



## Press Release: “Stus”

The first international exhibition about a forgotten Ukrainian and European freedom fighter: Vasył Stus was a poet, intellectual, Nobel Nominee and dissident from Ukraine who died defending the Ukrainian identity and language in the Soviet Union in 1985.

“Behind me was Ukraine, my oppressed people, whose honor I had to defend or perish” – Stus noted in his camp notebook. Stus might have first fallen in love with the rhythms and flows of the Ukrainian language, when his mother sang him Ukrainian folk songs. In conjunction with his dissident freedom-loving instinct this love would define his life. Already in the 60s, he decided to teach the Ukrainian language and literature in Horlivka defying widespread soviet top-down russification policies. No wonder then it also had him pay a huge price: Throughout the history of the UdSSR he was repeatedly arrested, his works and Ukrainian translations of German poetry forbidden, his activism in defense of the Ukrainian intelligentsia and the Ukrainian Helsinki group suppressed.

Vasyl Stus was born amidst the horrors of World War II, surviving not only the Nazi occupation but also the harsh post-war times that brought about widespread hunger. The experience of hunger would haunt him till his very last day: Stus died embarking on a dry hunger strike. A few years before, he had already gone on a hunger strike to be allowed to see his dying father. This is an exhibition simultaneously telling the story of an undeservedly unknown European freedom fighter and that of a nation fighting for its right to breathe and exist.

Being constantly deprived of basic human rights in the Soviet Union enraged him, but also fueled his passion for freedom. In 1965, he joined two Ukrainian intellectuals publicly denouncing the mass imprisonment of Ukrainian intellectuals in the Ukraina cinema in downtown Kyiv. Subsequently, he was expelled from university, from the Shevchenko Institute of Literature, where he was completing his PhD and became unemployed. The consequences were, however, far more grave as he could now be accused of “parasitism” resulting out of the legal obligation to work in the UdSSR in which case he would have to leave Kyiv. Additionally, none of his poetry was ever to be published again in the Soviet Union.

His fate represents that of his nation: Subjugated and repressed by the Soviet authorities, only tolerated, if he were to give up its own identity, language and freedom. Many of his literary pieces as well as his Ukrainian translations of Goethe and Rilke were later confiscated by the KGB never to be seen and read again. In 1972, Stus was arrested for the first time for “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda and served a five-year sentence in a labour camp and three years in exile. Eight years later he was imprisoned again: this time he was to spend ten years in a forced labor camp and five years in exile.

His struggle for freedom was a reaction to a centuries-long Russian insistence to not accept Ukrainianness as an independent identity. Not only Stus’s story is being told here, but also

that of the underappreciated Ukrainian anti-Soviet dissident movement which to this day has remained at the peripheries of Europe's collective memory.

This is an exhibition which is as much an essay in historical understanding as it is a timely contemporary commentary. No other than Timothy Snyder remarked that "If we want to understand the war in Ukraine, and why it matters to the world, we need to know its history." And indeed, there's a considerable list of contemporary, if at times somewhat unusual, contexts: His family house in Donetsk has been under Russian occupation since 2014. Stus's wife died during the temporary occupation of the Kyiv region by Russian troops in the course of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and was buried in the backyard of her house by her neighbors. Stus's public defender in the 80s was Viktor Medvechuk, Russia's meant-to-be puppet after the full-scale invasion in 2022 and Stus's works continue to inspire a whole generation of Ukrainians resisting Russia's genocidal war. The exhibition takes note: sometimes history does indeed go in circles. These days, Ukrainian poets once again have to fight for their nation's independence and survival – although this time, they dropped their pens, picked up guns and joined the Ukrainian army. Some of them are shown in the exhibition, reading out loud Stus's poetry. The exhibition also includes a meditation on the philosophical nature of Stus's activism:

The aim of the exhibition was not only to present the biography of Vasyl Stus, but also to attempt to understand the peculiar force that guided him throughout his life. Stus's life fits the parole "heroes are made and not born" – not a fairytale character, but a real human in the true sense of the word, he happened to be well-equipped with a moral compass robust enough to take responsibility for his own freedom. This force led him to spend most of his conscious life in camps or exile, and, in the absence of physical freedom, in a world created by writing, reading, and translating.

The list of contemporary contexts explored in the exhibition does, however, not stop here: Being an admirer of many German writers, sadly, he never got to know how many of them repeatedly demanded his release from imprisonment. Among them was Heinrich Böll, who became the main subject of the literary article "Through the eyes of a humanist".

Vasyl Stus's relationship with Poland was fueled by similar fascination resembling a love affair: He translated the poetry of Tadeusz Różewicz and Tadeusz Kubiak, urged his wife and son to learn Polish, subscribed Polish magazines and endorsed the Polish Solidarność movement enthusiastically, hoping it would inspire the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe and the majority of Ukrainians to create unity and stand their ground against the communist rulers .

Stus was an admirer of both German and Polish culture, including both languages, the countries' writers and, in particular, the Polish anticommunist resistance movements. In his afterlife, Stus's affection for both countries has inspired a cooperation between Polish, German and Ukrainian organizations, an alliance which is so desperately needed in today's Europe!

## **Credits**

**Main Organizer:** Pilecki-Institut Berlin

**Co-Organizer:** Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Vasyl Stus Center

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