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# AIGEL'S SONG *GAS* AS AN ANTI-WAR MANIFESTO: POETICAL, MUSICAL AND FOLKLORE ASPECTS[1]

Abstract: This paper analyzes the song *Gas* by Aigel Gaisina as a contemporary reinterpretation of the folkloristic genre of lamentations. The core research question addresses how the song utilizes traditional poetics while subverting and deconstructing them to reflect collective trauma and anti-war sentiment following 2022. The theoretical framework combines folkloristic studies with musical analysis, drawing on Baroque symbolism and song studies. Methodologically, the study employs textual analysis, intertextual comparisons, and musical semiotics. The paper argues that *Gas* incorporates ritualistic syntax, tabooed lexemes, and archetypal imagery, adapting them to a modern context. It highlights the song's duality, drawing from both Slavic and Tatar lament traditions while rejecting their consolatory functions. Instead, the song portrays death as omnipresent and inescapable. This bleak imagery critiques war, framing it as senseless violence that eradicates hope and humanity. These findings contribute to understanding contemporary folklore-inspired art as a medium for expressing societal despair, political critique, and anti-war messages.

Keywords: anti-war agenda, poetry, Aigel Gaisina, song, Russian invasion, lament

## Introduction

Since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, numerous musicians, singers, and songwriters in Russia have adopted an anti-war stance and have openly opposed Putin's authoritarian regime. The repercussions of their outspoken views were swift for many: their concerts and festival performances were cancelled, they were officially labelled "traitors" blacklisted by government authorities, and they were subjected to harassment by online "bots" and self-proclaimed "patriots". The Russian Ministry of Culture excluded them from all initiatives, including cultural projects involving minority groups. Predictably, many musicians have opted to leave Russia at the earliest opportunity to continue expressing their anti-war and anti-Putin sentiments without the fear of censorship or criminal prosecution.

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This decision has been made despite the fact that a significant number of their peers have felt pressured to change their stance, publicly repent, and seek absolution by performing concerts in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

Resistance, defence against enemies, and unity with other members of the community who share the same values are very old functions of singing, especially choral, as can be seen today during concerts by Russian musicians with an anti-war agenda who are in exile. J. Jordania, the anthropologist, notes:

> We could ask this question in other words as well: what was the survival value of polyphonic group singing? According to the proposed model, vocal polyphony (more precisely, the inseparable unity of group singing and dancing) was born primarily as a strategy for the group defence of their lives and their territories from the major predators of Africa. […] Choral singing at this stage (before the advance of articulated speech) must have been a means of social bonding and stress relief as well, but I suggest that the primary evolutionary function of choral singing was a strategic defence against major African predators (Jordania 2006, 298).

It is logical that Russian musicians play such a significant role for anti-war Russians and those opposed to Putinism, serving as their recognizable and influential voices on a large scale. A song today simultaneously becomes a form of group psychotherapy, a political statement, and a cultural code that helps identify "kindred spirits" in a world of enemies. At concerts abroad, it also becomes an attempt to recreate, for a few hours, the cultural space of a forsaken homeland. Moreover, since February 2022, a significant body of texts and musical compositions has begun to emerge. These works capture the reality of war with documentary precision and a distinctly journalistic focus, aiming to foster a critical perspective on the events and influence the listener. These texts give rise to a unique phenomenon of a genuinely mass pacifist narrative, seemingly appearing for the first time in the Russian-speaking culture. To some extent, it is comparable to the song movement in the United States opposing the Vietnam War (Clegg 2013, 145-161) and "singing resistance | revolutions" in many countries in the 20$^{th}$ and 21$^{st}$ centuries (see: Brokaw | Brokaw 2001, 17-29; Payerhin 2013, 291-310). This phenomenon still requires thorough research, but initial attempts at analysis have already been emerging (see: Vorontsova 2025, 215-232). A noteworthy example of a systematic approach is the podcast titled *Antiwar Music* (*Антивоенная музыка*) by musicologist A. Vilenskaya and journalist M. Zagovor. The podcast examines both the lyrics and the musical aspects of these songs within a broad historical perspective.

The artist I am going to focus on is Aigel Gaisina (born in 1987 in Naberezhnye Chelny, the Russian Federation), a Tatar poet who writes in both Tatar and Russian. She is the frontwoman of the electronic hip-hop indie band Aigel, in collaboration with a musician Ilya Baramia, and she is also a professional voice actor. Following the events of February 24, 2022, immediate protests against the Russian invasion

of Ukraine appeared in the band's social media. Facing pressure from the authorities, members of the group left Russia; Gaisina is currently residing in Berlin, Germany, while Baramia was living in Montenegro (in January 2026, he was granted a talent visa in France). Despite censorship attempts, Aigel became even more popular in the Russian-speaking world after emigrating. A film director, Zhora Kryzhovnikov, used one of the band's compositions in the Tatar language, *Pyala*, in his acclaimed series *The Boy's Word: Blood on the Asphalt* without crediting them, but people identified the authors thanks to the service and application Shazam. However, Aigel's creative works have not been studied by scholars yet, specifically as a distinct poetical or musical phenomenon. Some papers examine Aigel alongside other Russian rap artists, analyzing key motifs in their creative work (Yeremenko 2019, 214-217), feminist themes (Diveyeva 2022, 281-289), and the impact on listeners' sub-consciousness (Klochkov 2020, 107-112). Some scholars emphasize Gaisina's role as an activist supporting and developing the Tatar language (see: Baranova 2023, 91, 124-125). Anti-war songs have not been the subject of scientific research yet.

Gaisina's reaction to the events of February 24, 2022, had a long-term impact on her mental health, creativity, as well as her composing skills. As she confesses in an interview conducted by the independent journalist and renowned Russian interviewer Yuri Dud in 2023, she experienced a loss of self-confidence and managed to write only one non-commercial song *Gas* since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (AIGEL… 2023). After a long hiatus, the group finally released two albums in 2025: *Tatar Rave* (in Tatar and German) and *HUMAN* (*ЧЕЛОВЕК*) (in Russian). She admits in the mentioned interview that she is still unable to evaluate the song examined in this paper aesthetically from either a literary or musical standpoint. *Gas* reflects Aigel's tragic worldview and her resolute opposition to war.

The main aim of this paper is to analyse *Gas* (2022) in the context of its lyrics, music, and long-standing folklore traditions of funeral lamentations and to reveal the stylistic and formal techniques the author of the song uses to convey an anti-war message.

## 1. *Gas* as a Woman's Perspective on the Horrors of War: Lyrics

The focal point of these lyrics[2] is undeniably the repeated mention of "gas" throughout the song's verses and refrains. This imagery can be interpreted on several distinct semiotic levels. On the one hand, the phrase "the 200th gas" phonetically and semantically evokes the idiomatic Russian expression *Груз 200* (lit. Cargo 200), referring to Soviet and post-Soviet soldiers who were repatriated in zinc

[2] For quotes in Russian and English the official subtitles from Aigel's YouTube channel were used. See: (Aigel 2022). Original spelling and punctuation have been preserved.

coffins (Braithwaite 2010, 253-257; Korovuškin 2000, 80). This military slang gained widespread recognition among civilians, largely due to the 2007 neo-noir thriller *Cargo 200* directed by A. Balabanov. On the other hand, "gas" could serve as a metaphor for Putinism itself. Natural resources have long been associated with this regime, which has secured deals with Western partners for discounted rates and low gas prices. This imagery, central to the song, conveys an anti-war agenda indirectly. While the current geopolitical situation is not explicitly mentioned, the underlying message is unmistakable:

> A neighbor's son in a foreign soil
> Will decompose to gas and gas
> And travel up the pipeline to check up on us[3].

Furthermore, in the Russian version, the line "The homeland will sell you out of a song,"[4] without a fixed object, can be interpreted in various ways.

Firstly, it reflects a bitterly ironic commentary on the toxic relationship between the homeland and its "sons". Gaisina chooses the lexeme *Fatherland* (*Отечество*), which is more fitting in the wartime context and evokes the masculine world of violence and aggression: all the men mentioned in *Gas* are victims of the war unleashed by the Fatherland.

Secondly, this message may be understood more directly, considering Russian gas supplies. The lyrical subject, a feminine figure – a detail that underscores the personal and human perspective – exists in a dystopian world, where dead soldiers return home not in coffins but through gas pipes, symbolizing how the war infiltrates every apartment. By highlighting both possible interpretations of the imagery of gas, one might speculate that the state's resources are metaphorically built on the dead bodies of its soldiers.

Moreover, the gender of the lyrical subject is intentional: Gaisina gained fame through her play and debut album *1190* (2017), which focuses on the theme of Russian prisons, and prominently employs the artistic technique of focalization. She performed all compositions herself, using a range of voices and timbres. In *Gas*, however, there is a single lyrical subject who, according to feminist criticism, exemplifies the experience of traumatic historical events through the female body (see, for instance: Feminist Trauma Theologies… 2020; Harel-Shalev 2020, 55-72; March 2017).

The entire song portrays a heroine's inner dialogue, presumably with her beloved, who is later revealed to be synonymous with the 200th gas, which she references throughout the song. A gas stove in the kitchen becomes as a medium for

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3 "Соседский сын в чужой земле / Разложится на газ и газ / И вверх по газовой трубе / Поднимется проведать нас" (Aigel 2022).

4 „Отчизна задарма продаст" (Aigel 2022).

communicating with the afterlife: "Do you read me? It's Hell, over / a soldier missing in action".[5] This dialogue structurally resembles military radio communication: "I'll turn the gas stove knob / to pick up the right frequency".[6] It is evident that the heroine attempts to connect with her beloved man in hell, suggesting there is no absolution for the soldiers who died in this war. She recounts a story about a neighbor's son, a narrative that parallels her own tragedy.

Through numerous repetitions of significant lines such as "The cozy blue light", "keep us warm", "Oh God oh God, everything's in blood", and "the 200th gas",[7] delivered in a rather subdued tone, the intention is to induce a trance-like state in the listeners and to depict this dystopian world and massacre as a tragically common occurrence.

The imagery of gas pipes connecting apartments in multi-story buildings allows listeners to speculate that similar situations unfold in every kitchen throughout the country, with death being as pervasive as the gas itself. The heroine even uses the plural pronoun *we* signifying a communal bond among women who have lost their men, but they remain tied together through the pervasive presence of gas: "to check up on us", "Whom will the guy warm up this winter? / Which one of them? Which one of us?"[8] This manifestation underscores her belonging to a community of lonely women and their men.

In this doomed world, restless souls do not appear as ghosts but take the form of gas after their massacre in a senseless war. Interestingly, in *Gas*, Gaisina avoids depicting militaristic imagery, unlike many of her colleagues in their songs. Instead, her use of omission resonates more deeply with listeners, opening alternative paths for interpretation and evoking personal experiences, especially in the context of events after February 24, 2022.

## 2. *Gas* as a Baroque Cross Melody: Music[9]

The musical aspect of the song perfectly complements the grim world depicted in the lyrics. The melody at the beginning, which then loops, is partially a reversed variation of the cross motif from Baroque music, especially Bach[10]. Generally, the theme of the cross consists of two descending seconds forming dissonant, unstable,

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5 „Прием! Как слышно? Это Ад / Пропавший без вести солдат" (Aigel 2022).

6 „Плиты я ручку поверну, / Поймаю нужную волну" (Aigel 2022).

7 „Уютный синий огонек", „согрей", „О Боже! Боже! Все в крови", „двухсотый газ" (Aigel 2022).

8 „проведать нас", „Зимой согреет паренек, / кого из них, кого из нас" (Aigel 2022).

9 The author of the paper expresses sincere gratitude to Irina Utienkowa-Szalapak, a musicologist, for her insightful comments used that informed the analysis in this sub-section.

10 It is worth mentioning that many researchers have noted the orientation of contemporary Russian-language performers toward Baroque traditions (Belobrov 2016; 2017; 2018; Vilenskaya 2021).

and anxious intervals (see: Newman 1995; Walter 1949, 345-354). In *Gas*, the latter second is ascending, and the limiting interval is not a dissonance but a consonance – a minor sixth (equivalent to the folklore genre of lament, or Russian romance), which imbues it with a shade of melancholy and hopelessness, surpassing the standard Baroque sense of tragedy and anxiety. In the development of the musical plot, the cross motif gradually dissolves into layers of pulsations, explosions, and percussive waves, only to suddenly reemerge briefly as a flicker in the background during the words "Oh God, Oh God, everything's in blood" and instantly fading into the sounds of sirens.

The melodic line of the textual part is also interesting: its tedious, monotonous, looping motion within the confines of a minor third primarily evokes the "tune-formulas" of Russian folk ritual laments and lamentations; a connection that will be analyzed further. However, in comparison with the original genre, where the melody often intertwines with physiological crying, the impression here is one of being frozen in time and indifferent. This effect seems to represent the highest expression of the heroine's horror and despair after losing her beloved man during the dreadful and unnecessary war.

Also noteworthy is the direction of the motion: not descending, as in laments, but ascending – an endlessly repeating a question without an answer as the lyrical subject engages in a dialogue with the dead. Another allusion is to Chopin's famous funeral march, but in a distorted and reversed form, accompanied by a heartbeat-like pulsation. In turn, in Baroque symbolism, ascending intervals traditionally evoke resurrection and spiritual elevation, in contrast to descending ones, which signify the abyss, crucifixion, and atonement (Nosina 1997, 16-24). The reversed direction of motifs in both the theme of the cross and the main melody suggests reflections on the ephemeral spirit – existing beyond corporeality, time, and life – as the image of gas and dead soldiers is rendered musically.

The last noteworthy aspect is the stratification of three texture layers. The theme of the cross, the melody with the text, and the accompaniment – they exist somewhat independently and make the impression of being rhythmically unrelated. This can be treated as a metaphor of chaos dominating in the artistic space. The voice enters unexpectedly, loops, and varies only through a formal increase in dynamics at the climax.

The cross motif in the lower voice begins as a melody, attempts to develop, but quickly loops and gradually dissolves. Interestingly, the sounds of war, which conventionally would function as a background element, become the primary layer of texture, which exhibits movement, development, and climax. This layer starts with random sounds, intensifying through persistent pulsations, and culminates in "explosions", imitations of percussive waves, and sirens.

To sum up, the war is more evident in the music than in the lyrics; it serves as the constant background for the heroine's lament and depressing perception of the world.

## 3. *Gas* as a Funeral Lamentation: Folklore

As suggested even by the musical aspect of the song, *Gas* can be identified as a contemporary variation of the folklore genre known as lamentations (Rus. *плач*, *причёт*, *причитание*, *вой*, *жаль*, *голошение*). Studies have shown that lamentations should be understood as elegiac improvisations created by women (the gender aspect is particularly significant in this context) for a wide variety of occasions and diverse themes. These lamentations arose predominantly in connection with sad, sorrowful, or tragic events in life, such as: fires, crop failures, famine, illness, family discord, various manifestations of social oppression, the hardships of orphans or widows, army conscription, death, and so on (Chistov 1960, 6). This genre is so ancient and universal across cultures that it has permeated the literary traditions of many nations (see: Weinbaum 2001, 20-39).

Lamentations do not have fixed texts or specific plots; the performer's emotions are expressed through a familiar repertoire of poetic imagery and phrases, the use and selection of which were individualized for each occasion. Forced marriage, the departure of a husband, father, or brother to military service, and the death of a loved one were three of the most significant sorrowful events experienced by mourners and lamenters in the past – events that disrupted their entire lives. The recurrence of these events, along with the development of established rituals surrounding them, contributed to the relative stability of certain types of lamentations: wedding, conscription, and funeral laments (see: Al'tšuler 2007).

In these three cases, lamentations (not only the act of lamenting but also their themes, imagery, and vocabulary) became ritualistically obligatory elements of the ceremony, creating a tradition that greatly influenced the poetics of lamentations as a whole – both ritualistic and non-ritualistic (Chistov 1960, 6). The primary functions of this genre are its ritualistic role and a non-ritualistic therapeutical function, emphasizing importance of expressing emotions tied to traumatic loss.

Tatar culture has its own forms of lamentations – marsiyas or *елау-сыктау* – which are characterized by less improvisation and a stronger religious focus compared to Slavic examples. These laments are often performed in Old Tatar, lending them an archetypal significance (Mähdiev 1997, 25-50).

*Gas* incorporates both traditions and develops the folklore genre using contemporary tools. This song can be classified as a funeral lament, even though it thematically also connects to a conscription lament. The narrative about the

neighbors and their son, who shares the same fate as the heroine's beloved, is deliberate and borrowed from the traditional folklore genre.

As K. Chistov notes, funeral rituals, along with their associated lamentations, were vividly collective ceremonial actions in which all members of the clan or tribe participated, and later, members of the family and local community (referred to in lament terminology as *kinfolk* and *neighbors* or *fellow villagers*) (Chistov 1960, 12).

Gaisina's lamentation is not individual; it addresses the collective trauma following 2022. Scholars emphasize that the analyzed folkloristic genre has always been tied to relevant social issues, reflecting them and highlighting the bleak future of the survivors (Andreyev | Vinogradov 1937, XIII).

The song also employs the distinctive syntax of lamentations, marked by an abundance of interrogative-exclamatory constructions, rhetorical appeals, and exchanges of remarks. The ritualistic nature of this contemporary lamentation is underscored by the use of trance-inducing repetitions. The dialogue with the deceased is both traditional and typical of the genre.

At the same time, the grim world depicted in *Gas* is hopeless in contrast to the archaic beliefs of the ancestors: traditional funeral rituals aimed to frighten death, confuse it, and make it forget the path to the home it visited (Andreyev | Vinogradov 1937, VII). However, in the song, it becomes clear that such efforts are fruitless and meaningless: death invades every apartment through gas pipes.

In traditional laments, direct reference to the deceased as a "corpse", "dead", or with similar terms is taboo. The heroine of the song also employs a figure of omission, addressing her beloved simply as "you" while using substitutes like "cozy blue flame" and "the 200$^{th}$ gas". The heroine narrates a parallel story of the decomposing neighbor's son and her own attempt to connect with hell, subtly hinting at what happened.

The song begins with the words: "I'll scoop / the ashes from the gas oven / and put in an urn – that's you".[11] The choice of lexemes evokes the image of the cremation urn and introduces the motif of death, leaving no room for alternative interpretations. Thus, the terms *gas*, *ash*, and *flame* replace the tabooed words *corpse* and *death*. The only detail listeners learn about the soldier's fate in a foreign land is that he went missing in action, placing him in a liminal state between life and death. Presumably, this liminality enables the continuation of the dialogue with him.

Undoubtedly, *Gas* draws on both folkloristic and literary resources. An example of lamentations arising in similar circumstances can be found in the famous *Lament of Russian Women* featured in *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, as well as in the remarkable *Yaroslavna's Lament*.

When it comes to Tatar lamentations, it is evident that Gaisina deviates from and deconstructs this tradition. Tatar laments typically include the remembrance of the

[11] „Сгребу из печки газовой золу, / засыплю в урну – это ты" (Aigel 2022).

deceased's good qualities, expression of the family's grief and loss and prayers to Allah, asking for mercy for the deceased's soul. None of these elements is present in the song, leading to the conclusion that the deceased was not a virtuous man, but rather someone who came with a weapon to a foreign land, making it futile to ask Allah for mercy and forgiveness. One of the last lines in the song, "Oh God, Oh God, everything's in blood", underscores the horror and hopelessness surrounding the soul's fate and the fate of the heroine.

In Tatar folk culture, which Gaisina follows, lamentations also situate between speech and song, where the musical component is deliberately restrained and subordinate to verbal expression and emotional intensity. Rather than functioning as fully developed songs, Tatar lamentations are best described as intonationally organized recitative or melodized speech, closely tied to mourning practices and rites of passage (Muhamedzânov 1976, 106-110). Melodically, lamentations employ a narrow pitch range, often limited to several tones, typically structured around pentatonic principles, which are characteristic of many Turkic musical traditions (Levin 1999, 242-245). Pauses, repetitions, elongation of syllables, and broken phrases are common, reinforcing the improvisational nature. Thus, the musical and vocal dimensions of the song under analysis are also shaped by the influence of this tradition.

## Conclusions

To sum up, this paper marks the preliminary stages of a comprehensive investigation into anti-war lyrical compositions written in Russian after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. This study aimed to identify key anti-war motifs in the song *Gas* by Aigel Gaisina and examine them in a broader context. The song's musical accompaniment reinforces its lyrical themes and provides a wide spectrum of interpretative avenues. *Gas* can be considered an example of lamentations originating from folklore bridges with contemporary anti-war sentiment.

Its synthesis of lyrical poetics, baroque musical motifs, and lamentation traditions crafts a multidimensional narrative of loss, despair, and women's loneliness. Through its innovative reinterpretation of funeral laments, the song transcends individual grief to encapsulate collective trauma and critique systemic violence. The haunting imagery of gas as both a metaphor for death and a symbol of modern sociopolitical oppression underscores the inextricable link between personal tragedy and societal decay. This work amplifies the voices of marginalized and traumatized individuals and redefines folklore-inspired art as a powerful medium for 21$^{st}$-century political and cultural expression. Baroque symbolism in Gaisina's song enhances the anti-war message by emphasizing the contrasts between life

and death, light and darkness, which are central to Baroque aesthetics. Images of decay, loss, and spiritual purification, characteristic of Baroque art, underscore both personal grief and the widespread destruction caused by war. This approach intertwines deeply emotional experiences with a philosophical reflection on the inevitability of human suffering and its transcendence. In other words, all aspects of the song – poetic, musical, and folkloristic – contribute to its anti-war message.

The anti-war works of poet-songwriters creating in Russian and responding to current events require closer attention from researchers. These works stand as unique documents of the epoch, forms of group therapeutic practice, and records of the trauma witnessed by opposition-minded Russians. This research can be expanded by incorporating texts from other authors created during the same period, as well as by providing a more detailed analysis of each motif highlighted in the study.

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