The Song of Igor's Campaign, also translated Lay of Igor's Campaign, Russian Slovo o polku Igoreve, masterpiece of, an account of the unsuccessful campaign in 1185 of Prince of Novgorod-Seversky against the Polovtsy (Kipchak, or Cumans). As in the great French epic The Song of Roland, Igor’s heroic pride draws him into a combat in which the odds are too great for him. Though defeated, Igor escapes his captors and returns to his people. The was written anonymously (1185–87) and preserved in a single manuscript, which was discovered in 1795 by A.I. Musin-Pushkin, published in 1800.

The Song of Igor's Campaign (Translated by Vladimir Nabokov)

Exordium

Might it not become us, brothers,
to begin in the diction of yore
the stern tale
of the campaign of Igor,
Igor son of Svyatoslav?

Let us, however, begin this song
in keeping with the happenings
of these times
and not with the contriving of Boyan.
For he, vatic Boyan
if he wished to make a laud for one,
ranged in thought
[like the nightingale] over the tree;
like the gray wolf across land;
like the smoky eagle up to the clouds.

For as he recalled, said he,
the feuds of initial times,
"He set ten falcons upon a flock of swans,
and the one first overtaken, sang a song first" -
to Yaroslav of yore, and to brave Mstislav
who slew Rededya before the Kasog troops,
and to fair Roman son of Svyatoslav.
To be sure, brothers,
Boyan did not [really]
set ten falcons upon a flock of swans:
his own vatic fingers he laid on the live strings,
which then twanged out by themselves
a paean to princes.

So let us begin, brothers,
this tale from Vladimir of yore
to nowadays Igor.
Who girded his mind with fortitude,
and sharpened his heart with manliness;
[thus] imbued with the spirit of arms,
he led his brave troops against the Kuman land
in the name of the Russian land.

Boyan apostrophized

O Boyan, nightingale
of the times of old!
If you were to trill [your praise of]
these troops,
while hopping, nightingale, 
over the tree of thought; 
[if you were] flying in mind 
up to the clouds; 
[if] weaving paeans around these times, 
[you were] roving the Troyan Trail, 
across fields onto hills; 
then the song to be sung of Igor, 
that grandson of Oleg [would be]:
"No storm has swept falcons 
Across wide fields; 
flocks of daws flee toward the Great Don";
or you might intone thus, 
vatic Boyan, grandson of Veles:
"Steeds neigh beyond the Sula; 
glory rings in Kiev; 
trumpets blare in Novgorod[-Seversk]; 
banners are raised in Putivl."

Vsievolod's speech

Igor waits for his dear brother Vsevolod. 
And Wild Bull Vsevolod [arrives and] 
says to him: 
"My one brother, one bright 
brightness, you Igor! 
We both are Svyatoslav's sons. 
Saddle, brother, your swift steeds. 
As to mine, they are ready, 
saddled ahead, near Kursk; 
as to my Kurskers, they are 
famous knights-swaddled under war-horns, 
nursed under helmets, 
fed from the point of the lance; 
to them the trails are familiar, 
to them the ravines are known, 
the bows they have are strung tight, 
the quivers, unclosed, 
the sabers, sharpened; 
themselves, like gray wolves, 
they lope in the field, 
seeking for themselves honor, 
and for their prince glory."

The Eclipse and Igor's speech

Then Igor glanced up at the bright sun 
and saw that from it with darkness 
his warriors were covered. 
And Igor says to his Guards: 
"Brothers and Guards! 
It is better indeed to be slain 
than to be enslaved; 
so let us mount, brothers, 
upon our swift steeds, 
and take a look at the blue Don."
A longing consumed the prince's mind, and the omen was screened from him by the urge to taste of the Great Don: "For I wish," he said, "to break a lance on the limit of the Kuman field; with you, sons of Rus, I wish either to lay down my head or drink a helmetful of the Don."

**Igor sets out; accumulation of omens**

Then Igor set foot in the golden stirrup and rode out in the Champaign. The sun blocks his way with darkness. Night, moaning ominously unto him, awakens the birds; the whistling of beasts arises; [stirring?] the daeva calls on the top of a tree, bids hearken the land unknown - the Volga, and the [Azov] Seaboard, and the Sula country, and Surozh, and Korsun, and you, idol of Tmutorokan!

Meanwhile by untrodden roads the Kumans make for the Great Don; [their] wagons screak in the middle of night; one might say - dispersed swans.

**Igor rides on**

Igor leads Donward his warriors. His misfortunes already are forefelt by the birds in the, oaksrub. The wolves, in the ravines, conjure the storm. The erns with their squalling summon the beasts to the bones. The foxes yelp at the vermilion shields. O Russian land, you are already behind the culmen!

Long does the night keep darkling. Dawn sheds its light. Mist has covered the fields. Stilled is the trilling of nightingales; the jargon of jackdaws has woken. With their vermilion shields the sons of Rus have barred the great prairie, seeking for themselves honor, and for their prince glory.

**The first engagement**

Early on Friday they trampled the pagan Kuman troops
and fanned out like arrows over the field; 
they bore off fair Kuman maidens 
and, with them, gold, and brocades, 
and precious samites. 
By means of caparisons, and mantlets, 
and furred cloaks of leather 
they started making plankings 
to plank marshes and miry spots 
with all kinds of Kuman weaves.

A vermilion standard, 
a white gonfalon, 
a vermilion penant of [dyed] horsehair 
and a silver hilt [went] to [Igor] son of Svyatoslav.

Night, and dawn of Saturday

In the field slumbers 
Oleg's brave aerie: far has it flown! 
Not born was it to be wronged 
either by falcon or hawk, 
or by you, black raven, pagan Kuman! 
Gzak runs like a gray wolf; 
Konchak lays out a track for him 
to the Great Don.

On the next day very early 
bloody effulgences herald the light. 
Black clouds come from the sea: 
They want to cover the four suns, 
and in them throb blue lightnings. 
There is to be great thunder, 
there is to come rain in [the guise of] 
arrows from the Great Don.

Saturday: the Kumans counter-attack

Here lances shall break, 
here sabers shall blunt 
against Kuman helmets 
on the river Kayala by the Great Don. 
O Russian land, 
you are already behind the culmen!

Now the winds, Stribog's grandsons, 
in [the guise of] arrows waft 
from the sea 
against the brave troops of Igor! 
The earth rumbles, 
the rivers run sludgily, 
dust covers the fields. 
The banners speak: 
"The Kumans are coming 
from the Don and from the sea and 
from all sides!"
The Russian troops retreat. 
The Fiend's children bar the field
with their war cries;  
the brave sons of Rus bar it  
with their vermilion shields.

**Vsevolod in battle**

Fierce Bull Vsevolod!  
You stand your ground,  
you spurt arrows at warriors,  
you clang on helmets  
with swords of steel.  
Wherever the Bull bounds,  
darting light from his golden helmet,  
there lie pagan Kuman heads:  
cleft with tempered sabers  
are [their] Avar helmets-  
by you, Fierce Bull Vsevolod!

What wound, brothers,  
can matter to one who has forgotten  
honors and life,  
and the town of Chernigov --  
golden throne of his fathers --  
and of his dear beloved,  
Gleb's fair daughter,  
the wonts and ways!

**Recollections of Oleg's feuds**

There have been the ages of  
Troyan;  
gone are the years of Yaroslav;  
there have been the campaigns of Oleg,  
Oleg son of Svyatoslav.  
That Oleg forged feuds with the sword,  
and sowed the land with arrows.  
He sets foot in the golden stirrup  
in the town of Tmutorokan:  
a similar clinking  
had been hearkened  
by the great Yaroslav of long ago;  
and Vladimir son of Vsevolod  
every morn [that he heard it]  
stopped his ears in Chernigov.

As to Boris son of Vyacheslav,  
vainglory brought him to judgment  
and on the Kanin [river]  
spread out a green pall,  
for the offense against Oleg,  
the brave young prince.  
And from that Kayala

Svyatopolk had his father  
conveyed- cradled between Hungarian pacers  
[tandemwise]- to St. Sophia in Kiev.  
Then, under Oleg, child of Malglory,
sown were and sprouted discords;
perished the livelihood
of Dazhbog's grandson
among princely feuds;
human ages dwindled.
Then, across the Russian land,
seldom did plowmen shout [hup-hup to their horses]
but often did ravens croak
as they divided among themselves the cadavers,
while jackdaws announced in their
own jargon that they were about to fly to the feed.
Thus it was in those combats
and in those campaigns,
but such a battle had never been heard of.

**Termination of battle**

From early morn to eve,
and from eve to dawn,
tempered arrows fly,
sabers resound against helmets,
steel lances crack.
In the field unknown, midst the
Kuman land,
the black sod under hooves
was sown with bones
and irrigated with gore.
As grief they came up
throughout the Russian land.

What dins unto me,
what rings unto me?
Early today, before the
effulgences,
Igor turns back his troops:
he is anxious about his
dear brother Vsevolod.
They fought one day;
they fought another;
on the third, toward noon,
Igor's banners fell.

**Defeat and Lamentations**

Here the brothers parted
on the bank of the swift Kayala.
Here was a want of blood-wine;
here the brave sons of Rus
finished the feast-
got their in-laws drunk,
and themselves lay down
In defense of the Russian land.

The grass droops with
condolements
and the tree with sorrow
bends to the ground.
For now, brothers, a cheerless tide has set in; now the wild has covered the strong; Wrong has risen among the forces of Dazhbog's grandson; in the guise of a maiden [Wrong] has stepped into Troyan's land; she clapped her swan wings on the blue sea by the Don, [and] clapping, decreased rich times.

The strife of the princes against the pagans has come to an end, for brother says to brother: "This is mine, and that is mine too," and the princes have begun to say of what is small: "This is big," while against their own selves they forge discord, [and] while from all sides with Victories the pagans enter the Russian land.

O, far has the falcon gone, Slaying birds: to the sea! But Igor's brave troops cannot be brought back to life. In their wake the Keener has wailed, and Lamentation has overrun the Russian land, shaking the embers in the inglehorn. The Russian women have started to weep, repeating "Henceforth our dear husbands cannot be thought of by [our] thinking, nor mused about by [our] musing, nor beheld with [our] eyes; as to gold and silver none at all we touch!" And, brothers, Kiev groaned in sorrow, and so did Chernigov in adversity; anguish spread flowing over the Russian land; abundant woe made its way midst the Russian land, while the princes forged discord against their own selves, [and] while the pagans, with victories prowling over the Russian land, took tribute of one vair from every homestead.

**Victories of Svyatoslav III recalled**

All because the two brave sons of Svyatoslav, Igor and Vsevolod,
stirred up the virulence
that had been all but curbed
by their senior,
dread Svyatoslav, the Great
[Prince] of Kiev,
[who kept the Kumans] in dread.

He beat down [the Kumans] with
his mighty troops
and steel swords;
invaded the Kuman land;
leveled underfoot
hills and ravines;
muddied rivers and lakes;
drained torrents and marshes;
and the pagan Kobyaka,
out of the Bight of the Sea,
from among the great iron Kuman troops,
he plucked like a tornado,
and Kobyaka dropped in the town of Kiev,
in the guard-room of Svyatoslav!

Igor blamed

Now the Germans,
and the Venetians,
now the Greeks,
and the Moravians
sing glory to Svyatoslav,
but chide Prince Igor,
for he let abundance sink
to the bottom of the Kayala,
[and] filled up Kuman rivers
with Russian gold.

Now Igor the prince
has switched
from a saddle of gold
to a thrall's saddle.
Pined away
have the ramparts of towns,
and merriment has dropped.

Svyatoslav's dream

And Svyatoslav saw a troubled dream
in Kiev upon the hills:
"This night, from eventide,
they dressed me, "he said, "with
a black pall on a bedstead of yew.
They ladled out for me
blue wine mixed with bane. From
the empty quivers of pagan tulks
they rolled great pearls
onto my breast, and caressed me.
Already the traves
lacked the master-girder
in my gold-crested tower!

All night, from eventide,
demon ravens croaked.
On the outskirts of Plesensk
there was a logging sleigh,
and it was carried to the blue sea!"

The Boyars explain their sovereign's dream

And the boyars said to the
Prince:
"Already, Prince, grief has
Enthralled the mind;
for indeed two falcons
have flown off the golden
paternal, throne
in quest of the town of
Tmutorokan --
or at least to drink a helmetful
of the Don.
Already the falcons' winglets
have been clipped
by the pagans' sabers,
and the birds themselves
entangled in iron meshes."

Indeed, dark it was
on the third day [of battle]:
two suns were murked,
both crimson pillars
were extinguished,
and with them both young moons,
Oleg and Svyatoslav,
were veiled with darkness
and sank in the sea.

"On the river Kayala
darkness has covered the light.
Over the Russian land
the Kumans have spread,
like a brood of pards,
and great turbulence
imparted to the Hin.

"Already disgrace
has come down upon glory.
Already thralldom
has crashed down upon freedom.
Already the daeva
has swooped down upon the land.
And lo! Gothic fair maids
have burst into song
on the shore of the blue sea:
chinking Russian gold,
they sing demon times;
they lilt vengeance for Sharokan;
and already we, [your] Guards, hanker after mirth."

**Svyatoslav's speech**

Then the great Svyatoslav
let fall a golden word
mingled with tears,
and he said:
"O my juniors, Igor and Vsevolod!
Early did you begin
to worry with swords the Kuman
land, and seek personal glory;
but not honorably you triumphed
for not honorably you shed
pagan blood.
Your brave hearts are forged of
hard steel
and proven in turbulence;
[but] what is this you have done
to my silver hoarness!

"Nor do I see any longer
the sway of my strong,
and wealthy,
and multimilitant
brother Yaroslav —
with his Chernigov boyars,
with his Moguts, and Tatrans,
and Shelbirs, and Topchaks,
and Revugs, and Olbers;
for they without bucklers,
with knives in the legs of their
boots, vanquish armies with war cries,
to the ringing of ancestral glory.

"But you said:
Let us be heroes on our own,
let us by ourselves grasp the
anterior glory
and by ourselves share the
posterior one.
Now is it so wonderful,
brothers,
for an old man to grow young?
When a falcon has moulted,
he drives birds on high:
he does not allow any harm
to befall his nest; but here is
the trouble:
princes are of no help to me."

**The Author apostrophizes contemporaneous princes**

Inside out have the times turned.
Now in Rim [people] scream
under Kuman sabers,
and Volodimir [screams]
derunder wounding blows.
Woe and anguish to you,
[Volodimir] son of Gleb!

Great prince Vsevolod!
Do you not think of flying here
from afar
to safeguard the paternal golden
throne?
For you can with your oars
scatter in drops the Volga,
and with your helmets
scoop dry the Don.
If you were here,
a female slave would fetch
one nogata, and a male slave,
one rezana;
for you can shoot on land live
bolts-[these are] the bold sons of Gleb!
You turbulent Rurik, and [you] David!
Were not your men's gilt helmets
afloat on blood?
Do not your brave knights roar like bulls
wounded by tempered sabers
in the field unknown?
Set your feet, my lords,
in your stirrups of gold
to avenge the wrong of our time,
the Russian land,
and the wounds of Igor,
turbulent son of Svyatoslav.

Eight-minded Yaroslav of Galich!
You sit high on your gold-forged
throne;
you have braced the Hungarian
mountains with your iron troops;
you have barred the [Hungarian]
king's path;
you have closed the Danube's gates,
hurling weighty missiles over
the clouds,
spreading your courts to the
Danube.
Your thunders range over lands;
you open Kiev's gates;
from the paternal golden throne
you shoot at sultans
beyond the lands.
Shoot [your arrows], lord,
at Konchak, the pagan slave,
to avenge the Russian land,
and the wounds of Igor,
turbulent son of Svyatoslav!
And you, turbulent Roman, and Mstislav!
A brave thought
carries your minds to deeds.
On high you soar to deeds
in your turbulence,
like the falcon
that rides the winds
as he strives in turbulence
to overcome the bird.
For you have iron breastplates
under Latin helmets;
these have made the earth rumble,
and many nations-
Hins, Lithuanians, Yatvangians,
Dermners, and Kumans-
have dropped their spears
and bowed their heads
beneath those steel swords.

But already, [O] Prince Igor,
the sunlight has dimmed,
and, not goodly, the tree sheds
its foliage.
Along the Ros and the Sula
the towns have been distributed;
and Igor's brave troops
cannot be brought back to life!
The Don, Prince, calls you,
and summons the princes to victory.
The brave princes, descendants
of Oleg, have hastened to fight.
Ingvar and Vsevolod,
and all three sons of Mstislav,
six-winged [hawks?] of no mean brood!
Not by victorious sorts
did you grasp your patrimonies.
Where, then, are your golden helmets,
and Polish spears, and shields?
Bar the gates of the prairie
with your sharp arrows
to avenge the Russian land
and the wounds of Igor,
turbulent son of Svyatoslav.

No longer indeed does the Sula
flow in silvery streams
for [the defense of] the town of
Pereyaslav;
and the Dvina, too,
flows marsh-like
for the erstwhile dreaded
townsmen of Polotsk
to the war cries ofpagans.

Izyaslav recalled

Alone Izyaslav son of Vasilko
made his sharp swords ring
against Lithuanian helmets-
[only] to cut down the glory
of his grandsire Vseslav,
and himself he was cut down
by Lithuanian swords
under [his] vermilion shields,
[and fell] on the gory grass
[as if?] with a beloved one upon a bed

And [Boyan] said:
"Your Guards, Prince,
birds have hooded with their wings
and beasts have licked up their blood:'
Neither your brother Bryachislav
nor your other one—Vsevolod—was there;
thus all alone
you let your pearly soul drop
out of your brave body
through your golden gorget.

Conclusion of Apostrophe

Despondent are the voices;
drooped has merriment;
[only?] blare the town trumpets.

Yaroslav, and all the
descendants of Vseslav!
The time has come
to lower your banners,
to sheathe your dented swords.
For you have already departed
from the ancestral glory;
for with your feuds
you started to draw the pagans
onto the Russian land,
onto the livelihood of Vseslav.
Indeed, because of those quarrels
violence came from the Kuman land.

Vseslav's fate recalled

In the seventh age of Troyan,
Vseslav cast lots
for the damsel he wooed.
By subterfuge,
propping himself upon mounted troops,
he vaulted toward the town of Kiev
and touched with the staff [of his lance]
the Kievian golden throne.

Like a fierce beast
he leapt away from them [the troops?],
at midnight, out of Belgorod,
having enveloped himself
in a blue mist.
Then at morn,
he drove in his battle axes,
opened the gates of Novgorod,
shattered the glory of Yaroslav,
[and] loped like a wolf
to the Nemiga from Dudutki.

On the Nemiga the spread sheaves
are heads, the flails that thresh
are of steel,
lives are laid out on the
threshing floor,
souls are winnowed from bodies.
Nemiga's gory banks are not sowed
goodly-sown with the bones of Russia's sons.

Vseslav the prince judged men;
as prince, he ruled towns;
but at night he prowled
in the guise of a wolf.
From Kiev, prowling, he reached,
before the cocks [crew], Tmutorokan.
The path of Great Hors,
as a wolf, prowling, he crossed.
For him in Polotsk
they rang for matins early
at St. Sophia the bells;
but he heard the ringing in Kiev.
Although, indeed, he had
a vatic soul in a doughty body,
he often suffered calamities.
Of him vatic Boyan
once said, with sense, in the tag:
"Neither the guileful nor the
skillful, neither bird [nor bard],
can escape God's judgment."
Alas! The Russian land shall
moan recalling her first years
and first princes!
Vladimir of yore, he,
could not be nailed to the
Kievan hills.
Now some of his banners
have gone to Rurik and others to
David, but their plumes wave in
counterturn.

Lances hum on the Dunay.
The voice of Yaroslav's daughter
Is heard;
like a cuckoo, [unto the field?]
unknown, early she calls.

**Yaroslavna's incantation**

"I will fly, like a cuckoo," she
says, "down the Dunay."
I will dip my beaver sleeve in the river Kayala.
I will wipe the bleeding wounds on the prince's hardy body."
Yaroslav's daughter early weeps, in Putivl on the rampart, repeating:

"Wind, Great Wind!
Why, lord, blow perversely?
Why carry those Hinish dartlets on your light winglets against my husband's warriors?
Are you not satisfied to blow on high, up to the clouds, rocking the ships upon the blue sea?
Why, lord, have you dispersed my gladness all over the feather grass?"
Yaroslav's daughter early weeps, in Putivl on the rampart, repeating:

"O Dnepr, famed one!
You have pierced stone hills through the Kuman land.
You have lolled upon you Svyatoslav's galleys as far as Kobyaka's camp.
Loll up to me, lord, my husband that I may not send my tears seaward thus early."
Yaroslav's daughter early weeps, in Putivl on the rampart, repeating:

"Bright and thrice-bright Sun!
To all you are warm and comely;
Why spread, lord, your scorching rays on [my] husband's warriors;
[why] in the waterless field parch their bows with thirst, close their quivers with anguish?"

**Igor's escape**

The sea plashed at midnight; waterspouts advance in mists; God [?] points out to Igor the way from the Kuman land to the Russian land, to the paternal golden throne.

The evening glow has faded: Igor sleeps; Igor keeps vigil; Igor in thought measures the plains from the Great Don to the Little Donets; [bringing] a horse at midnight, Ovlur whistled beyond the river: he bids Igor heed—
Igor is not to be [held in bondage].

[Ovlur] called,
the earth rumbled,
the grass swished,
the Kuman tents stirred.
Meanwhile, like an ermine,
Igor has sped to the reeds,
and [settled] upon the water
like a white duck.
He leaped upon the swift steed,
and sprang off it,
[and ran on,] like a demon wolf,
and sped to the meadowland of
the Donets, and, like a falcon,
flew up to the mists,
killing geese and swans,
for lunch, and for dinner,
and for supper.

And even as Igor, like a falcon,
flew, Vlur, like a wolf, sped,
shaking off by his passage the
cold dew;
for both had worn out
their swift steeds.
Says the Donets:
"Prince Igor!
Not small is your magnification,
and Konchak's detestation,
and the Russian land's gladness."

Igor says: "O Donets!
Not small is your magnification:
you it was who lolled
a prince on [your] waves;
who carpeted for him
with green grass
your silver banks;
who clothed him
with warm mists
under the shelter of the green tree;
who had him guarded
by the golden-eye on the water,
the gulls on the currents,
the [crested] black ducks on the winds.
Not like that," says [Igor],
"is the river Stugna:
edowed with a meager stream,
having fed [therefore]
on alien rills and runners,
she rent between bushes
a youth, prince Rostislav,
imprisoning him.
On the Dnepr's dark bank
Rostislav's mother weeps the youth.
Pined away have the flowers with
condolent, and the tree has been bent to the ground with sorrow."

No chattering magpies are these:
on Igor's trail
Gzak and Konchak come riding.
Then the ravens did not caw,
the grackles were still, the
[real] magpies did not chatter;
only the woodpeckers, in the
osiers climbing,
with taps marked [for Igor] the way to the river.
The nightingales
with gay songs announce the dawn.

Says Gzak to Konchak:
"Since the falcon to his nest is flying,
let us shoot dead the falcon's son
with our gilded arrows."
Says Konchak to Gza [sic]:
"Since the falcon to his nest is flying
why, let us entoil the falconet
by means of a fair maiden."
And says Gzak to Konchak:
"if we entoil him
by means of a fair maiden,
neither the falconet,
nor the fair maiden,
shall we have,
while the birds will start
to beat us in the Kuman field."

**Igor's return**

Said Boyan, song-maker
of the times of old,
[of the campaigns] of the kogans

Svyatoslav, Yaroslav, Oleg:
"Hard as it is for the head
to be without shoulders
bad it is for the body
to be without head," --
for the Russian land
to be without Igor.

The sun shines in the sky:
Prince Igor is on Russian soil.
Maidens sing on the Danube;
[their?] voices weave
across the sea to Kiev.
Igor rides up the Borichev [slope]
to the Blessed Virgin of the Tower;
countries rejoice, cities are merry.