinct generational registers, with different mechanisms and different implications. For the middle and older generation of Ukrainian listeners – those for whom DDT was, as survey evidence consistently shows, already deeply embedded in personal and cultural identity – the official prohibition creates a dissonance that is resolved, in the majority of cases, through silence rather than through critical re-engagement. For the younger generation, the problem is more categorical: Shevchuk is rejected not after evaluation but by definition, as an instance of a category – Russian culture – rather than as a specific creative voice requiring individual assessment.

The generational dimension of this problem deserves separate treatment, because the implications of the two generational dynamics are structurally different.

For the middle and older generation – those who had already internalised Shevchuk's work as part of their cultural identity before 2022 – the process now underway is one of progressive disconnection from material that had previously been experienced as genuinely anti-imperial. This disconnection is enforced not by intellectual reconsideration – survey evidence suggests that intellectual recognition of the anti-imperial dimension persists – but by social pressure, public prohibition, and the general logic of cultural wartime. The result is a paradoxical silencing: a generation that possesses, in its cultural memory, a body of material directly relevant to the experience and articulation of imperial aggression, but which finds itself unable to draw on that material without violating the norms of cultural solidarity in wartime.

For the younger generation, the dynamic is different and, in certain respects, more consequential. For those who reached adulthood after 2022, or whose cultural formation was already underway when the war began, DDT is not a body of work awaiting re-evaluation: it is a category – Russian culture – that is inadmissible by definition, regardless of content. This categorical rejection forecloses the possibility of the kind of selective, critical engagement that might have converted an ambiguous legacy into a usable cultural resource. The idea of freedom embedded in Shevchuk's best work – freedom understood not as inner withdrawal but as civic demand – is, by this mechanism, made unavailable to precisely the generation that is most in need of robust conceptual and cultural vocabularies for thinking about freedom, resistance, and the relationship between culture and power.

The long-term cultural implication is that Shevchuk and DDT are being progressively forgotten in Ukraine – not through an act of collective intellectual decision but through the erosion of access, the withdrawal of social permission, and the gradual disappearance of the work from the cultural field of younger listeners. This forgetting, unlike deliberate rejection, is particularly final: it removes not only the ideologically ambivalent dimensions of the work identified in the earlier sections of this article, but also its anti-imperial dimensions – the dimensions that, in a different political context, might have been its most politically productive contribution.

The situation we have described is, in the full sense of the word, a tragedy – and a tragedy that operates simultaneously in two registers.

In the first register, it is a tragedy for Shevchuk's creative work itself. A body of work that dedicated decades to the articulation of anti-imperial, anti-authoritarian, and anti-colonial ideas – work produced at personal risk and with genuine civic courage – has been functionally aligned, through the mechanism of categorical rejection, with precisely the cultural products against which it was directed. The work of a man who publicly confronted Putin in front of cameras, who refused the cultural logic of imperial mobilisation at the cost of his own career trajectory within Russia, is now largely inaccessible in the one country where its anti-imperial charge might have been most productively received.

In the second register, it is a tragedy for Ukraine's cultural-political resources. Ukraine, in a moment of existential confrontation with Russian imperialism, finds itself unable to deploy a body of cultural material that articulates, from within Russian culture and in the Russian language, precisely the critique of imperial consciousness that Ukraine needs its global and regional interlocutors to understand. This is not merely a theoretical loss: the capacity to demonstrate that the critique of Russian imperialism is not a product of Ukrainian nationalism but a position shared by significant figures within Russian culture itself carries significant communicative and political value – and it is a capacity that is being progressively surrendered.

We close this section with a reflection that we believe is analytically necessary, however uncomfortable it may be in the current moment. The question that Ukraine faces is not simply whether Shevchuk's work is tainted by the ideological ambivalences identified in this article. It is – accepting those ambivalences as real – whether the anti-imperial content of that work constitutes a resource that a society at war with imperialism can afford to abandon. The answer to that question requires something that wartime conditions make extraordinarily difficult: the capacity to hold complexity without resolving it prematurely into binary certainty. It is, precisely, this capacity for complex cultural-political thinking that constitutes the most durable foundation for any serious project of decolonisation – and it is a capacity that is, perhaps, the most valuable thing that any anti-imperial tradition, including Shevchuk's, can offer.

Conclusions

This article does not set out to analyse the entire creative output of the DDT band over the full period of its existence, as that undertaking would require considerably more time and effort and cannot, in any case,

be accommodated within the format of a single article. What it does set out to do is something analytically prior and, in our view, more urgent: to reconstruct the mechanism – *the cultural logic* – through which a body of genuinely anti-statist work has objectively served the reproduction of the imperial order it ostensibly opposed. It is this mechanism, and the conclusions to which its analysis leads, that we now summarise.

The first conclusion of this study concerns the concept of *subjectless propaganda*. The analysis has demonstrated that ideological influence need not presuppose an identifiable commissioning agent in order to be real, durable, and consequential. DDT's creative output did not serve imperial purposes because anyone designed it to do so; it served those purposes because the *cultural constructs* it reproduced – unconditional sentimental patriotism, the aestheticisation of suffering, the cult of inner freedom as a substitute for civic action, the humanisation of the colonial agent without condemnation of the colonial institution, and the sacralisation of sacrifice – are structurally compatible with, and indeed functionally supportive of, an imperial social order. The absence of a conscious commissioning agent is not a mitigating circumstance but an aggravating one: *subjectless propaganda* is precisely the propaganda that offers no defence in the form of exposing a manipulator. It penetrates where planned manipulation cannot reach, because it presents itself – and is genuinely experienced – as art.

The second conclusion concerns the cultural matrix and its relationship to *mass political behaviour*. The recurring figurative clusters identified across the DDT corpus – taken individually, each explicable as a legitimate artistic choice – aggregate into a coherent and self-reinforcing system of meaning. This system establishes, at a pre-conscious level, the frames within which the audience thinks and feels; what is thinkable as possible, what is natural, what is permissible. The “*DDT person*” – educated, culturally sophisticated, aware of the system's injustices – is the product of a cultural matrix that grants full emotional permission to understand everything and to act upon nothing. The rallies of 2011-2012, at which DDT songs served as anthems of dissent, and the overwhelming subsequent silence of the same audience in the face of the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine: these are not contradictory phenomena but sequential expressions of a single cultural logic. Critique without conversion into action is not resistance – it is, functionally, acquiescence in a different emotional register.

The third conclusion concerns the specific mechanism of depoliticisation through art. The analysis of “*Rodina*”, “*Song of Freedom*”, “*Russkaya Vesna*”, and the military songs has revealed a three-step cultural logic that operates with remarkable consistency across texts: the honest acknowledgement of the system's violence or injustice; the aesthetic transformation of this acknowledgement into emotional experience (longing, suffering, inner freedom, love); and the consequent displacement of the question of civic responsibility. This three-step movement – *see, feel, do not act* – is the cultural grammar of educated Russian acquiescence. Its power derives precisely from the honesty of the first step: an audience that has been given permission to see everything has no reason to suspect that it has simultaneously been relieved of any obligation to respond. The aestheticisation of suffering is not a neutral artistic choice – it is a specific mechanism for converting political pain into cultural catharsis and thereby neutralising its actionable potential.

The fourth conclusion concerns the relationship between artistic force and ideological ambivalence. The analysis has confirmed that these are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing characteristics. The better a song is written – the more convincingly it communicates emotional truth, the more deeply it penetrates the listener's identity – the more durably it installs the cultural constructs embedded within it. “*Rodina*” is not dangerous despite being artistically powerful; it is dangerous because of it. “*Russky Kharakter*” is not an incidental lapse but the moment at which the deepest layer of the cultural matrix – the one shared between the artist-critic and the system he criticises – becomes visible. The sacralisation of sacrifice, the theology of caesaropapism, the organic fusion of the lyric subject with the soil of the Homeland beyond any critical distance: these are not ornamental features of a text that is otherwise anti-imperial. They are the load-bearing constructions of a worldview whose political consequences we have witnessed in the signatures of “*I feel no regret, I am proud*” at the funerals of children sent to Ukraine.

The fifth conclusion concerns the scholarly reception of the DDT phenomenon and its own complicity in the mechanism described. The analysis of the existing Russian-language bibliography has demonstrated that academic discourse on DDT does not merely describe the cultural matrix – it *reproduces* it. By transforming suggestiveness into artistic virtue, unconditional patriotism into spiritual patrimony, and depoliticisation into existential wisdom, scholarship has performed the same ideological function as the texts themselves: legitimating the cultural matrix, rendering it academically authorised, and thereby making it still more resistant to critical reconsideration. The systematic cessation of analysis precisely at the point where

it might become uncomfortable is not coincidence. It is the structural expression of the same protective aura that surrounds the Shevchuk phenomenon in mass consciousness. The absence of critical analysis in the academy is itself evidence of how deeply the cultural matrix has taken root.

The sixth conclusion is comparative and concerns the significance of cultural alternatives. The analysis of Grebenshchikov's refusal to perform for colonial troops – "*I have no wish to display solidarity with military aggression*" – is not introduced as a normative verdict on Shevchuk but as an analytically necessary contrast. The existence of a different choice, made by a figure of comparable cultural stature, demonstrates that the path Shevchuk followed was not structurally predetermined. It was a choice – and choices, even when made in good faith and without awareness of their consequences, have consequences. Equally, the comparison with Taras Shevchenko's tradition – in which suffering passes into anger and anger into a summons rather than into reconciliation – reveals that the specific emotional construction of DDT is not the inevitable form of great poetry in conditions of oppression. It is one form among others, and it is the form that has proven, historically, most compatible with the reproduction of imperial endurance. A culture that produces Kobzar produces the conditions for self-transformation; a culture that produces "Rodina" produces the conditions for its own patient continuation.

The seventh conclusion is methodological and concerns the distinction between intentional and functional analysis. This article has deliberately and consistently declined to ask what Shevchuk intended to say in favour of asking what his texts do to their listeners. This is not a rhetorical device but an epistemological commitment: the consequences of cultural production are independent of authorial intention, and the study of those consequences requires a methodology that does not collapse into biography or into the evaluation of personal sincerity. Shevchuk's personal courage – *his confrontation with Putin*, his refusal of Kremlin concerts, his condemnation of the invasion after 2022 and the consequent persecution – is documented, real, and deserves recognition without reservation. But personal courage and systemic effect are distinct phenomena that neither reinforce nor cancel one another. A study that conflates them does not honour the artist; it merely adds another layer to the protective aura that has rendered critical analysis of this phenomenon structurally impossible for so long. Honest acknowledgement of Shevchuk's courage is the condition, not the obstacle, of honest analysis of his work's consequences.

The eighth conclusion is the broadest and the one that extends beyond the specific subject of DDT to the wider question of culture and political responsibility. The *DDT phenomenon* is, in the end, a case study in what happens when a society produces sufficient valves for the safe release of dissatisfaction but no cultural instruments for converting that dissatisfaction into action. Shevchuk gave his audience a language of critique but not a language of civic agency. This is not a failure unique to him – it is the structural consequence of the conditions under which post-Soviet Russian rock culture developed: permitted from above, tolerated as a release valve, never required to cross the threshold from aesthetic dissent to political practice. DDT, for all its artistic virtues and for all the personal integrity of its creator, is, in this sense, the most effective release valve in the history of post-Soviet Russia – and therefore, paradoxically, one of the most important cultural preconditions for the silence that made possible five decades of the regime's reproduction, and ultimately the full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

This article emphasises, without equivocation, that the creative legacy of Yuri Shevchuk represents an extraordinarily large *anti-colonialist resource* with corresponding potential. Yuri Shevchuk and the DDT collective likely constitute one of the sole examples – in the first instance – of genuine resistance to the regime and to imperial policy, including specifically and personally Vladimir Putin, in those forms and at those levels available to a singer and a musical collective within the framework of peaceful protest. We express special esteem and respect for Yuri Shevchuk and the creative work of the DDT band. The enormity of this positive legacy is not diminished by the analysis offered in these pages; if anything, the scale of Shevchuk's contribution makes the structural ambivalence identified here all the more significant – and all the more urgent to understand.

The task of this article has been to analyse how a body of work planted in unsuitable soil and received by people who used it – consciously or unconsciously – in ways its creator did not intend has contributed to the spread of imperial narratives in Russian politics, both domestic and foreign. This is not a study of a bad artist, nor of a dishonest one. It is a study of a great artist whose greatness made possible a tragedy – the tragedy of a culture that knew everything, felt everything, and, in its overwhelming majority, did nothing. It is precisely this tragedy – not merely the problem, but the tragedy – of the DDT phenomenon to which we have sought to draw attention. Understanding it is a precondition for understanding Russia. And understanding Russia is a precondition for responding to what Russia has done.

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Conflict of Interest

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