

Article

# Russian First World War Propaganda Literature through Its Anthologies. Some Observations on Russian Soldier-Literature and Journalistic Reporting

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**Abstract:** In the Soviet era, Russian involvement in WWI long represented an ostracised and even forgotten event. This very attitude is reflected by Soviet literary criticism of WWI war literature. Taking into account both the studies which re-examined this part of Russian literature in a less ideologically biased manner and the stances that major writers of that period took towards the war, the aim of this paper is to investigate Russian Soldier-literature as presented in anthologies published in the wake of the First World War. The publishing of short stories, journalistic reporting and poems actually (or allegedly) composed by soldiers themselves can be interpreted as a symptomatic expression of a broader cultural discourse that was common at that time, and of which state propaganda publications often availed themselves.

**Keywords:** Russian literature; soldier-literature; war literature; WWI; propaganda



**Citation:** Cortesi, Luca. 2021. Russian First World War Propaganda Literature through Its Anthologies. Some Observations on Russian Soldier-Literature and Journalistic Reporting. *Literature* 1: 58–70. <https://doi.org/10.3390/literature1020008>

Received: 1 November 2021

Accepted: 9 December 2021

Published: 15 December 2021

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## 1. Introduction

In Soviet official historiography, the three years from 1914 to 1917 of Russian involvement in the First World War remained plunged into silence for a long time. Never officially commemorated during the Soviet era, this period of Russian history underwent a kind of 'collective oblivion', which was grounded in Lenin's disapproval of the Russian 'imperialist' war effort<sup>1</sup> and was reflected in the approach of substantial ostracism or neglect adopted thereafter by the intelligentsia and civil institutions (Golubinov 2010, p. 55). As previous research has shown (Gatrell 2005, pp. 255–59; Imposti 2016a, pp. 55–56), such a 'collective oblivion' is marked by a phenomenon which starkly contrasts with what happened post-war in other European Countries involved in WWI, that is, the almost total absence of monuments and memorial sites dedicated to the fallen soldiers of this war. The sole exception to this phenomenon is to be found in the case of the Moscow City Fraternal Cemetery, discussed by K. Petrone (2011, pp. 1–8). This memorial site, also known as the All-Russian War Cemetery, was established in February 1915, with the civic and nationalist goal of inspiring patriotism in future generations. However, after 1917, the cemetery would also host the burial of victims of both the 1917 revolutions and the Civil War. Converted into a park in 1925, by the end of the 1920s the cemetery was left to its fate, lacking civic and financial support. Between the 1930s and 1940s, the cemetery church, monuments and graves were demolished.<sup>2</sup> This very attitude towards national memory of WWI mirrors the perspective that Soviet literary critique adopted when dealing with literary works that arose in the wake of WWI. Although Petrone (2011) has shown that the Great War was overall a major subject of debate on different levels of the cultural discourse during the interwar period, the sole interpretative paradigm adopted by Soviet literary critics to investigate how WWI was perceived and received in Russian literature was the one established by O. Cechnovicer in his 1938 monography *Literatura i mirovaia vojna 1914–1918* [Literature and World War 1914–1918]. Cechnovicer, whose theoretical yardstick is to be recognised in the ideological consequences of the October revolution,

provides a literary analysis bearing a clear Marxist-Leninist influence, subdividing Russian war literature of that time into two main categories: (a) 'chauvinist' literature, deemed guilty of supporting the imperialist war, and (b) 'defeatist', or 'pacifist' literature, whose authors were opposing war, in compliance with Lenin's theoretical stances. In his criticism of the former, Cechnovicer's privileged targets are above all Leonid Andreev and some Symbolist writers, such as V. Brjusov and A. Belyj, defined as 'bourgeois' and 'chauvinist' (See Cechnovicer 1938, pp. 291–314); regarding the latter, Cechnovicer includes authors such as A. Blok, V. Chlebnikov and V. Majakovskij. Their work is positively evaluated, although at various times the critic underlines how their stance is not devoid of ideological mistakes and ingenuousness, remaining substantially conditioned by their inability to understand the real meaning of the war from the perspective of the impending revolution<sup>3</sup>. Such a critical approach remained substantially unchanged up to the end of the 1980s, with little variations on the theme. As an example, it is worthwhile to mention another Soviet study on WWI Russian literature, V. Vil'činskij's (1972) lengthy essay *Literatura 1914–1917 godov* [Literature of the Years 1914–1917]. According to Vil'činskij, the literary value of a given work is to be found in the positive description of the Russian soldier, in the emphasis of progressist ideas and in the condemnation of the atrocities committed by the Prussian thron. Vil'činskij openly admits that his analysis was strongly conditioned by the experience of the Second World War, and how it served as a magnifying glass, recalibrating the critical approach he adopted in characterising First World War literature (Vil'činskij 1972, p. 229). In essence, Cechnovicer's and Vil'činskij's different perspectives agree on the fact that the literature of the Great War is characterised by greyness and utter mediocrity. Even later Western criticism provides an overall negative evaluation of Russian war literature of 1914–1918, stating that it did not give rise to any relevant work (see Heller 1989). However, at the beginning of the post-Soviet era, when censorship and state-fostered oblivion regarding WWI began gradually to lift, a timid attempt at reconsidering these events more rigorously and less ideologically was undertaken (see Golubinov 2010, p. 57), eventually culminating in a revised course of investigation which has been taking place since the early 2000s.<sup>4</sup>

On these grounds, this paper aims to highlight how official state propaganda was embodied in texts intended for a broad public, demonstrating how state rhetoric changed drastically throughout the war, following the course of military and political events. To achieve this research objective, I will focus on the analysis and comparison of two literary anthologies that adequately represent the development of the Russian attitude to the First World War. Such an analysis will not dwell upon the contributions of major authors of the time, since there is a significant number of studies that deal with this particular aspect.<sup>5</sup> Previous research has shown that the whole intelligentsia was somehow involved in the cultural discourse which revolved around the events of the war,<sup>6</sup> and in particular the most prominent writers and authors gave their contribution by allowing the publication of literary works in charity almanacs, which were mostly aimed at raising funds to help Russian war prisoners, or in a broader sense, victims of war.<sup>7</sup> This study will instead focus on what was to be considered 'authentic' war literature by the contemporary public opinion, regardless of the strong censorship any published work underwent in the war period. In this perspective, major writers' works have not been considered. Investigating the outlets of minor subsets of literary publications, it is possible to cast light on the elements composing the cultural discourse and on what we should refer to as 'propaganda literature'. Starting from Ivanov's (2005, p. 6) yearly subdivision, to which I shall return later, I will dwell on two anthologies, published in 1914 and 1916, respectively, aiming to isolate and discuss the main occurring themes of the cultural discourse and to identify their development in Soldier-literature throughout the war period.

## 2. First World War Russian Literature

Soviet critique condensed and polarised the reception of war that its contemporaries had in the main points of its 'rejection' or 'acceptance'; however, there is much more

to it than that. In fact, each year of involvement in the war proves to be connoted by a specific societal attitude to it which, in turn, affects the peculiarities of war literature. As [Ivanov \(2005, p. 6\)](#) has pointed out, we can recognise three different steps, each of which corresponds to one of the following three years of the actual Russian war effort: (a) 1914, characterised by an unprecedented intellectual outburst and a passionate response to the beginning of the war;<sup>8</sup> (b) 1915, in which society acknowledges that WWI will not be a brief conflict; (c) 1916, in which the possibility of a military defeat and the fear of its consequences begin to catch on in society. I will avail myself of this subdivision in the analytical part of this paper. It is important to mention another aspect that distinguishes substantially the Russian context from that of other countries involved in WWI: the very writing of war literature. Overall, in the broader European context, the most significant literature of the First World War was written by soldier-authors. Originating from the need to make sense out of war and often devoid of the traditional pre-war patriotic literary clichés, these works not only represent an attempt at finding an acceptable and sensible way to cope with the combatants' personal traumatic experience, but also cast light on the inadequacy of conventional language and style, unfitting to depict the very trauma of the war. In Russia, as [Hellman \(2018, p. 50\)](#) has pointed out, "the established writers were too old to participate, and the majority of the younger poets [ . . . ] were spared from service at the front". Accordingly, Hellman concludes that there is no Russian author whose fame was established by First World War literature, and even considering the handful of writers (e.g., N. Gumilev, N. Aseev, S. Bobrov) who took part in the war *and* conveyed their experience into writing, their literary output "was not very substantial, and [ . . . ] passed unnoticed by the critics" ([Hellman 2018, p. 51](#)), with the sole exception of Gumilev. To this, I shall add the fact that Russian society of the late-1910s and the early Soviet period did not have an opportunity to process its war trauma into a coherent and cohesive societal narrative, for obvious reasons related to the 1917 revolutions, to the Civil war outbreak and to the subsequent condemnation of WWI as an 'imperialist war', in line with Lenin's definition.

The impact of WWI on Russian society was immediately disruptive. At the very beginning of the war, the mystifying motifs of political and military rhetoric intertwined with foreshadowing proper to literature and essay writing, weaving literary and extra-literary narratives that proved to be profoundly ideological, regardless of their various articulations. As [Heller \(1989, p. 723\)](#) has stated, Russia's entry into the war was enthusiastically welcomed by the most renowned representatives of the intelligentsia, who in September 1914 signed the manifesto *K rodine i vsemu civilizovannomu miru* [To the Fatherland and All the Civilized World]<sup>9</sup>, in support of the war effort against the Germans. Most surprisingly, with Lenin as the sole exception, Russia's participation in the war was seen favourably by practically every representative of the cultural environment, regardless of their political beliefs. Writers were enraged at this, as Zinaida Gippius noted in a 1914 diary entry.<sup>10</sup> As shown by previous research ([Heller 1989, pp. 724–27](#); [Petelin 2012, pp. 10–12](#)), the reasons for this 'collective rage' are most diverse but are mainly of a political and ideological slant.

Once Russia entered the war, the intelligentsia began discussing the ethical aspects of its activity directly in the press, where two polarised attitudes to war emerged, splitting intellectuals and writers into two factions. A consistent group of authors deemed literary and artistic activity to be unethical and unjust in the context of war-weariness. The most prominent representative of this stance is undoubtedly Z. Gippius, who in a diary entry dated December 1914 condemned the rash enthusiasm surrounding the participation in the war and included verses urging fellow poets to observe a sort of respectful silence:

Боже, но с каким безответственным легкомыслием кричат за войну, как  
безумно ееоправдывают! Какую тьму сгущают в грядущем! Нет, теперь  
нужно

—«Лишь целомудрие молчания—

И, может быть, тихие молитвы . . . » ([Gippius 1982, p. 105](#))

God, what is the irresponsible frivolity with which they shout for war, how insanely they justify it! What darkness is thickening in the future! No, now we need

—«Only the chastity of silence—

And, maybe, quiet prayers . . . » (Translation provided by the author).

However, even at the beginning of 1915, we can witness how in the cultural discourse there emerges a distance between the patriotic and nationalist representation of war and its real experience, to the traumas of which many intellectuals felt the urgency to reply. In this regard, as a representative of a stance polemicising with Z. Gippius, we shall consider L. Andreev's 1915 essay *Pust' ne molčat poëty*, in which the writer advocated not only for the necessity of resuming the artistic and cultural practices of the intellectuals but also of making the war play a central role in it, by insisting on the need of "listening to the war", although it could prove to be painful and controversial (See [Kupcova 2013](#), pp. 581–82). Author and literary critic E. Koltonovskaja echoes this attitude in the essay *Vokrug vojny. Pisateli o vojne* [Writers on war], published in the same year:

Сейчас не столько страшною, сколько святою представляется льющаяся теперь кровь, не только потому, что война идет за правое дело, за идеальные ценности, а и потому, что каждый из участников отдает себя ей сознательно и добровольно. Такая кровь обязывает всем сердцем участвовать в происходящем [ . . . ] ([Koltonovskaja 1915](#), p. 136).

Now the blood that is pouring these days seems to be not so much terrible, but holy, not only because the war is being fought for a just cause, for ideal values, but also because each of the participants gives himself up to it consciously and voluntarily. Such blood obliges us to take part in what is happening with all our heart [ . . . ] (Translation provided by the author).

Overall, the idealisation of the experience of war was identified both as a moment of national *grandeur* and as an inevitable consequence of the ideological contraposition of cultures (e.g., Slavs vs. Germans; East vs. West; Europe vs. Asia), which since the mid-Nineteenth century had gradually grown stronger among intellectuals of Slavophile and Pan-Slavic tendencies and took a definitive hold in early Twentieth-century Russian society as a consequence of the 1908 crisis and the subsequent annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina to the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>11</sup> As symptomatic evidence of such cultural tension, it is worthwhile to recall V. Chlebnikov's tirades in the 1908 manifesto *Vozzovanie učaščichsja slavjan* [Slavs!] and his three 1913 essays,<sup>12</sup> in which the revival of historically grounded motifs of ideological contrapositions between the Slavs and the Teutonic enemy plays a pivotal role; a similar example of such an ideological outburst can be found in the intensification of radical, pre-existing anti-Western stances. For example, V. Rozanov describes WWI not as an ordinary war, but as two different worlds clashing with one another (See [Rozanov 1915](#), p. 5), whereas V. Brjusov and the prince E. Trubeckoj depict Russia as a cultural bulwark defending Europe from Europe itself, and from German barbarism (See [Cechnovicer 1938](#), p. 119; [Trubeckoj 1914](#)). This very motif proves to be a common background feature in most of Russian WWI literature, not only in major authors' journalistic reportages (such as Brjusov's),<sup>13</sup> but also in a plethora of different works published in 1914 in response to the German occupation of Belgium.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. First World War Literary Anthologies

The first anthology<sup>15</sup> here examined is *Vojna. Literaturo-chudožestvennyj almanach* [War. Literary and Artistic Almanac], published in 1914. This volume is the ideal representative of the late 1914 cultural milieu, which was characterised by an unprecedented intellectual outburst in response to the war (As pointed out in [Ivanov 2005](#), p. 6). Hence, it is not surprising that a substantial predominance of the ideological component is evident in each of the texts collected in the anthology. Let us consider the very first lines of the opening

essay, Arcybašev's *Vojna* [War], in which the depiction of the Germans as bloodthirsty enemies "with natural tendencies to murder and destruction"<sup>16</sup> stands out. Arcybašev's introductory thoughts seem to pave the way for other contributions of major authors of that time, such as A. Kuprin's essay *O vojne* [About the War] (Ibid., pp. 11–14.) or V. Brjusov's, F. Sologub's and V. Majakovskij's poems, which essentially follow the same ideological discourse. The German Kaiser Wilhelm II proves to be the most frequent subject of criticism, whether depicted as a tyrant in other polemical essays (See *Vil'gel'm II*, in Ibid. pp. 60–61), or heavily mocked in A. Roslavlev's lyric *Vil'gel'mu* [To Wilhelm] (Ibid., pp. 53–54). However, not all the contributions fit within such a framework of generalised scorn: P. Berlin's essay *Dve Germanii* [Two Germanies] represents a slightly less-biased attempt at delving deeper into the contemporary situation. By assuming the existence of two different worlds coexisting in a single nation, the author separates the great literary and cultural achievements of German Romantics and philosophers from what he defines as *avtomatičeskij militarizm* [automatic militarism] (Ibid., p. 86), a feature permeating Prussian culture. Indeed, the utter disdain for Germans acts as a common thread that puts all the texts of the anthology in relation to one another. Mocking verses and essays aside, war-related short stories, short poems and translations of foreign literature are also included in the anthology. The former group is well represented by V. Garšin's *Iz vospominanii rjadovogo Ivanova* [From the Reminiscences of Private Ivanov] (Ibid. p. 139). The inclusion of Garšin's short story in this anthology is of particular interest. It was in fact written and published in 1882 and depicts scenes from the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–1878. Garšin's *povešt'* offers such a vivid depiction of military events that P. Henry called it "a superior example of the '*vojennyi bytovizm*' or semi-documentary reportage on the war" (Henry 1983, p. 135). Here, the authentic description of clashes with the Turks gives place to realistic and striking visions of war:

Дым, треск, бешеное«ура!» ... запах крови и пороха ... Закутанные дымом странные чужие люди, с бледными лицами. Дикая, нечеловеческая свалка. Благодарение Богу за то, что такие минуты помнятся только как в тумане. (Ibid., p. 153)

Smoke, the crackling of rifle shots, groans, frenzied 'Hurrahs!' The smell of blood and powder. Smoke-sweathed, strange, alien men with pale faces. A savage, inhuman scramble. Praise be to God that such moments are only remembered as in a haze, mistily. (Translation taken from Henry 1983, p. 138)

The original version of the story consists of nine chapters, but only the last three were published in the anthology. This editorial choice can be related to the very content of each presented part of the narrative: the elements that stand out the most from an ideological perspective are the representation of the "basic good tempers and powers of endurance of the Russian peasant soldier" (Henry 1983, p. 137) and the composed depiction of fallen soldiers, who are described not as victims of crude episodes of war, but with rhetorical nuances emphasising their human dignity and their fulfilled duty towards their homeland:

Он был ранен в животе и, должно быть, долго мучился до смерти. Тонкий-тонкий отпечаток чего-то одухотворенного, изящного и нежно-жалобного оставило страдание на его лице. Глаза были закрыты, руки сложены на груди. Сам ли он перед смертью принял это положение, или товарищи позаботились о нем? (Ibid., p. 145)

He was wounded in the abdomen and must have suffered a lot before his death. His suffering had left the gentle imprint of something spiritual, graceful and delicately plaintive on his face. His eyes were closed, his arms folded on his chest. Did he himself take this position before his death, or did his comrades take care of him? (Translation of the first and last sentences by the author; the translated central part is taken from Henry 1983, p. 138)

Note the semi-rhetorical question at the end of this passage – whichever the answer, the reason behind the publishing of the final chapters of Garšin's story becomes clear, as the author substantially depicts the making of a collective hero, that of the peasant-soldier, in which the whole Russian Empire ought to find a representation of each of its societal components.<sup>17</sup>

The way in which war is represented shifts to a more contemporary contextualisation in two specific war poems, A. Žurin's *Morskaja Bitva* [The Naval Battle] (*Vojna 1914*, pp. 133–34) and A. Lipečkiĭ's *V Okopach* [In the Trenches] (*Ibid.*, pp. 155–56). From the perspective of form, these poems do not represent anything particularly interesting; nevertheless, they should be regarded as an example of the all-encompassing patriotic sentiment which this anthology aimed to foster. Žurin's poem is likely to portray the wrecking of German battleships:

Гремящий треск и грозный грохот—  
Неокеана ли злобный хохот?  
И влага, восприняв огонь,  
Какобожженный скачет конь . . .

Левиафаны погибают  
И в безднах моря погребают  
Тех, кто, как Бог, их создавал  
И кто, как Дьявол, враждовал. (*Ibid.*, p. 134)

Thundering crackle and formidable rumble—  
Is it not the evil laughter of the ocean?  
And the moisture, on fire,  
Like a burnt horse gallops . . .

Leviathans die  
And in the depths of the sea they bury  
Those who, like God, created them  
And who, like the Devil, was an enemy. (Translation provided by the author)

It is worthwhile to highlight that at the beginning of the war the Russian navy did not achieve any strictly military success against the Germans. It is likely that Žurin is referring to what happened in late August 1914 to the German cruiser "Magdeburg", which ran aground in the Gulf of Finland, eventually leading to the recovering of the German naval codebook by Russian navy divers. Thereafter, this constituted a major strategical advantage throughout the war (see [Mauriello 2009](#), pp. 20–29).

Lipečkiĭ's poem, on the contrary, shows a different approach in depicting war-related scenes, and plays on the stark contrast that the juxtaposition of imagery produces:

Знакомая хата в четыре окошка,  
Корова и овцы и серая кошка—  
Все мирно, и осень, как добрая мать,  
Готовится плод перезревший снимать,  
А здесь вот могилы в земле красноватой  
Разрыты послушной солдатской лопатой,  
И с хохотом дьявольским рвется шрапнель,  
И с глиной смешалась и мокнет шинель (*Ibid.*, p. 155)

A familiar hut with four windows,  
Cow and sheep and gray cat—  
Everything is peaceful, and autumn, like a kind mother,  
Is preparing to harvest the overripe fruit,  
And here are the graves in the reddish earth  
Torn apart by an obedient soldier's shovel,

And shrapnel breaks with a devilish laugh,  
And the soaked overcoat mixes with clay. (Translation provided by the author)

Lipeckij's quasi-bucolic description of a typical autumn harvest gives place to the harsh conditions that peasant-soldiers endured in autumn 1914. Seemingly echoing Garšin's motifs, Lipeckij establishes a strongly rhetorical and patriotic portrait of the beginning of Russian mobilisation.

These two poems provide a clear example of two different yet converging manifestations of how the ideological discourse developed in the wake of Russia's entry into the war. On the one hand, Žurin's work appeals to a sort of common ethical feeling that is grounded on clear religious references, describing the Germans as malevolent demiurges, whose constructs, like the biblical Leviathan, end up being annihilated; on the other hand, Lipeckij's emphasis on the sacrifices being made by the common soldiers is the perfect embodiment of the propaganda celebration of the costly yet inevitable effort to achieve the final victory.<sup>18</sup>

The anthology also includes two translated literary works, which are an excerpt from a novel of the Polish author K. Tetmajer and G. de Maupassant's short story *Mademoiselle Fifi*. While Maupassant's narrative openly celebrates the common people resisting Prussian atrocities, Tetmajer's excerpt *Na pole bitvy* [On the Battlefield] is introduced by the following quote from Tetmajer himself,

Немец не первый пан мира, каким ему хочется быть, а первый хам мира, каким его все считают. (*Vojna 1914*, p. 99)

The German is not the first master of the world, as he wants to be, but the first boor of the world, as everyone thinks him. (Translation provided by the author)

This leaves no doubt that these texts were specifically chosen to foment the reader's scorn, as both deal with strong anti-German resentment.

In the volume, we can also find different illustrations representing war-related themes. Two of these stand out in a particular manner: a poster mocking the German Kaiser with the use of an unexpected pun in Italian, created by Majakovskij<sup>19</sup>, and, surprisingly enough, the reproduction of a painting by the Austrian symbolist Alfred Kubin (See *Ibid.*, p. 33). In summary, in this publication it is possible to recognise a clear representation of the undying ideological mystifications enacted by institutional and political propaganda, which were a common topic in the cultural discourse of that time (See also [Minutina-Lobanova 2016](#), pp. 86–87).

Let us examine the anthology *Ėpizody vojny. Sbornik razskazov učastnikov vojny i korrrespondentov različnykh periodičeskich izdanii* [Episodes of War. Collected Reports of Participants in the War and of Correspondents of Various Periodical Editions], published in 1916. This anthology constitutes a very interesting case study, even considering how the publication is structured. As it is evident from the title, this publication collects not only soldier accounts and reportages, but also other literary material taken from periodical literature. Each source is cited with the initials of its name, therefore the occurring 'B.V.' or 'R.V.' may refer to the magazines "Birževye Vedomosti" and "Russkie Vedomosti", respectively; however, no further information is provided, often making it quite difficult to identify the correct source or author. The collection is divided into several chapters, each of which follows a precise thematic categorisation; for example, the sections "Episodes of War" and "Military Life" contain mainly prose works, in the form of sketches and short stories, whereas "Poetry" contains a few brief poems and hymns. Most surprisingly, there are also two sections devoted to 'humorous' literature, namely short stories and poems, to which I shall return later.

The volume is addressed to the broad public, and the overall narrative concurs to reinforce a stereotypical, romanticised depiction of the Russian soldier, who in fact is often removed from a purely military context. The themes are varied and involve both hot topics, such as the military use of gas, presented to the reader as a detailed report in form of an interview with a wounded soldier (See *Udušlivye gazy*, in

*Épizody vojny 1916*, pp. 54–57), and more trivial themes, such as stories and anecdotes of everyday life at the front, which are often different from one another, their subjects ranging from strange and macabre events to fraternal bonds between combatants (See *Okop mertvecov* and *Duša ruskogo soldata*, in *Ibid.* pp. 57–58, 64–67). However, soldiers are more often represented as passive witnesses of events than the main characters of the narrative. This becomes particularly evident when considering short prose works, even those in which the narration seemingly centres on a military event. For example, in the brief reportage *Ataka* [The Attack] (*Ibid.*, pp. 30–31), the description of the battle scene is minimised to a couple of sentences: “Пограничники двинулись вперед [ . . . ] и, бросившись ватаку, порубили австрийцев как капусту” (*Ibid.*, p. 30), whereas most of the reportage focuses on the most rhetorical and stereotypical description of the Russian cavalymen: “так велико было нервное напряжение этих богатырей [ . . . ] на их славных, покрытых пылью и кровью лицах написано было сознание честно исполненного долга” (*Ibid.*, p. 31), and of their mutual respect and camaraderie: “при взгляде на них не одно сердце пламенело жгучей ревностью” (*Ibid.*). It is also relevant to remark that the most frequently mentioned type of Russian soldier is the border guard (*pogranichnik*); by recounting to the reader their everyday lives, stories and achievements, the authors actively involve that reader in the guards’ duties, this way somehow assuring them of the safety of the imperial borders from foreign invaders.

Soldier-poetry collected in the “Poetry” section has the aim of reassuring the reader of the common soldier’s deep faith in the State’s war policies. Overall, these poems stand out neither in form nor in content. A clear example of this kind of style can be found in the short poem *Žena zapasnogo* [The Reservist’s Wife] (*Ibid.* pp. 86–87). Here, the anonymous author is describing a young woman praying for her husband to return from the front. The woman is represented with elements taken from both a stereotypical depiction of Russian women and religious imagery:

Она стояла предо мной  
И смуглость бедных щек  
Своею яркой белизной  
Подчеркивал платок.  
Почти монашеский наряд  
Смиранный был на ней (*Ibid.* p. 86)

She was standing before me  
And the duskiness of her poor cheeks  
With its bright whiteness  
Emphasized her shawl.

It looked like a monastic outfit  
Which humbly was on her. (Translation provided by the author)

Through the woman’s recount, emphasis is put on the moral virtues of the mythologised figure of the ‘good soldier’, who left his wife and children for a greater good:

Он для меня был жизнь и свет  
Мой друг и господин . . . (*Ibid.* p. 87)

To me he was life and light  
My friend and lord . . . . (Translation provided by the author)

The occurring major motifs in this kind of soldier-poetry are mostly those of abnegation, patriotism and the celebration of Russian military might. This is particularly evident in the first part of another short poem, *Iz soldatskoj poëzii* [Soldier-poetry] (*Ibid.* pp. 88–89), where the author, the *efrejtor* [corporal] A. Balagurov, solemnises the Tsar and the Russian army, whose glory is granted by God’s assistance and favour:



И с надеждою на Бога  
 Крест наш свято понесем,  
 За Царя, за Русь святую  
 Мы со славою умрем.  
 [ ... ]  
 Русь с надеждою на Бога  
 Чтя любимого Царя,  
 Никогда врагом коварным  
 Побежденной не была (Ibid. p. 89)

And with trust in God  
 We will sacredly bear our cross,  
 For the Tsar, for the Holy Rus'  
 We will die in glory.  
 [ ... ]  
 Rus' trusting in God  
 And honoring the beloved Tsar,  
 Was never defeated  
 By the treacherous enemy. (Translation provided by the author)

The author also makes use of several quasi-Slavophile motifs, clearly echoing medieval Rus' and the ancient Slavic institution of the *družina*:

Русь великая встряхнулась  
 Получив царский приказ  
 И могучие дружины  
 Сформированы из нас (Ibid. p. 88)

The Great Rus' was shaken  
 Having received the imperial order  
 And mighty squads  
 Were formed from us. (Translation provided by the author)

These two poems share a common feature, that is, the songlike structure of the alternate couplets and the fixed meter of the verse, which can be found in other poems in the anthology. This kind of choice may be explained by considering in parallel the lyrical structure of Russian military songs of the time. However, there is another poem, *Mysli v okopach* [Thoughts in Trench] (Ibid. p. 87), which immediately differentiates itself from the others due to its quite refined rhyme structure, making it one of the most stylistically interesting examples of the whole section. Let us consider its last verses:

[ ... ] как и прадеды в старь  
 верьте нам  
 лечь костями мы за Вас все готовы. (Ibid. p. 87)

[ ... ] like our ancestors in ancient times  
 Believe in us  
 We are all ready to die for you. (Translation provided by the author)

What is immediately evident is the embodiment of traditional pre-war patriotic literary clichés. The author, referred to simply as *N.V.V.*, is celebrating once again nothing but patriotism and the traditional values of obedience and individual sacrifice for the motherland in its achievement of final victory. The title given to the poem is also of relevance, as it aims at presenting the common opinion of all the Russian soldiers.

The last chapters of the volume are devoted to 'humorous literature' of different genres, ranging from short stories to goliardic songs and mocking verses. Such writings are preceded by an introductory note, in which the editor presents them to the reader as various

sketches of real front-life ‘curiosities’ and ‘funny episodes’ that happened to the soldiers (See Ibid. p. 91). A subtler level of analysis allows us to assume that such statements were in fact once again aimed at reassuring the reader of the healthy psychological state of the soldiers, who every now and then can enjoy some merry time for themselves, despite the tragedies they witness. The comedy of errors is seemingly the most frequent literary device at work in these sketches. Let us consider the brief story *Nemeckij obed* [The German Lunch] (Ibid. p. 99), in which a German regiment’s cook does not notice that while he is preparing lunch for the whole troop, the Russians successfully beat the Germans and occupy the position, and ends up serving nutritious meals to his enemies, being loudly mocked once the misunderstanding is revealed; or *Georgevskij Kavalier i . . . krysa* [The St. George Knight and the Rat] (Ibid. pp. 101–2), in which we are presented with a young volunteer scout (*razvedčik*), who has not only earned the respect of the whole troop thanks to his bravery and fearlessness in action, but has also received a medal of honour; however, when setting up a provisional shelter after a military action, he appears to be frightened by the presence of a rat. As the story goes on, his comrades find out that he is in fact a young girl, who impersonated her own husband. She pleads with her superiors to be allowed to fight again in the army, as the only thing she fears are rats; however, ironically enough, she is immediately dismissed and sent to the nearest Red Cross camp to serve as a nurse. *Lovlja avstrijev na salo* [Catching Austrians with Salo] (Ibid. pp. 101–4) is another humorous real-life episode written and sent directly to a magazine by an officer at the front. In this brief sketch, the officer reports that to overcome boredom he challenged his soldiers to feed Austrian troops deployed in the trench opposite to theirs with *salo*<sup>20</sup>. At night they decide to crawl near the enemies’ trench and leave the food in front of it. The Austrian soldiers take the bait, and the Russians repeat this trick successfully for three days, eventually deciding to once again use the *salo* to set up a pitfall. The Austrian soldiers fall for the trap and are easily taken prisoner, to the great amusement of the Russians.

Overall, the textual material presented in this volume fulfils a precise cultural and societal function, that is, to celebrate the patriotic nuances of the Russian war effort. In many texts, especially in those belonging to the ‘humorous literature’ section, great emphasis is placed on the enemy’s foolishness and naiveness rather than on a celebration of Russian military valour. This element is of particular interest, as it allows a paradigm shift in interpreting propaganda literature. Considering that in the Russian Empire of 1916, the literacy rate was constantly increasing, thus ceasing to be a prerogative of higher social classes (See Guroff and Starr 1971; Brooks 1985, pp. 28–29), one may conclude that such an anthology had the aim of dispelling the public’s fear of mutinies, mass desertions or revolutionary tendencies among the army, as well as reassuring all social classes within the empire of the final victory over the German and Austro-Hungarian enemies. In this perspective, victory was to be expected not in relation to the battle prowess of the Russian soldier or the heroism of the Russian army, but from the starting point of the substantial incompetence of the enemies, who are constantly mocked, while the Russian soldier seemingly plays a more secondary, background role. This interpretation can be also related to the precise moment in which the volume was published. 1916 was a critical year for the Russian Empire, as the strain of the war had begun to irreparably affect the internal situation. The countryside was becoming more restive, mass unrest and strikes were taking place in several cities, while the high losses that the army ranks suffered were rapidly increasing the soldiers’ discontent. Considering that censorship authorised the publication of the anthology on July 24, it is possible to assume that its editor began collecting material earlier that year, in the wake of the military success of the Brusilov offensive, which halted at the end of September.

#### 4. Conclusions

Investigating secondary propaganda literature proves to be an invaluable asset in understanding not only which was the most predominant cultural discourse in the WWI period, but also how it affected single authors’ stances, which in turn were mirrored in

their works. As I have shown in this study, the official cultural discourse promoted by the establishment remains substantially unaltered throughout the entire duration of the war; what had changed, however, was how ideological positions were conveyed to the common reader. It is possible to recognise a dominant anti-German rant as the common feature of most works written in this period, but whereas the 1914 literary samples sprang from a shared national position of rage, the works published in 1916 mark a sort of change in the overall attitude the readers must have had. This is the reason for the underlying presence of key rhetorical motifs, both perduring since 1914 (e.g., the religious references), and newly introduced in 1916, such as the frequent passages in which the soldiers swear loyalty to the Tsar. What becomes particularly evident when comparing the two anthologies is the strong thematic shift that official state propaganda underwent as a consequence of the events that were affecting the course of the war and the internal political situation. The initial emphasis on the abnegation of the Russian army and the patriotic celebration of the common soldier's self-sacrifice slowly fade out, whereas the hatred and contempt for Germans turn gradually into a less ideologized mockery. The aim of such literary publications is therefore a reassuring one, making the reader confident of the correctness of the State's war policies, despite the internal crisis that was taking place and that eventually led to the 1917 Revolutions and the definitive Russian withdrawal.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lenin's definition of First World War as an 'imperialist' war can be found in several articles of the period 1914–1915, the most prominent of which is *O poraženii svoego pravitel'stva v imperialističeskoj vojne* [The Defeat of One's Own Government in the Imperialist War] (Lenin 1969, pp. 286–91).
- <sup>2</sup> As Petrone (2011, p. 3) states, "the destruction of the cemetery is shrouded in urban legend. [ . . . ] The grave markers were supposedly destroyed in 1932 on Stalin's personal order. In another account, it was the building of the Moscow metro that precipitated the cemetery's destruction [ . . . ]".
- <sup>3</sup> "Мы видим, какую трудную, большую и извилистую дорогу пришлось им пройти, чтобы суметь прозреть «тайну» войны, поднять свой голос для ее разоблачения и, наконец, притти[sic] к приятию Великой пролетарской революции. Этот глубоко прогрессивный путь для Блока и Хлебникова оказался незавершенным, а Маяковский [ . . . ] сумел преодолеть в себе мелкобуржуазные футуристические пережитки и выдвинуться на ведущее место в мировой революционной поэзии", Cechnovicer (1938, p. 314). As Golubinov (2010, p. 56) states, the 1930s period to 1945 is characterised by an overwhelming influence of Stalin's cult of personality on the historiography of WWI, therefore it is not surprising to find such ideologized stances in secondary literature.
- <sup>4</sup> See Imposti (2016a, p. 57). A pioneering representative of such a revised course of investigation is to be found in Smirnov (1999), which collects international scientific efforts to cast new light on both an unbiased re-reading of historical facts and the overall impact of WWI on Russian society. It should be also noted that on occasion of the 100-years anniversary in 2014 a significant number of publications, studies and conferences on such topics took place all over the world.
- <sup>5</sup> See (Heller 1989; Hellman 2018; Imposti 2016a, 2016b; Polonskij et al. 2013, 2014).
- <sup>6</sup> For further reference, see (Heller 1989; Kacis and Pavlovič 2011); see Minutina-Lobanova (2016) for a detailed account on the poets' immediate response to the war and to what extent it affected contemporary Russian society.
- <sup>7</sup> As an example, see the anthology *V pomošč' plennym russkim vojnám*, Moskva (1916), which includes works of major authors of the time, such as L. Andreev, I. Bunin, V. Brjusov, and K. Bal'mont.
- <sup>8</sup> I shall note that most of critical literature on Russian First World War literature focuses greatly on the reactions of the most prominent members of the intelligentsia, delving deeper into the Symbolists' and Futurists' stances towards war involvement. For a broader reference framework, see (Hellman 2018; Imposti 2016b; Polonskij et al. 2014).
- <sup>9</sup> *Russkie vedomosti*, September 29, 1914.
- <sup>10</sup> "Писатели все взбесились", Gippius (1982, p. 101).

- 11 For a detailed study on the 1908 Balkan crisis as a prelude to WWI, see (Kacis and Pavlovič 2011). For further reference see Gatrell (2015), Lieven (2006), McMeekin (2011), Utkin (2002).
- 12 I refer to the essays published in 1913 on the journal "Slavjanin": *O rasširenij predelov russoj slovesnosti* [Expanding the Boundaries of Russian Literature]; *Kto takie ugorossy?* [Who are the Ugorossy?]; *Zapadnyj drug* [A Friend in the West].
- 13 One of the most prolific contributors among Russian writers is undoubtedly Valerij Brjusov, who authored dozens of articles when working as a correspondent for Russian magazines "Golos" and "Russkie vedomosti" in 1914–1915, which he often signed using his maternal grandfather's surname (V. Bakulin). For further reference, see the section devoted to V. Brjusov in Polonskij et al. (2014, pp. 243–580).
- 14 This is the case of M. Golubinskij's pamphlet *Černaja kniga germanskich zverstv* [The Black Book of German Barbarism], Petrograd, 1914.
- 15 If not otherwise stated, I am responsible for the adaptation of pre-1917 Russian orthography to current norms and the translations from Russian.
- 16 "[...] в душе каждого немца, под всеми культурными наслоениями, жил кровожадный инстинкт разрушения и убийства", Arcybašev, M., *Vojna*, in *Vojna* (1914, p. 6).
- 17 This becomes particularly evident when considering the ideological stances that permeate the first parts of Garšin's story, which were expunged from this anthology for obvious political reasons. Such stances are to be found in two particular moments of the narrative: (a) the depiction of the army as a powerful, but mindless machine, "terrifying because [...] it is potentially out of control" (Henry 1983, p. 139), and (b) of the conflict enacted by the two main characters of the story, Ivanov (Garšin's alter ego) and Vencel': at the root of their quarrels one can find Ivanov's will "to study the People in its representative, the soldier" (Henry 1983, p. 139). Ivanov's populist view is heavily mocked by Vencel', "a fine cameo of the [...] embittered liberal" (Henry 1983, p. 139).
- 18 Very little is known about these two minor poets; however, sources are most likely to point out at the fact that neither of them took part in the war. For further references, see the entries 'Žurin, Aleksandr' in *Russkie Pisateli*, (II, See Nikolaev and Egorov 1989–2019, p. 253), and 'Lipeckij, Aleksej', in *Russkie Pisateli*, (III, See Nikolaev and Egorov 1989–2019, p. 361).
- 19 See (Ibid. p. 130). Majakovskij's pun plays on the juxtaposition of two strips: the first one, *Načalo* [The Beginning] depicts a caricature of the German Kaiser Wilhelm II holding a banner. There dominates the inscription *Germania Grandiosa* [Great Germany, in Italian], which in the second image, entitled *Vozmožnyj konec* [The Possible Outcome], becomes *Mania Grandiosa* [Great insanity, in Italian], this time with a comical representation of an overwhelmed Kaiser, after a military defeat.
- 20 *Salo* is a typical Slavic food which consists of cured slabs of pork fat or belly.

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