Poetry of the Cold War

Cold War poetry, whether American or Russian, reveals the fear and distrust that hung like a cloud over the whole world during the years between 1945 and 1991. An assumption that the Cold War would eventually lead to World War III combined with an inability to comprehend the potentially massive scope of destruction if nuclear war broke out, and horror at the possibility that past atrocities might foretell future atrocities all fed people's fears. The distrust that is evident in the poems is not only for the perceived enemy, but is sometimes directed toward the writers' own homeland.

Terry Ann Thaxton writes in her poem "The Cold, Cold War:"

There was proof of fear in 1970: beneath our desks,
Where kids stuck ABC gum, we held our knees, waiting for
The Bomb. Ten years passed, and I grew to be
Afraid of tanks coming down Lockwood Ridge Road
And men with machine guns knocking on my door.
The odds suggested to me it was time to take
Our share of machetes into our bedrooms.

Thaxton writes very vividly, imagining not only "the bomb," but ground attacks. Her image of tanks coming down the road shows her fear of losing her home. Her resignation to the inevitability of the attack is mixed with a sense of futility, with a machete her only defense against tanks and machine guns. The overarching emotions expressed in this passage are fearful vulnerability and hopelessness.
In his "Advice to a Prophet," (1961) Richard Wilbur expresses his embarrassment that the Cold War has created a climate where weapons were so destructive that they were almost impossible to comprehend, pleading with the prophet:

When you come, as you soon must, to the streets of our city,
Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,
Not proclaiming our fall but begging us
In God’s name to have self-pity,
Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range,
The long numbers that rocket the mind;
Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,
Unable to fear what is too strange.

Wilbur fears that all of humanity shares the fault, and will share the penance, for the existence of weapons that would assure the destruction of the entire population of Earth.

Russian poet Yevgeni Yevtushenko, in his 1961 poem "Babi Yar," which is a screed against Russian anti-Semites and a love letter to Russia all in one, shows distrust for forces within his homeland that possess the ability to commit atrocities against humanity.

O, Russia of my heart, I know that you
Are international, by inner nature.
But often those whose hands are steeped in filth
Abused your purest name, in name of hatred.
I know the kindness of my native land.
How vile, that without the slightest quiver
The anti-Semites have proclaimed themselves
The “Union of the Russian People!”
Yevtushenko expresses his disgust that even a force for good, which he considered Russia to be, could be co-opted by evil. His mention of Russia's international nature places Russian anti-Semites in league with the Nazis who committed unspeakable massacres in 1941 against Jews at Babi Yar in Kiev with the tacit approval of Russian officials (holocaustchronicle.org). That this had been allowed to happen in the recent past undoubtedly heightened feelings of Cold War tension and fear that existed in when 1961, the year of the botched Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba.

These poems each express a different aspect of the emotion that the Cold War engendered in people who lived through it. Fear of the unknown, an inability to comprehend the destructive forces that could be unleashed at virtually any moment, and distrust of the leadership who controlled those forces were all parts of the makeup of that black cloud hanging in the air over the world for those 46 years. (635)

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Bibliography


