

# Search for Freedom

*A Retrospective on the Life and Work of Val Polyinin*

Jillian Morrison

Written for *Safekeeping: The Art of Val Polyinin*

Ти знаєш, що ти — людина.  
 Ти знаєш про це чи ні?  
 Усмішка твоя — єдина,  
 Мука твоя — єдина.  
 Очі твої — одні.

Більше тебе не буде.  
 Завтра на цій землі  
 Інші ходитимуть люди,  
 Інші кохатимуть люди —  
 Добрі, ласкаві й злі.

Сьогодні усе для тебе —  
 Озера, гаг, степи.  
 І жити спішити треба,  
 Кохати спішити треба —  
 Гляди ж не проспй!

Бо ти на землі — людина,  
 І хогеш того чи ні —  
 Усмішка твоя — єдина,  
 Мука твоя — єдина,  
 Очі твої — одні.

Василь Симоненко

You know that you're a person;  
 You know this; or do you not?  
 Your smile is unique,  
 Your pain is unique,  
 Your eyes — only you have got.

Tomorrow you'll be here no longer;  
 No more on this earth will you be.  
 Others will walk  
 And will love and will talk,  
 Others — much better, much eviler than we.

Today all is here just waiting:  
 The meadows and lakes and the unbounded  
 steppe.  
 And to live you must rush,  
 To love you must rush.  
 Hurry up, wake up, don't sleep.

For on earth you are still — a person.  
 And whether you like it or not,  
 Your smile is unique,  
 Your pain is unique,  
 Your eyes — only you have got.

Vasyl Symonenko

Translated by Fr. Andriy M. Chirovsky<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vasyl Symonenko, "You're a Person\*," in *Hranitni Obelisky/ Granite Obelisks*, ed. and trans. by Fr. Andriy M. Chirovsky (Jersey City, Svoboda, 1975), 54-57. \*Originally this work is untitled. In the translated edition of *Granite Obelisks*, Fr. Chirovsky gives titles to Symonenko's untitled poems for identification purposes.

Tucked away in the mighty redwood forests of coastal California lies a treasure trove of a local Ukrainian-American artist, Val Polyaniin. For nearly 30 years, he has lived and worked in Crescent City, California, pursuing odd jobs all in support of creating his art. Crescent City's government acquired his collection in June of 2022; four months after Russian forces poured into Ukraine in February 2022. At that time, Ukrainian art curators across the country scrambled to protect valuable art works and pieces of cultural history. They could not protect everything. When Russian soldiers stole countless pieces of Ukrainian art, they did not simply seek out monetary gain. They planned for a cultural genocide. Russian museum curators had clearly already planned out the operation, even before the invasion began.<sup>2</sup> Russia's repression of Ukrainian art and cultural identity is nothing new. Polyaniin himself escaped Soviet cultural repression in search of creative and artistic freedom. Throughout his journey to the present day, he carries a spirit of defiance and a passion for the creative process.

Understanding Polyaniin's spirit of defiance requires us to also understand his cultural background. During the artist's childhood, the Soviet Union began to "thaw" in its restriction of writing, cinema, art, and other forms of cultural expression following the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953. As the new Premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev began the process of de-Stalinization or "thawing" out the control tactics of terror and fear as a tool to control the nations. He ordered a gradual return to a more pure Leninist ideology.<sup>3</sup> Although the control methods had changed, the goal remained the same: assimilation of all Soviet nationalities into one. Unlike Western colonization methods, the Soviet system demanded homogeneity from all

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<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Gettleman and Oleksandra Mykolyshyn, "As Russians Steal Ukraine's Art, They Attack Its Identity, Too," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/14/world/asia/ukraine-art-russia-steal.html>.

<sup>3</sup> In order to respond to the "national question," Khrushchev believed in returning to a less centralist policy as Lenin had initially imagined the Soviet Union. The "national question" or rather how to strike this balance between national identities and the state identity pervaded all aspects of Soviet politics. See Oleh Fedyshyn, "Khrushchev's 'Leap Forward': National Assimilation in the USSR after Stalin," *The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (1967): 35, JSTOR.

nationalities; therefore, a person possessed a Soviet identity before their personal national identity.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Stalinist ideology sought to erase *all expressions* of specific national identities. Academic and political institutions relied on the Russian language to communicate, therefore, everyone needed to acquiesce to Russian culture.<sup>5</sup> By the mid-1950's, these tactics resulted in thoroughly Russocentric cities while rural areas remained loyal to their ethnic nationalities.<sup>6</sup> In order to gain upward social mobility, rural Ukrainian youths were expected to assimilate into the Russified academic and political world.

Within these spheres, the party-state continued to enforce the art style known as “socialist realism.” This style of art and writing demanded members of the intelligentsia to create work that adhered to state approved ideology. Any form of creative expression needed to focus on the “friendship of people.”<sup>7</sup> In a less poetic sense, cultural works had to highlight the positives of Communist life and glorify the Communist Party.<sup>8</sup> Even under Khrushchev’s thaw, straying from these values placed the intelligentsia in great danger. At best, they faced expulsion from the established cultural institutions such as the Union of Ukrainian Writers. This was a fate they could redeem themselves from, however, straying too far from socialist realism and criticizing the Communist Party (CPU [refers specifically to the Communist Party of Ukraine]) too strongly led to arrest by the Committee for State Security (KGB). The consequences were far more dire after that.

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to understand that under the Soviet system the party-state (or government) and the nation (the people) did not exist synonymously. The party-state presided over the nation and therefore the nation was considered subordinate to the state; *See* Liah Greenfeld, “The Scythian Rome: Russia,” in *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992): 261.

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Dzyuba, *Internationalism or Russification?: A Study in the Soviet Nationalities Problem*, 2nd ed., (London: The Camelot Press, Ltd, 1970): 135.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Tromly, “An Unlikely National Revival: Soviet Higher Learning and the Ukrainian ‘Sixtiers,’ 1953-65,” *The Russian Review* 68, no. 4 (2009): 612, JSTOR.

<sup>7</sup> Simone A. Bellezza, *The Shore of Expectations: A Cultural Study of the Shistdesiatnyky* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2019): 72.

<sup>8</sup> Ivan Koshelivets, “Socialist Realism,” Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine, accessed April 14, 2023, <http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CS%5CO%5CSocialistrealism.htm>.

Many Ukrainian creatives (or intelligentsia) took advantage of the Thaw in order to begin expressing their national identity again through their art, writing, and cinema. Through the Thaw, it became possible to upset the dominant Russian paradigm and instead outwardly embrace a Ukrainian national identity.<sup>9</sup> For this fresh, post-war generation of intelligentsia, they shared Khrushchev's initial goals of correcting the wrongs of the Stalin era and returning to a more pure form of socialism.<sup>10</sup> How they wanted to achieve that goal, however, differed greatly from the CPU's ideas. Known today as the *shistdesiatnyky*,<sup>11</sup> this movement included artists, writers, and other intelligentsia active mostly in Kyiv and Lviv. Notably, a majority of *shistdesiatnyky* came from peasant families. When entering the academic world, they had already experienced the struggle against Russification. Key figures included the founding members of the Creative Club for Youth (KTM), an offshoot of the Komsomol: Ivan Dzyuba, Lina Kostenko, Vasyl Symonenko, and Alla Horska.<sup>12</sup> Horska and her husband, Viktor Zaretskyi, used their apartment as the center for the *shistdesianystvo*<sup>13</sup> movement. The *shistdesiatnyky* distributed their ideas for their nation's future through *samyvdav*: unofficial publications, pamphlets, and booklets. The participants of this movement felt that their national freedom needed to start from within themselves as individuals.<sup>14</sup> In Kostenko's poetry, she cautioned against the censor that dwells inside the minds of Ukrainians, warning that it will, "rob you of your inner self."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Tromly, "An Unlikely National Revival," 613.

<sup>10</sup> Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000): 507.

<sup>11</sup> Literally translated to "of the sixties;" See Bellezza, *The Shore of Expectations*, XI.

<sup>12</sup> This is not a comprehensive list of all the literary figures and artists active during this period. I chose to highlight some of the most well known *shistdesiatnyky* for the purposes of brevity. For a more complete list of key figures, see Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 515.

<sup>13</sup> This word, "shisdesinystvo," refers specifically to the movement itself. See Bellezza, *The Shore of Expectations*, XIII for further explanation.

<sup>14</sup> Tromly, "An Unlikely National Revival," 614.

<sup>15</sup> Lina Kostenko, "Beware the Censor in Yourself," All Poetry, trans. by Artyom Timeyev, December 2016, <https://allpoetry.com/poem/13055862-Beware-the-Censor-in-Yourself--by-Lina-Kostenko--translated-from--by-Artyom-Timeyev>.

The party-state recognized the potential of these writers and subsequently the Union of Ukrainian Writers actually invited Dzyuba and other *shistdesiatnyky* into the fold. This was not a benevolent act: it was meant to quell their potential for dissent. Tensions between the KTM and the party-state began to fester following the tragic death of Symonenko in 1963.<sup>16</sup> The following year, Alla Horska, in collaboration with Opanas Zalivakha, Halyna Zubchenko, Halyna Sevruck and Lyudmila Semikinay, created a stained glass piece displayed at Kyiv National University, titled *Shevchenko. Mother.* to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Taras Shevchenko's birth. The work depicted the national poet protecting a matronly figure (Ukraine) and holding up Kobzar with the words, "I will glorify these silent slaves, and my words will stand guard over them," arching over the main image.<sup>17</sup> The work provoked a strong reaction in the intelligentsia community of Kyiv. For the young dissidents, they marveled at this piece of rebellion. In contrast, the university rector himself took a hammer to the glass and smashed it on the instruction of local Communist Party leaders.<sup>18</sup> The CPU considered the work ideologically hostile and inconsistent with the Soviet memory of Shevchenko: only sketches and photos of the piece remain today. As a result, Horska and Semikinay were expelled from the Ukrainian Union of Artists.<sup>19</sup> In October of 1964, an internal coup pushed Khrushchev out of power. Leonid Brezhnev replaced him with a clear mandate: the time for allowing nationalism in the Soviet Union was ending.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Symonenko died at only age 28 following a brutal beating by KGB agents and the discovery he had kidney cancer. Even to the end, he defended his Ukrainian heritage and the importance of promoting Ukrainian culture. His work is quoted as the epigraph of this paper. For more information see Bellezza, *The Shore of Expectations*, 41-52.

<sup>17</sup> Siyak et al., "Alla Horska;" Multiple translations of this phrase exist. Some translations use "voiceless" or "little" in place of "silent." The message remains the same: Shevchenko was unapologetically a Ukrainian nationalist. The Soviet approved memory of the poet did not match his true history.

<sup>18</sup> Lyubov Krupnyk, "Osobystist proty systemy," *Tyzhden*, June 19, 2019, <https://tyzhden.ua/osobystist-proty-systemy/>; Anna Zbarazhska, "Mystetstvo shistdesyatnykiv. Dolya vitrazhu u chervonomu korpusi," *Plomin*, January 14, 2020, <https://plomin.club/stained-glass-window-in-red-case/>.

<sup>19</sup> Zbarazhska, "Mystetstvo shistdesyatnykiv;" Both artists were subsequently reinstated the following year.

<sup>20</sup> Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 508.

With Brezhnev's rise to power, dissent became more and more dangerous for these youths. A set of mass arrests in 1965 and 1966 meant to intimidate the *shistdesiatnyky* only led to greater protest.<sup>21</sup> Opanas Zalivakha, one of Horska's co-collaborators for *Shevchenko. Mother.*, unfortunately was a target of the 1965 arrests. He received a five year work camp sentence for his alleged dissident activities. Horska, Kostenko, and Dzyuba attended the trials of their friends taking down unofficial minutes and printing them in *samyvdav*. Another series of mass arrests in 1968 led to the publication of the Letter of Protest (sometimes also called the Letter of the 139). Signed by 139 *shistdesiatnyky*, the letter specifically addressed Brezhnev's employment of Stalinist terror tactics to earn their submission. Although the letter was not intended to create greater protest, the Soviet authorities saw this polite demand for justice as an attempt to topple the party-state.<sup>22</sup> The Thaw drew to a close following Horska's alleged KGB murder in late 1970. In January 1972, another set of arrests occurred: this time with the intent of killing the nationalist movement altogether. The KGB targeted and imprisoned around 90 key leaders that year.<sup>23</sup> In May 1972, a new CPU leader was appointed, Volodymyr Shcherbytsky, who led a purge against anyone he perceived as sympathetic to the nationalist cause.<sup>24</sup> Without the key leaders in place, the movement fell apart and nationalist tensions in Ukraine did not resurface for another twenty years.

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<sup>21</sup> Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 517.

<sup>22</sup> Krupnyk, "Osobystist."

<sup>23</sup> Known as the great pogrom of 1972, this set of arrests focused on expelling any chance of nationalist tension from ever arising again in Ukraine. Dzyuba himself was forced to publicly recant his strong anti-Russian stance and he was sentenced to five years in prison in 1973. For more information, see Christine Chraibi and Alya Shandra, "Carols against the USSR: the tragic 1972 vertep and KGB mass arrests of Ukrainian dissidents," Euromaidan Press, January 12, 2019, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2019/01/12/the-tragic-1972-vertep-in-lviv-photos/>.

<sup>24</sup> Anna Reid, *Borderland: A Journey Through the History of Ukraine*, (New York: Basic Books, 2015): 207.

Born in 1953, Val Polyanin grew up in Mariupol and Donetsk, Ukraine during the Thaw period. Even early on in his life, Polyanin felt connected to creating art.<sup>25</sup> He identified art as an outlet to escape from the oppressive reality in Soviet Ukraine. Despite having this outlet, the young artist found he could not express his full range of creativity. In his own words, Polyanin deemed socialist realism, “stupid [and] boring.” For him, choosing to yield to these standards meant giving up his hope for creative freedom. Directly following the completion of his high school years, Polyanin went to complete his mandatory two year service in the Soviet military. After completing his military service, Polyanin attended university in Vladivostok, Russia: finally beginning to pursue a career in art. In the Soviet era, many Ukrainian artists followed a similar path in order to escape: attain a Russian degree and leave for the Paris art scene following the completion of their degree. While abroad, artists often concealed their Ukrainian roots to avoid further persecution for their national identity. During Polyanin’s third year in university, his art instructor forced him to remove a few of his paintings from the university’s studio. These paintings were too abstract and did not conform to the “correct” socialist standards. The mass arrests of January 1972 were not so far behind as the party-state had reverted to Stalinist terror tactics to control the nations.<sup>26</sup> Considering this, the young artist realized that if he wanted to freely express himself, he needed to leave the USSR. Without leaving, it would not be possible to have a meaningful future. In leaving his home, Polyanin believed he had an opportunity to, “be completely free.”

Escaping Soviet Ukraine was not an easy task and required Polyanin to carefully consider his options, especially considering the risks should he not succeed in his escape. The soon-to-be-defector personally knew of a friend who returned from a work camp and punitive

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<sup>25</sup> Laura Brown, “Creative lifeblood: Artwork is Ukrainian immigrant’s foundation,” *The Daily TriPLICATE* (Crescent City, CA), July 26, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Christine Chraibi and Alya Shandra, “Carols against the USSR.”

psychiatry program a total shell of his former self.<sup>27</sup> In looking at his former friend, the young man knew he was gazing into his future. The geography of Ukraine limited the options for escape over land. The country was situated squarely in the center of the Communist bloc. Finland and Norway were the closest democratic nations who would not return him to Communist Ukraine. Based on knowledge from his prior military service, escaping to the Nordic countries were highly difficult options and improbable options. After speaking with a friend who worked on cargo ships, Polyanin turned his eyes to the sea and formulated a plan to escape to Japan. Unlike his options over land, Japan did not maintain sympathetic relations to the USSR, and therefore, would not return Polyanin to a certain doom. As a cargo ship worker, no one would suspect his plan either. In February of 1986, Polyanin jumped from his ship while it was passing through the two main Japanese islands of Honshu and Hokkaido. After swimming for two to three hours in frigid waters, the newly escaped artist encountered Japanese fishermen who hoisted him onto their boat, provided him a blanket and cigarette, and took him to shore.

In the months following his dramatic escape, Polyanin spent his time in Japanese immigration centers waiting for political asylum. Leaving Ukraine also meant leaving behind his home studio of about 300 pieces: the state destroyed them all and labeled him a traitor. After receiving word of this destruction, Polyanin knew he could never return. Eventually in 1987, an American organization placed him in Los Angeles. Speaking minimal English, Polyanin worked as a dishwasher and took English as a Second Language courses while he became oriented to American life. After a short period of time, he found work at a cabinet maker who allowed him to recycle the scrap wood into pieces of art.<sup>28</sup> Polyanin felt frustrated that his wooden works

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<sup>27</sup> Following the 1972 mass arrests, the Soviet government began using forced institutionalization and medication as a tool to control dissenters. Instead of punishing a prisoner's body, medical staff injected prisoners with substances such as haloperidol and sulfur. This had the effect of ruining the prisoner's mind, so they became too incapacitated to dissent at all. For more information see Bellezza, *The Shore of Expectations*, 295-301.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, "Creative lifeblood."

tended to decompose and rot when left outside, leading him to experiment with epoxy resin and materials found at construction sites. In order to further acclimatize to American life, Polyanin enrolled in Los Angeles Community College. Almost into his 40's at this point, the artist no longer felt like he needed to understand the basic principles of art. Instead, he wanted to study the *people* in his classes to improve his cultural familiarity with his new home. A 1992 visit to Crescent City proved another turning point for the artist's life.<sup>29</sup> Life in Los Angeles had become overwhelming and too fast paced. Once again, Polyanin packed up his life and moved to this small town in northern California.

Almost immediately after arriving in Crescent City, a local business owner, Nick Hampson, offered the artist studio space at his antique shop, Eclectic. Hampson recognized the artist's talent and provided him a way to establish himself in the local arts scene.<sup>30</sup> During this period, Polyanin frequently worked on paintings in the Orthodox iconography style, using vibrant reds, oranges, and golds to depict religious scenes. This included a 1994 piece, *Liberty Wins. Communism Dies.\** depicting the Archangel Michael spearing a Communist snake—a clear statement celebrating the end of Communism in Eastern Europe.<sup>31</sup> In addition to displaying at Eclectic, Polyanin showcased his art at a local Mediterranean restaurant, Lino's, where he also worked as a sushi chef. Through securing these display spaces, Polyanin began to create a local following of his art. In 1996, Polyanin took a position at the Elk Valley Casino as a security guard. This position gave him the economic support his art did not fully provide. Whenever he was not working his day job, he could be found working on his next artistic creation.<sup>32</sup> Alongside two other artists, Ray Marshall and Driftwood Willie, Polyanin established Marshall's Redwood

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>31</sup> Val Polyanin, *Liberty Wins. Communism Dies\**, 1994, oil, gold leaf, and silver leaf on canvas, 122 cm x 168 cm, Collection of the City of Crescent City. \*Originally this work is untitled. For identification purposes, I have titled the work based on the caption present on the painting itself.

<sup>32</sup> Brown, "Creative lifeblood."

Gallery located just outside of Crescent City on Highway 101. Polyanin's work also evolved away from Orthodox iconography, growing more abstract and experimental with form and color. Over the next twenty years, the multifaceted artist began to amass vibrant paintings and outdoor sculptures. Colors began to bloom across his canvases and the sharper edges in his sculptures gave way to more organic curves.<sup>33</sup> His rough exterior personality also gave way to a more joyful, easy going one as he adjusted to living in the community of Crescent City. In leaving one home, he had found another one where his art was allowed to thrive.

In early 2022, the Hambro Group contacted the city of Crescent City notifying them that Polyanin had left a post-it note on three large shipping containers located at Marshall's Redwood Gallery. Despite his love for the community, Polyanin suddenly disappeared. These containers held almost thirty years of work, including sculptures, paintings, drawings and mosaics. On the note, he stated that he wished to donate all the contents to the Crescent City government. Following this, city officials faced the challenge of whether or not to save the local artist's entire archive. Without a decision, the Hambro Group planned to simply throw it away. Fortunately, city officials voted to save his collection in June of 2022 with the intent that this could provide an economic and cultural driver for the community.<sup>34</sup> At the time of voting, a concrete plan did not exist for what to do with these pieces. Moving the work out of the shipping containers required a small squadron of city officials and volunteers who slowly transported the collection into a former bank building in downtown Crescent City for safekeeping. This prospect presented the city with an opportunity to elevate its arts and culture environment, however, many within

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<sup>33</sup> See examples such as: Val Polyanin, *Ledy Gaga*, 2012, oil on canvas, 48 cm x 61 cm, Collection of the City of Crescent City and Val Polyanin, *Spoiler Alert*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 61 cm x 81 cm, Collection of the City of Crescent City.

<sup>34</sup> Jessica C. Andrews, "Artist Who Fled Soviet Union Donates Life's Work to Crescent City, Leaves Town; Val Polyanin Operated 'Iconic' Roadside Gallery Near South Beach," Wild Rivers Outpost, Jul 6, 2022 <https://wildrivers.lostcoastoutpost.com/2022/jul/6/ukrainian-artist-donates-lifes-work-crescent-city/>.

city council felt unsure about the acquisition, citing concerns about a return on investment.<sup>35</sup> On February 6th of 2023, city council officially voted to allocate resources to displaying and exhibiting the collection. Many community members echoed similar concerns about a return on investment and worried that the city had misallocated the money.<sup>36</sup>

According to the Crescent City Economic Development Strategic Action Plan of 2021 (2021 EDSAP), the city identifies the need to grow the local arts and culture scene of Crescent City and Del Norte County.<sup>37</sup> Specifically, the plan determines that adding more arts and culture opportunities gives, “meaning to our communities and neighborhoods.”<sup>38</sup> Polyanin’s work is a unique cultural asset for Crescent City. His work has broad themes that appeal to wide groups of people therefore increasing the marketability and a potential to attract visitors. Creating the Safekeeping exhibition has addressed some of the 2021 EDSAP’s key goals such as establishing strong community partnerships and investing in tourism. The 2021 EDSAP also identifies the success that the neighboring city of Eureka has had in implementing a Strategic Arts Plan in 2018.<sup>39</sup> Initially, Eureka’s Director of Development Services, Rob Holmund, felt unsure about sponsoring such a plan; however, community members continued to prompt his attention towards items the Strategic Arts Plan would address. Holmund consulted with others in city government who received similar community feedback and began to see how the arts could provide a major quality of life improvement.<sup>40</sup> Through building strong community partnerships and making an

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<sup>35</sup> Jessica C. Andrews, “Council Weighs Return on Investment When Deciding Whether to Use Public Dollars to Display Ukrainian Artist’s Life’s Work,” Wild Rivers Outpost, February 7, 2023 <https://wildrivers.lostcoastoutpost.com/2023/feb/7/council-weighs-roi-against-using-public-dollars-di/>.

<sup>36</sup> Roger Gitlin, “Eye on Del Norte: What is and isn’t art?” *Del Norte TriPLICATE*, February 23, 2023 [https://www.triplicate.com/opinion/eye-on-del-norte-what-is-and-isn-t-art/article\\_d0833dec-b2d0-11ed-bff4-63168e962ca1.html](https://www.triplicate.com/opinion/eye-on-del-norte-what-is-and-isn-t-art/article_d0833dec-b2d0-11ed-bff4-63168e962ca1.html)

<sup>37</sup> Crescent City, *Economic Development Strategic Action Plan*, June 21, 2021, 10, [https://www.crescentcity.org/media/Community-Development/CrescentCity\\_EconomicDevelopmentStrategicActionPlan\\_v28\\_Final.pdf](https://www.crescentcity.org/media/Community-Development/CrescentCity_EconomicDevelopmentStrategicActionPlan_v28_Final.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> *Idem*, 201.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> City of Eureka, *Strategic Arts Plan 2017-2022*, February 2017, n.p., <https://ca-eureka.civicplus.com/DocumentCenter/View/823/Strategic-Arts-Plan-PDF?bidId=>.

investment in the beautification of the city, Eureka has leveraged the creative placemaking process to attract businesses, jobs, and other economic benefits to the local community. With Polyaniin's collection, Crescent City has the potential to emulate Eureka's success.

Saving Polyaniin's work does not simply preserve physical pieces of art: it preserves the tangible culture of Crescent City. For almost thirty years, his art has been a fixture in local galleries. His work represents part of the tangible heritage and history of the area. Globally, dominant or occupying powers often steal or destroy this exact type of tangible heritage.<sup>41</sup> Paintings, artifacts, and other pieces of material culture—proof a culture existed in the first place—are ferried away to distant lands and their position is strengthened through this horror. In the destruction of material culture, occupying powers legitimize their position as “better than.” In Ukraine's case, Russia pushes the position that Ukraine simply exists as an extension of Russia which in turn supports their imperialistic narrative.<sup>42</sup> It further justifies their actions when they actively destroy or steal Ukrainian cultural objects. Preserving and protecting material culture during wartime provides Ukrainian people with a source of resilience and a reminder to continue fighting for their freedom. Despite Vladimir Putin's claims of a shared history, this so-called “shared history” ignores decades of Russia subjugating Ukraine and her people.<sup>43</sup> As Ivan Dzyuba once wrote, “[n]ot everything is brotherhood that claims to be brotherhood. Not everything is love that calls itself love.”<sup>44</sup>

Putin's “brotherhood” for Ukraine ignores how this subjugation continues into the present day. In the occupied regions of Donbas and Donetsk, there are bans on speaking Ukrainian.

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<sup>41</sup> The American University of Rome, “Introduction to Cultural Heritage #.3 PREPARING FOR DISASTER.,” YouTube, January 30, 2023, video, 1:21:45, <https://youtu.be/jNf6Hc1okkM>.

<sup>42</sup> Lisa Korneichuk, “Ukrainians Demand Their Place in Art History,” Hyperallergic, January 17, 2023 <https://hyperallergic.com/793899/ukrainians-demand-their-place-in-art-history/>; Reid, *Borderland*, 229.

<sup>43</sup> Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” President of Russia, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; Anna Reid, “Putin's War on History: The Thousand-Year Struggle Over Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/ June 2022, ProQuest: 55.

<sup>44</sup> Dzyuba, *Internationalism or Russification?*, 97-98.

School teachers cannot instruct in the Ukrainian language or teach Ukrainian history.<sup>45</sup> In Polyanin's home city of Mariupol, the occupying Russian forces have tried to erase Ukrainian culture from every corner of the city.<sup>46</sup> The scale of death and destruction Russian forces caused in the early days of the invasion completely outweighs any sense of unity between the two countries. Over 40 years ago, Polyanin fought against this same ideological censorship. He acknowledges the cultural oppression Russia continues to force upon his homeland. The city council of Crescent City's choice to preserve Val Polyanin's entire catalog enhances the already rich local history present in Del Norte County and reminds the community of the value of freedom of expression. Not only does the artist recognize the personal importance, he also identifies the broad ability of art to open people's minds to new ideas. His spirit of defiance speaks not only to his Ukrainian heritage, but also to a deeply American ideal of freedom. Through his artwork, Polyanin reminds us how genuine freedom begins with the self.

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<sup>45</sup> Luke Harding, "A generational shift': war prompts Ukrainians to embrace their language," *The Guardian*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/06/russia-ukrainians-embrace-language-war>; Guy Davies, "How the Russia-Ukraine conflict became a cultural war," *ABC News*, February 23, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-ukraine-conflict-cultural-war/story?id=97332345>.

<sup>46</sup> Lori Hinnant et al., "Russia scrubs Mariupol's Ukraine identity, builds on death," *The Associated Press*, December 22, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-erasing-mariupol-499dceae43ed77f2ebfe750ea99b9ad9>.

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