Opinion

on the Dissertation of Nedyalko Zhelev

"The Wars of the 20th Century – Novelistic Interpretations

in the Slavic Literatures after 1989"

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Undoubtedly, one of the merits of Nedyalko Zhelev's dissertation, *"The Wars of the 20th Century – Novelistic Interpretations in the Slavic Literatures after 1989"*, is the relevance of its topic. Until recently, commentary on war literature was not particularly visible, but now—amid changing geopolitical conditions and the insistent presence of war in political and media realities—it proves to be necessary. Even timelier is the dissertation's focus on Slavic literatures, since it was precisely the Slavic peoples who, in the post-1989 period, had to confront the reality of war.

Another merit of the dissertation is its interdisciplinarity. Nedyalko Zhelev correctly understands that war cannot be discussed solely from a strictly literary perspective. Therefore, he also turns to philosophy, sociology, and the psychology of war. Appropriately, the first chapter of the work is devoted to the psychology of war, with a dominant psychoanalytic perspective. The author's reflections on how war affects the fear of death and the concept of heroism are particularly interesting. The killing of the "enemy" creates a sense of "victory" over death. On the other hand, the hero transforms evil into good. He performs actions that would be unacceptable in peacetime, but which, in the context of war, are valued positively and even deemed praiseworthy.

The first chapter reveals one of the important strengths of the dissertation—the erudition of its author. Zhelev consistently and conscientiously refers to the perspectives of other scholars. He not only cites their theses but also critically integrates them into his own approach to the topic. The second chapter outlines the theoretical literary framework of the study. Quite correctly, the researcher focuses his attention on the First World War. This is the first modern military conflict that radically transforms prior conceptions of war and the experience of encountering such an event. Consequently, the narrative strategies for representing war in modern literature are connected precisely with the First World War. Of literary-critical significance are the author's

reflections on the links between war literature and the pastoral. The two modes of representation seem incompatible—one depicts extreme events, while the other portrays idyllic experiences of nature. However, Zhelev convincingly argues that they can be seen as related, since both describe specific, bounded zones governed by unique laws of subject formation. The author rightly refrains from giving a definitive answer as to whether war literature can be considered a development of the pastoral tradition or an anti-pastoral.

The third chapter turns to the specifics of literary analysis. The diversity of war novels from the Slavic literatures after 1989 that are analyzed is striking. An important aspect of the study, in my view, is that despite its focus on individual texts and attention to their specific features, it retains the researcher's theoretical stance. Literature is approached through models and categories; the researcher does not "get lost" in the details of the analyzed works but maintains a view of the whole and the general. At the same time, although the study delves into textual specifics, it does not become enclosed within the text—it consistently seeks a comparative perspective. Personally, the most interesting part of this chapter for me is the episode involving the analysis of the alternative historical narrative in the novel *Ice* by Polish writer Jacek Dukaj. Alternative history poses a challenge to war literature, which typically strives for realism, while the alternative historical narrative subverts precisely that. Although the dissertation deals with narrative models in war literature after 1989, it does not indulge in purely formal analysis but seeks the human experience within the works. The text includes compelling reflections on the experiences of war from the perspectives of children and women.

The fourth chapter introduces us to the thematic dominants in war literature. I consider the researcher's decision to include works from Bulgarian literature in a comparative reading with texts from other Slavic literatures to be a valuable and enriching choice. The study provides a detailed analysis of the mechanisms behind the construction of the figure of the military leader in literary works—a traditional narrative element. A strong point of the dissertation is its focus on the "damaged people"—those who have experienced the trauma of war and carry it within themselves. The researcher convincingly argues that it is precisely these individuals who contribute to the renewal of war after its subsiding, to its "cyclical" nature.

The abstract accurately reflects the content and contributions of the dissertation.

I respectfully ask the esteemed academic committee to award Nedyalko Zhelev the educational and scientific degree of Doctor in the professional field 2.1. Philology. I vote IN FAVOR.

June 17, 2025

Respectfully,
Maurice Fadel