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## BORN OF WAR: THE RELUCTANT MODERNISM OF VLADISLAV CHODASEVIČ

EDWARD WAYSBAND

### Abstract

This paper contextualizes Khodasevich's poem 'Slezy Rakhili' ('Rachel's Tears'; 1916) and his article 'Voina i poezii' ('War and Poetry'; 1938) as his responses to World War I and to the Munich agreement, respectively. I contend that the First World War provided the impetus to Khodasevich for starting to write modernist poetry, in which he explicitly opposed "then" and "now", a contrast that lies at the core of modernist consciousness. In Khodasevich's case, this acute awareness of a break with previous values had a personal quality, as the birth of his modernist poetics evolved out of a personal crisis in the wake of the suicide of his closest friend, Samuil Kissin, on 22 March 1916. Khodasevich's poem 'Slezy Rakhili' recapitulates macro- and micro-histories, referring to the broader issue of refugees and deportees and to Kissin's tragic end. 'Slezy Rakhili' is also a self-referential war poem as it reflects on current war poetry and questions whether poetry can adequately negotiate modernity in its most extreme form of a modern war. It is a conscious exploration of the contrast between "established things" and the new catastrophic reality of war and postwar Russia and Europe that makes Khodasevich a modernist poet and unites him with other modernist poets, like Vladimir Maiakovskii, despite their personal and literary animosities.

**Keywords:** *V.F. Khodasevich; World War I; Munich Agreement; S. Kissin; V. Maiakovskii; F. Tiutchev*

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In Western literary studies it has become a commonplace to explore Modernism in correlation to the experience of World War I (see, *inter alia*, Fussell 1975; Sherry 2003; Sherry 2005; Smith 2000; Campbell 2005; Tate 1998). As Edna Longley points out, however, one should not overstate the extent to which the war can be associated with literary Modernism in some national literary traditions (2005: 74). Even so, it was the unprecedented strength and urgency of the modern war experience that gave rise to modernist literary consciousness in some cases and that intensified prewar modernist tendencies in others. In this light, it is clear that too little work has been done in linking Russian Modernism's premises with the first war that was called a "world war". One explanation may lie in the general underestimation of both phenomena – World War I and Modernism – in Russian cultural and literary consciousness. Contemporaries and subsequent generations of scholars have overlooked the historical and cultural influences of this war in favour of the 1917 October revolution and its aftermath, which has exerted a major influence on cultural and literary studies up to the present (see Cohen 2008: 2-4; Ogden 2014: 234). Works that have attempted to coordinate Modernism with Russian history also focused predominantly on the Bolshevik October revolution (see Williams 1977; Gibian 1976: 15; Erlich 1994), thus perpetuating the inattentiveness to World War I in literary studies. A dearth of research does not, however, signify an absence of subject matter. Some Russian writers shared the elsewhere common recognition of the war as a watershed between the modern and pre-modern world – best known is probably the famous formulation in Anna Achmatova's 'Poëma bez geroja' ('Poem Without a Hero') of the "non-calendar, but – real twentieth century" having been ushered in by World War I. In fact, Russian war poetry – like its Western counterpart – became a battlefield where Russian poets attempted to cope with the growing tensions between pre-war aesthetic norms and modernist challenges. The authors of the best war poems expressed the feeling of an unprecedented historical rupture that separated the modern "age of extremes" (Hobsbawm 1995) from a pre-war reality perceived as "normal". Although it is impossible to provide an all-inclusive definition of Modernism covering scores of writers, individual case studies show that the time has come to explore in depth the general premise that Modernism, as a literary exploration of the impact of modernity, in some cases appeared and in some cases intensified because of World War I. This war increasingly became a historical event that demolished pre-war conception of a rational world (or at least a rational Europe), marking a total collapse of all logic and sense instead.

As I show in this paper, Vladislav Chodasevič represents a prominent example of the birth of modernism out of the spirit of this particular war. As for many of his contemporaries, the war became a watershed in his poetic career. It epitomized to him the extremity of modernity, which required a

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