

# THE CONVERSATION

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Elizabeth Gilbert at the European premiere of *Eat, Pray, Love*, London, September 2010. Paul Jeffers/AP

## Eat, Pray ... Boycott? Elizabeth Gilbert's withdrawn novel is a valid act of cultural resistance

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Elizabeth Gilbert, the celebrated author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, has cancelled her latest novel, *The Snow Forest*. Planned for publication in February 2024, there is now no release date.

Gilbert declared that her decision to suspend publication was out of respect for her (potential) Ukrainian readers, who had taken to the review website Goodreads to express their sorrow and displeasure at the news that *The Snow Forest* was set in Russia.

The act of self-cancellation raises some interesting questions. Gilbert's novel is apparently set in the mid-20th century in Siberia and concerns a group of people who decide to remove themselves from society to resist the Soviet government and defend nature against industrialisation, so it potentially has some important messages for modern audiences.

Some have described the self-cancellation as being prompted by “a few hundred people participating in a stage-managed event ... a fascistic minority ... obeying the instructions of various far-right nationalist outfits”. The novelist Francine Prose has expressed concern that Gilbert is caving to online bullying.

Others argue that writing a work of historical fiction that humanises Russian people does not amount to taking sides in a war. Rather, they see objections to the novel as sadistic online shaming – motivated not by real concerns to help a marginalised group, but by a desire to cause pain to someone else (in this case, Gilbert).

On the other hand, Gilbert’s action and the arguments of those calling for the cancellation of her novel can be seen as part of a long tradition of boycotts, divestments and sanctions – a strategy that has often had significant symbolic and cultural components, and has often proved effective.

## **Non-violent resistance**

The strategy of non-violent non-cooperation has a long history. It was a feature of American colonists’ struggle against British rule, and India’s independence campaign, during which Indians boycotted British goods and made their own instead.

The struggle against South African apartheid was largely won not by violent resistance, but through international campaigns that isolated the regime. These boycotts were cultural, economic and sporting. The sports boycotts, in particular, caused social and psychological pain and eroded the ideological foundation of the apartheid system. The stigma of being citizens of a pariah state contributed to a large section of the white population supporting reforms.

Czechoslovakian resistance to Soviet occupation in 1968 involved leaflets in Russian, German and Polish explaining to the occupiers that they were in the wrong. Secret radio stations broadcast advice and resistance news. Street signs were changed. People on the streets of Prague wore Czech flags on their lapels. These actions were combined with protests, blockades and sanctions. In the end, both sides compromised, but the ground was laid for even bigger non-cooperation later.

In the mid-1980s, the people of the three Baltic countries under the yoke of the Soviet Union – Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia – began gathering in their thousands, and eventually hundreds of thousands, to sing banned patriotic songs. They raised outlawed flags and held music festivals in what became known as the Singing Revolution.

Baltic Way, August 1989. Kusurija/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-NC

In 1989, more than a million protesters lined up to form the “Baltic Way” – a continuous human chain that stretched 675 kilometres through the three Baltic states. The protest, photographed from above by an activist journalist, was pushed into international headlines. In the summer of 1991, the Baltic states declared independence from the Soviet Union, which collapsed a few months later. Civilian resistance has been an official part of Lithuania’s defence strategy ever since.

Symbolic protests, humour, satire and rock concerts were also important in the student-led Otpor! movement in Serbia which, helped by the West, successfully deposed pro-Russian president Slobodan Milošević.

Similar tactics helped pro-West activists in Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004. They adopted orange as a unifying colour across the country, and eventually deposed pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich.

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***Read more: In Russia's war against Ukraine, one of the battlegrounds is language itself.***

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## **The battleground of culture**

Suzanne Nossel – chief executive of PEN America, an organisation that advocates for free expression, defends writers and fights censorship – has called Gilbert's decision to withdraw her novel "well-intended" but regrettable. "Fiction and culture are essential to supporting mutual understanding and unleashing empathy," she argues: "literature and creativity must not become a casualty of war."

However, Nossel also admits culture is not just caught in the crossfire; it is itself a battleground. The war in Ukraine is being waged through "propaganda, intimidation, false narratives, and a campaign of cultural annihilation". Russian President Vladimir Putin's propaganda offensive has helped keep many Latin American, African and Asian nations neutral; weakened the boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns; and kept China on side. Culture, says Nossel, must be mobilised as a "wellspring of defence".

Since the invasion of Ukraine, creatives there have protected galleries, museums and collections. They have used writing, dance, fashion, film, painting and poetry to assert their national identity and desire for peace. At the same time, they have cleared ruins and helped with repairs.

Some Ukrainians have even used brave forms of symbolic resistance on the front lines, such as singing and chanting. One woman confronted Russian soldiers and tried to put sunflower seeds in their pockets, explaining that flowers would grow when they died on Ukrainian soil.

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Ukrainian woman confronts Russian soldiers in Henychesk, Kherson region. Asks them why they came to our land and urges to put sunflower seeds in their pockets [so that flowers would grow when they die on the Ukrainian land]



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These types of protests, if repeated, can weaken the soldiers' resolve, make them reluctant to shoot, and even cause mass mutinies and defections, as happened during the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917.

In Russia, hundreds of thousands of peace activists have protested with signs and chanting in the streets. More than 13,500 have been arrested. Thousands of Russian writers, journalists, war evaders and conscientious objectors have fled to countries across Eurasia.

Subversive street art and graffiti critiquing the war have spread across Russia since the Kremlin cracked down on anti-war protesters. Posters, stickers, coded messages on social media, emojis, weblinks and QR codes have been used to organise and resist creatively within a repressive regime.

All of this non-violent cultural resistance complements the practical measures taken against Russia, which have included frozen bank accounts, blocked online propaganda, disrupted technology systems, and trade restrictions. According to a young Russian anti-war protester, Sergey Faldin:

*When sanctions bite and hard times hit the country, people will lose their fear. Then Putin will be finished.*

Cancelling the publication of one novel may seem like a small gesture – one that is insignificant when compared with the power of missiles, tanks and a booming arms industry. But words and ideas underlie all actions, and many small, diverse actions can add up.

Gilbert's act of solidarity with the people of Ukraine has sparked debate and made a contribution to international non-violent resistance through boycotts and cultural means. In its small way, it does help the causes of peace and justice.