

Nationalism and Its Discontents:  
Transformations of Identity in  
Contemporary Russian Music on and off the Web

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents a multifaceted examination of the complex sociopolitical contexts of contemporary popular and classical music in Russia. By attending to the competing expectations of Russian creators, government officials, impresarios, critics, and listeners, it examines how contemporary musical artists have navigated the shifting nationalistic and popular moods of the past two decades.

I argue that popular music artists Olga Kormukhina and Polina Gagarina, composer Rodion Shchedrin, and the Mariinsky Theater have transformed the works of past artists, including Viktor Tsoi and Nikolai Leskov, updating them according to a popular demand for patriotic works that the Russian state has cultivated through its media outlets and official pronouncements on cultural policy. Other rock musicians (Konstantin Kinchev and the band Bi-2) have also transformed their political identities to match the present-day demands and expectations of either Russian officialdom or their particular Russian audiences. With the exception of Bi-2 (an ambiguous counterexample), all of these transformations have led to greater associations with nationalistic sentiments or fervent support for state agendas in the contemporary geopolitical arena.

Exploring the wide variety of styles and genres in this dissertation required a methodological versatility involving archival research, reception history, the analysis of musical scores and sound recordings, an examination of prose and poetic texts, and close study of visual imagery in music videos and onstage. The approach to reception history is the most groundbreaking, for it considers a wide range of digital sources, including blogs and social media comment threads, and makes use of language partner apps to augment the pool of informants, allowing conversation with Russians living outside the limited

geographical range (St. Petersburg and Moscow) considered by previous studies. This holistic approach to contemporary reception history helps us to better understand how Russian audiences from diverse regions perceive these ongoing transformations.

Dedicated to Patricia, a beautiful light, gone from this world too soon.

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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Russian quotations and citations are provided in Cyrillic throughout. In the main body of the text I provide transliterations of important terms and titles using the Library of Congress system. There are a few exceptions. I defer to more familiar English-language transliterations of names, places, and titles. I also use “o” (e.g., in the case of *chornyi*) and “yo” (e.g., in the case of Kuryokhin) for the Cyrillic “ë” as well as “ye” and “ya” when the respective Cyrillic letters “e” and “я” appear at the beginning of a word in order to make the pronunciation of certain terms and names less ambiguous to readers unfamiliar with the Russian language.

## Introduction

Throughout music history, musicians and composers have willingly or unwillingly engaged with politics. Whether composed in support of, or in reaction to prevailing agendas (or in studied avoidance of these agendas), musical compositions individually and collectively tell us something about the contexts they both sprang from and affected. One of the earliest examples cited in every history of Russian music is Mikhail Glinka's first opera, *A Life for the Tsar* (1836). Notable in its original form for its affinities with the Official Nationalism of Tsar Nicholas I, bureaucrats and willing artists during the Soviet period transformed the work in both name and content, making Glinka's music—now refashioned as *Ivan Susanin*—a prime vehicle for the ideological aesthetics of socialist realism.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary Russian musical culture between 2000 and 2018 offers significant, much newer examples of such sociopolitical transformations. My dissertation examines, compares, and contrasts several of these instances, including a contemporary Russian opera, Rodion Shchedrin's (b. 1932) *The Left-hander*; an influential rock song, Viktor Tsoi's "Kukushka" (The Cuckoo); and two stylistically varied-rock groups, Alisa and Bi-2. Each connects to debates that have been raging within post-Soviet Russia about history, politics, identity, culture, and contemporary global affairs. They touch on themes related not only to Russian society but to similar debates throughout the Western world

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<sup>1</sup> The success of this type of transformation led to the virtual abandonment of new opera composition during the Stalinist era. See Marina Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet Opera Project: Ivan Dzerzhinsky vs. Ivan Susanin," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 2 (July 2006): 181–216, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586706002163>; and Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 61–70.

surrounding homeland and otherness, the folk, religion, social mores, language, and ethnicity. Moreover, many of these subjects are found frequently in the rhetoric of populist nationalism currently ascendant on both sides of the Atlantic.

The focus of my analysis varies from case to case. My first chapter traces the evolution of Tsoi's late-Soviet rock song "Kukushka" across two recent and highly consequential cover versions. For Shchedrin's opera, *The Left-hander*, I compare the libretto, musical score, and the Mariinsky Theater's staging to its source, the well-known, late-nineteenth century story by Leskov (*Levsha*), as well as to some notable musical theater and film adaptations from the Soviet period. My third chapter tracks the ways in which Konstantin Kinchev and his band Alisa have transformed themselves—and been transformed—since they first achieved renown in the Soviet rock scene of the 1980s, while the final chapter considers the shorter but no-less significant career of the hit group Bi-2.

All of these examples fall under the concept of what I am calling "transformation." "Transposition" is a related term that literary scholar Caryl Emerson uses in her studies of the adaptations of stories from one genre or medium to another (e.g., from historical accounts or prose to opera).<sup>2</sup> "Adaptation" is a similar concept that

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<sup>2</sup> Caryl Emerson, *Boris Godunov: Transpositions of a Russian Theme*, Indiana-Michigan Series in Russian and East European Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Caryl Emerson, "Shostakovich and the Russian Literary Tradition," in *Shostakovich and His World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 183–226; Caryl Emerson and David Bethea, *All the Same the Words Don't Go Away: Essays on Authors, Heroes, Aesthetics, and Stage Adaptations from the Russian Tradition* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011); see also Andrew Wachtel, ed., *Intersections and Transpositions: Russian Music, Literature, and Society*, Studies in Russian Literature and Theory (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998).



Eric Hobsbawm used to define the efforts of social or political groups (especially nations) to invent new traditions out of old.<sup>3</sup> I choose the term “transformation” because it is more all-encompassing and therefore better captures my particular case studies in their totalities.<sup>4</sup> During their careers, many artists undergo these kinds of changes of their own volition, but as we will see, sometimes others also attempt to make significant transformations on their behalf, whether posthumously or not. The transformations I discuss are the result of complex negotiations between artists, critics, fans, and state actors.

My central thesis is that the transformations I discuss exemplify the artistic ramifications of the conservative-authoritarian rhetoric that has been building in Russian state-run media and in government policy pronouncements since Vladimir Putin’s ascendancy to the presidency in 2000. While the first three chapters involve transformations toward increasingly nationalistic representations that correspond to, if not help fuel, this charged rhetoric, the example of Bi-2’s transformation offers a possible (if highly complicated and contingent) reaction against these trends. The chapters variously assess how the identities of authors, works, or even entire bands have been transformed in response to these broader cultural and political shifts and how they, in turn, have amplified or articulated these broader shifts. In the next section I outline some of the

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<sup>3</sup> “Adaptation took place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes.” See Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Canto, 1992), 5.

<sup>4</sup> My use of the term “transposition” in chapter 2 to refer to the act of transferring the prose original to the operatic medium should not be confused with the “transformation” that occurred as a consequence of this act.

government's most recent statements on cultural policy to show how they broadcast a template for potential support and success to its artists.

### **Analysis of Language in State Cultural Policy**

The government's recent pronouncements on cultural policy help us to understand the possible motivations behind the transformations I am discussing. Recommendations put forth by the Presidential Council on Culture and Art in early 2014, entitled "Project on the Foundations of State Cultural Policy,"<sup>5</sup> were "much-discussed and widely ridiculed"<sup>6</sup> according to professor of contemporary philosophy and social sciences Alexander Bikbov of Moscow State University. One dissenting member of the council commented, referring to the infamous stagnation of the Brezhnev era in the USSR, "Nothing of the kind has existed since the late 1970s."<sup>7</sup> Bikbov called the recommendations "a clear step in the redefinition of the global mission of state cultural policy." He added that this "first document was cheered by the traditionalist far right in culture and strongly criticized by left and liberal experts as an essentially neo-traditionalist programme involving forced ideological indoctrinization, nationalist mobilization, and an anti-European and Russian pro-ethnic tune."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The full document is accessible at "Минкультуры изложило 'Основы государственной культурной политики,'" *Известия*, April 10, 2014, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://iz.ru/news/569016>.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Bikbov, "Neo-Traditionalist Fits with Neo-Liberal Shifts in Russian Cultural Policy," in *Russia: Art Resistance and the Conservative-Authoritarian Zeitgeist*, eds. Lena Jonson and Andrei Erofeev (New York: Routledge, 2018), 76.

<sup>7</sup> "Минкультуры изложило 'Основы государственной культурной политики,'" *Известия*.

<sup>8</sup> Bikbov, 76.

Bikbov stated that the final version approved in December 2014 as Presidential Decree No. 808 of the Russian Federation, “Foundations of the State Cultural Policy,”<sup>9</sup> “was even more explicit in its political agenda and pragmatism.”<sup>10</sup> An important component that he recognized in the final version was a neoliberal or neo-mercantilist notion imported from the West of culture as a tool for retaining Russia’s best and brightest (especially the youth), so that they might feel a responsibility to “contribute to regional development and consume nationally produced media products.”<sup>11</sup> Bikbov then identified how free-market, capitalist philosophies work in concert with the neo-traditionalist ideals: “As seen in Russian cultural policy and the transformation of its entire public sector, the mission is less about capitalism made moral and more about a moral turn made profitable.”<sup>12</sup> In his concluding remarks, he articulated what this means for producers of culture on a more practical level: “being politically conformist becomes economically profitable.”<sup>13</sup>

My own analysis shows that xenophobic language in the initial working document was obscured in the final decree by language that spins the multiculturalism of the “Russian World” (alternatively described as “Russian civilization”) as a unique strength.

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<sup>9</sup> “Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.12.2014 г. № 808,” Президент России, accessed October 17, 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/39208>.

<sup>10</sup> Bikbov, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Bikbov, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Bikbov, 78.

<sup>13</sup> Bikbov, 80.

In a backhanded compliment to the positive attributes of neighboring ethnic groups, and in a way that both reframes Russia's colonial legacy and assuages the pangs of lost empire, Putin stated the following amid these discussions about culture in 2014:

And in reference to our people, our country has sucked in like a vacuum cleaner representatives of various ethnic groups, nations, and nationalities. By the way, this is the basis not only for the creation of our cultural code, but also of our extraordinarily potent genetic code, because during all these centuries and even millennia an exchange of genes and mixed marriages have taken place. And it is precisely this genetic code that has almost certainly constituted one of our main competitive advantages in the contemporary world.<sup>14</sup>

The Russian cultural scholar Ilya Kalinin argues that from the perspective that Putin privileges here, Russia is both a "historical" and a "civilizational unit, around which neighboring nations consolidate."<sup>15</sup> Echoes of a Russian-centric Eurasianism first developed in the early part of the last century continue to reverberate in contemporary political rhetoric.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "А что касается нашего народа, то страна наша, как пылесос, втягивала в себя представителей различных этносов, наций, национальностей. Кстати говоря, на этой основе создан не только наш общий культурный код, но и исключительно мощный генетический код, потому что за все эти столетия и даже тысячелетия происходил обмен генами, смешанные браки. И именно этот наш генный код, наверное, может быть, почти наверняка является одним из наших главных конкурентных преимуществ в сегодняшнем мире. Он очень гибкий, он очень устойчивый. Мы даже этого не чувствуем, но это наверняка есть." Владимир Путин, "Прямая линия с Владимиром Путиным," accessed December 16, 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>; qtd. in Ilya Kalinin, "The 'Russian World': Genetically Modified Conservatism, or Why 'Russian Culture' Matters," in *Russia: Art Resistance and the Conservative-Authoritarian Zeitgeist*, eds. Lena Jonson and Andrei Erofeev (New York: Routledge, 2018), 27.

<sup>15</sup> Kalinin, "The 'Russian World,'" 39.

<sup>16</sup> For discussion of the influence of Eurasianist thought on Russian composer Arthur Lourié (1892-1966), see Richard Taruskin, "Turania Revisited, with Lourié My Guide," in *Russian Music at Home and Abroad* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 165-72. For a similar discussion relative to Igor Stravinsky's 1923 ballet and concert work *Les Noces* (*Svadebka*, or *The Wedding*) see Richard Taruskin, "Stravinsky and the Subhuman," in *Defining*

The final decree included striking language that signaled a shift toward an agenda of ideological development and promotion that is expressly prohibited by the nation's constitution.<sup>17</sup> In section I, the introduction, the language conjures up a Russian state that has existed unbroken for centuries in which Russian language and culture (as opposed to the conquest, displacement, and assimilation of ethnic minorities) have acted as the glue binding the multiethnic population together.

Though the decree nods to a handful of other confessions, it gives clear pride of place to "Orthodoxy," declaring that it "has played a special role in shaping Russia's value system."<sup>18</sup> In order for Russia to achieve its next developmental goals, the document states, "maximum involvement of culture" is required,<sup>19</sup> adding that culture is like a "natural resource" necessary for socio-economic development. It also recognizes culture as important for nurturing a sense of patriotism and national pride.<sup>20</sup>

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*Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 393-400.

<sup>17</sup> Article 13, clause 2 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation asserts that no state or obligatory ideology can be established. "Никакая идеология не может устанавливаться в качестве государственной или обязательной." See Конституция Российской Федерации, <http://www.constitution.ru/10003000/10003000-3.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> "В формировании системы ценностей России особую роль сыграло православие. Ислам, буддизм, иудаизм, другие религии и верования, традиционные для нашего Отечества, также внесли свой вклад в формирование национально-культурного самосознания народов России. Ни вероисповедание, ни национальность не разделяют и не должны разделять народы России." "Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.12.2014 г. № 808."

<sup>19</sup> "Современный этап развития России требует максимального вовлечения потенциала культуры в процессы общественного прогресса." "Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.12.2014 г. № 808."

<sup>20</sup> "На протяжении всей отечественной истории и именно культура сохраняла, накапливала и передавала новым поколениям духовный опыт нации, обеспечивала единство многонационального народа России, воспитывала чувства патриотизма и национальной

In section II, entitled the “Basis of State Cultural Policy,” we find reasons for this sudden interest in culture that echo Bikbov’s reading of the policy as essentially neo-liberal. According to the document, a rapid and intense economic and social modernization was needed, and in order to accomplish this, the state would have to invest in the “qualitative renewal of the personality.” At a time when rampant corruption, increased retirement ages, and lowered pensions are some of the crucial issues confronting Russian society, its government locates the problems within the people themselves. It asserts that a “humanitarian crisis” looms due to “insufficient investment” in this area in recent years<sup>21</sup> and then lists the “most dangerous manifestations” of this crisis for the future of Russia. Most conspicuous are the “devaluation and distortion of common values,” the “deformation of historical memory,” the “negative appraisal of significant periods of national history,” “spreading false ideas about the historical backwardness of Russia,” and the “growth of individualism.”<sup>22</sup> It all reads like the preamble to a top-down system for thought control.

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гордости, укрепляла авторитет страны на международной арене.” “Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.12.2014 г. № 808.”

<sup>21</sup> “Перед Российской Федерацией стоит задача в исторически короткий период осуществить экономическую и социальную модернизацию страны, выйти на путь интенсивного развития, обеспечивающего готовность государства и общества ответить на вызовы современного мира. Это возможно только при условии планомерных и последовательных инвестиций в человека, в качественное обновление личности. В недавнем прошлом такие вложения были явно недостаточными, что создало угрозу гуманитарного кризиса.” “Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.12.2014 г. № 808.”

<sup>22</sup> “К наиболее опасным для будущего России возможным проявлениям этого кризиса относятся: снижение интеллектуального и культурного уровня общества; девальвация общепризнанных ценностей и искажение ценностных ориентиров; рост агрессии и нетерпимости, проявления асоциального поведения; деформация исторической памяти, негативная оценка значительных периодов отечественной истории, распространение

Near the beginning of section III (“General provisions”), culture is defined as a “set of formal and informal institutions and phenomena, and factors that affect the preservation, production, transmission, and dissemination of spiritual values.” Ethical, aesthetic, intellectual and civic values were not forgotten, but they were tacked on at the end of the phrase in a parenthetical aside.<sup>23</sup> And in section VI, related to the “tasks of the state,” a subsection dedicated to the humanities (which they also consider a wing of the sciences), we find that development of the “spiritual activities” of a person is once again at the top of the list.<sup>24</sup> Considering the importance awarded to Orthodoxy for “shaping Russia’s value system,” this emphasis on the “spiritual” should be concerning to anyone wishing to keep church and state separate.

Other sections of the decree enumerate a host of tasks related to Russian language education and spreading Russian fluency worldwide. The concern of generational divisions was evident in two other tasks: “bridging the gap between generations within

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ложного представления об исторической отсталости России; атомизация общества - разрыв социальных связей (дружеских, семейных, соседских), рост индивидуализма, пренебрежения правами других.” “Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.12.2014 г. № 808.”

<sup>23</sup> “В настоящих Основах используемые понятия означают: ‘культура’ - совокупность формальных и неформальных институтов, явлений и факторов, влияющих на сохранение, производство, трансляцию и распространение духовных ценностей (этических, эстетических, интеллектуальных, гражданских и т. д.).” “Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.12.2014 г. № 808.”

<sup>24</sup> “Приоритетное развитие гуманитарных наук как наук о человеке, его духовной, нравственной, культурной и общественной деятельности.” “Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.12.2014 г. № 808.”

the family” and “establishing a generational dialogue across society.”<sup>25</sup> These statements seem to recognize that younger generations are not accepting government propaganda to the same extent that older generations of Russians are and that something must be done to remedy the resulting imbalance. As we will hear from one of my informants in the first chapter, when inserted into the context of World War II nostalgia, Viktor Tsoi’s “Kukushka” represents an attempt to remedy this precise problem of generational divide.

Echoes of traditionalist thought are evident in the task of the “affirmation of traditional family values in the public consciousness.”<sup>26</sup> Couched within this vague priority is, of course, an intolerance toward anything or anybody perceived as nontraditional. The hand of organized religion is hard to miss. Although it might be a result of contact with the Russian Orthodox clergy, such statements could possibly gain traction with some of the more conservative wings of other faiths in Russia as well (most prominently, Judaism and Islam).

The decree provides for the creation of new institutions if and when the government determines that the above-stated goals of the state cannot be carried out simply by “transforming the management system.”<sup>27</sup> Yet there is evidence to suggest that

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<sup>25</sup> “Возрождение традиций семейного воспитания, преодоление разрыва между поколениями внутри семьи. . . . Налаживание диалога между поколениями в масштабах общества.” “Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.12.2014 г. № 808.”

<sup>26</sup> “Утверждение в общественном сознании традиционных семейных ценностей, повышение социального статуса семьи.” “Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.12.2014 г. № 808.”

<sup>27</sup> “Целесообразность создания новых институций продиктована невозможностью достижения целей государственной культурной политики в рамках имеющихся административных структур за счет изменения их полномочий, функций, форм деятельности и регламентов. Масштаб и глубина необходимых преобразований требуют постепенного и целенаправленного включения профессионального сообщества и



changes to the management system have already affected artistic production. Writing about contemporary visual arts in Russia, Lena Jonson asserts, “The call to use culture for the purposes of educating and socializing people into the new ideological paradigm created new conditions for the art scene.”<sup>28</sup> About the administrative changes alluded to in the decree, she notes, “By restructuring art institutions and redefining contemporary art, and with the help of a state-sponsored exhibition policy, the government was able to redirect the art scene to promote art that fitted its own liking and to marginalize art that did not conform to the conservative paradigm.”<sup>29</sup>

The final iteration of the state’s policy on culture positions Russian civilization as the savior of European civilization while simultaneously throwing notions of borders into question. Isolationism is downplayed in favor of improving economic ties with the West, for the state asserts that the specific traditional values and social mores that the Russian people are concerned with are also a global concern. Therefore, the cultivation of Russian culture is regarded much like a natural resource for Russia’s competition in the global market.

Following the period of public discussion, presidential speeches, and the well-publicized enactment of the decree, the state made it very clear that any artists who

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общественных организаций в процесс трансформации системы управления.” “Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.12.2014 г. № 808.”

<sup>28</sup> Lena Jonson, “The New Conservative Cultural Policy and Visual Art,” in *Russia: Art Resistance and the Conservative-Authoritarian Zeitgeist*, eds. Lena Jonson and Andrei Erofeev (New York: Routledge, 2018), 60.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

participated in the “deformation of historical memory,” the “negative evaluation of significant periods of national history,” and the “spread of false ideas about the historical backwardness of Russia,” would find it difficult to succeed.<sup>30</sup> Artists such as Gergiev and Shchedrin in the classical music world and Kormukhina and Gagarina in the field of popular music have all met recently with success, reshaping the works of others to offer their patrons and fans a Russia-centered view of the world that downplays negative evaluations and any mention of historical backwardness.

If we think of this cultural policy and its rhetoric as a map of prescribed paths that are sure to lead artists to various forms of reward (the “carrots” so to speak), the next section details the consequences (or “sticks”) that artists might face via the indirect methods of powerful actors in the social and political spheres. The examples I will provide of indirect censorship in the arts complicate assertions that expression in Russia today is entirely free.

### **Indirect Censorship and Ties to the Church**

Making direct connections between government power and the suppression of artistic activity in contemporary Russia is often very difficult. Yet there are a number of conditions that have arguably privileged the success of some artists while hampering the efforts of others. These include indirect and convoluted methods of censorship

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<sup>30</sup> “Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.12.2014 г. № 808.”

(inevitably resulting in further self-censorship) that are often connected with Orthodox religious groups.<sup>31</sup>

Bikbov recognizes “a moralist turn” in the form of “harsh governmental criticism of Westernized contemporary culture and decadent public values” as an undeniable consequence of the massive protest efforts against Putin and “his regime” that began in December 2011.<sup>32</sup> Characterizing the prosecution of the 2012 Pussy Riot protesters as an illustration of “how a criminal trial can rely on anti-feminism and accusations of disrespect for Russian Orthodox culture,” Bikbov notes that Orthodox-affiliated groups had been successful in getting the state to prosecute artists much earlier and for much more innocuous exhibitions in private galleries.<sup>33</sup>

Among a number of other indirect acts of censorship in the visual arts, Jonson details two cases in which the exhibitions “Beware! Religion” (2003) and “Forbidden Art” (2006), both staged in the private, non-profit gallery at the Sakharov Center in Moscow, were forced to shut down. In each instance, gallery directors and curators

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<sup>31</sup> As music censorship journalists and scholars Marie Korpe, Ole Reitov, and Martin Cloonan have noted, religion and the state have been “the two principal agents of music censorship” across the world and throughout history. They argue that the motivation is a strong concern for “regulating mass behavior.” See Marie Korpe, Ole Reitov, and Martin Cloonan, “Music Censorship From Plato to the Present,” in *Music and Manipulation: On the Social Uses and Social Control of Music* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 240. For an extensive survey of both musical censorship and music’s use as propaganda, see Steven Brown and Ulrik Volgsten, *Music and Manipulation: On the Social Uses and Social Control of Music* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006). Examples of musical censorship from around the world are also cited and discussed in the following sources: Marie Korpe, ed., *Shoot the Singer!: Music Censorship Today* (London: Zed Books, 2004); Marie Korpe and Ole Reitov, “Banned: A Rough Guide,” *Index on Censorship* 39, no. 3 (2010): 34–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306422010381043>.

<sup>32</sup> Bikbov, “Neo-Traditionalist Fits with Neo-Liberal Shifts in Russian Cultural Policy,” 65–66.

<sup>33</sup> Bikbov, 65.

(rather than the artists themselves) were convicted in criminal court on charges similar to those that members of Pussy Riot would eventually face. Though prosecutors initially found no reason to prosecute, appeals to members of the Duma made by religious groups resulted in lengthy and dramatic trials in which the prosecution sought three-year sentences in a penal colony as punishment. That heavy fines were assessed instead was of little consolation to the convicted. Meanwhile, protesters who committed destructive acts of vandalism against one of these exhibitions while claiming to defend the Orthodox church against blasphemy were acquitted in their own trials.<sup>34</sup> A writer for the opposition news site Grani.ru (which has been blocked in Russia for extremism) interpreted the first trial's outcome as a return to the nineteenth century:

Since the completion of this trial, our country is no longer a secular state. . . . The right of the Moscow Patriarchate to a monopoly on the interpretation of “national” symbols is legally recognized, which means that the national-religious doctrine, which a century and a half ago was called “Official Nationalism” (Orthodoxy-autocracy-nationality), is legitimized and protected by law from criticism. Church censorship, forgotten as a bad dream, has returned.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See Lena Jonson, *Art and Protest in Putin's Russia*, Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series ; 61 (New York: Routledge, 2015), 50–53; 105–29.

<sup>35</sup> “С момента завершения этого судебного процесса наша страна более не светское государство (как ранее она перестала быть государством федеративным, социальным и демократическим). Ибо художественное высказывание на тему ‘Религия и общество’ отныне приравнено к нападкам на церковь, т.е. на верующих, т.е. на русский народ. Юридически признано право Московской патриархии на монопольную интерпретацию ‘национальных’ символов, а значит, легитимизирована и защищена законом от критики национально-религиозная доктрина, которая полтора столетия назад именовалась ‘казенной народностью’ (православие-самодержавие-народность). Вернулась забытая как страшный сон церковная цензура.” Евгений Ихлов, “Крест на Конституции,” Грани.Ру/Культура, March 29, 2005, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://graniru.org/Culture/m.86958.html>.

In 2005 the director of the Tretyakov gallery in Moscow self-censored the gallery's "Russian PopArt" (or "Sots-Art") exhibit by removing Aleksander Kosolapov's "Icon-Caviar" after receiving a letter signed by churchgoers and the Priors of four Moscow churches claiming that the work excited "social and religious hatred."<sup>36</sup> Former head of the Tretyakov gallery's contemporary art section Andrei Erofeev detailed a list of three categories of art which in 2006 resulted in other examples of self-censorship: works "that used the rough language of the street," "those with religious signs and symbols," and "those depicting erotic fantasies." By 2007 he noted the addition of a fourth category: "those with political references."<sup>37</sup>

Closer to music, in the world of theater and film even one of Russia's most celebrated directors and stage designers (including opera stages) has been targeted. The case of Kiril Serebrennikov, artistic director of the Gogol Center in Moscow since 2012, outspoken supporter of the LGBTQ community, and critic of both the Crimean annexation and the Orthodox church's rising political influence, reveals another underhanded, roundabout way that the state applies pressure on outspoken artists. In May 2017 Serebrennikov was arrested and both his office at the Gogol Center and his apartment were ransacked by police investigating fraud allegations connected with his theater Platforma, a hotbed of political satire. After spending eighteen months under house arrest Serebrennikov was finally released on bail in April 2019. On June 26, 2020, he was ultimately convicted with three co-defendants on charges of embezzlement of

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<sup>36</sup> Jonson, *Art and Protest*, 110.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

state funds that have been widely denounced as specious. Though prosecutors sought six years imprisonment, the judge issued a three-year suspended sentence, fined him 800,000 rubles, demanded the return of 133 million rubles to the state from Platforma, and barred him from administrative positions in state cultural institutions for three years.<sup>38</sup> The Russian film director Pavel Lungin's response to the trial points to a system of funding and accountability for cultural institutions laden with potential pitfalls and traps:

I would like the Ministry of Culture to change the means of accountability for funding. It is not possible to issue money for a finished product. It is impossible to report each purchased paper clip. Everyone violates these laws. A person working with public money can be accused, arrested, and subjected to endless checks. Ultimately, everyone is under constant threat. . . . I really want to believe that Olga Lyubimova [the current Minister of Culture] will change this terrible system of accountability that came to us from the depths of Soviet times.<sup>39</sup>

As journalist Joshua Yaffa reports, a general lack of fundraising opportunities and endowments means that cultural institutions are largely dependent on the state. The dramatic arts provide the most palpable example of this dependence as there are over six hundred theaters in Russia and almost all of them rely on government funds for seventy

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<sup>38</sup> Robyn Dixon, "Renowned Russian Director Convicted of Embezzlement in What Critics Call a Show Trial," *Washington Post*, June 26, 2020, accessed July 12, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/renowned-russian-director-convicted-of-embezzlement-in-what-critics-call-a-show-trial/2020/06/26/ee8031d6-b776-11ea-a510-55bf26485c93\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/renowned-russian-director-convicted-of-embezzlement-in-what-critics-call-a-show-trial/2020/06/26/ee8031d6-b776-11ea-a510-55bf26485c93_story.html).

<sup>39</sup> "Я бы хотел, чтобы Минкультуры изменило способ отчетности финансирования. Выдавать деньги по готовому продукту – невозможно. Отчитываться за каждую приобретенную скрепку – невозможно. Все нарушают эти законы. Человека, работающего с государственными деньгами, могут обвинить, арестовать, подсылать к нему бесконечные проверки. В конечном счете – все ходят под постоянной угрозой. . . . Очень хочется верить, что Ольга Любимова будет менять эту ужасную систему отчетности, пришедшую к нам из глубины советских времен." "Лунгин призвал Минкультуры изменить способ отчетности после приговора Серебрянникову," *Газета.Ru*, June 26, 2020, accessed July 12, 2020, [https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/news/2020/06/26/n\\_14596231.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/news/2020/06/26/n_14596231.shtml).

percent of their budgets.<sup>40</sup> Longtime journalist and art critic Anna Narinskaya extended this problem to the Russian film industry: “You don’t have a choice between making a film with state participation or without. The question is: Do you want to make a film at all?”<sup>41</sup> With this level of dependence it is not difficult to imagine the potential for state influence on cultural institutions.

Prominent theater critic and editor of Russia’s *Theater* magazine Marina Davydova paints the picture of a capriciously punitive system for those failing to meet state expectations: “If you do something a little too radical—and only you can guess where this line is located—then they will show up and look for something. And, of course, they’ll find something. You think even a place like the Bolshoi is clean? If they wanted to come up with financial violations, I’m sure they could find plenty.”<sup>42</sup>

Examples of these forms of indirect censorship in the musical world are harder to find, yet recent events in the career of Ivan Alekseev, the rapper and hip-hop artist whose stage name is Noize MC, offer glimpses of where the uncrossable lines are and the ways in which musicians can be punished for stepping over them. In August 2014 Alekseev performed a song in Ukrainian in Lviv, Ukraine, and then draped over his shoulders the Ukrainian flag a female audience member had tossed to him. As images of this gesture of solidarity began to surface in Russia, he reported that over sixty percent of his Russian

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<sup>40</sup> Joshua Yaffa, “The Rise and Fall of Russia’s Most Acclaimed Theatre Director,” December 11, 2017, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-rise-and-fall-of-russias-most-acclaimed-theatre-director>.

<sup>41</sup> Anna Narinskaya, quoted in Yaffa, “The Rise and Fall.”

<sup>42</sup> Marina Davydova, quoted in Yaffa, “The Rise and Fall.”

shows were cancelled while others were raided by federal drug officials and bomb squads acting on tips about “suspected” criminal behavior. Alekseev claims that at nearly every stop of his Siberian and Russian Far East tour during this period, his group was met by authorities aimed at preventing them from performing at alternative sites to the main venues that had been cancelled.<sup>43</sup> He said, “It was [like] if you were doing a three-day tour of gigs in Ohio and you have guys from the CIA, FBI, and local police coming and telling you to go.”<sup>44</sup> As he related to another Western journalist, “We know we are blacklisted, it’s obvious,” stating that advance warning was broadcast to venues that he and his band intended to “provoke the audience in an unpatriotic way.” He then added, “We are being watched and monitored everywhere. It’s pretty creepy. I’m really against war. And now this kind of position is considered dangerous.” He also reported that as a result of this official and unofficial interference, the band has lost money.<sup>45</sup>

The conditions described in the previous two sections on cultural policy and indirect forms of censorship will be important to keep in mind during the discussions that follow; I will refer back to them often. The rhetoric of the cultural policy, the artistic responses I will discuss, and the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in censorship

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<sup>43</sup> Karoun Demirjian, “Russian Youths Find Politics as Their Pop Icons Face Pressure,” *Washington Post*, December 2, 2014, sec. Europe, accessed July 12, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russian-youths-find-politics-as-their-pop-icons-face-pressure/2014/12/01/1b1898c0-4f26-44e1-a6c6-dd076a315983\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russian-youths-find-politics-as-their-pop-icons-face-pressure/2014/12/01/1b1898c0-4f26-44e1-a6c6-dd076a315983_story.html).

<sup>44</sup> Ivan Alekseev (a.k.a. Noize MC), quoted in Demirjian, “Russian Youths.”

<sup>45</sup> Ivan Alekseev, quoted in Sarah Rainsford, “Culture War Divides Russia’s Music Stars,” *BBC News*, November 20, 2014, sec. Europe, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30087935>.



cases all highlight the broader topic of nationalism that forms an over-arching theme for this dissertation.

In addition to Anderson's, and Hobsbawm's and Ranger's studies of nationalism (cited previously), there are a number of other relevant theoretical works concerned with nation building and modern industrial societies.<sup>46</sup> Liah Greenfeld provides a comparison of ideological discourses related to the historical development of nationalism in the first five societies to call themselves nations (England, France, Russia, Germany, and the United States).<sup>47</sup> Her chapter on Russian discourse shows that the eighteenth-century origins of Russian nationalism were largely a product of intellectuals' tortured and conflicted comparisons of Russia with the West. My case studies suggest that these comparisons remain crucial to contemporary notions of Russian identity.

Charles Clover, a former Moscow bureau chief for the *Financial Times*, discusses the intersection of one of Russia's newest strains of nationalism with older Eurasianist ideas that have their roots in the thinking of White Russians exiled in 1920s Europe. He cites a revealing statement from controversial Russian political theorist Alexander Dugin's book *The Foundations of Geopolitics* (produced with the help of Russia's Academy of the General Staff): "One absolute imperative of Russian geopolitics is the

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<sup>46</sup> See for instance Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication; an Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality.*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1966); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 2nd ed., *New Perspectives on the Past* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780 Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>47</sup> Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

total and unfettered control of Moscow over the entire length of the Black Sea coast stretching from Ukrainian to Abkhazian territory . . . The north shore of the Black Sea should be exclusively Eurasian and centrally obey Moscow.”<sup>48</sup> The idea of hegemonic dominance over neighboring countries (especially Ukraine) will appear more than once in my case studies.

According to anthropologist Lloyd Fallers’s studies of emergent African nationalism in the 1960s, nationalism is “an ideological commitment to the pursuit of the unity, independence, and interests of a people who conceive of themselves as forming a community.”<sup>49</sup> While Fallers’s definition has a positive connotation related to liberation from colonial/imperial hegemony, the ideological commitment to the pursuits he lists can also have negative ramifications when notions of a people’s exceptionalism begin to pollute the waters in service to the interests of a governing elite or majority ethnic and religious groups. Thus nationalism can just as easily signal hegemonic rule itself.<sup>50</sup> Fallers also argues that nationalism’s goal of “consensus” requires “constant innovation” and speaks of this as a problem of “cultural management.”<sup>51</sup> Finally, he defines ideology

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<sup>48</sup> Alexander Dugin, quoted in Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia’s New Nationalism* (London: Yale University Press, 2016), xii, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/asulib-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4451477>.

<sup>49</sup> Lloyd A. Fallers, “Ideology and Culture in Uganda Nationalism,” *American Anthropologist* 63, no. 4 (1961): 677, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1961.63.4.02a00010>.

<sup>50</sup> Slavic and film studies scholar Nancy Condee has recently discussed these conflicting notions of nationalism. See Nancy Condee, “Tales Told by Nationalists,” in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*, eds. Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 37–52.

<sup>51</sup> Fallers, *Ibid.*

as “that part of culture which is actively and explicitly concerned with the establishment and defense of patterns of value and belief.”<sup>52</sup> Both the policy rhetoric and the examples of censorship discussed above point to a strategy of cultural management for the building of consensus in contemporary Russia that seems to recognize this necessity of constant innovation.

This study also extends the interrogation of Russian nationalism to wider social and cultural contexts. Though Russian political scientist Marlene Laruelle has recently called this mode of inquiry an important new trend,<sup>53</sup> musicologists have been making these kinds of contributions to the understanding of Russian nationalism for decades.<sup>54</sup> A

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<sup>52</sup> Fallers, 677-78.

<sup>53</sup> Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism: Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlefields* (London: Routledge, 2018), 5, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429426773>.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Taruskin, *Opera and Drama in Russia as Preached and Practiced in the 1860s*, Russian Music Studies ; No. 2 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan (UMI) Research Press, 1981); Malcolm Brown, “Native Song and National Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Russian Music,” in *Art and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, ed. Theofanis G. Stavrou (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 57–84; Richard Taruskin, *Musorgsky: Eight Essays and an Epilogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Caryl Emerson and Robert William Oldani, *Modest Musorgsky and Boris Godunov: Myths, Realities, Reconsiderations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions a Biography of the Works through Mavra* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Marina Frolova-Walker, “‘National in Form, Socialist in Content’: Musical Nation-Building in the Soviet Republics,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51, no. 2 (1998): 331–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/831980>; Marina Frolova-Walker, “Against Germanic Reasoning: The Search for a Russian Style of Musical Argumentation,” in *Musical Constructions of Nationalism* (Cork, IE: Cork University Press, 2001), 104–22; Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Klara Moricz and Simon Morrison, eds., *Funeral Games in Honor of Arthur Vincent Lourié* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Rebecca Mitchell, *Nietzsche’s Orphans: Music, Metaphysics, and the Twilight of the Russian Empire*, Eurasia Past and Present (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Richard Taruskin, *Russian Music at Home and Abroad* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Marina Frolova-Walker, *Stalin’s Music Prize: Soviet Culture and Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); Pauline Fairclough, *Classics*

number of popular music scholars have also touched on this phenomenon over the past twenty years.<sup>55</sup> The work of musicologists on nationalism in the music of other countries shows that while the ideological content of Russia's nationalism might be unique, the use of music to unite a people or to propagandize particular ethnic or national interests is a world-wide occurrence with a long history.<sup>56</sup>

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*for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity under Lenin and Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); Patrick Zuk and Marina Frolova-Walker, eds., *Russian Music since 1917: Reappraisal and Rediscovery*, Proceedings of the British Academy ; 209 (Oxford, UK: Published for The British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>55</sup> David MacFadyen, *Red Stars: Personality and the Soviet Popular Song, 1955-1991* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); David MacFadyen, *Estrada?!: Grand Narratives and the Philosophy of the Russian Popular Song since Perestroika* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), <http://www.deslibris.ca/ID/400116>; S. I. Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960-1985* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); David-Emil Wickström, *Rocking St. Petersburg: Transcultural Flows and Identity Politics in Post-Soviet Popular Music*, Second, Revised and Expanded Edition, *Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 101 (Stuttgart, DE: Ibidem-Verlag, 2014); Arve Hansen et al., *A War of Songs: Popular Music and Recent Russia-Ukraine Relations*, *Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 203 (Stuttgart, Ger.: ibidem Press, 2019).

<sup>56</sup> See Taruskin's primer on the history of nationalism relative to classical music traditions. Richard Taruskin, "Nationalism | Grove Music," 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.50846>. See also Philip V. Bohlman, *The Music of European Nationalism: Cultural Identity and Modern History*, ABC-CLIO World Music Series (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004). In the context of classical Indian music, see Janaki Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also Mark Fitzgerald and John O'Flynn, *Music and Identity in Ireland and Beyond* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315596617>. In his recent study of popular musical cultures and Nordic political life, ethnomusicologist Benjamin Teitelbaum shows how "nationalism's hooligan stereotype" (associated most closely with skinheadism) has been transformed into more widely acceptable forms of anti-immigrant, antiliberal activism that focus on the alleged notion of white oppression. He argues that this popular transformation has been largely "perpetuated by a dramatic shift in activists' musical practices," adding that affiliated groups disseminate their messages via hip-hop and reggae. Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, *Lions of the North: Sounds of the New Nordic Radical Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

Finally, following Laruelle, this dissertation demonstrates that nationalism in Russia functions as a “mutilayered and multifaceted repertoire,” full of competing agendas whose promoters come from a pool of not only state institutions and Orthodox affiliated groups, but also from popular grassroots movements and compelling individual personalities.<sup>57</sup> In one sense, Laruelle asserts that this repertoire conjures an “imaginary realm” of an “imperial nature” that subsumes all of the territory held by the former Soviet Union. She states that “because this empire ceases to exist, it can only be recreated in a discursive world, by elaborating doctrines that re-invent a virtual alternate Russia.”<sup>58</sup> Many of my case studies have become a part of this “discursive world,” imagining an alternate Russia with an alternate history and geography and alternate versions of artistic works.

Laruelle also considers that part of this repertoire of nationalism is an “experiment of doctrines and ideologies” that seeks to synthesize: “Aryanness and its religious corollary, neo-paganism”; Dugin’s “multiple attempts to rehabilitate fascism as compatible with modern Russia and its Eurasianist destiny”; “conservative values”; and “anti-Westernism.”<sup>59</sup> Each of these features connect with one or more of the case studies in the chapters ahead. Before embarking on a summary of the arguments I present in each, I provide an account of my methodology.

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<sup>57</sup> Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

## Method of Inquiry and Further Review of Literature

Discussing the transformations and broader implications of opera and a variety of popular music genres using sound recordings, live performance videos, and the music videos created by rock bands and also by their fans requires a flexible and interdisciplinary methodology. To that end, I draw variously from both historical musicological and ethnomusicological methods. Though my ethnographic work is largely centered in the digital realm, the principles and ethics guiding that work have their roots in more traditional field work.

Drawing on Elizabeth Ozment's ethnographic study of music videos related to American Civil War reenactments, Emily Erken's analysis of the Russian reception of recent opera and stage adaptations of Alexander Pushkin's *Yevgeny Onegin*, and Noriko Manabe's research of Japanese antinuclear protest music, I have made use of the considerable data available online. These include social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, VKontakte (Russia's version of Facebook), Twitter, and artists' personal websites. Each offers a distinctive view of the range of meanings Russians associate with the rock songs and videos I am studying (specifically those of Kino, Alisa, and Bi-2).<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Whittenburg Ozment, "The Politics of Musical Reenactment: Civil War Commemoration In American Culture" (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2014), <http://hdl.handle.net/10724/30578>; Emily Alane Erken, "Constructing the Russian Moral Project through the Classics: Reflections of Pushkin's 'Eugene Onegin', 1833-2014" (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2015), <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/pqdtglobal/docview/1779253438/abstract/F61E534F14524AD3PQ/1>; Noriko Manabe, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Protest Music After Fukushima* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

The unique videos made by users themselves as they reinterpret songs using their own novel imagery are especially informative. As Manabe argues, new meanings are derived from performances replayed online.<sup>70</sup> User-generated videos play important roles in my chapters on Tsoi's "Kukushka" (chapter 1) and on the songs of the rock group Alisa (chapter 3). Those Russians who read an essentially patriotic message in "Kukushka" and those who identify strongly with the recent ideological turn of Alisa have been particularly active in the realm of re-creation. From their videos we come to understand the variety and intensity of feelings the original songs and the even more recent cover versions continue to evoke.

The comments sections of videos on YouTube provide numerous rich threads of discussion related to the musical, textual, and visual content of videos, and aided my assessment of how Russians view these works along the spectrum from propaganda to protest. VKontakte and Facebook users have created countless fan pages and forums for discussing musicians and bands, and posts made with links to individual videos often contain extensive comment threads as well. In my engagement with the seemingly infinite data set that social media presents us, I focus on the comments that generate the most "likes" and responses from other online users.

I also solicited the input of a select number of informants who I befriended online and during research trips and language study in both St. Petersburg and Moscow. As Tom Boellstorff and his co-authors state, "ethnographers must be flexible in their techniques to

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<sup>70</sup> Manabe, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Protest Music After Fukushima*, 4.

make their methods sensitive to the contexts we study.”<sup>71</sup> My digital and ethnographic research provide the emic (insider) counterbalance to the etic (outsider) perspective of my own textual translations and interpretations. Boellstorff and his collaborators discuss the necessary balance and distinctions between these perspectives in ethnography:

An ethnographic approach thus implies drawing on both etic and emic forms of analysis. Above all, it implies keeping them distinct, for one of the clearest signs of a flawed or incomplete ethnographic study is confusion regarding which claims are the researcher’s etic conclusions and which are the emic understandings of the informants themselves (although certainly at times emic and etic may overlap).<sup>72</sup>

I have intentionally structured my chapters in a way that separates my own (etic) analyses from the (emic) perspectives of my informants.

I have further engaged with a number of Russian citizens (both at home and abroad) whom I became acquainted with in online contexts, using the smartphone application HelloTalk. This app pairs language learners with native speakers and has helped to expand and diversify my ethnographic scope. This is but one example of many similar platforms that should be explored in future ethnographic work. My work suggests that these technologies and the virtual communities they foster are extremely valuable supplements for engaging with cultures geographically removed from a researcher’s home base. To the best of my knowledge, no other study of rock music in Russia has incorporated dialogues with informants spread across such a wide geographical expanse. Ultimately, we gain new perspectives on the tastes, identities, and life experiences of a

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<sup>71</sup> Tom Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds a Handbook of Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 4–5, <https://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=http://lib.mylibrary.com/detail.asp?id=385245>.

<sup>72</sup> Boellstorff et al., 16.



broader swath of the Russian-speaking world than would be logistically feasible to obtain from traditional, more geographically constrained fieldwork experiences. What follows merely hints at the possibilities that digital technologies offer for widening ethnographic research.

Though the statements I collected from the comment sections attached to some of the videos I discuss reveal a complex range of possible interpretations for their texts, music, and visual imagery, they represent the opinions of self-selected fans and critics. My engagement with informants adds another angle to my discussion of a select number of these videos. Because they approached these videos at my request with no preconceived agendas of their own, their input helps balance and complicate the study. Yet the quantity and depth of my informants' engagement with the videos was inconsistent. Some informants seemed eager to speak about one or another video but were less interested in engaging with others. Nevertheless, when they *did* choose to engage, they often added degrees of refinement to our understanding of the possible meanings conveyed by the text, music, and visual images.

Most of my interlocutors communicated with me in Russian, but occasionally some would respond in English. Wherever my informants use Russian, I provide the original in the footnotes below. I lightly edited any English responses for clarity when necessary. Several of my informants appear in more than one chapter. In order to distinguish between those with the same first name, as I reintroduce my informants in each chapter, that is, I begin each chapter by using both first and last names, but switch to first name alone thereafter. My discussions with informants surrounding Tsoi and the related covers of "Kukushka" mostly occurred during spring 2019, with some additional

clarifications obtained in December of that year. My conversations with Eduard Matveev (see below) about *The Left-hander* were sporadic, occurring between March and September 2019. The dialogues with informants about Konstantin Kinchev and Alisa used in chapter 3 occurred in February 2020, while chapter 4's interactions about the work of Bi-2 took place in March 2020. In the paragraphs that follow, I relate how I met my informants, my ethical considerations, and the various ways in which my informants contributed to this study.

As stated earlier, I met a number of informants online using HelloTalk. This app paired me with other users living across Russia and the post-Soviet Russian diaspora who desired to learn English better and practice their communication skills using either text or voicechat functions. After becoming sufficiently acquainted virtually, I met some of them in person in St. Petersburg. During my research I interacted with 25 different informants who were born and raised in either Russia or Ukraine. Four of them were already living abroad in the United States or in Israel when we met.

HelloTalk has a built-in set of ethics that users abide by if they want to be successful meeting new friends and building relationships. It allows you to correct the spelling, syntax, and grammar of your friends' text messages, showing them both the incorrect and correct versions simultaneously so that they can quickly grasp where and how they erred. The number of corrections one makes is counted for all to see in your profile and the higher your number, the more attractive you become to sincere learners. In some cases, I also edited academic and employment applications and cover letters for friends in English. Establishing and maintaining relationships was a time-consuming effort, so being selective about how many people I interacted with became necessary. I

limited my HelloTalk circle to ten friends, six of whom I managed to meet in person, since they lived in the St. Petersburg area. My initial contact with non-HelloTalk informants occurred during language study and research trips to Russia.

My informants contributed to this project in countless ways, from elucidating idiomatic expressions to filling me in on cultural references. Many simply gave me a window into Russian language, culture, and society by sharing details of their lives and interests. Two even accompanied me to the Mariinsky Theater for opera performances and one young couple that I met through HelloTalk gave me an all-day tour of St. Petersburg, pointing out places of interest related to Viktor Tsoi. I called on others regularly to correct transcriptions of audio/video material, and when one transcription project proved too large and difficult for me to accomplish in the short timeframe required, I paid one of my informants to do it because I knew I could trust her to be accurate and attentive to details. In the following paragraphs, I provide more biographical information for those informants who appear in the chapter discussions in order to give a better sense of their identities. They appear in no particular order.

Thirty-three-year-old Oleg Ugryumov studied management and organization at St. Petersburg State University. We met at the bar he used to manage called *Pivnoy Etiket* (Beer Etiquette) which specialized in Russian craft beer. It is now closed due to the problem of increasing rent that he says is common among small businesses in the heart of St. Petersburg. Since August 2019 he has worked for an internet advertizing company.

Anna Bessanova is a thirty-two-year-old visual artist from Novokuznetsk, Siberia. She lived in Moscow prior to moving to Tel Aviv just over two years ago with her Ukrainian husband, Sergey Murzich. Sergey grew up in Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine. I

originally became acquainted with Anna through HelloTalk but was able to meet both her and her husband during a vacation they took to Saint Petersburg while I was studying Russian there. Anna usually responds to me in English, probably with the assistance of an online translator.

I became acquainted with Victoria from Pyatigorsk through HelloTalk as well. Victoria was one of the friends I met through the app who did not provide me their last name; I chose not to press her for it because both providing and asking about personal identifying information was frowned upon in the app's suggested guidelines for communication. Now forty-six, she spent ten years living in Moscow studying to be an English interpreter and translator but had to return to her native city to care for her mother, who had suffered a stroke. Victoria responded to most of my questions in English because of her high level of fluency.

I also met Svetlana Shabrova (45) through the language partnering app HelloTalk. Because she lived in Tempe, Arizona, when we first became acquainted, we were able to meet a couple of times for face-to-face conversation. On one occasion she, her husband Aleksey, and their daughter Sophia even had dinner with me and my wife. She used to work for an advertising agency in Moscow but grew weary of the system of bribes and corruption that she reported anyone engaging in business had to deal with. She and her family left Russia in 2013 because, as the political situation became untenable, they sought a better quality of life. They have since moved to Atlanta, but we regularly keep in touch and help each other with various language related tasks.

Maria Udovydenko (37) is from St. Petersburg. Her high school and college years were spent in Moscow attending the school (*Shkola sovremennogo iskusstva*

“*Svobodnye masterskie*”) affiliated with the Museum of Modern Art (*Gosudarstvennyi tsentr sovremennogo iskusstva*). She also spent time employed at the museum and later as a fellow at the Institute of Street Art in St. Petersburg (*Institut issledovaniia strit-arta*). From September 2012 to December 2016 she lived in Bakhchisaray, Crimea, in an urban settlement called *Nauchnyi* (Scientific) adjacent to the Crimean Astrophysical Observatory. During that period she organized a residency for young artists (ArtPlatz) to create dialogue between them and the scientists at the observatory. In addition to this she participated in several large projects, including a lecture series on contemporary art in Simferopol and Sevastopol, exhibitions for the “Night of Museums” in Simferopol, and a residency with an educational program for young artists. Maria currently lives in St. Petersburg curating independent art projects and working as the head archivist for that city’s research branch of the “Garage” Museum of Modern Art. We became acquainted over the several days I spent perusing the archive for materials related to Viktor Tsoi and Konstantin Kinchev.

Sergey Chubraev is forty-eight and grew up in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). He has a degree in world history and culture from the St. Petersburg State Institute for Culture and describes himself as a photographer, head of architectural projects, producer of television programs, documentary film producer, and archivist of materials related to the Soviet avant-garde of the late-1980s and 1990s. Maria Udovydchenko put me in contact with him because his collection of materials related to Sergey Kuryokhin, an artistic and musical contemporary and collaborator of Tsoi and Kino is housed in the “Garage” archive.

Sergey Klishis is in his early fifties and cobbles together a living in St. Petersburg dabbling in both musical theater and portrait photography while living with his wife and young child. He has a degree in radio engineering, electronics, and communications from the St. Petersburg State University of Aerospace Instrumentation. We first met through HelloTalk while I was still in Arizona. When I was in St. Petersburg for language study in summer 2018 we met for coffee; his gregariousness and penchant for conspiracy theories reminded me of one of my oldest friends from my undergraduate years.

During my last trip to St. Petersburg near the end of winter 2019, I treated Sergey to a performance of Shchedrin's opera. He adamantly refused to let me pay for his ticket until I told him that I wanted some of the best seats and fibbed that "Uncle Sam" was indirectly paying for it through a cultural research grant. (In truth, I *had* won a fellowship for my 2018 language study as well as an additional one to aid in my completion of this dissertation—one of those *did* come from the US government, but I paid for Sergey's ticket myself.) After the opera, we discussed all manner of social, cultural, and political issues (with more conspiracy theories) over a couple of beers.

Sergey is unique among my informants because his musical interests, like mine, encompass both classical and popular genres. Though he can speak at length on just about any topic in person, he tended to keep his online responses to my questions brief. For all this brevity, his unique sense of humor and opinionated personality produced some of the sharpest and most tightly packed statements of all of my informants. In preparation for our excursion to the Mariinsky, I asked him to reread Leskov's original tale, hoping to have a lively discussion afterward about any differences he noticed. It is unclear whether he had time to follow through with the request. Though he said he did,

he had little to say when I later asked him to compare the opera with the original. During the intermission he complained about Shchedrin's modern idiom, but by the end of the opera he seemed generally pleased with the production after all. His main contribution to the chapter on *Levsha* came by way of introducing me via VKontakte to one of his acquaintances who sang in the chorus for the Mariinsky production that we saw. Sensing that her friend and fellow chorus member Eduard Matveev could better answer my many questions, our contact ended after she put me in touch with him.

Forty-something Eduard Matveev holds a degree in composition from the St. Petersburg Conservatory where he was a student of Sergei Slonimsky. He says that he has two musicological dissertations which he has yet to defend because interactions with the St. Petersburg musicological community are not very interesting to him. Because of this, he reports that he lives in a creative and scientific "internal emigration." As a twenty-year member of the Mariinsky Theater's chorus, he has sung in the chorus for *The Left-hander* multiple times. Despite our differing views on the appropriate manner for transposing a literary text into an opera libretto, Eduard was always eager to answer my questions and went out of his way to make sure I understood his explanations.

Alexander Petrov (early-thirties) studied philosophy at the Herzen State Pedagogical University in St. Petersburg. I met him in a bar called "Leningrad" in the Petrograd district of St. Petersburg where I lived during my summer 2018 language study. During a game of chess, I discovered his passionate interest and eclectic taste in both music and art. Though he frequently tried to redirect my research interests toward "more interesting" music and musicians, he provided thoughtful and richly descriptive responses to most of my questions.

Gleb Vildanov, his wife Maria Vildanova, and their two young boys were my hosts in St. Petersburg during my two-month language program. Gleb is thirty-four and works as maintenance scheduler for airplanes at Pulkovo Airport in St. Petersburg. Though this job often had him working late-night shifts, he somehow managed to find time to speak with me about Russian language and culture on a regular basis. He spent the first twelve years of his life in the Komi Republic town of Inta before his family moved to St. Petersburg. Gleb studied music intensively in school during the equivalent of his high school years.

Gleb's wife, Maria (henceforth Masha, to avoid any confusion with my other informant with this name) is thirty-six and was born in the same town as Gleb. After spending some years living in Chelyabinsk, her family moved to St. Petersburg where she went to the same high school as Gleb and also focused on music studies. Currently, she runs a small business making travel arrangements for Russian tourists and further supplements their household income working as a tour guide at the Peter and Paul Fortress and hosting students like me from the language institute.

Alyona Loshakova works with children and as a tour guide in St. Petersburg. She and her husband are in their late thirties and have a daughter who just recently entered kindergarten. On top of her already full schedule, Alyona volunteers as a "Russian buddy" at the language institute I attended in summer 2018. After being assigned to me, she generously went above and beyond the suggested timeframe for interaction, spending an entire afternoon with me once per week and serving as my personal tour guide around the picturesque and historical sites of the city, all the while gently forcing me to speak only in Russian.



Mike,<sup>73</sup> another language partner of mine in his thirties that I met using HelloTalk, lives in Rostov-on-the-Don, a southern Russian city very close to the Russophone separatist regions of eastern Ukraine. For many years he worked in total quality management systems, but he is now looking for a new job while working part-time in a factory.

For the most part, with the exception of Eduard and Sergey Klishis, the informants above commented only on the music and videos I examine in chapters 1, 3, and 4. Though I did speak with some of them about their general understanding of Leskov's original tale, their lack of access to the opera and lack of interest in the genre precluded further discussion.

Online ethnographic data is harder to come by for Shchedrin's opera, *The Left-hander*. Aside from reviews by professional and amateur critics in Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, there is less discussion of this work in the types of Russian online blogs and forums Erken accessed for her study of recent *Onegin* productions. This is probably due to the *The Left-hander*'s newness (2013). Only time will tell if its level of popularity (or controversy) will rise to a level that instigates more protracted online discussion.

Visits to important libraries—including the Russian State National Library as well as the Garage Archive in St. Petersburg, the Russian State Library, the Russian State Archive of Literature and the Arts, and the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History in Moscow—provided me with an opportunity to engage with materials not

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<sup>73</sup> For the purposes of interaction with strangers on HelloTalk, this is the handle he has chosen.

readily available in the U.S. I found musical scores and libretti for a number of stage adaptations of *Levsha*, sketches of costume and set designs for the earliest of these adaptations by the well-known artist Boris Kustodiev, and nineteenth-century periodicals that published Leskov's responses to criticism about *Levsha*. The Garage Archive in St. Petersburg provided an assortment of secondary sources in Russian about the rock genre as well as clippings from periodicals related to rock criticism published since the 1980s. These contributed to my understanding of the earliest public perceptions of the bands I am studying and helped me to construct a clear baseline from which to make comparisons about their reception and interpretation today.

### **Chapter Summaries**

My four case studies are variously connected to patriotism, nationalism, religious faith, protest, and propaganda. Understanding music's role in these phenomena in Russia today enriches our understanding of their contemporary manifestations worldwide. These examples also illuminate intersections between art and power, a relationship of deep concern to recent musicology. Barry Shank and Eric Weisbard have in different ways advocated for popular music's power for positive and progressive change,<sup>75</sup> and my investigation questions whether Bi-2's more recent music inspires such progressive thinking. In my earlier chapters, I seek to explicate the extent to which the opposite is also possible. My first and last two case studies in particular are important for opening

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<sup>75</sup> Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*, Refiguring American Music (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Eric Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

new avenues in contemporary Russian popular music studies, which for the most part tend to focus on the protest group Pussy Riot or the punk subgenre.<sup>76</sup> The fact that popular music receives no treatment in one of the latest texts on Russian music further highlights the need for new approaches to the topic.<sup>77</sup> And though I will cite numerous scholars on Russian popular music below and in the following chapters, their discussions are limited to either classical or popular music contexts. In further contrast to existing scholarship, I discuss transformations across both art and popular music examples.

While chapter 2 evaluates plot changes, omissions, and additions to Leskov's tale, chapter 1 considers alterations in genre, style, and performance context, and the last two

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<sup>76</sup> Ivan Gololobov, "There Are No Atheists in Trenches under Fire: Orthodox Christianity in Russian Punk," *Collected Work: Punk & Post-Punk. 1/3 (2012): Punk in Post-Socialist Space*. 1, no. 3 (January 1, 2012): 305–21; Ivan Gololobov and Yngvar B. Steinholt, "Preface: The Elephant in the Room?," *Collected Work: Punk & Post-Punk. 1/3 (2012): Punk in Post-Socialist Space*. 1, no. 3 (January 1, 2012): 249–51; Ivan Gololobov, Hilary Pilkington, and Yngvar Bordewich Steinholt, *Punk in Russia: Cultural Mutation from the "Useless" to the "Moronic,"* Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series ; 55 (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2014); Stephen Amico, "Digital Voices, Other Rooms: Pussy Riot's Recalcitrant (In)Corporeality," *Popular Music & Society* 39, no. 4 (October 2016): 423–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2015.1088284>; Volha Kananovich, "Progressive Artists, Political Martyrs, or Blasphemous Hussies? A Content Analysis of the Russian Media Coverage of the Pussy Riot Affair," *Popular Music & Society* 39, no. 4 (October 2016): 396–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2015.1088280>; Andrei Rogatchevski and Yngvar B. Steinholt, "Pussy Riot's Musical Precursors? The National Bolshevik Party Bands, 1994–2007," *Popular Music & Society* 39, no. 4 (October 2016): 448–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2015.1088287>; Yngvar B. Steinholt, "Kitten Heresy: Lost Contexts of Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer," *Popular Music and Society* 36, no. 1 (February 1, 2013): 120–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2012.735084>; Yngvar B. Steinholt and David-Emil Wickström, "The Pussy Riot Complex: Entering a New Stage of Academic Research into a Viral Russian Controversy," *Popular Music & Society* 39, no. 4 (October 2016): 393–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2015.1088279>; Katharina Wiedlack, "Pussy Riot and the Western Gaze: Punk Music, Solidarity and the Production of Similarity and Difference," *Popular Music & Society* 39, no. 4 (October 2016): 410–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2015.1088281>.

<sup>77</sup> Patrick Zuk and Marina Frolova-Walker, eds., *Russian Music since 1917: Reappraisal and Rediscovery*, Proceedings of the British Academy ; 209 (Oxford, United Kingdom: Published for The British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2017).

chapters discuss modifications in lyrical content across varying periods. In my analysis of lyrics, due consideration is given to their musical settings and any associated visual imagery.

This dissertation's first chapter focuses on the song "Kukushka" by Viktor Tsoi (1962-90), the noted lead singer of the noted rock band Kino. As I analyze the musical presentation and visual imagery connected with multiple recent covers of the song, including versions by Olga Kormukhina, Polina Gagarina, and Yaroslava Degtyareva, I show its transformation from a ballad by a solitary artist struggling to summon his creative powers near the end of the USSR to a heroic anthem celebrating glory in battle and defense of the Motherland. I also seek to explicate the new associations that arise in connection with this new "Kukushka," among them associations with military strength and with a Russia-centered, pan-Slavic unity. Relative to these two themes is the notion of Russia's hegemonic dominance over one of its closest neighbors, Ukraine. Finally, I show how the image and personal philosophies of Tsoi himself have now become subjects for debate as a result of the song's metamorphoses.

My study of Shchedrin's opera *The Left-hander* (2013) in the dissertation's second chapter begins by examining the State Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg. Artistic director Valery Gergiev has transformed the company into an artistic juggernaut, promoting Russian culture in performances near and far, as well as through a host of recordings produced and distributed under its own new label, Shchedrin's opera among them.<sup>80</sup> By Gergiev's admission, the state-of-the-art improvements to the Mariinsky's

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<sup>80</sup> <https://mariinskylabel.com/>.

performance spaces, as well as its growing presence on the classical music recording market, would have been impossible without substantial support from the current leader of the Russian political system. In 2008 Gergiev made this revealing statement:

In St Petersburg my goal is to have a new opera house for the 2010-2011 season. To visit the Ministry of Culture from time to time will not necessarily bring this project to maturity. The bureaucracy is so great, you need half a year just to sort the paperwork. One visit a year to the head of government is more effective. Putin makes quick decisions. Thank God he realizes the Mariinsky is important. We already have our own concert hall [recently built with a large subsidy]: one of the achievements of my life. I don't think western opera houses are so lucky.<sup>81</sup>

As I examine Shchedrin's opera, I further interrogate this relationship, considering the extent to which it has affected decisions about repertoire and commissions of new works, as well as how it has inflected the perception of these commissions and repertoire decisions.

This line of inquiry culminates in an in-depth analysis of *The Left-hander*, one of the Mariinsky's recent commissions, which Shchedrin dedicated to Gergiev himself. The opera is based on the eponymous tale (*Levsha*) by nineteenth-century Russian author Nikolai Leskov, in which Tsar Nicholas I, in an effort to outdo British ingenuity, calls upon his own peasant gunsmiths to improve upon a microscopic steel flea built by British craftsmen that dances at the turn of a key. Following the example of Vadim Shakhov's line-by-line comparison of the libretto of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* to its original Leskov source, I show how changes made by Shchedrin in his *Left-hander* are incongruous with Leskov's version of *Levsha* (as the tale is known in

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<sup>81</sup> Valery Gergiev qtd. in Andrew Clark, "Lunch with the FT: Valery Gergiev," *Financial Times*, September 5, 2008, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/9880da60-7ad9-11dd-adbe-000077b07658>.

Russia).<sup>82</sup> I argue that the operatic version makes significant alterations to Leskov's original. In its final transformation, the opera better resembles Soviet transpositions of the tale to the stage. Shchedrin's methods of presenting a debauched view of Great Britain draw on the nationalist conceits and orientalist tropes of nineteenth-century Russian composers. It thus fits the current Russian state's generally xenophobic posture toward the West, a posture drawing on the complicated relationship Russian intellectuals have had with countries to its West dating even further back to the late eighteenth century.

It is important to point out that my scope of inquiry for Shchedrin's opera differs from the surrounding chapters. Rather than uncovering the range of meanings evoked by its performance and transformation over time, my goal is to show how the libretto and staging differ in significant ways from the original tale (*skazka*) by Nikolai Leskov. By engaging with the literature on Leskov—both past and present, in English and in Russian (including by Soviet scholars)—as well as with Leskov's own thoughts on the work of his contemporaries, I intend to show that a clear philosophical distinction exists: On the one hand lies the original congenial and multicultural spirit of *Levsha* and on the other hand the majority of Soviet transpositions to musical theater and film and Shchedrin's transposition of the work into the operatic medium. (With one rare exception, all of these transpositions to other artistic mediums transform the plot, tone, and messages of the

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<sup>82</sup> Вадим Шахов, "Леди Макбет Мценского уезда Лескова и Шостаковича," in *Шостакович - между мгновением и вечностью* (Санкт-Петербург: Композитор, 2000), 243–94.

original work). Whereas most more or less perpetuate stereotypes of a debauched West, this latest transposition is the most vividly transformative.<sup>83</sup>

A transposition with greater fidelity to Leskov's original would have gone against the efforts of Russian state actors to cultivate a national "us versus them" mentality. Shchedrin's operatic version willy nilly plays right into this goal, giving tacit support to the xenophobic rhetoric that has appeared in recent Russian conversations about cultural policy, while simultaneously preserving Soviet-era myths about Leskov. Ultimately, it becomes clear that most Russians have a memory of the story that skews in the patriotic direction. Many seem unaware of the social and political satire that Leskov originally imbued it with; the opera and its production perpetuate this lack of awareness.

The dissertation's third chapter focuses on the most recent work of Konstantin Kinchev (b. 1958) and his rock group Alisa. An original, leading participant in the vibrant Russian rock scene in late-Soviet Leningrad, the band was by most accounts at odds with, or at the very least, indifferent to the state agendas of the time. Kinchev himself participated on the front lines of protest against the 1991 Communist coup, earning a medal from Yeltsin in 1993 for "Defense of the Homeland." During the early post-Soviet period, Kinchev positioned the band as one of the defenders of Russian rock in opposition to the Western popular music then inundating Russia during one of its most acute identity crises.

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<sup>83</sup> Leskov's efforts to assuage the suspicions of both the Orthodox church and the government regarding the extended visit of the English evangelist, Lord Radstock, indeed show him to be exceedingly tolerant and even warm toward other faiths and nationalities. See Nikolai Leskov, *Schism in High Society: Lord Radstock and His Followers*, trans. James Y. Muckle (Nottingham, UK: Bramcote Press, 1995).

As Kinchev's personal philosophies morphed into xenophobia and anti-Semitism, the band underwent a transformation as well. This transformation is evident not only in the texts of certain songs (which are almost exclusively written by Kinchev), but also in the imagery his band has displayed in recent music videos. Fan creations that incorporate his music on such platforms as YouTube cast his songs as a form of positive, if violent patriotism. Kinchev's outspokenness against Judaism and about issues related to Ukraine and the Orthodox church has alienated some of his oldest fans, but it has also drawn new ones. Though his posture toward Putin and the state seems to be constantly evolving, his work has been used in recent official patriotic celebrations. Ultimately, I show that Kinchev's particular brand of nationalism remains attractive/seductive? to many Russians.

The dissertation's final, fourth chapter deals with another popular music group, Bi-2, which lately has undergone an important transformation of its own. After lengthy periods living in Israel and Australia, the members of the band arrived in Moscow in 1999, managing to get a handful of their new wave inflected rock tunes onto the airwaves despite some grumblings that their music did not fit the standard understanding and format of Russian rock. What ultimately catapulted them into the mainstream was their appearance on the screen and on the soundtrack for Alexey Balabanov's film *Brother-2* (2000), a movie that has become infamous for its anti-American and anti-Ukrainian themes.

For most of the subsequent years of their career, the members of Bi-2 avoided overtly inserting themselves into political debates, but the lyrics and imagery in their latest work suggest a turn against state rhetoric and an apprehension about the current



Russian leadership. Very recently, they have even spoken out against concert bans.<sup>84</sup> Bi-2's career shows a transformation from political non-engagement to a form of "mild" protest that some read positively and others read negatively. During this period, their stylistic palette also has become much more diverse, including elements of popular dance music and hip-hop, which has drawn the ire of Russian rock purists. At the end of this chapter, I consider whether using these elements, which some consider "foreign or alien" to Russian rock, has made their new political consciousness more broadly relatable to Russian listeners (and particularly younger Russian listeners) with diverse generic interests.

My first three chapters suggest that some Russian artists today are responding in accordance with the cultural climate the state and its media apologists have been trying to build. The example of Bi-2's recent move in the opposite direction is more complicated. What looks like a new agenda of social and political protest to some is interpreted by others as "authorized," "controlled," or even "friendly" opposition, an opposition perhaps encouraged by the state to preserve an appearance of totally free expression. Bi-2 has been active for over twenty-five years and has yet to receive attention in musicological research. My fourth chapter attempts to fill that gap, for an understanding of Bi-2's success has significant implications for understanding the current (and future) state of musical protest and freedom of expression in Russia.

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<sup>84</sup> Presumably in response to the recent performance ban and arrest of the rapper, Husky, the band posted on twitter under the hash tag "I will sing my music," that "We are against bans of concerts. We are for free self-expression." Би-2, "#ябудупетьсвоеймузыкеpic.twitter.com/17Hpihi6BS," Tweet, @b2band (blog), November 26, 2018, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://twitter.com/b2band/status/1066994496926289920>.

## Chapter 1

### Viktor Tsoi's "Kukushka" – A Case Study of State-Sponsored Transformation

"On the Death of Viktor Tsoi"

The last hero was buried on the holiday for the Air Fleet.  
Fountains of fireworks soared dutifully above him.  
And the downpour kept coming, washing away the idiots' rapture,  
And the city, as before, shot at the living with fire.  
The romantic walk is over – the raincoat turns into a dot [becomes useless],  
And the great and wise night embraces the whole world.  
Where are your secrets? How is a star forged into a line?  
And explain how I am supposed to live through the night?  
Farewell, dear one.

--Anonymous<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

In spring 2019 Russian copyright law was changed to include new arrangements or cover versions of songs as protected material. As a result, Olga Kormukhina began pursuing her claims of copyright infringement against pop star Polina Gagarina and her arranger, Konstantin Meladze, for their 2015 version of Viktor Tsoi's song "Kukushka" (1991). Lawyers for Kormukhina won a small victory in court on December 19, 2019: her case would be allowed to move forward and the arrangements in question would be

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<sup>1</sup> "НА СМЕРТЬ ВИКТОРА ЦОЯ" Последний герой похоронен был в праздник Воздушного Флота. Фонтаны салюта взлетали дежурно над ним. А ливень все шел, замывая восторг идиотов, И город, как прежде, огнями стрелял по живым. Прогулка романтика кончена - плащ превращается в точку, И ночь обнимает весь мир, велика и мудра. Где тайны твои? Как звезда переплавлена в строчку? И как, объясни, в эту ночь мне дожить до утра? Прощай, дорогой. 19. 08. 1990 г. (Без подписи) This poem was dated August 19, 1990 by its anonymous author. In Александр Николаевич Житинский and Марианна Цой, *Виктор Цой: стихи, документы, воспоминания*, Звезды рок-н-ролла (Санкт-Петербург: Новые Геликон Язык, 1991), 356.

subjected to forensic analysis and comparison by musicological experts. Kormukhina contends that her version of the song, written by her husband, Alexey Belov, and regularly performed by her since 2012, differs in significant ways from the original, adding that it also has the blessing of Tsoi's son, Alexander. She asserts that Gagarina's arrangement, by contrast, is barely distinguishable from her own and asks that Gagarina be forced to cease all future performances.<sup>2</sup>

There is a long and rich history of performers transposing existing songs by other artists into new genres or treating them in stylistically diverse ways. Sometimes newer versions expand the dramatic dimensions of a song, extending the reach of the original artist's work to newer and wider audiences. As musicologist Albin Zak has argued about Jimi Hendrix's cover of Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower," the new version "unpacks the latent drama only suggested by the original," offering "an alternative answer to the song's existential dilemma implied in its lyrics and emphasized in its musical setting."<sup>3</sup>

Though many cover versions garner huge popular acclaim, sometimes overshadowing the originals, even the most commercially successful covers receive ethical and legal scrutiny from time to time in the popular press, in scholarly publications, and in courtooms. From both ethical and aesthetic standpoints, Elvis Presley's 1956 cover of Big Mama Thornton's 1952 R&B hit "Hound Dog" has been criticized for its

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<sup>2</sup> Екатерина Скрижалина, "Суд отправил на экспертизу 'Кукушку,' которую Гагарина могла скопировать у Кормухиной," МК.ru, December 19, 2019, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.mk.ru/culture/2019/12/18/sud-otpravil-na-ekspertizu-kukushku-kotoruyu-gagarina-mogla-skopirovat-u-kormukhinoy.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Albin J. Zak, "Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix: Juxtaposition and Transformation 'All along the Watchtower,'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 644.

appropriation of African-American musical traditions—an appropriation that garnered both Elvis and his record company far greater fame and monetary reward than it did Thornton. Though musicologist Robert Fink exposes the sonic features that mark Elvis’s recording with “an angry, jerky, hierarchy-of-beat dominated *whiteness*,” he points out that Elvis’s awareness of his musical theft was evident in his defense of the gyrations that mainstream America lambasted him for displaying on national television: “The colored folks been singing it and playing it just like I’m doin’ now, for more years than I know. They played it like that in their shanties and juke joints, and nobody paid it no mind ‘til I goosed it up. I got it from them.”<sup>4</sup> Elvis was never sued for his version. By contrast, in 1993 Roy Orbison’s estate sued the hip hop duo 2 Live Crew.

In 1994 the United States Supreme Court overturned the circuit appellate court’s ruling that 2 Live Crew’s cover of Roy Orbison’s song, “Pretty Woman” violated U. S. copyright law.<sup>5</sup> Justice David Souter, writing for the Court’s majority, stated that although the lyrics “big hairy woman,” “bald-headed woman,” and “two-timin’ woman” might not represent the highest examples of art, the song nevertheless met the legal criteria for parody (a protected form of speech under the First Amendment), which is recognized as a viable form of creative transformation under the “fair use” doctrine of copyright law. Souter argued that the circuit court, which overturned the lower court’s

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Fink, “Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music Studies at the Twilight of the Canon,” *American Music* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 171; Also quoted in Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley*, 1st ed.. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co, 1994), 288–89.

<sup>5</sup> “Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc., 510 U.S. 569 (1994),” Justia Law, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/510/569/>.

ruling, had erred in considering the four criteria that the law has established regarding fair use in isolation from one another. In justifying the ruling, Souter added, “The later words can be taken as a comment on the naivete of the original of an earlier day, as a rejection of its sentiment that ignores the ugliness of street life and the debasement that it signifies.”<sup>6</sup>

My discussion of recent cover versions of Tsoi’s “Kukushka” in this chapter avoids the legal merits of Kormukhina’s case in favor of the ethical and aesthetic concerns they raise. Musicologist Joanna Demers suggests that “transformative appropriation” might be “benign so long as it entails an original contribution from the copying artist.”<sup>7</sup> While one could argue that Kormukhina (and perhaps even Gagarina) made original contributions in their cover versions, there are still serious questions about ethics. I argue that both of their versions of “Kukushka” represent dramatic changes to Tsoi’s original, and that these subsequent transformations have made the song especially attractive for political use in Russia today. The recent versions of “Kukushka” have been performed numerous times at state-sponsored patriotic concerts featuring military and war imagery; they display a marked increase in tempo, the heavier timbres of hard rock and symphony orchestra, and a much wider dynamic range (at times softer, at times much louder). Their transformations and performance recontextualizations raise questions about whether their appropriations were indeed benign.

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Greenhouse, “Ruling on Rap Song, High Court Frees Parody From Copyright Law,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 1994, sec. U.S.

<sup>7</sup> Joanna Demers, “Music, Copies and Essences,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Popular Music*, ed. Andy Bennett (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015), 588.

Written near the end of the Soviet Union (1989–90), the meanings and resonances of “Kukushka” in Russia have moved from consensus to contention, changing with astonishing speed and pervading Russian culture. What began as an intensely personal expression of struggle and anxiety about the future that many youth identified with in the waning days of the Soviet Union has become a symbol and rallying cry for Russian patriots of all ages. Beginning in 2015, the song has been vying for contention as Russia’s unofficial—or alternative—national anthem. It has been used time and again to bolster notions of Russian triumphalism and to build consensus for the state’s annexation of Crimea. Even more recently, the song has paradoxically been used to warm relations between Russia and the former Soviet Republics as well as China. While many younger audiences now tie this song to a patriotic collective identity, so too, it seems, do older audiences who might not have encountered the song at the time of its original release. These are the people who might have felt little or no connection to the underground or unofficial Russian rock of the late-Soviet period yet still find something to identify with in the song’s latest iterations. These conflicting associations will be fleshed out in my analysis of the cover versions and in my discussions with my informants below.

The transformation of Tsoi’s “Kukushka” (1991) from an individual and apolitical<sup>9</sup> expression about the pains of the creative process into an aggressively patriotic call for Russian unity and solidarity has been achieved through generic and stylistic shifts in the music, as well as by changes in performance venue, performance practice,

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<sup>9</sup> My larger discussion below complicates this notion. Though Tsoi insisted that he intended no political subtexts in his songs when pressed to address this issue in interviews, at least one of my informants argues for an anti-Soviet subtext in “Kukushka.”

costuming, and other visual elements (including cinematic inflections). What emerges from the many cover versions of “Kukushka” produced between 2012 and 2019, which with rare exceptions appear in concerts or projects funded by the Russian Ministry of Culture, is a brand-new song entirely divorced from Tsoi’s philosophical positions.

Rather than Tsoi and his band Kino’s brooding new wave style, these latest arrangements also more closely borrow from the demonstrative theatrical aesthetic of late-Soviet variety song, or *estrada*, represented by such artists as Valery Leontiev and Alla Pugacheva, as well as by the aggressiveness of hard rock. The theatricality of the recent “Kukushka” covers has morphed the song into a vehicle for state propaganda, carrying on “the civic- or public-minded” impulse that musicologist David MacFadyen identifies as the driving force behind songs of earlier Soviet *estrada* performers such as Josef Kobzon and Lev Leshchenko.<sup>10</sup>

Tsoi died in a car wreck on August 15, 1990 before he ever had a chance to perform the song in a live venues. Yet the aural evidence he left behind on a demo tape finished on August 13, 1990,<sup>11</sup> while on holiday in Plienciems, Latvia, suggests that many of the heightened emotional gestures that recent performers of “Kukushka” and their audiences exhibit are incompatible with Tsoi’s original conception. *Estrada* aesthetics were something most Russian rockers of Tsoi’s generation would have

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion of these concepts and the artists MacFadyen applies them to, see David MacFadyen, *Red Stars: Personality and the Soviet Popular Song, 1955-1991* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> “Это было записано буквально за два дня до его смерти.” Kino bandmember, Igor Tikhomirov, qtd. in Виталий Калгин, *Цой. Последний Герой Современного Мифа* (Москва: Рипол Классик, 2016), 519.

shunned or employed only for the sake of irony. What we might imagine as music for individual, domestic contemplation or, at most, public performances with waving lighters—as at the end of Kino’s famous performance of “*Khochu peremen*” (I Want Change) from *Assa* (1987, dir. Sergei Solovyov)<sup>12</sup>—has evolved into music that inspires ecstatic gestures such as jumping up and down and shouting the ends of phrases in unison when the singer points the microphone toward the audience. As I will show, these theatrical gestures help to inspire a new type of civic-mindedness in the song that presumes it is Russia’s destiny to expand beyond its current borders and lead the world.

This chapter first provides a brief overview of relevant details from Tsoi’s biography before analyzing both the text and music of Kino’s original version of the song, drawing from the writings of Russian music critics, literary scholars (in both Russian and English language sources), and the comments of Russian informants. We then turn to similar analyses of not only the musical but also the visual elements of three recent cover versions by Kormukhina, Gagarina, and Degtyareva; these analyses draw from contemporary Russian reception, recent scholarship on contemporary Russian art, social media commentary, and the testimonies of my informants.

### **Tsoi and Kino in Context**

In order to fully grasp how the new cover versions of “Kukushka” radically alter the original song, we need to understand more about Tsoi’s personality, his social milieu, and the aesthetic aims of both him and his band Kino (Cinema). To define Tsoi and his

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<sup>12</sup> “Кино - Перемён (‘Асса’) / Kino - Peremen (the final scene of the movie ‘Assa’),” YouTube video clip posted by Rus78regionSpb, October 22, 2010, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8ZgrGz86Xw>.



group as part of any particular artistic ideology (punk, new wave) is perhaps a fool's errand: although one aspect of their artistic approach might resemble a particular genre, another aspect might not fit at all within that very same genre. Furthermore, the ways these genres are understood in Russian popular culture differ from how they are delineated in the Western Europe and the United States.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, examining how their music intersects with these different genres and ideologies helps us better understand what the song might have meant to the artists themselves.

Kino can be situated most easily geographically, for though they toured extensively around the Soviet Union, their base of activity and development was 1980s Leningrad. Even more specifically, they are generally considered to be second-generation members of the Leningrad Rock Club,<sup>14</sup> a state-sanctioned organization established in 1981 that provided young, up-and-coming bands a venue where their music could be evaluated and discussed, but perhaps more importantly from the government's perspective, controlled. Song lyrics of Rock Club bands were subject to a pre-approval process known as *litovka*, a word formed from the acronym LITO for the Literary-Publishing Department of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment (*Literaturno-*

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<sup>13</sup> See the following sources as an example of differing understandings of what constitutes "punk" in particular. Yngvar Bordewich Steinholt, "Punk Is Punk but by No Means Punk: Definition, Genre Evasion and the Quest for an Authentic Voice in Contemporary Russia," *Punk & Post Punk* 1, no. 3 (November 16, 2012): 267–84, [https://doi.org/10.1386/punk.1.3.267\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/punk.1.3.267_1); Ivan Gololobov, Hilary Pilkington, and Yngvar Bordewich Steinholt, *Punk in Russia: Cultural Mutation from the "Useless" to the "Moronic"* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Yngvar Bordewich Steinholt, *Rock in the Reservation: Songs from the Leningrad Rock Club, 1981-86* (New York: Mass Media Music Scholars' Press, 2005), 43.

*izdatel'skii otdel Narkomata prosveshcheniia*).<sup>15</sup> And for behavior unbecoming of rock club members, individual artists and even entire bands faced periodic bans from performance in official venues.<sup>16</sup>

The club went through a period of heightened self-censorship in order to avoid reprimand during a union-wide crackdown on rock music between 1983 and 1986. Following this period, the practice of *litovka* disappeared. With the arrival of Gorbachev and perestroika, the Rock Club also began a long and slow fadeout as fewer restrictions from above and a more commercialized atmosphere began to pervade the popular music industry. The need to cultivate an air of acceptability among young groups vanished and artists increasingly had to fend for themselves in the new marketplace.<sup>17</sup>

During the early period of the Leningrad Rock Club, musicians tended to put all of the energy that remained to them into their music after typically once-per-week shifts in dead-end jobs.<sup>18</sup> A musician without such a position would have been subject to the laws against parasitism, so at least some form of meager employment—most commonly, night watchman, street sweeper, or, Tsoi's occupation, boiler room technician—was mandatory.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Polly McMichael, “‘A Room-Sized Ocean’: Apartments in the Practice and Mythology of Leningrad’s Rock Music,” in *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Youth Cultures, Music, and the State in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 205, n. 44.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>17</sup> Steinholt, *Rock in the Reservation*, 45.

<sup>18</sup> McMichael, “‘A Room-Sized Ocean’: Apartments in the Practice and Mythology of Leningrad’s Rock Music,” 183.

<sup>19</sup> Alexey Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 151–55.

Central to the identity of both the musicians and their audiences was the notion of “*svoi*” (us/ours), which sociologist Alexey Yurchak defines as something existing outside of official cultural ideology, but not necessarily in opposition to it. Those said to be *svoi* or “one of us,” went through the required and expected rituals of Soviet life (attending meetings, parades, paying dues, etc.) out of a sense of responsibility to their particular circle even if everyone collectively regarded these rituals as useless and meaningless. Being present for a parade, for instance, did not require that one actually pay attention to it or believe in the ideological meanings behind it. In other words, they were neither dissidents nor activists, but merely “*normal’nye liudi*” (“normal people”) trying to live their lives without drawing the undue attention of the authorities upon themselves. As long as one outwardly adhered to the rituals of officialdom, they were often free to engage in any number of creative activities in the private or unofficial sphere.<sup>20</sup>

In the earliest manifestations of Russian rock music as well as during the period of the Leningrad Rock Club this notion of *svoi* applied to music shared within close settings like private apartments. These unofficial performances known as *kvartirniki* were often the only option open to artists that had been banned. Even artists who were not under a ban would use the *kvartirniki* as a venue to perform songs whose texts had not met with official approval.<sup>21</sup> Often they also performed approved songs with alternative versions of the lyrics that would not have passed the censorship process. Because of their intimate nature and the necessity to keep the volume level low, musicians almost always

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<sup>20</sup> Everything in this paragraph from Yurchak, 102–14.

<sup>21</sup> McMichael, “‘A Room-Sized Ocean’: Apartments in the Practice and Mythology of Leningrad’s Rock Music,” 187-200.

performed acoustic versions of their material as a very small and exclusive audience sat around and drank vodka, brandy, or fortified wine. The combination of *litovka* and the acoustic environment of the *kvartirniki* put the texts of songs front and center to some extent.<sup>22</sup> Thus the lyrics of a song were privileged over its musical aspects by many early Russian rock musicians and critics.

In this context, *svoi* related to an artist's accessibility and legibility to an intimate circle. Even if audiences in these circles had a fondness for Western rock music, that music lacked the specific qualities that made its Russian counterparts *svoi*.<sup>23</sup> These non-official circles that audiences and performers shared thus existed “*vne*,” a word Yurchak uses to describe a way of being said to exist inside Soviet society, yet outside of political or ideological meaning.<sup>24</sup> All of the above information will be important in our determination of whether the changes to “Kukushka” freight the song with new ideological agendas.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 190-91.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 184–85.

<sup>24</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More*, 134.

## Tsoi's "Kukushka"<sup>25</sup>

Literary scholars in Russia who write about Russian rock texts seem to agree that "Kukushka's" subject is the individual as hero—as opposed to some collective identity—and his deeply personal struggles. Anderson argues for the image of Tsoi in general as a solitary hero in the literary tradition most clearly exemplified by the Russian Romantic poet Mikhail Lermontov (1814-41). In the text of "Kukushka," she states, "It is easy to picture a Lermontov-like solitary walk and feelings of disquiet."<sup>26</sup> I build on Anderson's reading as well as those of the Russian literary scholars Berdnikova, Milyugina, and Petrova.<sup>27</sup>

Milyugina cites the first stanza of Tsoi's "Kukushka" as one of many examples of the "rock hero [that] is doomed to solve eternal problems alone, the first and last

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<sup>25</sup> The original version, as recorded by Tsoi's band Kino and based on the demo tape Tsoi and bandmate Yuri Kasparyan made just prior to Tsoi's death, can be heard at the Youtube link provided at the end of this citation. Tsoi never had the opportunity to perform the song live, so this video (with background crowd sounds added) represents a creative imagining of how Tsoi would have looked performing the song. The editors skillfully combined footage from a Kino concert of other songs at Moscow's Olympic Stadium with the audio track found on Kino's *Black Album* (1990). We might see this as a form of fan fiction, reclaiming the song for Tsoi following the debut of Olga Kormukhina's cover (discussed below). ANOTHER STORY BAND, "KINO V Tsoi- Kukushka (Cuckoo Bird) (Edited by A. SARGSYAN #2013), 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1Nx3SU2izA>.

<sup>26</sup> Rebecca Diane Anderson, "Viktor Tsoi, Rock Star as Soviet Hero: Individual Resistance in the Lermontov Tradition" (M.A., Canada, University of Alberta (Canada), 2006), 71, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304953170/abstract/F464FE6226474DFFPQ/1>.

<sup>27</sup> Александровна Мария Бердникова, "Гендерная инверсия исполнения рок-песен," *Русская рок-поэзия: текст и контекст*, no. 15 (2014), <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/gendernaya-inversiya-ispolneniya-rok-pesen>; Екатерина Г. Милюгина, "Феномен рок-поэзии и романтический тип мышления," *Русская рок-поэзия: текст и контекст*, no. 2 (1999), <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/fenomen-rok-poezii-i-romanticheskii-tip-myshleniya>; С. А. Петрова, "Фольклорная традиция в цикле 'Черный альбом' группы 'Кино,'" *Русская рок-поэзия: текст и контекст*, no. 12 (2011), <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/folklornaya-traditsiya-v-tsikle-chyornyy-albom-gruppy-kino>.

questions of personal, social and universal existence.”<sup>29</sup> Petrova interprets the most important issue of concern in the text of “Kukushka” as the future in general, but for her this future is actually an expansion of the lyrical subject’s concern for his own personal journey through life.<sup>30</sup> Related words like “solitary,” “personal,” and “alone” point to a common theme of introspection in each of these interpretations. Here is my own translation of the song for comparison with points made throughout this discussion:

### **Кукушка – Виктор Цой/Кино**

#### Verse 1

Песен еще ненаписанных, сколько?  
Скажи, кукушка, пропой.  
В городе мне жить или на выселках,  
  
Камнем лежать или гореть звездой?  
Звездой.

#### Chorus

Солнце моё - взгляни на меня,  
Моя ладонь превратилась в кулак,  
И если есть порох - дай огня.

Вот так...

#### Verse 2

Кто пойдет по следу одинокому?  
Сильные да смелые  
Головы сложили в поле в бою.  
Мало кто остался в светлой памяти,

### **Cuckoo – Victor Tsoi/Kino**

How many songs are yet unwritten?  
Tell me, cuckoo, sing to me.  
Should I live in the city or on the  
outskirts,  
To lie as a stone or burn as a star?  
Like a star.

Sun of mine – glance upon me now,  
My palm has turned into a fist,  
And if there is gunpowder – give me a  
spark.  
Like so...

Who will walk along the lonely path?  
Strong and brave heads are laid together  
on the field in battle.  
There are few who remain in clear  
memory,

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<sup>29</sup> “Рок-герой обречен решать в одиночку вечные проблемы, первые и последние вопросы личного, общественного и вселенского бытия.” Милюгина, (page numbers were not printed within this source. See the sixth page of the downloadable pdf document at the link cited above).

<sup>30</sup> С. А. Петрова, “Фольклорная традиция в цикле ‘Черный альбом’ группы ‘Кино,’” *Русская рок-поэзия: текст и контекст*, no. 12 (2011): 83, <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/folklornaya-traditsiya-v-tsikle-chyornyy-albom-gruppy-kino>.

В трезвом уме да с твердой рукой в  
строю,  
В строю.

In sober mind, and with a firm hand in the  
ranks,  
In the ranks.

(Chorus)

Verse 3

Где же ты теперь, воля вольная?  
С кем же ты сейчас  
Ласковый рассвет встречаешь?  
Ответь.  
Хорошо с тобой, да плохо без тебя,  
Голову да плечи терпеливые под плеть,  
Под плеть.

Where are you now, free will?  
Whom are you with now?  
Are you meeting the tender dawn?  
Answer.  
It is good with you, and bad without you,  
My head and patient shoulders are bent to  
the whip (under the lash).

(Chorus)

All but one<sup>31</sup> of the Russian literary scholars I cite above predate two momentous events in the changing interpretation of the song: the 2011 release of Olga Kormukhina's cover of "Kukushka" and the 2015 release of the Russian film *The Battle for Sevastopol* (*Bitva za Sevastopol*). I will return to a more detailed discussion of these versions later.

Anderson considers the period when Tsoi wrote the song (1989–90) and wonders, "Why was Tsoi still concerned about servitude (most likely referencing the text of the third verse) when freedom and change could be seen? After all, this was the time of the destruction of the Berlin Wall, which had been a symbol of suppression, physically dividing the public and individuals from each other."<sup>32</sup> One likely possibility is that when the Berlin Wall fell, it was unclear what the ramifications would be for the Soviet Union.

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<sup>31</sup> Though Petrova's article was published not long after the release of Kormukhina's cover, her commentary is more concerned with the folk traditions that she perceives to be in evidence throughout the lyrics of Tsoi's final album.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson, "Viktor Tsoi, Rock Star as Soviet Hero: Individual Resistance in the Lermontov Tradition," 72.

Anderson refers to Troitsky for other possible explanations. Troitsky, writing in the afterword of his landmark 1987 book *Back in the USSR*, stated that rock musicians were likely to have more opportunities, but that many had trouble adjusting to the dizzying new atmosphere. Furthermore, he argued that rock as a genre was still “controversial and vulnerable,” as the Ministry of Culture (aided by some of the television networks), Russophile writers, and a particular “chauvinistic organization that carri[e]d on anti-Semitic propaganda and decree[d] rock music as ‘Satanic,’” had been carrying out a sustained assault.<sup>33</sup> In this context, Tsoi’s song might express uncertainty for his own future as an artist battling creative dilemmas (verse one), a sense of loneliness in that struggle (verse two), and yet another level of uncertainty concerning the freedom to express himself in ways most natural to him (verse three). The chorus, with its image of the fist, would then seem emblematic of a determination to stay the course until poetic inspiration strikes.

Parallel to the life of “Kukushka,” the late-Soviet state’s cautious forbearance toward Russian rock has become open cooperation in the post-Soviet era. The nationally broadcast live performance of the band Lyube’s song “*Davai za*” as Putin and Medvedev strolled side-by-side across Red Square to give victory speeches on the stage following the 2008 elections is but one example of this new cooperative relationship.<sup>34</sup> Rock song texts that employ battle metaphors to express internal psychological struggle (like

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<sup>33</sup> Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia* (Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 137.

<sup>34</sup> \_Matvey Music, “ЛЮБЭ - Давай За... (выступление на Васильевском спуске),” accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ni19S9FazEg>.



“Kukushka”) seem especially ripe for appropriation. The range of meanings that a text evokes becomes increasingly limited after it has been repeatedly associated with wartime images and patriotic fervor. This appears to be the case with “Kukushka.” I will explore this further in my analysis of a number of YouTube videos connected to state patriotic celebrations below.

Berdnikova points out that in Tsoi’s “Kukushka” there is a marked use of personal pronouns yet none of the verbs in the text betray the lyrical subject’s gender.<sup>35</sup> The prominence of personal pronouns signals the primacy of the individual and reinforces the protagonist’s connection to the romantic heroes of any national tradition. The lack of gender identity made the song especially easy to cover for female artists in the years that follow. While other acts featuring male vocalists have covered the song,<sup>36</sup> the vast majority of new versions have been performed by women and teenage girls.

Before venturing into a discussion of “Kukushka” from my informants’ perspectives, I offer my own analysis of the relationship between the text analyzed above and the music. I argue that both the original demo tape and the recording produced for Kino’s *Black Album* exhibit musical features that reinforce the introverted and lonely soul-searching that I and others read in the text. Regarding the arranging and recording of the *Black Album*, Kino drummer and percussionist Georgy Guryanov stated, “We tried as much as possible to preserve the sound and style [of the demo]. . . . Because of this, it

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<sup>35</sup> Бердникова, “Гендерная инверсия исполнения рок-песен,” 50.

<sup>36</sup> See Bi-2 and Sbornik. Bi-2’s version features the female singer Chicherina, singing the chorus with the male lead, thereby demonstrating the lyric’s ability to assume both male and female heroes even simultaneously.

was even more difficult to work.”<sup>37</sup> Yuri Kasparyan, who recorded the original demo with Tsoi in Latvia declared, “Well, in fact, our main task was to save everything that was left of Viktor: voice, guitar. And then a few technical points: sync the drum machine recorded on this demo tape using a click track.”<sup>38</sup> Comparing the final version with the demo, we can also hear that the melodic motives in the accompaniment (guitar riffs, for example) survived virtually unchanged.<sup>39</sup> This might be because Kasparyan himself created those parts in the demo. Since the demo tape is basically a skeletal version of the one that appears on the *Black Album*, I will restrict my discussion to the final version.

The simple melody’s frequent emphasis on the falling minor second between the sixth and fifth scale degrees in A minor strengthens the sense of longing for answers to the larger questions Tsoi poses about life, and Tsoi’s lightly-strummed acoustic guitar evokes the lonely bards of many folk music traditions as well as the intimacy of the intimate *kvartirniki*. In the instrumental introduction and choruses (excluding the first chorus) a synthesizer alternates between the third and second scale degrees (C and B) creating strong-beat dissonances that achingly resolve the half-step either up or down (depending on the chord played beneath them) at the beginning of nearly every bar.

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<sup>37</sup> “Мы старались максимально сохранить звук, стиль... Из-за этого было трудно даже работать.” Георгий Гурьянов qtd. in Калгин, *Цой. Последний герой современного мифа*, 522.

<sup>38</sup> “Ну, собственно, у нас главная задача была – сохранить все, что от Виктора осталось: голос, гитару. И потом несколько технических моментов: синхронизировать записанную вот на этой демонстрационной кассете драм-машинку с синхросигналом.” Юрий Каспарян, qtd. in *Ibid*.

<sup>39</sup> For those wishing to make their own comparison, the contents of the demo tape were released in 2002 by Moroz Records. The full album is available on YouTube and “Kukushka” can be heard at 35:44 at the link provided. Deividas Lasinis, “Кино Последние записи (белый альбом),” June 9, 2018, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://youtu.be/SbpOvqHDoq4?t=2142>.

The tempo plods along rather ponderously and unchanging (circa 106 beats per minute). In the harmonic progression, chords change only at the beginnings of bars as a bass line focused exclusively on chord roots supplies an ostinato repeated endlessly on the rhythm of a dotted-quarter, eighth note, and a half note. Tsoi's vocal melody is nearly as static and his delivery is almost monotone, its volume consistently registering a *mezzo forte* dynamic level. This is a fairly typical feature of his work in general.

As the song progresses from verse to verse, the texture becomes slightly more complex with the addition of short guitar riffs and woodblocks, yet the volume never exceeds a medium level. Without these subtle changes to the background accompaniment, the song would run the risk of falling into total stasis. As these elements accumulate, they provide a sense of building tension near the end of the song that parallels the hero's desire for the return of free will as he patiently bends to the lash. My informants spoke less about the music than the text, yet those who chose to say something about the music alluded to similar characteristics and pointed toward a certain interiority in the song's performance.

### **Informant Impressions of Tsoi's Original**

Those individuals who elected to tell me about the specific meanings they heard in "Kukushka" read it similarly: as an expression of the personal struggles of a lonely artist. Yet a survey of individual observations provides a richer portrait of the song's range of meanings. Oleg told me it has been familiar to him since childhood. He reports that generally speaking, Kino had a great influence on the generation that grew up in the 1990s and early 2000s. In grade school and even into his undergraduate years, he and his friends would sing Kino's songs with guitar accompaniment almost every time they

gathered together. He says that “Kukushka” was one of the group’s most well-known and beloved songs.<sup>40</sup> Victoria stated that “Kukushka” is “one of my favorite songs. In general, I like the songs of Viktor Tsoi. He was my idol. I still remember how upset I was when they reported his death in a car accident.”<sup>41</sup>

Svetlana Shabrova states that the song is “a reflection on fate, about a personal choice,” and referring to the lyrics, the choice is whether one will “lie like a stone or fight.”<sup>42</sup> For her it seems that the song represents Tsoi summoning the courage needed to continue some vague struggle. Her memory of the day Soviet citizens learned about Tsoi’s death is still vivid and gives us eye-witness perspective from a city other than Moscow or St. Petersburg. Svetlana was born and raised in Ivanovo, about three hundred kilometers northeast of Moscow. Her account of Tsoi’s immediate memorialization takes place in that city:

I remember well the day Tsoi died. That evening, at a discotheque, I go to the restroom and suddenly I see a girl breaking into hysterics. She had just found out that Tsoi was dead. Then others joined her. They turned off the music in the club. They announced an intermission. There was massive grief throughout the country. I was not a fan of Tsoi, and his work is not very familiar to me, but the song “Kukushka,” of course, was very popular.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “Эта песня знакома с детства, концертное видео раньше я не смотрел. Группа “Кино” имеет большое влияние на поколение 90-х и начала 2000-х. Их песни мы пели под гитару, почти каждый раз, когда собирались компанией еще школьников или уже будучи студентами. Одна из самых любимых и известных песен этой группы.” Oleg Ugrumov, Facebook dialogue, March 26, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Victoria from Pyatigorsk, HelloTalk message, April 11, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> “Песня Кукушка- размышлением о судьбе, о собственном выборе-лежать камнем или бороться.” Svetlana Shabrova in an email, April 1, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> “Я хорошо помню день, когда умер Цой. Это вечер, дискотека, я захожу в туалет и вдруг вижу девушку, бьющуюся в истерике. Она только что узнала, что погиб Цой. Потом к ней присоединились другие. Выключили музыку в клубе. Объявили паузу. Это было масштабное горе в рамках всей страны. Я не была поклонницей Цоя, и его творчество мне

From both Oleg's and Victoria's comments and Svetlana's account, we come to appreciate the level of widespread popularity Tsoi had attained, not to mention the degree of meaningfulness his songs must have held for the generation that grew up listening to them. As we will see, this made more than one song of his particularly susceptible to political use.

Sergey Chubraev asserted that the "song is of course important and significant." Before seeing the cover versions that I would later share with him, he stated, "I know many cover versions of 'Kukushka.' By and large, in my opinion, no one could spoil it because it is a complete and remarkable work in its perfection."<sup>44</sup> (As we will see in the conclusion of this discussion, these notions were radically altered when I showed him videos of cover performances he had not previously seen.) For him, the song provides proof that Tsoi possessed special powers of premonition and therefore belongs among the canon of Russia's most renowned poets:

It seems to me that this song dotted all the signs: song-testament, song-premonition, song-farewell. In Russian poetry there are many such examples - Pushkin, Yesenin, Vysotsky, Brodsky. It always produces a trembling horror and convincing proof of [the artist] as a member of a special elect few, and the gift of premonition that creative geniuses have. In fact, they are endowed from heaven and God with what the ordinary mortal is deprived.<sup>45</sup>

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не очень знакомо. Но песня Кукушка, конечно, была очень популярна." Svetlana Shabrova, email communication, April 1, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> "Песня, конечно, важная и значимая. . . . Я знаю много кавер-версий "Кукушки". По большому счету, на мой взгляд, её никто испортить так и не смог. Потому что это законченное и прекрасное в своем совершенстве произведение." Sergey Chubraev, email communication, April 17, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> "Мне кажется, что эта песня расставила все точки над знаками. Песня-завещание, песня-предчувствие, песня-прощание. В русской поэзии много таких примеров-Пушкин, Есенин, Высоцкий, Бродский. Это всегда вызывает трепетный ужас и убедительное доказательство

Sergey seems to recognize that Tsoi was perhaps pondering his own death and wondering whether anyone else would continue the struggle should he succumb:

In the beginning, the song “Kukushka” disturbed me and plunged me into a state of sadness and melancholy. But before long, I understood that this was some kind of a message from Victor, the meaning of which is that if he really dies, then there will be no one to hope and count on anymore, and the battle flag will have to be taken from his invisible hands, to walk further, or to crawl. We’ll see how it goes. It’s too early to draw conclusions, but I dream and hope that it succeeded and will continue to succeed.<sup>46</sup>

The song therefore communicates for Sergey the artist’s fear that his work will have been in vain, but Sergey is hopeful that the Tsoi’s work will continue to resonate in positive ways. Though Sergey did not engage directly with the musical elements, when he describes the “state of sadness and melancholy” it evokes for him it is probably the song’s musical setting that he is responding to, reinforcing the lonely imagery in the text.

Maria Udovydchenko first situated the song very specifically within its original era, speaking of its relationship to political issues of the Soviet period. For her, “[T]his song...is about opposition to the Soviet system, which indiscriminately reduces everyone to the same level.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, the struggle Tsoi was singing about, was in part the struggle for artistic autonomy in a system that sought to obliterate individuality.

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особой избранности и дара предвидения творческих гениев. Собственно, наделённых от неба и Бога тем, чего лишён обычный смертный.” Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> “Песня ‘Кукушка’ в начале тревожила меня и погружала в состояние грусти и меланхолии. Но вскоре я понял, что это некое послание от Виктора, смысл которого заключается в том, что если он действительно погибнет, то тогда надеяться и рассчитывать уже будет больше не на кого, и придётся принят из его невидимых рук боевое знамя. И идти дальше. Или ползти. Как получится. Итог подводить рано, но я мечтаю и надеюсь, что это получилось и будет получаться дальше.” Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “[Э]та песня. . .о противостоянии системе советского строя, уравнивающего всех без разбора.” Maria Udovydchenko, Facebook messenger conversation, April 9, 2019.

Maria was only seven when the Soviet Union split up and she was still only a teenager when she began to regularly listen to the song. As an adolescent, she said she had yet to delve into the intricacies of Soviet politics and the song therefore carried no political colorings. However, she states, “I clearly felt that this was a song about confrontation, about choosing one’s own path, about all the difficulties associated with this choice. Therefore, to me, a rebellious teenager, the song was very gratifying.” Maria now works at the “Garage” Museum’s archives in St. Petersburg and much of the material she curates is closely connected to this time period as well as the work of Tsoi’s group, Kino and affiliated artists. She states that now she is convinced of the song’s additional political implications, having studied both Kino and its surrounding milieu.<sup>48</sup>

Maria’s comments notwithstanding, some of my other informants refuse to allow for any political connection in Tsoi’s work. In 2007 Russian poet and author Marina Strukova (b. 1975) published an essay devoted to Tsoi in the gazette *Day of Literature*, entitled, “Country of Romantics. From the ‘Lost’ Generation,” in which she sought to articulate what Tsoi meant to her generation. It has since been republished in anthologies about Tsoi and appears in several places across the Russian internet. Here she argues against political motivations in any of Tsoi’s works, but speaks to the same concern for individuality that Maria finds in “Kukushka”:

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<sup>48</sup> “Оригинальная песня Цоя и группы Кино: когда я слушала ее подростком, она не была для меня политически окрашена, поскольку я даже не вникала в ситуацию. Когда закончился СССР мне было 7 лет. Но, я четко ощущала, что это песня о противостоянии, о выборе своего пути, обо всех сложностях, связанных с этим выбором. Поэтому, мне - бунтующему подростку, она очень нравилась. Сейчас, зная историю, изучая художественную ситуацию того времени, бэкграунд группы Кино - уверена, что так оно и есть.” Ibid.

Thanks to Tsoi, many of my peers have succeeded as a person and survived the era of change, because in his songs we really found answers to questions about the meaning of life. Under their influence we made a moral choice - [to be] absolutely different young people – because his songs did not impose any political views, did not appeal to any of the religions, but only brought up a strong, independent personality, proclaiming self-affirmation, the courage of a young person in spite of any cataclysms, the indifference of others, [or] fate.<sup>49</sup>

Despite their different opinion about Tsoi's political meanings or motives, in both the words of Strukova and of Maria, we find references to individuals making difficult choices in order to assert their true identities in the face of external resistance and limitations.

Tsoi himself made it clear in an interview that he did not intend any political meaning for the song “I Want Change,” cited above. He maintained that his performance of the song was merely tacked onto the end of the film *Assa* (1987) and bore no relationship to the political meanings people ascribed to the film.<sup>50</sup> This song has been appropriated by political movements of both the opposition and ruling parties since the film's premiere.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “Благодаря Цою многие из моих сверстников состоялись как личность и выжили в эпоху перемен, потому что в его песнях мы действительно находили ответы на вопросы о смысле жизни, под их влиянием делали нравственный выбор, - абсолютно разные молодые люди, потому что его песни не навязывали никаких политических взглядов, не апеллировали ни к одной из религий, а лишь воспитывали сильную, независимую личность, декларируя самоутверждение, мужание молодого человека вопреки любым катаклизмам, равнодушию окружающих, судьбе.” Марина Струкова, “Страна романтиков. Из истории ‘потерянного’ поколения,” *Газета День Литературы*, May 2007.

<sup>50</sup> “Виктор Цой о песне ‘Перемен’ и Фильме ‘Асса.’ 1988 год,” YouTube, accessed December 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgf42-azgtI>.

<sup>51</sup> See a detailed history of the song's use in Лев Ганкин, “‘Хочу перемен!’: как песня «Кино» превратилась в главный политический лозунг в России — и почему Цой этого вообще-то не хотел,” *Meduza*, June 20, 2017, <https://meduza.io/feature/2017/06/20/hochu-peremen-kak-pesnya-kino-prevratilas-v-glavnyu-politicheskiy-lozung-v-rossii-i-pochemu-tsoy-etogo-voobshe-to-ne-hotel>. For an English language translation of this article see Lev Gankine, “How



When confronted with these facts, Maria clarified her position about Tsoi's general political intentions, stating that neither he nor anyone in his circle sought to overthrow the government. Rather, she finds that through their hobbies, manner of dress, etc., they participated in 'forms' of self-expression that were clearly opposed to power in general, and more specifically to the Soviet government's prescriptions for how citizens should live their lives and conduct themselves. She asserts that had they been able to "wear long hair and write abstractions" like rockers in the West, there would have been no conflict and perhaps Tsoi would have been something else entirely.<sup>52</sup>

Maria seems to doubt Tsoi's sincerity in the interview cited above, characterizing Tsoi and his close friends, the artists Timur Novikov (1958–2002) and Sergei "Africa" Bugaev (b. 1966), as "trolls" who "ridiculed everything, deliberately mixed things up, created a fog of doubt, and generally caused confusion." She describes this as "their

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Viktor Tsoi's Most Famous Song Became the Post-Soviet World's Protest Anthem, against the Rock Legend's Own Wishes," trans. Kevin Rothrock, Meduza, June 21, 2017, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2017/06/21/how-viktor-tsoi-s-most-famous-song-became-the-post-soviet-world-s-protest-anthem-against-the-rock-legend-s-own-wishes>.

<sup>52</sup> "Виктор Цой, в начале 1980-х, когда только начинал свою музыкальную карьеру был частью контр-культуры, так называемого неофициального искусства. В среде неофициальных художников в целом и особенно в Ленинграде, не было особенно политических настроений, т.е. особенно никто не призывал свергнуть существующую власть. Да и это было просто невозможно (это отдельный разговор). Протест художников и музыкантов, их противостояние системе, заключались в стремлении жить так, как им хочется - делать то искусство, которое им интересно, одеваться так, как хочется, а не как положено советскому гражданину. Эта, в целом не политическая позиция. Делала их противниками власти, стремившийся подавить их творческие порывы и способы самовыражения через увлечения, стиль в одежде и прочее. Если бы в то время не было этой советской системы, а как на западе можно было бы заниматься рок-музыкой, носить длинные волосы и писать абстракции - конфликта бы не было. Возможно он был бы в чем-то другом, но того противостояния, которое несет в себе позднесоветская контр-культура, скорее всего не было бы." Maria Udovydchenko, Facebook message, December 24, 2019.

strategy for taking over everything, including power,” noting that Bugaev was even a cultural advisor to Putin for a short period.<sup>53</sup> The short period actually extended off and on from at least 2009 to 2019, in which Bugaev served the Putin administration in two capacities. In 2009<sup>54</sup> and 2010,<sup>55</sup> he was a speaker at the all-Russian youth forum “Seliger,” on Lake Seliger in the Tver Region. This forum existed on the initiative of “Nashi” (a kind of youth for Putin movement) and the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs (*Rosmolodyozh*). From early 2012 until as late as 2019 he served as an “authorized representative,” (or proxy) for Putin.<sup>56</sup>

Bugaev, who played the doomed hero Bananan in *Assa*, has recently commented on the film and Tsoi’s role in it, as well as his own relationship to power. He regards Putin as part of a modern-day avant-garde, stating that his thinking is similar to the radically abstract expressionist painter and theorist, Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935).

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<sup>53</sup> “. . . и Цой, и его близкие друзья – Тимур Новиков, Бугаев Африка (художники) – были такими ‘троллями,’ т.е. высмеивали все, специально путали, наводили туман, сбивали с толку. Это была их стратегия по захвату, в том числе и власти – Африка в какой-то момент был советником Путина по вопросам культуры.” Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> “Художник Сергей ‘Африка’ Бугаев посетил Форум ‘Селигер 2009,’” *Российская газета*, July 21, 2009 accessed April 2, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2009/07/21/afrika-seliger-anons.html>.

<sup>55</sup> See in “Бугаев, Сергей Анатольевич,” in *Википедия*, March 15, 2020, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%91%D1%83%D0%B3%D0%B0%D0%B5%D0%B2\\_%D0%A1%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%B9\\_%D0%90%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%87&oldid=105696907](https://ru.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%91%D1%83%D0%B3%D0%B0%D0%B5%D0%B2_%D0%A1%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%B9_%D0%90%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%87&oldid=105696907).

<sup>56</sup> Bugaev’s name appears in the appendix of a document posted by the Central Election of Commission among a list of 498 other proxies. See the document available for download at “О регистрации доверенных лиц кандидата на должность Президента Российской Федерации Владимира Владимировича Путина,” Документы ЦИК России, February 6, 2012, accessed July 14, 2020, <http://cikrf.ru/activity/docs/postanovleniya/26420/>.

Though he states that he left his advisory role disillusioned about what could actually be accomplished, his vaguely critical statements seem directed merely at the general mechanisms of bureaucracy, rather than at Putin specifically. Furthermore, he asserts that the youth today do not really understand what oppression is. Echoing the Traditionalist<sup>57</sup> voices of neo-conservatism, he declares: “Modern Russian society has finally achieved the most important thing, faith. Four religious denominations have been officially registered. What other freedoms are needed?”<sup>58</sup>

Bugaev paints a picture of a Tsoi who changed after 1988, hinting at more commercially motivated ambitions and describing Tsoi’s comments about the use of his song in the film as indicative of a revised way of thinking: that despite what he later said about the song not being connected to the film (and thereby some sort of political message), it became a favorite among audiences for its presumed subtext. In an assertion suggesting that at the time of filming Tsoi indeed sought to take some sort of a stand, he

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<sup>57</sup> The Traditionalist movement was founded by René Guénon (1886-1951). Though it has split into a variety of independent and even divergent branches and sub-branches throughout the world, adherents generally subscribe to the belief that a primordial wisdom is shared by the ancient religions of the world and that affiliation with one of these is essential to gain access to that wisdom. Through the more esoteric practices of these faiths, they believe one gains access to a higher, divine intuition that has been lost to the modern world since the emergence of secular philosophies during the Enlightenment. See Mark J. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: University Press, 2004).

<sup>58</sup> “У современного российского общества наконец появилось самое главное — вера. Официально зарегистрированы четыре религиозные конфессии. Какие еще свободы нужны?” Марина Гаричян, “‘Путин — новый Малевич’: Сергей Бугаев из фильма «Асса» — о свободе в России,” 161.ru Ростов-на-Дону онлайн, April 5, 2019, <https://161.ru/text/culture/66044413/>.

states, “Tsoi was a romantic. He defended a certain picture of the world.”<sup>59</sup> Along these same lines, in her essay “Country of Romantics,” Strukova asserts that Tsoi represented “constancy in the midst of change. Sincerity in the midst of lies and the noise of modern art. A romantic walk through the mud of the twentieth century, a romantic who has not renounced idealism, nobility, and honesty. He called to embody *toska* [longing, melancholy] for a meaningful, bright life in action, according to the laws of conscience.”<sup>60</sup>

In the following statement from the BBC documentary *Comrades* (1985) we find Bugaev arguing for the non-political view of music: “I think they try and make music dependent on politics here. I don't think that helps anyone. Music has hardly anything to do with politics at all. I'd like music to get its independence here.”<sup>61</sup> Yet his more recent comments seem to deny Tsoi the right to keep his music independent of politics.

Reading just the title of the song, “I Want Changes” in the context of its time, it is impossible to ignore a political or at least socio-cultural subtext. Though Maria allowed for the fact that art does not have to have a political message and that Tsoi and many of the “New Artists” he associated with outwardly “disowned” politics, she asserted, “but at

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<sup>59</sup> “Цой был романтиком, он защищал определенную картину мира.” Гаричян, “Путин — новый Малевич.”

<sup>60</sup> “Постоянство среди перемен. Искренность среди лжи и и зауми современного искусства. Прогулка романтика по грязи двадцатого века, романтика, не отрекшегося от идеализма, благородства, честности. Тоску по осмысленной, яркой жизни он призывал воплощать в действие по законам совести.” Струкова, “Страна романтиков. Из истории ‘потерянного’ поколения.”

<sup>61</sup> His statement is translated in the subtitles beginning at 5:20 of this video clip. “Сергей Курёхин и Его Поп-Механика. 1985 год,” YouTube, accessed January 11, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iv82\\_N1BTzs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iv82_N1BTzs).

the same time, many of their works nevertheless contain this message, albeit veiled.”<sup>62</sup> Judging from Bugaev’s comments about Putin and the issue of freedom in contemporary Russian society, it seems that Bugaev might have been the one to change, rather than Tsoi. Furthermore, “Collecting stadiums”<sup>63</sup> full of people, as Bugaev characterizes Tsoi’s later form of implied commercialism, does not necessarily mean that he sold out his counter-culture credibility at the time, or that he would have engaged in patriotic banner waving had he survived to the present.

Maria Engström, a scholar of contemporary Russian culture and literature, finds a connection between Tsoi and the neo-conservative wing of the late- and post-Soviet avant-garde but offers some clarifications about this movement via Yurchak that seem to preclude the wholesale acquiescence to capitalism by Tsoi that Bugaev implies. She makes the claim that as Liberalism became the dominant discourse during perestroika, it came to be regarded with the same disdain by non-conformists as the formerly dominant Soviet ideology for presuming to possess a monopoly on truth.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, travels to the West by Tsoi, Novikov, and another artist Tsoi was closely associated with, Sergey Kuryokhin (1954–96), led to an extreme disillusionment with capitalism. Some time after

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<sup>62</sup> “Искусство может быть не политическим и не иметь политический посыл. ‘Новые художники,’ с которыми был близок Цой, тоже отрешиваются от политического посыла, но в тоже время, многие из их работ все-таки этот посыл содержат, пусть и завуалированный.” Maria Udovydchenko, Facebook message, December 24, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> “Виктор Цой после 1988 года был уже другим Цоем. Он стал собирать стадионы. Отношение к его концертам очень сильно изменилось. Соответственно, он пересматривал свои взгляды на вещи.” Гаричян, “Путин — новый Малевич.”

<sup>64</sup> Maria Engström, “Daughterland: Contemporary Russian Messianism and Neo-Conservative Visuality,” in *Russia: Art Resistance and the Conservative-Authoritarian Zeitgeist*, eds. Lena Jonson and Andrei Erofeev (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 86-87.

his western sojourns, Kuryokhin for example, joined the National-Bolshevik Party,<sup>65</sup> asserting that a modified form of socialism was the best path forward. He attributed this to the fact that socialism was the means of combating capitalism that was most familiar to Russians.<sup>66</sup>

Engström characterizes the radical art that came about in the post-Soviet space (after Tsoi had passed away) as “part of a libertarian emancipation project aimed at liberation from both Soviet officialdom and post-Soviet neo-liberal capitalism.” Then she adds, “The quest for the prized territory of outsidedness/*vne* and freedom from all forms of ideological violence manifested itself in hybridization, provocation and a free mixture of elements that belonged to different ideologies.”<sup>67</sup> This “free mixture” led Kuryokhin at least to intermittent associations with the likes of Alexander Dugin and his “Nazi-stained” ideologies.<sup>68</sup> For his part, Kuryokhin often employed a form of provocative

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<sup>65</sup> The NBP was formed by Eduard Limonov and Alexander Dugin in 1993 with a goal to bring the extremes of the political Left and Right together. For a discussion of the paradoxical ideologies it housed within its platform, as well as the participation of artists like Kurekhin, see Yngvar Steinholt, “Siberian Punk Shall Emerge Here: Egor Letov and Grazhdanskaia Oborona,” *Popular Music* 31, no. 3 (October 1, 2012): 408–11, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143012000311>.

<sup>66</sup> Engström, “Daughterland,” 87.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> For a history of how Dugin and far-right ideologies in general have inched from the fringe toward the mainstream in Russian politics, see Marlene Laruelle, “The Iuzhinskii Circle: Far-Right Metaphysics in the Soviet Underground and Its Legacy Today,” *The Russian Review* 74, no. 4 (2015): 563–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12048>. In her discussion, Laruelle makes a slight, yet consequential error, which if unrecognized by readers, could lead them to associate Kino, and thus Tsoi with Yevgeny Golovin, one of Russia’s most fervent promoters of Traditionalism. Her statement that Golovin’s poems “were put to music by Vyacheslav Butusov and his band, Kino,” is partially incorrect. Butusov was the lead singer for the band, Nautilus Pompilius and Tsoi as we already know, was the leader of Kino. See in *Ibid.*, 568.

humor known as *stiob* (also frequently transliterated as *styob*)<sup>69</sup> in his artistic projects as well as in the media stunts he produced for political purposes. As Steinholt reports via the regrets of a close associate of Kuryokhin's, his jokes "had finally gone too far and made him friends among the wrong kinds of people."<sup>70</sup>

There is no indication whatsoever that Tsoi would have been interested in such direct forms of engagement with the political sphere. During his participation in a large round-table discussion regarding the future of Soviet society on the nationally televised program *Vzgliad* ("Viewpoint"), Tsoi appears uncomfortable, sitting quietly and offering the most anodyne opinions only when directly prompted to respond.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, though his song texts might be open to a host of personal interpretations, they are not characterized by the kind of ideological ambiguity that might lend them to associations with fascism, authoritarianism, or making war. These associations were furthest from the

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<sup>69</sup> Yurchak defines *stiob* as "a peculiar form of irony that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision, or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor. It required such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob* was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two. The practitioners of *stiob* themselves refused to draw a line between these sentiments, producing an incredible combination of seriousness and irony, with no suggestive signs of whether it should be interpreted as the former or the latter, refusing the very dichotomy between the two." See in Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More*, 249–50.

<sup>70</sup> Steinholt, "Siberian Punk Shall Emerge Here," 411.

<sup>71</sup> The entirety of this program is available on Youtube where it has been divided into the following three segments. "Программа 'Взгляд' от 27.10.1989 (О кооперации в СССР) Часть 1," accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97DethKxNsE&list=PLVFrw4Sh9eB-JRvDHooKnAn-zZ1LddyB4&index=17&t=73s>; "Программа 'Взгляд' от 27.10.1989 (О кооперации в СССР) Часть 2," accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRXpv8Js3nI&list=PLVFrw4Sh9eB-JRvDHooKnAn-zZ1LddyB4&index=15&t=0s>; "Программа 'Взгляд' от 27.10.1989 (О кооперации в СССР) Часть 3," accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vK4Gmk22L0&list=PLVFrw4Sh9eB-JRvDHooKnAn-zZ1LddyB4&index=16&t=85s>.

minds of the youthful generation that first identified with Tsoi's songs. Indeed, such associations must be forced and can only be achieved by dressing the words in the gaudy aural and visual apparel so characteristic of Russia's contemporary propaganda machine.

Bugaev's eventual deference to power, by contrast, might be explained by his own inability to remain relevant in the new, more consumer-driven market. In the media and cultural spheres that eventually came to be dominated by the state in the early 2000s, making ideological compromises might have been Bugaev's only means of keeping himself in the public consciousness. In line with Maria's comments regarding the artists' desire to infiltrate power structures, Engström claims, "The prevailing mood during the liminal period of perestroika was that of waiting for the triumph of the 'aesthetic state' and for the transgression mediators – underground musicians and artists – to enter the corridors of power."<sup>72</sup> However, she points to statements from the neo-conservative philosopher, Alexander Sekatsky, that suggest why these utopian dreams of influence might have been realized only through some form of compromise.

Sekatsky asserts that as a result of the "shock therapy" economic reforms of the 1990s, "the entire Soviet underground was in poverty, having lost its existential niche. They were the main losers in the collapse of the Union."<sup>73</sup> Though he vaguely acknowledges the problems inherent to government (echoing Bugaev), he dutifully lays

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<sup>72</sup> Engström, "Daughterland," 87.

<sup>73</sup> "А весь советский андеграунд в эпоху шоковой терапии оказался в нищете, потеряв свою экзистенциальную нишу. Они-то и стали главной проигравшей стороной при развале Союза." See in Александр Секацкий, "Миссия России – стать новым ковчегом," *Невское время*, January 11, 2011, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://nvspb.ru/2011/01/11/missiya-rossii-stat-novym-kovchegom-44138>.



most of the blame for the nation's problems on a society that had lost its way in the 1990s, mistaking the pursuit of the shiny temptations of consumerism in the West for freedom. According to him, as the century changed over (and as Putin consolidated his power), the Russian people began a turn toward the plans God had originally intended for them to pursue. Emphasizing the 'residual' inertia of greedy consumerism, he stated that artists who wanted to have a voice at the table needed to propose a "national idea as something more tempting, rich and aesthetically appealing than the modest charm of shopping. . . . Now Russia can rally around a new idea of non-consumerism, super-social justice, or the spiritual leadership of all mankind. That is, its task is to again become an Empire with a capital letter."<sup>74</sup> As the likes of Vladislav Surkov came to hold the strings of power, perhaps artists such as Sergei "Afrika" Bugaev saw the writing on the wall and began to make the necessary adjustments in order to gain favor.

Surkov, who also figures in later chapters, has been variously described as a "tactical genius,"<sup>75</sup> "the Kremlin's chief puppet master,"<sup>76</sup> and as "Putin's 'gray cardinal'

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<sup>74</sup> "По сути, на рубеже 1990–2000-х годов Россия очнулась от 'обморока государственности.' Русский народ начал возвращаться к своему изначальному проекту, к 'замыслу Бога о себе.' Вместе с тем в 'нулевые' годы в России взяла верх социальная инерция – желание отдохнуть, пожить в свое удовольствие и предаться безудержному потреблению. . . . Единственное, что могло бы изменить такую систему, – это инсталляция национальной идеи как чего-то более соблазнительного, яркого и эстетически притягательного, чем скромное обаяние шопинга. . . . Сейчас Россию может сплотить идея нового нестяжательства, сверхсоциальной справедливости или духовного лидерства в масштабах человечества. То есть ее задача – вновь стать Империей с большой буквы." See in *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 207.

<sup>76</sup> Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, Reprint edition (New York: Riverhead Books, 2013), 269.

who famously liked to keep tabs on ‘culture.’”<sup>77</sup> He is credited as the principal organizer of Putin’s United Russia Party, as the founder of the pro-Putin youth group, *Nashi*, (mentioned above) and as the architect of Putin’s “sovereign democracy,” in which a vertical concept of governance placed all of the power in the president’s hands, disabling all other branches of government and heads of regions. In a statement that will be especially relevant to my later discussion of nationalism’s “discontents” in Russia, screenwriter and former *GQ Russia* editor-in-chief (2012–14) Michael Idov opines, “The regime’s most ingenious feature was a built-in tolerance for a certain degree of dissent: not enough to matter, just enough so that Western journalists would have something to write about.”<sup>78</sup>

### **“Kukushka” – The Antithesis of Power and Patriotism**

Most of my informants make the case that “Kukushka” offers no tangible associations with power or even patriotism. I presented them with very open-ended questions about “Kukushka,” inviting them to speak about any aspects they were most

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<sup>77</sup> Michael Idov, *Dressed Up for a Riot: Misadventures in Putin’s Moscow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 33.

<sup>78</sup> Idov, 38. I cite Idov (b. 1976) as a primary source here, below, and in other chapters because he was an eyewitness to many of the events discussed. He was born to Jewish parents in Soviet Latvia and spent a number of his formative years there before his family emigrated to the United States. He admits, “My childhood thus may not have been a typical Russian one, but it was certainly Soviet enough” (p. 6). Yet he lived in the USSR until 1992, two years after the death of Tsoi and the release of “Kukushka” on KINO’s *Black Album*. In his early teens, he recalls devouring Russian rock, dubbing tapes for friends, and memorizing and reciting lyrics. He even recalls scratching the phrase, “Tsoi Lives!” into school desks after the car accident that claimed the rocker’s life (p. 8). After moving to Moscow in 2012, he sought to make *GQ Russia* a more serious representation of culture and politics and that led him into conflict with bosses beholden to the government. His work brought him into close contact with many of Russia’s cultural and governmental leaders of the period as well as leaders of the opposition movement.

comfortable with or interested in. While those cited in the preceding section focused on the text, my informants in this section also discussed their sonic impressions. Speaking generally, Sergey Klishis hears an intense intimacy in Tsoi's original version. Though he does not elaborate, we might speculate that the relaxed tempo, medium dynamic levels, the presence of acoustic guitar (once again, the ubiquitous staple of the *kvartirniki*) contribute to the intimacy he describes. Furthermore, the sense of yearning evoked by the half-step resolutions of dissonances in the prevailing minor mode perhaps subconsciously signals the kind of deep psychological insight that people only share in close settings. For Sergey the song evokes depths: the "archetypes of the Russian soul."<sup>79</sup> He was the first of my informants to ask me whether I knew about the omen associated with the song's eponymous archetype, the cuckoo. According to him, the bird tells you how long you have to live, as indicated by the number of cuckoos it sounds following the fateful question. For instance, one cuckoo means the addressee has but one year left to live. Though his reference to "archetypes of the Russian soul" hints at an ancient trope of Russian nationalism, his discussion of this particular archetype points to Tsoi's motives as more personal—spiritual—than patriotic, much less nationalistic.

Sergey also claimed that for "Tsoi, like a great poet, the words are not as important as the energy itself standing behind the song. Meaning is sacrificed to higher vibrations and spiritual or mystical insights."<sup>80</sup> This speaks to a point that I will elaborate

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<sup>79</sup> "Очень уютная песня, поэт обращается к архетипам русской души." Sergey Klishis in a VKontakte message, February 24, 2019.

<sup>80</sup> "Но у Цоя, как у большого поэта, смысл слов не итак важен, как сама энергия, что стоит за песней. Смысл принесён в жертву высшим вибрациям, духовным или мистическим прозрениям." Sergey Klishis, VKontakte message, March 26, 2019.

on later regarding the newer cover versions. I contend that a change in “energy” in these covers is partly responsible for the song being freighted with new associations that Tsoi perhaps could not have imagined.

Alexander Petrov said that he has been familiar with “Kukushka” for a long time, but that he somehow never listened very attentively to the lyrics until now. For some reason, perhaps because of its mood, style, or text, he stated that the song now reminded him of Cossack folk songs, the kind he says one might hear frequently sung by patrons of the very St. Petersburg bar we met in.<sup>81</sup> He provided a couple of examples from YouTube of songs in this style, asserting that corresponding to the aesthetic of his day, Tsoi’s song differed from them only in genre and in manner of performance.<sup>82</sup>

For Alexander, the words seem to echo fairytales or the folk-epic narrative known as the *bylina*. Reading the lyrics of the first Cossack song Alexander cited, “*Ne dlia menia*,” (“Not For Me”) we can even see an affinity with the personal fate motive present in Tsoi’s “Kukushka.” Though Cossack songs were generally patriotic in nature, a bitter sense of foreboding about the singer’s military duty is the unifying sentiment of each verse in this particular song:

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<sup>81</sup> “Эта песня мне давно и хорошо знакома, но раньше как-то не вслушивался в текст, а в данный момент он мне чем-то напоминает народные, казачьи песни. Может по настроению, может по слогу и словам. Эти в баре Ленинград многие бы подпели. ☺” Alexander Petrov in a VKontakte message, March 26, 2019.

<sup>82</sup> “Манера исполнения и музыка, конечно, другие, соответствующие эпохе.” Alexander Petrov in *ibid.*, speaking about the following two recordings: Tenno N., “Казачьи песни-‘Не для меня,’” accessed November 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1hAJUlyTKE>; odinmim, “‘Когда мы были на войне.’ Казачья песня,” accessed November 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOTD2KaAVjc>.

**“Не для меня”**

Не для меня придёт весна,  
Не для меня Дон разольётся.  
Там сердце девичье забьётся  
С восторгом чувств -- не для меня  
И сердце девичье забьётся  
С восторгом чувств -- не для меня

Не для меня цветут сады,  
В долине роща расцветает,  
Там соловей весну встречает,  
Он будет петь не для меня.

Не для меня текут ручьи,  
Журчат алмазными струями,  
Там дева с чёрными бровями  
Она растёт не для меня...

Не для меня придёт Пасха,  
За стол родня вся соберётся  
Вино по рюмочкам польётся  
Такая жизнь не для меня

А для меня кусок свинца,  
Он в тело белое вопьётся  
И слезы горькие прольются  
Такая жизнь, брат, ждёт меня.

**“Not for Me”**

Not for me will the spring come,  
Not for me will the Don overflow.  
There the girl's heart will begin to throb  
With the delight of feelings – not for me.  
The girl's heart will begin to throb  
With the delight of feelings – but not for  
me.

Not for me are the gardens blooming,  
In the valley a grove will blossom,  
There a nightingale meets the spring,  
He will not be singing for me.

Not for me do the brooks flow,  
Babbling with brilliant spurts,  
There, a maiden with black eyebrows,  
She is growing not for me...

Easter will not come for me,  
At the table all the kinfolk will gather  
Wine will be poured in little shots  
Such a life is not for me.

And for me, a piece of lead,  
It will pierce into a white body  
And bitter tears will be spilled  
Such a life, brother, is waiting for me.

Alexander notes that Tsoi's voice characteristically exhibits a kind of monotonous detachment and that the music merely serves as an unremarkable background for the very recognizable melody. In his opinion, if one read the text before hearing the song, it would be possible to imagine it rendered completely differently, in a manner close to the Cossack folk style exhibited in the performance of “*Ne dlia menia*” cited above.<sup>83</sup> He

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<sup>83</sup> “... (характерный монотонно-отстраненный вокал Цоя и музыка, создающая для него фон, ничем не выделяющаяся, но при этом с очень узнаваемой мелодией), а в словах мне чудятся какие-то сказочно-былинно-фольклорные отголоски. Если не слышать песню до

states that in the tradition of Russian rock, the words are more important than the music and its manner of performance. Though this singing style is one of the reasons he is not particularly fond of the subgenre, he quips that it does make the song “easier to sing in the kitchen with a guitar.”<sup>84</sup>

When I asked him to elaborate on how the text reminds him of folk style, he replied that this was due to certain words and phrases that Tsoi used. He then provided a list of antiquated words and short phrases that he thought were reminiscent of Russian folklore in the text: “Cuckoo, heads are laid, bright memory, free will, and also “*da*” (which in contemporary usage usually means “yes”) for “and” instead of the more modern ‘*i*’.”<sup>85</sup>

While nationalistic sentiment is often suggested when folkloric elements are incorporated, a love for one’s people, rather than a love for the state that governs them could have been the factor motivating Tsoi. Furthermore, selecting a well-known folkloric trope like the cuckoo provides a vivid metaphor of fate that most Russians would be able to access and understand easily. Signaling atavistic Russian tropes imbues the song with a sense of timelessness that reminds the listener that the struggle alluded to is an ancient one, dating to the very beginnings of human creativity.

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этого, а прочитав только текст, то можно её себе представить в совершенно другом исполнении, близком к русским народным.” Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> “Как и в большей части русского рока, текст важнее мелодии и исполнения (за что я не слишком его люблю), зато легче на кухне под гитару спеть. ☺” Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> “По словам и оборотам использованным в песне (кукушка, головы сложили, светлая память, воля вольная, “да” вместо современного “и”) у меня создаётся впечатление, что Цой делает отсылку к народным/фольклорным песням.” Ibid.

The hierarchy of words over musical content that Alexander speaks of actually agrees with what many critics, artists, and even fans of Soviet and Russian rock have asserted time and again.<sup>86</sup> And just as the homegrown variety of rock was beginning to come into its own, the words, which inevitably addressed societal problems, also became the chief reason for what one prominent rocker called a “strangulation” imposed by the authorities in the mid-1980s.<sup>87</sup>

Yet emphasizing the words leads to an incomplete analysis that devalues the meaningful contributions made by Soviet popular musicians. As Yngvar Steinholt, a scholar of Russian popular music, convincingly argued in 2003, Russian scholarship on Russian rock music at the time exhibited agendas similar to the earliest Russian rock musicians and critics, namely, to frame Russian rock first and foremost as a poetic art and defend its worth by associating it with the heralded Russian literary tradition. As Steinholt observed, “the tradition of approaching rock as a form of poetry holds a firm grip on research on Russian rock even today, and it has unfortunately blocked the way for musicological and performance-related approaches.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> See for instance discussions in Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia* (Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 40–42; Thomas Cushman, *Notes from Underground: Rock Music Counterculture in Russia*, SUNY Series in the Sociology of Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 103–7; Julia P. Friedman and Adam Weiner, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Holy Rus’ and Its Alternatives in Russian Rock Music,” in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev* (Duke University Press, 1999), 110–37.

<sup>87</sup> Yuri Shevchuk, leader of the band DDT and member of the Leningrad Rock Club. See in Thomas Cushman, *Notes from Underground: Rock Music Counterculture in Russia*, SUNY Series in the Sociology of Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 73.

<sup>88</sup> Yngvar B. Steinholt, “You Can’t Rid a Song of Its Words: Notes on the Hegemony of Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs,” *Popular Music* 22, no. 1 (2003): 90.

The very title of a recent analytical work on Russian rock, *Rok-noetika* (2020, published in 2018 under the title *Poetika russkogo roka*), suggests that the literary approach of philological scholars continues to prevail over more holistic approaches today. Although it pays lip-service to an interdisciplinary methodology in the introductory chapters, invoking a trinity of interrelated elements (words, music, and dance), the discussion avoids engagement with musical features and only discusses performative aspects when they bolster arguments for an artist's connection to the "high culture" of the literary tradition.<sup>89</sup> In the sections below I discuss Tsoi's "Kukushka" and its subsequent transformations in terms of their musical and performative elements so we might understand how the words are now being interpreted differently.

### **Aesthetics of "Kukushka" vs. Hard Rock and *Estrada***

The latest versions of "Kukushka" appropriate the song in service of a patriotic message in part by altering the song's original musical and performative aesthetic. Ironically, these new versions more closely resemble Western pop styles than anything from Kino's discography. No longer in the new wave rock style of Tsoi and Kino, when viewed in the contemporary context of state-funded patriotic concerts, these new versions also recall the state approved songs of the Soviet period. Thus, the introvert, seemingly singing for himself, becomes the extrovert eagerly addressing and firing up a crowd.

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<sup>89</sup> Tsoi is not one of the primary subjects and is therefore mentioned in only a few passing moments. See the chapter entitled, "Conception of the word in the poetics of Kinchev" for a model of this approach. Наташа Ройтберг, *Рок-поэтика. Смыслы и постулаты* (Litres, 2020), 238–61. I consulted a recently published digital version of this book. It was also previously published in paperback under a slightly different title. Наташа Ройтберг, *Поэтика русского рока: Смыслы и постулаты* (LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2018).



Russian rock critic Andrei Burlaka found this kind of posture toward the crowd foreign to Tsoi's character. Contrasting Tsoi with Konstantin Kinchev, the subject of chapter 3 of this dissertation, he averred, "for all the social address of his songs, Tsoi (unlike, say, Kinchev) never addressed His Generation – he just sang on its behalf."<sup>90</sup> In more deliberate, direct communication with the audience, the newest performers inspire feelings of collective patriotism that imply a call to some vague civic duty or patriotic action.

As I stated in the introduction to this dissertation, what makes the transformed versions of "Kukushka" resemble hard rock and pop styles is a pronounced theatricality. Though *estrada* artist Pugacheva's theatricality was largely a means to assert her own individuality in the waning years of a government that sought to level the individual, the theatrical drama of the cover versions of "Kukushka" destroy the individualism inherent to the original. And in ways similar to *estrada* artists from an earlier period—those like Josef Kobzon and Lev Leshchenko who were more socially committed, more inclined toward public or civic mobilization on behalf of the state—the new cover versions of "Kukushka" seem to push for a collective mobilization of support for the current government.

Tsoi's performance on the track for Kino's *Black Album* is more immobile in the social sphere, tending toward self-reflection, rather than inspiring public action or some vague unity of purpose. This is even evident in the concluding verse of the text itself with the inclusion of the word *terpelivye* (patient), which clearly exhibits passivity. In this

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<sup>90</sup> "...при всей социальной адресованности своих песен Цой (в отличие, скажем, от Кинчева) никогда не обращался к Своему Поколению — он просто пел от его имени." Андрей Бурлака, "Цой," *ROCK FUZZ*, September 25, 1995, 7.

way, his performances represent the mannerisms of more modest *estrada* performers, who seemed to reject all things big, even great passion, in favor of providing a window to the artist's inner world. MacFadyen identifies the *estrada* stars Klavdiya Shul'zhenko and Edita P'ekha as exemplars of this particular aesthetic.<sup>91</sup> All of this is not to say that Tsoi's music, and more specifically "Kukushka," did not have an impact on the public sphere, moreover, that he did not intend for it to have such an impact. What I am asserting is that both the song's text and Tsoi's performance—the manner in which he set the text to melody and communicated it on the original demo tape—bears a closer resemblance to introversion and passivity than it does to the outward theatricality of more civic-minded *estrada* performers and contemporary Russian pop stars.

In the former Soviet Union, the all-encompassing term *estrada* or *estradnaia muzyka* was designated for popular music that was officially approved. Because of its variety of forms and the frequent theatrical nature of its presentation, it has been traced back to the same rural fairground entertainments (the *balagany*) that inspired Zamyatin's adaptation of Leskov's *Levsha* to the stage discussed in detail in the next chapter. As the late historian of Russian culture Richard Stites noted, these popular carnival-like celebrations, full of drinking, satire, and theatrical merriment, underwent significant change in the years leading up to the revolution. The government and sympathetic entities began staging them in dedicated urban areas or even indoors with strict rules against drinking in an effort to lure the public away from politics and the pubs.<sup>92</sup> Thus, as

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<sup>91</sup> MacFadyen, *Red Stars: Personality and the Soviet Popular Song, 1955-1991*.

<sup>92</sup> Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900*, Cambridge Soviet Paperbacks 7 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 16–17.

MacFadyen observes, “what was once a supposedly spontaneous or private form of expression becomes useful for a public purpose.”<sup>93</sup> In a similar manner, the private soul-searching of Tsoi’s “Kukushka” has been reconstituted to serve the purposes of the Russian state, namely to garner public support for military and territorial conquest.

The aesthetic aims of Tsoi and his group Kino were much closer to a blend of Western rock movements like punk and new wave than the highly polished Soviet *estrada*. Additionally, Kino, as part of the Russian rock movement centered in Leningrad, represented the antithesis of civic-minded *estrada*. The original versions of “Kukushka” that Victor Tsoi recorded with Kasparyan on the demo tape and that the remaining members of Kino committed to posterity on the *Black Album* mirror the aesthetic conceits of the new wave, while the latest versions sung by young girls and women throughout Russia and the former Soviet republics relate more clearly to the drama of contemporary Western pop music.

### **The Transformation to Ecstatic Patriotism**

The new and dramatic covers of “Kukushka” subvert Tsoi’s personal, internal dialogue, opening it up to messages that are directed outward rather than inward. The dramatic pop aesthetic is rendered so convincingly that some audiences associate the surrounding context of each performance with positive patriotic action rather than overt displays of nationalism or promotion of military aggression. Thus, the Russian state’s version of events regarding such specific acts as the annexation of Crimea are supported

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<sup>93</sup> MacFadyen, *Red Stars: Personality and the Soviet Popular Song, 1955-1991*, 12.

as the song incites more vague patriotic emotions. This is evident in a number of cover versions that I will discuss in greater detail below.

## **Olga Kormukhina**

Olga Kormukhina has performed her version of “Kukushka” (2011)<sup>94</sup> in a number of concerts dedicated to a variety of patriotic holidays in the Moscow area.<sup>95</sup> Most of

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<sup>94</sup> Most of Kormukhina’s live performances make use of all or at least some of the tracks from this studio version. This is confirmed by the fact that when using the smartphone song identifier application Shazam, the studio recording is identified as the basis for all of the videos cited below with the exception of the one filmed at МХАТ-2 in Moscow. It is often difficult to ascertain whether she is actually singing or lip-syncing to her original vocal track in many of these performances. “ОЛЬГА КОРМУХИНА - КУКУШКА (ПРЕМЬЕРА 2011),” YouTube, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcUftjLH760>.

<sup>95</sup> Her performance for the Day of the Baptism of Rus. “Ольга КОРМУХИНА - КУКУШКА | День Крещения Руси, 28.07.2011,” accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=citblnMK92c>. The concert for her album premiere at the Moscow Art Theater features one of the few obviously live performances of the song. “Ольга КОРМУХИНА - КУКУШКА (Виктор Цой) | МХАТ им М. Горького,” accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTsAueHyuDw>. Performance for Victory Day. “09.05.2014. Ольга Кормухина – ‘Кукушка.’ Сл./муз.- В.Цой [HD],” accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fNblzLdw-E>. During her performance for the Day of the Defender of the Fatherland, the drummer's absence from the stage is conspicuous, leading to the possible conclusion that the two guitar players performing on either side of her are merely props. Adding to this awkwardness is the fact that a live orchestra sits silently on stage while a recorded one is heard through the hall's amplification system. “Ольга Кормухина — КУКУШКА [День Защитника Отечества, 23.02.16],” accessed July 14, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYCV\\_0HомYk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYCV_0HомYk). Performance for the Day of the Worker. “Ольга КОРМУХИНА - КУКУШКА | День работника с/х, 15.10.2017,” accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbSdnLdN0zМ>. Performance for the Day of National Unity. “Ольга КОРМУХИНА - КУКУШКА | День народного единства, Лужники, 04.11.2017,” accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPF7wI37C-Q>. At the conclusion of her performance for the Musical Festival “Spring,” the fact that she had been lip-syncing is made apparent when she shouts a final “*Vot tak*” after the song has finished. The difference between her voice processed through the recording versus yelling into the microphone is obvious. “Ольга КОРМУХИНА - КУКУШКА | Музыкальный Фестиваль ‘ВЕЧНА,’ 18.03.2017,” accessed July 14, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j\\_alL9RhmXg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_alL9RhmXg). During her performance for Russia Day on Red Square, Kormukhina appears to be singing live due to the fact that her voice disappears during the brief moments that she points to the crowd. Despite this, the possibility of her lip-syncing remains. The fact that these moments were planned ahead of time cannot be ruled out. Aside from that, the visual imagery projected onto the large screen behind the performers appears to be recycled from her 2017 performance discussed below.

these promote connections to patriotic sacrifice in either peacetime or war. The former is represented by the formal military dress of some of the audiences she plays for, while the latter is revealed by either the singer's own quasi-military form of dress, or scenes from battle projected onto large screens behind her as she performs the song.

The performance under discussion here took place in the middle of Red Square on Russia Day, June 12, 2017.<sup>96</sup> The music in the video opens with the clean sounds of an electric guitar riff that differs subtly, yet importantly from the one heard on the recording from Kino's *Black Album*. Tsoi's acoustic strumming accompaniment is replaced by an electric rhythm guitar filtered through slight distortion. Absent are the mystical synth harmonies that in Kino's recording betrayed the influences of the new wave. The intro is half the length of Tsoi's and with the tempo being roughly forty beats per minute faster than his, the relaxed swinging rhythm of Kino's electric guitar riff becomes a more driving, insistent declaration. The distortion filter and faster, driving tempo remove the song from the pensive realm of a solitary bard and plunge it into the more aggressive sound world of hard rock. While Kino's intro to "Kukushka" invites the body to sway loosely from side to side, Kormukhina's version encourages more emphatic movements back and forth and along the vertical plane.

Kormukhina is dressed from head to toe in the black leather, steel-studded outfit that has been worn by rockers affecting a rebellious persona since the 1950s. It lends her performance here for the state a strange sense of irony. Behind her and the orchestra,

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"Ольга КОРМУХИНА - КУКУШКА (Виктор Цой) | День России, 2019," accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuTG41yHX8I>.

<sup>96</sup> "Ольга КОРМУХИНА - КУКУШКА [ДЕНЬ РОССИИ, Красная Площадь, 12.06.2017]," YouTube, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Es7U936PWUo>.

black and white images from World War II flash across an enormous screen framed by flashing lights and the colors of the Russian flag. Though the images reflect the heroic deeds of a multiethnic Soviet past, the colors of the flag force associations with the current Russian state. At odds with the somber imagery of both text and war are the beaming smiles and emphatic fist pumps that Kormukhina projects toward the audience and the cameras. Early in the intro she is also seen trying to get the audience to participate by reaching her arms high into the air and clapping on the off beats.

While both Tsoi's vocal performance and Kino's arrangement (based off of Tsoi's demo tape) exhibit a stasis of energy throughout, Kormukhina's version deploys a variety of effects to craft a much more dramatic arc. The accompaniment described above persists through the first verse, but at the moment Kormukhina begins the chorus ("*Solntse moyo, vzgliani na menia...*") the rhythm guitar, suddenly filtered through more noticeable distortion, begins making heavily accented gestures on only the first beat of the bar, while the melodic guitar initiates a new repetitive, syncopated riff stretching across two bars. These subtle changes gradually amp up the tension that is eventually released by the heavy bass drop and entry of the orchestral strings and drums that occurs at the elision between the chorus and the returning intro material. The release of tension is evidently palpable to the audience, for loud shouts ring forth from the crowd immediately after the impact of this moment.

Kormukhina's performance of the second verse is noticeably louder and she affects a grittier, more visceral vocal style reminiscent of Janis Joplin. Where Joplin's style was characterized by dramatic fluctuations in intensity, Kormukhina sustains a shouting style through both the second verse and subsequent chorus that cuts through the

the now thicker texture like a gas-powered saw. She accompanies this aural change with angrier facial expressions and more emphatic gestures that seem to demand an answer to the question posed at the beginning of the verse. At one point during this section of the song a visual and historical dividing line occurs in the chain of images projected onto the large screen. Following a color image of the eternal flame at the tomb of the unknown soldier, pictures from the Soviet past in World War II are increasingly mixed with color images of the modern Russian military. The bravery and sacrifice of Soviet soldiers from a host of ethnic and national entities is thus completely subsumed by the current Russian state.

The third verse appears with a sudden, but brief return to the sparse texture of the opening guitar duo as Kormukhina brings her voice back down to her initial *mezzo forte*. Following the first three questions directed at free will and its whereabouts, everything suddenly explodes: Kormukhina shouts out the demand “Answer!” and the full orchestration enters once again after a loud drum fill with every attack accentuated by flashing lights. As the camera pans over the crowd the viewer can see a range of emotional responses. Most are young adults who are able to sing along despite the fact that they would have been very young or not even born when the song originally came out in 1990. At 2:50 in the video and just before the third chorus, a young brunette woman wearing large-framed glasses first appears with a pained expression on her face. Moments later at 2:59 this emotion seems to sublimate into ecstatic catharsis as she closes her eyes, throws her head back, and sends her arms up into the air on a strongly accented beat. In between shots of her the young guitarist onstage moves more emphatically than before, tossing his long hair back and forth.

Kormukhina closes her cover with an extra chorus, seen in Example 1.1 (transposed up a fourth for comparison in the original key), that has a slightly modified melody, each line emphasizing the fifth scale degree with mostly neighbor-tone embellishments. This dominant emphasis (and subsequent higher register) and the melody’s shouted delivery brings the song to its highest level of dramatic intensity—a point far removed from anything in Tsoi’s presentation of the song—and sets up an extremely emphatic conclusion. Before the moment of the final cadence, a colorized image of Soviet troops marching on Red Square appears with a large May Ninth graphic and the Russian flag superimposed on top.

**Example 1.1. Viktor Tsoi (all choruses) & Olga Kormukhina (final chorus – trans. up from E minor for pitch comparison in original A minor), “Kukushka.”**

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system contains two staves: the top staff is for Tsoi, marked 'ca. 104', and the bottom staff is for Kormukhina, marked 'ca. 140' and 'mf'. The second system contains two staves: the top staff is for Kormukhina, marked 'ff', and the bottom staff is for Tsoi, marked 'ca. 104'. The notation includes treble clefs, 8/8 time signatures, and various musical symbols such as rests, notes, and accidentals. A fermata is placed over a note in the Kormukhina 'ff' staff in the second system.

The very day that Kormukhina gave this performance, anti-corruption protesters turned out in both St. Petersburg and Moscow, resulting in the arrests of over one thousand people.<sup>97</sup> The Moscow protesters had shown up at another Russia Day street

<sup>97</sup> “День России в Москве и Петербурге. Фотографии массовых задержаний,” *Meduza*, June 12, 2017, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://meduza.io/feature/2017/06/12/den-rossii-v-moskve-i-peterburge-fotogalereya-massovyh-zaderzhaniy>.



celebration not far from Red Square on Tverskaya Street. The journalist Michael Idov summed up the scene in his memoirs:

Before the protesters showed up, the festival had consisted of elaborate, costumed outdoor re-creations of Russia's historical milestones (which led to some unforgettable visuals, such as wooden-shielded medieval warriors protecting school kids from OMON troops). Every single one of the tableaux involved war. The cult of military prowess as Russia's defining virtue continues to claim the people's minds.<sup>98</sup>

My online dialogues with my informants rarely touched on this video or on Kormukhina's version in general. Aside from its vocal quality, little differentiates hers from all the other versions that have appeared subsequently.<sup>99</sup> These overwhelming similarities may play to her advantage in the court case that she is currently pursuing against Gagarina.

One informant did comment on Kormukhina directly. After watching this version from the 2017 Day of Russia concert, Victoria stated, "[it] gives me some nostalgia, because in 2015 when I lived in Moscow Olga Kormukhina sang the same song on the same holiday, the Day of Russia."<sup>100</sup> Though she waxes nostalgic when she hears Kormukhina cover "Kukushka," she evidently prefers Tsoi's original tempo: "By the way, I don't like that the music is faster."<sup>101</sup> As we have seen in the above discussion, this tempo change is but one example of the ways in which Tsoi's song was musically

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<sup>98</sup> Idov, *Dressed Up for a Riot*, 261.

<sup>99</sup> I decided against pressing my informants more on Kormukhina's version, fearing they would feel compelled to manufacture a response.

<sup>100</sup> Victoria from Pyatigorsk, HelloTalk dialogue, May 20, 2019.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

reimagined. These dramatic alterations brought “Kukushka” in line with its obvious propagandistic purpose in the state-organized concerts cited above and perhaps inspired its similar use in the war film to be discussed in the next section. Despite Gagarina’s “theft” as Kormukhina puts it, her own opportunities to perform the song in public seemed to have picked up dramatically after the film’s premiere. Undoubtedly due to her service in these concerts, Putin made her an Honored Artist of the Russian Federation in 2016.<sup>102</sup>

One final note about Kormukhina bears mentioning. Though her participation in so many state-sponsored patriotic concerts might be read as an artist just trying to make the best of a difficult situation in the political climate of today’s Russia, recent published statements show that she goes above and beyond the duties of performing artist, supporting the government in other ways as well. After Bishop Filaret Kucherov, head of the Lviv Eparchy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, published an open letter to Vladimir Putin expressing concern over developments in Crimea and requesting that he withdraw Russian troops from Ukraine,<sup>103</sup> Kormukhina publically came to her president’s defense within three days.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> “Указ Президента Российской Федерации От 26.10.2016 № 572 ‘О награждении государственными наградами Российской Федерации,’” Официальный интернет-портал правовой информации, accessed July 12, 2020, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201610270009?index=20&rangeSize=1>.

<sup>103</sup> Filaret Kucherov, “Bishop of Lviv Urges Putin to Withdraw Troops from Ukraine,” trans. Natalya Mihailova, Pravmir.com - Orthodox Christianity and the World, March 4, 2014, <http://www.pravmir.com/bishop-lviv-urges-putin-withdraw-troops-ukraine/>.

<sup>104</sup> For an English translation, see Olga Kormukhina, “Olga Kormukhina, a Famous Russian Singer, Replies to Bishop Philaret of Lviv,” trans. Natalya Mihailova, Pravmir.com - Orthodox Christianity and the World, March 7, 2014, <http://www.pravmir.com/olga-kormukhina-replies-bishop-philaret-lviv/>; For the original Russian, see Ольга Кормухина, “Ольга Кормухина

In her own letter to Bishop Filaret, she took the blame for the strife in Ukraine out of Moscow's hands and assigned it to Kyiv. She reiterated the litany of misinformation and hyperbole that the Kremlin had been circulating about "uncontrolled gangs" [read: Ukrainian nationalists] roaming the streets of cities, threats to priests loyal to the canonical Church [Moscow], and threats to Russian-speaking citizens in general. Finally, she asserted that the citizens of Crimea [majority Russian] should have the right of self-determination and that the eastern Ukrainian cities of Kharkiv and Donetsk [also majority Russian] deserved to live free of the fear of visitations from "friendly guests" with revolution and pogroms in their suitcases."<sup>105</sup> The fact that the majority Russian population in Crimea was the cumulative result of centuries of Russian colonization, effectively eliminating the original Tatar majority is completely ignored by Kormukhina.

Russian rhetoric about Ukraine is characterized by a condescending, big brotherly tone. Kormukhina's letter is no exception. In the next section, I show how "Kukushka" has been combined with the emotional charge of World War II nostalgia in the genre of cinema. This combination subtly reinforces the conceit that Russians and Ukrainians belong together under one flag.

### **Polina Gagarina and *The Battle for Sevastopol***

Gagarina's version of "Kukushka" closely follows the faster tempo and dramatic arc of Kormukhina's with some subtle changes that further intensify the drama and make

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ответила епископу Львовскому Филарету," Правмир, March 7, 2014, <https://www.pravmir.ru/koruhina-slova-o-mire-i-lyubvi-stanovyatsya-podvigom/>.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

the song's association with the maiden warrior more explicit.<sup>106</sup> Gagarina heightens this drama by dropping the medium volume level of Kormukhina's first verse-chorus pair down to almost a whisper. The clean electric guitar that provides the only accompaniment through the end of the first verse is less an identifiable riff than a simple broken-chord ostinato. Its simplicity and purity of timbre pairs well with the calculated vulnerability of Gagarina's voice and the fresh-faced teenaged girl seen earnestly juggling adolescent cares with rifle training during the opening of the promotional music video produced for the film for which this arrangement was composed.

Orchestral strings enter as Gagarina begins the first chorus (delayed until the chorus's conclusion in Kormukhina's cover). The heroine undergoes a literal baptism by fire during a visual montage alternating between both naval and land battle scenes and intimate moments shared by her and a love interest. As the words, "My palm has turned into a fist" ("*Moia ladon' prevratilas' v kulak*") are sung, a close-up of the heroine taking aim and firing her rifle appears. The explosive charge of her shot is immediately followed by the squelch of the bullet entering a German soldier's body. As she rapidly evolves from young maiden to warrior woman, a slow and meandering pitch ascent in the strings raises her seemingly to the level of beatification. The delicate nature of this musical texture, standing in sharp contrast to the visual imagery that accompanies it, magnifies the distance between her lost innocence and the violence of her wartime occupations.

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<sup>106</sup> This association was already hinted at by director Sergey Bodrov Jr.'s use of the original in his 2001 film, *Syostry* (Sisters), which centers around the two adolescent daughters of a Russian gangster, one of which wants to be an army sniper when she grows up.

Engström connects the imagery in the film and Gagarina’s music video to a phenomenon in post-Soviet Russian art whereby a neo-conservative visual metaphor referred to as *Rodina-Doch’* (Daughterland) positions Russia as “a *katechon*, or a ‘shield’ against the apocalyptic forces of chaos.”<sup>107</sup> She notes that “The images of homeland as a female virgin warrior or a merciful young female who is ready to sacrifice herself for the cause are typical during war or in prewar periods, as they possess great mobilization potential.”<sup>108</sup> Engström calls the maiden warrior aspect of this phenomenon a form of “erotic patriotism” that “reflects deep-rooted archaic symbolism of youth sacrifice for the ‘common cause.’”<sup>109</sup> In a remark about the actress who played the Soviet sniper, one Russian film critic illustrates how the film seems to effectively capture this brand of eroticism: “And Yulia Peresild, the dirtier she is, the more beautiful.”<sup>110</sup>

Following Kormukhina’s arrangement, Gagarina sings the second verse-chorus pair at a much louder dynamic level than Tsoi accompanied by the full complement of rock textures. During the phrase, “Strong and brave heads were laid together on the field in battle,” reverb is added to the voice track to emphasize “on the field” (“*v pole*”) and “in battle” (“*v boiu*”). During the second chorus, Gagarina holds out the word “me” (“*menia*”), clipping the end with a short fall in pitch that reminds the listener of

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<sup>107</sup> Maria Engström, “Daughterland,” 84. See page 97 for the mention of Gagarina’s video.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>110</sup> “А Юлия Пересильд чем чумазее, тем красивее.” Олег Зинцов, “‘Битва за Севастополь’ рассказала историю любви девушки и винтовки,” *Ведомости*, accessed May 27, 2020, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/lifestyle/articles/2015/04/02/bitva-za-sevastopol-rasskazala-istoriyu-lyubvi-devushki-i-vintovki>.

vulnerability despite the heroine's brave confrontation with war. The word "spark" ("ognia") is held out all the way to the end of the verse, creating further dramatic tension. Where Kormukhina's version makes use of only an additional string section, Gagarina's raises the song to the level of cinema, incorporating symphonic winds to match the bombast displayed in the film trailer. The soaring, heroic sound of the French horn is the most conspicuous of these orchestral timbres.

In a move that will surely be noted during the plagiarism court case mentioned at the head of this chapter, Gagarina returns to her softer opening volume at the beginning of the third verse and then suddenly belts out her loudest *fortissimo* on the word, "Answer!" ("Otvet'!"), following the questions directed at free will. For the final chorus, the word "me" ("menia") is held out once again, but this time the note (fifth scale degree) is embellished three times in alternation with its lower neighbor. The word "spark" ("ognia") is also intensified by approaching the fifth scale degree via a sudden leap to the upper tonic. Gagarina's vocal gifts are exploited almost to straining in an effort to sustain dramatic intensity all the way to the song's conclusion. The arrangement ends with a naked presentation of a sinister motive in the strings that had been trying to rear its head during previous statements of the chorus. This four-note motive covers the first four notes of the minor scale and mechanically repeats itself three times before stopping suddenly at the sounding of a final tonic chord in the electric guitar filtered through a distortion pedal. This ominous ending provides a bleak suggestion that the fascism confronted in the film's battle scenes has not been completely extinguished.

The extent to which some Russians read this film and Gagarina's music video for "Kukushka" as part of a larger mission of Russian propaganda will be fleshed out more

thoroughly when we turn to the comments of my informants further below. That a film perceived by some as part of Russian propaganda was jointly funded by the Ukrainian government should come as no surprise considering that Viktor Yanukovich, widely acknowledged to be pro-Russian,<sup>111</sup> stood at the helm of the Ukrainian government during the early stages of the film's production. His unleashing of government troops (*berkut*) during the Euromaidan Revolution of 2013-14 in Kyiv resulted in the deaths of over a hundred protesters and ultimately led to his ouster. At the moment his position became completely untenable, he fled to Crimea, and later to Russia. Soon thereafter, Crimea was annexed by Russia after a referendum held under Russian guns.<sup>112</sup>

We should consider a few more points about the film before proceeding. Though the joint-venture (released in both Russia and Ukraine on April 2, 2015) was set in Soviet Ukraine and revolved around the exploits of the real-life, Soviet-Ukrainian sniper, Lyudmila Pavlichenko, the Russian language was given pride of place in the film's international release. For the Ukrainian release of the film, alternatively entitled, *Nezlamna (Indestructible)*, the Ukrainian language was dubbed over the actors' voices speaking in Russian.

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<sup>111</sup> Kremlin support for Yanukovich dates back to the run-up to the 2004 presidential election in Ukraine. See Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (London: Granta Publications, 2017), 238–39; See also the section entitled “Osenniy karnaval” (“Fall carnival”) in the following electronic version of Russian independent journalist Mikhail Zygar's book: Михаил Зыгарь, “Осенний Карнавал,” in *Вся кремлевская рать. Краткая история современной России*, электронное (Москва: Альпина Диджитал, 2016), 163–167/608, <https://www.litres.ru/mihail-zygar/vsya-kremlevskaya-rat-kratkaya-istoriya-sovremennoy-rossii/chitat-onlayn/>.

<sup>112</sup> Gessen, *The Future Is History*, 427-28.

In what we might read as an effort to achieve some semblance of balance between the two nationalities, the filmmakers also featured Ukrainian rock band Okean Elzy's song "Embrace" (*Obiymy*) from their 2013 album *Earth (Zemlya)* in addition to the Russian song "Kukushka." Yet somehow the film failed to fully express the uniqueness of Ukrainian culture for at least one Ukrainian critic. In her diplomatic review, Olena Rubashevskya first suggested that perhaps the film's budget caused the screenwriter and director to focus on making the war scenes rather than the human elements more realistic. She then added,

And unfortunately, that is why, having watched the film, not knowing in advance that the picture is Ukrainian too, it is impossible to determine. After all, what is Ukrainian cinema? This is the depth of the soul, this is our land, nature, colorful characters, a special identity, and of course, poetry. All this is not in the film, although it is noticeable that the authors would like to convey the human side of the conflict.<sup>113</sup>

The Russian Minister of Culture (2012-2020), Vladimir Medinsky, frequently emphasized that the film was a Russian-Ukrainian partnership.<sup>114</sup> Yulia Peresild, the Russian actress who played the role of the Ukrainian sniper, Pavlichenko, told the Pskov

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<sup>113</sup> "Однак, можливо, саме великий бюджет підштовхнув авторів фільму – сценариста Єгора Олесова і режисера Сергія Мокрицького – у бік ефектності на шкоду людяності. І, на жаль, саме тому, подивившись фільм, не знаючи заздалегідь, що картина – і українська теж, неможливо цього визначити. Адже що таке українське кіно? Це душевна глибина, це наша земля, природа, колоритні персонажі, особлива ідентичність, і, звичайно, поетичність. Всього цього немає у фільмі, хоча і помітно, що авторам хотілося би передати людську сторону конфлікту." Олена Рубашевська, "Незламна в битві за Севастополь," *Кіно в Україні* (blog), May 30, 2015, <http://kinoukraine.com/nezlamna-v-bytvi-za-sevastopol/>.

<sup>114</sup> See for example Елена Лаптева, "Мединский, Расторгуев и Говорухин оценили 'Битву за Севастополь,'" *KP.RU – Комсомольская правда*, March 27, 2015, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26359/3241463/>; and Андрей Ванденко and Владимир Мединский, "Владимир Мединский: Я человек бесконфликтный. Но упертый," *TASS*, April 26, 2016, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://tass.ru/top-officials/3236070>.



Information Agency, “I am glad that Vladimir Medinsky called the “Battle for Sevastopol” a Russian-Ukrainian film. I am very glad that we did not try to steal the show. . . . in Ukraine they are trying, of course, but as a younger brother they should be forgiven.”<sup>115</sup> The familiar condescension directed toward Ukraine is even more explicit here than in Kormukhina’s statement to Bishop Filaret cited earlier.

After calling the film historically accurate, Medinsky pointed out that producers on the Ukrainian side of the production deleted an episode from the script in which the heroine sniper is seen prior to her military service in the Odessa archives writing a thesis about Bogdan Khmelnytsky and his role in the seventeenth-century “reunification of Ukraine with Russia.”<sup>116</sup> Medinsky implies here that some of the Ukrainians involved in the film had contemporary political motives for cutting this scene, yet it seems difficult to justify the relevance of such an episode in the overall plot of love, sacrifice, and loss. It only makes sense as part of a secondary motivation to promote the modern-day reunification of Ukraine (or at least parts of it) with Russia. Some of my informants

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<sup>115</sup> “Я рада, что Владимир Мединский назвал ‘Битву за Севастополь’ русско-украинским фильмом. Я очень рада, что у нас не попытались перетянуть одеяло... На Украине пытаются, конечно, но как брата младшего их надо простить.” “Юлия Пересильд: Я рада, что Мединский назвал ‘Битву за Севастополь’ русско-украинским фильмом,” Псковское агентство информации - культура, March 29, 2015, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://informpskov.ru/news/172499.html>.

<sup>116</sup> “К слову, моя бабушка из Смелы всю жизнь проработала школьной учительницей истории, а на истфаке Киевского университета имени Шевченко в свое время училась вместе с Людмилой Павличенко, знаменитым снайпером, героиней российско-украинского фильма ‘Битва за Севастополь.’ Фильм, кстати, хороший и исторически весьма корректный. Правда, украинские сопродюсеры предпочли опустить эпизод о том, как Павличенки, находясь в июне 41-го года на практике в одесском архиве, писала диплом на тему Богдан Хмельницкий и его роль в воссоединении Украины с Россией. Эпизод киевские коллеги вычеркнули из сценария, сочтя, что это уже слишком.” Vladimir Medinsky in Ванденко and Мединский, “Владимир Мединский.”

below recognized a hint of this subtext in the film even without this episode. More importantly, they saw political motives in the “Kukushka” promotional video as well.

Before commenting more extensively on Tsoi’s original version of the song, Victoria shared the very next video I had intended to send her of Polina Gagarina singing “Kukushka” for the film’s soundtrack because she also likes this version. When asked whether the soundtrack version adds different meanings to the song, she stated the following about the original version first:

Well, the song is about determination, achieving goals on the one hand and desire to know what the future has in store on the other. Of course by Victor it’s more personal, because it’s like his prayer. He wrote it about his life. He is singing about his creative work of course. He is asking his fortune to be kind to him. He also feels lonely in his fight. Maybe I was wrong, just my first perception. If I think twice I might be more profound in my judgment of the song. You know, I am usually more impressed by tune and mood of the song.<sup>117</sup>

About Gagarina’s version for the soundtrack to the film, she stated: “You see, the World War II film influences the song and the meaning shifts from the personal life of a musician to the general fight of all Soviet people, as I feel it.”<sup>118</sup> I juxtaposed these comments within this part of the discussion to illustrate how even for someone who appreciates all versions, the meaning of the song has been changed.

Oleg Ugryumov provides further evidence of this. He rather liked the film *Battle for Sevastopol* and his opinion of Gagarina’s version for the soundtrack is also positive. He says that here the song begins to play with new colors and that a new meaning appears which identifies with the main character of the film (the young female sniper).

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<sup>117</sup> Victoria from Pyatigorsk, HelloTalk dialogue, April 11, 2019.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

He perceives a direct relationship between the text of the song and the visual imagery of the promotional music video.<sup>119</sup> Oleg clearly demonstrates that at least for him, the song has acquired new meanings through Gagarina's performance and its association with the film and that the new meanings arise in connection with the accompanying visual elements. I wondered whether Oleg could identify the use of "Kukushka" in this context as a manipulation of viewers' emotions for political capital, but resisted the urge to ask him because I preferred to have my informants bring up such matters on their own. As we will see below, other informants do indeed recognize a manipulative element. And in a later discussion about another singer's performance, even Oleg seems to recognize the hand of the state.

Maria Udovydchenko could not stomach watching the film trailer beyond its midpoint. She made it clear that part of her problem with the video was that she is not a fan of female vocalists. But what made it especially unpalatable to her was the associated visual imagery. Recall that in the section above about Tsoi's original version she spoke of a political meaning in opposition to the Soviet system's indiscriminate destruction of individuality. Regarding this version, she states that an "obvious profiteering has occurred – they took a famous song with a strong text, took it out of context and used it for enhancing the effect of a patriotic film." Then she added, "In my opinion, this was a move that was supposed to unite generations – those who are now 30+ and younger, and older viewers who are still influenced by the patriotic past." She concluded her remarks

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<sup>119</sup> "Т.к. этот вариант был саундтреком к фильму (вполне неплохому), то впечатление положительное. Песня заиграла новыми красками, в ней появился еще один смысл. Идет отождествление с главной героиней фильма. Т.е. появилась прямая связь текста и картинки." Oleg Ugryumov, Facebook Messenger dialogue, April 8, 2019.

by stating that she would not be watching the film because she has no interest in patriotic cinema.<sup>120</sup>

Gleb Vildanov's musical tastes lean towards hard rock and heavy metal, especially of the American variety (e.g. ZZ Top and Iron Maiden). For him, Russian rock possesses an over-affected air of profundity, an affectation that he scoffs at and reviles when he hears it in the rock genre. As I understand him, this striving to be deep is a sign of self-importance, of elitist arrogance. Because of his genre preferences and his dislike of the affectations he perceives in Russian rock, he has never really liked Tsoi or his music. Despite this, he generously took the time to watch the videos I sent him and thoughtfully responded to my questions about the various versions of "Kukushka" that I am discussing here.

Gleb had nothing noteworthy to say about Tsoi's version of "Kukushka," so he began his comments with Gagarina's. He recognized the film as "more about politics," with a patriotic message proclaiming "Crimea is ours!" He has more than once used this declaration ironically to label a very specific type of propaganda geared toward

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<sup>120</sup> "Сначала про второе видео: я даже не смогла досмотреть его до середины. Во первых - мне не нравится женский вокал, во вторых - для меня эта песня совсем о другом, скорее о противостоянии системе советского строя, уравнивающего всех без разбора. В клипе же произошла очевидная спекуляция - взяли известную песню с сильным текстом, вырвали из контекста и использовали для усиления эффекта от патриотического фильма. На мой взгляд, этот ход должен был объединить поколения - тех, кому сейчас 30+ и младше, и более старших зрителей, еще находящихся под влиянием патриотического прошлого. Сам фильм, куски которого представлены в клипе - не смотрела и не буду, потому что очень не люблю современное патриотическое кино. Но это отдельная тема для разговора." Maria Udovydchenko, Facebook Messenger dialogue, April 9, 2019.

legitimizing the annexation of Crimea. He also stated, “But on the whole, a picture of the tragedy of war is created, the tragedy of loss.”<sup>121</sup>

As Gleb’s comments suggest, the music video taps into the valuable resource of nostalgia for the Great Patriotic War to create solidarity among ethnic Russians wherever they may live. Furthermore, it imagines that Russian and Ukrainian relations should be uncomplicated today. Yet despite the treatment Ukrainians received at the hands of the Nazis, and despite the unity of purpose they shared with all Soviet citizens during the war, many Ukrainians today (especially in the Western part of the country) do not share in this nostalgia. The accompanying film’s release following the annexation of Crimea is therefore deserving of scrutiny. It is not hard to imagine that this production helped to increase the strength of attachment and possessiveness that many Russians feel for this part of Ukraine.

Masha Vildanova had less to say about the political elements that Gleb picked up on in this version. Like her husband, she states that she “is completely indifferent to Tsoi’s work,”<sup>122</sup> yet from my conversations with her in their kitchen, their reasons for not liking his music are very different. Where Gleb is generally against what he perceives as attempts at profundity, Masha cannot stand the *way* he sings. During one exchange in their apartment she even mimicked his singing style with the lowest, monotone voice she

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<sup>121</sup> “Второе видео - это саундтрек к патриотическому фильму Битва за Севастополь (Типа Крым наш!) это больше политика. Но в целом создаётся картинка трагичности войны. Трагедия потери.” Gleb Vildanov, Facebook Messenger dialogue, April 9, 2019.

<sup>122</sup> “Полностью равнодушна к творчеству Цоя.” Maria Vildanova, Facebook Messenger dialogue, May 13, 2019.

could muster. Her musical tastes veer more towards popular song than rock, as she expressed to me a love for jazz singers like Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald.

Though Masha finds Tsoi's text for "Kukushka" to be "sufficiently strong and philosophical," she believes that this is more fully realized in Gagarina's version, stating that she "brought bright color and the correct accents to the song" in her performance. For her, "this is a case when the cover version is much stronger than the original."<sup>123</sup> Though she told me that she completely agreed with other informants when I said they perceived a change in the song's original meaning in this version, the specifics of her own perceptions were somewhat vague and equivocal when I tried to tease them out in our online dialogue. Twice she wondered openly what exactly Tsoi meant, perhaps hoping that I would offer some clues as to what it was I wanted her to say.<sup>124</sup> She stated that she "always perceived this song as having a bit of a military theme," but when pressed to describe in more specific detail how Gagarina's version was different, she simply restated that hers adds color.

When Sergey Klishish heard Polina Gagarina's version for the soundtrack to the film *Battle for Sevastopol* paired with the visual imagery of the film trailer, he was unenthusiastic to say the least: "I have not watched any of the film. The clip does not move me. ☹ From Tsoi, this is a personal song, but here a propagandistic-patriotic ring is

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<sup>123</sup> "Текст достаточно сильный, философский и песня, как мне кажется, полностью раскрывается в кавер-версии Полины Гагариной. Это тот случай, когда кавер значительно сильнее оригинала. Полностью равнодушна к творчеству Цоя, но Гагарина, как мне кажется, внесла яркие краски и правильные акценты в песню." Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> "Интересно, а какой смысл вкладывал в песню Цой?" And later, "А что на самом деле имел в виду Цой?" Ibid.

turned out.” In a play on the words of the chorus which begins each time with the entreaty, “Sun of mine, look upon me” (*Solntse moyo, vzgliany na menia*), Sergey declares that this version of “Kukushka” is “Not mine. ☺” Like many in the text-based communication of social media, Sergey employed emojis for added emphasis and to make sure I understood that the pun was intended.

Alexander Petrov had a rather violent reaction to the film trailer that features Gagarina’s cover of “Kukushka.” In order to understand how intensely he felt about it, it is worth quoting his comments in full:

The cover version is nothing. I did not watch the film. I don’t want to watch anything more about The Great Patriotic War since we decided to make a cult from the victory and to justify Stalin on this basis. It was so fucked up, how many people died, how many lives were broken, how many were destroyed. The Ninth of May should not be a holiday, but a day of mourning in memory of the dead. It is not clear to me what relationship the song could possibly have to the film.<sup>125</sup>

From his testimony, we can see that there is a great disconnect for Alexander between his understanding of the song’s meaning and the imagery in the film trailer. Morbid curiosity perhaps got the better of him, as he reported a couple of hours later that he had watched the film. Commenting once and for all on the efficacy of the song in this context, he used an idiomatic expression which basically translates to “This song is neither here, nor there.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> “Кавер никакой. Фильм я не смотрел, не хочется больше ничего смотреть о Великой Отечественной после того как у нас решили из победы делать культ и оправдывать на этой почве Сталина. Это же был полный пиздец, сколько людей погибло, сколько жизней поломано, сколько всего уничтожено. 9 мая должно быть не праздником, а днём траура, памяти погибших. Какое отношение может иметь песня к фильму мне не ясно.” Alexander Petrov, VKontakte dialogue, April 20, 2019.

<sup>126</sup> “Ну вот, посмотрел фильм. Эта песня там ни к селу ни к городу.” Ibid.

Some time later he articulated a clear opinion about the motivation to showcase “Kukushka” in the film: “The visual series and images in the video are an attempt to connect a well-known song with the theme of the war (although Kukushka, as it seems to me, is not about that at all) and to profit from Tsoi’s popularity.”<sup>127</sup> Gagarina herself and arguably the Russian government as well, continue to profit from this popularity. Before moving on to Yaroslava Degtyareva’s cover version—which firmly associates this patriotic version of “Kukushka” with the annexation of Crimea—I touch on two additional performances (one extensively, the second in brief) based on the arrangement Meladze wrote for Gagarina as a postscript to this discussion concerning Gagarina’s impact on the song.

### **Gagarina’s “Kukushka” as a Form of Soft Power Diplomacy**

If we read Gagarina’s cover as part of a larger assertion of Russian hegemony over Ukrainian territory, then a paradox appears when it seems to simultaneously broadcast an anti-war, “friendship of the peoples” narrative with other neighbors. Indeed, as relations between the United States and China have become more strained, the Russian government has sought a closer partnership with The People’s Republic<sup>128</sup> and I propose that Gagarina’s cover of “Kukushka” has operated as a form of soft diplomacy to help bring about this warmer relationship.

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<sup>127</sup> “Визуальный ряд и образы в видео - попытка связать хорошо известную песню с темой войны (хотя Кукушка, как мне кажется, вообще не о том), нажиться на популярности Цоя.” Alexander Petrov, VKontakte dialogue, May 14, 2019.

<sup>128</sup> See an analysis of the implications of this trend here: James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, and Ali Wyne, “A Warming Trend in China-Russia Relations,” April 18, 2019, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/04/a-warming-trend-in-china-russia-relations.html>.



I suggest that the two videos discussed in this section are examples of how Tsoi's song has recently functioned in this capacity. The first example represents a form of cultural exchange that might have involved some form of government influence in the interest of strengthening ties between the strategic and economic interests of Russia and China. The second video is more informal and its connection to any government entity is doubtful. Yet it possibly represents an example of the kind of deference Russia might like the ethnic nationalities of the former Soviet Union to show to the "first among equals." Russia's strategic and economic dominance in the region that includes Kyrgyzstan is clear. The second video indicates how even the youngest generations of ordinary citizens in some of these neighboring nations remain cognizant of their continued dependence.

In early 2019, Gagarina participated as the invited "add-on" contestant for the fourth episode of the Chinese professional vocalist competition, *The Singer*, televised all over China. As part competition, reality show, and documentary, viewers see snippets of daily life from the competition and learn biographical details of each artist. Near the beginning of the episode, Gagarina is warmly welcomed into a room where all of the mostly Asian contestants have been assembled, waiting to meet the Russian star. She enters to the oohs and ahs of the other contestants, saying "hello everyone" ("dàjiā hǎo, dàjiā hǎo") in Chinese. In a "friendship of the peoples" moment, the contestants enthusiastically interact, teaching each other how to say the numbers in Chinese and

Russian printed on the *matryuska* dolls<sup>129</sup> that reveal the performance order for the episode.<sup>130</sup>

After performing “Kukushka,” her signature hit, Gagarina took first place in this round, winning a Mazda CX-8 Crossover and ultimately advancing to the finals, placing fifth overall. During the performance segment of the show, the emcee (a contestant himself) introduced the singers, reading from handheld cue cards. When he introduces Gagarina, he describes her stage presence as “pretty and dominant...just like a queen.” In a touch of exaggerated canonization that would surely have made Tsoi blush with embarrassment, he reported that the song’s original author was “the father of Soviet Rock, the Elvis Presley of Russia.” He concludes his remarks by declaring, “And I did my homework. In particular, I learned how to pronounce Cuckoo in Russian.” After mispronouncing it as “kukushika,” the television audience sees the multilingual Kazakh-Bulgarian contestant, Kristian Kostov,<sup>131</sup> in a backstage room gently correcting the

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<sup>129</sup> The show’s principal sponsor, the Chinese dairy conglomerate Yili, managed to saturate the entire program with logos and product placement for their milk, Satine (printed even on the Russian *matryoshka* dolls). Contestants are also seen drinking this product from small cartons.

<sup>130</sup> The scene just described begins at 8:58 in the following video. “[ENG SUB] Singer 2019 EP4 - Chyi Yu Sings A Meaningful Touching Song ‘Live’ - 20190201,” accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXt7pGYrzJw&t=539s>.

<sup>131</sup> Kostov, who was born in Moscow, participated in the first season of Russia’s The Voice - Kids, and won second place representing Bulgaria at the 2017 Eurovision Song Contest, often acted as cultural intermediary between Russian, Chinese, and English-speaking audiences. A brief biography is available at “Kristian Kostov Will Represent Bulgaria at Eurovision 2017 with ‘Beautiful Mess,’” *wiwibloggs*, March 13, 2017, <https://wiwibloggs.com/2017/03/13/kristian-kostov-will-represent-bulgaria-eurovision-2017-beautiful-mess/179642/>.

pronunciation. In a show of sincere interest, a Chinese contestant repeats the corrected form after him.<sup>132</sup>

During her own pre-recorded introduction to her performance, Gagarina explains “the meaning” behind the song and its importance to generations of Russian people as a clip from her video for the *Battle for Sevastopol* film plays onscreen: “The song is very strong because it is about war, about overcoming. Russia has experienced many wars and sufferings, but the people became even stronger and mightier because of this. In this song I want to show that strength that we possess.”<sup>133</sup> While the film merely created new associations between “Kukushka” and Russian bravery during the war, Gagarina makes the dubious assertion that this is exactly what Tsoi originally intended in the song. Furthermore, the collective efforts of all Soviet peoples during the war are erased and replaced by Russian heroism.

Even the shamelessly pro-Kremlin tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, could not resist making a few ironic comments about Gagarina’s choices and interpretive presumptions: “A blonde [stood] with wide open blue eyes in a black floor-length dress and a sparkling diadem on her head – what more could a disciplined citizen of the

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<sup>132</sup> I am quoting from the English subtitles embedded in the video. The segment just described begins at 1:22:50 in the video linked above. “[ENG SUB] Singer 2019 EP4 - Chyi Yu Sings A Meaningful Touching Song ‘Live’ - 20190201.”

<sup>133</sup> “‘Кукушка’ в России — это масштабная песня, с которой выросли многие поколения. Песня очень сильная, потому что она о войне, о превозможении. Россия пережила много войн и страданий, но люди от этого становились еще сильнее и могучей. В этой песне я хочу показать ту силу, которой мы обладаем.” Polina Gagarina. This segment begins at 1:23:50 in the video linked above. “[ENG SUB] Singer 2019 EP4 - Chyi Yu Sings A Meaningful Touching Song ‘Live’ - 20190201.”

Peoples' Republic of China dream of?"<sup>134</sup> And then referring to the song and its author, the tabloid states, "Apparently she decided to kill two hares at once. First of all, the author's surname [Tsoi's father is Korean] would surely ingratiate her to the Asian people (they watch the show all over Asia). Secondly, she endowed the philosophical and even slightly fairy-tale song with a touch of tragic heroism. As we recall, Gagarina recorded a cover version of "Kukushka" for the military drama *Battle for Sevastopol*." The film's pervasive presence in Russian society is implied by the question, "Well, can you imagine anyone not being able to recall?" The article concludes with a compliment that seems to be rather back-handed: "Tsoi's hit, which was arranged by the musicians of Kino after the death of their leader, was later covered by Bi-2, DDT, Olga Kormukhina, and Zemfira. But it only occurred to Polina to present 'Kukushka' as a song about the wars that Russia survived."<sup>135</sup> Though such a review suggests that freedom of expression in the state-owned press is alive and well in Russia, we cannot rule out the possibility that such critique might be allowed or even encouraged in order to make these freedoms appear entirely untrammelled.

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<sup>134</sup> "Блондинка с широко открытыми голубыми глазами в черном в пол платье и со сверкающей диадемой на голове — о чем еще мог мечтать дисциплинированный гражданин КНР?" Егор Арефьев, "Гагарина — первая в китайском 'Голосе!,'" КР.RU – *Комсомольская правда*," February 4, 2019, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26937/3988613/>.

<sup>135</sup> "Видимо, решила убить двух зайцев сразу. Во-первых, фамилия автора наверняка расположит к себе азиатскую публику (шоу смотрят по всей Азии). Во-вторых, наделила философскую и даже чуть сказочную песню оттенком трагики подвига. Как мы помним, Гагарина записала кавер-версию 'Кукушки' для военной драмы 'Битва за Севастополь.' Ну, подумаешь, с кем не бывает? Хит Цоя, который был сведен музыкантами 'Кино' уже после гибели лидера, в свое время перепевали и 'Би-2,' и ДДТ, и Ольга Кормухина, и Земфира. Но только Полине пришлось в голову представить 'Кукушку' как песню о войнах, которые пережила Россия." See in *Ibid*.

Perhaps the tabloid author gives Gagarina too much credit. Surely it was the collective imagination of the film's directors (again, funded by the Russian Ministry of Culture and Yanukovich's pro-Russian Ukrainian government) that caused these new associations to take shape. Whether Kormukhina ever imagined them herself, both she and the Russian government have capitalized on these associations since the film's release in the various patriotic concerts cited in the previous section. Meanwhile, it is difficult to imagine Gagarina's arrangement taking the musical dramatic form that it does without the precedence that Kormukhina's version set. To conclude this section of the larger discussion, I will show an example of how Gagarina's version resonates in one of the former ethnic republics of the Soviet Union.

In May of 2018, a young singer from Kirghizstan who calls herself Nur Cholpon published her own melodically embellished cover of Meladze's arrangement for Gagarina on Youtube.<sup>136</sup> It is arguable that she merely chose Tsoi's song to broaden her exposure to audiences outside of her native country. And while I do not seek to rob her of agency, I think it is worthwhile to briefly unpack her performance and some comments that follow it to explore its range of possible associations.

From the outset of the video, the orange and black-striped collar of her otherwise white blouse would instantly register with most inhabitants of Russia and even the former Soviet Union. It clearly represents the St. George ribbon, a symbol of valor for both imperial Russia and the modern Russian military. More recently, pro-Russian separatists

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<sup>136</sup> See Nur Cholpon, "НурЧолпон - В.Цой "Кукушка" (ЖИВОЙ ГОЛОС)," accessed March 29, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3n45pdZUlfq>.

in eastern Ukraine have adopted the ribbon as their own symbol.<sup>137</sup> Coupled with a message she left in the comments below her video, “[T]his performance is dedicated to our ancestors who gave us Victory,”<sup>138</sup> it is clear that she either wishes to express Kirghiz solidarity with Russia or that she understands how potent World War II nostalgia is for attracting Russian audiences to her work. If she is not playing the dutiful little sister to big brother Russia, then she is making a shrewd calculation to exploit the song’s new associations with war.

We see evidence that her efforts hit this mark precisely in the most liked comment (over 1400 to date) made by YouTube user Ivan Ivanov: “I respect the Kirghiz. The Kirghiz guys worked for us. All are very hardworking, honest, modest and very clean. Greetings to the fraternal, Kirghiz people!!!”<sup>139</sup> The notion of who worked for whom implies an asymmetrical power relationship between the celebrated fraternal bonds. The final cover performance of “Kukushka” we will consider exemplifies this same chauvinistic attitude toward the Ukrainian people.

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<sup>137</sup> In the video embedded in the link, Kirghiz soldiers also demonstrate their solidarity with Russia. See in “Kyrgyz Soldiers Participate In St. George’s Ribbon Relay,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, April 30, 2014, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-st-georges-ribbon-relay/25367650.html>.

<sup>138</sup> “А данное исполнение посвящается нашим предкам подарившим нам Победу!,” Nur Cholpon. See in the comments in Nur Cholpon, “НурЧолпон - В.Цой ‘Кукушка’ (ЖИВОЙ ГОЛОС).”

<sup>139</sup> “Уважаю киргизов. Работали у нас ребята киргизы. Все очень работающие, честные, скромные и очень чистоплотные. Привет, братскому, киргизскому народу!!!,” Иван Иванов. See at the top of the comments for the video in Nur Cholpon.

## Yaroslava Degtyareva's "Kukushka" Cover in Crimea

In May 2018 the Russian government staged celebratory events and performances for the opening of the highly controversial Kerch Strait Bridge connecting the Taman peninsula in the Russian Federation with the Kerch peninsula in Crimea. This is the part of Ukraine infamously annexed by Russia in 2014, yet recognized by most governments as still belonging to Ukraine. The performance of one particular artist, the child star, Yaroslava Degtyareva, constitutes the remainder of the main body of this discussion.

As a keyboardist begins to play the opening strains of a familiar tune, we see audience members consisting mostly of workers in various construction uniforms standing in front of the stage. Many of these wear bright orange and blue uniforms with the name *Mostotrest* printed in white across their backs. A day earlier saw President Vladimir Putin officially opening the bridge. After hearing about the intricacies of the bridge's construction from his childhood friend Arkady Rotenberg, and after participating in a short ceremony and conversation with *Mostotrest* workers, Putin took the wheel of a large orange dump truck and led a massive convoy of various other trucks across the strait.

Back onstage the next day, ten-year-old Degtyareva stands before the audience of bridge builders. Dressed in quasi-military chic, sporting a brown blouse with beaded epaulettes, she stands in front of a men's chorus composed of Russian sailors from the Black Sea Fleet. Accompanied by the chorus and other musicians, she sings a version of a recent cover of that familiar tune, Victor Tsoi's "Kukushka." The song earlier garnered her instant fame and accolades on Russia's most prominent talent show for child singers. The arrangement she sang for the talent show *The Voice – Kids* is the same one Gagarina

regularly performs. Degtyareva has even been groomed to sing all of the embellishments that Gagarina applies to the melody. The only significant differences between the two are the differences that lie between a mature and adolescent vocal timbre. The chorus of sailors in this particular performance is merely an added layer to that same arrangement.

Their contribution here is more symbolic than musically substantive since they represent a historically significant arm of the Russian Navy based in Sevastopol on land leased to Russia by Ukraine long before the Crimean peninsula's annexation. One of its earliest victories was the 1790 defeat of the Turkish fleet in the very strait that the new bridge traverses.<sup>140</sup> In 1942, during the events portrayed in the film discussed above, the fleet, along with the Red Army, suffered some of its most devastating losses while trying to hold off the eventually successful Axis powers for several weeks in defense of Sevastopol.<sup>141</sup>

While Degtyareva sings, the audience moves to the beat, holding up placards with the names of historically significant Russian cities whose fortifications formed lines of defense against the Crimean Tatars between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Their appearance along with the sailors unmistakably associates the opening of the bridge with a new stage of conquest.<sup>142</sup> Periodically the video pans to views of the new bridge where we see a parade of motorcyclists clad in black leather crossing over the water from both

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<sup>140</sup> Mungo Melvin, *Sevastopol's Wars: Crimea from Potemkin to Putin* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 88.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 532.

<sup>142</sup> Those visible in the video include the cities of Belgorod, Cheboksary, Kolomna, Ryazan, and Serpukhov.



sides. Many of them fly the flag of their pro-Kremlin biker club, the Night Wolves, alongside flags of the Russian Federation.<sup>143</sup>

This vignette represents the confluence of a number of phenomena in contemporary Russian culture and politics. These include crony capitalism, World War II nostalgia, the symbolic militarization of youth—especially young girls and young women—in service to the fatherland, and the Russian state’s hegemonic acts toward its neighbor to the southwest, Ukraine. Furthermore, Degtyareva’s performance signals the culmination of a string of Russian nationalist appropriations of Victor Tsoi’s song, an artifact of late-Soviet rock counterculture.<sup>144</sup> Recently in an interview with one of Kino’s co-founders, Aleksei Rybin, the musician and film director was asked whose side Tsoi would have taken in the conflicts with Ukraine. The interviewer cited the performance of Tsoi’s music at the opening of the Crimean bridge as exemplary of the fact that at least some believe Tsoi would have sided with the Russian patriotic position. He also noted

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<sup>143</sup> See The Moscow Times, “Russian Bikers Cross ‘Putin’s Bridge’ in Inaugural Drive,” *Moscow Times*, May 16, 2018, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/05/16/russian-bikers-cross-putins-bridge-in-inaugural-drive-a61474>. The leader of the Night Wolves is Alexander Zaldostanov, nicknamed “the Surgeon” due to his former career as a facial reconstruction specialist. He has been acquainted with Putin since 2009 and the two have been pictured together on numerous occasions since then. Putin also awarded him an order of honor for his role in the patriotic education of youth. See Alec Luhn, “‘The Surgeon’: We Spoke with the Leader of Putin’s Favorite Biker Club, the Night Wolves,” *Vice* (blog), March 24, 2015, accessed July 12, 2020, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/gynz5j/the-surgeon-we-spoke-with-the-leader-of-putins-favorite-biker-club-the-night-wolves](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/gynz5j/the-surgeon-we-spoke-with-the-leader-of-putins-favorite-biker-club-the-night-wolves). See also, Lulu Morris, “Putin’s Biker Best Friend,” March 29, 2017, accessed March 19, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com.au/history/putins-biker-best-friend.aspx>.

<sup>144</sup> Degtyareva’s performance, as well as everything described above can be seen in this video. TalantTV, “Ярослава Дегтярева - Кукушка (Крымский Мост 2018),” accessed December 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1UeWI5WbFk>.

that others believe Tsoi would have joined the ranks of the protesters.<sup>145</sup> The entirety of Rybin's response to this question is worth quoting, for it brings additional nuance to Engström's and Yurchak's discussions cited earlier concerning the particular goals of the artistic circle Tsoi belonged to. His response also resonates with Maria Udovydchenko's clarifications about the nature of the societal implications in "Kukushka":

I think the same thing as I did back then: He would have written songs and performed them from the stage. How can you guess about the political choice of a person who has died? Even during his lifetime, he did not indicate it unambiguously. Retroactively, they began to say that the song, "I Want Changes!" was about perestroika. Of course it wasn't. This is a very commonplace perspective. None of us were engaged in a struggle with the system, although we did not love it because it prevented us from living the way we wanted to. Rather, we existed outside the system and were not planning to make any revolutions. It was a defense of an alternative reality. In part, it coincided with the future that is now, and it was also partially discordant with it. Yet an ideal reality does not exist.<sup>146</sup>

Rather than subscribing to Bugaev's notions that Tsoi had changed after 1988, Rybin suggests that he would have continued behaving in the same way he always had. One

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<sup>145</sup> "Раз уж заговорили о политике, ответьте на вопрос, который волнует всех: на чьей стороне был бы Цой, ваш партнер по группе? Одни уверены, что он занял бы патриотическую позицию (например, те, кто пел его песни на открытии Крымского моста), другие видят его в рядах протестующих. Чем бы он сейчас занимался?" Aleksey Rybin qtd. in Ян Шенкман and Алексей Рыбин, "Он терпеть не мог ходить строем," *Новая газета*, November 20, 2018, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/11/21/78652-aleksey-rybin-on-terpet-ne-mog-hodit-stroem>.

<sup>146</sup> "Думаю, тем же, чем и тогда: писал бы песни и исполнял их со сцены. Как можно гадать о политическом выборе человека, который умер? Он и при жизни не обозначал его однозначно. Задним числом стали говорить, что песня 'Хочу перемен!' — о перестройке. Конечно нет. Это очень примитивный подход. Никто из нас не занимался борьбой с системой, хотя мы ее не любили, она нам мешала жить. Но мы существовали вне системы, никаких революций делать не собирались. Это было отстраивание альтернативной реальности. Частично она совпала с тем будущим, которое наступило, частично диссонирует с ним. Но идеальной реальности не бывает." Aleksei Rybin in *ibid*.

system or another would always be in place and though some would be worse than others, spending your life in endless struggle against them would amount to not living at all. Instead, they sought to carve out their own space, geographically and functionally within the system, yet emotionally and creatively detached from it. In this way, they were the popular culture equivalent of the unofficial composers of the Thaw period that Peter Schmelz has extensively researched.<sup>147</sup>

The main purpose of the interview with Rybin was to discuss his new path as a film director and a couple small digressions from the discussion of Degtyareva's cover is relevant and fruitful to the Crimean question that "Kukushka" has now become inextricably tangled up with. Rybin's debut film, *All Will End Soon* (*Skoro vse konchitsya*) (2017), which he describes as "rather anti-war," had been played at festivals and awarded prizes in several places outside of Russia. But after more than a year it had yet to be shown within his home country. He essentially reasoned that since it is about the effects of the Ukrainian conflict on the lives of ordinary citizens in St. Petersburg, it was perhaps hitting too close to home—a bitter pill that the government did not want its people to swallow.

Working from the premise that crossing the Russian-Ukrainian border from either direction did not suddenly "affect your mind, honesty, talent, or character," Rybin evaded questions related to which nation Crimea actually belonged; seeking instead to remind audiences of everyone's humanity. In this way, he provides an alternative to the most prevalent strategies being used against Ukraine in the Russian mainstream media:

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<sup>147</sup> Peter John Schmelz, *Such Freedom, If Only Musical: Unofficial Soviet Music during the Thaw* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

namely, the big-brother condescension exhibited in Kormukhina’s letter to Bishop Filaret and the jingoistic and dehumanizing tactics Zaldostanov (“the Surgeon”) and his band of Night Wolves used in a spectacle they acted out in Sevastopol, a project supported by a fifteen-million-ruble grant from the Ministry of Culture and broadcast live throughout the nation by the federal TV channel Rossiya 2.<sup>148</sup>

Michael Idov characterized the Night Wolves’ show as an example of the *Krymnash* (“Crimea is ours”) phenomenon of popular support for the annexation of Crimea (which Degtyareva’s performance clearly belongs to). He described this particular iteration of the bikers’ annual celebration dubbed *The Return*, as the “apex of the madness,” “Russia’s answer to redneck culture,” and “an infernal parody of the Sochi Olympics’ opening ceremony.”<sup>149</sup> Zaldostanov, acting as narrator, summoned World War II nostalgia, connecting past battles against fascists with the present, turning Soviet victory into a Russian one, all the while absolving Stalin of his litany of atrocities:

Victory. Fiery, sacred, divine. My motherland has dealt Stalin’s ten blows to the hairy trunk of fascism. . . . We rose from the ashes, rebuilt our cities, and thought that this flowering would last forever. But the enemies who hate our country bought up the Soviet Union, took its territory and its army, devastated its great factories, slashed our land into pieces, and left the stumps of the United Russian State bleeding and radiating intolerable pain. . . . But the healing is upon us, and it’s coming from the Russian Sevastopol. The poisonous dough of fascism overflowed the kneading trough of Kiev and began spreading all over Ukraine. The new battle with fascism is inevitable. Stalin’s eleventh blow is inevitable!<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Idov, *Dressed Up for a Riot*, 232.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-33.

<sup>150</sup> Alexander “the Surgeon” Zaldostanov, trans. by Michael Idov in *Ibid.*, 233. View the program in full at the following link. Zaldostanov’s entire introductory speech can be heard from 3:59-5:40. The camera pans to him as he recites into a microphone wearing his Night Wolves attire at 4:14. Radek Hotovy, “Байк-шоу 2014 Севастополь,” accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPnb97ybtIU>.

Later, a band sang, “Tell me, Ukraine, for how many thousand euros did you sell the Kievan Rus to Europe?”<sup>151</sup> I cite these passages because they demonstrate in far more explicit terms what Degtyareva’s performance of “Kukushka” implicitly reinforces: the inflamed rhetoric against Ukraine and the West, the Russian State’s ultimate goals regarding Ukraine, and the violent lengths it is willing to go toward achieving those goals. Both Degtyareva’s performance and the Night Wolves’ show represent two more Ministry of Culture projects seeking to unite ethnic Russians in support of military aggression.

Returning once more to Rybin, we find in his concluding remarks about Tsoi a clear refutation of such violence as he states, “The only thing I know for sure, is that Viktor was a person with a clearly expressed anti-war position.” To reinforce this claim he reminded the readers of Tsoi’s song, “I Declare My Home to be a Nuclear-free Zone” from Kino’s album *This Is Not Love* (1985). Then he stated, “I also remember our conversations about this. He could not tolerate going along in formation, and in general, [he thought that] war is very stupid.”<sup>152</sup> To understand the extent to which some Russians understand the implication of military conquest in Degtyareva’s performance and more generally, the use of children to promote it, we turn to comments collected from both my informants and social media sites.

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<sup>151</sup> Thirteenth Constellation, trans. by Michael Idov in *Ibid.*, 233-34.

<sup>152</sup> “Единственное, что я знаю точно, Виктор был человеком с ярко выраженной антивоенной позицией. Вспомните 'Я объявляю свой дом безъядерной зоной.' Я помню и наши разговоры об этом. Он терпеть не мог ходить строем, да и вообще, война — это очень глупо.” Aleksii Rybin, in Шенкман and Рыбин, “Он терпеть не мог ходить строем.”

My informants differed in what they chose to respond to in Degtyareva's performance, yet all of their statements are illuminating. Maria Udovydchenko had this reaction: "I opened the last video and flipped through it. I could not watch the last video in full [Degtyareva], especially when the cadre of Crimean bridge workers and those bikers with flags began to go by." And then relating this video to the others, she stated, "For me, this is all the same profiteering and drawing of one work into a completely different context."<sup>153</sup>

She then pointed to a discussion that had flared up on Russian Facebook about whether it was appropriate to continue dressing children up in replicas of military uniforms for patriotic celebrations. A child psychologist started it off just days before Victory Day celebrations by urging parents in a Facebook post to stop doing this, calling it the "romanticization and adornment of war." She went further, stating that this "implicitly broadcasts to them the idea that there is nothing terrible in this war." Stressing appropriate memorializing in a way that resonates from lived experience and individual family stories, she stated, "A desire may come to celebrate 'in a unified impulse' . . . . [W]e have such an important date ahead. As you prepare for it, listen to what rings personally for you. We are all from a society where instructions on how to correctly live,

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<sup>153</sup> "Открыла последний ролик... пролистала. Как ты и предполагал, я не смогла посмотреть последний ролик целиком, особенно когда пошли кадры с крымским мостом и этими байкерами с флагами. Для меня это все та же спекуляция, и втягивание одного произведения в совершенно другой контекст." Maria Udovydchenko, Facebook dialogue, May 14, 2019.

think and feel were issued from above. But today we can choose. For example, there is the awareness that no unity is worth the cost of dressing children in clothing for death.”<sup>154</sup>

A commenter on the psychologist’s Facebook post drew nearly four hundred expressions of approval after stating, “Unfortunately, in recent years, Victory Day is beginning to resemble the Brazilian Carnival with the costumes. And this is scary.”<sup>155</sup>

Maria put this back in the context of Degtyareva’s Crimean bridge performance, declaring, “And yet here also are the girl’s epaulettes, as if from a Lady Gaga costume, sparkling with some kind of decorations. For me, this is already beyond the pale.”<sup>156</sup> She did however acknowledge that Degtyareva was a good singer. It seems that her talents have made her conspicuous as a resource to be exploited by the Russian state for its propaganda purposes. Perhaps another child psychologist somewhere in Russia will eventually speak up about this phenomenon too.

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<sup>154</sup> Елена Г. Кузнецова, “Давайте На Правах Психолога, Имеющего Немалые... - Elena G. Kuznetsova,” Facebook (blog), April 26, 2019, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ElenaKuznetsova11/posts/3267414729951222>. Another website reported on the thousands of responses to the post and posted their own opinions in support of Kuznetsova’s statements. Pictures of children dressed in typical World War II uniform replicas are also available for viewing. The authors concluded their commentary on the topic by stating that “Children should know that war, and even the celebration of its end, is not a masquerade.” See “Психолог призвала родителей не одевать детей в военную форму,” НЭН, May 8, 2019, accessed December 21, 2019, [https://n-e-n.ru/nouniform/?fbclid=IwAR3q1ebGNjulGR1OsTknqpIYwe\\_KLdljlb4JL-zcmRdv3CcqdCL2pvMILA](https://n-e-n.ru/nouniform/?fbclid=IwAR3q1ebGNjulGR1OsTknqpIYwe_KLdljlb4JL-zcmRdv3CcqdCL2pvMILA).

<sup>155</sup> “К сожалению, в последние годы День Победы начинает напоминать бразильский карнавал с ряжеными. И это страшно.” Facebook commenter Ольга Киц-Ковязина. See in Кузнецова.

<sup>156</sup> “А здесь еще и погоны у девочки, как от костюма Леди Гага - блестящие с каким-то украшениями. Для меня это уже за гранью. Хотя поет она хорошо.” Maria Udovychenko, Facebook dialogue, May 14, 2019.

When I asked Maria about the placards bearing various city names in the audience during Degtyareva's performance, she loosely connected them with the defense of Sevastopol, Crimea during World War II. She stated, "This makes it even more complicated, because in Sevastopol the city has such a history, some wars, and all this is like a game. On the whole, there is a very heavy atmosphere there. It is a monument city, where no matter what you do, you offend the memory. There is no room for life."<sup>157</sup> Conflict over how to commemorate and memorialize the war rages in many cities in Ukraine populated by large numbers of ethnic Russians.

Alexander Petrov had a completely different reaction to Degtyareva's singing but seems to agree with Maria's sentiments. He began by stating that Degtyareva "rather shouts, than sings," and that the "army" [sic] choir backing her up was essentially useless, "like a fifth leg on a dog. The result sounds like an unsuccessful attempt to catch a senseless pathos that is inappropriate to the song's spirit and meaning."<sup>158</sup> Then Alexander shared a 1993 video clip from a concert in which the Finnish band The Leningrad Cowboys performed ZZ Top's 1983 hit single "Gimme All Your Lovin'" with the Red Army Choir and Alexandrov Folk Ensemble. He cited it as a much more

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<sup>157</sup> "Думаю какие-то контакты с Севастополем - клип в Севастополе снимали, насколько я поняла. От этого еще сложнее, потому что в Севастополе такая история у города, одни войны и все это как игра. Там очень тяжелая атмосфера в целом - город-памятник, где чтобы ни сделал - оскорбляешь память. Для жизни места нет." Maria Udovydchenko, Facebook Messenger dialogue, May 14, 2019.

<sup>158</sup> "Дегтярёва на этом видео скорее орёт, чем поёт, да и армейский хор тут как собаке пятая нога. Итог звучит как малоудачная попытка нагнать бессмысленного пафоса в неподходящую для этого по духу и смыслу песню." Alexander Petrov, VKontakte dialogue, May 14, 2019.



imaginative integration of a military ensemble into a pop music context.<sup>159</sup> The scene onstage is a mutually self-deprecating spoof of both Soviet and Western cultural stereotypes, all performed in the spirit of a new cultural openness and comradeship between former strategic opponents.<sup>160</sup> The atmosphere thus demonstrates a much more progressive attitude toward neighboring countries twenty-five years prior to the one on display in Degtyareva's performance of "Kukuskha." In contrast, Degtyareva's performance with members of the Black Sea Fleet chorus paints a sad regression in foreign relations.

Victoria from Pyatigorsk states, "the girl is very talented and sings well, but I think not as well as Polina Gagarina does. Her voice is strong, but for me, it lacks some of the power that Polina's has. I mean the girl just hasn't had enough life experience yet.

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<sup>159</sup> Вот тут, например, абсолютно замечательные Leningrad Cowboys наглядно демонстрируют, что можно сделать с армейским хором при наличии некоторой фантазии. Фантазии, которой так не хватает всем этим каверам на "Кукушку." Alexander Petrov, VKontakte dialogue, May 14, 2019.

<sup>160</sup> The Cowboys perform wearing pseudo military dress uniforms with medals dangling from their chests as well as exaggerated versions of American rockabilly fashions like upturned pointed-toe shoes, foot-long faux-hawk pompadours, and dark, black-rimmed sunglasses. Interspersed between the Cowboys singing segments of ZZ Top's song, the military band interjects the first phrase of the Soviet national anthem (musically the same as today's Russian national anthem) as well as stylistic references to American vaudeville while the choir periodically inserts snippets of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." Balalaika and accordion players and folk dancers in traditional Cossack costumes perform the well-known squatting and kicking movements of the *khopak* throughout the musical pastiche. Meanwhile, a gigantic red tractor (housing the drummer and his trap set) with working exhaust stack and flashing headlamps completes the picture as a possible reference to the bright depictions of the Soviet collective farm seen in so many old films. With a cow skull on its grill, the tractor is doubly connected with American Western and rockabilly culture. See in "Leningrad Cowboys & The Red Army Choir - Gimme All Your Lovin,'" accessed December 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNSfhrWINE>.

Polina’s performance is the best because she isn’t just singing, it’s more like she is telling the story, because she knows what is behind the words.”<sup>161</sup>

After I remarked to her that most of the recent covers of “Kukushka” have been made with young girls singing, she responded, “I guess they sing it just to show off, to show their vocal potential, to show how cool they are because they can sing as mighty as Gagarina does. The young girls started to sing it after Gagarina, not after Tsoi. And the words in it don’t count at all for them, I think. They are too little to understand the words.”<sup>162</sup> This reiterates the need to question whether the naiveté of the young girls is being exploited for propaganda.

I asked Gleb Vildanov what he thought the performers and the people that hired them for these state-sponsored concerts (the string of Kormukhina’s performances included) and films were trying to accomplish. He believed that the performers’ goals were “quite simple—to start becoming famous, to start their career.” He also allowed for the fact that personal convictions about Crimea might have led them to lend their talents. Gleb proposed that the concert organizers and artists alike recognized the potential for earning money in this context because of the fact that many of their countrymen believe that Crimea belongs to Russia. Furthermore, he sees this not merely as private enterprise, but as part of state propaganda.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Victoria from Piatygorsk, HelloTalk dialogue, May 20, 2019.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> “Я думаю, что цель исполнителя - достаточно простая, засветиться, я имею в виду начать становиться известной, начать карьеру + возможно личные убеждения и мысли про Крым. Цель тех людей, кто платит исполнителям деньги - мне кажется, это заработать на том, что Крым российский (так думают очень много людей в России) + как мне кажется

Gleb elaborated, stating that the hyper-politicization of Crimea creates lucrative opportunities for those willing to speak about it constantly on television. Conversely those who speak openly against the annexation of Crimea may encounter problems because a law has been enacted against such speech. One could possibly be labeled an enemy of the state.<sup>164</sup> From Gleb's comments we might surmise that the surest path to stardom in Russia is one taken in lockstep with the Kremlin. When I asked him about the significance of the placards displaying the names of various cities during Degtyareva's performance, he responded that they were there to show that allegedly, all of Russia is glad that Crimea has returned to Russia.<sup>165</sup> His use of the word "allegedly" points to the possibility that these notions are not universally held by all Russians.

Oleg revealed that he had a similar understanding of the performance after I asked him about the significance of the placards displaying city names. He said that the intent was to show that people from all over Russia came to the concert at the opening of the bridge to Crimea. Then he allowed for the possibility that this was all staged: "But in fact, this is not necessarily the case. Perhaps this is just window dressing since this is a state

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это часть государственной пропаганды." Gleb Vildanov, Facebook Messenger dialogue, May 17, 2019

<sup>164</sup> Тема Крыма очень политизирована, если человек согласен что Крым российский, то он может заработать на этом деньги от правительства если будет постоянно говорить про это из телевизора. . . . Если человек не согласен, что Крым российский, он становится врагом государства, и у него могут быть проблемы, если он говорит об этом. У нас даже такой закон есть." Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> "А города - это чтобы показать, что якобы вся Россия рада что Крым вернулся, что якобы в вся Россия рада." Ibid.

concert.”<sup>166</sup> I then asked Oleg whether he thought Tsoi wanted the song to convey a patriotic message and he stated, “Not in such a way as they now present it. In general, I do not think Tsoi wanted the state to touch his work in any way.”<sup>167</sup>

## Conclusion

Because my informants tended to lump the recent cover versions of “Kukushka” together, commenting on them mostly as a collection of similar videos, I have decided to let their general statements frame the conclusion of this chapter. In addition to Gagarina’s performance on the film soundtrack and the live performances of Kormukhina and Degtyareva discussed above, I shared a live performance of Gagarina singing for uniformed officers and their wives during a concert commemorating the Day of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of the Interior in March 2016.<sup>168</sup> After watching the three live performances, many of my informants noted that Gagarina’s exhibits the highest professional standards. Yet this level of polish seems to have been antithetical to Tsoi’s musical concerns. Such remarks underscore the gulf that exists between Tsoi’s approach to the song and those of the cover singers discussed above. As the song transforms from introspection to conspicuous patriotism, the more Spartan aesthetics of Tsoi and Kino are

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<sup>166</sup> “Таким образом хотят показать, что на концерт приехали люди их разных городов России. Но, на самом деле, это не обязательно так и есть. Возможно, это просто показуха, т.к. концерт государственный.” Oleg Ugryumov, Facebook Messenger dialogue, May 13, 2019.

<sup>167</sup> “Не в таком виде, в каком ее преподносят сейчас. Не думаю, что Цой вообще хотел, чтоб государство каким-либо образом касалось его творчества.” Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> My informants watched this video: “Полина Гагарина ‘Кукушка’ - Текст Песни. Legendado Em Português Do Brasil,” accessed December 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHtwpwT-YM4>; A video containing the same performance is available in the following link, which shows the name of the concert at its conclusion. “Полина Гагарина - Кукушка (Live),” accessed December 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7bS9JGbtNE>.

subverted in favor of the aggressive displays of hard rock (Kormukhina) and the dramatic vocal pyrotechnics on display in Gagarina's pop version and all subsequent covers performed by young girls after her, the latest incarnations of the state-approved *estrada* of old.

Tsoi consistently avoided such over theatrics. Sergey Klishis sees deeper reasons behind this tendency in "Kukushka": "It seems that the CIA for a moment lost control over Tsoi and instead of political rebellious themes he wrote a patriotic song that touches the 'hero' in the Russian soul."<sup>169</sup> During many of our face-to-face conversations and online dialogues, Sergey displayed this susceptibility to conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories about the CIA aside, his assertion points unmistakably to a perception that the meaning of "Kukushka" has been altered by these new contexts, that the goal of these performances is to inspire the patriotic hero that audiences might imagine residing within themselves.

Sergey added, "It is amazing that the song touches both the older generation and the youngest. This is unique for modern songs."<sup>170</sup> That it is so legible to so many demographic groups across Russia today is worth repeating. This accessibility makes the song extremely useful for any and all propagandistic goals. Yet there is something cynical about these contemporary covers of "Kukushka." While the best Soviet *estrada* artists sincerely sought to cultivate healthy, spiritual (in the secular sense) personalities

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<sup>169</sup> "Похоже ЦРУ на миг потеряли над Цоем контроль и он вместо политической бунтарской тематики написал патриотическую песню, которая трогает 'героя' в русской душе." Sergey Klishis, Vkontakte dialogue, May 17, 2019.

<sup>170</sup> "Удивительно, что песня трогает и старшее поколение и самое молодое.... Это из современных песен уникально." Ibid.

and national camaraderie, the cuckoos of these cover versions incite thoughts of an imagined enemy, first in whispers, and then in full-throated shouts.

Svetlana Shabrova states, “Of course, the visual aspect greatly changes the meaning of the song.” For her, Tsoi’s song seems to have been superimposed upon the subject matter of these performances—“the heroism of Soviet soldiers.” While noting that personal life experiences cause each listener to read their own meanings into the original song, she states, “You are exposing the fact that they are pulling out the work of long deceased singers and using the fruits to achieve their own patriotic goals.” Though Svetlana has never been a fan of Tsoi, she can still discern how “Kukushka” is being manipulated in these cover versions and to what end.<sup>171</sup>

Masha Vildanova generally found that the other live versions in this discussion conveyed the same meanings that Gagarina’s did in the film soundtrack: “[They] are about patriotism, human strength, and an inner core [or heart]. Each cover has a military theme,” – and here she equivocates – “but from Tsoi’s performance, what he had in mind is generally not clear.” And from her next statement, “Yes, the videos help,” it seems that they are influencing her understanding of what Tsoi himself meant.<sup>172</sup> Rather than

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<sup>171</sup> “Конечно, визуальный аспект очень меняет смысл песни. Когда Зритель видит картинку, они думают над сюжетом видео и смысл песни как бы накладывается на этот сюжет. В этом смысле Кукушку Цоя привязали к ВОВ, героизму советских солдат. Другое дело, когда слушаешь просто песню без навязывания стереотипов. И здесь каждый человек находит свой смысл в песни. Кто прошёл реперкуссия - своё, кто-то неудачи жизни в любом аспекте, кто-то в отношениях, а кто-то видит в песне политические аспекты. Я не фанат цоя и никогда не была. Поэтому меня никакая версия не злит. А раздражаетесь то, что вытаскивают творчество уже ушедших певцов и пользуются из плодами в достижение своих патриотических целей.” Svetlana Shabrova, email communication, December 25, 2019.

<sup>172</sup> “Все-таки смысл этой песни не меняется: про патриотизм, силу человека и внутренний стержень. В каждом кавере присутствует военная тематика. А из выступления Цоя вообще

sharing with her my own perception of Tsoi's text, I conveyed what the other Maria had to say about anti-Soviet political themes. Her exact response was, "Hmm.... that's interesting. Of course, the video clips helped me to think that this is about politics."<sup>173</sup>

I hesitated to include Masha's responses in this discussion, because in retrospect it is difficult to know whether she fully understood what I was asking. Furthermore, I could not ascertain whether she had been able to give my questions and the videos I sent her the time needed for anything more than superficial reflection. Having lived in her household for two months, I know full well that her free time is extremely limited. That being said, her comments do reveal something important – that some people come to their own understanding about the meaning of Tsoi's text for this song only through the performances of the cover versions now so ubiquitous in Russian culture. It points to the internal, deeply personal struggle that many of my informants perceive in the original being drowned out by the patriotic, military-themed imagery that almost always accompanies the newer versions of the song.

Alexander Petrov gives his final assessment of the cover versions in no uncertain terms: "I find it disgusting that they intentionally distort the meaning, and what's more, they do it with a serious expression and not in a parody, for example. . . . Tsoi didn't sing about that and I think he turns over in his grave from all these covers."<sup>174</sup> Quoting a line

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ничего не понятно что он имел в виду. Да, видеоряд помогает." Maria Vildanova, Facebook Messenger dialogue, May 13, 2019.

<sup>173</sup> "Хм.... интересно. Конечно, видеоряд помог мне думать, что это - о политике." Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> "Мне противно, когда при этом намеренно искажают смысл, причём делают это с серьёзной миной, а не в пародийном, например, ключе. Цой не о том пел и, я думаю, вертится в гробу от всех этих каверов." Alexander Petrov, VKontakte dialogue, May 15, 2019.

from the famous Russian Romantic poet First name Lermontov, Alexander stated, “All of this would be funny, were it not so sad.”<sup>175</sup>

Recalling Sergey Chubraev’s earlier comments that Tsoi’s song was so perfect that it could not possibly be ruined, we see in the following statements a complete about-face. Rather than discussing in detail each of the performances I shared with him, he chose to mostly address them as a group. I quote him in full because his opinions provide a remarkable conclusion to our discussion:

I carefully watched the new videos. Thanks for the links! Altogether, it just looks extremely disgusting. I think Tsoi would be very upset by such use of his songs. All together, they look like an elaborate and coordinated means for the Russian authorities to promote the Russian army and its strengths. And they plant “Kukushka” into all the conceivable fervor of state events: a concert for generals [Gagarina], Red Square [Kormukhina], and the “cherry on the cake,” the opening of the Crimean bridge [Degtyareva]. Moreover, in all these cases, piercing female vocals are used, having the ability to hit high notes with evident professional musical training. It gives the impression that all these singers prepared for their performances with the same vocal coach, and the delivery and decision of the arrangements of these artists are also identical. However wonderful a work of art is, when its incarnation is taken over by state structures and power it will inevitably transform into a strident, crude, and vulgar instrument for the embodiment of their goals and objectives. That is what we see in these videos.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> “Всё это было бы смешно, когда бы не было так грустно.” Alexander Petrov, VKontakte dialogue, May 14, 2019. A full version of Lermontov’s original poem, dedicated to the nineteenth-century St. Petersburg socialite Alexandra Smirnova-Rosset can be read here: “Russian Poetry for Learners of Russian,” accessed December 20, 2019, <http://russianpoetry.yale.edu/poet/lermontov/ao-smirnovoy.html>.

<sup>176</sup> “Я внимательно посмотрел новые видео. Спасибо за ссылки! Выглядит это всё вместе просто на редкость отвратительно. Думаю, Цой был бы очень огорчён таким использованием своей песни. Все вместе они смотрятся продуманным и согласованным российской властью средством для пропаганды русской армии и её силы. И "Кукушку" втыкают во все мыслимые пафосные государственные мероприятия- концерт для генералов, Красную площадь, и ‘вишенка на торте’ - открытие Крымского моста. При этом во всех этих случаях используются пронзительный женский вокал, умеющий брать высокие ноты с явным профессиональным музыкальным образованием. Не оставляет ощущение, что все эти певицы готовились к выступлению у одного преподавателя вокала, настолько идентична подача и решение аранжировок этих исполнителей. Какое бы не было



Unsurprisingly, no one performs “Kukushka” in state-sponsored concerts the way Tsoi did on his demo tape or in the manner that Kino recorded it on the *Black Album*. These two very similar cover versions have become *the* versions for all intents and purposes. Despite Tsoi’s anti-war stance, his song now seems irrevocably linked to military aggression. And while he (like his band mate Aleksei Rybin) might not have taken a clear position on who Crimea rightfully belongs to, the Russian government continues to use “Kukushka” to bolster the *Krymnash* assertion.

Strukova addressed the subject of war in Tsoi’s works in her essay, “Country of Romantics.” She argued,

Tsoi has many songs that mention war. This war is abstract unless you try to decipher its philosophy from the point of view of a primitive confrontation between red and white, right and left, because it is immeasurably higher than the primitive fights between packs under colorful flags. His War [sic] is a struggle with a world engulfed in darkness for his own soul, saving it from dissolving into a swamp of Philistine indifference to eternal truths.<sup>177</sup>

A bit later, Strukova clarifies this understanding of war in Tsoi’s songs even further:

So the concept of War began to unfold for me as a multifaceted, inexhaustible, and beautiful test of human strength, sincerity, loyalty to ideals; War – as a temple of heroes who change the world – even of one hero. [It is the] militant

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замечательное произведение искусства, когда его воплощение берётся на контроль государственными структурами и властью, то оно неминуемо превращается в настырный, грубый и пошлый инструмент воплощения их целей и задач. Что мы и видим на этих видео..” Sergey Chubraev, email dialogue, May 15, 2019.

<sup>177</sup> “У Цоя много песен, где упоминается война. Эта война абстрактна, если попытаться подойти к расшифровке ее философии с точки зрения примитивного противостояния красных и белых, правых и левых, потому что она неизмеримо выше примитивных схваток между стаями под пестрыми флагами. Его Война - это борьба за собственную душу с миром, охваченным тьмой, спасение ее от растворения в болоте обывательского безразличия к вечным истинам.” Струкова, “Страна романтиков. Из истории ‘потерянного’ поколения.”

individualism of a person disillusioned with the surrounding reality, ready to change it, despite the incomprehension and condemnation of “small” people.<sup>178</sup>

The text of “Kukushka”—with its mention of a “fist,” “gunpowder,” and “ranks” of individuals in “battle”—fits rather obviously in the category to which Strukova refers. And it seems that the most recent artists covering “Kukushka” have been trying to decipher the song’s philosophy in the more “primitive” way that she describes. If the “eternal truths” of Tsoi’s version similarly reside somewhere in the struggle for the soul with “militant individualism,” then the transformations the song has undergone in today’s political climate has made it ripe for waving “colorful flags.”

Later in her essay, we see that Strukova adamantly opposes the state’s participation in the memorialization of Tsoi: “Let the graves of other poets be visited by official delegations with pompous speeches. The state establishes monuments to them, the people gave the glory to Tsoi, the Russian youth—not the decree of an official from the Ministry of Culture or literary critics.”<sup>179</sup> In her association of literary critics with the Ministry of Culture, she appears to say that the work they are doing has a similar agenda. However one interprets the specific meanings of each line in the anonymous poem cited at the head of this chapter, the author clearly imagines Tsoi inhabiting some romantic

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<sup>178</sup> “Так понятие войны стало раскрываться для меня как многогранное, неисчерпаемое и прекрасное испытание человека на прочность, искренность, верность идеалам; война - как храм героев, меняющих мир. Даже одного героя. Воинствующий индивидуализм человека, разочарованного в окружающей действительности, готового изменять ее, несмотря на непонимание и осуждение ‘маленьких’ людей.” Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> “Пусть могилы других поэтов посещают официальные делегации с пафосными речами, государство устанавливает им монументы, славой Цоя наделил народ, российская молодежь - не указ чиновника из Минкульта или литературные критики.” Ibid.

space outside the rapturous celebrations of officialdom; he stands in contrast to the continued violence exacted on the living by governments (Soviet, Russian, or otherwise). When the author later asks, ambiguously, “*Kak zvezda pereplavlena v strochku?*” (“How is a star forged into a line?”), a limited number of related interpretations are possible depending on how one translates the verb “*perepravliat*’,” which in this context means, “to transport, transfer, or translate something or someone through great difficulty from one place or physical state to another.” Either way, some kind of strenuous conversion is suggested. We might interpret that the author asks, “How does a star come to be fixed in a constellation?” Or more vividly, “How is a star melted down and reforged into a constellation?” Perhaps the author here is simply providing an example of the kinds of philosophical questions one might ponder under the cloak of night, but maybe they also intend for this question to relate metaphorically back to the subject of the poem, Tsoi himself. Relative to the transformations I have discussed thus far, the question might read, “How can an artist or their work be transferred from the constellation of the personal and reconstituted as a part of the constellation of officialdom and military victory?” The last utterance of Tsoi’s chorus for “Kukushka” across all of its transformations might serve as a suitable answer: “*Vot tak*” (“Like so”).

## Chapter 2

### *The Left-hander: Nationalism at the State Mariinsky Theater*

“...Do not bend to the changeable world; it is better to let it bend to us.”

—Andrey Makarevich, as quoted on the personal webpage of Svetlana Starchikova <sup>1</sup>

“And is Leskov's tale relevant now? Yes. In our time, the ‘Americanization’ of national culture is in full swing. We must remember that one cannot bow down to all that is foreign. We must remain true to ourselves, our history and culture.”

—Svetlana Starchikova, Russian literature teacher <sup>2</sup>

### **Introduction**

Every summer Valery Gergiev and the Mariinsky Theater conduct a lengthy and dense schedule of performances as part of a festival including everything from solo and

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<sup>1</sup> “...Не стоит прогибаться под изменчивый мир, пусть лучше он прогнётся под нас.” Светлана Владимировна Старичикова, “Старчикова Светлана Владимировна - Сайт учителя русского языка и литературы Старичиковой Светланы Владимировны,” Социальная сеть работников образования nsportal.ru, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://nsportal.ru/starchikova-svetlana-vladimirovna>.

<sup>2</sup> “А сейчас актуален сказ Лескова? (Да. В наше время ‘американизация’ отечественной культуры идет полным ходом). Мы должны помнить, что нельзя преклоняться перед всем иностранным. Нужно оставаться верными самим себе, своей истории и культуре.” Светлана Владимировна Старичикова, “План-конспект урока по литературе (6 Класс) на тему: Н.С. Лесков. Сказ ‘Левша.’ Особенности проблематики и основная идея сказа.,” Социальная сеть работников образования nsportal.ru, September 20, 2015, <https://nsportal.ru/shkola/literatura/library/2015/09/20/n-s-leskov-skaz-levsha-osobennosti-problematiki-i-osnovnaya>.

symphonic concerts to opera and ballet. Known as “The Stars of the White Nights,” this festival coincides with a period in which the sun barely dips below the horizon in the northern cultural capital of St. Petersburg, Russia. After attending the concert premiere of Rodion Shchedrin’s latest opera, *The Left-hander*, during the 2013 festival, one prolific amateur cultural blogger introduced his review with the following lines, laden with sarcasm and disdain for a perceived connection to state interests:

With the support of the Ministry of Defense, with the blessing of the Patriarch, and with the participation of Deputy Minister [Maria] Maksakova<sup>3</sup> in the part of the English Princess Charlotte, Gergiev performed *Levsha* in concert as part of his annual festival of hackwork. It is difficult to expect musical revelations from the Gergiev festival. In general, it is not a musical or cultural event, but a kind of routine dish of semi-cultural officialdom. But I wanted to listen to Shchedrin's *Levsha*, and it was worth it.<sup>4</sup>

Though the blogger’s full review of the opera is mostly favorable (with some notable exceptions enumerated below), it is clear that he discerns a form of pandering to the state

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<sup>3</sup> Both Maksakova and her husband, Denis Voronenkov were indeed deputies in the state Duma, as well as members of Putin’s United Russia political party. However, the two became vocal critics of new policies regarding homosexuals and Ukraine. In December 2016, they left Russia and received a residence permit in Kyiv, Ukraine. On February 16, 2017 they were expelled from the United Russia party and on March 23, 2017, Voronenkov was shot dead in a hotel in the center of Kyiv. See in “Почему россиян волнует, что происходит в Украине? — оперная певица Максакова,” LSM.LV, November 27, 2018, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://rus.lsm.lv/statja/novosti/mir/pochemu-rossijan-volnuet-cto-proishodit-v-ukraine--operaja-pevica-maksakova.a300968/>

<sup>4</sup> “При поддержке министерства обороны, по благословению патриарха и при участии депутата Максаковой в партии английской принцессы Шарлотты в рамках своей ежегодной фестивальной халтурки Гергиев концертно исполнил ‘Левшу’. От гергиевского фестиваля музыкальных откровений ждать трудно, это, в общем, и не музыкальное, не культурное событие, а некое дежурное блюдо ококультурного официоза, но ‘Левшу’ Щедрина послушать хотелось и стоило.” Слава Шадронов (\_arlekin\_), “‘Левша’ Р. Щедрина, Мариинский Театр в КЗЧ, Дир. Валерий Гергиев,” accessed December 1, 2018, <https://users.livejournal.com/-arlekin-/3074086.html>.

as well as the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in the production—an institution that government leaders have openly courted in contemporary mass media.

By the time Rodion Shchedrin began to adapt Nikolai Leskov's well-known story, *Levsha* (from 1881; revised in 1882), he had already tackled several even better-known Russian texts: operas based on Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* in 1977 and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in 1992, and ballets based on Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* in 1971 and Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* in 1979, to name a few. *Levsha* was also not the first time for the composer to engage with Leskov.

In 1988, as late perestroika ushered in a slightly more tolerant stance toward religion in the officially atheist Soviet state, Shchedrin composed the first of four Leskov-related projects, a choral work subtitled, "Russian Liturgy" in Old Church Slavonic loosely based on Leskov's tale *The Sealed Angel*. In 2002 he would add an opera for the concert stage based on Leskov's *The Enchanted Wanderer* and finally, subsequent to *Levsha* (2013), Shchedrin adapted Leskov's translation of a tale by the Czech author Božena Nemptsova to the operatic stage in another production premiered at the Mariinsky Theater entitled, *A Christmas Tale* (2015). Opera and Russian music enthusiasts will undoubtedly remember that Shostakovich also famously adapted Leskov's *Lady McBeth of the Mtsensk District* (1936) for the operatic medium.

As he did for most of his other operatic works, Shchedrin wrote both the music and libretto for *The Left-hander*. In his autobiography he stated, "Schoenberg's observation that a composer in search of a librettist will usually find it in himself strikes me as accurate. My own work on *Dead Souls* and *Lolita* – not to mention the later *Sealed*

*Angel* – has only reinforced in me the justness of this view of operatic dramaturgy.”<sup>5</sup>

Writing immodestly about the libretto he wrote for Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, he declared, “I have said more than once that while there may be operas which are more interesting musically, there has never been, and never will be in the history of this planet an opera with a better libretto.”<sup>6</sup>

While this chapter does not question the quality of Shchedrin’s dramaturgical skills in transposing Leskov’s *Levsha* to the operatic stage, it does interrogate his libretto’s faithfulness to the themes and plot details of the original tale. I show how a combination of musical elements derived in part from the nationalist operas of nineteenth-century Russian composers has worked mostly in tandem with the visual and theatrical features brought to bear in the opera’s production. In this analysis, we see how both Shchedrin and the Mariinsky production staff have made this transformation all the more vivid. Ultimately, I argue that their combined work has transformed the original from a satirical, tragic tale about Russian society to a patriotic display of Russian exceptionalism in both ingenuity and morality, giving the cultural elites who patronize the State Mariinsky Theater a sense that they indisputably lead the world in both cases.

In the sections that follow, I first present a synopsis of the basic plot of Shchedrin’s libretto before showing how it differs from the original, calling upon line-by-line analysis, American and Soviet literary criticism, and arguments from the contemporary Russian blogosphere. Following that, I discuss how the notion of Russian

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<sup>5</sup> Rodion Shchedrin, *Rodion Shchedrin: Autobiographical Memories*, trans. Anthony Phillips, English edition (Mainz, Ger.: Schott Music GmbH & Co., KG, 2012), 182.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

superiority lies at the heart of the opera's genesis based on statements that Shchedrin has made about the opera to the press.

Some of these statements connect with a related notion that the unique Russianness of Leskov's language makes translating the original text into other languages a hopeless endeavor (especially the case for English). The implication is that the full message is obscured behind his florid language, precluding non-native Russian readers from critically engaging with the text. Though I do not profess to be a linguist, I show in a very rudimentary way how sustained effort can overcome the obstacles that the author's lexicon presents to non-native speakers. In any case, my discussion makes it clear that Leskov's language is also difficult even for natives to grasp without the aid of an accompanying glossary listing his many invented neologisms.

Next I show how alterations to the basic plot that paint Levsha as a technological wunderkind triumphing over the British craftsmen parallel the competitive meta-narrative created in the press to justify the construction of the brand-new and very expensive, Mariinsky-2 Theater. With *The Left-hander* slated to open this technologically advanced stage, the production crew pulled out all the stops, so to speak. The overarching message was that Russia had the very best artists in the world and therefore deserved the most-advanced venue to provide opportunities for them to fully make use of their unique gifts.

Following this, I discuss the critical reception of the concert version that Londoners witnessed at the Barbican Centre shortly after the opera's debut in St. Petersburg. Though they were not regaled with the full splendor of the Mariinsky-2's technological capabilities, the music in the concert version provided enough eyebrow-raising moments. Critics indeed recognized a spirit of "one-upmanship" as well as an



invidious contrast of social mores. I also show through musical examples how Shchedrin built this contrast into the introductory bars of the very first scene.

Before embarking on two larger discussions integrating the visual and musical details of the opera that undergird this contrast (and thus the transformation), I provide the musical historical background for the conventions Shchedrin calls upon. Though the composer retains his unique modern idiom, I show how he incorporates stylistic conventions rooted in the nationalist traditions of nineteenth-century Russian opera composers to make the characters associated with the Russian *narod* appear wholesome and brave and the majority of the British characters appear frivolous, self-absorbed, and debauched. Though some of the aristocratic Russians are portrayed with a similar self-absorption, only one character in the entire British cast is portrayed as righteous.

In the penultimate section of the chapter, I show how *The Left-hander* exemplifies the larger patterns of Shchedrin's career. Drawing upon reception history and past analysis of his earlier work, we see how he first became the darling of the Soviet musical establishment by walking a middle path between the extremes of musical conservatism and what was considered bourgeois and dangerous dissonance. Near the end of perestroika, he manages to paint himself as a maverick, proudly wearing his religious convictions on his sleeve shortly before it became fashionable for everyone else to do so. Though the religious theme has been a consistent presence in Shchedrin's work since then, the much earlier religious output of his contemporaries makes his assertions all the more dubious. In short, he has proven to be highly adaptable to the needs of the moment, and the moment of *The Left-hander's* composition is no exception. Critics were already gathering in lock-step to anoint him as Russia's "national bard." As one of my

informants states, “[Shchedrin] is considered to be very important . . . as he [is] presumably the greatest of living Russian composers.”<sup>7</sup> This is a curious label given his relocation to Munich, Germany in 1991.<sup>9</sup>

Before my concluding remarks, the final section discusses how Shchedrin has even transformed Leskov’s political beliefs in comments made to the press about the opera’s relevance to today’s Russia. By changing words in a statement attributed to Leskov about his disdain for nihilists, Shchedrin positions *Levsha* as a prophetic and cautionary tale, effectively warning that a rise in Western-style liberalism could lead to a return of the oppressive rule of despotic far-left revolutionaries. In the end, Shchedrin emerges as a bard for the status-quo.

### **A Synopsis of the Opera**

By many accounts, “Levsha” is one of Leskov’s strangest, so before going further, it will be helpful to present a summary of the plot as it appears in the opera. In Act 1, the Don Cossack Ataman Platov has been summoned by Tsar Nicholas I to explain the story behind a most unusual item he found in the trunk of his late brother, the

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<sup>7</sup> My informant, a member of the Mariinsky Opera Chorus, initially began communicating with me in English. However, as I asked that all other conversation be conducted in Russian, future quotations will reflect my own translation of his words. Eduard Matveev, VKontakte dialogue with author, March 21, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Another curiosity is that this quintessentially Russian opera was composed in the Swiss chalet of a J. P. Morgan international investment banking chairman. Of course, many of Stravinsky’s most “quintessential” Russian compositions were also composed in Switzerland. An acknowledgment near the front of the score attests to this: “My heartfelt thanks to Mrs. Caroline Gubert and Mr. Walter Gubert, who kindly provided me with the opportunity to work on this score in the Chalet Saint Eloi in Verbier, Switzerland.” See near the front of the orchestral score in Rodion Shchedrin, *The Left-hander: The Tale of the Cross-Eyed Left-hander from Tula - Opera in Two Acts - Libretto by the Composer after the Story by Nikolai Leskov*, Music of Our Time (Mainz, Ger.: Schott Music GmbH & Co., 2014).

previous tsar, Alexander I. As Platov relates the tale, the audience is transported from the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg to Buckingham Palace in London where Princess Charlotte and her retinue try to tempt Alexander I with all the wonders their weapons armory has to offer. Of particular interest to the tsar is a steel flea which can sing the English alphabet and dance a lancer's quadrille after being wound up by a tiny key (with the aid of a powerful microscope). At the sight of this marvel, Alexander declares that the English craftsmen excel all others on earth. The Cossack Platov is resolutely unimpressed by all things foreign but grudgingly doles out an enormous fee to purchase the flea. Directed by the Tsar, Platov then hands over an equal amount for its diamond-studded box.

The setting returns to the present time (the early nineteenth century) in the Winter Palace with Platov suggesting to Nicholas I that their Russian craftsmen should be given a chance to top the English feat. The tsar thinks this a splendid idea and sends him off to his gunsmiths in Tula (a governorate south of Moscow, famous for its weapons manufacturing), fully confident that they will devise an even more clever modification. Platov, unable to see the work they purport to accomplish and deeply suspicious, drags one of them, the "cross-eyed" Levsha (Lefty), back to St. Petersburg in order to answer to the tsar. He does this in such haste that Levsha is unable to grab his passport. When he is summoned to explain his work to the tsar, Levsha winds up the flea and it proceeds to sing the Russian alphabet and dance a *barynia*, one of the most recognizable Russian folk dances, in which dancers often bend deeply at the knee. The tsar is so impressed that he orders Lefty to be cleaned up, dressed as a person of rank, and sent back to England to show off his marvelous improvements on the steel flea.

Following the flea's demonstration at the beginning of Act 2, the English are even more mesmerized and inquire about where and what Levsha studied to become such an accomplished master craftsman. To their astonishment, Levsha seems to have come to these gifts entirely on his own, independent of any formal education, for they learn that he has only studied the *Psalter* and the *Book of Dreams*. They try to tempt him to stay in England by offering him the education he lacks and by presenting him with two women, one with brunette hair, the other with blond, representatives of the bounty of women from which he might select a wife. Levsha is embarrassed by everything he sees and only wishes to tour the armory before returning home. He is not particularly impressed by anything that the British show him but is taken aback by the superior condition of their muskets, for unlike the Russians, they do not use brick dust to clean them.

Before the stormy sea voyage back to St. Petersburg, Levsha makes the acquaintance of an English “under-skipper”—or “half-skipper” (*polshkiper*)<sup>18</sup> in the unique language of Leskov—who challenges him to a game in which the two of them match each other drink for drink over the course of the trip. They arrive in Russia barely conscious and in poor health owing to the effects of the alcohol and prolonged exposure to the elements. Their fates diverge considerably at this point because Levsha still lacks a passport. While the Englishman is carried to his embassy and afforded the best medical care available, Levsha is roughed up, his new possessions are stolen by the gendarmes, and he is sent to a hospital where indigents with no documents go to die. Throughout this ordeal, he selflessly begs everyone he encounters to relay his message to the tsar about

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<sup>18</sup> The rank of “under-skipper” is a colloquial term that Leskov seems to use to denote some sort of non-specific officer anywhere in the hierarchy below the captain. It was not an official rank in the nineteenth-century British navy.

the excellent methods the British employ to clean and maintain their weapons. To the dismay of his new friend, the English under-skipper, and a chorus that seemingly represents the righteous common citizens of St. Petersburg, Levsha succumbs to his illness.

In the opera's epilogue, Levsha is held over the ground by his compatriots in the pose of the crucified Christ, with legs together, arms outstretched, and head bowed to the side.<sup>19</sup> The flea appears, sings a wistful lullaby in the folk style, and then disappears. Echoes of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* are present in the burial rite that ensues in which the chorus begs for the Lord's mercy and for their sins to be taken away.

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<sup>19</sup> This staging is not explicitly laid out in Shchedrin's libretto.

**Table 2.1. Truncated version of opera synopsis from the Mariinsky’s digital playbill<sup>20</sup>**

<p><b>ACT ONE</b>  <b>St. Petersburg. Winter Palace.</b>          Tsar Nicolas I discovers a steel flea and learns about its English provenance from Ataman Platov.  <b>London <i>Kunstkamera</i>.</b>          Princess Charlotte proudly demonstrates to Alexander the achievements of the English gunsmiths.  <b>River Tulitsa (scene dissolves):</b>          To the song of Speaking Women: “River Tulitsa” - Levsha appears.  <b>Orchestral interlude No. 1: Buckingham Palace.</b>          Royal offering. At Buckingham Palace. Three Lords of the Treasury and Princess Charlotte.  <b>Orchestral interlude No. 2: Seven turns of the key.</b>          A flea dances a lancers’ quadrille and sings the letters of the English alphabet.  <b>Again at the Winter Palace (during the reign of Nicholas I).</b>          Nicholas I, after listening to Platov’s story, decides to prove that Russian masters are no worse than English ones.  <b>Outskirts of Tula.</b>          Levsha and Tula villagers are having fun. Arriving, Ataman Platov demonstrates the flea and demands “to put the work of the English nation to shame.”  <b>Choral scene “Flea Dances in Russian Style.”</b>          An irate Platov returns to the Palace with Levsha.</p>	<p><b>Orchestral interlude No. 4: Focusing the Small Scope.</b>          Having studied the flea in the “small scope”, the tsar discovers that Levsha has “reforged” her: now she dances a <i>barynya</i> and sings the letters of the Russian alphabet. Full of pride, he decides to return the flea “subjected to Russian revisions” to England.</p> <p><b>ACT TWO</b>  <b>Buckingham Palace.</b>          The Russified flea demonstrates its talents to the astonished English. Then the British try to seduce Levsha with English brides. But he is indifferent to their love canzonets, and he does not like the outfits of English women at all.  <b>Orchestral interlude No. 5: “Levsha’s tour around England.”</b>  <b>Vision of Russia ...</b>          Speaking women in the guise of the blessed intercessors sing about the river Tulitsa.  <b>Levsha’s departure to Russia.</b>          Despite the approaching storm, Levsha boards a ship, which soon goes to sea.  <b>Orchestral interlude No. 6: The Storm.</b>          In the noise of the waves, Speaking women appear in the guise of guardian angels.  <b>Return to St. Petersburg.</b>          In St. Petersburg, the drunk Levsha and half-skipper are taken out of the ship. The Englishman is sent to his embassy. Gendarmes rob Levsha and drag him to the “Obukhvinsk hospital,” where “they take all the unknown to die.” The dying Levsha has only one request [to warn the tsar about the superior upkeep of English muskets].</p>
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<sup>20</sup> This is for the performance the author attended. See “Левша,” mariinsky.ru, February 25, 2019, [https://www.mariinsky.ru/playbill/playbill/2019/2/25/2\\_1930](https://www.mariinsky.ru/playbill/playbill/2019/2/25/2_1930).

## Shchedrin vs. Leskov

While one professional Russian opera critic noted that Shchedrin made some changes to Leskov's original, he skirted the most glaring discrepancy between the two—Shchedrin's flea does not suffer from the scientific and mathematical ignorance of the Tula gunsmiths that Leskov's flea does. Rather, he brings the nineteenth-century plot into the language of Silicon Valley, stating that the flea is “reformatted” by Levsha, adding that this is “a much more complicated endeavor from a technical standpoint.”<sup>21</sup> Though it is indeed more complicated for the composer and the opera's production team, this leads to a gross exaggeration of the capabilities of the gunsmiths from Tula. Thus this critic adds contemporary Russian ingenuity in both opera composition and set design to the pile of Russian traits deserving praise without even remarking on the “elephant in the room.”

In casual conversations with my informants, most vaguely remember studying the tale in their childhood schooling. Oleg Ugryumov (age 33), for instance remembers studying it when he was about 10 or 11. He recalls the plot and some of the details, but it seems doubtful that at that age he was fully able to understand and appreciate the satire.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “Так вот, в Щедрина сошлось то, что называется идеальным проявлением русской души в искусстве. Он приближается к тому внутреннему стержню, который можно условно назвать русской национальной идеей. И в этом смысле его место в культуре уникально.” See in Соломон Волков, “Странник Щедрин - Почему автор шлягера ‘Не кочегары мы, не плотники’ предпочел писать оперы и симфонии,” *Российская газета - столичный выпуск*, December 14, 2017, 285 (7451) edition, sec. Культура, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2017/12/14/pochemu-rodion-shchedrin-predpochel-pisat-opery-i-simfonii.html>.

<sup>22</sup> “Привет, Шон! Спасибо, всё в порядке. Сказку помню, проходили в школе классе в 6 или 7 вроде. Мне было лет 10-11 примерно. Сюжет помню, некоторые детали тоже.” Oleg Ugryumov, WhatsApp dialogue, October 23, 2018.

Svetlana Shabrova (mid 40s) believes that younger generations do not know it very well, stating, “We know it because everyone watched the cartoon in childhood.” She also said that everyone read it in childhood, but that the cartoon was simply visually more memorable.<sup>23</sup>

The cartoon she referred to, directed by Ivan Ivanov-Vano in 1964, has an important detail in common with Shchedrin’s operatic version: after showing Nicholas I his modifications to the flea, Levsha makes a few adjustments and the flea begins to dance what resembles the movements of a *barynia*. Yet when Alexander I encountered the flea in England earlier in the story, it performed a different dance to an entirely different tune.<sup>24</sup> So while Shchedrin perpetuates this misrepresentation, the idea is not original. His contribution is to extend this false plot point to song—having the flea not only dance two different dances, but sing two different alphabets as well.

Levsha was first published serially across three issues of the journal *Rus* in October, 1881. Bukhshtab discusses the numerous small additions Leskov made to the tale when it was published as a separate edition in 1882. He asserts that these changes “strengthen the satirical sharpness of the tale, the accusation of the people's absence of

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<sup>23</sup> “Думаю новое поколение не очень знает. Мы знаем потому что все в детстве смотрели мультфильм. Мультфильм ещё с советских времён. Не думаю, что отображает всю историю. Моей маме 72. Она знает эту историю. Мама моего мужа тоже знает и видела этот мультфильм. В детстве все читали. Просто зрительно лучше запоминается мультфильм/фильм.” Svetlana Shabrova, WhatsApp dialogue, October 23, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> The English flea (before Levsha’s alterations) can be seen dancing for Alexander I at 8:10 in the following video. The Russified flea can be seen at 26:55. Иван Иванов-Вано, *Левша*, Мультфильм (Москва: Союзмультфильм, 1964), YouTube video “Левша” posted by Сказки Чуду, accessed July 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2O4Y1jR-TY>.



rights and their oppression, of the ignorance in which the people were held, of religious superstitions, and of the fleecing of the people by the men of the Church, etc.”<sup>25</sup> I will elaborate on the changes that are most relevant to my discussion.

In the later version of *Levsha*, Leskov added a biting comment directed at a certain practice connected with the Church. He devoted the first part of the seventh chapter to elaborating ironically on some of the traits for which certain Tula inhabitants had become famous. Those that enter the monastic life, for instance, “make the most capable collectors of alms. . . . everybody knows that the Tula inhabitants are a most remunerative people. . . . Today the Tula men . . . skillfully collect contributions *even where there is nothing to collect*.”<sup>26</sup> The italics are mine. They represent what was added in the 1882 version of the tale.<sup>27</sup> Such expository narrative passages like this are admittedly impossible to transfer to a medium that thrives on dialogue. Furthermore, for reasons of maintaining interest and keeping the opera at a manageable length, Shchedrin

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<sup>25</sup> “В отдельное издание 1882 года Лесков внес ряд добавлений — небольших, но усиливающих сатирическую остроту рассказа, обличение народного бесправия и угнетения, невежества, в котором держали народ, религиозных суеверий, обирания народа церковниками и т. п.” Лесков, “Б. Я. Бухштаб. Комментарии: Н. С. Лесков. Левша,” 498.

<sup>26</sup> “из них выходят самые способные сборщики. На святом Афоне знают, что туляки — народ самый выгодный. . . . Теперь ‘афонские туляки’ обвозят святости по всей нашей родине и мастерски собирают сборы даже там, где взять нечего.” Н. С. Лесков, “Левша (Сказ о тульском косом Левше и о стальной блохе),” in *Собрание сочинений в 11 Томах. Том 7.*, ed. Б. Я. Бухштаб (Москва: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1958), 37, [https://rvb.ru/leskov/01text/vol\\_07/039.htm](https://rvb.ru/leskov/01text/vol_07/039.htm).

<sup>27</sup> See Buxshstab’s discussion of this in Н. С. Лесков, “Б. Я. Бухштаб. Комментарии: Н. С. Лесков. Левша,” in *Собрание сочинений в 11 Томах. Том 7.* (Москва: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1958), 498, <https://rvb.ru/leskov/02comm/039.htm#c1>.

necessarily had to cut much more than this. I bring this small addition up because it points to another side of Leskov's satire that the opera obscures.

Yet before leaving this particular discrepancy, it seems worth mentioning that Shchedrin's paternal grandfather Mikhail Mikhailovich Shchedrin was a priest in the village of Vorotsy in what was then known as the Tula *Guberniia* (approximately 40 kilometers southwest of the city of Tula). He was moved to another community in Aleksin on the Oka River shortly after Shchedrin's father was born in 1894 (12 years after Leskov wrote the revised 1882 version of *Levsha*). Shchedrin reports that his paternal grandmother Elizaveta Nikolayevna *née* Doctorova also came from a clerical family and that his father and all seven of his brothers were educated at the Tula Seminary.<sup>28</sup> Though Leskov's passage above references alms collectors associated with the monastery and Shchedrin's Tula relatives belonged to the country clergy, the anecdote nevertheless reflects negatively on some aspects of Orthodoxy with which Shchedrin might want to avoid any mistaken affiliation. At any rate, Leskov's revised version of the tale dealt critically with an aspect of religious life while Shchedrin's opera is conspicuous for its entirely uncritical view of the Church.

Another discrepancy that Bukhshtab addressed points more notably to the opera's affinity with the less satirical earlier version of *Levsha*. Originally in chapter three, Platov makes this grandiose claim to Alexander I: "Our people could make anything once they got a glance at it." In the 1882 edition he added, "only they haven't had any useful

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<sup>28</sup> Shchedrin, *Rodion Shchedrin: Autobiographical Memories*, 9.

training.”<sup>29</sup> It is a slip of the tongue that would have been an immense *faux pas* for a subordinate in Platov’s position to commit in the presence of the tsar, the person most responsible for the people’s lack of education. The fact that such an uncritically patriotic individual as Platov would make such an observation is also striking. In Shchedrin's opera, this conversation is conflated with a future one that Platov has with Nicholas I about the English flea, in which he opines, “there’s no need to fall over in amazement at it,” and then, after crossing himself in the manner of the Orthodox faith, declares with patriotic boldness, “By the Blessed St. Nicholas the Miracle-Worker, we’d do well to have our Russian craftsmen take a look at the Flea.”<sup>30</sup> Similarity with the earlier, less satirical serialized version of the tale is evident.

In the opera Platov is generally depicted as a minor hero who is true to his Fatherland and its people even if he is a bit rough with Levsha for a short period. When asked to explain his use of the extra-symphonic instrumentation in the score, Shchedrin stated that the rustic sounding folk instruments were intended “to add to the brave and daring portrait of Platov.”<sup>31</sup> This seems to be verbal proof of a wish to amplify the character’s perceived positive attributes.<sup>32</sup> One Russian critic recognized this positive

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<sup>29</sup> “Так, в главе третьей к словам, ‘Наши на что взглянут, всё могут сделать’ добавлено: ‘но только им полезного ученья нет.’” Bukhshtab's observation in “Б. Я. Бухштаб. Комментарии: Н. С. Лесков. Левша,” 498.

<sup>30</sup> Liner notes to Rodion Shchedrin, *The Left-hander*, Mariinsky Hybrid-SACD, MAR 0554 (2013), 15–16. These liner notes will be cited henceforth due to a printing error that Schott made in the published libretto that resulted in the omission of scenes 26-28.

<sup>31</sup> Rodion Shchedrin in Евгения Кривицкая, “Как Родион Щедрин ‘подковал’ Мариинский Театр,” *Музыкальная жизнь* 7-8, 2013, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Count Matvei Platov (1751-1818) was an actual historical figure whose exploits in the Napoleonic Wars led to his heroic treatment in Cossack folk songs. However, his death in 1818

depiction of Platov, and judging by her similar choice of adjectives, she apparently approved of it: “The dashing and fearless retorts of Ataman Platov (Eduard Tsanga), who is insolent to the tsar, are accompanied by the *zhaleiki* [single-reed Russian hornpipes].”<sup>33</sup>

Platov is also introduced by his own recurring thematic motive. A host of exotic percussion (bongos, tambourine, ratchet, etc.), the pungent sounds of brass with metallic mutes, the *baiian* (or button accordion), and the pair of *zhaleiki* cited above by the Russian critic, appear with this identifying material. These folk timbres serve to further contrast him with the tsar and his retinue, transforming Leskov’s characterization of him by bringing him into closer affinity with the Russian *narod* in this operatic transposition. In later scenes—for instance, when his temper flares in London—some of these folk instruments reappear with his thematic motive to brazenly interrupt the otherwise decidedly Western European musical soundscape.

Leskov’s treatment of Platov varies considerably from Shchedrin’s in that readers witness a host of transgressions directed against unfortunates in the lower social strata that include among other things, yanking Levsha’s hair from its roots and mercilessly beating his “whistling men,” whose job it was in turn to mercilessly beat the troika driver, whose job it was to mercilessly beat the horses when they were not moving at a satisfactory speed. As McLean states,

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would have temporally excluded him from any dealings with Nicholas I since he did not become tsar until 1825. See in Hugh McLean, *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and His Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 397.

<sup>33</sup> “Лихие и бесстрашные реплики атамана Платова (Эдуард Цанга), дерзющего царю, сопровождаются жалейками.” See in Евгения Кривицкая, “Как Родион Щедрин ‘подковал’ Мариинский Театр,” *Музыкальная жизнь* 7-8, 2013, 3.

Though the negation is never explicitly spelled out, the author and his readers are presumed to share a system of values that does not condone such acts of Platov's as repeated physical assaults on his social inferiors, including the lefthander, or his proposal to have the guiltless lefthander thrown into prison and held there "until such time as he might be needed." The naive narrator accepts such behavior as the natural order of things, part of the fabric of Russian society; but it is clear that the author does not.<sup>34</sup>

While Shchedrin paints Platov in the image of a daring patriotic hero closely related to the *narod*, Leskov clearly used him to illustrate some of the more brutal attributes of the oppressive bureaucracy and the Russian imperial class system.

Leskov also used Platov's unquestioning patriotism as a mirror for ignorance. This point is made very clear by Alexey Kuznetsov, a Moscow secondary school (*gimnaziia*) history teacher who is also a regular host and cultural blogger for the radio station *Echo Moskvy*:

At the beginning of this story of dubious patriotic virtues, the correct general Platov, in the good sense of the word, is contrasted with the sovereign. His correctness clearly follows from the fact that he is a) a Cossack; b) a hero; c) worries about the Fatherland even when no one is bothering it (the Fatherland); d) drinks a lot of kizliarka and afterwards with snoring prevents the British from sleeping; e) he constantly defends the preeminence of domestic science, even though Popov has not yet been born. And here this flawless character by the most cunning means is exposed as a complete idiot.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> McLean, *Ibid.*; In a rare example of an objective Soviet reading of the tale, Bukhshtab may have been the first to note this discrepancy between the narrator's and the author's portrayal of Platov. See in Б. Я. Бухштаб, "Об источниках 'Левши' Н. С. Лескова," *Русская литература*, no. 1 (1964): 58–59.

<sup>35</sup> "В начале повести сомнительных патриотических достоинств государю в хорошем смысле слова противопоставлен правильный генерал Платов. Правильность его недвусмысленно вытекает из того, что он а) казак; б) герой; в) переживает за Отечество даже тогда, когда его (Отечество) никто не трогает; г) пьет много кизлярки и после храпом мешают англичанам спать; д) постоянно отстаивает приоритеты отечественной науки, даром что Попов еще не родился. И вот этот безупречный персонаж самым иезуитским способом выставлен полнейшим идиотом..." See in Алексей Кузнецов, "Блоги / Алексей Кузнецов: О пользе своевременной ловли блох," *Эхо Москвы*, accessed September 4, 2019, <https://echo.msk.ru/blog/alexey68/2420847-echo/>.

What he then presents as evidence of Platov's idiocy is an early part of the story in which Platov and Alexander I are shown several London factories, including one that makes sugar of every type and grade imaginable. Platov boasts about their own Molvó sugar, made in St. Petersburg, and asks to see where the British make *their* Molvó. Kuznetsov breaks into this excerpt from the tale, asking questions with feigned exasperation and noticeable sarcasm:

Well, what does "Molvó" have to do with anything? Why on earth would one demand Russian-made sugar in England? And besides that, it is not a grade, but simply a trademark, yes? He would have inquired about Morshanskaya tobacco [a course, strong variety grown in Russia and Ukraine] even in Cuba ... Moreover, the owner of the aforementioned plant, Nikolay Yakovlevich Mollvo is one-hundred-percent, unalloyed German.<sup>36</sup> What did the author want, in fact, to say with this?<sup>37</sup>

Kuznetsov's ingenious satirical essay is worthy of Leskov himself, for he uses a structure similar to the one Leskov deployed in *Levsha*. While Leskov employed the biases and affected speech of an unreliable narrator to hide his true intent from the censors—not revealing his own voice until the last three paragraphs of the story—Kuznetsov pretends until his last paragraph to be an irate patriot exposing the treasonous messages that Leskov has hidden in plain view. His concluding paragraph sums up how painfully

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<sup>36</sup> Edgerton points similarly to this, though he posits a French lineage for Molvó. In an endnote to his introduction to his translation of the tale, Edgerton reports that one Ya. N. Molvó owned a St. Petersburg sugar factory in the early nineteenth century and that his name was apparently a Russification of the original French name Mollevaut. As he notes, "If this supposition is true, then the irony of Plátov's patriotic Russian defense of 'Mollevaut' sugar becomes all the sweeter." See in Nikolay S. Leskov, *Satirical Stories*, trans. William B. Edgerton (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 53, n. 2.

<sup>37</sup> "Ну при чем тут 'молво'? С какой стати требовать в Англии сахар русского производства, да к тому же еще и не сорт, а просто торговую марку? Он бы еще на Кубе моршанской махоркой поинтересовался... Тем более, что владелец помянутого завода Николай Яковлевич Моллво – стопроцентный, беспримесный немец. Что автор хотел этим, собственно, сказать?" See in Кузнецов.

relevant he finds Leskov's tale to be for contemporary Russia. Expressing his true opinions in a voice nearly devoid of the satire he had been employing throughout the essay, he points to reasons why Russians might want to continue misreading it:

This tale is about how all talent is obliged to exist in a state of overwhelming tyranny; and the tyranny is invariably shielded by speeches about the decadence of the West and the redemptive meekness of the people, but from the West [this tyranny] is eagerly awaiting attention and recognition, and believes that the meek people are dirty cattle; and when the time comes to pay for rifles cleaned with bricks, the same people will be driven to slaughter; but, perhaps, at the end of the slaughter, they will condescendingly and deliberately thank the people in a toast at the banquet for the diversion of eyes and the difficulty of interpretation, generously supplied with antiquated language and a few humorous sayings; a person who loves his Fatherland could not write this. Whoever does not believe this - see for yourself.<sup>38</sup>

Kuznetsov's biting satire is no longer directed in mock anger toward Leskov, but at the current government and its own treatment of its people. Though he states that "a person who loves his Fatherland could not write this," he provides plenty of justification in his last paragraph for Leskov's loss of love. Judging from his history of critiquing the current government on *Echo Moskvy* (perhaps a tolerated "opposition/critical" media outlet), it is possible that he wants his blog readers to see parallels between the nineteenth-century autocracy and what Karen Dawisha called "Putin's Kleptocracy."<sup>39</sup> Kuznetsov lays bare

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<sup>38</sup> "Эту повесть, о том, как все талантливое вынуждено существовать в обстановке всепобеждающего самодурства; и самодурство это неизменно прикрывается речами о растленности запада и спасительной кротости народа, но от запада напряженно ждет внимания и признания, а кроткий народ полагает за грязную скотину; а когда приходит время платить за чищенные кирпичом ружья, этот же народ погонят на убой; но, возможно, по окончании убоя снисходительно поблагодарят в тосте на банкете, нарочито для отвода глаз и затруднения прочтения обильно снабдив устаревшей лексикой и прибауточками, не мог написать человек, любящий свое Отечество. Кто не верит – убедитесь сами." This last sentence is hyperlinked to the collected works edition available online. See in Кузнецов.

<sup>39</sup> Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

the issues at stake in Shchedrin's operatic transposition, a work that goes out of its way to erase accounts of Russia's historical backwardness.

Though a statement Shchedrin made in the liner notes of the compact disc recording is laced with a few essentialized statements about the Russian national character, he puts forth a message that is almost congruent with Leskov's original text:

And lastly, there is the protagonist: the cross-eyed, illiterate, craftsman from Tula "with the golden hands." I think the most essential and typical features of the Russian national character are concentrated in him: innovative talent, resourcefulness, the ability to laugh at oneself, indifference for human life [his own], and a disastrous passion for alcohol. And there is the eternal Russian theme of power and the common man, the lack of demand for genius in his homeland.<sup>40</sup>

Yet in the opera, the "theme of power" is drowned out by the music and theatrics of a socio-cultural contrast which on balance denigrates the British and exalts the Russians. His last clause, "the lack of demand for genius in the homeland," is what seems the most out of step with Leskov's original in this particular statement. Changed to reflect what Leskov actually privileged, this phrase might alternatively convey a more general idea: "the lack of concern for the common man in his homeland." For though Leskov indeed showed Levsha to be "resourceful," considering his lack of education and the tools he had to work with, he did not depict him as a genius "with golden hands." Additionally,

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<sup>40</sup> I have provided my own translation in the text above of the original Russian appearing on pg. 7 of the compact disc liner notes: "И, наконец, главный герой. Косой неграмотный мастерской из Тулы 'с золотыми руками.' В нем сфокусированы, думаю, важнейшие и типичнейшие черты русского национального характера: самобытная одаренность, смекалка, самоирония, безразличие к человеческой жизни, пагубная страсть к алкоголю. И вечная русская тема - власть и простой люд. Невостребованность гения на своей родине." The English translation provided by the record label on pg. 8 has slight, but not insignificant differences: "And lastly, there is the protagonist. The cross-eyed, illiterate, nimble-fingered craftsman from Tula. In my view, he is the condensation of the most essential and typical features of the Russian national character: innovative talent, resourcefulness, the ability to laugh at oneself, lack of concern for human life and a disastrous love of alcohol. And there is the eternal Russian theme of power and the common man, the lack of demand for genius in his homeland." Shchedrin, *The Left-hander*, SACD MAR0554 (Mariinsky, 2013).



his resourcefulness was obviously born of necessity and not some unique set of talents which the opera implies are exclusive to the Russian people. Leskov's message is therefore more concerned with the general fate of the common man, not with the neglect of individual genius.

### **The Opera's Genesis**

According to Shchedrin, it was Gergiev's idea to commission him to write an opera for the State Mariinsky Theater's new stage. The composer's choice of Leskov as a source for yet another work elicited a positive response from Gergiev. By contrast, Shchedrin recalled the late conductor Loren Maazel greeting his earlier idea to adapt Leskov's story *The Enchanted Wanderer* to opera with skepticism after he read the story in an English translation. After re-reading the story in a German edition Shchedrin provided him, Maazel was reportedly convinced. Shchedrin related this anecdote to underscore his point that while Leskov is hailed within Russia as one of the greatest in Russian literature, he is not recognized as such in the West because he suffers greatly in translation—apparently *especially* so into English, a claim that is often made about Pushkin's works as well. As another justification for his choice, Shchedrin declared: “In general, I think that Russian literature - let it not sound excessively patriotic - is the richest literature in the world.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “Вообще, я думаю, что русская литература — пускай это не звучит чрезмерно патриотично — самая богатая литература в мире.” Rodion Shchedrin in Родион Шедрин and Татьяна Ершова, “Музыка всегда ждет нового гения,” Lenta.ru, June 24, 2013, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2013/06/24/schedrin/>.

His disclaimer begs the question, “How could this *not* sound excessively patriotic?” Later in the interview, when asked how well Russia is currently integrated into world musical culture, Shchedrin makes similar declarations about the quality of Russian musical performance and about the level of artistic creativity at the Mariinsky: “Performance-wise – it is absolutely integrated. I would even say that the West is integrating into us. The level of performance is still the highest. One Mariinsky Theater is worth something. I think that today it has no equal in the world in terms of creativity.”<sup>43</sup>

Based on these quotations, it seems fairly obvious who Shchedrin would privilege in a story about the differences between East and West. The essentialist notion that the people of one nation share primordial or inborn traits and values that those of other nations either lack outright, or are in short supply of, lies at the heart of Shchedrin’s operatic transposition of *Levsha*.

### **The Leskovian Lexicon**

Without delving too deeply into the specific plot of Leskov’s original tale, I would first like to address the unique features of Leskov’s language, often claimed to be “untranslatable.”<sup>44</sup> Leskov himself lent credence to the notions of incomprehensibility

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<sup>43</sup> “Исполнительски — абсолютно интегрирована. Я бы даже сказал, что Запад интегрируется в нас. Исполнительский уровень по-прежнему высочайший. Один Мариинский театр чего стоит. Я думаю, он сегодня не имеет себе равных в мире по творческим возможностям.” Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> The most recommended translation of the story into English is by the scholar William Edgerton. “Apart from the title [“The Steel Flea”], the best translation is Edgerton’s.” Hugh McLean, *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and His Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 699 note 3. In a review of Pevear and Volokhonsky’s translation, the translator Robert Chandler also cited Edgerton’s version as the best: “Instead of attempting ‘Lefty’ themselves, Pevear and Volokhonsky could have included the outstanding version of this story by the late William Edgerton.” Robert Chandler, “The Enchanted Wanderer and Other Stories, by Nikolai

when he made the following statement to his German translator: “‘The Flea’ is excessively Russian and hardly translatable (due to its language).”<sup>45</sup> Later he added, “Local literary Germans say that if you translate *Levsha*, you will be a magician of the first order.”<sup>46</sup> As scholar of Russian literature Irmhild Sperrle more recently stated, “His language makes heavy use of individualized speech patterns, includes archaisms as well as neologisms, mixes high and low styles, and sports the most ingenious verbal acrobatics.”<sup>47</sup> Yet another scholar of Russian literature Tom Eekman cited *Levsha* specifically as the only work that could possibly serve as an example of Leskov’s reputation as a “constant word acrobat,” a reputation he sought to temper in his brief survey of Leskov’s complete works.<sup>48</sup> At any rate, it is clear that Leskov’s use of the language is what most endears him to Russian readers. Whether scholars agree about how much the “acrobatic” tendency permeates all of his works, this perceived tendency has

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Leskov – Review,” *The Spectator*, May 4, 2013, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2013/05/russias-best-kept-secret/>

<sup>45</sup> “‘Блоху’ чересчур русская и едва ли переводимая (по языку).” Leskov to Greve [Grehwe], 26 Октября 1888, *Собрание сочинений*, том 11, 395.

<sup>46</sup> “Здесь литературные немцы говорят, что если вы переведете ‘Левшу,’ то вы, стало быть, ‘первый фокусник.’” Leskov to Greve [Grehwe], November 29, 1888. *Collected Works*, v. 11, 400.

<sup>47</sup> Irmhild Christina Sperrle, *The Organic Worldview of Nikolai Leskov*, *Studies in Russian Literature and Theory* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 3. Edgerton calls these word inventions “malapropisms,” stating that they “are the nails that hold the structure of ‘The Steel Flea’ together.” He adds, “The translator who turns this story into straightforward literary English, taking no account of Leskov’s droll distortions of Russian, will convey only a part of the meaning that lies in the Russian original.” See in Nikolay S. Leskov, *Satirical Stories*, trans. William B. Edgerton (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 24.

<sup>48</sup> Tom Eekman, “The Authorial Voice in Leskov’s Work,” in *Semantic Analysis of Literary Texts; To Honour Jan von Der Eng on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Eric De Haard, Thomas Langerak, and William G. Weststeijn (New York: Elsevier, 1990), 125.

clearly given him the reputation as the most Russian of authors. If finding an author suitable for celebrating what it means to be Russian was important to this operatic commission from the Mariinsky Theater, Shchedrin could not have found a more Russian choice. With language such an important part of Russian national identity, choosing an author so distinctive in his use of language would have been a logical choice for such a patriotic enterprise. I argue against the incomprehensibility of *Levsha* below because Shchedrin and others have harped on this notion, seemingly to preclude criticism or investigation of this work by foreign critics and scholars.

In *Levsha*, the most prominent features of Leskov's inventive and invented lexicon are "neologisms" tied to the "highly individualized speech patterns" of a "low style" narrator who tries to affect a "high style." I will deal with the neologisms in greater detail before addressing the particularities of the narrator's voice. In Leskov's practice, this essentially meant combining the obviously intended word with another word of disparate meaning or from a different part of speech to create a new word that imparts an added layer of humor to the intended word within the specific context of the tale. The result is a new Russian word—often incorporating words from other languages like French, German, or even English—that somehow carries a clever compound meaning which is not always recognized and furthermore, nonsensical when encountered outside the context of the story.

During his formative years, the Ukrainian-born medieval historian and philologist Nikolai Mikhailovich Bubnov (1858–1943) lived in the same apartment in St. Petersburg as Leskov, for his mother was Leskov's life partner at the time. His unpublished memoirs provide valuable insight into the foreign origin of many of Leskov's neologisms:

His pensiveness did not keep him from following our childish chatter and even from taking part in it. Whenever one of us would make a mistake in pronouncing some intricate foreign word, he would brighten up and he would jump up and dash into his study to make a note of our amusing mistake. This was the origin of a whole series of those amusing words that are to be found in his works. By analogy with our mistakes, and imitating them, he himself invented a great many. They are especially numerous in his tale of “The Cross-Eyed Smith and the Steel Flea [i.e., *Levsha*].”<sup>49</sup>

As part of a seven-page review in the journal, *Musical Life*, which more closely resembles promotion of Shchedrin, the opera, and the mysteries of “Russianness” than objective criticism, the cultural, historical, and philosophical essayist Boris Paramonov (b. 1937)<sup>50</sup> contributed some thoughts on the language inherent to the tale:

N. S. Leskov is arguably the only Russian writer who has created in the literature a real “Rus style” as a visible characteristic of organic Russianness. Who will say that Leo Tolstoy or Dostoevsky are not Russian writers? Yes, but their art forms are, by and large, in line with the European tradition. Roughly speaking, they can be translated into any civilized [sic!!] language. But to translate Leskov, it seems to me, is impossible. He will be completely lost in translations, as with poems.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Николай Михайлович Бубнов, бывший ординарный профессор Киевского и Люблянского университетов, “Воспоминания,” (ca. 1937), deposited in the library of the Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia (now Slovenia), pp. 158-165, cited in William Edgerton, “Nikolai Leskov: The Intellectual Development of a Literary Nonconformist” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1954), 276.

<sup>50</sup> Like Shchedrin, this champion of Russian culture curiously lives abroad (in New York, since 1978).

<sup>51</sup> “Н. С. Лесков - единственный, пожалуй, из русских писателей, создавший в литературе настоящий “стиль рюс” - как видимую характеристику органической русскости. Кто скажет, что Лев Толстой или Достоевский не русские писатели? Да, но их художественные формы в общем и целом лежат в ряду европейской традиции. Грубо говоря, их можно перевести на любой цивилизованный язык. Но переводить Лескова, думается, невозможно, он совершенно пропадет в переводах, как стихи.” Борис Парамонов, “Николай Семенович Лесков,” *Музыкальная жизнь*, 7-8, 2013, 7.

And as proof of the untranslatable nature of Leskov’s prose, Paramonov provides a snippet of text from Leskov’s “The Sealed Angel.”<sup>52</sup> This is given without commentary, but once you dig into the text’s Leskovian wordplay, it becomes apparent that Paramonov intends to show that only Russians are able to divine the cheeky sexual innuendo that lies hidden in the profusion of neologisms. I cite a rather cleaned-up translation by Pevear and Volokhonsky of just part of the text Paramonov cites as an example of what might be lost in lesser translations—a peasant’s description of the ideal Russian woman:

We also don’t appreciate snaky thinness but require that a woman be on the stout side, ample, because, though it’s not so elegant, it points to maternity in them. The brow of our real, pure Russian woman’s breed is more plump, more meaty, but then in that soft brow there’s more gaiety, more welcome.<sup>53</sup>

For comparison, I have endeavored to provide my own translation. The italicized and hyphenated words represent my invented English approximations of Leskov’s wordplay. I resorted to these hyphenated constructions, rather than trying to create a new word that combines parts of both (as Leskov did), in order to most clearly express the meanings of each of the derived Russian words. The two words separated by a slash represent a combination that is indeed impossible to convey with even a hyphenated approximation. Nevertheless, a comparison of the two versions reveals that the gist of the text is not lost. What we miss is only a steamier degree of its colorful (or rather, pornographic) subtext:

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<sup>52</sup> “Змиевидная тони́на у нас тоже не уважа́ется, а тре́буется, чтобы́ же́нщина была́ из себя́ понедри́стее и с пазу́шкой, потому́ оно́ хотя́ это и не так фигу́рно, да зато́ мате́ринство в ней обознача́ется, лобоч́ки в нашей настоя́щей чисто́ русской же́нской породе́ хоть поте́льнее, помя́снее, а зато́ в это́м мя́гком лобоч́ке весе́лости и приве́та больше́.”  
Парамо́нов, “Никола́й Семенови́ч Лесков,” 7–8.

<sup>53</sup> Nikolai Leskov, *The Enchanted Wanderer: And Other Stories*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Translation edition (Vintage, 2013), 59.

We also do not admire *snaky-looking thinness*,<sup>54</sup> rather it is required that a woman be *more deeply-wombed*,<sup>55</sup> and have a *cannony-bosom*,<sup>56</sup> because although it is not so elegant, on the other hand, motherhood becomes clear in her. The *brow/pubic mound*<sup>57</sup> in our true, pure female breed is even more *bedroomy-sweaty*,<sup>58</sup> more *squeezably-meaty*,<sup>59</sup> but on the other hand, in this soft little *brow/pubic mound* there is more gaiety and welcoming.

As an instructive side note to this discussion, I can relate that one of my Russian interlocutors was absolutely perplexed when I first asked him to confirm the accuracy of my translations of these neologisms. Initially, I had only provided the words invented by Leskov, plus the two (or sometimes three) words I had determined them to be derived from. Once I provided the full paragraph in the original context these words came from, he took a while to reflect and then replied, “Your Russian is excellent!”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> змиевидная, an invented adjective derived from the noun змея (snake) and the adjective видная (visible or noticeable); тони́на, an invented noun serving as an antonym to the noun толщина (thickness or corpulence).

<sup>55</sup> понедри́стее, an invented comparative adjective, possibly derived from the prefix по- (more) and an archaic meaning for the noun недра (womb; more contemporary definitions refer to the interior or bowels of the earth, or the innermost depths of anything in particular), thus “more wombly” or perhaps “more deeply wombed.” Incidentally, the Russian language version of Google Translate (Yandex Translate) provides a telling neologism of its own when trying to provide an adequate translation for this word (“penetratee”).

<sup>56</sup> пазушкой, an invented noun derived from the noun пазуха (colloquial, for bosom) and the noun пушка (cannon).

<sup>57</sup> лобочка, an invented noun derived from the noun лоб (brow or forehead) and a diminutive form of the noun лобок (pubis or pubic mound).

<sup>58</sup> потельнее. an invented comparative adjective possibly derived from the attributive adjective постельный (bed, as in “bedroom scene”) and the verb потеть (1. to perspire, sweat 2. (colloq.) to become misty; steam up).

<sup>59</sup> помясистее, an invented comparative adjective derived from the prefix по- (more) and the adjective мясистый (meaty or fleshy), but possibly also contaminated by, or conveniently related to the verb помять (to squeeze).

<sup>60</sup> For added emphasis, he ended the instant message with three emojis—the one in which a face is seen to be laughing so hard that tears are splashing off of it. “Шон! У тебя отличный

The Mariinsky chose to accentuate Leskov's unique language by including in the thick program printed for the premiere of the opera a section entitled "*Leskovksikon*" (itself a neologism combining "Leskov" and "lexicon"), in which the venerable St. Petersburg critic Joseph (Iosif) Raiskin provided a lengthy enumeration of the origins of this mysterious language for native Russian speakers in the audience. That both Raiskin in the premiere program and Paramonov in the review for *Musical Life* felt Leskov's language warranted detailed discussion, indicates their awareness of the paucity of scholarship on Leskov, even in Russia. Perhaps it also indicates a concern that the Russian people are not generally well-acquainted with Leskov's tale.

Following Raiskin's explanation, a glossary of no less than fifty-four of the invented words from the tale is provided as a preparation for the audience's reading of the libretto provided in the digital supertitles above the stage (see figures 2.1a and 2.1b below). My personal research and conversations about this *Leskovksikon* show that the Leskovian color is also difficult for native speakers to grasp.<sup>62</sup> Yet this difficulty should not deter anyone from engaging with it to form their own interpretive judgments.

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русский !!!" Gleb Vildanov, "9/02/2019 WhatsApp conversation with Gleb Vildanov.," September 2, 2019.

<sup>62</sup> Incidentally, out of the twenty-three pages that comprise this program, the three that involve this essay and glossary are the only ones for which an English translation is not provided. It is almost as if an attempt was made to preserve this "untranslatability." Иосиф Райскин, "ЛЕСКОВКСИКОН," in *Левша - Родион Щедрин* (Санкт-Петербург: Мариинский Театр, 2013), 12–14.



Figure 2.1a: “*Leskovksikon*” from the Mariinsky program for *The Left-hander’s* premiere.<sup>63</sup>

*Аболон полведерский* – искаж.: *Аполлон Бельведерский*  
*Ажидация* – соедин.: *ожидание+agitation (фр.)* – *возбуждение, волнение*  
*Буреметр* – искаж.: *барометр* (измеритель бури)  
*Бойло* – *битье* («работает не с бойлом, а с обучением»)  
*Буфта* – искаж.: *бухта*  
*Бюстры* – соедин.: *люстры+бюсты*  
*Валдахин* – искаж.: *балдахин*  
*Верояция* – искаж.: *вариация*  
*Водопление* – соедин.: *вода+плен+потопление; шторм*  
(«Водопление стало ужасное»)

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<sup>63</sup> Notice that the invented word “Ажидация” (azhidatsiya) is described as a union of “ожидание,” (ozhidaniye) meaning “waiting; expectation” with the English word “agitation.” Иосиф Райскин, “ЛЕСКОВКСИКОН,” *Левша - Родион Щедрин* (Санкт-Петербург: Мариинский Театр, 2013), 13.

Figure 2.1b: “Leskovksikon” (cont.)<sup>64</sup>

<p>Грандеву – искаж.: <i>рандеву</i>          Дансе танцевать – от <i>danse</i> (фр.) – танец, пляска          Двухместная (коляска) – соедин.: <i>двухместная+сесть</i>          Долбиза умножения – искаж.: <i>таблица умножения</i>          Ерфикс – <i>air fixe</i> (фр.); <i>закрепленный воздух, углекислый газ</i>          Кавриль – искаж.: <i>кадриль</i>          Казамат – искаж.: <i>каземат</i>          Канделябрия – соедин.: <i>Калабрия+канделябр</i>          Керамида – искаж.: <i>пирамида</i>          Кисельвроде, граф – искаж.: <i>граф Нессельроде</i>          Клеветон – искаж.: <i>фельетон</i>          Курица с рысью – искаж.: <i>курица с рисом</i>          Лодиколонный – искаж.: <i>одеколонный</i> («лодиколонный пузыречек рому»)          Мантон – соедин.: <i>манто+балахон</i>          Мелкоскоп – искаж.: <i>микроскоп</i>          Междоусобные разговоры – искаж.: <i>разговоры между собой</i> (с близкими, друзьями)          Мерблюзья – соедин.: <i>верблужья+мерзнуть</i> («мерблюзья мантоны»)          Мисанеры – искаж.: <i>миссионеры</i>          Мурин – негр; «арап, негр, чернокожий» (В.И. Даль)          На холодном парате – искаж.: <i>на парадном крыльце</i>          Непромокабель – искаж.: <i>непромокаемый плащ</i>          Нимфозория – искаж.: <i>инфузория</i>          Ноговочки – соедин.: <i>носочки+ноги</i>          Обухвинская больница – искаж.: <i>Обуховская больница</i> (для бедных)          Озямчик – искаж.: <i>азям, озям – длиннополый крестьянский кафтан</i> (сермяга)          Пантомима – искаж.: <i>пантомима</i>          Плезирная трубка – искаж.: <i>клизтирная трубка</i>          Парей – соедин.: <i>пари+порей</i> («держать аглицкое парей»)          Преламут – искаж.: <i>перламутр</i>          Пистоля – соедин.: <i>пистолет+пуля</i>          Поликипер – искаж.: <i>подкипер</i> (помощник шкипера)</p>	<p>Презент – искаж.: <i>брезент</i> («в каюты нейдет – под презентом сидит»)          Пубель – искаж.: <i>пудель</i>          Пуплекция – искаж.: <i>комплексия</i>          Публицейские – соедин.: <i>публичные+полицейские</i> («сейчас в публицейские ведомости описание...»)          Свистовые – соедин.: <i>вестовые+свист</i>          Симфон – искаж.: <i>сифон</i> («по симфону воды с ерфиксом приняля...»)          Спираль – искаж.: <i>спертый воздух</i> («потная спираль сделалась»)          Студинг – соедин.: <i>студень+пудинг</i>          Твердиземное море – искаж.: <i>Средиземное море</i>          Трепетир – см. <i>часы с трепетиром</i>          Туамент – искаж.: <i>документ</i>          Укушетка – искаж.: <i>кушетка</i>          Часы с трепетиром – соедин.: <i>репетир+трепет</i>. Репетир – механизм, «вызывающий бой в карманных часах пожатием пружины» (В. И. Даль).          Щиглеты – искаж.: <i>штиблеты</i></p> <p>Пример Лескова заразителен: если бы не его ранний рассказ «Овцебык», как знать, может быть, мы не прочли бы блистательную повесть шестидесятника Фазила Искандера «Созвездие Козлотура». Не появились бы на 16-й полосе «Литературной газеты» – не нынешней, а той прежней, легендарной, – яркие, порой «хулиганистые», этимологические находки, вроде «гололедица – женская баня» (когда много голых ледей). Не вошли бы в музыкантский фольклор хлесткие темповые ремарки «Аллегро поспешато» или «Престо удирато». Если бы не Лесков... По счастью, Лесков с нами!</p>
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Ирина Чередникова. Эскиз костюма артистки хора к постановке оперы «Левша»  
 Irina Cherednikova. Costume sketch for a chorus artist for the production of the opera *The Lefthander*

In *Levsha* all of this preposterous language comes from the mouth of a narrator who Leskov invented as a buffer between himself and the story’s obvious satire. Leskov’s own authorial voice (or the closest approximation thereof) does not appear until

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 14.

the last chapter, which amounts to three paragraphs.<sup>65</sup> The late Leskov scholar, Hugh McLean spoke of this narrator not as a true witness, but as a “disembodied voice” who “projects his ‘point of view’ in both senses of the term—the angle of vision from which he sees the events and his attitude toward them.”<sup>66</sup> He pointed out that in the distance Leskov creates between himself and the narrator an obvious tension arises between the narrator’s judgments of events and Leskov’s. McLean then argued that “Bizarre language is thus part of the camouflage beneath which Leskov hoped to slip his subversive message through the censorships, official and private, and into his readers’ hearts.”<sup>67</sup> If only his readers would actually engage with his rich texts rather than depend on received interpretations.

### **The Mariinsky-2 as Technological Wonder**

If the potential obscurity or incomprehensibility of Leskov to Westerners suggests that the opera was meant for domestic Russian consumption, then the fully staged opera, exploiting all of the technological capabilities of the recently completed Mariinsky-2 theater, heightens the effect. As my informant Eduard Matveev stated, “The unique

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<sup>65</sup> Here Edgerton discusses the important role of the narrator in conveying Leskov's satire: “Underneath the deceptive gaiety of Leskov’s prose there runs a caustic commentary on Russian social and political life. Its effect is all the more powerful because it is ironically placed in the mouth of a narrator who is a staunch supporter of things as they are. This so-called *skaz* manner, the device of telling a story through one of its characters and in his own peculiar language, is the most prominent feature of Leskov’s storytelling technique. He almost always uses it ironically; and his malapropisms and other deformations of language reinforce his satire.” See in Nikolay S. Leskov, *Satirical Stories.*, trans. William B. Edgerton (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 24.

<sup>66</sup> McLean, *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and His Art*, 403–4.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.

technical equipment of our theater is demonstrated very well in *The Left-hander* – it is almost impossible to see it in another place.”<sup>68</sup>

During the transition to the first London scene for instance, we see a spinning, three-dimensional hologram of the earth seemingly formed before our eyes from the swirling snow of the Russian scene. This digitally enhanced video projection coincides with Platov’s explanation of the trip around Europe he and Alexander I took in Leskov’s tale following the Congress of Vienna. During the stormy sea voyage back to St. Petersburg, there is another remarkable scene that makes use of this technology to realistically represent the forces of nature. Complex mechanisms also govern the movement of set pieces. As Levsha and the Under-skipper bob up and down on the moving parts of the stage, above them realistic clouds churn and below them a frothy, threatening sea surges and splashes.

Facing criticism from some of the St. Petersburg locals for the expense and aesthetic appearances of the new theater,<sup>69</sup> Gergiev apparently felt it necessary to stage a

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<sup>68</sup> “... в Левше очень хорошо показано уникальное техническое оснащение нашего театра - это почти невозможно увидеть в другом месте.” Eduard Matveev, VKontakte dialogue with the author, March 25, 2019.

<sup>69</sup> The scandal was already in full swing by 2009, resulting in the intervention of Putin himself. Some journalists nicknamed it the “Gergiev knot” (*Gergiev uzel*) to describe the seemingly intractable problems surrounding its construction. Another nickname alluded to the project’s ever-ballooning expense and its resemblance to a money pit: “Mariinsky pit” (Mariinskaya vradina). See in “А теперь еще раз, но как положено - Владимир Путин вмешался в скандал вокруг ‘Мариинки-2,’” Lenta.ru, June 1, 2009, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2009/06/01/theatre/>. Bloggers wondered whether “a new broadcasting company for Gergiev” would be next on the agenda for state projects. The director of the State Hermitage Museum Mikhail Piotrovsky, called the building a “city planning mistake,” adding, “This is a lesson to all of us.” See in Кира Обухова, “Мариинка-2 - вам архитектуру или достроить?,” June 2, 2013, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2013/02/06/121/>. Meanwhile, Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky stated, “Russia will be getting the best theater building in the world.” See in Galina Stolyarova, “New Mariinsky to Open in 2013,” *Moscow*

number of press conferences to justify the project. While not wanting to appear as a “person obsessed with figures” (in other words, “let it not sound like an excess of braggadocio”) Gergiev boasted of the Mariinsky’s intensive schedule. In a promotional video for the opening of the Mariinsky-2 he compared the 760 performances planned for an upcoming year to the 250–300 put on by similar venues. He added, “it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that the historic building has for a long time exceeded its capabilities—it has reached its limits. The new building...will expand our capabilities significantly.”<sup>70</sup>

Just months before the opening of the Mariinsky-2 and the premiere of *The Left-hander*, Gergiev sat down for an interview with the state-owned Channel One’s resident (some might say “token”) progressive voice, Vladimir Posner. Posner reminded Gergiev of a 1999 statement he made in which he appeared to describe the same kind of backwardness Leskov satirized in *Levsha*, a backwardness related to the education and opportunity that Gergiev apparently still found in contemporary Russian society at the time: “And you once said that Russians do not know how to work, or are unable to work.”<sup>72</sup> Posner then quoted the specific statement by Gergiev to which he was referring:

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*Times*, August 15, 2012, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/08/15/new-mariinsky-to-open-in-2013-a17064>.

<sup>70</sup> “World Famous Mariinsky Ballet and Opera - Mariinsky II (New Theatre) - BalletAndOpera.Com,” accessed July 25, 2019, [https://balletandopera.com/theatre/mariinsky-new-theatre/info/sid=m75sU90z9DE04sF6Y5r1&play\\_date\\_from=&play\\_date\\_to=](https://balletandopera.com/theatre/mariinsky-new-theatre/info/sid=m75sU90z9DE04sF6Y5r1&play_date_from=&play_date_to=).

<sup>72</sup> “И вы как-то сказали, что русские не знают, как работать, или не умеют работать.” Vladimir Posner, in Валерий Гергиев and Владимир Познер, “Валерий Гергиев в программе ‘Познер,’” *Познер Online*, accessed August 26, 2019, <https://pozneronline.ru/2013/04/4670/>.

“Stalin forced everyone to work like mad, and he proved with his terrifying methods what can be achieved. Is this the only approach that works in Russia? I hope not.”<sup>73</sup>

When asked if he still felt that way, Gergiev, without admitting any regrets for his earlier statement, dutifully invoked the time-honored belief in Russia’s supremely talented people that is so central to Shchedrin's reading of *Levsha*. Then he justified the expensive new Mariinsky-2 with all of its technological wonders as part of the solution to these problems:

In terms of the number of talented people, I still tend to think that we are ahead of almost everyone. In terms of creating conditions for them, we are also ahead of everyone in the number of missed opportunities. That’s the problem. We will talk soon about the new theater, and about why Russia needs a new Mariinsky theater. I think Russia needs it, first of all, in order to create unique opportunities for a huge number of not only young artists, managers, and technical specialists, but for the highest quality specialists as well. After all, we have the most up-to-date technologies available.<sup>74</sup>

Gergiev’s criticism of Russia as leading the world in “missed opportunities” demonstrates the same kind of critical rhetoric politicians use in Russia almost daily. The most important feature is that it is vaguely directed at some systemic problem (like corruption) that can in turn be vaguely directed at the previous administration without

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<sup>73</sup> “Сталин заставлял всех работать как безумных, и он доказал своими ужасающими методами, чего можно добиться. Это единственный способ работать в России? Я надеюсь, что нет.” Valery Gergiev, as quoted by Vladimir Posner in *ibid*.

<sup>74</sup> “По количеству талантливых людей я все еще склонен считать, что мы опережаем едва ли не всех. По количеству... Создать для них условия. По количеству упущенных возможностей мы опережаем тоже всех. Тут и кроется проблема. Поговорим скоро о новом театре, зачем России нужен новый театр Мариинский. Мне кажется, он нужен России, прежде всего, для того, чтобы создать уникальные возможности громадному количеству молодых не только артистов, менеджеров, специалистов технического профиля, в том числе высочайшего качества специалистов. Ведь, у нас там технологии самые-самые современные.” Valery Gergiev, in *ibid*.

naming names (like Yeltsin). Gergiev then positions his new theater as part of the remedy. His assertions that the Russian population is uniquely talented and that Russia leads the world in technology parallels aspects of Shchedrin's plot, not Leskov's.

Because the premiere of *The Left-hander* was slated to open the new theater, set designer Alexander Orlov took this opportunity to exploit and showcase all of the new capabilities of the Mariinsky-2.<sup>75</sup> Thus, the production of *The Left-hander* and the opening of this technologically advanced theater parallel the competitive story line that Shchedrin envisioned as integral to Leskov's message in the original tale. A music critic from the state-owned St. Petersburg press articulates the local political significance of this production: "The opera, written specifically for the new stage of the theater. . . . has become a sign of the full legitimization and commissioning of the new stage."<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps the same assumption about the impossibility of fully staging the opera in any other venue made by my informant Eduard, influenced decisions about how it should be performed abroad. In the next section I deal more directly with some of its musical details, citing examples from the orchestral score as they relate to some of the political intrigues connected with a performance abroad.

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<sup>75</sup> A detailed description of the theater's features and unique capabilities is available in English at "MARIINSKY II," accessed June 4, 2020, [https://www.mariinsky.ru/en/about/history/mariinsky\\_ii](https://www.mariinsky.ru/en/about/history/mariinsky_ii).

<sup>76</sup> "Опера, написанная специально для новой сцены театра. . . . стала знаком полной легитимации и ввода в строй новой сцены." Гюляра Садых-Заде, "'Левша' показал возможности Мариинского-2," *Невское время* - мнения и комментарии, August 2, 2013, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://nvspb.ru/2013/08/02/levsha-pokazal-vozmojnosti-mariinskogo-2-51915>.

## A Curious form of Cultural Diplomacy

It is revealing that the opera has only been performed abroad once: at the Barbican Centre in London in November 2014. Even more tellingly, the London audience never got to see any sets, props, or costumes; they were afforded only a concert version of *The Left-hander* presumably for the reasons cited above. After Gergiev made his characteristically late appearance (this time delayed by an hour),<sup>77</sup> one reviewer could not help but speculate on possible political implications: “A bewildered audience roamed the Barbican's foyers. The LSO don't ‘do’ late: for his home team it was clearly business as usual. Given the opera's subject, Russian-European relations, I couldn't help wondering if Gergiev was merely contemptuous or making a cultural point.”<sup>78</sup>

A reviewer of the compact disc (released in 2014) based on live recordings made in St. Petersburg (2013) that the Mariinsky label released the following year was also at the Barbican that night. He reported that before the opera had even commenced, some of the patrons left, with others to follow at the intermission. Beyond that, he remarked that the flashbacks of the plot and the double duty that baritone Vladimir Moroz had to perform as both Alexander I and his younger brother Nicholas I “contributed to a degree of bafflement even if one had read beforehand the Nikolay Leskov novella.”<sup>79</sup> Clearly the

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<sup>77</sup> I experienced a delay that equaled this when I attended one of Gergiev's orchestral engagements at the new Mariinsky Concert Hall in the summer of 2017.

<sup>78</sup> Helen Wallace, “Mariinsky Opera: Levsha (The Left-Hander) – Barbican,” accessed June 9, 2019, <http://www.classical-music.com/blog/mariinsky-opera-levsha-left-hander>.

<sup>79</sup> Geoffrey Norris, “Shchedrin: The Left-Hander, Review: ‘A Mixed Blessing,’” March 21, 2015, sec. Culture, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalcdreviews/11482302/Shchedrin-the-Left-Hander-review-a-mixed-blessing.html>.



already frustrated audience was presented with a performance that was difficult to understand.

Yet maybe a degree of incomprehensibility (or maybe more accurately, dazzling mystery) was entirely the point in dangling this curious Russian confection before the Londoners. In his interviews, Shchedrin seems to tell Russian readers that the story is something only *they* will fully comprehend. If Shchedrin meant for this opera to travel abroad, we can also read in the disclaimers he makes about the tale's potential incomprehensibility to foreigners a foundation for plausible deniability of a host of interpretations. Any negative readings of the opera as overtly nationalistic can therefore simply be written off with the blanket statement, "You foreigners just don't get it." Yet as we have seen, this language, difficult even for Russians, does not prevent informed readers from recognizing the satire in the story.

While the British reviewer cited above implied that he had read the novella beforehand, he made no comment about the discrepancies between it and Shchedrin's libretto. Yet another critic, Tim Ashley, noted the difference, writing, "Shchedrin dilutes both its fury and its wit by shifting emphasis."<sup>80</sup> In a strictly musical presentation such as the one audiences would have heard at the Barbican that night or on the compact disc released later (2014), the British characters might only appear eccentric because of the affected nature of some of their vocal lines. But in the staged version there is an erotically charged atmosphere pervading the British scenes, an atmosphere largely dependent on the

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<sup>80</sup> Tim Ashley, "The Left-Hander Review – Finely Played and Sung, but It's No Masterpiece," *The Guardian*, November 5, 2014, sec. Music, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/05/left-hander-mariinsky-gergiev-review>.

production's visual elements: the sets, the acting, and the costume design. Nevertheless, the same reviewer provides colorful commentary, illustrating the evocative potential of the music and supplying a reading of the plot that places competition front and center:

On disc, though, and with the aid of the text in the booklet, it makes more sense, another advantage of a CD being that one does not have to put up with the pouting antics of Princess Charlotte (Maria Maksakova) that proved to be such a distraction on the platform. . . . The crux of the story is that Levsha, the left-handed craftsman of Tula, is involved in a tussle of one-upmanship between Russia and England over the fashioning of a microscopic mechanical flea.<sup>81</sup> It is a comedy, albeit with a tragic ending when Levsha dies neglected once he has fulfilled his purpose. Local Russian and English colour is provided by folk instruments on the one hand and by stiff-upper-lip courtliness and a drunken travesty of "God Save the King" on the other.<sup>82</sup>

The "drunken travesty" he speaks of is indeed conspicuous in the opera's introduction.<sup>83</sup> Six bars of a highly dissonant and off-kilter version of the triple meter British anthem, "God Save the King" are shown in Example 2.1b and c. The drunkenness is achieved by means of a B-minor tonality in the winds that clashes with a back and forth weaving in the lower strings between G-sharp minor and G-sharp major. This follows on the heels of an opening brassy fanfare that climaxes with Shchedrin's musical homage to his most devoted patron, Gergiev.

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<sup>81</sup> Tim Ashley noted this with similar language, stating that the opera portrayed "a naive, left-handed metalworker, caught up in an absurd game of Anglo-Russian one-upmanship," and later, that it portrayed "an imperial obsession with Russian craftsmen being better than their English counterparts." See in Ashley, "The Left-Hander Review."

<sup>82</sup> Norris, "A Mixed Blessing."

<sup>83</sup> The English "Under-Skipper" sings a literally drunken rendition of this tune in A major against Levsha's signature folk song, "Little Scarlet Flower" (earlier in B major, now sung in D major) during their drinking bet during the storm aboard the ship headed back to St. Petersburg in Act 2, Scene 28: "The Left-Hander Sets Sail for Russia."

The letters of Gergiev's last name appear in the violins and are followed by the letters of his first name in the trumpets shown in Example 2.1b. Shchedrin seems to position himself as the terminus (or at least a descendent) of both Russian and Soviet compositional traditions for such composers as Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Lyadov, Glazunov, Myaskovsky, Shostakovich, and Schnittke all employed ciphers in at least one of their works before him. Shchedrin's use of the cipher here is conspicuous: the letters of Gergiev's name are printed directly above the notes in the full orchestral score.

In this imposing placement of the conductor's monogram between the brusque imperial flourishes and the farcical adaptation of the British anthem, we encounter a clever musical metaphor for the literal metaphor of the conductor as traffic cop. Gergiev is presented as unique in his ability to expertly 'direct traffic,' navigating between East (Russia) and West (Great Britain). Nonetheless, before Gergiev's tenure with the London Symphony Orchestra concluded in 2015, his work on behalf of the orchestra had already been criticized by some for its "fluctuating conducting standards," "predictable" repertoire, and absentee leadership. His close relationship to Putin stirred up much controversy as well.<sup>85</sup> Shchedrin's encoding of Gergiev's initials served as a tacit marker

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<sup>85</sup> "His eight-year tenure has divided opinion, with concerns raised about fluctuating conducting standards and a frequently predictable choice of repertory, a lack of dynamic, hands-on artistic leadership, and his controversial closeness to Putin's government in Russia. His recent work in the UK has certainly been variable." Tim Ashley, "LSO/Gergiev Review – a Beguiling, Superbly Judged Home Farewell," *Guardian*, October 19, 2015, sec. Music, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/oct/19/lso-gergiev-review-london-symphony-orchestra-barbican>. See also Philip Clark, "Gergiev's Credibility Has Been Shot to Pieces," *Guardian*, November 6, 2013, sec. Music, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/nov/06/gergiev-s-credibility-has-been-shot-to-pieces>; Andrew Clements, "Gergiev and the LSO: Fond Farewells or Sighs of Relief?," *Guardian*, October 9, 2015, sec. Music, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2015/oct/09/gergiev-and-the-lso-fond-farewells-or-sighs-of-relief>; Arthur Lubow, "The Loyalist - Valery Gergiev," *New York Times*, March 12,

of support in the London performance (yet if anyone heard it, they made no comment in the press).

In the opera's compact introduction Shchedrin also uses contrasting tonal areas (suggesting the C-flat Lydian mode and B minor) to depict the oppositional forces within the plot, Russian versus British. In opera, this practice dates back to the Russian works of Glinka, Dargomyzhsky, and Musorgsky—not to mention Verdi.<sup>86</sup> But rather than associating one tonality with the Russians and another with the British, Shchedrin calls on a smaller collection of pitches using a strategy similar to early Stravinsky in which pitches from a mostly diatonic collection form quasi-folk melodic material that is then harmonized by dissonant clusters.

In the opening fanfare of the “Russian Dance” from Stravinsky's ballet *Petrushka* (1912), shown in Example 2.2, the upper voice is harmonized through diatonic planing of densely voiced chords taken strictly from the G-Mixolydian mode. This signals the piquant folk atmosphere of the *balagany* or puppet box theaters associated with the Shrovetide fair central to the ballet's scenario.

Alban Berg employed a similar strategy to signal the folk during Act 2, Scene 4, “The Tavern Garden,” of his opera *Wozzeck* (1922), shown in example 2.3. As the chorus of men sing about a hunter riding through the green forest, the scalar upper voice of the tenors (for the most part derived from C major) is harmonized by an accumulative

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2009, sec. Magazine, accessed July 12, 2020,  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/15/magazine/15gergiev-t.html>.

<sup>86</sup> Caryl Emerson and Robert William Oldani, *Modest Musorgsky and Boris Godunov: Myths, Realities, Reconsiderations* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 230.

diatonic planing device in which each new note in the tenors is harmonized by a larger and larger cluster from the same collection of pitches.

With the exception of a few chromatic neighbor tones, Shchedrin's introductory flourish for a quartet of horns in F, shown in Example 2.1a, draws mostly from the C-flat Lydian mode. The first six notes of the scalar upper voice, much as in the Berg example, are also harmonized by chords that become successively more dense and dissonant. That this quasi-folk material is associated with Russia is evident: some form of it introduces every scene at the Winter Palace in the opera.<sup>88</sup> It seems to suggest that although the imperial system could be brutal, it nevertheless shared a connection to the *narod*.

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<sup>88</sup> See also the opening of Scenes 10, 16, and 19 from Act 1.

Example 2.1a. Shchedrin, *The Left-hander*, Act I, Scene 1, beginning – Reh. 3.<sup>89</sup>

Левша / The Left-Hander  
 Часть первая / Act one  
 1. Зимний дворец / The Winter Palace

Родион Щедрин  
 Rodion Shchedrin  
 \*1932

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<sup>89</sup> Rodion Shchedrin, *The Left-Hander: The Tale of the Cross-Eyed Left-Hander from Tula - Opera in Two Acts - Libretto by the Composer after the Story by Nikolai Leskov*, Music of Our Time, ED 21745 (Mainz, Ger.: Schott Music GmbH & Co., 2014).

Example 2.1b. Shchedrin, *Levsha*, Act I, Scene 1 (cont.).

3

(a tempo)  
(♩ ca. 84-88)

**(poco allarg.)** **ord.** **frull.** **fff** **6** **7** **allarg.**  **$\frac{3}{4}$**  **(a tempo)** **ff**

Picc. (3)

Picc. (4)

Fl. 1

Fl. 2

Ob. 1, 2

Cl. picc. (4) (Mi ♭)

Cl. 1 (Si ♭)

Cl. 2 (Si ♭)

Cl. 3 (Si ♭)

Tr. 1

Tr. 2

Tr. 3

Tr. 4

Trb. 1

Tb. 1, 2

Perc. I

Perc. II

VI. I

VI. II

Va.

Vc.

Cb.

(v)A-(L)E-R(y) **fff** **6** **7**

ord.

Campanelli (2 bacch. en fer) **fff**

Tamburo militare solo **ff**

Campanelli militare **ff**

G E R G(i) E(v) **fff** **(senza trem.)**

G E R G(i) E(v)

(non div.) **fff** **senza trem.**

arco **ff**

arco **ff**

arco **ff**

**55 907**

Example 2.1c. Shchedrin, *Levsha*, Act I, Scene 1 (cont.).

4

3AHABEC / CURTAIN

Picc. (3)

Fl. 1

Fl. 2

Ob. 1, 2

Cl. picc. (4)  
(Mi b)

Cl. 1 (Si b)

Cl. 2 (Si b)

Cr. 1 (Fa)

Tr. 1

Tr. 3

Tr. 4

Tb. 1, 2

Timp.

Perc. I

Perc. II

Va.

Vc.

Cb.

solo  
*ff fanfare*  
gliss

con sord. (cartone)  
sola  
*ff*

(a 2)  
baritone

senza trillo

solo  
*f ma non troppo*

*l. v.*

4/4

3/4

55 907



Example 2.2. Stravinsky, *Petrushka*, First Tableau: “The Shrovetide Fair,” Reh.  
33.<sup>90</sup>

➤РУССКАЯ                      RUSSIAN DANCE.

ПЕТРУШКА, АРАПЪ И БАЛЕРИНА ДРУЖНО ПУСКАЮТСЯ ВЪ ПЛЯСЬ КЪ ВЕЛИКОМУ УДИВЛЕНІЮ ВСѢХЪ.  
Petrushka, the Moor, and the Ballerina Suddenly Begin to Dance, to the Great Astonishment of the Crowd.

33 Allegro giusto. ♩=116.

Flauti Piccoli. I. II.  
Flauti I. II.  
Oboi I. II.  
Corno inglese.  
I. II.  
Clarinetti in Sib. III.  
Fagotti I. II. III.  
Corni in F. I. II. III. IV. ouvert.  
Pistoni in Sib.  
Piano.  
Violini I.  
Violini II.  
Viole.  
Violoncelli.  
Contrabassi.

Allegro giusto.  
pizz.

33

<sup>90</sup> Igor Stravinsky, *Petrushka - Original Version*, Reprint. Originally published: Pétouchka. Berlin: Edition russe de musique; New York: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1912. With introductory matter translated into English. (Toronto, ON: Dover, 1988).

Example 2.3. Berg, "Tavern Garden" from *Wozzeck*, Act 2, Scene 4, mm. 560-565.<sup>91</sup>

316

1.2.3. Fl.  
1.2.3. Ob.  
1.3.4. Kl. in B  
Bkl. in B  
1.2.3. Fg.  
Kfg.  
Pk.

560

565

kurze Luftpause Frisch (♩ = 132)

560 565

1. Ten. Ein Jä-ger aus der Pfalz Ritt einst durch ei-nen grü-nen Wald! Hal-li, Hal-

2. Ten. Ein Jä-ger aus der Pfalz Ritt einst durch ei-nen grü-nen Wald! Hal-li, Hal-

1. Bar. Ein Jä-ger aus der Pfalz Ritt einst durch ei-nen grü-nen Wald! Hal-li, Hal-

2. Bar. Ein Jä-ger aus der Pfalz Ritt einst durch ei-nen grü-nen Wald! Hal-li, Hal-

1. Baß Ein Jä-ger aus der Pfalz Ritt einst durch ei-nen grü-nen Wald! Hal-li, Hal-

2. Baß Ein Jä-ger aus der Pfalz Ritt einst durch ei-nen grü-nen Wald! Hal-li, Hal-

1.VI. nehmen Dpf.  
2.VI. o. Dpf. pizz. nehmen Dpf.  
o. D. alle nehmen Dpf.  
Vla. nehmen Dpf. pizz.  
Vlc. nehmen Dpf.  
Kb. nehmen Dpf.

560

565

ff

U.E. 7379 / U.E. 12100

<sup>91</sup> Alban Berg, *Wozzeck*, ed. Hans Erich Apostel (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1955).

Those familiar with Leskov's original story might have noticed that the plot summary of the opera provided at the beginning of this chapter is missing a few important details crucial to his satire of Russian social structures and chauvinism. The British critic, Norris touches vaguely on a "satirical bent" in Shchedrin's opera that he hears as having a musical kinship with Shostakovich's opera, *The Nose* (1928), based on the eponymous short story by Nicolai Gogol. He also suggests that Shchedrin "took his cue" from *The Nose* when he gave "cruelly high, ornate lines to the tenor title role and to the coloratura flea." Nevertheless, "a tussle of one-upmanship between Russia and England" in *Levsha* was "the crux of the story" for him and from just these opening musical details, we can discern with no difficulty who will be depicted in the more unflattering musical colors.<sup>92</sup>

There are indeed some obvious thematic and musical similarities between *Levsha* and *The Nose*. Both operas satirize the impossibly dense and tangled Russian bureaucracy of the early-nineteenth century with sarcastic dissonances and as Norris asserted above, they each place extremely difficult demands on the vocal soloists. Both employ the melodic material, song forms, and instruments of a folk-derived idiom—especially those connected with the *balagany* theater of outdoor carnivals. Where Shostakovich used *domras* and *balaleikas*, Shchedrin used *domras* and the *baian* (a button accordion) and deployed cello pizzicato techniques and other stringed instruments like the hackbrett (a kind of dulcimer) to imitate the sounds of the *balaleika* through more widely used orchestral timbres. Finally, both incorporate choral scenes with music reminiscent of

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<sup>92</sup> Norris, "A Mixed Blessing."

Orthodox church traditions. Where Shostakovich alludes to these traditions with irony, Shchedrin uses them to depict simplicity, piety, and reverence.

There is also an extra-musical similarity. Much like *Levsha*, and despite Shostakovich's vehement protest, *The Nose* was given its first performance in concert format without any of its stage and theatrical trappings in 1929. As Shostakovich complained, "*The Nose* loses all meaning if it is seen just as a musical composition. For the music springs only from the action. . . . It is clear to me that a concert performance of *The Nose* will destroy it."<sup>93</sup> The violent attack this performance received from the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians, proved Shostakovich correct.

*Levsha's* full impact is also very much dependent on the action, scenery, and costume designs that appear onstage. Where Shostakovich's *Nose* potentially suffers from this disconnect between eyes and ears in the concert format, the full brunt of Shchedrin's debauched characterization of the British is merely obscured in a similar presentation.

### **Portraying the Other in Russian Opera**

In an interview about the opera, Shchedrin stated that "Levsha himself is a concentration of all the features of the Russian people, from 'A' to 'Z.'" His list includes "talent, ingenuity, dignity," and "a complete contempt for mortality." Other traits that he says Levsha shares with this quintessential Russian are "unhurriedness," "self-deprecation," and a tendency "to abuse our national drink." For him, Leskov's original

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<sup>93</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, 2nd ed (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2006), 84.

tale is ultimately about “unacknowledged genius” or even more precisely, the “disposability of genius” in the native land. Generally, he states that Leskov deals with many topics, for example, “the people and the authorities, or even the population and the elites.” And finally, using language from some of the oldest Slavophile texts, Shchedrin states that in Leskov’s novella, “There is a contrast of the ways of life between the irrational Russian mentality and the rational British.”<sup>94</sup> This essentializing statement nonetheless correctly implies that the contrast between the two nationalities in Leskov’s tale is balanced, portraying both the positive and negative aspects of each society and state. Yet the contrast that Shchedrin and the Mariinsky production crew evoke turns out to be decidedly unbalanced.

This particular point is reiterated almost verbatim in the liner notes to the Mariinsky compact disc recording as well as in the theater program and other interviews he has given about the opera. After providing a surface view of the opera’s plot and a list of the principal characters, Shchedrin makes this astonishing statement in his program note in the CD booklet: “But look a little deeper (!! ) and you’ll clearly see the juxtaposition of two ways of life: that of the rational British and the irrational Russians.”<sup>95</sup> Remarkably, aside from the morality comparison, this “juxtaposition” is the

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<sup>94</sup> “Да, у Лескова это специальная тема. Непризнанность гения на родной земле, даже не непризнанность, а именно ненужность гения. Гений — всегда обуза. А вообще, тут множество тем, народ и власть, или даже население и небожители. Противопоставление иррациональной формы бытия русского сознания рациональной британской.” Щедрин and Ершова, “Музыка всегда ждет нового гения.”

<sup>95</sup> Shchedrin, *The Left-hander*, SACD MAR0554, 8.

most obvious, and the most crucial, feature of the production, no deep searching is required. It is a juxtaposition with a long back-story in Russian music and history.

The connection between operatic composition and state ideology during both the Imperial and Soviet periods has been well documented.<sup>96</sup> Russian opera's very first flowering—as exemplified by Glinka's first opera, *A Life for the Tsar* (1836)—participated in the mythologizing of a legendary national past to reinforce notions of the divine origin of the tsar's dynastic rule. In this way, opera could serve the state as a didactic tool for cultivating the historical understanding of the people.<sup>97</sup> The cultural and educational policy developed during Nicholas I's reign to accomplish this, known as Official Nationalism, promoted the values of Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality (*Pravoslavie, samoderzhavie, narodnost'*) as interdependent. In practice this interdependence was an illusion, as the autocrat maintained absolute authority.<sup>98</sup> The

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<sup>96</sup> See especially the discussions in Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Marina Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet Opera Project: Ivan Dzerzhinsky vs. Ivan Susanin," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 2 (July 2006): 181–216, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586706002163>; Richard Taruskin, "Entoiling the Falconet" and "M. I. Glinka and the State," in *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1997); Yekaterina Vlasova, "The Stalinist Opera Project," in *Russian Music Since 1917: Reappraisal and Rediscovery*, Proceedings of the British Academy 209 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 164–87.

<sup>97</sup> See for instance Taruskin's discussion of Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Maid of Pskov* in Richard Taruskin, "The Present in the Past: Russian Opera and Russian Historiography, Circa 1870," in *Musorgsky: Eight Essays and an Epilogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 129.

<sup>98</sup> Nicholas Valentine Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia, 1825-1855* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 73.

control that Nicholas I exerted over all areas of Russian life is exemplified by the fact that the final title for Glinka's opera was decided by the tsar himself.<sup>99</sup>

Russian opera frequently drew from plots that depicted Russian heroes vanquishing historical foes belonging to outside ethnic groups or national entities intent on usurping or thwarting this preordained power. Examples of these historical foes include the Polish in both Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*, and Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, and the Turkic nomadic Polovtsians in Borodin's *Prince Igor*. Though the Soviet period saw little in the way of opera production, Prokofiev's *Semyon Kotko* similarly pitted those loyal to the Red Army in 1918 Ukraine against both Germans and Ukrainian nationalists.

These opponents of the fatherland were cast in musical and visual terms that varied conspicuously from their Russian counterparts. To cite one example in detail, Glinka consistently represented the Polish enemy in *A Life for the Tsar* through stereotypical dance genres such as the *polonaise* or *mazurka* in triple meter, or the *krakowiak* in a syncopated duple meter.<sup>100</sup> As we have already seen from the opera's introductory themes, Shchedrin employs the triple meter material related to "God Save the Queen" as one of the markers for the British. In Glinka's opera, the Poles only sang *en masse*, while Russian characters alone were afforded individual personalities.<sup>101</sup> Shchedrin employs the opposite strategy in *The Left-hander*: Seemingly to convey difference between the self-interested, individualistic British and the Russians, bound

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<sup>99</sup> Taruskin, "M.I. Glinka and the State," 28.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

together in communal spirit, all we hear in the British scenes are individual personalities. Meanwhile, Russian scenes in Tula (such as that “A Village in Tula and the Left-Hander’s Rude Songs”) and at the end in St. Petersburg indeed feature Russians singing as one.

As shown above, this juxtaposition of difference is already apparent in the opera’s introductory musical themes. Shchedrin’s musical depiction of the two nationalities in question draws from two strains of musical practices across the opera. Both are connected to the the strategy outlined above that aims to set Russia and its people apart from the “others” of Russian opera plots: these are, orientalism and nationalism via folk elements. And they each find their origins in the operas of Mikhail Glinka.

Though the British have never quarreled with or intended to invade Russia as the Mongol Horde, Teutonic Knights, Napoleon, or Hitler did, the two nations nevertheless share a history of protracted political and diplomatic competition, as well as one short but devastating conflict. Throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries each sought greater influence in Central Asia and access to the riches of India in what historians would later call “The Great Game.”<sup>102</sup>

Perhaps most significantly, during the Crimean War (1853-56), both Britain and France supported the Ottoman Empire in a clash with Russia over the competing rights of Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Christians in Jerusalem.<sup>103</sup> The result was a humiliating

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<sup>102</sup> Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game* (John Murray Press, 2006); Karl E. Meyer, *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Central Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1999).

<sup>103</sup> For two fairly recent and somewhat opposing viewpoints on the motivations behind this conflict see Candan Badem, *The Ottoman Crimean War: (1853 - 1856)*, vol. 44, Politics, Society



defeat for Russia that initiated a call from its educated elites for extensive modernization and reform of Russian society. It also figured significantly in the original version of *Levsha*, for Leskov hinted that this terrible loss could have been avoided if only the tragic hero, possessing valuable information about the superior upkeep of British firearms, had been treated differently by the Russian authorities. Yet Shchedrin's opera makes no mention of the Crimean War.

### **Tropes of Nationalism and Orientalism in Russian Opera**

Beyond the moral and philosophical opposition it portrays between Russia and Great Britain, its similarities to Shostakovich's *The Nose*, and its use of musical ciphers, Shchedrin's score, despite its contemporary idiom, harkens back to some of the practices of other Russian composers, namely those of the nineteenth century. The following is an outline of the origins of those conventions. Revisiting them will help us later to see how Shchedrin's work further recalls the practices and tropes of a very nationalist period.

In *A Life for the Tsar* (1836), the Russian characters' lyrical passages were derived in part from folk material, but mostly from the sentimental romances that were so prominent in urban culture—essentially melodies in which as the musicologist, Richard Taruskin states, “the Russian folk melos had been put through an Italianate refinery.”<sup>104</sup> Throughout Shchedrin's opera, as we will see shortly, Shchedrin's practice makes use of this “Italianate refinery” in the opposite direction, reflecting the anti-Western backlash

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and Economy (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2010); Orlando Figes, *The Crimean War: A History* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2011).

<sup>104</sup> Taruskin, “M. I. Glinka and the State,” 29.

that all things Italian received during the 1860s in Russian musical culture. In combination with the other half of Russia's nineteenth-century musical nationalism (orientalism), we find that the Italian operatic style so central to Russia's own early operatic development once again becomes a marker for the the decadent other.

In Glinka's second opera, *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842), the composer laid the foundation for musically depicting characters of a more distant and mysterious other, the Near (or Middle) East. His opera established a fount of conventions for broadcasting the orientalist tropes that served to justify Russia's periods of imperial expansion in that part of the world. Future Russian composers would draw from this source again and again.<sup>105</sup> Though the other in *Levsha* is represented by the British, Shchedrin combines musical gestures that are redolent of earlier orientalist tropes with a highly embellished Italianate vocal style to freight his British characters with related stereotypes. In other words, musical tropes that were once markers for eastern exoticism are borrowed and adapted for a new context that is chiefly concerned with depicting the extremes of exoticism's more libidinous side—debauched eroticism.<sup>106</sup>

Central to the orientalism as imagined by Russians of the nineteenth century is the concept of *nega*, which translates to “sweet bliss” or “gratified desire.” As Taruskin

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<sup>105</sup> For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon with musical examples see Taruskin, “Entoiling the Falconet.”

<sup>106</sup> In her recent study of Ukrainian pop music between the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan, Ukrainian-American ethnomusicologist Maria Sonevytsky discusses how other tropes of exoticism (related to a certain “Wildness” that has long characterized perceptions of Ukraine as a wild and transitional nation) are often deployed quite differently as a strategy to assert political independence. See Maria Sonevytsky, *Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2019).

states, “In opera and song, *nega* often simply denotes S-E-X *à la russe*, desired or achieved.”<sup>107</sup> It is manifest in not only the behavior of various eastern seductresses of Russian opera but in that of their emasculated victims as well. Thus, it signals the daydreamer who succumbs to his earthly passions because he lacks the strength of character to see his more lofty missions through to completion. Here Taruskin sums up the implications for Russia’s Imperial expansion in the East:

While something that could certainly be indulged for its own sake as soft porn, the orientalist trope associated with *nega* . . . nevertheless functioned within the Victorian conventions of the time. . . . associated with the orient, [*nega*] is held up as a degenerate counterpart to more manly virtues associated with Russians. It marked the other—marked it, in fact, for justified conquest.<sup>108</sup>

*Nega* in Russian orientalism is represented by a set of “distinctive musical gestures” that make up a “characteristic semiotic cluster”<sup>109</sup> whose origin is found in Ratmir’s aria and cabaletta in the third act of Glinka’s opera, *Ruslan and Liudmila*. A distillation of these gestures with due consideration paid to the subtle innovations of later Russian composers leaves us with a cluster that is most relevant to Shchedrin’s *Levsha*: a pedal drum or drone, snaking chromaticism with heavy emphasis on chromatic neighbor tones or appoggiaturas, melismas, and syncopated rhythmic undulations. In Borodin’s *Arabskaia melodiia* (1881), Taruskin notes that the undulating rhythms of the vocal line

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<sup>107</sup> Taruskin, “Entoiling the Falconet, 165.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

gain intensity through diminution.<sup>110</sup> As I will show below, Shchedrin applies a similar procedure in his opera.

As a means of emphasizing this difference depicted by the combination of Italian and orientalist styles, Shchedrin set the Russian characters' lines in either a declamatory or folk-like style, while the British received vocal lines of a markedly florid nature—some might argue aggressively so. The unmistakable aural resemblance to the melismatic vocal style of Italian opera is further underscored by the orchestral score's designation of “Rossini-like” for the mezzo soprano role of Princess Charlotte.

This style blends neatly with the melismatic nature of earlier orientalist devices while having the added benefit of marking the characters as frivolous and self-interested, traits that the *moguchaia kuchka* or “mighty handful” (as well as their propagandists) — Glinka's successors—assigned to Italian opera performers. Their attacks on all things Italian were due in large part to a sense of frustration that festered among native Russian composers for decades in the nineteenth century. Beginning with the policies of Tsar Nicholas I, Italian opera was prized far above the home-grown variety. As Taruskin observes, most Russian opera historians agree on January 1836 as “the turning point” for Italian opera. Ironically following the premiere of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* by a few months, Rossini's last opera, *Semiramide* began an extended period of mania for the Italian repertoire and the superbly trained singers imported from Italy.<sup>111</sup> Consequently,

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>111</sup> Richard Taruskin, “Ital'yanshchina,” in *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 195.

Maria and Giuseppe were offered fees that far exceeded what the state would allow Masha and Mikhail to earn.<sup>112</sup>

Robert Oldani points to a period (1862-69) in which Italian opera endured a decline coinciding with the increased enmity this financial inequity aroused among native music critics and composers. Though some of their motives are evident in the inflation of this inequity, he shows that other examples of this motivation were cloaked under the guise of aesthetic criticism.<sup>113</sup> One such aesthetic argument put forth in an 1866 polemical essay by the chief propagandist of the *kuchka*, Vladimir Stasov, managed to also attack the spiritual values and intellectual capacities of those who enjoyed Italian opera:

The Russian operatic public of today can be divided into two groups, like all European publics. One consists of people at the very lowest level of development, devoid of taste and understanding in equal measure and therefore up to their ears in the most pitiful, routine and cynical music: Italian. These people have no discrimination and, save the emptiest of tunes and the most meaningless titillation, music is for them an impenetrable forest. The opposite group consists of people who are able to understand and love real art in all its exaltation and greatness and can be satisfied only with such works as show real talent, truth and beauty.<sup>114</sup>

Anton Rubinstein, the famous virtuoso performer and composer who founded the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1862 in order to produce the first professionally trained

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<sup>112</sup> See a discussion of this in Taruskin, "Ital'yanshchina," 186–235.

<sup>113</sup> Robert William Oldani, "Sing Me Some Glinka or Dargomyzhky," *History of European Ideas* 16, no. 4–6 (1993): 713–19.

<sup>114</sup> Qtd. in Richard Taruskin, *Opera and Drama in Russia as Preached and Practiced in the 1860s*, Russian Music Studies ; No. 2 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan (UMI) Research Press, 1981), 130; See also in В. В. Стасов, *Избранные сочинения I* (Москва, 1952), 147-151.

corps of musicians in Russia, pointed to the sense of frustration he experienced in trying to be politically correct during this period:

It must be remembered that at the time a spirit of jingoistic patriotism was rampant. In writing the charter [of the conservatory], we felt obliged to avoid foreign words and so would not think of calling our school a “conservatory”—the word is foreign. Remembering the function of a conservatory, we named it the “music school.” In addition, we called our faculty “teachers” since the word “professor” is also foreign.<sup>115</sup>

In *The Left-hander*, Shchedrin resurrects this animosity toward foreign elements (especially those associated with Italian opera) from its nineteenth-century grave, combining it with the musical features of orientalism signaling seduction and emasculation.

### **Portraying the Other in *The Left-hander***

The visual depiction of the binary opposition between Russia and Britain in the opera is the work of the costume designer Irina Cherednikova, set designer Alexander Orlov, and stage director Alexei Stepanyuk. Their contributions augment the intentions laid out by Shchedrin in both libretto and score. This is the same team that produced Shchedrin’s previous opera based on a Leskov text at the Mariinsky, *The Enchanted Wanderer* (2007). When asked whether he was pleased with the work of the production

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<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Oldani, “Sing Me Some Glinka,” 716; Also quoted in Лев Арнович Баренбойм, *Антон Григорьевич Рубинштейн: Жизнь, артистический путь, творчество, музыкально-общественная деятельность*, vol. 1 (Ленинград: Государственное музыкальное издательство, 1957), 420.

team on his newest opera, the composer left no doubt, stating, “This was my desire. I am very happy because we understand each other.”<sup>116</sup>

Stark lines of distinction are visually apparent early in the opera. Audiences first encounter this juxtaposition near the end of Act 1, scene 2 (“Ataman Platov’s Story”) in which there is a transition from the vast snowy expanses of Russia to the armory of Buckingham Palace in London. As Platov begins to recount his trip to London accompanying Alexander I, the Russian stage set floats up and away, giving the appearance that Platov, like a Russian Orpheus, is making his descent into the seedy bowels of some dark and cramped underworld.

Shades of red pervade the British stage set: eight red telephone booths lined up in a row, with a red Tower of London peaking out of the fog overhead that earlier had served as the snowy Russian landscape in the previous scene. The appearance of phone booths in an early nineteenth-century setting is not only intentionally comical, but topical as well. The row of eight booths seems to suggest both technology run amok and excess in the “rational” world of the British.

Below the fog, a red metal staircase winds down. The most prominent color other than red comes from green lights glowing from the low ceiling overhead. Princess Charlotte with her red hair and bright pink outfit (merely another shade of red) sits on the spiral stairway in a haughty pose. A critic for the Russian magazine *Musical Life*

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<sup>116</sup> “Оперу ставит та же команда, которая осуществила «Очарованного странника» в Мариинке, с режиссером Алексеем Степанюком. Это было моим желанием, я очень рад, поскольку мы понимаем друг друга.” Rodion Shchedrin in Щедрин and Ершова, “Музыка всегда ждет нового гения.”

described her ensemble vividly in a review full of admiration for the work of Orlov (the set designer) and Cherednikova (the costume designer), stating that her “little acid-pink suit...with a striking hat (like a giant cock-eyed cylinder) crashes into the retina forever.”<sup>117</sup>

**Figure 2.2. Princess Charlotte’s “Acid Pink” Suits<sup>118</sup>**



Two scenes later viewers meet the Three Lords of the Treasury sporting red walrus moustaches connected with bushy red mutton chops. Throughout history, red hair has been burdened with stereotypes ranging from the scandalous to the demonic. Though it is possible that this costuming in the opera is merely a cheeky reference to the British royal family—many of whom have had some shade of red hair—other associations are so

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<sup>117</sup> “...кислотно-розовый костюмчик Принцессы Шарлоты, с поражающей воображение шляпкой (вроде скособоченного гигантского цилиндра) врежется в сетчатку глаза навечно.” Гюляра Садых-Заде, “Сквозь волнистые туманы,” *Музыкальная жизнь*, nos. 7-8 2013, 5.

<sup>118</sup> These screenshots were taken from images in the digital playbill used for every performance of the opera. See for example “Левша” from February 25, 2019, [https://www.mariinsky.ru/playbill/playbill/2019/2/25/2\\_1930](https://www.mariinsky.ru/playbill/playbill/2019/2/25/2_1930).



deeply engrained in world culture that they are difficult to escape. All things considered, in the context of the opera, Princess Charlotte bears a special resemblance in both appearance and behavior to descriptions of one of the oldest red-headed seductresses in mythological history, Lilith.<sup>119</sup> One British critic found her to be a “delicious foil . . . so ripe a creature as to make the Duchess of Cambridge seem like a duenna.”<sup>120</sup> It bears mentioning that Shchedrin brought her into this story, not Leskov.

After Princess Charlotte slowly descends from the shadows of the staircase in the initial armory scene, viewers get a better look at her ostentatious hat and we see that her pencil skirt suit, with its plunging neckline, noticeably draws the attention of Tsar Alexander I. In the video of the opera, at first he looks on her with rapture, then with smirking lust. Members of the iconic yeomen of the guard—naturally, also dressed in

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<sup>119</sup> One of the earliest associations of red hair is with the evil and seductive Lilith, a figure from Hebrew religious tradition who first emerged in Sumerian culture in about the middle of the third millennium B.C.E. As Hebrew scholar Raphael Patai stated, “No she-demon has ever achieved as fantastic a career as Lilith, who started out from the lowliest of origins, was a failure as Adam’s intended wife, became the paramour of lascivious spirits, rose to be the bride of Samael the Demon King, ruled as Queen of Zemargad and Sheba, and ended up as the consort of God himself.” See in Raphael Patai and William G. Dever, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3<sup>rd</sup> enlarged ed., (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 221. As a redhead, Lilith appears as early as the thirteenth century A.D. in the Kabbalah: “She adorns herself with many ornaments like a despicable harlot, and takes up her position at the crossroads to seduce the sons of man. . . . Her ornaments for the seduction of the sons of man are: her hair is long and red like the rose, her cheeks are white and red, from her ears hang six ornaments, Egyptian cords and all the ornaments of the Land of the East hang from her nape. Her mouth is set like a narrow door, comely in its decor; her tongue is sharp like a sword, her words are smooth like oil, her lips red like a rose and sweetened by all the sweetness of the world. She is dressed in scarlet, and adorned with forty ornaments less one,” qtd. in Patai, 233-34. Lilith also appears many times with red hair in both Western literature (for example, Goethe’s *Faust*) and painting. See Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith* (1867) in “The Met’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History,” accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/08.162.1/>.

<sup>120</sup> Alexandra Coghlan, “Levsha, Mariinsky Opera, Barbican Hall: An Operatic Conceit of Enormous Wit and Charm,” *TheArtsDesk.com*, November 5, 2014, accessed June 9, 2019, <https://theartsdesk.com/opera/levsha-mariinsky-opera-barbican-hall>.

red—prance mechanically through their ceremonial paces. On close inspection, viewers can make out that they are all, incongruously, young women.

**Figure 2.3. Costume Designer Irina Cherednikova’s Sketches for the Three Lords of the Treasury, Princess Charlotte, and the Buckingham Palace Guards.**<sup>121</sup>



The Don Cossack Ataman Platov, dressed in his finest blue military regalia, with silver-tasseled epaulettes and the typical Cossack *papakha* on his head, is notably unimpressed by the displays presented to the Russians in the English armory. He frequently behaves insolently toward both the British and his own westward-gazing sovereign. Yet his gruff behavior—the intense disdain and skepticism he shows toward anything that is not Russian—is portrayed positively. Even the frequent swigs of *kizliarka* (*kisliarka* in Leskov’s tale – a kind of vodka made from grapes in the

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<sup>121</sup> This image is taken from the page dedicated to the opera in the Mariinsky’s online exhibition of Shchedrin’s works. See “Щедрин в Мариинском - Левша. 2013,” accessed June 4, 2020, <https://www.mariinsky.ru/about/exhibitions/shchedrin/levsha>.

Caucasus) he takes from a bottle hidden under his coat seem to be part of an understandable coping mechanism for all the affronts he patiently endures.

By contrast, Tsar Alexander I, wearing a white uniform, dark blue sash, gold-tasseled epaulettes, and a wide French-style *bicorn* hat with plumage in the colors of Russia's St. George ribbon (orange and black), is spellbound by each of the wonders paraded before his eyes. His portrayal, as in Leskov's original, is farcical. He nonetheless retains a certain masculine dignity in the opera absent from the portrayal of the three British Lords of the Treasury.

**Figure 2.4. Platov (kneeling) and Alexander I.**<sup>122</sup>



Shchedrin gives Princess Charlotte the opening lines of the first British scene, Act 1, Scene 3 (“Inspection of the Armoury”), shown in Example 2.4. She sings her very first vowel over a forty-note coloratura melisma full of leaps and chromatic slithering that traverses the range of an octave and a fourth as an echo to a similar line in the oboe.

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<sup>122</sup> Screenshot taken from the Mariinsky digital playbill for *Levsha* (see footnote 118 above).

Throughout this passage we hear the drone of the *bayan*, asked to perform double-duty here in imitation of a single, sustained bagpipe note. This is Shchedrin's English equivalent to the exotic drones of nineteenth-century orientalism. Meanwhile, the double-reed timbre of the oboe, also a marker of the East in nineteenth-century Russian music, calls to mind the same sensuousness. After a few shorter melismas on the syllables within the words "Your Highness" (*Vashe Velichestvo*), Princess Charlotte concludes the opening salvo of her seduction of Alexander I with a sly, flirtatious grin and playfully pulls her hand away from his lips.

The ensuing ensemble number (*terzetto*) is in a strict *tempo di menuetto* throughout and materially bears a resemblance to the "God Save Our King" theme heard in the introduction. Charlotte's lines continue to be notably florid. A new level of absurdity and bad taste is reached in one phrase where a compound melody embellished by neighbor note chromaticism is almost discernible due to the wide leaps occurring between eighth notes on each syllable. The vocal lines for Alexander I and Platov enter the minuet in reaction to the pyrotechnic display of Charlotte's just described. They are forced to adjust to this alien musical environment, however leaps in their lines are rare, being restricted only to moments of greatest delight (in Alexander's case) or heightened annoyance (in Platov's case).

Alexander, dumbstruck by the amazing sights paraded before them, enters first after a pianissimo steady sixteenth-note pulse begins in the snare drum (echoes of Shostakovich). The snare drum plays almost incessantly from this point until the end of the *terzetto*, perhaps to help the two Russians retain their bearings. A harpsichord, as well

as other instrumental markers of the English Baroque enhances the geographical orientation of this scene.

**Example 2.4. Shchedrin, *The Left-hander*, Act 1, Scene 3, mm. 134-145.<sup>123</sup>**

3. Осмотр оружейной кунсткамеры (терцет)  
3. Inspection of the Armoury (Terzetto)

**Andantino moderato**  
(♩ ca. 76 - 80)

Принцесса Шарлотта  
*p, con eleganza*

134

Пр. Ш.

Ва (a) - - - -  
Va (a) - - - -

Ат. Пл.

Ал-др. I

Ob.  
*p*

Vc., Cemb.  
*pp*

55 908

<sup>123</sup> Rodion Shchedrin, *The Left-hander: The Tale of the Cross-Eyed Left-hander from Tula - Opera in Two Acts - Libretto by the Composer after the Story by Nikolai Leskov*, Piano reduction by Erich Hermann, Music of Our Time, ED 21745 (Mainz, Ger.: Schott Music GmbH & Co., 2014).

Example 2.4 (cont.). Shchedrin. *Levsha*. Act 1, Scene 3 (cont.), mm. 136-145.

19

136

Пр. Ш.

138

Пр. Ш.

rit. molto

21 Tempo di menuetto (♩ = 120 - 126)

lunga

5:4

Fl., Hackbr., Cemb.

*p*

- - - ше - ве - ли - чест - во...  
- - - ше - ве - ли - чест - во...

142

Пр. Ш.

55 908

A critic for *Musical Life* noted the “obvious irony” with which the British characters were portrayed and added that the “affected vocal phrases of the English Princess Charlotte - Maria Maksakova, are reminiscent of the ‘Troubadour’ from the ‘Bremen town musicians.’”<sup>124</sup> Perhaps the reviewer was alluding to the eponymous 1969 Soviet cartoon in which a young man sings a soliloquy about his love for a young woman.<sup>125</sup> While the vocal style is equally affected, the affect that governs it is decidedly different from the one that Shchedrin asks Maksakova and future interpreters of Princess Charlotte to work from. As far as implied intentions are concerned, those of the troubadour are undeniably more chaste.

The amateur cultural blogger cited earlier regarding the implications of “quasi-officialdom” in the production found the caricature of Princess Charlotte extremely offensive. Ignoring the obscenities and some very specific personal attacks on Maksakova (who we can assume performed the role precisely as she was asked to), we read a critique that is perhaps more justifiably directed at the composer and the production team. Though he was generally complementary of the orchestra, choir, and each of the performers in the leading roles, he had harsh words for the role Maksakova played:

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<sup>124</sup> “Обитатели Букингемского дворца обрисованы с явной иронией: это и нарочитая оркестровая стилизация с включением клавирина, и жеманные вокальные фразы английской принцессы Шарлотты - Марии Максаковой, напоминающей о «трубадурочке» из «Бременских музыкантов».” Евгения Кривицкая, “Как Родион Щедрин ‘подковал’ Мариинский Театр,” *Музыкальная жизнь*, nos. 7-8, 2013, 3.

<sup>125</sup> Фирма Мелодия, “Бременские музыканты,” YouTube video, “The Bremen Town Musicians’ [Бременские Музыканты] - USSR, 1969,” posted by Rudesysop, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://youtu.be/UkhuydbgeHI?t=808>.

The performance, and this is precisely to be expected, came out willy-nilly though tolerable. It was possible to catch something in the orchestra and the choir; several of the soloists worked fairly well. . . but all the impressions combined are nothing in comparison with the emotions that Masha Maksakova provokes. . . its ugliness [referring to the role and its delivery] is simply too obscene to bear, and even more so in such proportions, carrying it with such aplomb. . . but to speak about the taste and meaningfulness of her singing is impossible because in order to listen to her, you have to close your eyes or turn away, because looking at Maksakova, nothing of Shchedrin will come to mind: a red dress, bare back,<sup>126</sup> necklaces that look like they were rented from an Arab concubine for belly dancing, a working mouth like a silicone doll (. . .); and grimaces, gestures; and moreover, looking like the peroxide loser from a rural consumer co-op, the dark roots of her lighter hairs having grown out long ago – and lo, in the first act when she begins in such a way to chant loudly on behalf of the English princess (!! ) presenting the flea at the royal court, “with the key in the hole, with the key in the hole” – it’s just porn.<sup>127</sup>

The moment he refers to at the very end of this screed is indeed full of sexual innuendo.

Popular music fans of a certain age might even be reminded of the pop singer Melanie’s *Billboard* topping song about her roller-skates, “Brand New Key” (1971). The allusion to sexual intercourse is hard to miss in both cases. And in the case of the opera, Shchedrin is as much responsible for this as anyone on the production team.

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<sup>126</sup> This description of Princess Charlotte’s attire (and later, her peroxide blond hair) matches the appearance she presented for the concert premiere that occurred on June 26, 2013. One can only imagine what his reaction would have been to the stage premiere.

<sup>127</sup> “Исполнение, но это как раз ожидаемо, вышло тяп-ляп, хотя терпимо, что-то расслышать в оркестре и хоре можно было, некоторые солисты работали неплохо. . . . но все впечатления вкупе - ничто в сравнении с теми эмоциями, которые вызывает Маша Максакова. . . . но просто неприлично свое уродство, да еще в таких масштабах, нести с подобным апломбом. . . . а про вкус и осмысленность пения говорить невозможно, но чтобы ее слушать, надо закрыть глаза или отвернуться, потому что глядя на Максакову, уже никакой Щедрин в голову не пойдет: красное платье, голая спина, ожерелья словно взятые напрокат у арабской наложницы для танца живота, рабочий рот как у силиконовой куклы (. . .); а ужимки, жесты; да еще, как у пергидрольной лохушки из сельпо, темные корни давно отросших осветленных волос - и вот когда она в первом акте начинает, от лица английской принцессы (!! ) в таком виде представляя при царском дворе Блоху, распевать ‘ключиком в дырочку, ключиком в дырочку’ - это просто порно.” Шадронов ( \_arlekin\_ ), “‘Левша’ Р. Щедрина, Мариинский Театр в КЗЧ, Дир. Валерий Гергиев.”



The scene described above, “The Royal Procession” (Act 1, Scene 6), shown in Example 2.5, is dedicated to introducing the most marvelous of all wonders, the steel mechanical flea. Once again, in *tempo di menuetto*, Princess Charlotte continues singing in the manner discussed above—only now she has company in the form of the Three Lords of the Treasury. The three tenors sound more like emasculated castratti as they frequently pop into the highest falsetto reaches of their range, titillating themselves with the naughty imagery they and the princess convey.

Over seven bars, the tenors sing a pulsating (or “undulating,” recalling Taruskin’s description of orientalist features) sixteenth-note rhythm full of chromatic neighbor embellishments. Their gradual crescendo and rising pitch from low to falsetto begins *piano*, repeating the words, “there is a tiny winding hole” (in the flea’s belly) three times. One syllable of an abbreviated fourth repetition over the words “a tiny hole there is” is stretched across a twelve-note melisma in all three voices just before the *fortissimo* climax.

During the entirety of this sixteenth-note passage, they advance slowly forward with the predatory stabbing and twisting motions of their black umbrellas violently mimicking what is to be done with the key. As they reach this climax, Princess Charlotte pulls out the key on a long chain from the depths of her bosom and begins twirling it around in the air to the sounds of soft chromatic sixteenth-note undulations emanating from the dark *chalumeau* register of four clarinets. Her subsequent solo passage involves another crescendo repetition (times 3) over the italicized words in the following phrase: “It is necessary *to put the tiny key in the tiny hole* to make the flea dance.” After she has worked herself up to her own climax, she concludes languidly, handing the key off to the

tsar as she sings a light and soft sixteenth-note melisma stretching across three bars. At the beginning of this phrase Shchedrin even indicates for her to sing “playful, a little sexy” (m. 491), presumably in case there is a soprano out there naïve enough to miss the overt innuendo of the musical setting.

Example 2.5. Shchedrin, *Levsha*, Act 1, Scene 6, mm. 475-482.<sup>128</sup>

53

54

475

*p delicato* *pp falsetto* (poch. allarg.)

Лор. каз. 1

У бло - хи \_\_\_\_\_ в пу-зич-ке \_\_\_\_\_  
 U blo - hi \_\_\_\_\_ v ru-zič -ke \_\_\_\_\_

Лор. каз. 2

У бло - хи \_\_\_\_\_ в пу-зич-ке \_\_\_\_\_  
 U blo - hi \_\_\_\_\_ v ru-zič -ke \_\_\_\_\_

Лор. каз. 3

У бло - хи \_\_\_\_\_ в пу-зич-ке \_\_\_\_\_  
 U blo - hi \_\_\_\_\_ v ru-zič -ke \_\_\_\_\_

480 (a tempo) 55

Лор. каз. 1

Лор. каз. 2

за - вод - на - я \_\_\_\_\_ ды - роч - \_\_\_\_\_  
 za - vod - na - ja \_\_\_\_\_ dy - roč - \_\_\_\_\_

Лор. каз. 3

за - вод - на - я \_\_\_\_\_ ды - роч - ка \_\_\_\_\_ есть, за - вод - на - я \_\_\_\_\_ ды - роч - \_\_\_\_\_  
 za - vod - na - ja \_\_\_\_\_ dy - roč - ka \_\_\_\_\_ est', za - vod - na - ja \_\_\_\_\_ dy - roč - \_\_\_\_\_

Cor. VI. 6

senza tr. *pp* *f*

<sup>128</sup> Shchedrin, *The Left-hander: The Tale of the Cross-Eyed Left-hander from Tula - Opera in Two Acts - Libretto by the Composer after the Story by Nikolai Leskov*, 2014.

Example 2.5 (cont.). Shchedrin, *Levsha*, Act 1, Scene 6, mm. 483-486

54

483 *ord. mf cresc.*

Лор. каз. 1  
 за - вод - на - я — ды - роч - ка — есть, ды - роч -  
 za - vod - na - ja — dy - roč - ka est', dy - roč -

Лор. каз. 2  
 - ка — есть, — за - вод - на - я — ды - роч - ка — есть, ды - роч -  
 ka est', — za - vod - na - ja — dy - roč - ka est', dy - roč -

Лор. каз. 3  
 - ка — есть, — за - вод - на - я — ды - роч - ка — есть, ды - роч -  
 ka est', — za - vod - na - ja — dy - roč - ka est', dy - roč -

6 6 6 Cor.  
*p f*

56

485 *sf sf*

Лор. каз. 1  
 - ка (а) — там есть!..  
 - ка (а) — tam est'!..

Лор. каз. 2  
 - ка (а) — там есть!..  
 - ка (а) — tam est'!..

Лор. каз. 3  
 - ка (а) — там есть!..  
 - ка (а) — tam est'!..

Trbe. Clar. Fg.  
*sf sf p*

Example 2.5 (cont.). Shchedrin, *Levsha*, Act 1, Scene 6, mm. 487-494.

55

487

Лор. каз. 1 *f p f p f p*  
 Вот\_ тут клю - чик...  
 Vot\_ tut klju - ěik...

Лор. каз. 2 *f p f p f p*  
 Вот\_ тут клю - чик...  
 Vot\_ tut klju - ěik...

Лор. каз. 3 *f p f p f p*  
 Вот\_ тут клю - чик...  
 Vot\_ tut klju - ěik...

3 Cor.  
*p*

(изриво, чуть эротично /  
 playful, a little sexy) 57 *росо*

491 *p*

Пр. Ш.  
 На - - до: клю - чи - ком\_ в ды - роч - ку,\_  
 Na - - do: klju - ěi - kom\_ v dy - roč - ku,\_

*VI.*  
*p. cant.*  
*VI., Vle. Vc. VI., Vle.*

Example 2.5 (cont.). Shchedrin, *Levsha*, mm. 495-506

56

495 *cresc.*

Пр. Ш.

к ло - чи - ком\_ в ды - роч - ку, к ло - чи - ком\_ в ды - роч - ку\_  
 klju - či - kom\_ v dy - roč - ku, klju - či - kom\_ v dy - roč - ku\_

58

499 *f*

Пр. Ш.

и бло - ха пой - лет дан - се  
 i blo - ha roy - djot dan - se

*p*

502 *p leggiero* (poco rit.) **Meno mosso (recitativo)**

Пр. Ш.

— та (а)н — — — — — це - вать...  
 — та (а)n — — — — — tse - vat'...

*p* *mf, sonoro*

attacca

My interlocutor from the Mariinsky opera chorus, Eduard, was very much offended by the comments made by the blogger about Maksakova and her performance—so much so that he questioned my motives for sharing them, wondering whether I was really a journalist instead of a musicologist. Before I could apologize for the offense and explain the necessity of dealing with the entire reception history available to me, he made a very telling admission: “In Russia we could care least of all about the precious honor of some imaginary English princess invented by Leskov.”<sup>129</sup> There are many issues to grapple with here. First of all, his statement betrays an imperfect memory of the original tale, because Princess Charlotte is nowhere to be found in Leskov.

As stated above, Shchedrin is entirely responsible for plucking her out of the pages of history, dropping her into his opera scenario, and inventing the unsavory picture the opera presents. (Knowing the tragic fate of this very real English princess makes his choice all the more peculiar.)<sup>130</sup> Secondly, how many others coming into contact with this opera have also forgotten (or never knew to begin with) that the princess figures nowhere in Leskov’s tale? It seems reasonable to ask whether the composer and production team are counting on the average audience member to conflate these “minor” details of the *skaz* and the opera. Where my interlocutor sees merely a random English princess, others

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<sup>129</sup> “Нам в России меньше всего дорога честь какой-то выдуманной Лесковым условной английской принцессы.” VKontakte dialogue with Eduard Matveev, April 8, 2019.

<sup>130</sup> Charlotte Augusta of Wales was the beloved grand-daughter of King George III. Her tragic death in 1817 at the age of twenty-one, following the stillborn delivery of her son, the heir to the throne, shocked and deeply saddened the entire nation. See Judith Schneid Lewis, “Charlotte Augusta, Princess [Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales] (1796–1817) - Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,” September 23, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/5160>.

might see her as a stand-in for Western values in general, a distinct possibility given Shchedrin's statements about the opera as a contrast between Eastern and Western values. The debauched image therefore carries powerful messages about current Russian attitudes toward the West.<sup>131</sup>

In the opera's second act (Scene 23, "The English Brides [Love Canzonets]") the English courtiers present Levsha with two potential brides as seductive enticements to stay in Britain. One critic observed: they are "wheeled out to lure Levsha to stay in London," and they "coax and ooze with sensual promise."<sup>132</sup> In the front of Shchedrin's score, they are simply labelled, "the blonde" and "a brunette."<sup>133</sup> Yet Shchedrin's musical setting of their texts fully justifies the erotic visual depictions I am about to discuss.

The brunette opens this scene and as she sings her soliloquy to Levsha, the yeomen of the guard (again, all female) come out onto the stage, this time dressed in lingerie, stockings, and garters to pose suggestively in the background. The strange addition of faux horse tails draws attention to their *derrières*. Although the English text the "brunette" sings evokes notions of a more chaste love, her movements are sexually suggestive. Outfitted in a deep burgundy, spaghetti-strap dress (in still another shade of red), her hands move over her body as she slinks nearly to the floor and back up again.

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<sup>131</sup> It is important to note that Eduard Matveev only reports experiencing the opera as a member of the chorus. At no point has he witnessed the scope and impact of the production from the audience's point of view. He is also careful to say that he speaks only for himself and not for Russian opera goers writ large.

<sup>132</sup> Coghlan, "Levsha, Mariinsky Opera, Barbican Hall: An Operatic Conceit of Enormous Wit and Charm."

<sup>133</sup> Shchedrin, *The Left-hander: The Tale of the Cross-Eyed Left-hander from Tula - Opera in Two Acts - Libretto by the Composer after the Story by Nikolai Leskov*.



Her gestures beckon toward Levsha, who sits stupefied on the floor. At one point she even teases him by opening the full-length slit of her dress nearly to the top.

Meanwhile, we see the only other farcically depicted Russian character (the courier, presumably a dutiful member of the servant nobility and an unquestioning actor on behalf of the bureaucracy) begin to remove some of his outer wear. Soon he stands transfixed in intimate proximity to the “blonde,” reaching longingly toward her and gathering the scent from her wavy hair. By the end of the song of the “brunette,” he is laying on his back, minus his topcoat, hat, tie, and glasses. With his top shirt buttons undone, he strains to reach back over his head to touch the feet of the “blonde” in their high heels as she stands on her podium.

**Figure 2.5. The Courier, “the Blonde,” Palace Guards, and Levsha**<sup>134</sup>



The “blonde” is clearly a caricature of Marilyn Monroe, sporting a slinky gold dress bedazzled with shiny sequins. A fluffy pink boa is draped over her bare shoulders and in closeups in the video version we see that bright red fingernails and lipstick

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<sup>134</sup> Screenshot taken from the Mariinsky digital playbill for *Levsha* (see footnote 118 above).

complete the picture. As her song progresses, the British guards, Lords of the Treasury, and Princess Charlotte emerge from the darkness backstage, creeping slowly toward Levsha in predatory fashion. The lords daintily dangle their umbrellas from their fingertips, moving them from side-to-side as if trying to hypnotize the already bewildered Russian peasant. In the arms of Princess Charlotte rests a Yorkshire terrier, but the mechanical motions of its bobbling head are ambiguous: is it meant to represent a warm-blooded animal or merely the mechanical replication of one?<sup>135</sup> As if to bring the conclusion of the song of the “blonde” to the very peak of decadence, two of the female yeomen end up on the floor with the Russian courier, simulating the beginning of a *ménage à trois*: one has her legs tangled up with his, while the other’s hands begin to roam over his body.

Shchedrin reinforces this decadent scene by combining the musical traits of orientalism and bluesy jazz within a very old Italian form. The use of jazz (or related popular syncopated styles) to signal decadence is not new. In the incidental music written for the earliest transposition of Leskov’s tale to the stage by playwright Yevgeny Zamiatin, Shchedrin’s own composition teacher, Yuri Shaporin also used elements of jazz to musically distance Great Britain from Russia. Zamiatin’s epigraph for the third

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<sup>135</sup> After being overwhelmed by Levsha’s “amazing” and “surprising” achievement in the previous scene (22. “Delighted English Question the Left-hander (Sextet)”), the princess faints into the supporting arms of the Lords of the Treasury. In a comical gesture that suggests the dog is indeed “inorganic,” one of the lords takes the terrier from her arm by its front legs and begins fanning her with its stiff and lifeless form. The implication seems to be that the “rational” British prefer fake pets instead of living and breathing ones.

movement of Shaporin's orchestral suite (derived from the music composed for Zamiatin's play) shows this contrast in words:

An amazing thing  
England - full of miracles.  
Oh, separation, you separation  
Oh, the strange/foreign/alien side.<sup>136</sup>

Citing Soviet musicologist Ivan Martynov's discussion of the suite's third movement, Samoylova notes in her recent dissertation on Zamiatin's play that two melodies of a noticeably different character alternate.<sup>137</sup> Shaporin composed a frivolous syncopated tune for the British that frames a brooding, homesick melody that Martynov identified as the Russian song, "Oh Separation, You Separation."<sup>138</sup>

The movement begins with a menacingly dissonant piano introduction that leads into a syncopated melody that makes use of the kind of altered dominant chords one might typically find in the music of a Weimar period cabaret show.<sup>139</sup> This juxtaposition of the burlesque in the British theme with the melancholy of the Russian song is basically

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<sup>136</sup> "Удивительная штука. Англия-гудес полна. Эх, разлука ты разлука. Эх, чужая сторона." Шапорин, *Блоха - шутейная сюита для оркестра (по повести Н. С. Лескова "Левша") Эпиграфы Евг. Замятина*, Соч. 8, 44.

<sup>137</sup> Елена Павловна Самойлова, "Сказ Н. С. Лескова 'Левша' и тровческая история литературно-художественной игры 'Блоха'" (Санкт-Петербург, Российский государственный педагогический университет им. А. И. Герцена, 2016), 190–91; See also Иван Иванович Мартынов, *Юрий Шапорин* (Москва: Музыка, 1966), 130.

<sup>138</sup> A version of this tune, complete with barrel organ, can be found here: "Разлука, Ты, Разлука...", YouTube video clip posted by TheDavid63, accessed July 14, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjP9mxBB\\_-4&list=RDjjP9mxBB\\_-4&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjP9mxBB_-4&list=RDjjP9mxBB_-4&start_radio=1).

<sup>139</sup> To hear a recording of this movement, see The State Academic Symphony Orchestra of the USSR and Gennady Rozhdestvensky, "*The Flea - Suite, 'Andantino,'*" YouTube audio recording posted by the State Academic Symphony Orchestra of the Russian Federation, accessed October 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mz25ufDbN18>.

a microcosmic example of the strategy employed almost a century later in the opera by one of Shaporin's favorite students on the same subject. Thus, in both compositions British morality is associated with the libertine via a specifically foreign musical style, while loyalty and devotion to the native soil (associated through folk song) are the preserve of Russian national character.

In Shchedrin's opera we also find pronounced syncopation—though of a more languid variety—in both love canzonets of the English brides. The appearance of triplet eighth-notes and the combination of dotted-eighth and sixteenth-note rhythms throughout the “blonde's” canzonet, shown in Example 2.7, even signal a primitive imitation of the swung eighth notes of jazz, while the tension created by the appearance of both the raised and lowered version of the seventh scale degree (in G minor) lends the song a bluesy quality. The only features missing from Shaporin's musical rendering of the British that Shchedrin incorporates liberally are the pedal drum rhythms and sustained drones borrowed from nineteenth-century orientalism. These are especially evident in Example 2.6, shown immediately below. The designation “velvety Mezzo” at the beginning of the “brunette's” slower *canzonet* (quarter-note ca. 58-60 as opposed to the “blonde's” tempo at quarter-note ca. 84-88) further underscores the composer's intentions.

**Example 2.6. Shchedrin, “The English Brides (Love Canzonets),” from *The Left-hander*, Act 2, Scene 23, (“Brunette,” excerpt) mm. 249-256.<sup>140</sup>**

23. Англицкие Невесты (Любовные Канцоны)  
 23. The English Brides (Love Canzonets)  
*Andante assai, sempre sotto voce*  
 (♩ ca. 58 - 60)  
 (Смотрины для Левши / inspection of the Left-hander's brides)  
 (Бархатное Меццо / velvety Mezzo) *ppp* *dolciss. con amore*

Брюнетка

My dream is love, my

Archi con sord. (tr)

*ppp*

Vle. (*mp*) (*ppp*)

253

Брюн.

soul is love, my arms is love, o, love, my

4 Clar. (tr)

4 Fl. (tr)

*ppp*

(*ppp*)

(*ppp*)

(*ppp*)

(*ppp*)

55 908

<sup>140</sup> Shchedrin, *The Left-hander: The Tale of the Cross-Eyed Left-hander from Tula - Opera in Two Acts - Libretto by the Composer after the Story by Nikolai Leskov*, 2014.

**Example 2.7. Shchedrin “The English Brides (Love Canzonets),” from *The Left-  
hander*, Act 2, Scene 23, (“Blonde,” excerpt) mm. 280-291.<sup>141</sup>**

231

190

Блондинка  
280 *p dolce*

Блонд.

A

Cemb. Fl.

Cemb. Fl.

Fl. alto,  
Cb. flag.

284

Блонд.

A

A

Fl.

Cemb.

Fl.

Vc. solo

*pp*

191

288 *p*

Блонд.

Here I am,

Cemb. Fl.

Cemb. Fl.

Cb. flag.

55 908

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

Additionally, Shchedrin's choice of and adherence to the strophic structure of the *canzonetta*—a light vocal genre originating in Italy and eventually making its way to England in the form of the *canzonet*—in these burlesque musical depictions of the British brides, solidifies the connections between his intentions and the anti-Italian *ressentiment* of the nineteenth-century *kuchka*. And these two little Italian 'love songs' provide the most pronounced examples of Shchedrin's marriage of the musical characteristics of Russian orientalism with the Italian style so maligned by the *kuchka* and their propagandists in the nineteenth-century musical press.

Shchedrin implies some sort of justification for these characterizations and thereby the extreme differences between them by asserting that they are present in Leskov:

Firstly, I think the plot of an opera should always be a bit "strange." The temperature for an opera plot should not be 36.6 (97.88 F), it should be 38.5 (101.3 F). Leskov is even higher because on the one hand, it is grotesque, on the other it is a parable about the righteous, a very religious teaching, as everything is throughout Leskov. He repeatedly relies on the Ten Commandments in his texts. On the other hand, to some extent it is a buffoonery, even a travel novel. In *Levsha* the characters are extremely juicy, very convex, hypertrophied.<sup>142</sup>

From the opera it is evident which characters Shchedrin uses to represent the grotesque (the British), the buffoons (Alexander I and all imperial courtiers), and conversely, the righteous (Levsha and the Russian *narod*). The question is whether these

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<sup>142</sup> "Во-первых, сюжет оперы всегда должен быть, как мне кажется, немножко «странноватым». Температура для сюжета оперы не должна быть 36,6, она должна быть 38,5. У Лескова еще выше, потому что, с одной стороны, это гротеск, с другой — притча о праведнике, поучение, очень религиозное, как все у Лескова насквозь. Он не раз в своих текстах опирается на десять заповедей. С другой стороны, в какой-то степени это буффонада, даже роман-путешествие. В «Левше» исключительно сочные характеры, очень выпуклые, гипертрофированные." Rodion Shchedrin in Щедрин and Ершова, "Музыка всегда ждет нового гения."

characterizations agree with Leskov's. Perhaps following the notion that "sex sells," Shchedrin had to make someone naughty, but that does not exclude this work from the inherent nationalistic associations that come with that choice. Moreover, that these traits are associated with all but one British character (the Under-skipper) points to obvious generalization.

There is one more pair of characters in the British scenes, who, however minor their role (they never sing), stand out and therefore deserve special attention. In an effort to impress Alexander I and Platov, two servants with slightly darker complexions<sup>143</sup> and wearing oriental garb of white turbans and reddish-orange kaftans are trotted out onstage to present one of the treasures of the armory during the same triple-meter *terzetto* described above (Act 1, Scene 3). Once they have fulfilled this duty, they sit in a subservient pose on the floor. Leskov's narrator uses one of his fancy invented words (*tuzhurnyi*) to describe the appearance of their clothing quite differently at a later point in his tale.<sup>144</sup> Edgerton translates his simple description as "workmen...in everyday jackets and aprons,"<sup>145</sup> most likely recognizing that the invented adjective was constructed from the Russian noun, *tuzhurka* (a men's double-breasted jacket or pea coat) and the French

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<sup>143</sup> It is unclear from the video production whether their skin tone is natural or altered with makeup. It is possible that the English characters were made to look even paler than normal, effecting this subtle contrast.

<sup>144</sup> "...а тут стоят их рабочие в тужурных жилетках и в фартуках..." Н. С. Лесков, "Левша (Сказ о тульском косом Левше и о стальной блохе)," in *Собрание сочинений в 11 томах. Том 7.*, ed. Б. Я. Бухштаб (Москва: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1958), 30, accessed July 12, 2020, [https://rvb.ru/leskov/01text/vol\\_07/039.htm](https://rvb.ru/leskov/01text/vol_07/039.htm).

<sup>145</sup> Leskov, *Satirical Stories.*, 28.



adverb *toujours* (always or forever).<sup>146</sup> If we look at the same scene from Soviet film director Sergey Ovcharov's *Levsha*, we see something very close to the description in Leskov's original (see Figure 2.6).

**Figure 2.6. The British Workmen from Sergey Ovcharov's 1986 film, *Levsha*.**<sup>147</sup>



This small scene in the opera betrays a connection to the very nineteenth-century trend of orientalism so prevalent in Russian opera of the period. It is also reminiscent of the *Ballets Russes* repertoire from the beginning of the twentieth century that the Russian impresario Sergey Diaghilev presented in Paris to appeal to the fetishization of the East that audiences there craved at the time. In the case of *The Left-hander*, it is imagined seemingly from thin air by the opera's costume and stage designers and must be intended

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<sup>146</sup> A softening of the initial “t” consonant to “d” produces a similar neologism, *duzhurnyi*, which calls to mind another related French construction, *du jour*, as in “soup *du jour*,” or “soup of the day.”

<sup>147</sup> This image is a screenshot from the film taken at 13:43. See Сергей Овчаров, *Левша*, (Ленинград: Ленфильм, 1986), YouTube video “ЛЕВША (Советский Фильм Сказка),” posted by LFV, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ygjn7nPvbg&t=3256s>.

to remind viewers of Great Britain’s colonialist past. Conveniently, the audience is never forced to reckon with Russia’s own not insignificant colonial exploits.

We have to go back to one of the first (if not the very first) adaptations of the tale to the stage to find what might have been the Mariinsky production staff’s inspiration for this orientalist characterization of the workmen. In Figure 2.8 we see costume sketches by the famous artist Boris Kustodiev for the Moscow Art Theater-2’s 1924 production of Yevgeny Zamiatin’s play entitled, *Blokha* (The Flea). Shchedrin himself may have pointed the Mariinsky staff toward Kustodiev’s sketches since his composition teacher, Yuri Shaporin wrote incidental music for the 1926 production of the very same play at the Bolshoi Dramatic Theater in Leningrad. Though the exotic other in this case is clearly of African descent, the message of subjugation is the same.

**Figure 2.7. Kustodiev’s Sketches for the English “Under-skipper” and “Servant.”**<sup>148</sup>



<sup>148</sup> This photocopy was taken from Самойлова, “Сказ Н. С. Лескова ‘Левша’ и Трговческая История Литературно-Художественной Игры ‘Блоха,’” 131; See also Борис Кустодиев, *Борис Михайлович Кустодиев: живопись, графика, скульптура из музеев, библиотек и частных собраний Российской Федерации: [каталог выставки]: к 125-летию со дня рождения.* (Санкт-Петербург: Palace Editions, 2003), 176; В. Ф. Круглов, *Борис Кустодиев: Альбом* (Санкт-Петербург: Золотой век, 2007), 147.

To be fair to the composer, it is not entirely clear how Shchedrin envisioned the servants. Though there is no indication in the orchestral score or libretto for them at this moment (and the front of the score merely refers generically to various supernumeraries for the British scenes), a description of their intended function appears during another *tempo di minuetto* in Act 1, Scene 5, “The Royal Processional.” At the moment they deliver another prized part of the collection (the flea), the score indicates that they are not the respected craftsmen that Leskov imagined, but “Court attendants,” who “solemnly bring a silver tray with a small casket.”<sup>149</sup> The credit (or blame) for these South Asian supernumeraries might very well rest entirely with someone in the Mariinsky production staff, but Shchedrin’s alteration of the original (however slight) gave the Mariinsky crew the license to interpret their appearance and manner of dress in this way. At any rate, orientalized servants rather suit the sensual aesthetic that inhabits both Shchedrin’s libretto and the music in the British scenes.

In a comically out-of-place allusion to a well-known piece of Soviet ingenuity, the very same South Asian servants bring out a golden AK-47 (see figure 2.4 above for a picture of the weapon) to represent what in Leskov’s original tale was merely a pistol. As a symbol easily recognizable to any member of the audience, Russians and non-Russians

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<sup>149</sup> “Придворные торжественно вносят серебряный поднос с ларцом.” Though the score translates the adverb to “festively,” they do indeed deliver all objects with solemnity. The festive aspects reside strictly in their manner of dress. Shchedrin, *The Left-hander: The Tale of the Cross-Eyed Left-hander from Tula - Opera in Two Acts - Libretto by the Composer after the Story by Nikolai Leskov*, 2014, 42.

alike, it was possibly intended to elicit feelings of pride for Russia's more recent technological brilliance.<sup>150</sup>

This moment also makes a subtle stab at Princess Charlotte, manufactured to make her appear clueless about the basic differences between handguns and rifles. Adding to this sport at the expense of her intelligence is the fact that Shchedrin has her sing a word that suggests a level of unsophistication in matters geographical. As the automatic rifle is being rolled out on its golden rack, she sings, "Here is a *pistol* [my italics] of exquisite workmanship: one of our admirals snatched it from the belt of a robber chieftain in *Candelabria*," employing another of Leskov's neologisms (Calabria + candelabra) originally spoken by his narrator.<sup>151</sup> By inventing the role of Princess Charlotte and placing the narrator's contrived word in her mouth, Shchedrin has solved the problem of transposing one of the narrator's more absurd utterances to operatic

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<sup>150</sup> A musical number entitled, "Levsha - Avtomat" in Boris Alexandrov's 1981 adaptation to the stage suggests that though this idea might have come to the Mariinsky team independently, it is certainly not original. Following on the heels of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the publication and subsequent production of this "Choreographed Presentation in Two Acts" might be read as propaganda since the titles of the musical numbers indicate a plot structure and interpretation that is similar to all of the other patriotic versions of the Soviet period. See "Левша - Автомат" in Борис Александрович Александров, *Левша - Хореографическое представление в двух частях - клави́р - либретто* (Москва: Советский композитор, 1981), 85.

<sup>151</sup> "Вот пистоля великого мастерства: ее наш адмирал у разбойничьего атамана в Канделябрии из-за пояса выдернул!" Calabria is a region in the toe of the boot-shaped Italian peninsula. The published English translation of the libretto reads "Ataman brigand," instead of "robber chieftain," erroneously implying that some rogue high-ranking Cossack leader had been plundering in southern Italy. Shchedrin, *The Left-hander: The Tale of the Cross-Eyed Left-hander from Tula - Opera in Two Acts - Libretto by the Composer after the Story by Nikolai Leskov*, 25–26; See also in the libretto reproduced in the liner notes of the compact disc recording. Rodion Shchedrin, *The Left-hander, SACD MAR0554* (Mariinsky, 2013), 14.

dialogue, while simultaneously making a British princess look not only oversexed but equally absurd.<sup>152</sup>

The mezzo-soprano's strong projection and wide vibrato in both the compact disc and video recordings, coupled with the three large leaps in the first half of the musical setting of the princess's statement sound remarkably uncouth considering the dainty baroque minuet in B-flat major provided by the softer French horns (her only accompaniment), shown in Example 2.8. The vocal leaping leads her comically to a pitch that is over an octave higher than her starting point.

From here, she sings in counterpoint with a high soft passage in the first violins which functions like a mysterious descant. The B-flat major tonality previously established by the horns is left for more chromatic territory with an augmented sixth triad as the passage's ultimate goal. The change to chromaticism parallels the Princess's deliciously dangerous origin story of the weapon. Across the last six bars of this passage, she gradually descends to the husky depths of her range with a crescendo that concludes with a sudden leap upward (the largest yet) of a diminished eleventh on the last word of the phrase, *vydernul* (snatched). Meanwhile the violin traverses over two octaves to get to the same low point. As Princess Charlotte descends through this chromatically tinged second half of her passage, her vocal line also features an undulating four-note sequence

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<sup>152</sup> This scene, which precedes the two second-act appearances of the Yorkshire terrier mentioned above also involves the dog (or automaton?). As she spits out the word "Candelabria," she viciously sends the dog flying behind her across the stage (house left). Because the previous two Yorkie scenes have not yet occurred, this act is quite startling from the audience's perspective and paints an ugly picture of the princess.

that calls to mind the *nega* of Russian orientalism discussed in the previous section. This six-note melisma on the final syllable further strengthens this association.

**Example 2.8. Shchedrin, *The Left-hander*, Act 1, Scene 3, “Inspection of the Armory (Terzetto)” - Reh. 30.**<sup>153</sup>

30

Fl. I

Fl. II

Cr. 1 (Fa)

Cr. 3 (Fa)

Пр. III

Ат. III

VI. I

VI. II

Vc.

Cb.

Вот пис - то - ля ве - ли - - - ко - го мас - тер-ства: е - ё наш ад - ми -  
 Вот pis - to - lja ve - li - - - ko - go mas - ter-stva: e - yo naš ad - mi -

- - ю...  
 - - ju...

uniti

uniti

55 907

<sup>153</sup> Shchedrin, *The Left-hander: The Tale of the Cross-Eyed Left-hander from Tula - Opera in Two Acts - Libretto by the Composer after the Story by Nikolai Leskov*, 2014.

## Example 2.8 (cont.).

26

Trb. 3, 4

Tb. I

Perc. I  
Tamburo

Пп. III.  
рал у раз - бой - ни - чье - го а - та - ма - на в Кан - де - лья - рии из - за по - я - са вы - дер - нул!...  
ral u raz - boj - ni - čje - go a - ta - ma - na v Kan - dc - ljab - rii iz - za po - ja - sa vy - der - null!...

VI. I

VI. II

Va.

Vc.

Cb.

Though a chromatic descent is not a convention that Taruskin considers “iconically exotic” in Russian orientalist music, he noted that its presence in Rachmaninov’s “*Ne poi, krasavitsa*,” a famous setting of an untitled Pushkin lyric, was quite similar to the *habanera* sung by the seductive gypsy woman, Carmen, in Georges Bizet’s eponymous 1875 opera. As Taruskin quips, this descending chromatic gesture was “a badge worn by exotic sexpots all over Europe.”<sup>154</sup> While Shchedrin may or may not be familiar with Rachmaninov’s song, he is intimately familiar with Bizet’s Carmen, having arranged music from the opera in a suite for strings and percussion for a ballet that would feature his wife, Maya Plisetskaya, the prima ballerina of the Bolshoi Ballet. His Carmen Suite (1967) is widely acknowledged as his best known and most popular work.

<sup>154</sup> Richard Taruskin, “Entoiling the Falconet,” in *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 165.

Returning to the scene at hand, Platov, military man that he is, immediately recognizes the origin of the rifle and begins to pry it apart to find the proof he needs. The tension of this scene builds in parallel to a sexual tension acted out between Princess Charlotte and Alexander I, exhibited as she wraps her calf around the gun rack and initiates a sort of small but earnest tug-of-war with the tsar. As she and Alexander implore Platov to stop disassembling the weapon, a longing look is shared between the two and the frustration of unfulfilled desire becomes evident in her facial expressions and her squirming body. As the tension reaches a fever pitch, Platov's efforts are rewarded: An engraving indicating that a certain squint-eyed left-hander from Tula was the maker of the gun is revealed.

The tsar reacts to this in disbelief: how could something of such exquisite workmanship be produced in Russia? This revelation triggers a scenic interruption and we are transported to Tula. All eyes turn to a scene hovering directly above Buckingham Palace in the cold celestial darkness. The clouds become snowy hills as the red Tower of London and everything below fades to darkness—all except that strange green light glowing faintly in the underworld left behind.

### ***The Left-hander: Contrasting the Russian Narod with the Other***

Having considered the decadent costuming, staging, and acting of the British characters, we may turn to the portrayal of the *Russkii narod* (the Russian people) in Shchedrin's opera: Levsha, his gunsmith colleagues, the peasants of Tula, and the denizens of St. Petersburg. As we do so, we may take full measure of how different the two national cultures appear. Based on his depiction in the opera, Platov could be added to this list too if not for his high military rank and the distance this places between him



and the common folk. Despite this distance, Platov is presented as the very picture of Russian masculinity and bravery, the epitome of a true and loyal patriot. And as I will show further below, Platov's signature arioso also became a vehicle by which Shchedrin would demonstrate his prowess in crafting a remarkably tuneful melody under a peculiarly Russian operatic convention that infamously produced impoverished melodies.

The contrasts between the British and Russians are made especially apparent following the scenic interruption described above. In the brief scene-within-a-scene that follows, entitled "The River Tulitsa," we get our first glimpse of the *real* Russian *narod* (in the form of two village women and our hero, Levsha) amid the night sky and beneath an abundance of stars accompanied by a moon that slowly waxes from crescent to gibbous. A British critic understood these women (simply designated in the score as "two speaking women") to represent "The Voice of Russia," adding that they offered "a recurring point of stillness and nostalgia—a warmly human reminder of a folk-simplicity."<sup>155</sup>

Covered head-to-toe in dark blue and white, the two women (house left) sing a lament for the cold and dark banks of the river and surrounding forests of the Tula region in which a treasure, presumably Levsha, lies buried. The role they play bears a resemblance to keening or lamenting women, village specialists who were often called upon in Russian peasant tradition (as well as in many other global cultures) to improvise

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<sup>155</sup> Coghlan, "Levsha, Mariinsky Opera, Barbican Hall: An Operatic Conceit of Enormous Wit and Charm."

mournful songs for the newly deceased.<sup>156</sup> Because they appear here as a preface to Levsha's initial entry and reappear throughout the opera singing truncated versions of this mournful material, their presence serves as an early foreshadowing of the hero's fate.

The fermatas and mixed meter that Shchedrin employs here, shown in Example 2.9a, lend to the improvisatory folk quality of the duet as the rapid, gentle plucking of the *domra*, a long-necked Russian string instrument of the lute family, provides additional folk color. Unmeasured tremolo bowed behind the bridge in the upper strings provides an aural analogy to the crystalline cold atmosphere above the stage and evokes a feeling of timelessness, while sustained dissonances in the basses elicit the sense of foreboding mentioned above. These die away before the last few bars of the women's duet. The minor third (D-sharp/F-sharp) that the women end on is sustained through the first six

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<sup>156</sup> It is clear from the following statement in Shchedrin's autobiography that he wants to be seen as deeply connected to folk music traditions. But autobiographies offer more often than not a view through rose-colored glasses; much of Shchedrin's reads that way. Describing his idyllic summers spent in the countryside, he states, "I retain some musical memories: shepherds calling to one another across the mist-shrouded river, the keening of mourners over the body of a departed relative, the echo of long-drawn-out songs [protyazhnaya] heard from two fields away, a single voice singing a lullaby. These sounds meant more to me than any classical music. For as long as they lasted I would be rooted motionless to the spot. It seemed as though all nature had held its breath, bewitched by their beauty." See in Rodion Shchedrin, *Rodion Shchedrin: Autobiographical Memories*, trans. Anthony Phillips (Mainz, Ger.: Schott Music GmbH & Co., KG, 2012), 19. Throughout his autobiography, Shchedrin seems to have a chip on his shoulder as well. He frequently finds some reason to either drop famous names, justify past actions, or defend himself against criticism. He is also not very bashful in interviews about providing unsolicited self-promotion in the form of quotes of praise from the mouths of other artists. In one interview, he turns his praise of the violinist Maxim Vengerov's performance of the violin concerto he wrote for him into an opportunity to highlight his own genius as a composer: "I asked Maxim a few times, 'How do you keep all these paths (he never made one mistake, it's unbelievable!) in your mind, in your memory, in your head?' And he says, 'because it's logical. It's not difficult for me because it's logical.'" See in the following video (11:03-11:22) Georges Gachot, *Rodion Shchedrin – Concerto Cantabile (Portrait of the Russian Composer, 1999)*, accessed September 25, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrDwXoWMwJ0>.

bars of Levsha's subsequent solo. Its relationship to his initial B-major tonality provides continuity between the two folk-like songs.

A mixture of ambiguous minor and major tonalities (C-sharp minor—both natural and melodic; B minor; and B major are hinted at) results from variously altered neighbor tones between whole and half-step intervals.<sup>157</sup> While modal mixture generally calls to mind folk song, in this context it more specifically hints at the *peremennost'* (“modal mutability”) of the Russian folk song type known as the *protiazhnaia pesnia* (“drawn out song”). This “mutability” occurs when the lower neighbor to the tonic in natural minor is approached cadentially on one or more occasions, resulting in a kind of shared tonality. Because the vocal lines variously hint at C-sharp minor and B major, they suggest the same “mutable” modality of the *protiazhnaia*.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> There is a discrepancy in the first measure of this duet between the full orchestral score and the piano reduction. In the full score, the second note of the lower voice in this duet shows D-sharp, resulting in half steps between the two E pitches that frame it, while in the piano/vocal score this note is a D-natural, resulting in a whole step relationship to the neighboring E. In both the compact disc recording and DVD/Blu-ray audio tracks, this note is sung as a D-natural, following the vocal and piano score. Meanwhile, the lower of the two *domra* parts has a seven-note chromatic descent in both scores which results in pungent dissonances that make naming a specific tonality even more difficult. This indicates a carefree harmonic relationship between voices and accompaniment that we might imagine encountering in a rustic village context where each musician embellishes to their own spontaneously inspired taste.

<sup>158</sup> Maria Frolova-Walker provides a thorough debunking of the dubious connections made between the *protiazhnaia* and Russian national identity. She shows how this one type of song was over-selected by urban dilettante musicians inspired by the German Romantic philosophies of Herder. Despite the abundance of other song types, the *protiazhnaia* became representative of Russian folk song itself. Musicians, literary figures, and intellectuals alike seized upon this notion with fervor and helped to cement the relationship between its sorrowful minor mode and the “tragic soul of the Russian people.” Her discussion shows how this relationship was largely invented and grossly inflated. Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 29–42; and Richard Taruskin, “‘Little Star’ - An Etude in the Folk Style,” in *Musorgsky - Eight Essays and an Epilogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 38–70.

On the heels of their duet, Levsha sings his own mournful folk song about Tula, “Little Scarlet Flower” (house right), wearing a black, fur-lined cap with ear flaps (an *ushanka*), a dark blue smock, and a rustic beige woolen overcoat. Though the song’s text conjures images of a barely inhabitable corner of the earth, Levsha poignantly expresses the heartache he feels when away from home in the outer sections of the aria. In a noticeably different middle section, his voice turns to an almost sarcastic high falsetto reminiscent of Shostakovich’s *The Nose*, as he sings about “flowers that do not bloom” and a “dawn that does not come.” The most noticeable additions to the complement of folk timbres are the hackbrett (or small cimbalom), *duduk* (a woodwind folk instrument) and pizzicato cellos, which are directed to imitate the sounds of a guitar, the accompaniment instrument most readily associated with Russia’s lonely musical bards.

Levsha’s melody, shown in Example 2.9b, begins with an embellished falling fifth motive<sup>159</sup> between F-sharp and B, also redolent of the *protiazhnaia* style hinted at in the previous duet. Sustained, near-constant pitches in the upper strings imbue both the duet and Levsha’s song with a deeply spiritual quality. As their pitches move progressively higher, we get the sense that they might buoy him up into heaven itself. By alluding to the *protiazhnaia* in so many ways in the two Tula songs, Shchedrin

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<sup>159</sup> Taruskin notes that in the *protiazhnaia* this “becomes a kind of model for further variation or development.” A case can be made that this is evident over the course of Levsha’s song as well. Though he does not provide a citation, Taruskin states that Glinka was fond of calling this melodic gesture “the soul of Russian music.” In the same parenthetical aside, he also states that the Soviet musicologist Izaliy Zemtsovksy referred to this “trademark” as the “intonational thesis.” See in Richard Taruskin, “‘Little Star’ - An Etude in the Folk Style,” in *Musorgsky - Eight Essays and an Epilogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 40. See also in Richard Taruskin, “M. I. Glinka and the State,” in *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 29.

perpetuates dubious nineteenth-century notions of this folk song style's authentic expression of the Russian peasantry. Shchedrin's allusion to nineteenth-century aesthetic conceits to signify "Russianness" seems to indicate that he is still significantly influenced by the dictates of Socialist Realism which very forcefully held up nineteenth-century composers, as the "correct" model.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> See the following sources for extensive discussions of the origins and manifestations of Socialist Realism in Soviet period music. Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism*; Marina Frolova-Walker, "The Glib, the Bland, and the Corny: An Aesthetic of Socialist Realism," in *Music and Dictatorship in Europe and Latin America*, vol. XIV, *Speculum Musicae* (Turnhout, BE: BREPOLs, 2009), 403–24; Frolova-Walker, *Stalin's Music Prize*; Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*.

Example 2.9a. Shchedrin, *The Left-hander*, Act I, Scene 4, beginning.<sup>161</sup>

34  
4. Речка Тулица (наплыв) / River Tulitsa (dissolve)

*Sostenuto assai*  
(ca. 42-44)

2 Fl. d. (c., t.)  
Cl. 1, 2 (Si<sup>b</sup>)  
Cl. 3, 4 (Si<sup>b</sup>)  
Perc. IV  
Domra 1 (s.)  
Domra 2 (c.)  
Cemb.

*ppp* *dolciss.*

Раз. жен.  
ДВЕ РАЗГОВОРНЫЕ ЖЕНЩИНЫ (soprano e mezzo)  
*ppp* *dolciss., senza vibrato*

Re - чень - ка      Ту - ли - ша,      ты за - чем      хму - рить - ся,      за ре - ко - ю  
Re - čen' - ka      Tu - li - tsa,      ty za - čem      hmu - riš - sja,      za re - ko - ju

*Sostenuto assai*  
(ca. 42-44)  
div. a 2 (sul E, sul A)

VI. I  
VI. II  
Va.  
Cb.

*ppp*

2 Fl. d. (c., t.)  
Domra 1 (s.)  
Domra 2 (c.)  
Раз. жен.  
VI. I  
VI. II  
Va.  
Cb.

*morendo*

оx, да,      клад за - рыт...  
oh, da,      klad za - ryt...

lec      шу - мит,      втом ле - су  
les      šu - mit,      vjom le - su

оx, да,      да,  
oh, da,      da,

*ppp*

*morendo*

\*) за подставкой / behind the bridge

55 907

<sup>161</sup> Shchedrin, *The Left-hander: The Tale of the Cross-Eyed Left-hander from Tula - Opera in Two Acts - Libretto by the Composer after the Story by Nikolai Leskov*, 2014.

Example 2.9b. Shchedrin, *The Left-hander*, Act 1, Scene 4, Levsha, Reh. 40-41.<sup>162</sup>

35

(a tempo, ma poch. più mosso)  
 (ca. 48-50)  
 (small stick)

40

Hackbr. *pp* *pp* *pp* *l. v.*

Diemra 1 (s.)

Diemra 2 (c.)

Arpa *pp* *pp* *pp* *l. v.*

Prn. xcu. *(pp) (h.ch.)*  
 Мм

Lea. *Mm*  
*(первое появление / his first appearance)*  
*(напеваем / sings) p dolce*  
 ЛЕВИША  
 А - - - лень-кий цве - то - чек, по-что ты в по - ле у - вья...  
 А - - - len'-kij tsve - to - ček, po-čto ty v po - le u - vjal...

(a tempo, ma poch. più mosso)  
 (ca. 48-50)  
 uniti ord.

41

VI I *pp* *pp* *pp*  
 ord. soli a 2 (1 Pult) (arco)

VI II *pp* *pp* *pp*

Va. *pp* *pp* *pp*  
 unite pizz., sul C *pp*

Vc. *pp* *pp* *pp*  
 1. solo pizz.  
 vibr. quasi Chitarra

Diemra 1 (s.)

Diemra 2 (c.)

Prn. xcu. *(falsetto)* *pp* *(poco rubato)* *ord.*

Lea. *pp* *(poco rubato)* *ord.*  
 Ах, ву-ла, ву-ла, ву - ла, Ту-ла мо-я, Ту-ла, Ту - ла, Ту - ла...  
 Ah, vu-la, vu-la, vu - la, Tu-la mo-ja, Tu - la, Tu - la, Tu - la...

VI I *pp* *pp* *pp*  
 tutti pizz., non div.  
*poco f*

VI II *pp* *pp* *pp*  
 tutti pizz., non div.  
*poco f*

Vc. 4 soli *pp* *pp* *pp*  
 pizz.  
 vibr. quasi Chitarra

Cb. 4 soli *pp* *pp* *pp*  
 (1. solo) arco pizz. *p* *pp* *pp*  
 arco pizz. *p* *pp* *pp*  
 pizz. *p* *pp* *pp*  
 vibr. quasi Chitarra  
 (gli altri soli) *p* *pp* *pp*  
*p* *pp* *pp*

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

Example 2.9b (cont.). Shchedrin, *The Left-hander*, Reh. 42-1 through Reh. 43.

36

42

**6/4 rit.** **4/4 *Meno mosso*** (ca. 50-52) **3/4** **4/4**

Duduk *solo* *pp dolciss. cant.*

Perc. II *Vibrafono (смычком от контрабаса / using a double-bass bow)* *p* *l. v.*

Лев. *pp dolciss.*  
 Ту-ла... то не цвет цве - тет, не за - ря, не за - ря, не за-ря за - рит, то раз-лу -  
 Tu-la... to ne tsvet tsve - tjet, ne za - rja, ne za - rja, ne za-rja za - rit, to raz-lu -

**6/4 rit.** **4/4 *Meno mosso*** (ca. 50-52) **3/4** **4/4**

VI. I *arco, con sord.* *ppp*

VI. II *arco* *ppp*

Va. *sola con sord.* *pp dolciss. quasi canto* *quasi gliss.* *ppp*

Cb.

43

**3/4** **rit.** (*Затемнение / lights fade*) **4/4**

Fl. I, 2 *pp* *ppp*

Fl. c. (3) *pp* *ppp*

Duduk *pp* *ppp* *(solo)* *pp cant.* *ppp* (*исчезает / morendo*)

Fig. 1 *pp* *ppp*

Fig. 2 *pp* *ppp*

Perc. II *p l. v.*

Лев. *ppp*  
 - ка то-мит со род-но-ю сто-ро - но-ю туль-ска - ю, туль-ска - ю, А...  
 - ka to-mit so rod-no-ju sto-ro - no-ju tul' ska - ju, tul' ska - ju, А...

VI. I *pppp* *morendo*

VI. II *pppp* *morendo*

Va. *poco gliss.* *pppp* *morendo*

*morendo* *attacca*

55 907



Aside from pointing to Levsha's fate, this short interlude depicts an obviously wide gulf separating the Russian people from the British. The debauched British, located as temporally "advanced" by electric green lighting, telephone booths, and the twentieth-century couture of Princess Charlotte (and later in Act 2, the costumes of the two brides) represent flighty impermanence and modern materialism. They are contrasted substantially with a spiritual people who are shown to originate from a vast, timeless space, connected to the land, and living in exalted simplicity.

A Russian critic speaking generally about the contrasts laid out in Orlov's set design and Cherednikova's costumes shows how they are equally obvious to Russian audiences. Rather than critiquing this egregious contrast, she seems to take it as gospel. A sense of the Russian people's superior morality, gravitas, unfettered simplicity, and timelessness is apparent in every word:

Two worlds - antagonists - Russia in the snow and London, studded with red telephone booths - exist simultaneously, in parallel. Russia extends in breadth and distance. London is cramped and bustling, it emerges in an instant on the platform, from somewhere below: it is pressed, crushed by the broad spaces of Russia. Backlit by the poisonous green light and the alarming red light of telephone booths, an alien world tempts Levsha with the charms of "English" brides who wear "clothes that he somehow cannot figure out."<sup>163</sup>

This last comment brings up another central issue about the potential brides proffered to Levsha—their clothing. Though Shchedrin gives a fairly faithful truncation of the

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<sup>163</sup> “Два мира-антагониста - Россия в снегах, и Лондон, утыканный красными телефонными будками - существуют симультанно, параллельно. Россия простирается вширь и вдаль. Лондон - тесный и суматошный, в один миг выныривает на платформе, откуда-то снизу: он прижат, придавлен долу российскими просторами. Подсвеченный ядовито-зеленым светом, и тревожным красным светом телефонных будок, чужой мир искушает Левшу прелестями ‘аглицких’ невест, на которых ‘одежда не так машется.’” Гюляра Садых-Заде, “Сквозь волнистые туманы,” *Музыкальная жизнь*, nos. 7-8, 2013, 6.

original text about Levsha's issues with how British women dress, the Mariinsky design team imagined costumes for the brides that run counter to the manner of dress implied by his words. Here is Edgerton's translation of Levsha's misgivings:

I don't mean to run them down; I just don't like the way their dresses sort of swish back and forth, so that you can't make out just what they've got on and what it's for. There'll be one thing here, and below something else will be pinned on, and on their arms they'll have some kind of socks. In them velveteen coats of theirs they look just like capuchin monkeys. . . . I'd be ashamed to look and wait until she got untangled from all that stuff.<sup>164</sup>

It seems rather obvious that for Levsha, the women's appearances suffered from an overabundance of complicated and confusing clothing instead of the skimpier, more revealing outfits created for the brides and all of the other British women, including the palace guards. Later Levsha praises the handmade lace worn by Tula women for its simplicity, the implication being that when they undress, there is less time for him to sit and feel embarrassed by his own desires. And where does this shame come from? All we learn about Levsha's upbringing is that he is very familiar with the *Psalter* and the *Book of Dreams*. When asked about this mysterious *Book of Dreams*, Levsha responds, "That book refers to if King David didn't reveal some fortune-telling clearly in the *Psalter*, then

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<sup>164</sup> Nikolay S. Leskov, *Satirical Stories*, trans. William B. Edgerton (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 46; For those interested in comparison, here is the original in Russian: "Я их не порочу, а только мне то не нравится, что одежда на них как-то машется, и не разобрать, что такое надето и для какой надобности; тут одно что-нибудь, а ниже еще другое пришпилено, а на руках какие-то ногавочки. Совсем точно обезьяна-сапажу — плисовая тальма. . . . только опасаюсь, что стыдно будет смотреть и дожидаться, как она изо всего из этого разбираться станет." See in Н. С. Лесков, "Левша (Сказ о тульском косом левше и о стальной блохе)," in *Собрание сочинений в 11 томах. Том 7*, ed. Б. Я. Бухштаб (Москва: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1958), 51–52, [https://rvb.ru/leskov/01text/vol\\_07/039.htm](https://rvb.ru/leskov/01text/vol_07/039.htm).

you can get some extra fortunes out of the *Dream-Book*.”<sup>165</sup> The implication seems to be that the peasants consult astrological sources whenever religious texts prove incomprehensible.

Later, at the end of Act 1 in a scene entitled, “A Village in Tula and the Left-Hander’s Naughty<sup>166</sup> Songs,” (Scene 11) we first encounter the Russian people *en masse*. This time, instead of a moon and a plethora of shining stars, we see flakes of snow floating through the air. The villagers wear a motley display of all the styles of winter clothing associated in popular culture with the idealized Russian peasantry (i.e., nothing in tatters and no dirt or soot stains). Each wears at least one garment in some shade of blue. This hue dominates the color palette otherwise accented by beige, gray, black, and a hint of cheery orange.

Some of the villagers effortlessly support above their heads or on their backs large stacks of trunks or implements associated with rural agrarian life such as wooden water buckets, a butter churn, and a big glass jug. A wide round shelf rests atop the head of one villager with what appears to be toys made of wicker (juggling balls and pinwheels) resting on it, the implication being that the *narod* is content with simple and wholesome amusements. Many have their faces decorated with rouge to emulate the ruddy complexions of people enjoying the bracing cold air.

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<sup>165</sup> See in Nikolay S. Leskov, *Satirical Stories*, trans. William B. Edgerton (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 45.

<sup>166</sup> The libretto, orchestral score, piano reduction, and compact disc recording for *The Left-hander* translate the colloquial adjective, *ozornoy* as “rude,” yet a more precise translation would be “mischievous” or “naughty.” Since one of Shchedrin’s most well-known compositions (his 1963 Concerto for Orchestra No. 1 entitled, *Ozornye chastuski*) translates the same adjective as “naughty” (as in *Naughty Limericks*), I have elected to do the same here.

Figure 2.8. Levsha and the Tula Villagers.<sup>167</sup>



Shchedrin also brings his favorite irreverent folk song style, the *chastushka*, into *Levsha* in this first Tula scene. First the chorus begins singing again about the harsh weather in a dizzying, antiphonal polyphonic a capella setting with a nod to Russia's most stereotypical folk instrument and the naughty rogue who plays it: "The wind blew hard on Granny Glasha. . . . Handsome is the *balalaika* player, but he's not for loving." The frenetic sixteenth-note lines (quarter-note ca. 88-92) of the chorus soon give way to Levsha's song. Playing the part of the naughty rogue himself, Levsha asks the question, "Eh, Tula, my Tula, how come your fillies all have a nice round Tula bun in the oven?," playfully insinuating that the harsh weather inevitably leads to a certain friskiness. The

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<sup>167</sup> This image is taken from the page dedicated to the opera in the Mariinsky's online exhibition of Shchedrin's works (see footnote 121 above).

“naughty” qualities of his *chastushka* are underscored by a comically plodding pizzicato eighth-note pulse divided between downbeats in the lower strings and offbeats in the upper strings. After a restatement of the music for the chorus, the foreboding lament of the “two speaking women” suddenly reappears.

Shchedrin’s career-long use of the *chastushka* has been so thoroughly discussed and praised in the literature that it would almost seem he was singlehandedly responsible for discovery of this genre of folk song.<sup>168</sup> Ostensibly, it was the *chastushka*’s potential for undermining the absurdities of Stalinism that attracted him.<sup>169</sup> Yet vivid descriptions from his autobiography about some of the women who sang them—those of the destroyed post-war villages he visited as a student collector of folk songs—reveal a strong additional interest in the more risqué side of these tunes:

Blackened by the winds and the murderous frosts, the women looked more like *muzhiks* [male peasants] than representatives of the fairer sex. Dominating the matriarchy beneath their filthy, oil and grease-stained padded jackets unyielding

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<sup>168</sup> Baeva, for instance, compares the result of Shchedrin’s early incorporation of the *chastushki* in his opera, *Not Love Alone* (1961, revised 1971) to that of Stravinsky’s innovations at the beginning of the twentieth century. She concludes that, “the beginning of Shchedrin’s creative work, penetrated by the energy of the search, carried the discovery of new, yet unexplored layers of artistic culture.” “Уже первая опера Щедрина -- ‘Не только любовь’ стала событием, отражающим со-бытие человека и мира. Рубеж 50-60-х годов знаменовал проыв к новому ощущению действительности и встраивание себя в современный звуковой универсум. ‘Магнитное поле Стравинского’ -- так определил Щедрин воздействие одного из корифеев искусства XX века на творчество многих современных отечественных композиторов. И как когда-то первые музыкально-сценические опысы великого предшественника обусловили прорыв в неизведанное, так и начало творческой деятельности Щедрина, пронизанное энергией поиска, несло в себе открытие новых, еще неисследованных пластов художественной культуры.” See in Алла Баева, “Оперный театр Родиона Щедрина: от 60-х к 90-м годам XX века,” in *Родион Щедрин: материалы к творческой биографии*, ed. Екатерина Власова (Москва: Композитор, 2007), 320.

<sup>169</sup> The musicologist Amy Nelson discusses the origins, traits, and use of the *chastushka* in a variety of social and political contexts. Refer to the index for several discussions of this genre in Amy Nelson, *Music for the Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

as wood from all the sweat they had absorbed, reeking of superphosphate and mixed animal feed, they were, nevertheless, smouldering tinderboxes of desire. You could never be sure that there would not break out in the next moment a hysterical explosion of unbridled sexuality. Had Papa Freud lived among these women he would have written his definitive book! Through hoarse, hacking throats they gave utterance to the despairing melancholy of their *chastushki*.<sup>170</sup>

A bit later he waxes poetic on this influence: “The seeds fell on the receptive soil of my imagination, and were later to put out green shoots that found their way into my *Naughty Limericks* and my opera *Not Love Alone*.”<sup>171</sup> Though the critical commentary of Shchedrin’s oeuvre suggests that he discovered “new, yet unexplored layers of artistic culture,” (see note 168 above) the *chastushka* had been used by a number of Soviet composers.

Though one might argue that with Levsha’s “naughty song” Shchedrin has provided a counterbalance to the risqué treatment the British characters are given, the sexuality presented here is much more subdued. The “nice round Tula bun in the oven” that Levsha sings about refers more to the procreative side of sex situated within family life as opposed to the brazenly lascivious innuendo presented in the London scenes.

An article entitled, “The Debauchers,” published by Leskov in the literary journal *Virgin Soil* in 1885 (three years after he published his revised version of *Levsha*) complicates the idealized image of villagers and village life that the Mariinsky production of the opera presents in the scene described above. In the article, Leskov writes about village girls who ended up working as prostitutes after moving to the city:

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<sup>170</sup> Shchedrin, *Rodion Shchedrin: Autobiographical Memories*, 63.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

The Russian peasant family only in very rare, exceptional cases exhibits those simple virtues, worthy of respect, with which it is decorated by the tendentiously minded fantasy of those selfless admirers of the village. The Russian peasant family is morally as sick in the country as it is in the city.<sup>172</sup>

The “selfless admirers” he referred to accepted only the most idealized view of the peasantry, believing the *narod* to be the purest essence of the Russian soul, and reframing their perceived faults (“irrationality,” for instance) as virtues. This view is similarly privileged in the Mariinsky production and Shchedrin’s musical depiction lends itself well to an idealized presentation of village life.

Two further numbers from Shchedrin’s first act illustrate the difference between the no-nonsense, natural style of the Russians, and the florid Italianate style of the British. The first three characters that we encounter in the opening scene at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg are Tsar Nicholas I, a member of his staff, Count Kiselvode, and the Don Cossack, Ataman Platov. Each declaim their lines clearly and syllabically, more or less according to the nineteenth-century dictates of realism in Russian opera. Opera composers in the Russian realist movement, believing they were revolutionizing the genre, endeavored to insert the original prose versions of highly regarded Russian texts into their libretti as is, with no conversion to the more poetic verse that was typical of all previous operas (including Glinka’s). The aesthetic conceit behind this practice held that spoken prose was more natural, less contrived (hence the label “realistic”), and therefore more truthful and beautiful.

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<sup>172</sup> “Русская простонародная семья только в очень редких, исключительных случаях представляет те простые, достойные уважения добродетели, которым украшает ее тенденциозно настроенная фантазия беззаветных поклонников деревни. Русская простонародная семья нравственно больна в деревне так же, как и в городе.” See in Н. С. Лесков, “Рассказы кстати. Пагубники,” *Новь* 7, no. 1 (November 1, 1885): 136. For a similar translation, see McLean, *Leskov*, 485.

The romantic notions assimilated from Herder that proclaimed language to be the highest expression of national identity were thus coopted by Russian nationalists as the foundation of Russian realist aesthetics. Following these new laws, the music should serve the natural expression of the words, not the other way around. Audiences found the most extreme examples of this compositional style difficult to endure since what inevitably resulted was essentially an opera made up entirely of recitative-like singing.<sup>173</sup>

Platov's Act 1, Scene 2, song, shown in Example 2.10, demonstrates how Shchedrin took care to accommodate the natural accents of Russian speech in a passage of prose that paraphrased a conflation of statements made by Platov in conversation with both Alexander I and Nicolas I from Leskov's text. At first glance, the most obvious feature beyond the syllabic text declamation is the subtle mixed meter employed to insure that the stressed syllables fall on strong beats in the song. Here Shchedrin inserts duple meter into a mostly quadruple meter scheme at various points to avoid weak stresses on strong beats.

Clear expression of the Russian prose in its natural and unadulterated (well, almost unadulterated) original state was paramount to the conventions that Shchedrin seems to be doing his best to observe with his Russian characters. The noticeable departure from the realist aesthetic in Platov's song is the use of long held notes at the ends of phrases (momentarily violating the notion of natural declamation). Yet these

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<sup>173</sup> The most famous example is Dargomyzhsky's *Stone Guest* (1869), with its prose libretto taken almost verbatim from Pushkin. See the chapter entitled, "The *Stone Guest* and its Progeny" in Richard Taruskin, *Opera and Drama in Russia As Preached and Practiced in the 1860s* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan (UMI) Research Press, 1981), 249-340.



moments lend to an authoritative gravitas in Platov's performance. As he proudly sustains these pitches, his heroic portrayal is heightened.

Shchedrin also hints at the same "modal mutability" (*peremennost'*) discussed above in the context of the duet for the "two speaking women." Though the accompaniment suggests a handful of tonalities (G minor/major, E-flat major, A-flat major), there are strong melodic cadences on B-flat at measures 88, 96, and 100 and a contrasting cadence on B-flat's subtonic (A-flat) at measure 92.

To further differentiate Platov's rough-and-tumble Cossack origins from those of the Aristocracy (and later) the British, Shchedrin calls for a number of folk instruments in the orchestration. In addition to various exotic percussion timbres, the orchestral score calls for Bartók pizzicatos in the cello, stop-muted horns, and bassoons directed to "slap" their keys as they change pitch. Russian folk instruments like the Kursk ratchet, *zhaleikas*, and the *baiian* or Tula accordion complete the rustic Russian soundscape.

Example 2.10. Shchedrin, *The Left-hander*, Act 1, Scene 2, Platov, mm. 76-102.<sup>176</sup>

12

13

*ff*  
76 Атаман Платов

Ат. Пл.

Ког - да мы прог - на - ли фран - цу - за  
Kog - da mu prog - na - li fran - tsu - za

*Fg.*  
*Trbne.*

80

Ат. Пл.

во две - - над - ца - том го - - ду,  
vo dve - - nad - tsa - tom go - - du,

*Trbe.*  
*f, stacc.*

83

Ат. Пл.

14

за - - - -  
za - - - -

*Picc., Fl.* *p. stacc.* *ff*  
*Fiat* *ff*

*Ob., Cl., Trbe.* *Cor.*  
*Trbne.*

55 908

<sup>176</sup> Shchedrin, *The Left-hander: The Tale of the Cross-Eyed Left-hander from Tula - Opera in Two Acts - Libretto by the Composer after the Story by Nikolai Leskov*, 2014.

Example 2.10 (cont.). mm. 85-92.

13

(Poch. meno mosso)

85

Ат. Пл.

хо - тел наш го - су - дарь про - ез - дить -  
 ho - tel naš go - su - dar' pro - ez - dit' -

Vle., Vc.  
*f; cant.*

Trbe.  
*sf; secco*

Cb. (pizz.)  
*ff; pesante*

88

Ат. Пл.

- ся и в раз - ных  
 - sja i v raz - nyh

VI.  
*ff*

Trbni., Pno., Cb.

Vla., Vc.  
*f; cant.*

Picc., Fl., Ob., Cl.

90

Ат. Пл.

го - су - дар - ствах по - бы - вать  
 go - su - dar - stvah po - by - vat'

Trbe.  
*sf*

Vle., Vc.

Trbni., Pno., Cb.  
*ff*

Cor.

15

55 908

Example 2.10 (cont.). mm. 93-102.

14

93

Ат. Пл.

и раз - ных там чу - дес под - гля -  
 i raz - nyh tam ču - des pod - glya -

Trbc., VI.

Trbc.

Cb.

*ff*

96

Ат. Пл.

- деть и я при сем с Го - су -  
 - det' i ya pri sem s Go - su -

VI.

Fg.

Cb., Pno.

Trbne., Tbe.

*f*

*meno f*

*p*

*pp, secco*

99

Ат. Пл.

- да - рем был...  
 - da - rem byl...

Picc.

*pp*  
 (quasi from afar  
 [eco])

Cor.

*mf*

16

55 908

Pointing to a different sort of musical distinction, a music history scholar at the Odessa National Academy of Music in Ukraine recently published an article in Russian, remarking, “In the Russian scenes of the opera an important role is given to the choir, and in English scenes there are only soloists and supernumeraries, which emphasizes the socio-cultural difference between the Russian and British peoples.”<sup>177</sup> Beyond the observation of this difference, the author implies something incredibly essentializing and patently false about both cultures: that the presence of special bonds uniting a people and the outward expression of that unity in the form of communal singing are phenomena inherent to Russian culture alone. Nevertheless, it forces us to acknowledge that if Shchedrin’s distinction reinforces these notions for a scholar of music history, then it is quite likely that it will for many members of the audience as well.

As this discussion has demonstrated, Shchedrin and the Mariinsky Theater created a work of nationalist opera. The distinction made between the characters of the two nations (British and Russian) in costuming and staging throughout are rather obvious. And Shchedrin’s musical contributions make it difficult to view this opera in some respects as anything but an extension of the *kuchkist* enterprises, some of which even Rimsky-Korsakov and Musorgsky eventually abandoned: the unique blend of Italianate styles with nineteenth-century orientalism (updated with hints of the blues in the case of “the brides”) for the British, the declamatory vocal style of the Russians, and the choices

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<sup>177</sup> “В русских сценах оперы важная роль отводится хору, а в английских сценах присутствуют только солисты и миманс, что подчеркивает социокультурное различие русского и британского народов.” See in Екатерина Немченко, “Проявление традиций православной культуры в оперном творчестве Р. Щедрина начала ххi века,” *Музичне мистецтво і культура* 23 (November 30, 2016): 83, <https://doi.org/10.31723/2524-0447-2016-23-79-91>.

of meter (often triple for the British, mixed meter for Russians), descended mostly from nineteenth-century Russian opera aesthetics. It is not the use of any particular style or convention that marks the opera as nationalistic, but the ends that are achieved by means of these stylistic choices.

### **Shrewd Shchedrin**

The musicologist Boris Schwarz described how the *chastushka* folk song genre allowed Shchedrin to occupy a protected, privileged space as “the darling of the musical establishment” during his Soviet career:

One of the hallmarks of Shchedrin's style is the use of the urban folk ditty, the “*chastushka*”—racy rhymes and impudent tunes which he incorporates into many of his scores. His music is full of youthful insouciance, bold orchestral effects (with obvious derivations from early Stravinsky scores), and a delightful sense of humor. Shchedrin is a new breed of Soviet composer—unafraid, open-minded, and without the pompousness that makes Socialist Realism so dull in the hands of older composers.<sup>183</sup>

As Schwarz implies, these traits enabled Shchedrin to straddle the line between reliability and dangerous modernism, positioning his music as “officially approved modernism,”<sup>184</sup> while other young composers such as Andrey Volkonsky (1933-2008) suffered at the behest of the musical authorities for their forward-looking offerings.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Boris Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 1917-1981*, Enl. ed (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 296.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> For discussion of Volkonsky and other unofficial composers of The Thaw period, see Peter J. Schmelz, *Such Freedom, If Only Musical: Unofficial Soviet Music during the Thaw* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

As one of Shchedrin's classmates, Sofia Gubaidulina has stated, "Volkonsky's trend elicited the most sympathy" in the circles of musicians, artists, and poets. She divided her classmates into three groups according to their compositional proclivities: "The first—the academic-conservative, the second—very radical, represented by Volkonsky, and the third—lying somewhere between the first and the second groups with Rodion Shchedrin as its main figure."<sup>186</sup>

This quote comes from a monograph on Gubaidulina co-authored by Valentina Kholopova, who also wrote a book on the subject of Shchedrin's life and work. The title, which translates as "Path down the middle" or "Path along the center" immediately calls to mind Gubaidulina's characterization of Shchedrin's compositional style as well as the language of criticism often leveled at the composer—that he was most often in sync with the Communist Party line or chose the safest path and that this choice was a very lucrative one for him during the late-Soviet era. Knowing this history of criticism, readers might be surprised to discover that Kholopova has taken that critical language and given it a decidedly positive spin, depicting Shchedrin as a stoic hero who stayed the course in deference to audience taste while the world around him erupted in a dodecaphonic assault on the ears of listeners.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Sofiya Gubaidulina, qtd. in Peter J. Schmelz, *Such Freedom, If Only Musical: Unofficial Soviet Music During the Thaw* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 31. For the original quote, see Валентина Николаевна Холопова and Энцо Рестаньо, *София Губайдулина* (Москва: Композитор, 1996), 21.

<sup>187</sup> A quotation attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson is entered at the bottom of the page that precedes the author's introduction: "Герой тот, кто неподвижно стоит в центре," which translates to, "The hero is the one who stands motionless in the center," and provides a philosophical basis for the biographer's arguments regarding the composer's greatness. See Валентина Николаевна Холопова, *Путь по центру: композитор Родион Щедрин* (Москва:

As an example of Shchedrin's brand of modernism, Schwarz cites his music to *The Little Hump-Backed Horse* (“*Konyok-Gorbunok*”) which had been known first as an orchestral suite (1955) before its staging as a ballet (1960). While noting the use of a French electronic instrument, the “*clavioline*,” Schwarz declares that, “essentially, the music is old-fashioned,” agreeing with British critic Arthur Jacobs’s statement that “in basic idiom it would have been modern if composed in 1910 along with Stravinsky’s *Firebird*.”<sup>188</sup> Recall the similarities in *The Left-hander* to the folk idioms of Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* (1912), discussed previously.

Though his composition teacher, Yuri Shaporin (1887-1966), described Shchedrin as “one of my best pupils”<sup>189</sup> in an essay entitled, “Shaping a Creative Personality,” he later excluded him in the same essay (whether consciously, or not) from what is arguably a more important list: “What pleases me most in my own students, such as Karen Khachaturian, Andrei Volkonsky, Grant Grigorian, Yuri Muravlev and Gaziza

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Композитор, 2000); I have yet to fully verify the quotation’s provenance, so it is difficult to say whether Emerson would have agreed with Kholopova’s use of his words in this context. In an email communication, she confessed that she was unable to cite where she found them. The closest resemblance I have found resides in words that Emerson used to describe the French Renaissance philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, though the word “hero” is missing. Put back into their possible original context, it is difficult to know whether Shchedrin would approve of this characterization: “He keeps the plain; he rarely mounts or sinks; likes to feel solid ground and the stones underneath. His writing has no enthusiasm, no aspiration; contented, self-respecting and keeping the middle of the road.” See in Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Montaigne; or the Skeptic,” in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* – RWE.org, accessed July 26, 2019, <http://www.rwe.org/montaigne-or-the-skeptic/>.

<sup>188</sup> qtd. in Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 1917-81*, 296. See also in Arthur Jacobs, “Music and Myth,” *New Statesman*, May 21, 1960.

<sup>189</sup> Yuri Shaporin, “Shaping a Creative Personality,” *Music Journal* 27, March 1969, 34.



Zhubanova, is that they possess distinct personalities of their own.”<sup>190</sup> While Gubaidulina’s statements suggest Shchedrin was not inclined toward conspicuous rule breaking, perhaps this omission from Shaporin’s list of “distinct personalities” suggests he was also inclined to consider external conditions before his own creative inspiration or instinct. Yet Shaporin’s own rather conservative compositional output might not have provided a very good model for developing a distinct personality.

Shaporin’s own work during the early Soviet period (when he wrote mostly film music and incidental music for the theater such as for Zamiatin’s *The Flea*) was criticized for its epigonism of nineteenth-century Russian compositions. Where Soviet contemporaries like Nikolay Myaskovsky (1881-1950) and Vissarion Shebalin (1902-1963) struggled greatly to adapt their personal style to the blandness of Socialist Realism, Frolova-Walker asserts that Shaporin “had a knack for producing well-crafted music that drew on the Russian classics and other idioms from the same era.” Regarding his later output from the 1930s to the 1950s, she declares that it “was always unproblematic, and demonstrated a perfect stylistic uniformity.” And then she adds, “Shaporin, I would argue, managed to achieve Socialist Realist perfection without trying. This was recognized by the critics, but in order to defend him, they felt the need to meet the issue of epigonism head on,” and thus, “vice is turned into virtue.”<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>191</sup> Frolova-Walker, “The Glib, the Bland, and the Corny: An Aesthetic of Socialist Realism,” in *Music and Dictatorship in Europe and Latin America*, vol. XIV, *Speculum Musicae* (Turnhout, BE: BREPOLs, 2009), 413–14.

Frolova-Walker shows that as late as 1989—notably in an essay by Stepan Grigoryev—Shaporin’s musical style was still being defended along these lines:

“Grigoryev invents a key concept of ‘hidden renewal,’ according to which ‘the music sounds fresh and new in spite of the well-known means employed’; these are ‘conceptualized and combined in a new way’ to produce ‘new combinations of sedimented means’ that are, admittedly ‘hard to spot.’ Shaporin, Grigoryev tells us ‘is free from fear of idioms that may seem a mere repetition,’ he has ‘a gift of converting common means of expression into his own characteristic ones.’ In Shaporin, then, we have blandness united with flair, resulting in the glib.”<sup>192</sup>

Shchedrin’s own characteristic idiom equally obscures his hints at the conventions of the nineteenth-century Russian nationalist composers in *The Left-hander*: the modal mutability borrowed from the *protiazhnaiia*, the declamatory setting of Russian prose instead of verse (the *sine qua non* of Russian realist opera), as well as the orientalist tropes revealed above. A similar defense of Shchedrin might also cite these “hard to spot” practices as part of a genius plan for their “hidden renewal.” Viewed in this way, perhaps the pupil has surpassed his teacher.

Aside from showing that Shchedrin’s nineteenth-century allusions parallel Shaporin’s, the criticism cited above points to a tendency in Shchedrin’s Soviet career that seems to continue in *The Left-hander* commission. Just as walking the “path down the middle” and avoiding “bourgeois modernism” was a strategy for success during the Soviet period, Shchedrin’s newest works (especially those based on texts by Leskov) strategically place Orthodox religious themes front and center in an era when government

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<sup>192</sup> Marina Frolova-Walker, “The Glib, the Bland, and the Corny,” 415. Frolova-Walker cites the quoted passages from Степан Григорьев, “Музыкальный стиль Шапорина,” printed in Елена Андреевна Грошева, ed., *Юрий Александрович Шапорин: литературное наследие--статьи, письма : статьи о творчестве Ю.А. Шапорина : воспоминания современников* (Москва: Советский композитор, 1989), 224–26.

leaders have made highly visible overtures on state-owned television toward the church.<sup>194</sup>

In Shchedrin's interview with Vladimir Posner,<sup>195</sup> he received a question that suggests a pandering to state agendas regarding the Orthodox Church is legible to at least some in Russia. Pozner asked whether Shchedrin's interest in religious subjects might stem from the fact that "in Russia, religion has become fashionable." As an answer to this possible challenge to his *bona fides* as a devout Russian Orthodox Christian, Shchedrin merely elaborated on his family's ecclesiastical background.

Pozner then asked whether as a religious person he liked what was happening with faith in Russia. Shchedrin set up his response by vaguely stating that "in Russia, everything was always a bit awry." Referring to today he remarked, "The first time I saw our leaders standing with candles in the church, it raised a huge hostility for me because they held them very clumsily. . . they held them like a glass of vodka."<sup>196</sup> He explained that because of his deep faith, it hurt him even more to find that religion had become

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<sup>194</sup> The titles of two Russian journal articles which both deal in part with Shchedrin's *The Left-hander* show how clearly references to Orthodox faith are read in the opera by Russian language scholars: "The manifestation of the traditions of Orthodox culture in the opera of R. Shchedrin at the beginning of the XXI century" and "The choir as a means of embodiment of sacred content and a symbol of the Orthodox faith in the work of Rodion Shchedrin." See Екатерина Немченко, "Проявление традиций православной культуры в оперном творчестве Р. Щедрина начала XXI века," *Музичне мистецтво і культура* 23 (November 30, 2016): 79–91, <https://doi.org/10.31723/2524-0447-2016-23-79-91>; А. М. Иванов, "Хор как средство воплощения сакрального содержания и символ Православной веры в творчестве Родиона Щедрина," *Обсерватория культуры*, no. 5 (2014): 51–57.

<sup>195</sup> "Познер. В Гостях Родион Щедрин," YouTube video posted by NoName, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4vTzP-9xNk&t=105s>.

<sup>196</sup> This is a recurring talking point in Shchedrin's published statements. See in Shchedrin, *Rodion Shchedrin: Autobiographical Memories*, 13.

“decorative.” Comparing this language to that of Gergiev’s in his own interview with Posner (cited above), we see the same vague and safe critique of unnamed leadership.

While there seems no reason to doubt the sincerity of Shchedrin’s faith, the flowering of religious themes in his work has a conspicuous timeline that arguably did not begin until the easing of restrictions on religious practice in the very late Soviet period. Though the musicologist Sigrid Neef paints Shchedrin as an early maverick, declaring that he “was writing sacred works long before perestroika made it fashionable to subscribe to the Russian Orthodox faith,” the only examples Neef gives as proof are two works from 1988: his choral work, *The Sealed Angel (Zapechatlennyi angel)* a “Russian liturgy” after Leskov’s tale of the same name and his work for symphony orchestra, *Stikhira (Hymn for the Millennium of the Christianization of Russia)*.<sup>197</sup>

We can contrast this timeline with the much earlier religious subject matter of some of his Soviet contemporaries like Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998) and Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931). Gubaidulina (baptized in the Orthodox faith in 1970), for instance, composed her *Introitus* (1970), *In Croce* (1979), *Offertorium* (1980), and *Seven Last Words* (1982) long before Shchedrin found his religious muse.<sup>198</sup>

In 1996 Shchedrin spoke of the period surrounding his composition of *The Sealed Angel* and *Stikhira*: “Although we had already enjoyed three years of perestroika and a

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<sup>197</sup> Sigrid Neef in the liner notes for the compact disc reissue of *Rodion Shchedrin, The Sealed Angel, Russian Liturgy*, Alexander Golyshev, Vladimir Minin, Moscow Chamber Choir, USSR Russian Choir (BMG Classics CD, 74321 36905 2, originally released in 1989 as Melodiya CD, 74321 36905 2), 8.

<sup>198</sup> Schmelz, *Such Freedom*, 268.

great deal had changed in our country, the attitude to religion on the part of the Communist state remained just the same as before.”<sup>199</sup> Yet the fact that the Moscow Chamber Choir and the USSR Russian Choir (Shchedrin referred to it as the Russian State Choir) premiered the work on June 18, 1988 in Moscow’s Tchaikovsky Hall and a year later recorded it in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, suggests that perhaps Shchedrin faced fewer complications with the Soviet apparatus than he is suggesting. In fact, as Shchedrin himself expressed, “The period during which we rehearsed the work with two of Russia’s best choirs. . . was one of the happiest of my life.”<sup>200</sup> Considering the contradictions stated by Shchedrin above, it is difficult to ascertain whether these early years of his religious output were the worst of times or the best of times.

In what seems like an effort to discredit the religious sincerity of some of his contemporaries, he also asserted,

Not until the early 1990s did religion become fashionable in Russia. . . . Even a number of my colleagues, including several Russian composers jumped aboard this bandwagon, but did so in vain, it seems to me, since they remained untouched by the actual essence of religion. Among the various signs of this fashionable trend was that of attaching an effective religious title to such pieces, even though their musical content often failed to reflect their composer’s true inclinations.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Shchedrin in the liner notes for *The Sealed Angel*, 9.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

There is a kind of gamesmanship in this language that is not uncommon in Shchedrin's published statements.<sup>202</sup> While it perhaps reflects a defensiveness motivated by the type of criticism cited above, it might otherwise be a byproduct of his active role in the politics of the Soviet musical establishment as the chairman of the Union of Russian Composers (1973-1990). Two years after leaving that post, Boris Yeltsin would invite him to the Kremlin and award him the Russian State Prize for *The Sealed Angel*. As Shchedrin stated four years later, "This, then, is the New Russia!"<sup>203</sup>

To be fair, before he became chairman of the Union of Composers, even Shchedrin faced heavy backlash on one notable occasion for refusing to sign a letter of support for the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. And his composition from the same year, *Poetoriia* was heavily and extensively critiqued by the journal *Sovetskaia muzyka* in the November 1969 issue.<sup>204</sup> As penance, Shchedrin composed his *Lenin in the Heart of the People* (*Lenin v serdtse narodnom*) fearing not only further reprisals against himself, but against his wife as well.<sup>205</sup>

Near the end of a short documentary on the composer, the subject of life as an artist under Communism came up. In what seemed like an effort to explain at least some of Shchedrin's output during the Soviet period, one of his American champions, the late

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<sup>202</sup> This rhetoric pervades much of his autobiography. See for instance his chapter entitled, "People Throw Stones Only at Apple Trees with Apples on Them" in Shchedrin, *Rodion Shchedrin: Autobiographical Memories*, 188–95.

<sup>203</sup> Shchedrin in the liner notes for *The Sealed Angel*, 11.

<sup>204</sup> "Обсуждаем 'Поэторию' Р. Щедрина," *Советская музыка*, no. 11 (1969): 18–32.

<sup>205</sup> Schmelz, *Such Freedom*, 277.

conductor Lorin Maazel, stated, “The important thing is that a composer offer music of substance, which may at one time be of greater value, or significance, or importance to a society than another time.”<sup>206</sup> In other words, a composer writes for the time and the audience at hand.

Shchedrin has proven time and again that he is highly adaptable to the needs of the moment. And at this moment in time, his country is in the midst of a painful struggle for identity and recognition that has been going on since the breakup of the Soviet state. In Solomon Volkov’s fawning praise for the composer, we can understand what Shchedrin might mean to the cultural elite in Russia:

I have had this idea for many years, that at any given moment, a country, in any national culture, has its own “national bard.” I do not mean such bards as the “performers of author’s songs” like Okudzhava, Vysotsky, or Galich. In my understanding, the “national bard” is a composer who at the moment expresses the deep—I want to emphasize it—the deep spiritual aspirations of the nation. In Georgia, such a national bard today is the composer Gia Kancheli, in Armenia – Tigran Mansurian, in Ukraine – Valentin Silvestrov. And this is despite the fact that all of them, by the way, live in the West [this is not true of Silvestrov, although it is true of Volkov himself]. So the ideal manifestation of the Russian soul converged in Shchedrin. He is getting closer to that inner core, which can be tentatively called the Russian national idea. And in this sense, his place in culture is unique.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> See at 41:45 - 42:05 in Gachot, “Rodion Shchedrin – Concerto Cantabile (Portrait of the Russian Composer, 1999).”

<sup>207</sup> “У меня есть многолетняя выношенная идея о том, что в каждый данный момент у страны, в любой национальной культуре есть свой ‘национальный бард’. Я не имею в виду бардов как ‘исполнителей авторской песни’, как Окуджаву, Высоцкого или Галича. В моем понимании ‘национальный бард’ - это композитор, который в данный момент выражает глубинные, хочу это подчеркнуть, глубинные духовные устремления нации. В Грузии такой национальный бард сегодня композитор Гия Канчели, в Армении - Тигран Мансурян, на Украине - Валентин Сильвестров. И это при том, что все они, кстати, живут на Западе. Так вот, в Щедрине сошлось то, что называется идеальным проявлением русской души в искусстве. Он приближается к тому внутреннему стержню, который можно условно назвать русской национальной идеей. И в этом смысле его место в культуре уникально.” Solomon Volkov in Соломон Волков and Игорь Виравов, “Странник Щедрин - Почему автор шлягера ‘Не кочегары мы, не плотники’ предпочел писать оперы и

Shchedrin is the “national bard” who serves to remind Russians, with their damaged pride, of their uniqueness and special moral value to the world. Thus, his interpretation of *Levsha* offers some salve for the wounds of the past few decades, promoting notions of Russian exceptionalism.

Shchedrin’s apologists today seem to be adherents of Russian Orthodoxy and the cultural elites who one way or another benefit from the status quo or fear the instability of a regime change. With *The Left-hander*, Shchedrin capitalizes on the hopes and fears of these two groups. Yet this kind of nationalistic opportunism (especially involving overtly religious works) is by no means exclusive to Shchedrin, nor to Russian composers. Within the oratorios of Handel, composed and staged in eighteenth-century England, scholars find a particularly nationalist appeal in their flattery of the English elite who patronized their performances, comparing them to the Israelites, God’s chosen people in the Bible.<sup>208</sup>

A more modern, quasi-religious example can be found in the American composer John Adams’s 1987 opera, *Nixon In China*, which Taruskin opines was marketed specifically to that class of Americans popularly referred to at the time as “yuppies.” In the opera, Nixon’s diplomatic victory is mythologized to such a degree that his domestic

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симфонии.” *Российская газета - столичный выпуск*, December 14, 2017, 285 (7451) edition, sec. Культура, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2017/12/14/pochemu-rodion-shchedrin-predpochel-pisat-opery-i-simfonii.html>.

<sup>208</sup> For an extensive discussion of Handel’s oratorios within the context of the politics of his day, see Ruth Smith, *Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (New York; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995) See especially pp. 238-39 regarding the association of the English cultural elite with the biblical Israelites.



problems are all but forgotten and the violent Chinese Communist dictators are depicted uncritically, in heroic fashion. Taruskin agrees with what music critic Alex Ross implies, that the opera's value for its intended audience "was independent of its relationship to external reality...that value was its capacity to create spiritual archetypes." Taruskin then asserted more specifically that it was "marketed for its powers of 'uplift' to a guiltily affluent audience eager to depict itself as humane."<sup>209</sup>

With *The Left-hander*, Shchedrin, the "national bard" of Russia, presents a "spiritual archetype" more closely related to the Handelian example. The value of Shchedrin's transformed version of *Levsha* resides in its capacity to allow the elite patrons of the Mariinsky to imagine that the eponymous hero's exceptional manifestations of the Russian soul also exist within themselves. And it presumes that these qualities uniquely afford them a higher moral and spiritual place in the world relative to the "rational" West. The final section of this discussion reveals how Shchedrin capitalizes more specifically on their fears.

### **More Shchedrin vs. Leskov**

Shchedrin has made other comments about Leskov's original tale and its relevance to today's Russia. Whether it was done consciously or unconsciously, he twice provided a distorted paraphrase of one of Leskov's statements in answer to the question, "Is *Levsha* relevant today?" In an interview for *Lenta*, Shchedrin began his answer by stating, "To a certain extent, Leskov was a prophet," and then he told the reporter, "He

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<sup>209</sup> Richard Taruskin, "Sacred Entertainments," in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*, Roth Family Foundation Music in America Imprint (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 284.

has remarkable words about how the liberals will take power and immediately elect the head of the police as the leader.” In another interview for *Musical Life* he similarly asserted that Leskov said, “If the liberals get power, then the next day they would elect the head of the police himself.”<sup>210</sup> Yet the obvious question of why Shchedrin finds this relevant to contemporary Russia goes completely unaddressed in both interviews. Before showing how Shchedrin has distorted Leskov’s words and before examining his motivations for doing so, it is important to mention Leskov’s general political leanings.

It is well known that Leskov was uncomfortable with both the extreme left and the reactionary right in nineteenth-century Russian politics. He was a pragmatist who believed that an honest assessment of social and governmental problems was more important than utopian theories and unqualified patriotism to lift the country out of its backwardness and set it on the path of progress. He believed that change must come, but that it must come from gradual reforms enacted by well-informed, educated, and enlightened thinkers. And he desperately bemoaned the loss of such an opportunity with the assassination of the reform-minded Alexander II by terrorists associated with the nihilist movement.

Two statements made by Leskov in 1883 add anti-Slavophile and pro-Western sentiment to this angst and frustration. As he wrote in a letter to his close friend (at the

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<sup>210</sup> “Лесков в какой-то степени был провидцем. У него есть замечательные слова о том, что либералы возьмут власть и тотчас же первого квартального изберут в вожди.” See in Щедрин and Ершова, “Музыка всегда ждет нового гения.” Compare with the following: “Если либералы получают власть, то они на следующий день изберут себе квартального.” See in the interview subsection entitled, “I am a Realist” (“Я - Реалист”) of Krivitskaya’s article in Евгения Кривицкая, “Как Родион Щедрин ‘подковал’ Мариинский Театр,” *Музыкальная жизнь*, 7-8, 2013, 4.

time) and editor, Sergey Shubinsky, “I loved my country after all. I wanted to see it move closer to good, to enlightenment and to truth. But instead of this, there is either vile nihilism, or a banal movement backwards, ‘home,’ that is, to the stupidity and falsehood of the pre-Petrine era.”<sup>211</sup> This statement contrasts sharply with the Slavophilic notion that Peter I’s westernizing ambitions were the beginning of great folly for the Fatherland. And finally, in another letter to Shubinsky we see Leskov express similar sentiments alongside regret for not being able to leave Russia entirely:

It is uninspiring, heavy, and all around it is so mean and so stupid that one doesn’t know where to catch a breath. I cannot forgive myself that I didn’t learn French well enough to work in it as in my native tongue. I wouldn’t remain an hour in Russia and would stay away forever. I am afraid that one could get to hate it altogether with all of its nihilists and guardians. There are no minds, no personalities, and there is not even a shadow of dignity.<sup>212</sup>

Though Leskov articulates disdain for the radical left, it is evident by his equal disdain for the “guardians” that preservation of the status quo was furthest from his mind.

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<sup>211</sup> Letter to Shubinsky, August 20, 1883, “Родину-то ведь любил, желал ее видеть ближе к добру, к свету познания и к правде, а вместо того — либо поганое нигилистничание, либо пошлое пячение назад, «домой», то есть в допетровскую дурость и кривду.” Н. С. Лесков, *Собрание сочинений в 11 томах. Том 11.*, ed. И. Я. Айзеншток (Москва: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1958), 284, [https://rvb.ru/leskov/tocvol\\_11.htm](https://rvb.ru/leskov/tocvol_11.htm). See also in Valentina Kompaniec Barsom, “The Misunderstood and Misinterpreted Leskov: Leskov in Pre-Revolutionary Radical and Soviet Literary Criticism” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1969), 194–95.

<sup>212</sup> Letter to Shubinsky, August 17, 1883, “Скучно, тяжело, и вокруг столь подло и столь глупо, что не знаешь, где и дух перевести. Не могу себе простить, что я никогда не усвоил себе французского языка в той мере, чтобы на нем работать как на родном. Я бы часа не остался в России и навсегда. Боюсь, что ее можно совсем возненавидеть со всеми ее нигилистами и охранителями. Нет ни умов, ни характеров и ни тени достоинства...” Н. С. Лесков, *Собрание сочинений в 11 томах. Том 11.*, ed. И. Я. Айзеншток (Москва: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1958), 283, [https://rvb.ru/leskov/tocvol\\_11.htm](https://rvb.ru/leskov/tocvol_11.htm); For the word “guardians,” Leskov used “okhranye,” the name for the secret police of the tsarist empire. Barsom translates this as “guardians of the old order.” See in Barsom, “The Misunderstood and Misinterpreted Leskov,” 194.

Returning to Shchedrin's distorted paraphrase, what Leskov stated about the nihilists, bent on the total dismantling of Russian society as it existed, says much about his lack of confidence in their theoretical utopian solutions to Russia's social and political ills. Leskov purportedly made the statements from which Shchedrin's talking point was extracted late in life in conversations during the 1890s with the critic and journalist, Anatoly Faresov. This was during a period when bitterness had all but extinguished his hope for a more gradualist approach to the political change that he felt was necessary.<sup>214</sup>

I have provided the full context of Leskov's thoughts on these matters as related by Faresov in order to make these points clear. Ultimately what this passage reveals is that Leskov might have been leery of the notion of mass democracy (a wariness he shared with the majority of nineteenth-century liberals in the West) due to his skepticism about the poorly educated, non-propertied man's capacity to intelligently participate in democratic institutions. The italicized portion reflects the wording that Shchedrin has cherry-picked and distorted. Faresov begins by stating that Leskov repeatedly told him the following:

My view of the social-revolutionary party and the future of Russia is very pessimistic and I have already expressed it in "No Way Out."<sup>216</sup> . . . And now I'm

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<sup>214</sup> Sperrle has criticized Faresov for his analysis of some of the statements Leskov made in their almost daily conversations spanning the last ten years of the author's life. From Leskov's statements, she reads ideological viewpoints that do not neatly correspond to the populist ideological stance Faresov favors in his interpretations (She contends that he interpreted Leskov's words so that they were more in line with his own populism). In other words, she does not accuse Faresov of misrepresentation, but merely opportunistic misinterpretation. Even if Leskov's words were in fact somehow misrepresented, this is the primary source from which Shchedrin's paraphrase is taken. The fact that he altered what was written is conspicuous and deserving of attention. Sperrle, *The Organic Worldview of Nikolai Leskov*, 14.

<sup>216</sup> Leskov's novel, *No Way Out (Nekuda)*, was written as a criticism of the nihilist Chernyshevsky's manifesto in fiction, entitled, *What Is To Be Done? (Chto delat'?)*, which inspired many revolutionaries, including Vladimir Lenin. Н. С. Лесков, "Некуда - роман в трех

even more confident that I am right. Even if the Red Party could exist under the most favorable conditions for it: if it had an invisibility cap and a self-flying carpet, what could this party do? Perhaps an assassination attempt—but after all, there were enough of them in Russian history, but did it really change history? A constitution could be added—but after all, you can always tear up a written constitution as Anna Ionnovna tore it up; and besides, if there was another written constitution, what would the people fight and die for? We cannot have the development of democracy — because after all, this people tears their doctors and sisters of mercy to pieces, as we see, and then goes to serve up their prayers. . . . After all, with this beast, is it really possible to create anything at the moment?

And then Faresov asks, “Nevertheless, Nikolai Semyonovich, do you not see even one bright spot?” to which Leskov replies,

How am I to blame if the reality is such that in fifty to one-hundred years we will become so loathsome to everything that we will deal with the European coalition? . . . It is amazing how Chernyshevsky did not realize that after the triumph of Rakhmetov’s ideas,<sup>217</sup> *the Russian people, on the very next day, would choose the most ferocious police chief*, and that consequently, with the government of the

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книжках,” in *Собрание сочинений в 11 томах. Том 2.*, ed. Н. И. Тотубалин (Москва: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1956).

<sup>217</sup> Rakhmetov was a character in the nihilist Chernyshevsky’s utopian novel, *What Is To Be Done? (Chto delat’?)* (1863), written while he was in prison for sedition in St. Petersburg’s Peter and Paul Fortress. He became the philosophical hero of the generations of Russian and Soviet revolutionaries that followed—not to mention the composers who latched onto his ideas about art, bringing realism into Russian opera composition. Adam Weiner even argues for the novel’s influence on such writers as Ayn Rand. See in Adam Weiner, “The Most Politically Dangerous Book You’ve Never Heard Of,” *POLITICO Magazine*, accessed October 1, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/russian-novel-chernyshevsky-financial-crisis-revolution-214516>.

sixties<sup>218</sup> it was possible to go forward without releasing the Rakhmetovs against it.<sup>219</sup>

The most important change that Shchedrin made to explain the tale's contemporary relevance was to replace the words "Russian people" with "liberals." Reading Leskov's entire passage, we can see that he clearly feared violent revolution and oppression if the nihilists should win the day. In that sense, Shchedrin was arguably correct when he asserted that Leskov had been prophetic. Yet Shchedrin compares two entirely different social and political contexts in the rest of his statement. He effectively associates the

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<sup>218</sup> Leskov is referring to the reign of Tsar Alexander II (1855-1881). Known as the Tsar Liberator for his abolition of serfdom in 1861, he initiated a number of other progressive reforms before the first of many attempts on his life in 1866. He ultimately succumbed after a final assassination attempt in 1881. With his death at the hands of members of the radical revolutionary movement "People's Will" (*Narodnaia volya*), all hope of reform came to a halt because his son and successor, Alexander III (1881-1894), was demonstrably more reactionary. In 2017, Putin dedicated a monument to Alexander III in Yalta, Crimea. The tsar, in his military dress, is seated on a stump in a commanding, yet relaxed pose, with arms resting atop an upright sabre standing between his legs. The phrase, "Russia has only two allies—her army and navy," famously attributed to Alexander III, is etched in gold on the pedestal beneath him.

<sup>219</sup> "Онъ неоднократно говорилъ мнѣ: — Мой взглядъ на социально-революцион- ную партію и будущность Россіи— очень пес- симитическій и я уже высказалъ это въ «Не- куда»... А теперь я еще болѣе увѣренъ въ своей правоте. Еслибъ даже партія красныхъ могла бы существовать при самыхъ благоприятныхъ для нея условіяхъ: имела бы шапку невидимку и самобранный коверъ самолетъ, то что же бы могла эта партія сделать? Покушеніе — но ведь ихъ было достаточно въ русской исторіи, а разве это изменяло ее; добиться конституціи— но ведь писанную кон-ституцию всегда можно изорвать, какъ изо-рвала ее Анна Іоановнна; а кроме писанной конституціи другой, за которую бы умирали и боролся народъ,—у насъ не можетъ быть; развитіе демократіи— но ведь этотъ народъ рветъ своихъ докторовъ и сестеръ милосердія, какъ мы видимъ, на куски и потомъ идетъ служить молебны... Ведь съ этимъ зверьемъ разве можно что-нибудь создать въ данный моментъ? — Однако, у васъ, Николай Семёновичъ, никакого просвета не видно. — Я же чемъ виновать, если действи-тельность такова, что черезъ 50— 100 лѣтъ мы такъ всею опротивѣемъ, что будемъ имѣть дѣло съ европейской коалиціей... Удивительно, какъ это Чернышевскій не догадывался, что послѣ торжества идей Рахметова, русскій народъ, на другой же день, выберетъ себѣ самага свирѣпаго квартальнаго и что слѣдовательно съ правительствомъ бохъ годовъ можно было идти впередъ, не выпуская противъ него Рахметовыхъ." See in Анатолий Иванович Фаресов, *Против течения: Н. С. Лесков: Его жизнь, сочинения, полемика и воспоминания о нем* (Санкт-Петербург, 1904), 43–44.

“liberals” (or progressives) in the present-day Russian opposition movement with the violent revolutionaries of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Therefore, the problem of “indifference” to the uniquely talented individuals of the Russian *narod* is linked most strongly with the past. And even though he implies that Russia must keep a constant vigil against indifference, he neatly avoids associating this problem with the current regime.

Shchedrin’s misquotation of Leskov implies two possible problems for contemporary Russia. How one reads the misquotation is dependent entirely on personal fears and or prejudice. Whether one is inclined to associate his words with a rise in liberal Western influence (the foreign influence problem) or a resurgence of the far-left revolutionaries (the historical problem), preservation of the status quo in the leadership of the state and in the culture of arch-conservatism is the objective.<sup>220</sup>

Though Kuznetsov’s jingoistic alter ego stated in the blog post cited earlier that the author of *Levsha* could not possibly love his country, Kuznetsov himself most likely reads Leskov’s motives here as I do. Despite the bitterness of some of Leskov’s statements quoted above, *Levsha*, like so many of his other works, directs the Russian

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<sup>220</sup> In his autobiography, Shchedrin stated, “Look at the television screens of today and watch them, our Communists of yesterday, the children and grandchildren of those brave fighters against ‘the opium of the people’, crossing themselves, exchanging kisses with the Orthodox triple kiss, standing reverentially, candles in their hands as though they were glasses of vodka - and be afraid.” With this remarkable statement, we see how strongly he fears a return to Communism because of its associations with religious suppression during the Soviet period, yet looking at the current government in Russia, the Communist party represents a very small minority--part of the “systemic opposition” the current majority allows to exist to give the appearance of a democracy. This majority has also been developing partnerships with an very willing and enthusiastic Orthodox church leadership. Shchedrin surely knows all of this, so statements like these suggest he is either being disingenuous or that he is under the spell of stability that so many supporters of the status quo seem to be under. See in Rodion Shchedrin, *Rodion Shchedrin: Autobiographical Memories*, trans. Anthony Phillips, English edition (Mainz, Ger.: Schott Music GmbH & Co., KG, 2012), 13.

gaze inward rather than outward for the source of the nation's problems. In doing so he reveals both the good and the bad without denigrating the ethnic, religious, social, or national other. It is an instructive lesson for all would-be patriots of any nation.

## Conclusion

There is a subtext to Leskov's tale that overly patriotic, if not nationalistic, interpretations such as Shchedrin's ignore. It is not a critique of Russia's neglect of, or "indifference" to its extraordinary native talent, but of its indifference to the entire peasant population. In an online Russian forum where readers have gone to discuss the tale (or to get the CliffsNotes version of it), one contributor alludes to this interpretation: "They have written here that he [Levsha] allegedly does not have a name; it's not true; he has a name, and his name is THE PEOPLE. Yes, the ordinary Russian people! And its fate is one and the same, nobody needs such people, then or now!"<sup>225</sup>

The heroic deed of Levsha, therefore, does not stem from his inborn talents. This is evident first of all in the fact that the modifications he and his Tula brethren made to the steel flea rendered its legs too heavy to dance its quadrilles. Any skills he possessed were born of necessity, not genetics or some ancient and communal wellspring—recall that in the absence of any magnification instruments, Levsha's eyes were forced to adjust in order to shoe the flea.

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<sup>225</sup> "Писали здесь что у него якобы нет имени, неправда имя у него есть, и имя ему НАРОД. Да простой русский народ! И судьба у него одна-никому у нас такие Левши не нужны ни тогда ни теперь!" See comment #53 in Алекс, "Комментарии к Левша," *Классика: Левша*, December 12, 2010, accessed July 14, 2020, [http://az.lib.ru/comment/1/leskow\\_n\\_s/text\\_0246?&COOK\\_CHECK=1](http://az.lib.ru/comment/1/leskow_n_s/text_0246?&COOK_CHECK=1).



The real heroic deed of Levsha, negated by the “indifference to human life” of nineteenth-century Russian bureaucracy, is that he discovered and sought to transmit vital information regarding the methods that the British used to clean their muskets with zero concern for his own life. This information never reached Nicholas I because of problems that were symptomatic to Russia’s bureaucracy. Even the colorful and biased narrator is able to recognize this problem the moment before Leskov takes the reigns from him at the end when he states that ignoring Levsha’s message may have been a contributing factor to Russia’s catastrophic loss in the Crimean War.

The ultimate message or moral of the story therefore is that Russia should value *all* of its people. A better educated Levsha might have actually bested the British and a better treated Levsha could have helped Russia achieve victory on the battlefield as well. In the context of the original tale, it is hard to imagine that Leskov would have viewed Levsha’s selfless devotion in this particular instance as worthy of celebrating. Rather, it seems he would have seen such a display as a pitiable waste of a human being and a reflection of what was wrong in his country.

Leskov was also more generally critical of utopian theoretical solutions to complex problems that the nihilists of his day put forth. Instead, he favored gradually implemented solutions based on pragmatism and arrived at through ruthlessly frank assessments of the nature and origin of Russia’s backwardness in his time. Though it does not propose a specific fix, *Levsha* stands as one such example of this frankness: it points to what must first be admitted and understood before pragmatic solutions can be developed.

This tragic side of the tale, coupled with the problems it exposed about Russian society, made for a pill that was perhaps judged too bitter to swallow at the Mariinsky. In its original version the tale was a little too relevant to contemporary Russian society's problems.

Leskov's withering critique of Russian social structures is limited in the opera to depictions of the aristocracy and bureaucracy of a time long past. Moreover, Leskov's sly attacks on the rampant jingoistic chauvinism he witnessed are, like the flea, subjected to their own reprocessing in the opera's libretto, music, and staging. The technological achievements and generosity that Leskov found in the British and portrayed in his other works (for instance, *Schism in High Society*, *The Enchanted Wanderer*, and chapter 3 of his book *Trifles from the Life of Archbishops*) become material greed and sexual decadence in the opera. And Shchedrin's faithful depiction of the righteous British "Under-skipper" is not sufficient to offset the distorted and uneven comparison of the two societies privileged throughout the rest of this work.

The clichés of Russianness and nationalism, shown elsewhere to be founded on myth and envious *ressentiment*, are traceable not only throughout the history of Russian opera, but also in Shchedrin's *The Left-hander*, one of the genre's most recent works. Some of these clichés were common as well to almost all adaptations of the story throughout the twentieth century.<sup>226</sup> *Levsha* represents a missed opportunity for

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<sup>226</sup> My investigations of the scores, libretti, and visual presentations in each of the following transpositions of Leskov's tale from the Soviet period are indicative of the same patriotic spin (transformation) that I read in Shchedrin's opera: Евгений Замятин, "Блоха," in *Мы. Рассказы*, Библиотека Всемирной Литературы (Москва: Эксмо, 2009), [https://www.litres.ru/static/or4/view/or.html?baseurl=/download\\_book/613525/7474418/&uuid=4a82351e-8082-11e0-9959-](https://www.litres.ru/static/or4/view/or.html?baseurl=/download_book/613525/7474418/&uuid=4a82351e-8082-11e0-9959-)

Shchedrin and his Mariinsky colleagues to correct or at least challenge long-accepted misreadings of Leskov's tale.<sup>227</sup> Following the more faithful 1986 adaptation to film produced at the beginning of perestroika, the opera represents a decisive turn backwards in its debauched and cynical portrayal of the British. Although this opera has yet to attract much attention in Russian academic circles, the full house and enthusiastic applause I witnessed in the audience when I attended a live performance of *Levsha* at the Mariinsky-2 Theater in February 2019 confirmed that this transformed version resonated with many in the public.

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47117d41cf4b&art=613525&user=578158815&uilang=ru&catalit2&track\_reading; Владимир Валентинович Дмитриев, *Русский секрет (Левша) - Музыкальная комедия в 2-х действиях - либретто - переложение для фортепиано* (Ленинград: Советский композитор, 1979); Анатолий Новиков and Рустем Галията-Валаев, *Левша - Русская музыкальная комедия в 3-х действиях - либретто Р. Галията-Валаева по мотивам Н. С. Лескова - клавир* (Москва: Советский композитор, 1960); Борис Александрович Александров, *Левша - хореографическое представление в двух частях - клавир - либретто* (Москва: Советский композитор, 1981); Анатолий Александров, *Левша - опера или трагикомическое представление в двух действиях, с пением, танцами, разговорами, симфонической музыкой и подкованной блохой - Соч. 103 - либретто - клавир* (Москва: Советский композитор, 1979); Иван Иванов-Вано, *Левша*, Мультфильм (Москва: Союзмультфильм, 1964), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTowYSFR2Uc>.

<sup>227</sup> The one adaptation I have been able to find that attempts to faithfully render the complete array of satire in the original is the film version directed by Sergey Ovcharov with a soundtrack composed by the prolific Ukrainian film composer and ethnomusicologist, Igor Matsiyevsky. Сергей Овчаров, *Левша*, (Ленинград: Ленфильм, 1986), YouTube video "ЛЕВША (Советский Фильм Сказка)," posted by LFV, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ygjn7nPvbg&t=3256s>.

## Chapter 3

### **Konstantin Kinchev and Alisa: From Counterculture to Apologia...and Back?**

“Ну против чего мне протестовать? Я всем доволен.”

“Well what do I have to protest against? I am satisfied with everything.”

-Konstantin Kinchev

#### **Introduction**

The first two chapters of this dissertation traced the movement of works from non-patriotic or apolitical (which is not to say anti-patriotic) positions to expressions of more overt nationalism. The next two chapters, by contrast, look at musical artists themselves who have undertaken or have undergone transformations in contemporary Russian culture. This chapter discusses the later stages of a transformation in a nationalist direction similar to those we witnessed with both “Kukushka” and *Levsha*: the case of Konstantin Kinchev and his band Alisa. Kinchev has come to represent the far-right wing of Russian rock despite his beginnings (much like Viktor Tsoi) as an icon of late-Soviet counterculture. Over the past three decades, Kinchev’s views have become conservative in the extreme. He has become so radically conservative, that, ironically, he has recently expressed displeasure with the United Russia party and its leader Vladimir Putin. According to the musings of Kinchev, democracy is not a viable form of government for the vast expanse of territory the Russian state controls. Therefore, his problems are not so much with Putin as they are with those who complicate matters of unified governance and unified Russian identity in the post-Soviet era.

Kinchev dreams of something less messy than democracy, namely an autocratic monarchy that takes its cues from the Orthodox church. As part of this desired return to Russia's mythical, prelapsarian greatness—a past that, needless to say, never existed—Kinchev also seems to yearn for the return of territory lost during the breakup of the Soviet Union. At the very least, he presumes some level of fealty to Russia on the part of other Slavic nations, including at least the nations of Ukraine, Bulgaria, Serbia, (and presumably, Belarus); he rejects their desires for self-determination as gullible at best and a betrayal of their Slavic brethren at worst. Some sympathetic fans find that by making such claims Kinchev is merely expressing painful truths about a widespread historical ignorance.

Although in interviews Kinchev professes to be a maverick, speaking his mind independent of political affiliation, the very ideas he espouses in public statements and in the lyrical content of his songs indicated a drift further and further toward nationalism and conservative traditionalism. A number of his statements also track the anti-Western rhetoric and mythologization of Russian history found in the Russian government's latest policies about culture cited in the introduction to this dissertation. Analysis of the relevant contexts surrounding three of Kinchev's songs shows how closely they accord with Russia's most recent adventures in regional politics (especially regarding Ukraine) as well as with its construction of a new messianic identity.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that Kinchev is an opportunist, playing the protester when it suits him. Yet it also seems possible that he feeds off the energy of the crowd, taking whatever posture is necessary to fuel that energy, putting him in a position of control. His most consistent posture is one of intense and sustained rebellion against

modernism and progressive values. It is no wonder the Russian government remains unperturbed by his periodic rants: Kinchev is able to maintain his nonconformist identity and the state is able to keep using his signature anthem, “*Nebo Slavyan*” (“Sky of the Slavs” – the first song in our discussion), to stir up nationalist sentiment. While the other works that are central to my argument, “*Vlast*” and “*Naebali*,” will probably never be used as official propaganda, they have not faced direct condemnation. Their lack of attractiveness as propaganda are due in part to the fact that both are dated, referring to specific events in recent Ukrainian history, while the latter has the added problem of being extremely profane.

Evidence from my informants and from the comment threads on various Russian social media platforms shows that Russian youth no longer hold Kinchev in high regard, and that he has lost a lot of the “*Alisa Army*” of old. Yet despite his transformation from widely admired to radioactively controversial, he has managed to retain a core following and even attract new listeners. An understanding of the significant influence Kinchev continues to wield is central to our understanding of how certain rock musicians help extreme, conservative rhetoric remain a part of mainstream conversations in Russia.

### **“*Nebo Slavian*” (The Sky of the Slavs)**

On November 7, 2017, the Russian Federation held one of its annual commemorations of World War II sacrifice. The most important of these events, known as *Den’ Pobedy*, or Victory Day, occurs annually on May 9 to mark Germany’s capitulation to the Soviet Union and typically includes mass displays of Russia’s military

strength, past and present, processing across and flying over Red Square.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the November 7 commemoration, entitled “Solemn march dedicated to the Parade on November 7, 1941” included military imagery, albeit more anachronistically. The unusual title refers to a sendoff parade for the Red Army that took place on this date in Red Square, after which the participating troops marched directly to the front to face the Axis forces. The armaments on display and the dress of many of the participants were meant to match those of the original event.<sup>2</sup> Other costumes and props recalled the historical dress of various defeated foreign invaders and their Russian counterparts from centuries past.

During the 2017 march reenactment, immediately following a performance of the Russian national anthem by a military band, the rock song “*Nebo Slavian*,” or “Sky of the Slavs,” was sung by one of the latest Russian pop stars to emerge on the scene, Anastasiya Spiridonova (b. 1986).<sup>3</sup> But Spiridonova did not write the song: it was a cover of a 2003 Alisa song from their album *Now Is Later Than You Think* (*Seichas pozdnee, chem ty думаesh*’).<sup>4</sup> The song’s chorus gets to the heart of both the song’s message and

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<sup>1</sup> Full video coverage of this year’s commemoration with commentary in English can be found here: RT, “Victory Day Parade on Red Square 2017 (FULL VIDEO),” accessed June 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MGj7CdLDds&t=296s>.

<sup>2</sup> “Марш в честь парада 7 ноября 1941 года прошел на Красной площади,” *Известия*, November 7, 2017, accessed June 13, 2020, <https://iz.ru/667887/2017-11-07/marsh-v-chest-parada-7-noiabria-1941-goda-prokhorit-na-krasnoi-ploshchadi>.

<sup>3</sup> Just weeks prior to this performance, the pop star gave her solo concert debut at the State Kremlin Palace. “Анастасия Спиридонова | Государственный Кремлевский Дворец,” accessed November 26, 2017, <http://kremlinpalace.org/ru/events/anastasiya-spiridonova>. This page has since been deleted from the Kremlin palace events site.

<sup>4</sup> Alisa, “*Небо Славян*,” Track 2 on Alisa, *Сейчас Позднее, Чем Ты Думаешь* (Moroz M’usik, 2003).

the message of the November 7 state commemoration: Russia is a great Slavic brotherhood; it will suppress all foreign invasion and influence; and its territory is nearly limitless.

“*Nebo Slavian*” – Chorus

Нас точит семя орды,  
Нас гнёт ярмо басурман,  
Но в наших венах кипит  
Небо славян.  
И от Чудских берегов  
До ледяной Колымы.  
Всё это наша земля! Всё это мы!

“Sky of the Slavs”

We are sharpened by the seed of the  
horde,  
We are bent by the Basurman yoke,  
But in our veins boils  
The sky of the Slavs.  
And from the shores of the Peipsi  
To the ice of Kolyma.  
All this is our land! All this is us!<sup>5</sup>

Kinchev, the song’s author, has a noted propensity for medieval allusion, archaic language, and by this point in his career, for references to Russian history and the Orthodox faith.<sup>6</sup> The opening lines call to mind past mythical, or near-mythical enemies that were eventually driven out of Russia. The word “horde” refers to the occupation of the Mongols (alternatively known as the Tatar Yoke) from the early-thirteenth to late-fifteenth centuries, while “*basurman*” denotes Muslims or any non-Christian or non-Orthodox religious practitioners.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Author’s translation. “*Nebo Slavian*,” accessed November 27, 2017, [http://www.alisa.net/disk1/d03\\_lyrics.htm#nebo](http://www.alisa.net/disk1/d03_lyrics.htm#nebo).

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these attributes, see David-Emil Wickstrom and Yngvar B. Steinholt, “Visions of the (Holy) Motherland in Contemporary Russian Popular Music: Nostalgia, Patriotism, Religion and Russkii Rok,” *Popular Music & Society* 32, no. 3 (July 2009): 320, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007760902985668>.

<sup>7</sup> David-Emil Wickström, *Rocking St. Petersburg: Transcultural Flows and Identity Politics in Post-Soviet Popular Music*, Second, Revised and Expanded Edition, Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society 101 (Stuttgart, Ger.: Ibidem-Verlag, 2014), 218.



The “shores of the Peipsi” allude to the lake on the border with today’s Estonia where the legendary Alexander Nevsky vanquished the Teutonic Knights in the famous battle on the ice in 1240 (the battle immortalized in Sergei Eisenstein’s 1938 film). Among other victories Nevsky’s battle essentially led to the permanent demarcation between Eastern and Western Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Reenactments of Nevsky’s triumphs have been *de rigueur* since the Soviet period and Spiridonova continued this trend when she sang “Sky of the Slavs” for a national television audience.<sup>9</sup> The connection to Nevsky is made explicit in Alisa’s video for the song. Near the beginning it features a clip from Eisenstein’s film, including the eponymous hero’s rousing, likely apocryphal statement: “If somebody invades us with a sword, from the sword he will also perish. On that [premise] stands and will stand the Russian land!”<sup>11</sup>

This quotation was unremarkable, even understandable, in the original film given the period in which it was made, the time of tension between the USSR and Germany (1938) that preceded the temporary comity lasting from the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact through the 1941 German invasion of the USSR. Yet Kinchev’s decision to include

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<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey A Hosking, *Russian History : A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions 308 (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8.

<sup>9</sup> The performance begins after 10:55 in the following video. “Торжественный марш, посвященный 76-й годовщине Парада 7 ноября 1941 года,” accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/den-pobedy/parady-pobedy/torzhestvennyy-marsh-posvyashenny-76-y-godovshine-parada-7-noyabrya-1941-goda>.

<sup>11</sup> “Если кто с мечом к нам войдет, от меча и погибнет. На том стоит и стоять будет Русская Земля!” trans. in Wickström, *Rocking St. Petersburg: Transcultural Flows and Identity Politics in Post-Soviet Popular Music*, 218; The choice to retitling the second, revised edition of this book might cause some confusion about this source. The same quotation appears in the first edition as well. See in David-Emil Wickström, “Okna Otkroi!” - “Open the Windows!”: *Transcultural Flows and Identity Politics in the St. Petersburg Popular Music Scene*, Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society 101 (Stuttgart, Ger.: Ibidem-Verlag, 2011), 204.

it in the official video for “Sky of the Slavs” in 2013 is significant. It is a direct response to NATO’s planned expansion up to the very borders of Russia, an expansion that reached fruition in April 2004 with the admission of the former Communist countries Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia (five years after admitting the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland). These are the new invaders Kinchev warns against.

In Alisa’s original recording, we hear a constellation of timbres and musical gestures that track the aggressive militancy of the text while simultaneously accessing an ancient past rooted in the Russian folk. Example 3.1 shows an electric bass/electric guitar ostinato that is filtered through heavy distortion which pervades the song. In combination with the specific rhythm of the ostinato, this distorted timbre, combined with the heavy bass, suggests the rapid bursts of a particularly large and powerful automatic weapon at the beginning of each bar.

As musicologist Albin Zak has noted, “Electric guitar distortion is common to many rock styles. . . . But this generalization does not begin to tell the story of the conflicting stances associated with different *kinds* of distortion.”<sup>12</sup> In short, the endless variety of distortion levels, filters, and recording processes (and the endless combinations thereof) available to electric guitarists signal an equally endless variety of meanings.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Albin J. Zak, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 64.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Wallace Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark, eds., *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018); Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Human Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Peter Doyle, *Echo and Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music Recording, 1900-1960* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press,

Zak argues for a wide semantic distinction between the “highly refined, clean and smooth” guitar distortion, resembling “large slabs of polished marble” on Def Leppard’s *Pyromania* (1983) and the “ragged, edgy, and searing” version found on Nirvana’s *Nevermind* (1991). The “carefully crafted” and “intentionally controlled” sound of Def Leppard, “made safe for mainstream pop consumption,” Zak asserts, indicates the band members’ desire to affect an attitude of “escapism.” He adds, “Like cinematic special effects that thrill but are never mistaken for reality,” the band’s particular brand of distortion “is prized mainly for its larger-than-life quality.” By contrast, he hears the more “raw” distortion on Nirvana’s album as “part of an intensely personal expression, a sonic assault on the mainstream shot straight from the soul of the outsider.” For Zak, associations with the similar sounds of early punk groups like the Sex Pistols and the Stooges, add even more “symbolic power” to Nirvana’s overall affect: now the guitar “is meant to sound like a spontaneous eruption of maverick psychic energy manifested in musical expression.”<sup>14</sup>

In the intro, transitions, and closing material of “Sky of the Slavs” the guitar distortion is edgy and thick, yet it better resembles the tightly controlled sounds of Def Leppard than the more raw and unrestrained timbres of Nirvana. In E minor, the guitar

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2005); David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995); *Music’s Meanings: A Modern Musicology for Non-Musos* (Larchmont, N.Y.: Mass Media Music Scholars’ Press, 2012); Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Music Culture (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993); Tony Bacon and Lynn Wheelright, “Electric Guitar,” Grove Music Online, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/0-mo-9781561592630-e-1002256412>; *Music’s Meanings: A Modern Musicology for Non-Musos*; Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music*.

<sup>14</sup> Zak, *The Poetics of Rock*, 64–65.

occupies the lower half of its range. The bass doubling creates a combined timbre with great sonic heft. Though it never threatens to overwhelm its handler, anyone standing in its path should beware. And while in some ways this timbre recalls the “sonic assault” of Nirvana, rather than originating from the “soul of the outsider” this assault is directed *at* the outsider. This recurring material is the most energetic in the song, propelling it forward from past to present and on to future victories against foreign invaders.

**Example 3.1. Alisa, “Sky of the Slavs,” Intro/Trans./Closing material, Electric Bass/Electric Guitar.**



Simple melodies and countermelodies in the natural minor immediately access a folk idiom, yet it is the occurrence of falling fourths and fifths (Glinka’s “soul of Russian music”) at cadential moments that truly connotes the Russian *narod* for ears attuned to these stereotyped folk conventions. A falling fifth is heard halfway through each statement of the recurring melody performed on a keyboard synthesizer over the texture described above (this gesture is audible at 0:19, 1:02, 2:29, 4:10, and 4:24 of the studio recording), while a scalar falling fourth in Kinchev’s vocal line appears at the midpoints (and some endings) of each verse (0:41, 1:23, 1:37, 2:49, 3:04, and 3:24) and at the ends of two choruses (2:07, 3:34). All occur at cadential moments. Whether Kinchev consciously accessed these conventions is unclear. Though conventions like these were exaggerated by nineteenth-century Russian composers, they have by now become firmly associated with common ideas about what Russian folk music sounds like. And while their primordial origin and ubiquity are dubious, they may nevertheless constitute part of the musical DNA of contemporary Russians like Kinchev. There are at least thirteen

songs in Alisa's discography (up to and including this 2003 album) that make use of one or more of these melodic conventions.<sup>15</sup>

The choruses move to a quasi-half tempo feel with heavy accents on beats one and three (e.g., 1:41). The combination bass/guitar timbre of the introduction material switches to an ostinato redolent of the smashes and hacks of more anachronistic weaponry. A countermelody with an improvisatory quality swirls higher and higher via a new synthetic timbre resembling the kind of primitive hand organ one might hear in the *balagany* theater of Russian village carnivals. During a later bridge section (2:09) the hand organ timbre adds even more florid figurations. And over the first half of the final chorus, the recorded sounds of marching feet suddenly provide the only accompaniment to Kinchev's voice. They continue to march in step as the introduction material described above returns to close out the song.

The theme of modern warfare signified with every return of the introduction material continually reifies the notion of Russia's present—and future—dominance. The combination of folk timbres and atavistic melodic figures help to position this modern, dominant Russia as the inevitable apex of the military victories of medieval Rus' and the Soviet Union shown in Alisa's video. The song imagines one continuous, unbroken chain of Slavic unity preserved and welded together by Russian might that extends from the distant past to a bright, messianic future.

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<sup>15</sup> See for instance, "Siberian Crane" (*Sterkh*) from the 1989 album *the Sixth Forrester (Shestoi Lesnichii)*, "Covered Wagon" or "Nomad's Tent" (*Kibitka*) from the 1993 album *For Those Who Have Fallen from the Moon (Dlya tekh, kto svalilsia s luny)*, "Mama" (*Mama*) from the 1997 album *Fool (Duren')*, "Red Mountains" (*Krasnye gory*) from the 2000 album *Solstice (Solntsevorot')*, "Good Morning" (*Dobroe utro*) from the 2001 album *To Dance (Tantsevat')*, and "Homeland" (*Rodina*) from the 2003 album *Now Is Later Than You Think (Seichas pozdnee, chem ty думаesh')*.

A Russian journalist mentioned “Sky of the Slavs,” in her vivid description of Alisa’s disparate audience during a 2007 concert: “People of different ages came to Kinchev; even after dinner, ‘*Nebo Slavian*’ boiled in their unruly little heads—punks and metal heads; vocalists of old, long-disintegrated jazz bands; and even skin-headed nationalists.”<sup>16</sup> Describing events during the concert, she added, “The security chief writhed hysterically and shouted that there had never been such a terrible concert in his life. Almost the entire first row was occupied by nationalists with flags who tenaciously climbed onto the stage.”<sup>17</sup>

Some might read the inclusion of “Sky of the Slavs” in the 2017 patriotic spectacle on Red Square with a touch of irony because it immediately followed a wordless performance of the Russian national anthem. The current anthem has a controvertial lineage: it is musically, but not textually, identical to the one that made its debut at the beginning of 1944 under Stalin.

After his death in 1953, Khrushchev expunged the text as part of his de-Stalinization efforts and the anthem would remain wordless until 1977 when the text was reinstated, albeit without the following lines:

May the Soviet banner, the people’s banner  
Lead us from one victory to the next! . . .

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<sup>16</sup> “На Кинчева пришли люди разных возрастов, еще с обеда в буйных головушках ‘кипело небо славян’ - панки и металлисты, вокалисты старых, давно распавшихся джаз-бэндов и даже бритоголовые националисты.” Татьяна Шугайло, “Кинчев требует расстреливать гомосексуалистов: эксклюзивное интервью лидера группы ‘Алиса,’” ЕНВ - Общество, February 22, 2007, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://novostiv1.ru/post/3874/>.

<sup>17</sup> “Начальник охраны бился в истерике и кричал, что такого ужасного концерта в его жизни никогда не было - почти весь первый ряд заняли националисты с флагами и упорно лезли на сцену.” Шугайло.

Thus Stalin has raised us, to be loyal to the people. . . .  
We cultivated our army in battle,  
We will wipe all despicable invaders from our path!  
In battle, we decide the fate of future generations,  
We will lead our fatherland to glory!

Common to both versions (1944 and 1977), were the first two lines (among others):

An unbreakable union of free republics  
Has been eternally welded together by great Russia.<sup>19</sup>

As the ethnomusicologist, J. Martin Daughtry notes, the reemergence of this tune as the melody for the national anthem in 2000 was seen by the cultural intelligentsia and progressives in government “as a step toward Soviet revanchism and as an affront to those who suffered under the Soviet regime.”<sup>20</sup> For them, the association between the music and the original text was too strong for any new words to erase the old ones, much less their ideological imprint. While a majority of today’s Russians may more closely associate the music of the anthem with the newest text, in 2003 when Kinchev penned “Sky of the Slavs,” there is reason to suspect that the old associations with the text cited above might have still been strong for many. According to Daughtry, some Russians reported that the Brezhnev government’s attempt to change the music’s Stalinist associations by finally replacing the Stalin-era text with its own set of updated lyrics was a failure. Flashing forward to 2000, Daughtry found that even some of those Russians who supported the reinstallation of this music still heard one of the older versions of the

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<sup>19</sup> The translation is Daughtry’s. See J. Martin Daughtry, “Russia’s New Anthem and the Negotiation of National Identity,” *Ethnomusicology* 47, no. 1 (2003): 48–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/852511>.

<sup>20</sup> Daughtry, 57.

lyrics in their head as they sung the new words.<sup>21</sup> For comparison, here are the new words set to the old Soviet melody:

VERSE 1

Russia, our holy power,  
Russia, our beloved [or “favorite”] country!  
A mighty will and great glory  
Are your achievement for all time!

REFRAIN

Glory to our free Fatherland  
An age-old union of fraternal Peoples  
The People’s wisdom, given by our ancestors—  
Glory to you, country! We are proud of you!

VERSE 2

From the southern seas to the Polar regions  
Our forests and fields have spread out.  
You are the only one on earth! You are unique—  
Protected by God, our native land!

REPEAT REFRAIN

VERSE 3

A wide space for dreams and for life  
Are opened for us by the coming years.  
Our faithfulness to the Fatherland gives us strength.  
So it was, so it is, and so it always will be!

REPEAT REFRAIN<sup>22</sup>

Comparing Kinchev’s text for “Sky of the Slavs” with the Stalin-era phrases shown earlier, we see a notable thematic similarity in the vanquishing of foreign invaders by a people sharpened in combat. Thus, part of Kinchev’s and Alisa’s transformation is an anachronistic turn toward rhetoric abandoned in 1953. Yet perhaps an even more germane similarity is the notion of an “unbreakable union...eternally welded together by great Russia.” The conceit that Russia was the bond uniting disparate republics in the

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<sup>21</sup> Daughtry, 60.

<sup>22</sup> This translation is also Daughtry’s. See Daughtry, 52.



Soviet era is the same one Kinchev seems to imply with his song's title. With every repetition of the words "sky of the Slavs" within the song, and with every performance of the song in a Russian patriotic context, the metaphor of the sky as the Russian flag looming large over its neighbors strengthens.

It therefore reads as a claim of legitimacy for the state's past and future transgressions on the sovereignty of those Slavic nations in its "near abroad."<sup>24</sup> In a 2008 press conference in Kyiv, Ukraine, Kinchev lent credence to this reading of the song's meaning, providing statements about his "*derzhavnik*" (a believer in the supreme power of a sovereign) worldview and about his views on events unfolding in Ukraine: "I am for a great, bright *Rus'* with the capital in Kiev. The capital should be here, but the country should be called '*Rus'*."<sup>25</sup> While this statement sounds remarkable, it is certainly not original. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn—vociferous critic of the Soviet Union that he was—was not immune to nationalist sentiment either, professing similar pan-Slavic reunification ideas during the twilight of perestroika. He even went so far as to declare that parts of Kazakhstan should be incorporated alongside Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus in this new Slavic state.<sup>26</sup> There seems little reason to doubt that the journalists reported

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<sup>24</sup> This phrase reflects Russians' ambivalence toward accepting that Russophone regions like Minsk in Belarus or Donetsk and Luhansk (but no longer Crimea) in southern and eastern Ukraine now belong to countries other than Russia. Geoffrey A Hosking, *Russia and the Russians: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 605.

<sup>25</sup> "Я за великую светлую Русь со столицей в Киеве. Столица должна быть здесь, а страна должна называться 'Русь.'" See in Михаил Рябов and Андрей Лубенский, "Кинчев призвал выдать дочек Путина за британских принцев и воссоздать столицу Руси в Киеве," *Новый День - российское информационное агентство*, February 23, 2008, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://newdaynews.ru/kyiv/165835.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Francis X. Clines, "Russia Gets Call By Solzhenitsyn For Slavic State," *New York Times*, September 19, 1990, sec. World, accessed July 12, 2020,

Kinchev's pronunciation of Ukraine's capital city accurately (using the Russian "Kiev," as opposed to the Ukrainian "Kyiv"), so it seems clear that he believes Russian language and culture, Orthodoxy, and government should reign supreme in his imagined state as well. In other words, we should not read this as an unwitting deference to Ukrainian nationalism.

After extolling the virtues of Putin and implying that then-prime minister of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko was two-faced, Kinchev painted the picture of a United States jealous of the new, stronger Russian state. He also trivialized concerns about free speech in Russia, opining that the internet would always be free of state control and that notions of a sovereign Russian internet were invented in Ukraine.<sup>28</sup> According to Kinchev, anyone was free to say whatever they wanted in Russia within the reasonable limits defined by its constitution. He summed up his views: "I am for an authoritarian state, but do not confuse it with a totalitarian one."<sup>29</sup>

As early as December 1999, Putin showed an interest in gaming the Russian internet's infrastructure, an idea that eventually led to the idea of establishing Russian "internet sovereignty." During his first term as prime minister (even before he had an email address), he began testing the waters with proposals for shifting control of the internet domain .ru from the nongovernmental organization based at the Kurchatov

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<https://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/19/world/russia-gets-call-by-solzhenitsyn-for-slavic-state.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Рябов and Лубенский.

<sup>29</sup> "Я за авторитарное государство, но не надо его путать с тоталитарным." Konstantin Kinchev, qtd. in Рябов and Лубенский.

Institute to the Kremlin.<sup>30</sup> And by 2010, merely two years after Kinchev’s statement, then President Vladimir Medvedev’s minister of communications, Igor Shchegolev, was openly promoting precisely this idea of Russia’s “national sovereignty” on the Internet.<sup>31</sup> In 2014 the business daily *Vedomosti* broke news leaked to them that the Russian Security Council had a meeting planned to discuss shutting the Russian internet off from the rest of the world should an emergency arise. Because of its centralized structure, and the very few Internet exchange points connecting it to the outside world, the plan is deemed feasible.<sup>32</sup> So far censorship initiatives have been more modest. Although clear-cut examples are difficult to find, they do exist. For example, in March 2014 *Roskomnadzor* (Federal Agency for the Supervision of Communications) blocked the sites of three independent opposition news media (Kasparov.ru, Ej.ru., and Grani.ru).<sup>33</sup> Two of my informants reported that these sites were still blocked as late as June 2020.<sup>34</sup>

In a 2011 public round-table discussion about Orthodox faith, Kinchev asserted, “Secular power should receive its nourishment from spiritual power, and not vice versa.”<sup>35</sup> This statement echoes another that Kinchev made after the 2007 concert

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<sup>30</sup> Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The Kremlin’s War on the Internet* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 94–97.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>34</sup> Gleb Vildanov, WhatsApp communication, June 14, 2020; Evgeny Lav, WhatsApp communication, June 14, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> “Власть светская должна получать окормление у власти духовной, а не наоборот.” Konstantin Kinchev, qtd. in Денис Ступников, “Кинчев на православном лектории:

described above and therefore demonstrates his ideological consistency: “Generally, I see the future of Russia in a symphony of authorities: in all decisions, secular power should receive the blessing of the clergy, the president should go hand in hand with the patriarch, and then [the state’s] power will grow stronger. Putin actually holds a good position now.”<sup>36</sup> He then drew from a very essentialist and stereotypical reading of Russian history to justify Putin’s strategies for governance:

We have a very large territory, and all the alien doctrines do not work! Of course, you can disagree with me, but I believe the main factors here are the Byzantine origins, which at a subconscious level are rooted in our mentality. Under autocracy, *Rus*’ multiplied and multiplied, and also all lands begged to come under our wing. And we just squandered everything. It is necessary to act in a strong-willed fashion. Russia is only suited to the stick and the carrot. I have been living on earth for a long time and have seen many leaders. Putin is the best! Since 1999, he has centralized the country and strengthened Russia’s position in world politics. He caught Russia a step away from collapse. And the Putin concept of power seems to me the most appropriate to what I consider necessary for my homeland.<sup>37</sup>

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‘Разочарую, я не проповедник – я рок-звезда!’” KM.RU, April 1, 2011, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.km.ru/music/9b19d1ee4b5545a3893f4363c1bbc679>.

<sup>36</sup> “Вообще я вижу будущее России в симфонии властей: власть светская на все решения должна получать благословение от духовенства, президент должен идти рука об руку с патриархом, тогда будет и держава крепнуть. В общем-то сейчас хорошие позиции занимает Путин.” Konstantin Kinchev, qtd. in Шугайло, “Кинчев требует расстреливать гомосексуалистов.”

<sup>37</sup> “У нас очень большая территория, и все пришлые доктрины не работают! Со мной, конечно, можно не соглашаться, но я считаю, что главные факторы здесь - это византийские истоки, которые на подсознательном уровне укоренились в нашем менталитете. При самодержавии Русь множилась и множилась, все земли просились и шли к нам под крыло. А мы просто так все разбазарили. Волевым методом надо действовать. Для России характерен только кнут и пряник. Я достаточно долго на земле живу и многих руководителей видел. Путин - наилучший! С 99-го года он централизовал страну и укрепил позиции России в мировой политике. Он подхватил Россию в шаге от развала. И путинская концепция власти мне представляется наиболее соответствующей тому, что я считаю нужным для моей Родины.” Konstantin Kinchev in Шугайло.

Kinchev's credo roots the collective mind of the historical Russian people in the East. As the words to "Sky of the Slavs" assume Russia's greater authority among Slavic nations, Kinchev's statements above correspond with the state's ambitions to create a Eurasian strategic and economic alliance led by Russia. To further connect this song with state ambitions, I conclude this part of my discussion by revisiting Spiridonova's performance and briefly discussing another performance of this song in relation to Crimea.

Spiridonova's performance represents yet another example of the mutually beneficial relationships that exist between the state and the most high-profile musical artists in Russia today. Singing this song by one of the legends of Russian rock provided the pop star with her second, state-sponsored performance and reinforced the government's tacit approval of the Russian-centric, pan-Slavic views of Kinchev. The rhetoric in these lyrics is colored mostly with pride for historical conquests, but we can also see room for conquests yet to be won, as well as hints of their inevitability. The text is useful to the current government's project to rebuild Russian national identity, for it promises the return of past dominion and past domination.

"Sky of the Slavs" has also been used in other Kremlin-funded patriotic productions. Translating the title as "Slavic Skies," Peter Pomerantsev speaks of it in connection to the same nationalist biker gang we encountered in chapter one, the Night Wolves. Writing in 2014, Pomerantsev provides a description of the bikers' televised spectacles that complements what we read in chapter 1 via Michael Idov. His account covers the entire panoply of state propaganda in one paragraph:

They [the Night Wolves] will receive Kremlin support for their annual bike show and rock concert in Crimea, the one-time jewel in the Tsarist Empire that ended up as part of Ukraine during Soviet times, and where the Night Wolves use their massive shows to call for retaking the peninsula from Ukraine and restoring the

lands of Greater Russia; posing with the President in photo ops in which he wears Ray-Bans and leathers; playing mega-concerts to 250,000 cheering fans celebrating the victory at Stalingrad in World War II and the eternal Holy War Russia is destined to fight against the West, with Cirque du Soleil-like trapeze acts, Spielberg-scale battle reenactments, religious icons, and holy ecstasies—in the middle of which come speeches from Stalin, read aloud to the 250,000 and announcing the holiness of the Soviet warrior—after which come more dancing girls and then the Night Wolves’ anthem, “Slavic Skies.”<sup>38</sup>

With the return of Stalin’s speeches in a patriotic celebration in Crimea that reaches its pinnacle at the moment Kinchev’s song is played, the thematic connections between the Stalin-era version of the national anthem and Kinchev’s text discussed above seem even stronger. This account also places the song within the context of Russia’s destiny to “fight against the West” which may have been provoked by the expansion of NATO and the hopes of many Ukrainians for stronger ties with the European Union. Finally, the events described above firmly connect the song to the notion of “restoring the lands” of other Slavs to “Greater Russia” that mentioned above. That his song might garner support among Kinchev’s fellow countrymen for the Russian state to take other lands seems possible. Though Putin is not likely to seek the blessing of the clergy in all decisions as Kinchev proposes, “Sky of the Slavs” represents the culmination of a transformative period in which Kinchev’s work moved squarely into a position of usefulness for the state’s hegemonic interests. Next I explore evidence that the authoritarian mindset demonstrated in statements cited above has been a part of Kinchev’s personality since the earliest days of Alisa.

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<sup>38</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), 187–88.

## The Kinchev Stage Persona

The prominent theater and cultural critics Marina Timasheva and Aleksandr Sokolyansky have drawn a striking contrast between Viktor Tsoi and Konstantin Kinchev, an argument that underscores the contrast I have been showing between these artists. Here the two critics describe Tsoi's persona:

Viktor Tsoi's choice was loneliness, rejecting fear, but devoid of hope. . . . He says "we," "ours" ("We are waiting for changes!"), but sometimes it seems that "we" for him is just a way to shield himself from "you," from a bond that obliges commitment. The world of Tsoi is a brotherhood of loners, united by an absence of a way out. In this world, without a second thought they would give their lives for the most distant stranger, while saying to those closest to them, "Do not touch my heart."<sup>44</sup>

They continue with a pithy description of Tsoi's performance aesthetic:

No matter how incendiary the words are, Tsoi dispassionately, almost melancholically transmits them to the hall, slightly choking the stretched-out vowels. He moves across the stage with a gloomy, arduous grace, as if overcoming the resistance of the environment: as a fish would swim in jelly. Tsoi's voice has more metal in it than all of heavy metal put together: he knows that the blade is more dangerous than a blacksmith's hammer.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> "Одиночество, отвергающее страх, но лишенное надежды — выбор Виктора Цоя. . . . Он говорит 'мы,' 'наше' ('Мы ждем перемен!'), но иногда думается, что 'мы' для него — лишь способ заслониться от 'ты,' от связи, обязывающей к самоотдаче. Мир Цоя — братство одиночек, сплоченное отсутствием выхода. В этом мире, не думая, отдадут жизнь за самого дальнего, но и ближайшего одернут: 'Не тронь мою душу.'" Марина Тимашева and Александр Соколянский, "Вместо послесловия: лики русского рока," in Илья Смирнов, *Время колокольчиков - жизнь и смерть русского рока* (Москва: ИНТО, 1994), 252.

<sup>45</sup> "Как бы ни были зажигательны слова, Цой бесстрастно, почти меланхолически транслирует их в зал, чуть сдавленно протягивая гласные. Он движется по сцене с сумрачным, нелегким изяществом, словно преодолевает сопротивление среды: так рыба плавала бы в киселе. В голосе Цоя больше металла, чем во всем 'хэви метал,' вместе взятом: он знает, что лезвие опасней, чем кузнечный молот." Тимашева and Соколянский, 252.

That the authors regard Tsoi and Kinchev as polar opposites is evident from the outset of their description of Kinchev:

The battle cry of the group Alisa was a response to the desperate loneliness of Kino: “We are together!” Its leader, the leader of the second generation of the new wave, Konstantin Kinchev, carried the word “we” like a banner. The question, “Together, in the name of what?,” was assumed to be incorrect. A tough, aggressive, extremely dramatic showman, Kinchev offered the audience his own image as a collective one: “My generation” — and gradually, almost imperceptibly, he shifted the emphasis to the word “my.” The position of the tribune grew into that of a conqueror.<sup>46</sup>

Their description of the audience response to Kinchev is equally revealing:

Trained to perceive itself as Kinchev’s creation, today the audience happily submits to him, and the emphasized collectivism of “we” is now replaced by a proud “I”: “There I go,” “I need air.” As a condition of unity, Kinchev asserts his monopoly on the discourse. [They] are speechless, and it’s worth it [to them]: Alisa’s performance is hardly ever the weakest in concert. Musical power, color, lighting, plastic art — everything is subordinate, everything is dazzling and demands an answer: not through dialogue, but by way of echo. Alisa’s consistently proclaimed anti-totalitarianism coexists strangely with their rather authoritarian and calculating management of the feelings of the audience in the hall.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> “Ответом на отчаянное одиночество КИНО стал боевой клич группы АЛИСА: ‘Мы вместе!’ Лидер ее, лидер второго поколения ‘новой волны’ Константин Кинчев слово ‘мы’ нес как знамя. Вопрос ‘Во имя чего вместе?’ предполагался некорректным. Жесткий, напористый, чрезвычайно эффектный шоумен Кинчев предлагал залу свой собственный образ как собирательный: ‘Моё поколение’ — и постепенно, почти незаметно перемещал акцент на слово ‘моё.’ Позиция трибуна переросла в позу завоевателя.” Тимашева and Соколянский, 253.

<sup>47</sup> “Приученная воспринимать создание Кинчева как себя самое, аудитория радостно подчиняется певцу и сегодня, когда подчеркнутый коллективизм ‘мы’ вытесняется гордым ‘я’: ‘Там иду я,’ ‘Мне нужен воздух.’ Условием единства Кинчев ставит свою монополию на высказывание. Нет слов — оно того стоит: выступление АЛИСЫ — едва ли не сильнейшее в концерте. Музыкальная мощь, цвет, свет, пластика — все соподчинено, все завораживает и требует ответа: но не диалога, а отзвука. Последовательно декларируемый антитоталитаризм АЛИСЫ странно уживается с этим довольно авторитарным и расчетливым управлением чувствами зала.” Тимашева and Соколянский, 253.



Whereas Tsoi is portrayed as an expert surgeon, dissecting the problems of late-Soviet youth with unmatched precision so that listeners find in his words the perfect expression of their own lived experience, Kinchev is depicted as a more aggressive version of the pied-piper, using brute force and pyrotechnics to rock the audience into submission. Both the persona and the audience response Timasheva and Sokolyansky describe can be traced throughout Kinchev's career as a live performer. Yet this image runs counter to the one he often tries to cultivate during interviews, insisting that he never pretends to be a leader or spokesperson. During one interview he averred, "My speech is tongue-tied, and my thinking is paradoxical. I can't give a clear answer to any question." Later he added, "I don't want to judge anyone," and "I'll disappoint you. I'm not a preacher and not a teacher - I'm a rock star!"<sup>48</sup>

Along with Grebenshchikov and Tsoi, Thomas Cushman noted that Kinchev was considered one of the "high priests" of Russian rock. Writing in 1995, he asserted that much of Kinchev's "sacred social identity" stemmed from his dark persona and his use of *chernukha* or "cruel theater" in his musical style, noting that he often focused on the "cruel, dark, and absurd" aspects of life.<sup>49</sup> Marina Kniazeva, writing about theater in the late-Soviet period, offers a more detailed definition for *chernukha*, calling it "the highest expression of cruel realism, which criticizes all sides of contemporary life and dethrones

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<sup>48</sup> "Речь моя косноязычна, а мышление – парадоксально. . . . Я не могу дать четкого ответа ни на один вопрос. . . . Я никого не хочу судить. . . . Разочарую вас, я не проповедник и не учитель – я рок-звезда!" Konstantin Kinchev in Ступников, "Кинчев на православном лектории."

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Cushman, *Notes from Underground: Rock Music Counterculture in Russia*, SUNY Series in the Sociology of Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 149.

social mythology, as if it were a funeral procession for the ruined destiny of the ‘little man.’”<sup>50</sup> From their personal interactions, he also read Kinchev as generally distrustful of outsiders, speaking “hesitantly and cryptically” and offering very little in the way of personal history.<sup>51</sup> Speaking of Kinchev’s lyrics, Cushman found that “Kostya’s poetic is characterized by a critique of the emptiness and isolation of the world and the setting up of himself as the object of enchantment and attraction.”<sup>52</sup> These last words are especially consistent with the observations of Timasheva and Sokolyansky.

Cushman further specified the foundations of Kinchev’s aesthetic aims as “anti-modern,” calling him a “prophet of the Black ethic.”<sup>53</sup> The *chernukha* aspect of Kinchev’s musical style is influenced by the inspiration he draws from Woland, a representation of the devil from Mikhail Bulgakov’s phantasmagorical satire of Soviet society, *The Master and Margarita*. Written during the early Stalin era but unpublished for decades, the story moves between Moscow and Jerusalem, culminating with Woland’s meeting with Christ on a Moscow rooftop. Christ has determined that the atheist Soviet people are beyond redemption, and Woland eventually leaves the city, finding them not worth his efforts as a corrupting influence either. His Moscow apartment in the story was based on an actual location which has become a site of

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<sup>50</sup> Marina L. Kniazeva, “Theater on the Market,” *Journal of Communication* 41, no. 2 (1991): 35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1991.tb02305.x>.

<sup>51</sup> Cushman, *Notes from Underground*, 150.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

pilgrimage for many, including Kinchev and his band. From Cushman’s perspective, Kinchev sees himself as a modern day Woland, the embodiment of an evil “which is necessary for any good to come from Soviet existence.”<sup>54</sup>

Timasheva and Sokolyansky connect this element of Kinchev’s stage persona to the authoritarian aspects mentioned above. Both critics relate how consequential the exit in 1986 of *Alisa*’s founding member and namesake, Slava “Alice” Zadery was to the band’s new direction, a direction afterward dictated solely by Kinchev. They describe a typical performance when Zadery was still a member of the group: “While Alice was playing in *Alisa* – at times on guitar, at other times on drums – the mischievous little imp lurked and wriggled behind the beautiful demon Kinchev, and the imperious gestures [of Kinchev] were parodied in a crooked mirror [represented by Zadery].” They report that after Zadery’s departure, the “imagery lost its scale and irony, and the unity demanded by Kinchev began to turn ever more noticeably into marching rhythms and rather emphatic slogans.”<sup>55</sup> From their perspective, Kinchev “sees the world in black and white” (or rather, as they muse, “black and red,” since those are the signature colors of the group and its army of fans), and they note a similarity to the pre-Revolutionary novels of Maxim Gorky in Kinchev’s “romance of the monolithic and belief in a strong

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>55</sup> “Слава (Алиса) Задерий когда-то подарил свою кличку группе — как название. Пока Алиса играл в АЛИСЕ — то на гитаре, то на ударных, — за спиной красивого демона Кинчева маячил и кривлялся озорной мелкий бес, властные жесты пародировались в кривом зеркале. Задерий ушел, изображение утратило объемность и ироничность, и взыскуемая Кинчевым цельность все заметнее стала оборачиваться маршевыми ритмами и весьма решительными лозунгами.” Тимашева and Соколянский, 253.

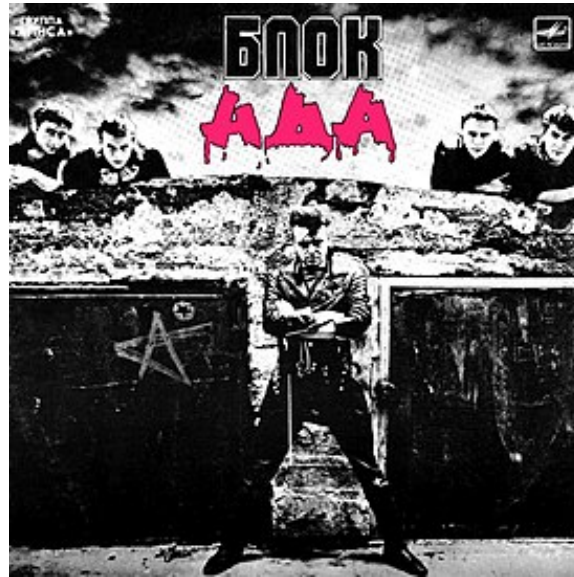
personality.”<sup>56</sup> The “cult of personality” associated with Stalin and more recently with Putin also comes to mind.

The album recorded not long after Zadery’s departure began with a track entitled, “*Vremia meniat’ imena*” (“Time to change names”), which in addition to the marching rhythms Timasheva and Sokolyansky described above, begins with a lone metronome and intermittently features military-style bugle calls. The metronome returns at the close of the album as well, leaving the listener with a distinct feeling of regimentation. The album’s title, “*Blok Ada*” has a double (or maybe even triple) meaning: in one sense, it relates to the English cognate, blockade; in another variation it can mean “Block of Evil” or even in the political sense, “Bloc of Evil.” The band’s signature colors appear in the names given to the sides of the original LP (side A, “Black” and side B, “Red”), in the song title that begins the “red” side of the album, “*Krasnoe na chornom*” (“Red on Black”), and on the album’s cover (see Figure 3.1, below).

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<sup>56</sup> “Кинчев видит мир черно-белым (учитывая ‘фирменные цвета’ группы, надо бы сказать: ‘черно-красным’) и своей романтикой монолита и верой в сильную личность отчасти напоминает героев дореволюционных рассказов М. Горького.” Тимашева and Соколянский, 253.

Figure 3.1: Cover for Alisa's 1989 album *Blok Ada*<sup>57</sup>



In one of Zadery's last performances with *Alisa* on the Leningrad television program, *Muzykal'nyi ring (Musical Ring)*, taped in 1986, the red and black colors are already visible in the stage dress of Kinchev. With all other members wearing only black, Kinchev is clearly set apart as the "object of attraction." Militant riffs sound on the snare drum during the performance of a song whose first line demands that the listener, "Come to Me!" ("*Idi ko mne!*"), seen at the 0:44 mark in the first video cited below. His "high priest" of the "cruel theater" persona is on full display throughout, as are the ironic poses and absurd antics of Zadery (playing bass guitar). The television producer Tamara Maksimova explained why this particular performance never made it onto the air:

The evil irony of Kinchev's songs "My generation!," "We are together!," the author's bluntness and intransigence, combined with a brilliant plastic solution and artistry of performance, made such an impression on the management of the

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<sup>57</sup> Алиса, *Блок Ада*, Melodiya LP C60 28425 006, 1989.

youth editorial office [of Leningrad television] that they demanded we erase the recording with “these fascist thugs” immediately.<sup>58</sup>

Fortunately, fragments of the tape managed to survive and are now available on YouTube.<sup>59</sup> The authoritarian personality described above seems to be present as early as 1986 and foreshadows the political statements Kinchev made much later. If we read an authoritarian pattern in his work from the very beginning, then the transformation he has undergone is not really an ideological one. It reads more like a compromise of the inclusive social position declared by the title of his early song, “We Are Together.” The next section shows evidence of an evolution toward more hostile attitudes to certain groups within society that suggests the “We” he imagined was no longer so inclusive.

### **Fallout with *Nashe Radio* and a Close Friend over Anti-Semitism**

Kinchev’s lyrics and statements in the Putin era have become increasingly anti-Semitic, xenophobic, and nationalistic. In a 2007 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Kinchev said: “You can think anything you like about me, but I regard the protocols of the Zionist sages as a true historical document, therefore I consider the liberal idea to be an absolute

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<sup>58</sup> “А вообще-то на ринге привыкли ко всякому. Даже к тому, что съемка может состояться, а вот в эфире никто передачи не увидит. Так произошло с ленинградской рок-группой ‘Алиса’ и ее лидером Константином Кинчевым, сегодня известным певцом, композитором, киноактером. Злая ирония песен Кинчева ‘Мое поколение!’, ‘Мы вместе!’, прямота и бескомпромиссность автора в сочетании с блестящим пластическим решением и артистизмом исполнения произвели на руководство молодежной редакции такое впечатление, что от нас потребовали запись с ‘этими фашистскими молодчиками’ стереть немедленно.” Тамара Максимова, *Музыкальный ринг* (Москва: Искусство, 1991), 51.

<sup>59</sup> For instance, see Музыкальный ринг, “АЛИСА Фрагменты 1986 г.,” accessed April 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOGLAfyaiA>; Алиса, “Алиса - Музыкальный ринг (1986).avi,” accessed March 27, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsL\\_NXs2uyk&lc=UgxqQobHP6TN2GuT\\_rl4AaABAg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsL_NXs2uyk&lc=UgxqQobHP6TN2GuT_rl4AaABAg).

harm to my country.”<sup>60</sup> Alisa’s 2000 album, *Solstice*, even featured three small swastikas on the cover (see figure 3.2 below), leading to the refusal of Mikhail Kozyrev, the founding producer of the rock station *Nashe Radio* (Our Radio), to put any of the station’s promotional resources behind it. Kozyrev gave detailed reasons for the radio station’s decision. Though he acknowledged Kinchev’s own explanations for the symbols, he felt that they were insufficient:

Kostya says that the sign of the solstice, that is, the left-sided swastika, is a symbol of the ascension of the Holy Spirit and purification as a result of these searches. I am afraid that his comments and explanations will not be heard, and people passing by the shelves in music stores will just see rows of swastikas on this album. The meaning of the sign on the album insert is not spelled out. Will fans want to think, will they try to understand the differences between the left-handed solstice and the sign, which in the minds of many means the Nazi emblem? The risk, in my opinion, is too great. It seems to me that a certain moral boundary has been crossed in the design of the album, and we decided together that we don’t want to put the “Our Radio” sign on this cover. However, this position will not affect the songs from the album that are already being played on the air.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> “Ты можешь думать обо мне что угодно, но я отношусь к протоколам сионских мудрецов как к правдивому историческому документу, поэтому либеральную идею считаю безусловным вредом для моей страны.” Konstantin Kinchev in Евгений Левкович, “Архив RS. Константин Кинчев: ‘Демократическая система голосования порочна по своей сути,’” *RollingStone*, February 10, 2007, <http://www.rollingstone.ru/articles/music/interview/151.html>. This link has since disappeared, but the contents of the article have been preserved under another name on a Russian blog site. See Евгений Левкович, “Мистер Мускул (О Кинчеве),” *Йя-Хха - yahha.com*, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.yahha.com/article.php?sid=204>.

<sup>61</sup> “Костя говорит, что знак солнцеворота, то есть левосторонняя свастика, является символом снискания святого духа и очищения в результате этих поисков. Я опасаясь, того, что его комментарий и объяснения не будут услышаны, и люди, проходя мимо полок в музыкальных магазинах, просто увидят на этом альбоме ряды свастик. Смысл знака на вкладке к альбому не прописан. Захотят ли фаны задуматься, попытаются ли понять отличия левостороннего солнцеворота от знака, ко торый в сознании многих означает нацистскую эмблему? Риск, по-моему, слишком велик. Мне кажется, что в оформлении альбома пересечена определенная нравственная граница, и мы сообща решили, что не хотим размещать знак ‘Нашего Радио’ на этой обложке. Однако это позиция не отразится на песнях из альбома, которые уже звучат в эфире.” Mikhail Kozyrev, quoted in Илья Легостаев, “Новый Крестовый Поход ‘АЛИСЫ,’” *Московский комсомолец*, February 25, 2000; The contents of this article are also preserved on Alisa’s website. See Илья Легостаев,

Figure 3.2: Cover for Alisa’s 2000 album, *Solntsevorot* (Solstice)<sup>62</sup>



Kozyrev was originally a great admirer of Kinchev’s and for some years he reports that they were even close friends. Yet he describes a number of reasons why the changes Kinchev went through put an end to their friendship. At the beginning of his chapter on Kinchev (published in 2007), he even imagines a fantasy scenario in which he goes back in time to 1986 (a time well before they knew each other) to make Kinchev listen to his latest album and one of his most recent interviews. Imagining the effect on Kinchev of such a glimpse into his own future, Kozyrev declares,

If Kinchev had put the disc on the first night, I think there would have been two possible outcomes: he would have either thrown it in the trash, as the delirium of someone's inflamed consciousness, or opened his veins in the bathroom. It’s a

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“Новый Крестовый Поход ‘АЛИСЫ,’” Группа АЛИСА - Пресса, 2000, accessed July 15, 2020, <http://www.alisa.net/prensa.php?action=2000&disk=press44>.

<sup>62</sup> Алиса, *Солнцеворот*, CD Land CD C60 28425 006, 2000.



good thing we don't know how to travel through time. But I know for sure: IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO IMAGINE THEN WHAT HE WOULD BE TODAY.<sup>63</sup>

Commenting on the 2003 album *Now Is Later Than You Think*, which contained such songs as “The Orthodox,” and “Sky of the Slavs,” Kozyrev said that he was most struck by the radical change in the texts which seemed to have been crafted from a single template and bore no resemblance to his earlier poetry.<sup>64</sup> He then compared Kinchev’s most recent poetry to the patriotic verse typical of Soviet agitprop brigades.<sup>65</sup> He mused that inputting a few dozen words like, “homeland, faith, grass, warrior, sword, star, cross, temple, destiny, enemies, fire, trail, turmoil, battle, Russia,” and “prayer,” into a computer program for composing verse would yield texts no worse than Kinchev’s latest. Kinchev’s lyrics were no longer poetic to Kozyrev: “It’s propaganda. Images disappear. Slogans remain. The poet constricts, and like some sort of Mr. Hyde, a preacher-propagandist comes out of him.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> “Если бы Кинчев поставил диск в первую ночь, думаю, возможны были бы два исхода: он либо выкинул бы его в помойку, как бред чьего-то воспаленного сознания, либо вскрыл себе вены в ванной. Хорошо, что мы не умеем путешествовать во времени. Но я знаю наверняка: НЕМЫСЛИМО БЫЛО ПРЕДСТАВИТЬ ТОГДА, КАКИМ ОН БУДЕТ СЕГОДНЯ.” Mikhail Kozyrev in Михаил Козырев and Борис Барабанов, *Мой Рок-Н-Ролл - Black Book*, vol. 1 (Москва: Гаятри, 2007), 24.

<sup>64</sup> “Тем временем Костя писал новый альбом, куда вошла песня ‘Православные,’ за ней последовало ‘Небо Славян,’ потом ‘Звери.’ Более всего меня поразили перемены в текстах. Все больше написанное талантливейшим поэтом Кинчевым напоминало странную однотипную словесную вязь, ничего общего не имеющую с его прежними стихами.” Mikhail Kozyrev in Козырев and Барабанов, 1:28.

<sup>65</sup> “Сегодняшняя поэзия Кинчева мне явственно напоминает патриотические советские стихи времен агитбригад.” Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> “Есть такие компьютерные программы, которые слагают стихи из заданного набора слов. Я не сомневаюсь, что если вбросить туда пару десятков существительных типа: ‘родина, вера, трава, воин, меч, звезда, крест, храм, судьба, враги, пожар, тропа, смута, битва, Русь, молитва,’ то компьютер соберет тексты не хуже нынешнего Кинчева. Потому

Kozyrev noted that for a long time he and Kinchev managed to avoid certain “fundamental topics” on which they painfully diverged, but that the last straw occurred during one of their many late-night conversations in Kinchev’s kitchen. After Koyzrev asked him, “Listen, if it turns out the I for example send my hypothetical daughter to a Jewish school, she will become an enemy to you?,” he reports that Kinchev firmly answered, “Yes!,” and that their friendship ended that night.<sup>67</sup>

*Nashe Radio* had been conceived in partnership with the British media magnate, Rupert Murdoch and one of Russia’s formerly powerful oligarch’s, Boris Berezovsky.<sup>68</sup> Its goal was to promote homegrown Russian rock and the newest and best artists of that genre, but Kozyrev was staunchly opposed to the xenophobic and nationalistic bent he saw in some of the newer bands.<sup>69</sup> Kozyrev’s tastes eventually ran afoul of too many listeners and he left after being asked to take a secondary role in programming decisions in 2005.<sup>70</sup> After Kozyrev’s departure, many of the groups he had previously vetoed made

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что это уже не стихи. Это агитки. Образы исчезают. Остаются лозунги. Скукоживается поэт, и таким мистером Хайдом из него вылезает проповедник-пропагандист. Так художник превращается в агитатора.” Ibid., 29.

<sup>67</sup> “Долго нам удавалось избегать каких-то принципиальных тем. Закрывать глаза на болезненные расхождения. Но бесконечно так продолжаться не могло. Последний разговор начистоту на кинчевской кухне я запомнил четко. Я спросил Костю: 'Послушай, получается, если я, например, свою гипотетическую дочку отправлю в еврейскую школу, то она тебе станет врагом?' -- и Костя твердо ответил: 'Да!' На этом наша дружба закончилась.” Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>68</sup> Козырев and Барабанов, *Мой Рок-Н-Ролл - Black Book*, 1:63.

<sup>69</sup> Михаил Козырев and Борис Барабанов, *Мой Рок-Н-Ролл - White Book*, vol. 2 (Москва: Гаятри, 2007), 101–2.

<sup>70</sup> Михаил Козырев and Борис Барабанов, *Мой Рок-Н-Ролл - Red Book*, vol. 3 (Москва: Гаятри, 2007), 53–54.

it onto the airwaves.<sup>71</sup> Eventually, Berezovsky gave up his assets in the media holdings under pressure from Putin.<sup>72</sup> A marked man, he fled to London shortly thereafter. Rupert Murdoch, citing a hostile business climate for foreign investors and fearing having something he built preemptively expropriated, sold the entire parent company *NewsCorp*, to one of Russia's biggest media magnates, Vitaly Bogdanov.<sup>73</sup> Bogdanov is a member of Putin's "United Russia" party and is also the third-highest earning senator on the Russian Federation Council,<sup>74</sup> entangling *Nashe Radio*, like so many other Russian commercial and cultural enterprises, with the Putin government.

Whereas Kozyrev had been interested in simply promoting the most-promising post-Soviet rock talent on *Nashe Radio*, the agenda of the station post-Kozyrev seemed to parallel the developing Russocentric cultural agendas of the state. Popular music scholar Polly McMichael has covered much of the station's history. She asserts that it "offer[s] the solace of the familiar, an aural palimpsest that promoted the achievements of both Russian culture and a Russia-centered view of the late-Soviet world, without confronting any of the traumas and ambiguities between the layers."<sup>75</sup> Thus, Kinchev's music over

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<sup>71</sup> Козырев and Барабанов, *Мой Рок-Н-Ролл - White Book*, 2:202.

<sup>72</sup> Козырев and Барабанов, *Мой Рок-Н-Ролл - Black Book*, 1:68.

<sup>73</sup> "US Media Mogul Sells Russian Radio Stations," *Interfax*, April 5, 2010, Lexis Nexis Academic.

<sup>74</sup> "Senator Ponomaryov declares income of over 2.6 bln in 2016 – the most in Federation Council (Part 2)," *Interfax*, April 14, 2017, Lexis Nexis Academic.

<sup>75</sup> Polly McMichael, "'That's Ours. Don't Touch.' - Nashe Radio and the Consolations of the Domestic Mainstream," in *Russian Culture in the Age of Globalization*, eds. Strukhov and Hudspeth, BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies, ed. Birgit Beumers (Milton, UK: Routledge, 2018), 90.

the past several years becomes part of an aural bridge across the treacherous conundrum that the Soviet period represents to revisionists, linking an imagined Russian present with a mythical Russian past in a single unbroken arc. In their assessment of the radio station, popular music scholars Yngvar Steinholt and David-Emil Wickström have drawn connections between promotion of Alisa's newer music and a kind of nostalgia. They argue that this nostalgia has been cultivated as part of a "government-induced positive patriotism and Putin's reclaiming of an indiscriminate historical pride." They further note that this kind of patriotic nostalgia has been built "while making sure to include references to Russian Orthodox Christianity."<sup>76</sup> Incidentally, the station's playlists from October 31 through November 20 of 2017 featured a heavy rotation of Kinchev's "Sky of the Slavs."<sup>77</sup> In the next section, I explore compelling albeit circumstantial evidence linking Kinchev to other agendas of the Putin administration.

### **Kinchev's Loose Affiliations with Power**

In Moscow, in March 2005, a meeting was reportedly held between Putin's culture tsar, Vladislav Surkov, and leading members of several of Russia's most prominent rock groups.<sup>78</sup> While the government refused to comment on what was

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<sup>76</sup> Wickstrom and Steinholt, "Visions of the (Holy) Motherland in Contemporary Russian Popular Music," 325.

<sup>77</sup> Between 10/31/17 and 11/20/17, it was aired ten times. Unfortunately, this type of data is no longer available on the station's website. "Playlist | NASHE Radio," accessed November 30, 2017, <http://www.nashe.ru/playlist/>.

<sup>78</sup> "Rock Stars Recruited to Fight Revolution," *Moscow Times*, March 31, 2005, sec. 3136, Lexis Nexis Academic.

discussed, a few participants were quoted anonymously by Russian journalists. One stated that Surkov wanted assurances that the rock star support the Orange Revolution received in Ukraine would not be duplicated in Russia. Putin indeed had cause for concern; Bohdan Klid outlines the extent to which Ukrainian rock and pop musicians lent their support to the 2004 Orange Revolution.<sup>79</sup> Another participant stated that Surkov let the musicians know that the government was willing to help them overcome professional hurdles in return for their promise to at least stay out of the fray should a protest movement arise.<sup>80</sup>

The music critic Alexander Kushnir stated that this meeting was in line with a pattern of overtures authorities had been making to rock musicians. He listed official state awards and invitations to perform at both corporate functions and at the posh dachas of the elite, adding, “The authorities understand that if there is a cataclysm or an election then you can comparatively inexpensively – that word is very important – get the vote of teenagers or the loyalty of teenagers with the help of 15 rock leaders.”<sup>81</sup> When Kushnir said “comparatively inexpensively,” he most likely meant that rock acts were hungry, owing to the fact that rock music receives far less airplay than pop music in Russia.

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<sup>79</sup> Bohdan Klid, “Rock, Pop and Politics in Ukraine’s 2004 Presidential Campaign and Orange Revolution,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 23, no. 1 (March 1, 2007): 118–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523270701194995>; See also Arve Hansen et al., *A War of Songs: Popular Music and Recent Russia-Ukraine Relations*, Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society 203 (Stuttgart, Ger.: ibidem Press, 2019).

<sup>80</sup> “Rock Stars Recruited to Fight Revolution,” *Moscow Times*, March 31, 2005, sec. 3136, Lexis Nexis Academic.

<sup>81</sup> Alexander Kushnir, qtd. in *ibid.*

Economic issues aside, it appears that the Putin administration believed rock music was a greater potential threat as protest, so courting the rockers seems like an understandable, if misguided, defensive strategy for the government.<sup>82</sup>

Though Alisa's Konstantin Kinchev was not present at the meeting with Surkov, Kinchev suggested that at some point (possibly around the same time) he had been asked to speak with someone in the administration. In the 2007 interview with *Rolling Stone* cited above, he cryptically offered the following: "They called me here [at his dacha] from the presidential administration, I won't say who. They suggested meeting, to talk for awhile. I did not go." When the journalist asked him why he did not accept, he replied, "But why should I? I haven't seen any deeds from this government yet — just loud words. I just said to them, 'If you really think that my songs bring favor upon the Fatherland — I am very happy. If you want, promote them.' But there's nothing to talk about."<sup>83</sup>

Despite the disdain that he claims to profess for meetings with politicians, he seems to have been more than willing to go above and beyond to oblige Surkov's request for the rockers to withhold their support for any color revolutions that might arise in Russia. Kinchev went a step further in July 2005 when he penned the song "*Vlast*"

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<sup>82</sup> The work of several scholars shows that rock's more protest-oriented image is dubious at best. See especially Deena Weinstein's chapter in Ian Peddie, ed., *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>83</sup> "Мне тут звонили из администрации президента, не буду говорить кто. Предлагали встретиться, поговорить. Я не пошел. . . . А зачем? Пока не вижу никаких дел от этой власти — одни громкие слова. Я только сказал им: 'Если вы действительно считаете, что мои песни приносят пользу отечеству — я очень рад. Хотите — пропагандируйте их. А говорить не о чем.'" Konstantin Kinchev in Евгений Левкович, "Мистер Мускул (О Кинчеве)," Йя-Хха - yahha.com, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.yahha.com/article.php?sid=204>.

(“Power”). The obvious references to Ukraine’s Orange Revolution in both the lyrics and in the official video (2008, the last official video Alisa has produced for any of its songs) mark the song as a clear denunciation of this movement. The most obvious reference to Ukraine’s Orange Revolution is in the final verse:

**“Власть”**

**Power**

Адептов передела сольют за бугор,

They will pour followers of redistribution  
over the hill,

На пепле революций возродится  
террор.

Terror will be reborn on the ash<sup>84</sup> of  
revolutions.

Оранжевые сопли – очкариков сны  
В предчувствии гражданской войны.

Orange snot-bespectacled dreams  
In anticipation of civil war.

In a 2008 interview, Kinchev made the meaning of the song clear: “For five years, the gob of fat ‘powers’ have been stealing from each other, completely spitting on their own people. That’s roughly what the song is about, about the Ukrainian government with all its orange snot.”<sup>85</sup> After performing the song many times while on tour in Ukraine in 2007, several media outlets called for Kinchev to be banned from the country, though the government never took such action. A reporter in another interview from 2008 noted to

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<sup>84</sup> Though Kinchev sings “na pochve” (“on the soil”) in the video and audio recordings of this song, the original version of the text, written in 2005 and published on Alisa’s website reflects the even darker image “na peple” (“on the ash”) of revolutions. The published lyrics are available on the band’s website under the 2008 album entitled, “Пульс хранителя дверей лабиринта” (“Pulse of the Guardian of the Labyrinth’s Doors”). See “Пульс Хранителя Дверей Лабиринта,” *alisa.net*, July 19, 2005, accessed July 14, 2020, [http://www.alisa.net/disk1/d08\\_lyrics.htm#vlast](http://www.alisa.net/disk1/d08_lyrics.htm#vlast).

<sup>85</sup> “На протяжении пяти лет шмат сала «власти» друг у друга тырят, полностью наплевав на свой народ. Вот примерно об этом и песня, про украинскую власть со всеми ее оранжевыми соплями.” Konstantin Kinchev, qtd. in “Интервью Журналу ‘Итоги,’” *Группа АЛИСА - Пресса*, 2008, accessed July 15, 2020, <http://www.alisa.net/pressa.php?action=2008&disk=press285>.

Kinchev, “Your song, “*Vlast*” was painfully received in Ukraine. But is it also about today’s Russia, too? Or is this not so and we are actually ‘rising from our knees?’”<sup>86</sup>

Kinchev’s response shows that he persistently associates the Orange Revolution with some vague group of anti-Russian actors who have duped Ukraine’s “impressionable” populace. Neither Surkov nor Putin could have asked for a better response:

Thank God, we have not observed anything orange here. This song is a warning against “orange” troubles, nothing more, and a sketch on the topic of what irresponsible power is. Although it is difficult to come up with a better sketch than what reality demonstrates. It is enough to look at what has been happening in Ukraine for five years, after the victorious dances at the fountain...Idiocy, you cannot say otherwise.<sup>87</sup>

The official music video for “Power” filmed by Oleg Flyangolts features a bare-chested Kinchev in front of a fortress of amplifiers staring down a massive phalanx of skeletons with large orange flags, with brief glimpses of the other band members. Near the end of the video, Kinchev makes a karate-style kick in the direction of the approaching force and every skeleton instantly disintegrates. Finally, Kinchev takes his signature “you’re welcome” bow, reminiscent of a court jester or Shakespearean actor bowing to his audience.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> “Вашу песню ‘Власть’ болезненно восприняли на Украине. Но она же и про нынешнюю Россию тоже. Или это не так и мы действительно — ‘встаем с колен?’” Ruslan Kravtsov in Руслан Кравцов, “Константин Кинчев в поисках истины - ‘metro,’” 2008, accessed July 15, 2020, <http://www.alisa.net/prensa.php?action=2008&disk=press273>.

<sup>87</sup> “У нас, Слава Богу, ничего оранжевого не наблюдалось. Эта песня-предостережение от «оранжевых» смут, не более того, и зарисовка на тему того, что такое безответственная власть. Хотя, лучшую зарисовку, чем демонстрирует реальность, трудно придумать. Достаточно посмотреть, что уже лет пять творится на Украине, после победных плясок у фонтана...Идиотизм, по-другому и не скажешь.” Konstantin Kinchev in Кравцов.

<sup>88</sup> Алиса and Олег Флянголец, “Алиса - Власть (AlisA - Power),” 2008, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s42ZvgFYhRA>.



## Kinchev and the Russian-Orthodox Church

Though he did not participate in the meeting with Surkov, Kinchev did meet with another partner of the state, the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>89</sup> On April 6, 2006 Metropolitan (now Patriarch) Kirill, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, hosted a meeting with a handfull of rock musicians, including Kinchev.<sup>90</sup> The online Orthodox news source *Tserkovnyi vestnik* (The Church Herald) reported on the proceedings. In his opening address Kirill stated a need for the Church's mission to connect, where possible, with segments of Russian popular culture especially intelligible to youth. Admitting little experience with rock music, except a knowledge that its musicians were constantly subjected to high-decibel sound, the Metropolitan joked that "if at least someone after a rock concert thinks about the meaning of life, then, this sacrifice by rockers is not in vain."<sup>91</sup>

During a revealing moment, Kinchev leveled attacks on pop music. First he took aim at televised song talent contests, declaring that the "Factory of Stars" (*Fabrika*

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<sup>89</sup> See the following for examples of state/church collaboration: "Putin Says Church Should Have More Control Over Russian Life," *Moscow Times*, February 2, 2013, accessed July 12, 2020, <http://themoscowtimes.com/articles/putin-says-church-should-have-more-control-over-russian-life-21178>; Ola Chichowlas, "Patriarch Kirill: From Ambitious Reformer to State Hardliner," *Moscow Times*, April 14, 2017, accessed July 15, 2020, <http://themoscowtimes.com/articles/patriarch-kirill-from-ambitious-reformer-to-state-hardliner-57725>.

<sup>90</sup> Other rockers in attendance were Yuri Shevchuk (DDT), Roman Neumoev ("Instructions for survival"), Stas Bartenev ("If") and Oleg Krivosheev ("the Brothers Karamazov"). See Денис Ступников, "Лазарева Суббота русского рока," *Церковный вестник*, July 2006, № 13-14 (336) edition, sec. Архив газеты / Молодежь, accessed July 14, 2020, <http://www.tserkov.info/numbers/youth/?ID=1866>.

<sup>91</sup> "Если хоть кто-то после рок-концерта задумается о смысле жизни, то, значит, эта жертва рокерами приносится не зря." Metropolitan Kirill in Ступников.

*zvyozd*) is “pure satanism.”<sup>92</sup> According to my informants, pop music is far more popular in Russia than rock. This is evident in the sheer ubiquity of pop music radio stations in Russia—they saturate the airwaves.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, attaching essentialist adjectives to the pop genre reads very much like a business strategy. Yuri Shevchuk, the leader of the band DDT reportedly leaned toward Kirill with a remarkable and telling request (perhaps joking, perhaps not): “You often meet with Putin. Whisper to him to have more rock on TV.”<sup>94</sup> The reporter’s characterization of Kinchev’s remarks recalls Theodor Adorno’s diatribes against the “culture industry,” equating pop music to “average, second-rate motives put on the conveyor belt, and substandard texts oriented toward base instincts.”<sup>95</sup> Three years prior, Kinchev made disparaging remarks along these lines about Sergey Shnurov, the lead singer of the wildly popular band Leningrad, whose work playfully ridicules many aspects of Russian society: “I don’t like what this man does. Shnurov is a

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<sup>92</sup> “Кинчев объявил ‘Фабрику звезд’ ‘настоящим сатанизмом.’” The words of Konstantin Kinchev, qtd. in Ступников.

<sup>93</sup> A list of stations across the entire FM dial for twelve different Russian cities shows that pop predominates. See “List of Russian-Language Radio Stations,” in *Wikipedia*, May 1, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List\\_of\\_Russian-language\\_radio\\_stations&oldid=954186089](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_Russian-language_radio_stations&oldid=954186089). Another source focuses on all radio connected to the city of Moscow (FM and internet stations). See “Stations From Moscow,” radio.net, accessed July 7, 2020, <https://www.radio.net/city/moscow>.

<sup>94</sup> “Вы часто встречаетесь с Путиным. Шепните ему, чтобы на ТВ было побольше рока.” Yuri Shevchuk, qtd. in Ступников.

<sup>95</sup> “По мнению Константина Кинчева, для поп-музыки характерны усредненные, второсортные мотивчики, поставленные на конвейер, и некачественные тексты, ориентированные на низменные инстинкты.” Ступников.

talented provocateur, he profanes the base feelings of the crowd, which, in principle, all representatives of pop music do.”<sup>96</sup>

During his 2006 meeting with the cleric, in a clear effort to discredit pop music as the devil’s temptation, Kinchev mixed the jargon of pop music marketing with biblical admonishments against worshipping false idols, declaring that it was time to “overthrow a new idol whose name is ‘format’ and ‘rotation,’ which was ‘true neo-paganism.’”<sup>97</sup>

This attack might be read as disingenuous considering that Alisa has benefitted from the same tactics of “format” and “rotation” on *Nashe Radio*. The Metropolitan brought the gathering to a close by stating to the gathered rock musicians, “If in your work it [Christianity] is implicit, God will invisibly be present and if your audience will know about your faith, this will have a huge missionary significance.”<sup>98</sup> For his part, Kinchev has regularly alluded to Orthodoxy. In the texts of his songs this emphasis can be traced back to “*Pravoslavnye*” (The Orthodox) on the 2000 album *Solntsevorot* (*Solstice*)

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<sup>96</sup> “Мне не нравится то, что делает этот человек. Шнуров - талантливый провокатор, он профанирует на низменных чувствах толпы, чем в принципе занимаются все представители поп-музыки.” Konstantin Kinchev in Ольга Сапрыкина, “Константин Кинчев: Нашел умиротворение в засолке грибов,” *Комсомольская правда*, 2003, 187 edition.

<sup>97</sup> “Сейчас важнее всего свергнуть нового идола, имя которому — ‘формат’ и ‘ротации,’ . . . ‘Это настоящее неоязычество.’” Konstantin Kinchev in Ступников, “Лазарева Суббота русского рока.”

<sup>98</sup> “Если в вашем творчестве имплицитно, незримо будет присутствовать Бог, если ваши зрители будут знать о вашей вере, это будет иметь огромное миссионерское значение.” Metropolitan Kirill, qtd. in Ступников.

discussed above. In some of his live performances, he performs wearing a popular t-shirt with the phrase “Orthodoxy or Death” (*Pravoslaviie ili smert'*) printed on it.<sup>99</sup>

**Figure 3.3: Kinchev Wearing the “Orthodoxy or Death” T-shirt**



Though the 2006 gathering was probably Kinchev’s most high-profile meeting with the clergy, his partnership with the Church was by then already in full swing. In November 2003, Kinchev and the Deacon Alexey Kuraev visited the cities of Kurgan, Chelyabinsk, and Yekaterinburg as part of their “battle for the youth” (*Bitva za molodyozh'*) tour. Before each concert, Kinchev implored his fans to listen to the famous theologian’s lecture afterwards. Speaking about the “missionary significance” of Kinchev to Orthodoxy, Kugaev stated, “Kinchev’s conversion to Orthodoxy and his testimony on

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<sup>99</sup> “Orthodoxy+or+death1.Jpg (410×324),” accessed November 28, 2017, [http://3.bp.blogspot.com/\\_qpE5hNwi618/TDsZHOchCKI/AAAAAAAAAH8g/nUve2VCkars/s1600/orthodoxy+or+death1.jpg](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_qpE5hNwi618/TDsZHOchCKI/AAAAAAAAAH8g/nUve2VCkars/s1600/orthodoxy+or+death1.jpg).

behalf of our faith mean a hundred times more than a hundred of my lectures.”<sup>100</sup> Under the year 1992 on the “History” page for Alisa’s official website, we find the following statement about his baptism: “K. Kinchev’s visit to Jerusalem was a turning point in his life. After this trip, Kostya was Baptized.” Kugaev asserted that in a man of the cloth like himself, people merely see someone performing a job to earn a living, that they better appreciate the opinions of a rock star since rock itself is perceived as so distant from the Church. He interpreted Kinchev’s songs as a “protest against consumerism, materialism, and banal primitivism” (again recalling Adorno) and then made a case for rock’s place in the mission of the Church that seemed to borrow from Old Testament teachings: “Christianity should not be sweet. There is also a place for God’s wrath in it. And what kind of music is more capable than rock to express it?”<sup>101</sup>

Kugaev also highlighted the sacrifices Kinchev has made in joining forces with the Church:

He knows that by uniting with Orthodoxy, he has considerably thinned the ranks of his admirers. I once asked Kinchev how much his popularity fell after he turned to Church themes. He said that if the earlier Alisa played stadiums, now they played rooms for a maximum of a thousand in the houses of culture. . . . In addition, Kinchev refused to perform during Church fasts (which is more than half the year). Both mean that a person suffers direct financial losses based on

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<sup>100</sup> “Обращение Кинчева в православие и его свидетельство о нашей вере значат в сто раз больше, чем сто моих лекций.” Andrey Kuraev qtd. in “Дьякон Андрей Кураев и лидер группы ‘Алиса’ завершили на Урале ‘Битву за молодежь,’” NEWSru.com, November 24, 2003, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.newsru.com/religy/24nov2003/kk.html>.

<sup>101</sup> “...песни Кинчева - это протест против потребительства, материализма и банального примитивизма. . . . Христианство не должно быть сладеньким. . . . В нем есть место и Божию гневу. А какая музыка лучше, чем рок, способна это выразить?” Andrey Kuraev qtd. in “Дьякон Андрей Кураев и Лидер Группы ‘Алисы.’”

their faith. You can imagine how difficult it was for him to explain the need for these sacrifices to the members of his group.<sup>102</sup>

While these facts indeed suggest the devotion of a true believer, it should be noted that going beyond baptism in the faith to actively teaming up with the Church might have been just as important to Alisa's survival as a working band because of rock music's decline in popularity in Russia.<sup>103</sup> Another possible factor to consider when weighing the actual cost of these purported sacrifices is the extent to which Kinchev's newest stances have contributed to Alisa's diminishing audience.

Kugaev apparently felt he also needed to defend Kinchev against attacks from the less-progressive wings of the Church. In previous statements, Kugaev had bestowed upon Kinchev the honored title of "holy fool," and in this epistle dedicated to Kinchev's Orthodox devotion, he addressed those who mocked this notion. The *iurodivye Khrista radi* (fools for Christ's sake, or holy fools), usually abbreviated to *iurodivye*, are a familiar archetype in Russian culture. Their behavior frequently manifests itself as

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<sup>102</sup> "Знает он и то, что соединившись с Православием, он изрядно проредил ряды своих почитателей. Я как-то спросил Кинчева, насколько упала его популярность после того, как он обратился к церковной тематике. Он сказал, что если раньше 'Алиса' собирала стадионы, то сейчас - максимум тысячные залы домов культуры. . . . И то, и другое означает, что человек несет прямые финансовые потери по мотивам своей веры. Можно представить, как непросто было ему объяснить необходимость этих жертв членам своей группы." Andrey Kugaev in Андрей Кураев, "Диакон Андрей Кураев. Юродивый миссионер," *Сибирская Православная газета*, No. 10, 2003, accessed July 14, 2020, <http://www.ihtus.ru/102003/m1.shtml>.

<sup>103</sup> In a 2004 article aptly entitled, "Rock-nervousness" the Russian pop culture critic, Капитолина Деловая noted that even the most popular rock acts in the country had ceased to draw the kinds of crowds pop stars were enjoying. Капитолина Деловая, "Рок-невроз," April 28, 2004, <https://www.mk.ru/editions/daily/article/2004/04/28/113954-roknevroz.html>; This article was republished in Капитолина Деловая, "Рок-невроз: 'Би-2' проверили на себе смену приоритетов," in *"Мегахит": музыка нового времени* (Москва: КРПА Олимп, 2006), 193–99.

extreme mental illness, which is then interpreted as evidence of their saintliness.

Examples from the Russian literary tradition include the holy fool Nikolka from Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* and Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *Idiot*.<sup>104</sup>

After reiterating that it is he who calls Kinchev a “modern holy fool” and not Kinchev himself, Kugaev offers his own definitions, refining the concept relative to Kinchev's behavior:

*Iurodivyi* does not mean crazy or homeless. A *iurodivyi* is a person who breaks out of the usual social standards of behavior in order to expose a truth to people that is too effaced and familiar. Kinchev is not a fool among Christians. He is a fool among the rockers (who, in turn, are fools among the laymen). It is easy to protest against a distant power (which, most likely, does not know about your protest and will not condescend to revenge). It is more difficult to go against the opinions of those close to you, to come out against the habits of your group. Kinchev, who renounces alcohol and obscene language and matches his creativity with his Orthodox faith, turns out to be swimming against the current.<sup>106</sup>

As we will see in our analysis of the song central to Kinchev's “next-level” nationalism, he no longer has any scruples where obscenity is concerned. Whether he imagines himself to be a “modern holy fool” is unclear, but it seems probable that he wears the moniker with at least a secret pride. In a 2003 interview with the now-defunct online news source Strana.ru, Kinchev spoke of playing the jester, rather than the clown:

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<sup>104</sup> Thompson, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture*.

<sup>106</sup> “Это я говорю, что Кинчев - современный юродивый, а не он сам. Юродивый - не значит сумасшедший или бомж. Юродивый - человек, который выламывается из привычных социальных стандартов поведения ради того, чтобы обнажить перед людьми слишком затертую и привычную истину. Кинчев - юродивый не среди христиан. Он юродствует среди рокеров (которые, в свою очередь, юродствуют среди обывателей). Легко протестовать против далекой власти (которая, скорее всего, и не знает о твоём протесте и не снизойдет до мести). Труднее идти против мнения близких людей, выступить против привычек своей компании. Кинчев, отказывающийся от алкоголя и мата, сообразующий свое творчество со своей ортодоксальной верой, оказывается пловцом против течения.” Кураев, “Диакон Андрей Кураев. Юродивый миссионер.”

There is a very fine line between buffoonery and clowning. As soon as you start thinking how to please a respected public, you turn from a jester to a clown, but a clown is a profession, and a jester is a vocation. Therefore, it is better to remain a jester and do what you think is necessary. That which you consider necessary, and that which, above all, warms you. What you consider important.<sup>107</sup>

Whether he is playing “holy fool” or “jester,” what seems to warm him more than anything else besides Orthodoxy is the “vocation” of proselytizing for his other religion, autocracy. Alternatively, we might interpret many of his outlandish pro-authoritarian statements as an attempt to gain as much attention as he can for himself, following the notion that “there is no such thing as bad publicity.”

Around the same time as his baptism in 1992, Kinchev adopted a positive view of nationalism in connection with religion, asserting that the media has confused it with the evils of Nazism and the totalitarianism, dictatorship, and bloodshed that results from what he called Nazism’s “purely human ambitions.” He thinks of nationalism as a “creative feeling,” resulting from the “pride, joy, and pain for one’s Motherland” that people experience. For Kinchev, nationalism is founded on the “faith of the fathers, the faith of the ancestors.”<sup>108</sup> Elsewhere he described “true nationalism” as no different from love for

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<sup>107</sup> “Есть очень тонкая грань между шутством и клоунадой. Как только ты начинаешь думать, как бы понравиться уважаемой публике, ты превращаешься из шута в клоуна, но клоун - это профессия, а шут - призвание. Поэтому лучше оставаться все-таки шутом и делать то, что ты считаешь нужным. То, что ты считаешь нужным, и то, что, прежде всего, греет тебя. То, что считаешь важным.” Konstantin Kinchev in “Константин Кинчев: ‘Демократия рождает нацизм,’” Группа АЛИСА - Пресса, October 6, 2003, accessed July 14, 2020, <http://www.alisa.net/prensa.php?action=2003&disk=press170>.

<sup>108</sup> “К сожалению, опять же средства массовой информации внушают обывателю, что национализм – это страшное зло, которое ведет страну к гибели. Они путают национализм с нацизмом. Нацизм – действительно зло, чисто человеческие амбиции, ведущие к тоталитарному режиму, диктату, пролитию крови. А национализм – гордость, радость и боль за свою Родину, то есть созидательное чувство. Фундамент национализма – это вера отцов, вера предков.” Konstantin Kinchev in Константин Баканов, “Константин Кинчев: ‘Я робко надеюсь на самодержавие’ - Novye Izvestiia, 2003, No. 84,” *Новые Известия*, October



the homeland and patriotism. Elaborating further, he laid out more precise differences between this “true nationalism” and Nazism:

Nazism is different. Because Nazism is not a struggle with an enemy within oneself, but a search for an external enemy. This is the simplest and most commonplace path leading to bloodshed. And since this path is simple, since it is easier to find an external enemy, young people who are not supported by any ideology from the position of the state just fall there, into this abyss. Therefore, democracy gives rise to Nazism. This is my belief. The liberal system, democracy—all this gives rise to Nazism.<sup>109</sup>

As these comments suggest, Kinchev, like the Russian state, regularly finds external enemies in the West.

### **Alisa’s “*Naebali*” – A Case Study in Social Media, Sound, and Video**

Alisa’s official webpage includes a section where fans can ask Kinchev questions. In March 2006, one fan posted about Ukraine, stating that everything points to the fact that Ukraine will withdraw further from the Eurasian alliance and draw ever closer to western Europe. This fan drew stark ethnic and spiritual lines, stating: “So, soon we will have NATO and the new invasion of the Teutons and the ousting of Orthodoxy. All this

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24, 2003, 84 edition, <https://dlib-eastview-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/search/simple/doc?pager.offset=0&id=5466105&hl=%D0%9A%D0%BE%D0%BD%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD+%D0%9A%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%B2>; The same source is available at Константин Баканов, “Константин Кинчев: ‘Я робко надеюсь на самодержавие,’” *Новые известия - Культура*, October 24, 2003, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://newizv.ru/news/culture/24-10-2003/2319-konstantin-kinchev>.

<sup>109</sup> “Нацизм отличается. Потому что нацизм - это не борьба с врагом внутри себя, а поиски врага внешнего. Это самый простой и банальный путь, ведущий к кровопролитию. А поскольку этот путь прост, поскольку врага внешнего проще найти, то как раз туда, в эту бездну молодые люди, не поддержанные с позиции государства никакой идеологией, зачастую и падают. Поэтому демократия рождает нацизм. Это мое убеждение. Либеральный строй, демократия - все это рождает нацизм.” Konstantin Kinchev in “Константин Кинчев: Демократия рождает нацизм.”

smacks of the prospect of our spiritual sterilization in the spirit of the unshakable values of consumer society.” Kinchev responded, “I totally agree with you. It is sad for me to observe what pro-American power is creating with Ukraine.”<sup>110</sup> Another fan struck an accusatory tone on December 18, 2003, asking why the band came to perform in Riga, Latvia, on May 9, Victory Day, instead of staying home and participating in the festivities in Russia. Kinchev replied by asking why the band shouldn’t come to Riga to support the Russians who are not able to live “sweetly” (*sladko*). His response demonstrates an early sympathy toward Russophones living in countries that were once part of the Russian-dominated Soviet Union. It also hints at the oppression he imagines they face.<sup>111</sup>

A similar sympathy was revealed in March 2014 when Kinchev penned the lyrics to a new song that would appear in 2016 on Alisa’s album, *Ekstsess* (Excess). Evidence

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<sup>110</sup> “У меня вопрос и не то чтобы вопрос а просьба к Константину Кинчеву. Не могу вдаваться в детальные подробности наших предвыборных псевдобаталий. Но все идет к тому что, будут таки созданы условия для отхода Украины от евроазиатства в пользу Евроатлантики. Так что скоро будет у нас и НАТО и новое нашествие тевтонов и вытеснение православия. Все это попахивает перспективами нашей духовной стерилизации в духе незабываемых ценностей потребительского общества. А вкратце "народ" борется за власть без бандитов, но в результате он как раз ее и получит. Если это возможно скажите пожалуйста свое слово. Может кто и выйдет из оранжевого тумана целым и невредимым. Извините за многословие и вычурность изложения. Как давний поклонник Вашего творчества прошу помощи.” - Георгий, Херсон. “Полностью с вами согласен. Мне грустно наблюдать за тем, что творит с Украиной проамериканская власть☺” – К. Кинчев. Georgiy Kherson and Konstantin Kinchev in “У меня вопрос и не то чтобы вопрос а просьба к Константину Кинчеву,” Alisa.net – faq – 27.03.2006 - Украина, accessed November 26, 2017, <http://www.alisa.net/faq/faq1371.htm>.

<sup>111</sup> “Мы приехали потому, что это было 9 МАЯ, День Победы русского оружия над ненавистным фашизмом. И почему мы должны были остаться дома, а не приехать в Ригу и поддержать русских, которым там не сладко живется?” Konstantin Kinchev in “Прошло уже много времени,” Alisa.net – faq – 18.12.2003 - 9 Мая, accessed November 26, 2017, <http://www.alisa.net/faq/faq1144.htm>.

from his band’s social media posts makes it clear that he wrote the song entitled “*Naebali*” in response to the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine. On both Alisa’s official website and the band’s Facebook pages, Kinchev posted the freshly written lyrics (completed in Pokrovka on March 11) following this terse, yet conspicuous message: “Reflecting on the situation and in pursuit of a declaration, a short text on the topic. – К.К..”<sup>112</sup> The “situation” Kinchev spoke of seems clear enough after reading the announcement posted to the band’s site the day prior by the site administrator: “Alisa is cancelling all concerts in Ukraine, which is in a state of political coup and anarchy.”<sup>113</sup> I will refer back to these two pieces of evidence several times in the discussion below. For some of my informants, learning about these postings understandably caused them to reassess their interpretation of Kinchev’s motivations for writing the song.

That Kinchev does not shy from admitting the song’s connection to events in Ukraine has already been recognized by the online Russian rock news blog *Reproduktor* (Loudspeaker), a site dedicated to providing Russian popular music enthusiasts the histories and backstories of well-known songs.<sup>114</sup> On December 22, 2014 a regular

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<sup>112</sup> “Размышляя над ситуацией и вдогонку к заявлению, текстик на тему. К.К..” Scroll down to March 30 (30 Марта) for this post. “Группа Алиса - Информация,” Alisa.net, accessed November 26, 2017, [http://www.alisa.net/informaciya\\_lite.php?action=2014](http://www.alisa.net/informaciya_lite.php?action=2014); See also Константин Кинчев, “Размышляя над ситуацией и вдогонку к заявлению, текстик на тему,” Facebook - Alisa - Posts, accessed November 26, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/alisanet/posts/724230124264563>.

<sup>113</sup> “АЛИСА отменяет все концерты на Украине, находящейся в состоянии государственного переворота и безвластия.” Scroll down to March 29 (29 Марта) for this post. “Группа Алиса - Информация.”

<sup>114</sup> Дмитрий Мех, “Видео: русские рок-музыканты о событиях на Украине,” *Reproduktor.net*, December 22, 2014, accessed February 26, 2020, <https://reproduktor.net/2014/12/video-russkie-rok-muzykanty-o-sobytiyah-na-ukraine/>.

contributor to *Reproduktor* discussed in detail a list of songs he identified as having a relationship to the ongoing events in Ukraine, yet he expressly avoided dividing the listed artists and their representative works into pro-Maidan or anti-Maidan factions. He left it up to readers and listeners to decide for themselves.

As the next few sections of this discussion argue, “*Naebali*” encapsulates Kinchev’s continued disdain for Euromaidan and all Ukrainian efforts to safeguard its sovereign territory. As ethnomusicologist Maria Sonevytsky has noted in her recent study of contemporary Ukrainian pop music between the two revolutions, this disdain dates back to Catherinian imperial narratives that viewed Ukraine as a “wild field” flowing into Crimea that needed to be tamed. From this perspective, Ukraine was forever the “‘little’ (*mala*) province of Russia, its unruly younger sibling.”<sup>115</sup> Crucially, the sufficiently vague and cryptic original text of “*Naebali*” leads some listeners to give Kinchev the benefit of the doubt even though he has explicitly expressed very similar ideas about Ukraine in recent interviews.

In October 2018, Kinchev revealed that he in fact was responsible for the March 29 statement he posted to the group’s site. As he told an interviewer,

I, in contrast to our state, did not recognize the power in Ukraine as legal, and to this day I consider the Poroshenko regime as a junta. Therefore, in 2014, I canceled all our tours of Ukraine with the wording: “in connection with the coup.” You can find the message dated March 29, 2014 in the “News” section on the

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<sup>115</sup> Sonevytsky, *Wild Music*, 4. For more on this condescending brotherly discourse see Andreas Kappeler, “‘Great Russians’ and ‘Little Russians’: Russian-Ukrainian Relations and Perceptions in Historical Perspective,” in *Donald W. Treadgold Papers in Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies* (Seattle, WA: Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, 2003). For further discussion of the history that underlies this notion of the “wild field,” see Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

Alisa website: “Alisa cancels all concerts in Ukraine, which is in a state of coup and anarchy. Administrator.” And since then we have not played in Ukraine. And since our government considers Lugansk and Donetsk to be the territory of Ukraine, we do not play there either. So all questions should be directed to the state.”<sup>117</sup>

The Russian government has steadfastly asserted that the separatist movement in Lugansk and Donetsk has been conducted by a grassroots, native-grown populace acting entirely independent of the Russian government. Meanwhile, NATO analysts have reported evidence to the contrary, stating that a host of sophisticated Russian weaponry and defense systems, as well as Russian mercenary troops colloquially referred to as “green men” had been deployed in these conflict zones for a number of purposes.<sup>118</sup> The

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<sup>117</sup> “Я в отличие от нашего государства не признаю власть на Украине законной и по сей день считаю порошковский режим хунтой. Поэтому в 2014 году я отменил все наши гастролы по Украине с формулировкой: 'в связи с государственным переворотом.' В разделе 'Новости' на сайте 'Алисы' можно найти сообщение от 29 марта 2014 года: "'Алиса' отменяет все концерты на Украине, находящейся в состоянии государственного переворота и безвластия. Администрация». И с тех пор мы на Украине не играем. А поскольку наша власть считает Луганск и Донецк территорией Украины, мы и там не играем. Так что все вопросы к государству." Konstantin Kinchev, qtd. in Борис Барабанов, “Все вопросы к государству,” *Коммерсантъ*, October 31, 2018, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3786904>.

<sup>118</sup> See reports in the following sources. David M. Herszenhorn, “NATO Reports Russian Troops in Ukraine: U.S. General’s Assertion of Border Crossing Draws Strong Denials in Moscow,” *International New York Times*, November 13, 2014; Andrew Higgins, Michael R. Gordon, and Andrew E. Kramer, “Photos Link Masked Men in Ukraine to Moscow: Growing Accusations Tie Them to Russian Military and Intelligence Forces,” *International New York Times*, April 22, 2014; Sabrina Tavernise, “In East Ukraine, a Subtler Game: Freelance Forces Shape Events on Ground and Let the Kremlin Deny a Role,” *International New York Times*, May 31, 2014; Andrew E. Kramer and Rick Lyman, “Chaotic Retreat Follows Ukrainians’ Withdrawal From Donetsk Airport,” *New York Times*, January 22, 2015, sec. World, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/23/world/europe/ukraine-cedes-donetsk-airport-to-rebels-as-fighting-continues.html>. Soldatov and Borogan discuss how conclusive evidence of a Russian troop presence in these areas was unwittingly revealed by the Russian soldiers themselves. Unbeknownst to their commanders, dozens proudly posted pictures to their VKontakte profiles from inside Ukraine.” Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The Kremlin’s War on the Internet* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 307.

statement Kinchev made above exhibits an impatience with Moscow; Russia's surreptitious interventions do not go far enough for him. Apparently, he wants the state to go one step further, officially recognizing the independent status the separatists proclaim.

Calling the Euromaidan events a “political coup” paints it as some organized and quickly executed takeover of the Ukrainian government, when in fact it was something entirely different. Though there were a plethora of motivations, the revolution actually resulted from slow-growing popular unrest over violence directed at students peacefully protesting the pro-Russian government's decision to back away from partnerships with the European Union.<sup>119</sup> Seven days after Kinchev wrote the lyrics, Russia officially annexed Crimea, the southern region of Ukraine bordering the Black Sea. In contemporary Russian slang, the song's title translates to “fucked,” connoting an element of deception or gross negligence, i.e., “fucked over.” He implies that the Ukrainian people who participated in the Euromaidan Revolution had been duped by corrupt (and also foreign) usurpers of a legitimate authority. The following discussion highlights noteworthy features of the song that reinforce the “declaration” Kinchev sought to make in his text—a denunciation of Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution and Russia's hegemony in the eastern Slavic region.

### **A Gleeful Expression of Disdain – Musical and Textual Analysis of “*Nayebali*”**

Much like “Sky of the Slavs,” “*Naebali*” follows a standard verse/chorus form with an introduction and transition material. The chart on the following page cues important aural landmarks in its form. The transitions and closing section in the tonic D

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<sup>119</sup> Olga Onuch, “Who Were the Protesters?,” *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 3 (July 2014): 44–51, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2014.0045>.

minor feature a simple, diatonic synthesizer melody that is replayed once before the final chorus with a guitar solo. The introduction is comprised simply of a synthesizer striking the tonic with an echo effect that sounds as if it mimics the ricochet of gunfire. The bass accompaniment for both the transitional material and verses, shown in Example 3.2, features a driving tonic ostinato with heavy distortion that is only dialed down for the first half of each verse and returns to its original intensity for the second half. Within the socio-political context, and paired with the lyrics of the verses, this aggressive, driving bass ostinato (like the one in “Sky of the Slavs” – see Example 3.1 above) sounds similar to short bursts from an automatic weapon. The most salient details for the purposes of my analysis are the sudden modulations to the lower mediant (B<sup>b</sup> major) accompanied by an infectious, syncopated ostinato in the keyboard synthesizer during the three appearances of the chorus.

**Example 3.2. Alisa, “Naebali,” bass/guitar ostinato (combined rhythm)**



**Table 3.1. Alisa, “*Naebali*” Form Diagram<sup>120</sup>**

Intro	Trans.	Verse 1	Chorus	Trans.	Verse 2	Chorus	Trans.	Chorus	Closing (Trans.)
Dm: i	i	i-V i-V	B <sup>b</sup> : I-iii I-ii I-iii I-ii/vii of Dm	Dm: i	i-V i-V	B <sup>b</sup> : I-iii I-ii I-iii I-ii/vii of Dm	Dm: i	B <sup>b</sup> : I-iii I-ii I-iii I-ii/vii of Dm	Dm: i
mm: 4	4+4	8+8	4+4 4+4	4+4	8+8	4+4 4+4	4+4	4+4 4+4	4+4
Synth	Solo keys	Additive instr. & distort.	Syncop. synth.	Solo keys	Sust. synth. chords	Syncop. synth.	Guitar solo	Syncop. synth. Hey!Hey! Hey!Hey!	Solo keys

As discussed above, Kinchev has made it clear that he viewed the Euromaidan as an illegal coup and on social media he has also clearly stated that this song was written in response to that event. This context drives the first two stanzas. The text asserts that truth was incomprehensible to Ukrainians and that what they fought and died for was a lie and a product of slowly growing, irrational fears. It suggests that the real truth (or alternatively, the rule of law) was broken under the pressure of the protesters’ bats and that the best of Ukraine will inevitably perish with it. The “steel” as a metaphor for the truth or the rule of law might represent more concretely the shields that the government troops (*berkut*) carried as they violently assaulted crowds of protesters.

<sup>120</sup> Due to the explicit nature of the title, Alisa substituted “@” for the Cyrillic “б” wherever the song is officially marketed and sold. The recording analyzed was “Нае@али,” words and music by Konstanin Kinchev, Apple Music, track 7 on Alisa, page 8 of digital booklet, *Ekstsess*, Soyuz-M’yuzik, 2016.



“*Naebali*” – Verse 1

Кровь на губах не просохла,  
Правда глаза слепит,  
Тем, кто глазел, как дохла  
Сталь под напором бит.

Страх выползал наружу,  
Ложью замазав быль.  
Здесь будет только хуже  
Лучшие лягут в пыль.

“Fucked Over”

The blood has not dried on the lips,  
The truth blinds the eyes  
Of those who gawked at how  
Steel succumbed under the pressure of  
bats.  
Fear crept outward,  
Blurring the truth with a lie.  
It will only get worse here—  
The best will bite the dust.

The chorus asserts that the protesters’ efforts and subsequent victory are but blips that will be forgotten in the grand scheme of history. The situation for Ukraine will not improve, it seems to say. It will remain as it always has, and as political winds change direction, the powers that be will simply spark other revolutions as necessary. The sudden modulation to the lower mediant, B<sup>b</sup> major, here is significant. The juxtaposition of violent and explicit lyrics with a bright major tonality and upbeat syncopation sounds like giddy anticipation for the grim future that the song imagines for Ukraine—sonic *schadenfreude*.

In most performances of the chorus, Kinchev substitutes the word *narod*, which translates to “nation/people/folk” for the second utterance of *boitsy*, or “fighters,” implying that the motives and ugly fate of the fighters are inextricably tied to the ordinary citizens of Ukraine. In some live performances, Kinchev replaces one or more instances of *boitsy* in the song with *khokhly*, a word that some Russians use for Ukrainians, usually intended as an insult or as a form of belittling humor. My informant, Alyona Loshakova clarified the offensiveness of the word “*khokhol*” and its plural “*khokhly*,” stating, “In the majority of cases, this is understood as an insult. But if it appears in a list of nationalities,

it will be clear that this means Ukrainian,” adding, “It is often used in jokes.”<sup>121</sup> I mentioned that others I spoke with believed this word was benign and asked whether she thought this was a generational matter. She responded with, “That is unlikely. It is simply from personal perception. Perhaps, over the past few years, the situation has become more acute due to tensions between Ukraine and Russia.”<sup>122</sup>

After I told her why I was asking and revealed that Kinchev composed “*Naebali*” in March 2014, using the word in question only in live performance, she offered her best guess as to why: “On March 17, the independent Republic of Crimea was proclaimed in unilateral fashion.” Then she added, “I think it is connected with these events. It was precisely then that relations became strained.”<sup>123</sup> In such a sarcastically bleak, highly politicized text, the insult is clear.

“*Naebali*” – Chorus

Эй, бойцы! (sometimes хохлы)	Hey, fighters! (Ukrainians – extr. derog.)
Вас опять наебали!	You have been fucked over again!
Эй, бойцы! (usually народ or khokhly)	Hey, fighters! (people, Ukrainians)
Век не помнит минут.	The century does not remember minutes.
Всё, как всегда,	Everything is like always,
И лучше будет едва ли.	And it will hardly get better.
А если что,	And if need be,
То вас опять наебут. . . Yeah	Then they’ll fuck you over again. . . Yeah

<sup>121</sup> “В большинстве случаев это понимается как оскорбление. Но если это перечисление национальностей, то будет ясно, что это украинец. Часто используют в анекдотах.” Alyona Loshakova, VKontakte dialogue, February 14, 2020.

<sup>122</sup> “Вряд ли. Только от личного восприятия. Возможно, за последние несколько лет ситуация стала более острой из-за напряжённых отношений Украины и России.” Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> “17 марта в одностороннем порядке была провозглашена независимая Республика Крым. Я думаю связано с этими событиями. Именно тогда обострились отношения.” Ibid.

I was rarely comfortable asking my informants direct questions about their own opinions about these tensions with Ukraine, preferring to let them reveal them to me of their own accord. For Alyona to say that the Republic of Crimea was proclaimed in “unilateral” fashion seems telling. Though she may have taken her response verbatim from the Russian Wikipedia article entitled, “The Annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation,”<sup>124</sup> the words “unilateral” (and “annexation” for that matter) are rarely used (or reused, as the case may be) by supporters of Putin’s 2014 *ukaz* (decree).

The song’s final two stanzas appear to allude to some evil outside force (i.e., the West, or more specifically the United States) exploiting Ukraine for financial gain. Ukrainians are mere pawns in a game controlled and funded by demons. Their aspirations for self-determination are being manipulated to do the devil’s bidding. The end result is massacre—death brought on themselves and their Russian brethren. The term “pogrom” is what connects this text to the notion of oppressed Russians living within Ukraine’s borders. Recall the Russian rock star Olga Kormukhina’s use of the very same word in the context of oppressed Russians in Donetsk and Luhansk being visited by “‘friendly guests’ with revolution and pogroms in their suitcases,” in her letter to the Ukrainian Orthodox Bishop cited in chapter 1. Kinchev ends the verse with another sarcastic line underscoring the debased futility of their sacrifices.

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<sup>124</sup> See in “Присоединение Крыма к Российской Федерации,” in *Википедия*, February 5, 2020, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5\\_%D0%9A%D1%80%D1%8B%D0%BC%D0%B0\\_%D0%BA\\_%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9\\_%D0%A4%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5_%D0%9A%D1%80%D1%8B%D0%BC%D0%B0_%D0%BA_%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9_%D0%A4%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8).

“*Naebali*” – Verse 2

Бесы готовят поле,  
Черти банкуют кон.  
Ярость качает волю,  
Воля вершит погром.  
Всяким благим порывом  
Высланы тропы в ад.  
Смерть – это так красиво!  
Если б не гниль и смрад.

Demons prepare the field,  
Devils fill the jar [place their bets].  
Rage sways the will,  
The will controls the pogrom.  
With every good impulse  
The paths to hell are paved.  
Death is so beautiful!  
If not for the rot and stench.

Before sharing the details of his interview with Kinchev, a journalist for the popular Russian newspaper *Argumenty nedeli* (Arguments of the Week) used the last four lines of “*Naebali*” as an example of the songwriter’s unique ability “to write songs in such a way that they turn out to be much deeper than the moment,” asserting that “after the lapse of time, [they] do not lose their spirit.” While noting that the song had been “dedicated” to the specific events of the Maidan revolution, the journalist attempts to canonize Kinchev, using the clichéd metaphor and gruesome sarcasm of these lines as evidence of his incomparable depth and timelessness.<sup>125</sup>

*Reproduktor* has an entry dedicated specifically to “*Naebali*.” Regarding Kinchev’s decision to cancel Alisa’s Ukrainian leg of their 2014 tour, the article states that many fans, “mainly from Kiev,” perceived the decision as a “betrayal.” The

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<sup>125</sup> “Будучи остросоциальным автором, Кинчев умеет писать песни так, что они получаются гораздо глубже сиюминутности и по истечении времени не утрачивают свой дух. ‘Кинчев несовременен. Он, если можно так выразиться, всевременен,’ – отметила его биограф Н. Барановская. Взять, к примеру, песню с нового альбома ‘Экссесс,’ посвящённую майдану: ‘Всяким благим порывом высланы тропы в ад. Смерть – это так красиво! Если б не гниль и смрад...’” Сергей Рязанов, “Музыканты – круче политиков,” *Аргументы недели*, no. 43 (534), November 11, 2016, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://argumenti.ru/society/n563/472283>.

anonymous author notes that heated discussions with the typical “epithets” as well as “wishful thinking” declaring that “nothing terrible is happening” flooded social media. Then a Russocentric oversimplification is made about the events being a product of a surging hatred for Russians in Ukraine: “However, events developed rapidly and anti-Russian sentiment in Ukrainian society began to manifest itself more and more strongly.”<sup>126</sup>

Against this background, the article cites a March 31, 2014 statement made by Alisa’s publicist (and Kinchev’s wife), Aleksandra Panfilova, which at times affects a neutral stance, while at other times betrays a condescending tone and reiterates inflammatory language attributed to Ukrainians. Panfilova first declares that any performance by Alisa in Ukraine at this time (two weeks after the annexation of Crimea) would inevitably be used as propaganda inside a “territory which internally cannot determine for itself who, for whom and with whom” it will be. She asserts that while a symphony orchestra or group merely intent on entertaining could “quite painlessly” exit the stage after their performance, it was a different matter for Alisa—that a “collision” would be inevitable. Next she contends that Ukrainians need to sort out their war for themselves, adding, “This is not a situation of ‘the enemy is near Moscow, let’s raise the

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<sup>126</sup> “Решение отменить украинскую часть юбилейного тура многие поклонники коллектива, в основном, из Киева, восприняли как предательство. В социальных сетях началось активное обсуждение темы, при этом комментаторы, как водится, не скупались в эпитетах и, как это часто бывает, выдавая желаемое за действительное, пытались убедить всех в том, что ничего страшного не происходит. Однако, события развивались стремительно и антирусские настроения в украинском обществе стали проявляться всё сильнее.” See in “Нае@али - Алиса,” Reprodaktor.net, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://reprodaktor.net/gruppa-alisa/naebali/>.

morale of soldiers,' this is a foreign, independent territory, and if the citizens of this territory care about the future, let them organize this future for themselves, although the latter is not easy." In conclusion, Panfilova speaks of a "strange logic" by which Ukrainians call for the heads of "Muscovites on pikes" and yet allow for songs to be sung about a "Bright *Rus*" that they desire: "If you want to sing along and listen [to such songs], we request you come to the vastness of Russia, we will be glad."<sup>127</sup>

The *Reproduktor* article added that during the Moscow phase of the tour, Kinchev prefaced each performance of "*Naebali*" with the following comment: "It is with sorrow and sadness that I sing this song." Finally, although the author noted that Kinchev would change the words "Hey, fighters" to "Hey, Donbass" or "Hey, *khokhly*" while on tour, the meaning of the song remained unaffected. Though Kinchev's intent already seems obvious from the evidence outlined above, my discussion below reinforces the pleasure he took in singing this song and the anger with which he decalims the epithet.

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<sup>127</sup> "Алиса на Украине – это неизбежное использование той или иной пропагандой. Использование на территории, которая внутри себя никак не может определиться – кто, за кого и с кем. Возможно, симфонический оркестр или группа с развлекательной направленностью вполне безболезненно могли бы отбыть номер и уехать, но 'Алиса' – это несколько иной случай. Кого качать – вот вопрос. И ответ – кого ни качай, раскачаешь на столкновения. С какой стати? Это не наша война, так что, пусть сами у себя разбираются. А подставлять выездных фанов группа не будет, это помимо прочего. Тут не ситуация 'враг под Москвой, поднимем боевой дух солдат,' тут чужая, самостийная территория, и если граждан этой территории волнует будущее, пусть они это будущее сами себе и организуют, хотя с последним туговато....Вообще, какая-то странная логика: 'москалей на ножи,' но песни пусть поют, да про Светлую Русь желательно. Желающих подпеть да послушать, милости просим на просторы России, будем рады." Aleksandra Panfilova, qtd. in "Нае@али - Алиса," *Reproduktor.net*."

## “*Naebali*” Videos

Alisa did not make an official video for “*Naebali*,” so all versions of it online consist of either live performances shot by camera crews and fans or fan creations in which the studio recording is set to various found visual imagery. The live performances show the fervent participation of audiences, as well as the passion Kinchev exudes when he sings the song. Some of the images in the fan creations are conspicuous for their placement in relation to key moments in the text and music, revealing much about fan interpretations of the song. Comparatively speaking, none of the videos have received a significant amount of traffic, suggesting that “*Naebali*” perhaps resonates with only a small number of people.<sup>128</sup>

During my initial investigations (November 2017), the most widely viewed performance video available was attributed to a live recording of a concert in Veliky Novgorod on September 19, 2014. As of June 2020, it shows just over 372,000 viewers. In this instance, Kinchev replaced the word for fighters (*boitsy*) with *khokhly* in the second appearance of the upbeat, syncopated chorus in B-flat major. Both times he shouted the word, adding noticeable force to the velar fricative (*kh*).<sup>129</sup>

The most watched video of “*Naebali*” on YouTube as of June 2020 (over 547,000 viewers) was posted in 2015 and entitled “*Ey Khokhly Vas Opyat’ Nayebali*” (“Hey *khokhly*, you got f-ed again”). Despite the title the YouTube user who posted the video

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<sup>128</sup> The Cyrillic search query, “Алиса Наебали,” produces a wide variety of fan engagements on Youtube.

<sup>129</sup> Алиса, “Алиса - Наебали,” YouTube live performance video posted by Сергей Медведев, accessed November 27, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyQY3KG6D3M>.

ascribed to it, Kinchev actually refrains from making the offensive substitution in this live performance. This led several commenters to come to his defense, asserting that “*khokhly*” was dreamed up by the person who posted and named the video and that Kinchev had never uttered such a word. As we saw in the previous video and the *Reproduktor* article, Kinchev is not always innocent of this charge. At the end of the last verse in this video, he switches from a singing voice to a speaking voice, adding obvious sarcastic emphasis to part of the phrase that the journalist from *Argumenty nedeli* (quoted above) found so poignant: “Death is so beautiful.” Especially noteworthy about this video is the date the user published it—May 9, Victory Day. By uploading this video on the most fervently patriotic date on the Russian calendar, the YouTube user Siberian Rock has conflated Soviet and Russian patriotism with a hatred for Ukrainians.<sup>130</sup>

Common to some of Alisa’s live performances of “*Naebali*” is the conspicuous use of blue and yellow lights panning back and forth across the stage and over the audience. These, of course, are the colors of the Ukrainian flag. The most striking of all the live videos of the song incorporates gigantic flames projected onto screens at the back

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<sup>130</sup> Алиса, “Алиса 21 11 14 Эй хохлы вас опять наебали,” YouTube live performance video posted by Siberian Rock, accessed November 27, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDsl4bzcFmk>. This user posted nearly 300 videos of live rock music performed in concerts in Siberia between March and September 2015. A cyrillic search query of the band’s name on the user’s YouTube page shows a list of 27 live performance videos of the Alisa posted on the same day (May 9) with this particular video of “*Naebali*” at the top of the list. See <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCaMdqUEk4IPXuZBjYFk6TdA/search?query=%D0%90%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%B0>.



and sides of the stage. The presence of fire blazing through the Ukrainian national colors is unmistakably violent.<sup>131</sup>

In another live concert video filmed during a 2016 concert in Moscow, we can hear the crowd shouting all of the words to the song as Kinchev sings and stomps around the stage. When he points emphatically to them to sing the obscenities, they shout even louder. At one point, he directs them like a drum major, cueing them with fist pumps to shout the repeated “Hey! Hey! Hey!” that echo in between the lines of the chorus heard in the background of the studio recording.<sup>132</sup>

Perhaps the most imaginative fan creation was posted to YouTube in October 2016 and currently has just over 115,000 viewers. It relies on a host of repeated images such as a large tower clock with its arms speeding forward in time, imploding buildings, and the mushroom clouds of detonated nuclear bombs. Four ballerinas, one of the hallmarks of Russian cultural identity, also appear frequently. Their movements are sped up to match the speed of the machine gun ostinato that pervades the song. Hillary Clinton appears three times in various clips that are drastically slowed down to make her smiling facial expressions appear exaggerated and demented.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> “Alisa - Na & Bali (Official Video ),” YouTube live performance video, accessed November 27, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikyuZMa0VsI> (outdated link). By June 2020, the YouTube account associated with this video had been deleted. When an account is deleted, all videos posted by that account disappear.

<sup>132</sup> Алиса, “Алиса - Наебали,” YouTube live performance video posted on the channel Air Cam Media, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1hTBWIFep4>.

<sup>133</sup> Дмитрий Ви, “Алиса - Нае@али,” YouTube video montage, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-i5w-8cAuTw>.

In a fan creation posted to the social network site, *Odnoklassniki* (Classmates), we see a montage of violent and bloody clips and still photos from the protests in Kyiv.<sup>134</sup> At the conclusion of the first chorus (“And if need be, they’ll fuck you over again.”) Viktor Poroshenko, the politician who eventually replaced the pro-Russian Yanukovich, appears chuckling in front of the Ukrainian national colors. As the words to verse 2 begin to sound (“Demons prepare the field, Devils fill the jar [place their bets]”), short clips appear of foreign government representatives (including U.S. Senator John McCain) walking around Kyiv, shaking hands and participating in photo ops.

During the final chorus, clips of thousands of Ukrainians bouncing up and down in Kyiv’s central square are timed to precisely coincide with the same shouts of “Hey! Hey! Hey!” that Kinchev directed his audience to perform during the 2016 Moscow concert video discussed above. The bright, syncopated chorus that seems to gleefully predict the impermanence of the Revolution is therefore juxtaposed with Ukrainians celebrating in solidarity. As Kinchev sings the final words of the song, (“They’ll fuck you again... Yeah!”), the video shifts to one of Alisa’s live performances in which the yellow and blue beams of light flash prominently.

The video of the song that I circulated among my informants was a 2016 reposting of the 2014 live performance from Veliky Novgorod that I first mentioned. Yet its new title is notably similar to the one discussed above that refers to the offensive words Kinchev uses in his altered version of the chorus. This new title suggests an

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<sup>134</sup> Viewers should be warned that much of this video contains imagery that is extremely difficult to watch. Александр Резник, “Алиса - Нае@али,” Ok.ru video montage, May 4, 2017, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://ok.ru/video/270069008932>.

increasingly accepted understanding that the song was meant to belittle Ukraine.<sup>135</sup> In a strategy designed to insure that my informants were cognizant of the various iterations of the chorus that Kinchev sings in this performance, as well as each line of the text, I asked them to first verify the accuracy of my own transcription. Their responses suggest that at least two did not listen to the words very carefully or even follow my transcription. Nevertheless, their comments proved fruitful.

My informants' responses touched on regional and geopolitical issues, ethnicity, nationality, propaganda in mass media, and the connotations of language. Whether someone reacted positively or negatively to the song seemed to be somewhat dependent on age. Some of my slightly older Russian informants were willing to give Kinchev the benefit of the doubt, while simultaneously betraying, in subtle ways, their own big-brotherly postures toward Ukraine. My younger informants tended to read Kinchev's song the same way, that is, they were generally skeptical of the "sorrow" and "sadness" he claimed to have felt when he sang it. Each of their contributions ultimately lend support to a reading of the song that underscores Kinchev's denunciation of Ukrainian citizens' ambitions to rid themselves of a government that favored Russian interests.

### **Generational Division in Informant Interpretations of "Naebali"**

Elina Morhunova is a twenty-one-year-old woman from Kharkiv, Ukraine, born to a Russian father and a Ukrainian mother. Yet as she reveals, it is difficult to be certain of the homogeneity of her mother's lineage, due to the fact that Russia and Ukraine both

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<sup>135</sup> VLADIMIR VVD VLADIMIROVICH, "АЛИСА - ЭЙ ХОХЛЫ , ВАС ОПЯТЬ НА@БАЛИ," YouTube, March 11, 2016, accessed July 13, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RA\\_uxVfEVk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RA_uxVfEVk).

belonged to the Soviet Union. Like many in her country, she speaks both Ukrainian and Russian. Elina was one of the first language partners I became acquainted with on HelloTalk and she has been immensely helpful to my understanding of the complex relationship between Russia and Ukraine. She is also fairly fluent in English, so much so that for the sake of expedience, we often reverted to it in conversation. As we will see, her individual story is especially relevant in the context of Russian-Ukrainian relations, so I digress here to relate parts of it.

In the three years that we have been communicating, Elina has demonstrated an intensely disciplined work ethic in pursuit of a career in international business law. As I write, she is serving an internship, working for the committees on foreign affairs and security and defense in the European Union Parliament in Brussels, and simultaneously writing her master's thesis on business restructuring, insolvency, and mergers and acquisitions. In the short term, she would like to gain EU citizenship status by continuing her work in the EU parliament in a paid position, but she believes the politics of "who you know" will preclude those ambitions. She said that as a citizen of Ukraine, it was nearly impossible for her to land this internship in the first place since her country is still not part of the EU. She is hopeful that Ukraine's admittance to the EU is a possibility, but her sense from working in the parliament is that it will take years for that to even become feasible.

Possibly owing to her mixed Russian-Ukrainian heritage and the pragmatism of compromise that studying international business must engender, Elina speaks cautiously, often in a non-committal way, about the strife between her nation and Russian separatists in the area of Ukraine where she was born and raised. Living in Kharkiv (located in the

Russophone region of eastern Ukraine), she witnessed firsthand the violence that followed the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014. She said that in 2015 she saw with her own eyes the shelled cities of the Luhansk Oblast, including her hometown. The reticence I spoke of above is evident in the following statements and admonishments she recently made to me regarding the situation there: “It was true, though, you know, everyone describes the situation differently. . . . Don’t be certain in what you hear. Yes, even I can’t be certain in that case. You don’t want to make loud statements based on assumptions publicly provided in media.”<sup>136</sup> Despite these reservations, contributions she has recently made to the blogosphere via the Europa United media outlet advocate for continued efforts against Russian interference in the Baltic States.<sup>137</sup> She was also unequivocal in describing her impressions of Kinchev’s “*Naebali*”: “In my opinion, this song is quite pessimistic and derogatory towards Ukrainians who were used to being fooled and deceived by more powerful nations like Russia. So instead of dignity, the authors of this song are trying to convince [listeners] that the Ukrainian nation is the one no [one] needs to reckon with.”<sup>138</sup>

Oleg Ugryumov offers a less specific interpretation: “In general, I understand this text (and the song) as a call to the fact that one cannot believe the promises of politicians

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<sup>136</sup> Elina Morhunova, from a Facebook messenger dialogue, February 4, 2020.

<sup>137</sup> Elina Morhunova, “The Western Balkans – the Brand of Geopolitics of Europe,” *Europa United* (blog), February 18, 2020, <https://www.europaunited.eu/the-western-balkans-the-brand-of-geopolitics-of-europe/>; Elina Morhunova and Yannis Karamitsios, “The West, the Baltic States and Russia – a Three-Pronged Containment,” *Europa United* (blog), February 20, 2020, <https://www.europaunited.eu/the-west-the-baltic-states-and-russia-a-three-pronged-containment/>.

<sup>138</sup> Elina Morhunova, Facebook messenger dialogue, February 4, 2020.

and populists. All that they say and do, they do for the sake of their specific interests and certainly not for the broader masses. In this particular case, the broader masses are the people (as a generalized whole), the army (fighters) and the small nationality (Ukrainians). Nothing will be changed in the present and future—there will be no positive changes and all promises will still be broken.”<sup>139</sup> In this interpretation, Oleg provides some cover for the derogatory “*khokhly*” that Kinchev adds to this live performance. Where Elina sees a slight against Ukrainians merely in the use of the ethnic slur, Oleg sees its incorporation as a means for Kinchev to say that everyone—the Ukrainians, members of armed forces, and the people as a whole—will all suffer the same indignity at the hands of political power. His ignoring of the offensive implications for Ukrainians of the term “*khokhly*” and his use of the adjective “*malaia*” (“small” or “little”) to describe Ukraine as a nationality betray Russian bias and condescending big brother speak (in multiple senses).

Sergey Chubraev provides a reading similar to Oleg’s, yet where Oleg interprets a distrust and hatred directed outward, toward politicians and populists, Sergey’s interpretation is more reflexive, aiming Kinchev’s vitriol at an eternally unavoidable plight for all Russian-speaking peoples. Sergey’s interpretation of the song is more detailed and will require significant unpacking: “Of course, I know this song well and the

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<sup>139</sup> “В целом, я понимаю этот текст (и песню), как призыв к тому, что нельзя верить обещаниям политиков и популистов. Всё что они говорят и делают, они делают ради своих конкретных интересов и точно не для широких масс. В данном конкретном случае широкие массы это народ (как обобщённое целое), армия (солдаты) и малая народность (украинцы). Чтобы не менялось в настоящем и будущем - положительных перемен всё равно не будет и все обещания будут нарушены.” Oleg Ugryumov, Facebook messenger dialogue, February 4, 2020.

text is not offensive in any way. There was a lot of talk about it at one time. The text is quite complicated, in my opinion. It is replete with difficult to understand images, allusions, and comparisons.”<sup>140</sup>

Then Sergey cited what was for him the most egregiously esoteric line from the text: “For those who gawked at how steel succumbed under the pressure of bats.” For context and convenience of understanding, here again is the full stanza Sergey extracted these lines from—the first verse of the song: “The blood has not dried upon the lips, the truth dazzles the eyes for those who gawked at how steel succumbed under the pressure of bats.” Sergey revealed the reasons for his incomprehension: “One can only guess what he had in mind. ‘*Bity*,’ roughly speaking, are heavy sticks. How steel can die by the pressure of sticks is not clear.”<sup>141</sup> Sergey’s translation of “*bity*” as “heavy sticks” is not far from my own translation of “bats.” Viewing any one of the plethora of videos documenting the Euromaidan protest on YouTube (and even some of the “*Naebali*” fan creations discussed above) will reveal that implements fitting this description were commonplace among protesters who beat against the metal shields (conceivably of steel alloy) that were so ubiquitous among the troops sent by Yanukovich’s government to quash the movement. Viewed metaphorically, these lines might convey the incredulity of

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<sup>140</sup> “Конечно, я хорошо знаю эту песню и текст не оскорбителен ни в кой мере. Про нее в свое время было много разговоров. С радостью постараюсь ответить на ваши вопросы. Текст довольно сложный, на мой взгляд. Он изобилует трудно понимаемыми образами, аллюзиями и сравнениями.” Sergey Chubraev, via email, February 4, 2020.

<sup>141</sup> “Тем, кто глазел, как дохла, Сталь под напором бит. Эти строки мне вообще не понятны. Остается только гадать, что он имел в виду. Биты, это, грубо говоря, тяжелые палки. Как сталь может умирать по напором палок, не ясно.” Ibid.

witnesses as they saw an unruly rebellion break the steely resolve of a government they believed was righteous and just.

Like the journalist from *Argumenty nedeli* cited earlier, Sergey finds Kinchev's imagery about death to be especially "beautiful and impressive." His interpretation is revealing: "The general concept of this song for me is the author's position on the difficult and tragic fate of our homeland. And he specifically splits and modifies the verses so as not to focus only on Ukraine. In this way, Kinchev sends the message that he does not separate Russia and Ukraine but perceives and feels the unity of these peoples."<sup>142</sup> Sergey's statement is consistent with Kinchev's own statements. Next, Sergey elaborates on what these people (Ukrainian and Russian) share in common:

[These are people] who incompetent authority (and those forces that influence it) deceive and send to their death throughout our centuries-old history. It is especially valuable in these lines that the poet reveals the demonstration of good intentions by the authorities and the imposition of beliefs on the people in order that they themselves [the people] want and desire to shed blood, so that it would be better later—that this is therefore how heroes are born. Kinchev in his song debunks everything, blames and condemns it all. It is a song of warning, a song of anxiety and pain for the gullibility, naiveté, and stupidity of Russian-speaking countries, which in addition to external aggression, beat each other regularly in civil wars. In conclusion, I can say that this song echoes Grebenshchikov's song "We Got Fucked Over" (*Nas s toboiu naebali*).<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> "А в целом, строки и образы красивые и впечатляющие. Особенно про смерть. Общая концепция этой песни для меня является позиция автора о тяжёлой и трагичной судьбе нашей Родины. И он специально дробит и изменяет куплеты, чтобы не акцентировать внимание только на Украине. Тем самым Кинчев дает понять, что он не разделяет Россию и Украину, а воспринимает и чувствует единство этих народов." Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> "Которых на протяжении всей многовековой истории обманывает и посылает на смерть бездарная власть. И те силы, которые влияют на эту власть. Особо ценно в этих строчках то, что поэт раскрывает манифестацию властью благих намерений и навязывания убеждения для людей того, что они сами хотят и желают проливать кровь. Чтобы потом было лучше. Что таким образом и рождаются герои. Кинчев в своей песне это всё развенчивает, обвиняет и осуждает. Песня предупреждение, песня тревоги и боли за доверчивость, наивность и глупость русскоязычных стран. Которые помимо внешней агрессии лупят друг друга в гражданских войнах регулярно.



This song by Boris Grebenshchikov, one of the pioneers of Russian rock during the late-Soviet period, tells the brief tale of two soldiers (most likely serving during the Soviet-Afghan war), the last surviving members of their unit, for whom all hope is lost. In the song, the pair fight bravely despite the commonplace problems of shoddy equipment and reinforcements that are never sent. In the end, all that is left to do for the soldiers is to light up a cigarette, for death is certain. A YouTube video featuring Grebenshchikov's song has been viewed nearly 6.5 million times. One of the more recent comments has generated 135 thumbs up in the four weeks since its posting and echoes Sergey's defeatist view of life as a citizen of Russian-speaking countries.<sup>144</sup> The commenter first asserts, "This song is very suitable for the anthem of the Russian Federation," and after quoting words from the song – "Well, this is ordinary stuff, we've been fucked over" – she opines, "this sacred phrase haunts the Russian from the moment of birth to death."<sup>145</sup> Linking Kinchev's song to Grebenshchikov's reveals an interesting paradox in thinking: Sergey's previous comments about the "Kukushka" cover songs in chapter 1 suggest a

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В завершении могу сказать, что эта песня перекликается с песней Гребенщикова 'Нас с тобою наебали.'" Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> For reasons that are unclear, YouTube does not provide the exact date for comments, merely a rough estimate of the time that has elapsed since they were made. By this estimate, the comment was made sometime around January 16, 2020.

<sup>145</sup> "Эта песня очень подходит для гимна РФ. 'Что ж обычные дела, нас с тобою на\*\*ли' - эта сакральная фраза преследует россиянина с момента рождения до смерти," YouTube user, Галина Рублева. Her use of the word "rossiyanin" refers to Russian citizens of any ethnicity, rather than merely ethnic Russians. See in V.Э, "Борис Гребенщикова - Нас с тобою наебали (Единичка)," YouTube, June 24, 2016, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BUC0mhV7FIQ>.

distaste for the current Russian government, yet both he and Kinchev seem to consider it folly for Ukrainians to want to distance themselves from that very same government.

I later provided Oleg and Sergey with evidence that points to the events in Ukraine as the specific motivation for Kinchev to write the song, offering also to Sergey my own interpretation for the words “heavy sticks” and “steel” within the song’s lyrics. Additionally, I asked them both about the relative offensiveness of the word “*khokhly*” and asked why Kinchev might have restricted its use to rare live performances. It took Oleg awhile to get back to me, but he ultimately agreed that Kinchev had anti-Maidan intentions for the song.<sup>146</sup> Regarding the ethnic slur, Sergey would only say, “As for *khokhly*, it’s hard for me to say something, but I have never heard any discontent with this word from my many acquaintances and friends in Kiev.”<sup>147</sup> Elina’s claims, as well as responses from my other informants, reveal that the question of the word’s offensiveness is more complicated. Otherwise Sergey merely restated what he previously said about the song: “It seems to me that the meaning of this song is not complicated—the new power and government will not bring the expected better life.”<sup>148</sup> We might restate this as “leaving Russia’s sphere of influence will not bring the expected better life.”

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<sup>146</sup> “Делает ли это намерения Кинчева более антимайданными?” Author, Facebook messenger dialogue, February 6, 2020. “Возможно, да. Скорее соглашусь с этим предположением.” Oleg Ugryumov, responding on February 25, 2020.

<sup>147</sup> “Насчет хохолов мне трудно что-то сказать, но я никогда не слышал каких-либо недовольств этим словом от своих многочисленных знакомых и друзей в Киеве.” Sergey Chubraev, via email, February 13, 2020.

<sup>148</sup> “Мне кажется, что смысл в этой песне не сложный-новая власть и правительство не принесут ожидаемую лучшую жизнь.” Ibid.

Anna Bessanova’s initial response to “*Naebali*” resembled Oleg’s: “Kinchev hints that the government is lying to people. I understand that. And [it] always lies, but people [still] believe.”<sup>149</sup> Yet when I offered her the same supporting evidence I gave Oleg and Sergey Chubraev, she began to see things differently. Despite the efforts I made to get my informants to notice that Kinchev added “*khokhly*” to this live performance, this fact did not initially register with Anna. It raises the question of how attentive listeners are to lyrics in general. When I asked her about it, she admitted, “I did not hear this word. Can you imagine? Yes, it’s very rude.”<sup>150</sup> After I revealed that Kinchev wrote this following the Euromaidan Revolution, she responded, “Here he speaks of the futility of the revolution, and the word ‘*khokhly*’—it just sounds clear. My husband is Ukrainian, he can take offense at such a word.”<sup>151</sup>

The fact that Kinchev has only used “*khokhly*” in a live performance suggests that his intent is to incite anti-Ukrainian sentiment among a particular segment of his fan base, perhaps the skinheads (among other nationalists) who clamber up to the stage during his concerts. It also suggests that he would like to avoid leaving a more permanent, formal video or audio record of this transgression.

After learning the full context surrounding Kinchev’s song, Anna stated, “but Kinchev is very strange. He went crazy, probably.”<sup>167</sup> Perhaps considering the Kinchev

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<sup>149</sup> Anna Bessanova, Facebook messenger dialogue, February 5, 2020.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

of today as a sadly comedic foil for the Kinchev of yesterday, she added, “Rock music is usually in opposition to the official authorities.”<sup>168</sup> Anna also offered her opinions about the band’s current cultural relevance: “Alisa is not popular right now. They listened to Kinchev 20 years ago. He had a completely different music. All of my friends love music – this is a lot of people – and none of them listen to Alisa.”<sup>169</sup> These statements show that Anna recognizes the evolution this chapter discusses in Kinchev’s ideology. Yet despite her labelling his latest work as irrelevant, Kinchev and his band have nevertheless found a niche market, exploiting the contemporary phenomenon of crowdfunding with notable success. On the site *planeta.ru*, the band initially asked for the modest sum of four million rubles (approx. \$63,000) to produce their 2016 album *Excess* (which included “*Nayebali*”) and ended up amassing a sum of 11,333,777 rubles (just over \$178,000) from supportive fans.<sup>170</sup>

When I pointed out his idea for uniting Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus under one banner, a nation called *Rus*’, Anna reiterated, “I say Kinchev is crazy, although now in Russia, there is propaganda of this idea.” But then she pointed to her own ambivalence: “Although I do not see much difference between Ukrainians, Russians and Belarusians. We have a common history.” And then she equivocated again: “But Ukraine and Russia are not one country. . . . Ukraine wants to be independent. This is understandable. . . .

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> “Группа ‘Алиса’ Новый альбом,” *Planeta.ru*, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://planeta.ru/campaigns/kinchev>.

Now people just need to decide who they are! And of course, Russia does not want Ukraine's independence. There is a lot of propaganda about unification.”<sup>171</sup>

Her youthful, idealized outlook on global society is evident as she states, “Although in a global sense, I do not think borders and separation of nationalities are needed. Unfortunately, this is not possible now. But Kinchev does not contribute to this idea of peace! Rather the opposite!” Then she gets to the heart of the matter, revealing her opinions about why such unification propaganda exists: “In Russia they are afraid of revolution and in every possible way depreciate the revolution in Ukraine. This Kinchev song is about the meaninglessness of the revolution. Some Ukrainians also think so. Because of this, there is a war in Ukraine. Unfortunately, propaganda works everywhere.”<sup>172</sup> By the end of our conversation, she clearly saw Kinchev as an artist in support of such propaganda.

My discussion of “*Naebali*” with Gleb Vildanov took a similar path. Initially he read the text in a way that loosely corresponds to Oleg and Sergey Chubraev’s understanding: “The song itself, I think, is a stereotype or life motto that everyone always deceives each other, especially when it comes to war and any political goals. But also many Russian and Ukrainian people think that all people will necessarily cheat in everyday life: work, family, relations with neighbors, trade, and the state.”<sup>173</sup> But even

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<sup>171</sup> Anna Bessanova, Facebook messenger dialogue, February 5, 2020.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> “Сама песня, как мне кажется- стереотип или жизненный девиз о том, что все друг друга всегда обманывают, особенно когда дело касается войны и каких либо политических целей. Но также много русских, да и украинских людей думают что все люди обязательно

before I shared the facts surrounding the song's provenance, Gleb already recognized a political motivation for using the word "*khokhly*": "If you heard '*Khokhly*' here, then this topic is also related to politics. Because on our TV, they say that Europe and America will inevitably deceive Ukraine."<sup>174</sup>

Though at least a couple of my informants believe, like Gleb, that Kinchev imagines a Ukrainian population that has been deceived, statements he made during an interview for Yuri Dud's (pronounced Dood) popular YouTube channel indicate that he affords Ukrainians greater agency, if not intelligence and moral righteousness. When Dud asked whether Ukrainians were their brothers, Kinchev responded with, "Well of course, brothers, of course, yes. But they unfortunately turned in the direction where Stepan Bandera called them. That's why they hate us more and more, and the hatred will only increase."<sup>175</sup>

Bandera is a controversial figure associated with fascist ideology and responsible for a number of atrocities committed on behalf of Ukrainian independence in the 1930s.<sup>176</sup> He was sent to the Sachsenwald concentration camp following his failed

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будут обманывать и в обычной жизни: работа, семья, отношения с соседями, торговля, государство." Gleb Vildanov, Facebook messenger dialogue, February 13, 2020.

<sup>174</sup> "Если здесь прозвучало "хохлы", значит эта тема ещё и связана с политикой. Потому что по нашему ТВ говорят что Украину обязательно обманут и Европа и Америка." Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> "Ну конечно братья, конечно да. Но они к сожалению повернулись в сторону куда их позвал Степан Бандера. Поэтому они нас всё больше и больше ненавидят, ненависть будет только усиливаться." Konstantin Kinchev in ВДудь, "Кинчев - чувства верующих, самогон, рок-н-ролл / ВДудь," YouTube, 2018, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zCVth5QUAA>.

<sup>176</sup> Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2015), 239–40.

attempts to create an alliance with the Germans, hoping they would be sympathetic to Ukrainian autonomy. As Ukrainian historian Sergii Plokhy states, “The Bandera faction of the OUN [Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists] went overnight from the Germans’ loyal ally to their enemy.”<sup>177</sup> Most Ukrainians today who view Bandera positively associate him with the partisan movement in Ukraine that steadfastly fought against Stalinist rule. Though the partisans took inspiration from Bandera’s dedication to Ukrainian independence, Bandera himself did not play a role in the leadership of the movement after his capture, nor after his release.<sup>178</sup> He never returned to Ukraine and was eventually assassinated by KGB agents in West Germany in 1959.<sup>179</sup> And though Bandera retained dreams of a fascist Ukraine until his death, fascism itself was only important to partisans in western Ukraine, and only during the war.<sup>180</sup>

Because of his brief overtures in 1941 to the Germans during the Great Patriotic War, Bandera’s name in Russia is almost universally connected to Nazism, and the Russian media routinely strengthens these associations. So when Kinchev summons the name Stepan Bandera, he reinscribes fascist ideology and Nazism on the Ukrainian population writ large, despite the fact that only small groups of nationalists in Ukraine identify with Bandera’s extremist viewpoints today. It did not help matters that in 2007 a

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 266-67.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>180</sup> Timothy Snyder, “A Fascist Hero in Democratic Kiev,” *The New York Review of Books* (blog), February 24, 2010, accessed July 13, 2020, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/02/24/a-fascist-hero-in-democratic-kiev/>.

statue of him was erected in Lviv, Ukraine and that in 2009, the Ukrainian government commissioned a postage stamp in commemoration of his one-hundredth birthday. As historian Timothy Snyder opines about this rehabilitation, “to glorify Bandera is to reject Stalin and to reject any pretension from Moscow to power over Ukraine.”<sup>181</sup> Kinchev’s statement during the interview cited above drips with precisely the kind of pretension of which Snyder speaks.

Gleb had more to say about the themes and opinions Kinchev has addressed: “And so Kinchev has been singing about Russia for a long time, about the burden of Russian life, about enemies, and about Orthodoxy. And this is not only his opinion. Many people in Russia think that [others] want to conquer Russia, and that the enemy will come from America or Europe because we, the Russians, are something special.”<sup>182</sup> According to Gleb, “This is either about resources or religion,” and then he added with his tongue firmly in cheek, “Therefore, we will never become Europeans. And Europe does not want to accept us because it does not love us, because we are Russians. ☺ So, in Russia there are many problems.”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Snyder.

<sup>182</sup> “А так Кинчев давно уже поет про Россию, тяжести русской жизни, о врагах, православии. И это не только его мнение, много людей в России думают, что Россию хотят захватить, а враг придет из Америки или Европы, потому что мы, русские, чем то особенные.” Gleb Vildanov, Facebook messenger dialogue, February 13, 2020.

<sup>183</sup> “Это или ресурсы, или религия, поэтому мы никогда не станем настоящими европейцами, а Европа не хочет принять нас, потому что она нас не любит, потому что мы русские ☺ поэтому в России много проблем.” Ibid.



Before the topic of Ukrainians came up in the interview with Yuri Dud, Kinchev referred to many of the xenophobic fears Gleb has outlined: “The bottom line is that there are a lot of people around who want to take all our resources away from us. And so let there be a strong Russian army and navy.”<sup>184</sup> When Dud asked who wanted to take these resources, Kinchev replied:

But America of course. Who wants to take them? America. It became obvious to me when America started bombing Belgrade.<sup>185</sup> There was an illusion that the free world was beautiful. This paradise on Earth collapsed back then. [Now] I do not feed [upon this illusion]. America has always been the perpetual enemy of Russia. I'm not talking about the people. The people can be beautiful, wonderful. But the government of America wants to destroy Russia and never vice versa. Russia never wanted to destroy America. She defended herself. And now she is forced to defend herself [again]. This is an unpopular position, I know.<sup>186</sup>

Kinchev often paints himself as a maverick rocker, but to assert that these opinions are unpopular in Russia is absurd and Dud does not let him get away with it, claiming with

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<sup>184</sup> “Но суть в том, заключается что вокруг очень много тех кто хочет забрать у нас все ресурсы. И поэтому пусть будет сильная армия и флот России.” Konstantin Kinchev in ВДудь, “Кинчев - чувства верующих, самогон, рок-н-ролл / ВДудь.”

<sup>185</sup> While Kinchev was speaking on this topic, the video producers flashed a short explanatory memo across the screen clarifying that it was in fact a NATO bombing campaign: “The NATO military operation in Yugoslavia took place from 24 March to 10 June 1999. The reason for the bombing was called ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. NATO troops launched a military operation without a UN mandate. Subsequently, Yugoslavia split into several independent States.” (“Военная операция НАТО в югославии проходила с 24 марта по 10 июня 1999 года. Причиной бомбардировок называли этнические чистки в Косово. Войска НАТО начали военную операцию без мандата ООН. Впоследствии Югославия распалась на несколько независимых государств.”) See in *ibid*.

<sup>186</sup> “Но Америка конечно. Кто хочет забрать? Америка. Мне это стало очевидно когда Америка начала бомбить Белград. Иллюзии того что свободный мир прекрасен. Это рай на земле рухнули в то время. Поэтому сейчас не питаю. Америка этого всегда всегдашней враг России. Я про людей не говорю. Люди прекрасные могут быть, замечательные. Но государство Америка хочет Россию уничтожить и никогда не наоборот. Россия никогда не хотела уничтожить Америку. Она защищалась. И сейчас она вынуждена защищаться. Эта непопулярная позиция я знаю.” Konstantin Kinchev in *ibid*.

calm certainty, “It is quite in the trend of what is shown on TV. . . . and as far as I understand, eighty-six percent of the population supports this position. Therefore, it is quite popular.”<sup>187</sup>

The comments section below the video of this interview provides evidence that at least some Russians find this line of thinking preposterous. The wisecrack of one YouTube user related to this topic of resources has so far gained the approval of over fifty other users: “Apple alone is worth as much as ten Gazproms. And in 20 years, oil will not be worth anything at all. So, of course, America sleeps and sees how it has conquered our resources.”<sup>188</sup> Even a comment devoid of such clever irony received the approval of twenty-five users: “America does not need Russia’s resources, what nonsense, Russia itself squanders everything.”<sup>189</sup> Responding to the former, another user stated, “Of course, because if America acquires such resources, then at least some of the income will go to people, and not to the accounts of Swiss banks of Russian officials.”<sup>190</sup> Another user referenced the Alisa song that opened this chapter, “Sky of the Slavs,” implying that Kinchev should be calling out the Russian government itself for the various

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<sup>187</sup> “[Это] вполне в тренде того что в телеке показывают. . . . Ну насколько я понимаю 86 процентов населения поддерживает такую позицию. Поэтому он вполне популярны.” Yuri Dud in *ibid*.

<sup>188</sup> “Одна только Apple стоит как десять Газпромов. А через 20 лет нефть вообще не будет ничего стоить. Поэтому, конечно, Америка спит и видит, как она завоевала наши ресурсы...” Борис Цейтлин, see in the comments, *ibid*.

<sup>189</sup> “Не нужны америке ресурсы России, что за чушь, Россия сама разбазаривает все.” Sunsetpeople, see in the comments, *ibid*.

<sup>190</sup> “@Борис Цейтлин конечно, ведь если Америка обзаведется такими ресурсами, то хоть какая-то часть доходов пойдет на людей, а не на счета швейцарских банков российских чиновников.” Шо каво, see in the comments, *ibid*.

ways he feels it has spoiled, squandered, or sold off the nation's natural resources to the highest bidders in the East, rather than the West: "And what about the Sky of the Slavs? Oh Kostya Kostya, how did you become so small? The Russian forest goes to the Chinese, is that right? And Baikal? And the Kurils to the Japanese?" Following that, he shamed Kinchev for not speaking out about some of the most pressing concerns of Russian citizens: "What about education in this country, which is already below the baseboard, as well as salaries, not to mention pensions? Well, yes, you have everything, so you are keeping your mouth shut."<sup>191</sup> This comment articulates a final transformative phase in Kinchev's career: because the problems his countrymen face no longer affect him personally, he is less motivated to speak against the status quo in any significant way. In fact, he seems more inclined to support it while merely paying lip service to change.

In his interview with Dud, Kinchev briefly tried to insist that he was a non-conformist and then began to mumble something about not believing the public opinion data Dud offered. But Dud cut him off and again tried to get him to articulate coherent reasons for his position. In particular, he wanted Kinchev to state the connection between the American bombing of Belgrade and the desire to destroy Russia. Kinchev gave a rambling response: "Because we are northern brothers [to the Serbs]. This is a specific threat to us. [When] you see such a slap in the face, so it will be with you too. The fact

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<sup>191</sup> "А как же небо славян? Эх Костик Костик, как же ты обмельчал? Русский лес китайцам это разве правильно? А Байкал? А Курилы японцам? А как насчет образования в стране. которое уже ниже плинтуса, как и зарплаты, не говоря уже о пенсии? Ну да, у тебя все есть, поэтому ты и молчишь в тряпочку." Семён Горбунков, see in the comments, *ibid*.

that [America] wants to destroy our Orthodox brothers.”<sup>192</sup> While on the subject of brotherhood, he took the opportunity to declare who had been excommunicated: “And only the Serbs are our brothers. And, well, the cowardly Bulgarians are no longer brothers—they’re cowards.”<sup>193</sup> Dud asked if joining the European Union is what made them cowards and Kinchev replied, “Yes...no, because they cannot stand their ground.”<sup>194</sup> Kinchev labels the Bulgarians as cowards because of their open posture toward the West, rather than toward Russia. In other words, they are cowards because they have abandoned the sacred Slavic family led by Russia, with its mythical, primordial wisdom.

Gleb offered other impressions about Kinchev’s general creative output that read like a listing of anti-modern, nineteenth-century Slavophile conceits: “Also in his work there are thoughts that the Russian person suffers because he does not think correctly with his head, does stupid things, because he is very kind, simple, naive. Bad people take advantage of this and deceive him, or the Russian himself gets into bad situations.”<sup>195</sup>

Following these statements, Kinchev reiterates some of the same tropes that we encountered in Shchedrin’s opera in chapter two. The idea that Russians, so simple and

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<sup>192</sup> “Потому что мы северную братья. Это угроза нам конкретной. Но такая пощечина о том что вот смотрите и так с вами будет. То что она уничтожает наших православных братьев.” Konstantin Kinchev in *ibid*.

<sup>193</sup> “А у нас братья только сербы. Ну и ссыкливые болгары уже не братья--ссыкуны.” Konstantin Kinchev in *ibid*.

<sup>194</sup> “Да...нет, потому что, не могут стать на позицию.” Konstantin Kinchev in *ibid*.

<sup>195</sup> “Также в его творчестве есть мысли, что русский человек страдает, потому что не думает головой правильно, делает глупые вещи, потому что очень добрый, простой, наивный. Этим пользуются плохие люди и обманывают его, или русский сам попадает в плохие ситуации.” Gleb Vildanov, Facebook messenger dialogue, February 13, 2020.

unaccustomed to the vile ways of the world, are regularly deceived by the evils inherent to the West comes up again and again.

I told Gleb that I believed the song was Kinchev's response to events in Ukraine, and then asked him to comment on the strange fact that "*khokhly*" was omitted from the published text and recorded album. His response was cautious, giving Kinchev the benefit of the doubt: "Perhaps the song itself was not initially dedicated to Ukraine. He sings about the fighters [in the published version], although he may have in mind the meaninglessness of the military action in the Donbass, and that it is not clear for what and for whom the soldiers will die. Possibly."<sup>196</sup> In this interpretation Kinchev speaks more generally about the senselessness of all war.

When I asked him whether Kinchev was inciting hatred for Ukrainians when he sang "*khokhly*" in live performances, Gleb firmly asserted that this was not his intention: "No, I think that he does NOT incite hatred of Ukraine, but he broadcasts it, this hatred, even if he himself does not know it. His thoughts are not that Ukraine is doing something wrong now, but that the nation is being deceived."<sup>197</sup> It is in these statements that Gleb's interpretation most closely corresponds to those of Sergey Chubraev. When I shared the Alisa website entry in which Kinchev described the situation in Ukraine as a "political coup," Gleb's generosity began to crumble, calling the band "*debily*" ("morons"). After I

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<sup>196</sup> "Возможно сама песня не была посвящена Украине изначально, он же поет про бойцов, хотя может и имеет в виду бессмысленность боевых действий на Донбассе, и что погибать будут солдаты не понятно ради чего и ради кого. Возможно." Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> "Нет, я считаю, что он НЕ разжигает ненависть к Украине, но он её, эту ненависть, транслирует даже сам того не хотя. Это не его мысли о том что Украина сейчас делает что-то не правильное, поэтому её обманывают." Ibid.

sent him Kinchev's website entry from the next day in which the text of "Naebali" was introduced, he replied, "Well what can I say, apparently he went into rotten politics. Because these thoughts were coming from the TV, he probably watched too much TV."<sup>198</sup>

The former Russian television producer Peter Pomerantsev's statements about the nature of contemporary television in Russia provide a rich and detailed context for Gleb's comments: "From near-medieval villages where people still draw water from wooden wells by hand, through single-factory towns and back to the blue glass and steel skyscrapers of the new Moscow—TV is the only force that can unify and rule and bind this country. It's the central mechanism of a new type of authoritarianism, one far subtler than twentieth-century strains."<sup>199</sup> After noting that Putin's first task as president in 2000 was to take control of the television stations, Pomerantsev added, "It was television through which the Kremlin decided which politicians it would 'allow' as its puppet-opposition, what the country's history and fears and consciousness should be. And the new Kremlin won't make the same mistake the old Soviet Union did: it will never let TV become dull. The task is to synthesize Soviet control with Western entertainment."<sup>200</sup>

Pomerantsev, who grew up mostly in London after his parents emigrated from the Soviet Ukraine as political exiles in the 1970s, had been tasked with bringing some of

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<sup>198</sup> "Ну что можно сказать, видимо он ушёл в гнилую политику. Потому что эти мысли шли из телевизора. Он наверное пересмотрел ТВ." Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, 5.

<sup>200</sup> Pomerantsev, 6.

that Western pizzazz to Ostankino, the nerve center of Russian television located in Moscow. He said that producers and political technologists frequently quipped, “The news is the incense by which we bless Putin’s actions, make him the President.”<sup>201</sup> Members of the state media apparatus recognized a connection between the role that Orthodoxy played during Russia’s Imperial age and the role that television plays in modern times. About his time spent working in Moscow, Pomerantsev concluded,

I had the sense that reality was somehow malleable, that I was with Prosperos who could project any existence they wanted onto post-Soviet Russia. But with every year I worked in Russia, and as the Kremlin became ever more paranoid, Ostankino’s strategies became ever more twisted, the need to incite panic and fear ever more urgent; rationality was tuned out, and Kremlin-friendly cults and hate-mongers were put on prime time to keep the nation entranced, distracted.<sup>202</sup>

Perhaps, as Gleb suggests, Kinchev is just one of the countless impressionable digesters of television media in Russia, easily susceptible to the kinds of strategies Pomerantsev describes. But this notion seems incongruous with the extroverted, demonstrative stage presence he has exhibited throughout his career. It seems more likely that Kinchev, rather than being “entranced” by television, uses it to learn which way the wind blows and adjusts accordingly, if he watches it at all. A YouTube user commenting on Kinchev’s interview with Dud made a direct connection between Kinchev and the propaganda he sees on Russian television: “The pensioner [Kinchev is semi-retired] is extremely far from the reality occurring in the country. Excellent material, another high-quality work

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<sup>201</sup> Pomerantsev, 6.

<sup>202</sup> Pomerantsev, 6–7.

by Yuri and his team, but I watched only until the 23rd minute, where KK began to broadcast [the messages from] our TV, giving them out as his opinions.”<sup>203</sup>

The remaining four informants who responded to my questions about this song were like the others split in their opinions about “*Naebali*.” While all recognized a connection to Maidan, the two older informants (10-20 years older than the two younger ones) were less troubled by its nationalistic implications, or merely thought the song was in poor taste. Victoria from Piatygorsk (in her mid-forties) had this to say in her first response: “*Naebali* [means] have been fucked, but it is used [here] in the meaning, to deceive, or simply to use someone like they are a superfluous thing and to throw them away. I do not quite understand how to comment. It seems to me that here it is about how governments are deceiving simple [or ordinary] people.”<sup>204</sup> About an hour-and-a-half later, she sent me a follow-up message indicating she had done a bit of research: “This song was written after the events in Ukraine on the Maidan in 2014.”<sup>205</sup> After I showed her my own research concerning the song’s origin I asked her whether she thought the song was specifically anti-Maidan. The next day she declared, “the fact that the song is anti-Maidan is evident from the words even without *khokhly*. The very name of the song

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<sup>203</sup> “Крайне далёкий от происходящей в стране реальности пенсионер. Отличный материал, очередная качественная работа Юрия и его команды, но я досмотрел только до 23-ей минуты, где КК начал транслировать наш телек, выдавая это за свои мысли.” TwoMan, see in the comments section of вДудь, “Кинчев - чувства верующих, самогон, рок-н-ролл / вДудь.”

<sup>204</sup> “Наебали have been fucked, но он употребляется в значении, обманывать, просто кого-то использовать и выбросить как ненужную вещь. Я не совсем поняла как надо прокомментировать. Мне кажется здесь о том как правительства обманывают простой народ.” Victoria from Piatygorsk, HelloTalk dialogue, February 15, 2020.

<sup>205</sup> “Эта песня была написана после событий на Украине на майдане в 2014 году.” Ibid.



already says, ‘all of you were deceived, fighters and *khokhly*.’<sup>206</sup> Her matter-of-fact responses reveal nothing about her own stance on the matters in Ukraine, but they do show that Kinchev’s intent is unambiguous to her.

Sergey Klishis is in his early fifties. Because he is a musician, I can usually count on him to give equal consideration to both the text and its musical context, but in this case he found nothing noteworthy:

As for me, the song is weak, there is little drive ... the text was written before Maidan and the fact that he inserts “hey *Khokhly*” does not speak in his favor. It’s better not to mix politics and art. Although the text fits the situation in Ukraine, it will do so in any other country. ;) When artistic figures go into politics, nothing good comes out of it – the same is true for Makarevich, Akhidzhakova, and Kinchev ... but then there is Tsoi, [to whom we can say] “well done!” ;)<sup>207</sup>

Though Sergey demonstrates a touch of the same pessimism about governments and their relationship to the people first articulated by Oleg and Sergey Chubraev, it is apparent that for his taste, Kinchev goes too far and would have done better to offer no commentary whatsoever on the situation in Ukraine. When I noted that the song was actually penned after Maidan, he merely added, “It’s a weak song and therefore arouses no emotion.” But as heavy metal songs go, I would argue that Kinchev’s and Alisa’s musical setting is actually an effective vehicle for the song’s messages. Although Sergey

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<sup>206</sup> “А то что песня антимайданская - это видно по словам и без Хохлов. Само название уже говорит что вас всех обманули и бойцов и хохлов.” Victoria from Piatyorsk, HelloTalk dialogue, February 16, 2020.

<sup>207</sup> “Как по мне- песня слабая, драйва мало... текст был написан до Майдана и то что он вставляет "эй хохлы" говорит не в его пользу- политику и искусство лучше не мешать. Хотя текст подходит под ситуацию в Украине, но это подойдёт и в любой другой стране. ;) Когда деятели искусства лезут в политику, то ничего путного не получается- что Макаревич, что Ахиджакова, что Кинчев... вот Цой молодец. ;)” Sergey Klishis, VKontakte dialogue, February 5, 2020.

remained unmoved, the musical fans of a certain persuasion are driven nearly to ecstasy by this song, as the many live performances available online attest.

My two remaining younger informants, Maria Udovydchenko and Alexander Petrov, are both in their early thirties and their comments most closely resemble those of even younger informants like Anna Bessanova (32), Elina Morhunova (21), and Gleb Vildanov (34). As a group they demonstrate a general tendency to not be moved by reports in the Russian media about Ukraine. They are also more prone to calling out nationalism where they see it because they seem to recognize it as a destructive force. Maria's comments were brief and to the point: "About Kinchev, I can say that now he has become a nationalist. I don't know how long ago this happened."<sup>208</sup> When I asked her whether the change could have begun after his baptism in the Orthodox faith, she said it was possible and then provided me with a link to educational videos about Russian culture, one of which discusses Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>209</sup>

Alexander Petrov provided the most detailed and angry response to Kinchev's song. He began with a recognition of the drastic changes over the course of the rocker's career: "Kinchev completely deteriorated with age. It's sad to look at it. Apparently, the former abuse of drugs and alcohol completely destroyed his brain and he hit on the

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<sup>208</sup> "Про Кинчева могу сказать, что сейчас он стал националистом, не знаю как давно это случилось." Maria Udovydchenko, Facebook messenger dialogue, February 4, 2020.

<sup>209</sup> Evaluation of these sources went beyond the scope of this inquiry. Nevertheless, I have provided them for readers to explore on their own. "Видеоистория русской культуры за 25 минут," Arzamas, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://arzamas.academy/likbez/ruskult>.

Orthodox-nationalist theme.”<sup>210</sup> If Alexander was ever a fan of Kinchev’s performance style, the following statement, borrowing from the song, makes it plain that this is no longer the case: “And as for the video itself, I will answer with the words of Kinchev himself: ‘everything is as always, and it will hardly be better.’”<sup>211</sup> Alexander saved his most detailed discussion for the lyrics, elaborating on his own understanding of the word nationalism:

The text is gloatingly nationalistic, in the bad sense of the word. Let me explain what I mean: When a person loves his homeland and tries to make it better, this is “good” nationalism (criticism and denunciation of shortcomings may well be included in “making it better”). But when a person hates and offends others simply because they do not belong to his nationality / nation / race - this is “bad” nationalism. The author of the song lyrics rejoices that “the neighbor’s cow has died,” in this case, the unstable situation in Ukraine, and he reports that this is what they, the Ukrainians, need.<sup>212</sup>

Alexander’s closing comments offer hope that at least some younger members of the population in Russia are cognizant of the problems inherent to the state-owned media: “Personally, it’s not too interesting for me to figure out ‘what’s going on there with the Ukrainians?’ I haven’t watched TV for a long time and I try to read the news very

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<sup>210</sup> “Кинчев с возрастом совсем испортился, печально на это смотреть. Видимо, бывшее злоупотребление наркотиками и алкоголем окончательно разрушило его мозг и он ударился в православно-националистическую тему.” Alexander Petrov, VKontakte dialogue, February 7, 2020.

<sup>211</sup> “А насчёт самого видео - ответу словами самого Кинчева: ‘всё как всегда, и лучше будет едва ли.’” Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> “Текст - злорадно-националистический, в плохом смысле этого слова. Поясню, что я имею в виду: когда человек любит свою родину и старается сделать её лучше - это “хороший” национализм(в “сделать её лучше” вполне может входить и критика, обличение недостатков). А вот когда человек ненавидит, оскорбляет других просто потому что они не принадлежат к его национальности/нации/расе - это “плохой” национализм. Автор текста песни радуется что “у соседа корова сдохла”, в данном случае - нестабильной ситуации на Украине и сообщает, что так им, хохлам, и надо.” Ibid.

selectively. But for those who watch television propaganda, this topic may still be of interest. Kinchev apparently sings for them.”<sup>213</sup>

### **Kinchev’s Interview with Dud Revisited**

Both Maria Udovydchenko and Alexander Petrov cited the YouTube interview Dud conducted with Kinchev in late 2018 as compelling evidence of how far Kinchev has evolved toward an Orthodox-inspired nationalism. Dud’s offerings on YouTube are a real contrast to what Russians encounter when they turn on their televisions and his interviews with cultural icons from all over the Commonwealth of Independent States attract millions of viewers. A very recent documentary has drawn much-needed attention to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia largely ignored by state-run television stations.<sup>214</sup> In addition to causing an immediate spike in HIV testing across the nation, the documentary brought much needed awareness of the disease to his viewers, while pointing out the ways that ignorance has led to unconscionable discrimination.<sup>215</sup>

In his interview with Kinchev, twenty-eight years his senior, the thirty-three-year-old Dud executed a delicate dance: on the one hand, he disarmed Kinchev with easy

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<sup>213</sup> “Лично мне уже не слишком интересно разбираться ‘что там у хохлов?’ Телевизор я давно не смотрю, новости стараюсь читать очень избирательно. Но для тех, кто смотрит телевизионную пропаганду, эта тема ещё может быть актуальной. Для них, по всей видимости, и поёт Кинчев.” Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Nine days after its appearance online it had been viewed over 14.6 million times. See вДудь, “ВИЧ в России / HIV in Russia (English Subtitles),” 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTRAEplIGZo>.

<sup>215</sup> Pyotr Lokhov and Pavel Merzlikin, “Russian YouTube Star’s HIV/AIDS Documentary Causes Skyrocketing HIV Testing in a Single Week Online,” trans. Hilah Kohen, Meduza, February 19, 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/02/20/russian-youtube-star-s-hiv-aids-documentary-causes-skyrocketing-hiv-testing-in-a-single-week-online>.

banter and by demonstrating a genuine interest in his family and the biographical details of his life; on the other hand, he brought up all of the controversial topics now associated with the artist without appearing overly antagonistic. So while keeping the interview light and amiable, he was able to draw out some of Kinchev's most extreme beliefs, letting Kinchev himself reveal to the viewers his disconnect from the realities that plague contemporary Russian society and the inconsistent positions he has taken in relation to power over the course of his career.

Returning to the topic of Ukrainians distancing themselves further and further away from Russia, Dud asked, "But don't you have the feeling that we had all the possibilities (not the grounds, but all the possibilities) to make sure that they did not turn away from us?" After Kinchev asked, "Which possibilities?" Dud replied, "The most obvious ones would have been for us to live and prosper in a way that was better than in Europe, so that people live just as well here."<sup>216</sup> Kinchev dismissed these notions, implying that the vastness of the Russian territory was a hindrance to achieving better outcomes for the average citizen. Dud pointed out that Canada's massive territory does not prevent its pensioners from living better lives than those in Russia, to which Kinchev replied,

Let's ask these questions not to me, but to the politicians who are responsible for this. I do rock-and-roll. And in general, I live outside of society. Of course, I would like us to live according to the way of life in Canada, but for some reason this doesn't happen for us. I'll answer you the [only] way I can. Because who am

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<sup>216</sup> "Дудь: А у вас нет ощущения, что у нас были все возможности (не основания, а все возможности) сделать так, чтобы они не отворачивались от нас? Кинчев: Ну а какие? Дудь: Самые очевидные - жить, процветать таким образом, чтобы у нас было лучше, чем в Европе, чтобы люди жили так же достойно." Yuri Dud and Konstantin Kinchev in ВДудь, "Кинчев - чувства верующих, самогон, рок-н-ролл / ВДудь."

I in life? The jester is nothing more than a pea, strictly speaking. How is it for me to say why we live badly? If I knew, I'd probably ... take a seat somewhere in an important office with these [fat] cheeks.<sup>217</sup>

I asked Svetlana Shabrova, an informant of mine to correct some of the more challenging parts of the transcript I made of this interview. She and her husband brought their daughter to the United States in 2013, seeking something better than the quality of life Russia had to offer. In this part of the interview she recognized that Kinchev was deploying a well-worn tactic, explaining this in English in a voicemail: “I don't know if you noticed, but Kinchev did not like to talk about the political situation. He always tried to avoid this [type of] conversation. . . . He doesn't speak about the corruption, the mass media control.” Svetlana had direct experience navigating this corruption in her Moscow advertising job, telling me early on in our acquaintance that bribery was just part of the cost of doing business there. Finally, commenting on Kinchev's excuses about territorial size, she said, “This is a simple answer when people [in Russia] try to avoid all these conversations about the political situation in our country.”<sup>218</sup> It also seems important to point out how positioning himself as merely a pea-sized jester of rock-and-roll is reminiscent of the holy fool persona that Kinchev has adopted since his Orthodox baptism.

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<sup>217</sup> “А это давайте Вы будете эти вопросы задавать не мне, а политикам, кто за это отвечает. Я рок-н-роллом занимаюсь. И вообще вне социума живу. Мне бы хотелось, чтобы мы жили, конечно, по образу жизни как в Канаде ,но почему-то у нас не получается. Я тебе отвечу вот так, как я и могу отвечать. Потому что по жизни я кто такой? - Шут гороховый, собственно говоря, и никто более. Че тут говорить о том, почему мы живем плохо? Если б я знал, я был бы наверно... заседал бы где-нибудь в важном кабинете вот с такими щеками.” Konstantin Kinchev in *ibid*.

<sup>218</sup> Svetlana Shabrova, WhatsApp voice message, February 24, 2020.

In August 1991, Kinchev very much inserted himself into the political fray during the Communist coup in which Soviet hard line politicians tried to wrest control of the country from the reform-minded Mikhail Gorbachev. In spring 1993, Kinchev received a medal for his “Defense of the Fatherland,” for helping to thwart the coup, but said he returned it near the end of 1994 to protest the assassination of journalist Dmitry Kholodov, an investigator of military corruption (one of the first of many journalist assassinations in post-Soviet history), as well as the beginning of the first Chechen War. In a retrospective of his career up to 1997, Kinchev told an interviewer, “This was my only possible political protest against what was happening in the country.”<sup>219</sup> When Dud asked him why he participated back in 1991, he said, “Because I thought [at the time] that if we didn’t go there now, then we will turn into an obedient herd again.”<sup>220</sup>

Alluding to this early history of protest, Dud asked him, “Can you imagine going to the barricades now, just like you did back in the nineties?,” to which Kinchev replied, “at a certain age there is no need to run to the barricades.” When Dud pressed him further, teasing him about how fit and capable to the task he still looked, Kinchev responded with a smile, uttering the words I used as the epigraph to this chapter: “Well what do I have to protest against? I’m satisfied with everything.” Dud expressed

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<sup>219</sup> “Получил я ее весной 1993 года - за август 1991-го. Медаль ‘Защитник Отечества’. А в конце 1994-го вернул -- из-за убийства Дмитрия Холодова и начала чеченской войны. Это был мой единственно возможный политический протест против того, что происходит в стране.” Konstantin Kinchev, qtd. in Кинчев, *Солнцеворот: стихотворения, песни, статьи, интервью*, 80.

<sup>220</sup> “Потому что я посчитал что если сейчас не выйти туда то опять мы превратимся в послушное стадо.” Konstantin Kinchev in ВДудь, “Кинчев - чувства верующих, самогон, рок-н-ролл / ВДудь.”

amazement and disbelief at this statement: “Damn! A rock musician who is satisfied with everything?” To which Kinchev responded, “That’s me, Konstantin Kinchev!” Then Dud asked, “Don’t you think you should act according to the laws of the genre?” Kinchev answered, shedding the mantle of the maverick that he so enthusiastically took up earlier in the interview: “This is a genre dreamed up by you journalists.... you imagined protest, that is.”<sup>221</sup> After pointing out that Russia already had the likes of Makarevich and Shevchuk, rockers who, he said, “can’t keep quiet,” he added, “But I can. Everything suits me.”<sup>222</sup> But even this contradiction was soon contradicted.

Despite Kinchev’s reticence to talk about contemporary Russian politics, Dud’s persistence eventually prompted him to open up a little more about his current political opinions. Dud forced the issue by confronting him with a reminder of the protest he called for during a concert at the end of 2011. With much of the country in an uproar over pervasive allegations of election fraud, Kinchev had shouted out to the crowd at a concert in Saratov on December 9, “Answer me just two questions: Do we want to be run by crooks? Do we want the elections not to be rigged, but to be redone and made fair?”

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<sup>221</sup> “Дудь: Вы можете себе представить сейчас выходящим на баррикады также как вы это делали тогда у нас девяностых? Кинчев: Слушайте одного возраст не тот нужно баррикады бегать. Дудь: Какая возраста он какой мед время? Вы сейчас пойдете в тот тренажерный зал. Я думаю подтяните больше меня. Кинчев: Не дольше. Ну против чего мне протестовать? Я всем доволен. Дудь: Блин. Кинчев: Да. Дудь: Рок-музыкант который всем доволен? Кинчев: Это я. Константин кинчев. Дудь: Ну вы же должны не годится по законам жанра... Кинчев: Это жанра придумали вы журналисты. Ну так, потому что этот жанр придумали вы то есть протест вот это...” Yuri Dud and Konstantin Kinchev in ВДудь, “Кинчев - чувства верующих, самогон, рок-н-ролл / ВДудь.”

<sup>222</sup> “...у нас есть Шевчук вот и Макаревич..... пускать прекрасные люди тоже их очень важен и своя позиция. Они не могут молчать но я могу. Меня всё устраивает.” Konstantin Kinchev in *ibid.*



Today, only the street can answer these questions. . . . Unfortunately, only the street. So that we don't become a deaf and dumb society, we need to make decisions. The time has probably come."<sup>223</sup> The next day mass protests against election fraud took place across Russia. This includes the 85 to 150,000 who participated in the now famous three-hour protest on Bolotnaya Square in Moscow.

This information would seem to call into question Kinchev's support of the status quo. Yet it is unlikely that Kinchev had a substantial effect on the country at large by shouting from the stage in Saratov. As Michael Idov explains, the sudden flowering of these brief, but intense election protests of late 2011 followed on the heels of then president Dmitry Medvedev's September 24 announcement to the United Russia congress that he would step aside and that Putin would run unopposed in the December election. Before this, the English-speaking, Twitter-using Medvedev had been ingratiating himself with younger voters, paying diligent lip service to ideas like "liberalization, modernization," and "court reform." Idov credits the subsequent mass indignation expressed by young voters all over Facebook and the rise of "Russia's first Internet politician," the anti-corruption activist Alexey Navalny with igniting the fuse.<sup>224</sup> It seems very possible that Kinchev was just riding this same wave of popular rebuke, hoping to

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<sup>223</sup> "Ответьте мне всего лишь на два вопроса: хотим мы, чтобы нами управляли жулики? Хотим мы, чтобы выборы были не сфальсифицированы, а были переделаны и стали честными? Сегодня на эти вопросы может ответить только улица. У вас это проспект Кирова. К сожалению, только улица. Чтобы из нас не делали общество глухонемых, нужно принимать решения. Время, видимо, пришло." Konstantin Kinchev, qtd. in "'Алиса' мегафон у меня - Кинчев призвал выйти на улицу," *Грани.Ру/Культура/Музыка*, December 17, 2011, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://grani-ru-org.appspot.com/Culture/Music/m.194171.html>.

<sup>224</sup> Idov, *Dressed Up for a Riot*, 45–46.

somehow capitalize on the slightest association with it. Alternatively, perhaps in Saratov Kinchev suddenly remembered the thrills he used to experience in his earlier days when he stood on the barricades in solidarity with Soviet youth. At any rate, as we already know, he would soon be aligning himself once again with the interests of the state when he penned “*Naebali*” two years later in early 2014.

In a previous part of Kinchev’s interview Dud asked whether today’s government differed from the Soviet one and Kinchev replied, “Perhaps not. The same gluttonous ghouls sit at the top.”<sup>225</sup> When Dud asked him why he called for protest in 2011, Kinchev declared that the situation had become too untenable to ignore: “The lie was so obvious that otherwise it was outrageous to me, and United Russia still outrages me. I do not like United Russia. I’m also tired of Putin. Honestly speaking, I also understand that without him the country’s tearing apart will begin, so he should stay, but I’m tired of him. For how much longer can I see it, I cannot see anymore.”<sup>226</sup>

After Dud pushed him to come up with an answer, Kinchev said, “Let him sit as long as he wants to as a tsar-father. It would be nice if he had already accepted a kind of marriage into the realm because then everyone would have calmed down.” And consistent with statements that he has been making since his Orthodox baptism, Kinchev

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<sup>225</sup> “Да пожалуй не чем такие же упыри зажавшиеся сидят наверху.” Konstantin Kinchev in ВДудь, “Кинчев - чувства верующих, самогон, рок-н-ролл / ВДудь.”

<sup>226</sup> “Ну, Потому что, да, ложь была такая очевидно что иначе никак было мне тоже возмущал, Единая Россия возмущает. Я не люблю единую россию. Мне и Путин надоел. Честно говоря другое дело что мне понятно что без него начнется дербан страны, поэтому пусть сидит хотело мне надоел. По сколько можно его видеть уже видеть не могу.” Konstantin Kinchev in *ibid*.

stated, “I’m all for the monarchy, because such a huge territory can in fact only be governed by a monarch.”<sup>227</sup> After Dud asked whether he would consider the possibility of Putin preparing a pair of successors, Kinchev answered in the negative.

At this point, Kinchev donned the hat of the jester: “But it would be possible to have relatives [a line of succession], as I have already suggested a kind of maxim, a very elegant one in my opinion. It [his idea] was rejected and again everyone reproached me for going crazy. I’ve already become used to this.” Dud asked him to elaborate and Kinchev declared, “There were two princes of the English crown to seek out and Putin has two daughters. He could have called on the security services to do so, to open up...to realize something more...and together, and accordingly they could have formed a dynasty.”<sup>228</sup> Dud responded with an idiomatic expression of disbelief that literally translates to “Oh Christmas tree sticks” (“Okh, yolki-palki!”), and then asked, “Therefore one of the sons would come to rule us after Putin?” As Kinchev continued, he began to lose the matter-of-fact demeanor he had maintained up to this point: “Of course, yes. But everyone there has already married or was going to be. This was sometime during the aughts, that is to say when I voiced flourishes (*zagoguliny*) like those that Boris Nikolayevich [Yeltsin] liked to say.” He was already chuckling when Dud exclaimed,

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<sup>227</sup> “Сколько хочет пусть сидит как царь-батюшка. Было бы лучше он принял уже как бы венчание на царство и успокоились бы все. Я вообще за монархию, потому что такой огромной территории может только монарх управляет вообще на самом деле.” Konstantin Kinchev in вДудь, “Кинчев - чувства верующих, самогон, рок-н-ролл / ВДудь.”

<sup>228</sup> “А вот родственников то можно было бы я уже как предлагал некую сентенцию, такую изящную на мой взгляд. Она подверглась остракизму мне опять очередной раз упрекнули все с ума сошёл. К этому привык уже ... Было два принца в английской короны искать у Путина две дочки вот назвал бы спецслужбы сделать так чтобы оскрывать, воплотить во что-то более и совместно и соответственно династи в образовалась.” Konstantin Kinchev in *ibid.*

“The horror!” to which Kinchev replied, “Yes I completely agree.” The end of this exchange at least revealed that Kinchev was not wholly serious about this idea. Yet Kinchev clearly remains committed to an autocratic form of government united with the Russian Orthodox faith, a government and faith that all other nationalities and ethnicities in the vicinity should defer to. Before closing this chapter, I explore whether Alisa’s music and ideologies find resonance among younger generations of Russians.

### **Alisa’s Relevance to Contemporary Russian Youth**

Although my informant Anna Bessanova claimed that young people in Russia are simply not listening to Kinchev or his band, online evidence suggests otherwise. I argue that this phenomenon is more complicated than she allows. Though Kinchev certainly has his detractors among Russian youth today, he still retains the loyalty of many second- and third-generation fans.

In March 2009, a VKontakte user posted the following question to the discussion board for a group called “*Armiia Alisa*” (“Alisa’s Army”): “Are there any children among the *AlisaAmanov* [Alisa followers or fans]? If there are, then at what age did you begin to listen to Alisa?”<sup>238</sup> The topic thread has remained moderately active since then with over 650 respondents. Most of the responses tell the predictably fond story about parents getting them hooked from an early age. Indeed, in a fan discussion such as this where participants are self-selected it would be surprising to find anything negative about

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<sup>238</sup> “Есть ли среди АлисАманов дети? Если есть то со сколько вы начали Алису слушать?” Masa Vakumova, “Есть ли среди АлисАманов дети? Если есть то со сколько вы начали Алису слушать?,” VKontakte Армия Алиса>Discussion Board, March 31, 2009, accessed July 13, 2020, [https://vk.com/topic-383\\_19640797?post=4068](https://vk.com/topic-383_19640797?post=4068).

the artist in question. Nevertheless, a few outliers show that the band has been a lightning rod for controversy in the Putin era.

A fourteen-year-old said that he had only recently found Alisa. He related that his parents are music lovers who made him listen to jazz improvisation, but that he always wanted something simple and comprehensible. He reported that when his parents found out that he was listening to Kinchev, they forbade him, his mother stating, “this is primitive shit music and Kinchev is a nationalist yap.” He stated that he did not care, that he liked Alisa, asking, “Isn’t that the most important thing?”<sup>239</sup> In this sense, Kinchev and Alisa might once again be relevant to at least some rebellious teenagers, as Tsoi’s “Kukushka” was so relevant to my informant Maria Udovydchenko during her rebellious teenage years. This is a rebellion of a different kind though. While in his earliest years Kinchev represented rebellion of the youth against a political and social system, for this teenager he represents defiance during generational disputes, a means to rebel against his parents’ musical taste. While the parents are partly concerned with the political messages they perceive in Kinchev’s songs, the son either does not recognize those messages or is simply not bothered by them. Framed this way, Alisa, and perhaps their political

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<sup>239</sup> “Мне 14. Начал слушать Алису недавно. Родители меломаны, заставляли меня слушать джазовые импровизации. А мне всегда хотелось чего-нибудь простого и понятного. Недавно открыл для себя Алису. Но родители (в частности мать) запрещает мне слушать Кинчева, говорит, что это примитивная говномузыка, а Кинчев - националистское трепло. Но мне все равно, мне нравится Алиса, не это ли самое главное?” Emperor Mankind, “Есть ли среди АлисАманов дети? Если есть то со сколько вы начали Алису слушать?,” VKontakte Армия АлисА>Discussion Board, April 20, 2009, accessed July 13, 2020, [https://vk.com/topic-383\\_19640797?post=4267](https://vk.com/topic-383_19640797?post=4267).

messaging, reaches some youth simply due to the surface sound of the group's heavy metal aesthetic.

Though a fourteen-year-old was also apparently untroubled by the messaging, she clearly recognized an errant historical and political element in Kinchev's body of work after only half a year of acquaintance with it, stating, "In my opinion he is a Slavophile (who does not know the textbook of Russian history for the eighth grade)."<sup>240</sup> While the Russian rock historian Andrey Burlaka does not accuse Kinchev of such ignorance, he nevertheless points to a related strain in Alisa's music emerging as early as the summer of 1999 with the album, *Solstice (Solntsevorot)*, asserting that the "material was largely inspired by Kinchev's interest in pan-Slavism and the pagan roots of Russian culture."<sup>241</sup>

In his 2007 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Kinchev made perhaps one of his most remarkable statements about Russian history: "And so I also consider that it was a big mistake to abolish serfdom."<sup>242</sup> His wife Sasha was also present for the interview, adding, "The serfs, for the most part, lived as if they were in Christ's bosom. At least they knew

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<sup>240</sup> "По моему он славянофил (кто не в курсе учебник истории России за 8 класс). С одиннадцати лет искала музыку для себя, шас 14, открыла РР год назад, Алисоманка полгода." Lyubov Varlamova, "Есть ли среди АлисАманов дети? Если есть то со сколько вы начали Алису слушать?," VKontakte Армия Алиса>Discussion Board, June 28, 2009, accessed July 13, 2020, [https://vk.com/topic-383\\_19640797?post=5017](https://vk.com/topic-383_19640797?post=5017).

<sup>241</sup> "Летом 1999 года АЛИСА начала работу над новым альбомом «Солнцеворот», материал которого был во многом инспирирован интересом Кинчева к панславизму и языческим корням русской культуры." Андрей Бурлака, "Алиса," in *Рок-энциклопедия. Популярная музыка в Ленинграде – Петербурге. 1965–2005: Том 1*, vol. 1 (Москва: Амфора, 2007).

<sup>242</sup> "Ты можешь думать обо мне что угодно, но я отношусь к протоколам сионских мудрецов как к правдивому историческому документу, поэтому либеральную идею считаю безусловным вредом для моей страны. Так же, как большой ошибкой считаю отмену крепостного права." Konstantin Kinchev in Левкович, "Мистер Мускул (О Кинчеве)."

how to stay occupied, they worked. And now in our village, which is still considered prosperous, [only] two laborers remain. The rest of the men drink, many do not even live to be forty years old.”<sup>243</sup> This assertion that the hereditary, lifelong indentured servitude of millions for the benefit of a very small elite class should have never been abolished is astonishing enough. Perhaps even more amazing is the notion that the most pressing economic and social problems of modern-day Russia are in some way connected to the reformist Tsar Alexander II’s emancipation of the serfs in 1861.

In the VKontakte thread, in contrast to those who were not bothered by any nationalist associations, a thirteen-year-old was very much concerned with how the messages were perceived. She stated that a friend had “infected” her with Alisa’s music the winter prior to her posting,<sup>244</sup> yet two months later she returned to the thread to say that she had since been “driven away,” that there was “now one less child fan of Alisa.”<sup>245</sup> After another forum poster asked what happened, she gave a detailed response: “But don’t you know that nationalist-Alisa-fascists bully children who simply listen to Alisa? For them, KKE [Kinchev, Konstantin Evgenevich] is not Kostya [a nickname

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<sup>243</sup> “Крепостные, в большинстве своем, жили как у Христа за пазухой. По крайней мере, знали, чем заняться, работали. А сейчас в нашей деревне, которая еще считается благополучной, осталось два землекопа. Остальные мужики пьют, многие не доживают даже до сорока лет.” Aleksandra Panfilova in Левкович, “Мистер Мускул (О Кинчеве).”

<sup>244</sup> “Мне 13. С зимы прошлого года меня заразила моя подруга.” Yulia Milshteyn, “Есть ли среди АлисАманов дети? Если есть то со сколько вы начали Алису слушать?,” VKontakte Армия АлисА>Discussion Board, April 19, 2009, accessed July 12, 2020, [https://vk.com/topic-383\\_19640797?post=4253](https://vk.com/topic-383_19640797?post=4253).

<sup>245</sup> “Теперь на одного АлисАмана-ребенка стало меньше. Довели.” Yulia Milshteyn, “Есть ли среди АлисАманов дети? Если есть то со сколько вы начали Алису слушать?,” VKontakte Армия АлисА>Discussion Board, June 15, 2009, accessed July 12, 2020, [https://vk.com/topic-383\\_19640797?post=4866](https://vk.com/topic-383_19640797?post=4866).

many fans use for Konstantin], but the Führer. And between the lines of Alisa's songs they hear 'waste the unworthy, the people of other races' and that because of such people we suffer." She made the observation that Tsoi has also been assimilated to the same nationalist causes: "For them, Tsoi also bequeaths the same as the Führer," providing a link to a VKontakte club page as an example.<sup>246</sup> She concluded by saying, "There are many like it. First, they invite you to the group. And then they threaten you with a Slavic knife to the kidney and rotting in the gas chamber of a Fourth Reich. Farewell, Alisa!"<sup>247</sup>

One commenter on the discussion board whose specific age is unclear provided a link to a YouTube video that he created with the statement, "Hi everyone, I've built a clip for one very old thing. But it turned out to be very relevant to Ukraine."<sup>248</sup> The "old thing" he was referring to is the 1991 Alisa single, "*Smutnye Dni*" ("Troubled Days"), which later appeared on their 1993 album *Dlia tek, kto svalilsia s luny* (For Those Who Fell from the Moon). The linked YouTube video begins with footage from the Euromaidan Revolution in Kyiv's Independence Square, superimposing still images of

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<sup>246</sup> <http://vkontakte.ru/club9554268>. The page located at this address has since been suspended for unspecified violations of the terms of service.

<sup>247</sup> "А то вы не знаете, что на детей, которые просто слушают Алису, наезжают националисты-алисисты-фашисты. Для них ККЕ не Костя, а фюрер. И они между строк песен Алисы слышат 'мочи недостойных, людей другой расы' из-за таких людей мы и страдаем. Для них Цой завещает то же, что и фюрер. Таких много. Сначала они приглашают в группу. а потом грозят славянским ножом с почку и гниением в газовой камере четвертого рейха. Прощай, Алиса!" Yulia Milshteyn, "Есть ли среди АлисАманов дети? Если есть то со сколько вы начали Алису слушать?," VKontakte Армия АлисА>Discussion Board, June 15, 2009, accessed July 12, 2020, [https://vk.com/topic-383\\_19640797?post=4868](https://vk.com/topic-383_19640797?post=4868).

<sup>248</sup> "Привет всем, вот соорудил клип на одну очень старенькую вещь. Но по поводу Украины она оказалась очень актуальной." See at Sergey Blokhin, "Есть ли среди АлисАманов дети? Если есть то со сколько вы начали Алису слушать?," VKontakte Армия АлисА>Discussion Board, January 30, 2015, accessed July 13, 2020, [https://vk.com/topic-383\\_19640797?post=46512](https://vk.com/topic-383_19640797?post=46512).



crying children over cherry-picked video clips of random protester aggression. Later we see a smiling Oleh Tyahnybok, a leader of the far-right Ukrainian political party Svoboda, standing amid the protesters near the flags of both his party and another right-wing nationalist group, the Right Sector.

After a rough cut to a grandfather and his young grandchildren laying flowers upon what is most likely an eternal flame memorial to World War II sacrifice, we see images and video clips from the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Soldiers holding up the flag of both *Novorossia* (pro-Russian separatists) and the old Russian empire alternate with those of right-wing Ukrainian militants giving the Nazi salute and sporting swastikas. The over-representation of far-right fringe groups in the protest scenes and the neo-Nazi militants in the conflict zone scenes implies that a fascist element was behind the Euromaidan protest and any defense of Ukrainian sovereignty, a distortion the state-owned press in Russia is fond of making as well.

Research conducted on the ground in real time suggests a different dynamic for the Euromaidan. The political scientist Olga Onuch asserts that her research team conducted “the only multiday survey of protest participants [size of random sample, N=1,304],” asking them “to describe their motives and goals in their own words.” As she reports, “The data reveal that the ‘median protester’ was middle class, with a new level of linguistic cosmopolitanism and a relative lack of partisanship.”<sup>249</sup> Collecting data after an escalation of violence on November 30, 2013 became difficult, but Onuch’s team was still able to conduct rapid, on-the-fly interviews as participant observers in Kiev.

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<sup>249</sup> Onuch, “Who Were the Protesters?,” 46–47.

Throughout they also snapped photos of signs and slogans, revealing that in the beginning, most protesters sought closer ties to the EU. Finally, and most crucial to judging the representative truthfulness of this YouTube creator's video, Onuch tells us, "The use of nationalist slogans increased from mid-January onward, but they never became the main type of claim made by the average protest participant."<sup>250</sup>

We take up the video again as it closes in on the final stretch of Kinchev's song. While the national flag of Ukraine is shown draped over coffins and stomped on the ground, the flags of pro-Russian separatist groups fly proudly over government buildings. The conclusion alternates between a youthful, fit, and happily dancing flash-mob and another group of actors dressed like a uniform mass of bloated zombies, aimlessly lurking about.

The song, written by Kinchev on the heels of the thwarted Communist coup of Gorbachev's government in August 1991, takes on a whole new set of meanings in association with this young Alisa fan's 2015 creation. Originally connected to the youth protest of Soviet power, the song in this context transforms into a reactionary statement against another popularly supported protest movement started by youth, as well as a denial of Ukrainian sovereignty over its Russophone lands. There is an ironic parallel between this transformation of Kinchev's song and the transformation of Victor Tsoi's "Kukushka" discussed in my first chapter; yet based on what we have learned about Kinchev's personal transformation, we have to imagine that he does not mind this fan's transgression. A line from the song provides a clue about its adaptability to such disparate contexts: "[These are] troubled days. It's time to decide who you are with." As the song

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<sup>250</sup> Onuch, 47.

repeatedly cries out, “Who are you with?” (*S kem ty?*), at the conclusion of the video, the imagery makes the question a matter of life and death, of good and evil. Viewers must decide whether they side with the righteous brethren of *Novorossia*, or the fascist zombies of Ukraine.

## **Conclusion**

Kinchev sees nationalism and patriotism as synonymous. And his commitment to the belief that Russians are the leaders among Slavs is merely distilled from the larger notion that Russian civilization is superior to all others—the old messianic belief of past Russian nationalists risen anew. Finding “truth” in anti-Semitic screed, belittling the democratic aspirations of “lesser” Slavic nations, and characterizing Western culture as debauched are the hallmarks of his more negative claims. Furthermore, Kinchev’s nationalism is not in defense of a besieged group—however eager he is to claim that Christianity is under attack in Russia—but is at least indirectly in service to a state led by those whose strategy for retaining power includes fabricating attacks from “outsiders.”

Believing wholeheartedly in an autocratic form of governance in which a monarchical power takes its cues from the clergy, Kinchev has made himself an opponent of democratic institutions. That he considers the 1861 abolition of serfdom to be a mistake betrays his philosophical connection to the oligarchy that rules over all other economic classes in Russia today. His reasoning that the territory of Russia is too large to be governed under a democratic system is contrary to the beliefs of younger Russians and is as regressive as his understanding of democracy’s responsibility for the rise of Nazism.

The stage persona Kinchev presents in which he sets himself up as the “object of enchantment and attraction” is wholly consistent with authoritarian strategies of the past

to synthesize a compelling personality. And though some associate him with the “holy fool” archetype and he himself professes to occupy the vocation of a “necessary jester,” it is difficult to ascertain when he accesses this persona in his music. The demon Woland of yesteryear is much closer to the vicious anger exhibited in more recent songs like “*Vlast*” and “*Naebali*.”

Even as I write this conclusion, there is fresh news of Kinchev protesting the treatment of accused youth in the FSB’s “Network case,” widely considered to be a total fabrication. It seems like another example (like the elections of 2011-12) of Kinchev jumping on a protest bandwagon after it has already amassed overwhelming popular support.<sup>251</sup> That many Russian citizens doubt his sincerity in this case is evident in a recent blogpost that my informant Gleb Vildanov forwarded to me.<sup>252</sup> Originally read by tens of thousands on a channel associated with the popular and embattled social media app Telegram,<sup>253</sup> it has since been picked up by the independent online media outlet Echo

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<sup>251</sup> “Константин Кинчев на фестивале ‘Чартова дюжина’ посвятил песню фигурантам дела ‘Сети,’” *Meduza*, accessed February 28, 2020, <https://meduza.io/news/2020/02/17/konstantin-kinchev-na-festivale-chartova-dyuzhina-posvyatil-pesnyu-figurantam-dela-seti>.

<sup>252</sup> СерпомПо, “Кинчев снова с нами,” Эхо Москвы (blog), February 16, 2020, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://echo.msk.ru/blog/serpompo2018/2589008-echo/>.

<sup>253</sup> After Telegram refused to surrender users’ encryption keys to the FSB, the government won a lawsuit to block its use in Russia in April 2018. The blocking was rather ineffective, resulting only in interruptions to third-party services. It was officially unblocked on June 19, 2020 after agreeing to help the FSB with extremism investigations. See “Роскомнадзор начал процедуру блокировки Telegram,” ТАСС, April 16, 2018, accessed July 25, 2020, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/5129977>; “A Moscow Court Sanctions the Russian Government's Request to Block Telegram,” *Meduza*, April 13, 2018, accessed July 25, 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2018/04/13/a-moscow-court-sanctions-the-russian-government-s-request-to-block-telegram>; Andrew Griffin and Oliver Carroll, “Telegram: Russia Lifts Ban on Private Messaging App After It ‘Agrees to Help with Extremism Investigations,’” *Independent*, June 18, 2020, accessed July 25, 2020,

Moscow and read by almost twice as many more. The sarcasm evident in the title, “Kinchev is With Us Once Again,” pervades the tone of the entire post. The blogger associates Kinchev with the same “Crimea is Ours!” (nicknamed *Krymnash*) phenomenon exhibited by nationalists discussed in my chapter on Tsoi’s “Kukushka”:

A sign of a change in public sentiment in Russia: The *krymnashist*, the leader of the group *Alisa*, Konstantin Kinchev, spoke in support of the accused in the FSB fabricated “Network case.” . . . Apart from this, Kinchev might have remained a *krymnashist*, but that was the day before yesterday, this is irrelevant, it lies in the long past year of 2014, the long-gone epoch of revanchist dope.<sup>254</sup>

Some of the comments were even more scathing: “Kostya suddenly saw the light? And still not long ago, he got inflamed for Crimea and Putin like a madman. Didn’t he realize they were links in the same fucking chain?”<sup>255</sup> Pointing to his continued worth to the government’s agendas, another added, “This is not entirely just. Kinchev is a headstrong person. He is merely responsive to a change of moods. This is also valuable.”<sup>256</sup> And finally, after quoting text from one of Kinchev’s signature perestroika hits, “My Generation,” another commenter wrote, “From a distance, descending from the stage of

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<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/telegram-russia-ban-lift-messaging-app-encryption-download-a9573181.html>.

<sup>254</sup> “Знак смены общественных настроений в России – крымнашист, лидер группы ‘Алиса’ Константин Кинчев выступил в поддержку обвиняемых по сфабрикованному ФСБ ‘делу Сети.’ . . . Кроме того, может быть Кинчев и остался крымнашистом, но это – позавчерашний день, это – неактуально, лежит в далеком уже 2014 году, давно ушедшей эпохе реваншистского дурмана.” Telegram blogger SerpomPo in СерпомПо.

<sup>255</sup> “Внезапно прозрел, Костя? А еще недавно за Крым и Путина топил как угорелый. Не понимал, что это звенья одной гребаной цепи?” Comment on blogpost СерпомПо.

<sup>256</sup> “Это не совсем справедливо. Кинчев – человек своевольный. Реагирующий на изменение настроений. Этим и ценен.” Comment on blogpost СерпомПо.

the Soviet Union, a salutation from the legendary Soviet rock arrived flying to the protesting young modernity. Welcome back, Kostya!”<sup>257</sup>

### **Coda: The Discontents – Creating Space for a Different Worldview**

Before answering any of my questions about “*Naebali*,” Anna Bessanova asked if I knew about the Saint Petersburg group Shortparis (originally from her hometown of Novokuznetsk, Siberia). She cited the song “*Tak zakalialas’ stal*” (How the Steel Was Tempered) and its official video as representative of their work.<sup>258</sup> According to Anna, “It is modern. Alisa is no longer. Young people do not listen to Alisa.”<sup>259</sup> The song, its accompanying video, and the band who wrote it are notable for their opposition to almost everything Kinchev seems to stand for in recent years. Their broader appeal to Russian youth deserves discussion for the sake of comparison with Alisa’s recent work. While the title bears resemblance to the line from the first verse of Kinchev’s song “*Naebali*” – “how steel succumbed under pressure” – the song and accompanying video seem to have an entirely different goal. Taking a very broad, surface-level view of Kinchev’s song (minus *khokhly*), the most positive idea it provides is that violence itself is a futile waste. But it is impossible to ignore the weeds in Kinchev’s garden that we have already discussed.

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<sup>257</sup> “Из далекого, сходящего со сцены Советского Союза, прилетел в протестную молодую современность привет от легендарного советского рока. С возвращением, Костя!” Comment on blogpost СерпомПо.

<sup>258</sup> Shortparis, “Shortparis – Так закалялась сталь,” YouTube music video, accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtDEAmSb9OY&bpctr=1581641804>.

<sup>259</sup> “Это современно. Алиса уже нет. Её не слушает молодежь.” Anna Bessanova, Facebook messenger dialogue, February 5, 2020.

Shortparis provides my larger discussion with a first glimpse of creative work that pushes against the nationalist trends that Kinchev and Alisa have increasingly exhibited. They belong to a very eclectic group of otherwise unrelated artists in contemporary Russian popular music—the “discontents” referenced in this dissertation’s title. Bi-2, the principal subject of the final chapter, represents an example of “discontent” from what we might consider a more mainstream thread of contemporary popular music in Russia. Rather than making overt references to the state, these artists have developed an indirect strategy for confronting societal problems and problematic ways of thinking. As lead singer of Shortparis, Nikolai Komyagin stated in an online profile of the band, “We are not concerned with concrete actions or concrete political demands. We have no manifesto. What we are about is more of an artistic, aesthetic gesture.”<sup>260</sup>

This interview with the band concluded in a Chinese restaurant in the Asian immigrant district of St. Petersburg known as Apraksin Dvor, a place that exemplifies the multicultural reality of the city today. About this part of town, Komyagin said, “I think this area is officially considered to be marginal and underdeveloped. The city plans to reorganize the entire area. The city administration is ashamed that we have an area like this right in the center of the city. They would like to hide it, but we can’t let that

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<sup>260</sup> “Мы не делаем конкретного жеста за которым стоит определенное политическое требование или манифест, этого нет. Мы создаем художественно-эстетический знак.” Николай Комягин (Nikolay Komyagin) in Arte TRACKS, “Shortparis: Russia’s Best Live Band Shows Us Their St. Petersburg (English Version),” YouTube, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5sMQcdM6Es>.

happen.”<sup>261</sup> Komyagin uses this scene in the Chinese restaurant to illustrate the band’s concept of “aesthetic gesture”:

Take for instance how we are sitting now at this table, like the “Last Supper.” In front of us, there’s this beautiful, colorful [food] and we are experiencing this amazing background. It is an artistic and aesthetic sign. From this point, we fall silent. We say nothing more. And the interpretation of the meaning and power of this sign can begin precisely because we do not interpret it ourselves.<sup>262</sup>

We might interpret this specific aesthetic gesture as twofold: as a means to show the “ashamed” city planners (among other nationalists) that variety and cultural difference is (both literally and figuratively) the spice of life, while broadcasting to Chinese immigrants that they and their cultural gifts are also welcomed and valued in this capital of Russian culture.

In Shortparis’s “*Tak zakalialas stal*,” there is a more general concern with violence and its host of chaotic consequences than in Kinchev’s “*Naebali*.” The state’s role as instigator is implied by the military training the protagonist undergoes near the beginning of the video. As uniformed recruits perform martial arts sequences, officers observe from a balcony. Just beneath them is a banner with the Latin phrase, “In hostem Omnia licita” (“In relation to the enemy, everything is permitted”) printed in red.

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<sup>261</sup> “По-моему на уровне игры где там городской программы, этот район признан не блага состоятельным, маргинальным и как бы цена программа по реорганизации этого района и превращение в благополучные. То есть город стыдится наличие такого пятна в центральном районе и хочет его спрятать. И мне кажется что это...мы не можем этого допустить.” Nikolay Komyagin in *ibid*.

<sup>262</sup> “То что мы сейчас сидим за этим столом, вот так как тайная вечеря, перед нами это прекрасная колоритные да познаем потрясающий фон. Это художественный и эстетический знак. Дальше мы замолкаем. Мы ничего не говорим. И начинается интерпретация и значения и сила этого знака как раз том что мы не интерпретируем его сами.” Nikolay Komyagin in *ibid*.



Over the course of the video, the protagonist commits acts of violence in wider and wider circles and with increasing atrocity. As he experiences the pivotal psychological break, the military superstructure designed to control his violent training and direct it toward specific strategic targets also breaks down. After his bloody rampage, he returns home, takes a knife from the kitchen table where his mother is preparing dinner, and then goes to his room where he disembowels himself in an allusion to the Japanese ritual known as *seppuku* (sometimes referred to as *hara-kiri*). While performing this suicidal act, Japanese calligraphy which translates to “*Bushido*,” or the “way” of the samurai, appears with ironic accompanying quotations in Russian subtitles: “A true samurai does not think about winning or losing. He throws himself headlong into the inevitable. However, to continue living without achieving your goal is cowardice. Real courage is to live when you need to live and to die when you need to die.”<sup>263</sup> A YouTube user offered her general impressions: “It seems to me that there are no hidden subtexts here. The meaning is very simple - cruelty and violence, if they are nurtured in a person, cannot be directed at one thing—a specific (enemy). They are chaotic and uncontrollable and can spill over to everyone around.”<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> “Подлинный самурай не думает о победе и поражении. Он без оглядки бросается навстречу неизбежному. Однако продолжать жить, не достигнув своей цели, - это трусость. Настоящая смелость заключается в том, чтобы жить, когда нужно жить, и умереть, когда нужно умереть.” See in Shortparis, “Shortparis – Так закалялась сталь.”

<sup>264</sup> “Мне кажется, что никаких скрытых подтекстов тут нет. Смысл очень прост - жестокость и насилие, если их возвращать в человеке, не могут быть направлены на что-то одно, конкретное (врага), они хаотичны и неконтролируемые и могут выливаться на всех вокруг.” Серафима Иванова (Serafima Ivanova) in *ibid*.

The title itself is an ironic allusion to Nikolai Ostrovsky's (1904-1936) Soviet socialist realist novel of the same name (published serially, 1932-34 and in book form, 1936), whose own protagonist fought on the side of the Bolsheviks during the Civil War (1918-21). Kinchev might have intended to make a similar ironic allusion to this novel in the first verse of "*Naebali*." Whereas Shortparis's allusion juxtaposes annihilation and the military exploits of the quintessential Soviet hero, Kinchev conflates the objectives of the Maidan with the destruction of the rule of law. And where Shortparis makes an "aesthetic gesture" devoid of concrete interpretation, Kinchev tells us how to think, directly mocking and condemning the protesters with metaphors that hardly need interpretation.

Much of the song's melodic material and Komyagin's vocal style clearly reference Muslim vocal traditions, while the accompaniment, with its insistent beat and synthesized bass is redolent of EDM (electronic dance music). This blend of multicultural allusions (Russian and Soviet, Japanese, Muslim) with denunciations of violence and xenophobia, aims to connect with and relate to a wider, much more diverse audience than the heavy metal nationalism of Kinchev's "*Naebali*."

Considering the widely popular dance subgenre of Shortparis' song, the appeal to young listeners that Anna Bessanova speaks of seems natural. The eponymous album, debuting in late 2019, received at least one rather tepid review from Alexey Yurchak when he asserted that it was "an unsuccessful search for a trajectory between joining and resistance in a difficult hour for the Motherland."<sup>265</sup> While his characterization of the

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<sup>265</sup> "“Так закалялась сталь’ — безуспешный поиск траектории между присоединением и сопротивлением в тяжелый для родины час.” Alexey Yurchak, qtd. in Лёва Левченко, “Добрые люди не понимают: Как Shortparis озвучивают Россию 2019 года,” *The Village*,

context the album emerged in seems especially apropos, his metric for success might be too limited. More recent reports indicate that the band, with its “provocative performances” and “political overtones,” is taking Russia by storm.<sup>266</sup>

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November 7, 2019, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.the-village.ru/village/weekend/musika/366499-shortparis>.

<sup>266</sup> See “Best New Band: Shortparis,” *Moscow Times*, December 18, 2019, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/12/18/best-new-band-shortparis-a68593>.

## Chapter 4

### Bi-2 and the Struggle for a Better Reality

“If you sit and think that tomorrow everything can end, you will stop writing songs. In principle, everything will pass. Now is the time—tomorrow will be different.”

– Lyova and Shura Bi-2

#### Introduction

I originally intended for this chapter to shift the main focus of this dissertation from nationalist trends in Russian music to a countervailing example in contemporary Russian culture. Yet my research into the Russian rock band Bi-2 has yielded a less dramatic evolution than I originally anticipated. Though I never found Bi-2’s early work particularly nationalistic, it was obviously associated on at least one prominent occasion, the soundtrack to the film *Brother 2*, with some very nationalistic trends in Russian popular culture of the early 2000s.

Nevertheless, I argue that Bi-2 has undergone a transformation in at least one demonstrable way: the content of their latest work exhibits a greater concern for contemporary socio-political issues. The stance they have taken is progressive, contrary to the nationalist discourses discussed in the previous three chapters. What remains unclear is whether the latest anti-government positions that I and many on social media interpret in Bi-2’s work represent boldness or merely an acceptable level of dissent that the government allows for good democratic optics, or some messy combination of the two. Contrary to Bi-2’s fans on social media, most of my informants (who are not

particularly interested in the band) tend to recognize the latter. At least one informant suggests that Bi-2's "friendly protest" represents a form of cynical opportunism. Ultimately, this chapter reveals a picture of the band's present relationship to the Russian state that is complicated and contested.

Charges of opportunism are tangential to the argument Ekaterina Vassilieva, a postdoctoral researcher at Humboldt University of Berlin, makes in her forthcoming book about the Russian government's complicated relationship to art critical of the state—that provocative works, "are not simply tolerated by the government," but maybe even encouraged. Expanding on this, she asserts, "In fact, these spaces can be regarded as the most important resource for cultural policy when it comes to providing approval for a regime where actual democratic institutions have little sway, yet democratic-style liberties must still at least be promised to citizens." Finally, she suggests, "The best promotion for an authoritarian government seems, paradoxically, to be the display of its perceived flaws and the deliberate creation of secure places – whether real or only imagined – where critical thinking can be cultivated without endangering the system's balance."<sup>1</sup> Bi-2's recent access to high-profile performance venues suggests such a compliant relationship to the state.

I personally enjoy the band's music and with that enjoyment comes a potential bias that should be acknowledged before embarking on a discussion of their past choices and their contemporary practices. These practices (poetic and musical) are what some detractors focus on to devalue the band's political sincerity and social relevance. Many of

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<sup>1</sup> Ekaterina Vassilieva, "Gesamtkunstwerk Putin?," *NYU Jordan Center* (blog), March 5, 2020, <http://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/gesamtkunstwerk-putin/>.

the criticisms of Bi-2 by critics and a few of my informants are rooted in artificial hierarchical value systems built on a series of facts, such as, “Bi-2 assimilates a variety of popular Western styles,” and “the band produces their albums outside of Russia,” that are then intertwined with a series of hoary conceits, such as, “rock is more authentic than pop,” and “Russian culture retains a primordial purity over the decadent and commercialized West.”

The marriage of these facts and conceits leads some to argue against the band’s sincerity, which leads naturally to the assumption that they are indeed pawns of the state. Rather than trying to argue for the aesthetic value of their music,<sup>2</sup> I seek to question these notions of inauthenticity as well as to show that their music has affective value (in terms of the emotions it raises and the philosophical and political thoughts it generates) among a number of people who are not categorically closed off to the hybridity of their style. I contend that their eclectic approach to music making is a function of sensibilities nourished by a diverse array of cultural experiences—experiences which unfortunately lead some to devalue their work for its perceived lack of “Russianness.” While I have no interest in interrogating their *Russkii* credibility, I do intend to show that they are indeed an affective force for a number of Russians within Russia and abroad.

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<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, Simon Frith argued that scholars should be prepared to defend aesthetic value in popular music studies. See in Simon Frith, “The Value Problem in Cultural Studies,” in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 3–20. Robert Walser, on the other hand, sees Frith’s value judgments as part of a discourse of power “whereby people who have greater authority, cultural capital, or rhetorical skills (teachers, critics) tell others (students, fans) what they ought to be listening to (classical music, authentic rock) according to a single scale of value.” See in Robert Walser, “Popular Music Analysis: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances,” in *Analyzing Popular Music* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19.

In the analysis that follows, I first outline the aesthetic criteria by which Russian rock purists exclude Bi-2's general practices from the genre. Understanding these notions, we can better interpret and evaluate Russian criticisms of their work and even their sincerity. Following that, we consider the band just before the height of their early popularity in Moscow. The story begins with a brief account of their early years, including their efforts to introduce themselves to the Russian rock scene after their move to Moscow just before the turn of the millennium.

Next I discuss their involvement with the immensely popular film *Brat-2* (*Brother-2*, 2000). Though this movie provided a much-needed injection of national pride following Russia's loss of status as a world power, I show why it has been roundly judged as nationalistic. For better or worse, Bi-2's prominence in the film is widely regarded as the reason for the band's sudden and meteoric rise to stardom. I argue, however, that their trajectory immediately following this project differs from artists such as Konstantin Kinchev who as we have seen have routinely stoked the flames of nationalism since his Orthodox baptism.

I then move to a discussion of examples from their most recent work, arguing that the band has become demonstrably more engaged with socio-political critique with the release of their 2017 album *Event Horizon* (*Gorizont sobytii*). First, I provide an in-depth analysis of the text and music for the song, "Theme of the Century" (*Tema veka*), enumerating the ways the text sarcastically alludes to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, while showing how the musical setting thoughtfully provokes listeners to imagine a state governed by and for the people.

My discussion concludes with a focus on two of Bi-2's most recent music videos, "Whisky" (*Viski*) and "Philosophers' Stone" (*Filosofskii kamen*). Along the way there will be some digressions toward other works and even other artists whenever comments from social media and my informants offer compelling reasons to do so.

### **Rock Authenticity—the Russian Remix**

Arguments questioning Bi-2's sincerity are connected to essentializing beliefs that only a certain kind of rock has proper claims to authenticity. Generalized notions along these lines are just as prevalent in popular music discourse in the West<sup>4</sup> and even find their way into the quest for the "authentic" (otherwise known as "historically informed") in classical music performances.<sup>5</sup> According to Russian rock criticism certain thematic and stylistic choices exclude a band from membership in the already contentious, exclusive "*Russkii rok*" canon.

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<sup>4</sup> This sample of articles shows the pervasiveness of authenticity discourse in popular music criticism and studies. Motti Regev, "Producing Artistic Value: The Case of Rock Music," *The Sociological Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (February 1994): 85–102; Francesca Brittan, "Women Who 'Do Elvis': Authenticity, Masculinity, and Masquerade," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 18, no. 2 (2006): 167–190, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-1598.2006.00087.x>; John J. Sheinbaum, "Periods in Progressive Rock and the Problem of Authenticity," *Current Musicology; New York, N. Y.*, Spring 2008, 29–51, 174; Michael J. Kramer, "Rocktimism?: Pop Music Writing in the Age of Rock Criticism," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 4 (2012): 590–600; Henry Adam Svec, "'Who Don't Care If The Money's No Good?': Authenticity and The Band," *Popular Music and Society* 35, no. 3 (2012): 427–445, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2011.624344>; Kimberly Mack, "'There's No Home for You Here': Jack White and the Unsolvable Problem of Blues Authenticity," *Popular Music and Society: Musical Autobiographies* 38, no. 2 (2015): 176–193, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2014.994323>; Travis L. Gosa, "Hip Hop, Authenticity, and Styleshifting in the 2016 Presidential Election," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 29, no. 3 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12236>.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Taruskin, "The Authenticity Movement Can Become a Positivistic Purgatory, Literalistic and Dehumanizing'," *Early Music* 12, no. 1 (1984): 3–12.



Exclusion from the Russian pantheon inevitably leads to unfavorable linkages with a Western model many deem inferior. Certain Russian rock purists believe that a more spartan version of rock, with its focus on lyrical, rather than musical content has elevated the genre to a position that is artistically superior to most models in the West. This is evident in the following statement made by the prominent Russian rock critic Artemy Troitsky in his influential 1987 book *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia*: “I’ll go out on a limb and assert that the purely literary level of our rock lyrics is higher, on the average, than in the West.”<sup>6</sup> A contributor to the equally significant *rok samizdat* publication *Roksi*, writing under the pseudonym “Sergei Slavianin,” already had taken this conceit to an even higher plane seven years before Troitsky:

[I]t seems to me that it is the Russian language that is not only as good as English in rock, but also in all respects superior to it. I’m even sure that it will simply replace it. . . . I have already expressed how rock in the west has in its development arrived at a wall, behind which Russia begins, not only with its language, but with its history, customs, (and) social order. Rock has not been capable of evolving further, since there is almost nothing more to do in rock now without knowledge of the Russian language.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Troitsky’s voice was the most prominent in the nascent years of Russian rock and he is the only Russian critic to have published in English, so he is highly influential to both Russian and Western understandings of Russian Rock. Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia* (Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 40.

<sup>7</sup> “[М]не кажется, что именно русский язык не только не уступает английскому в роке, но и по всем статьям превосходит его. Я даже уверен, что он попросту заменит его. . . . Я уже высказывался так: рок на Западе подошел в своем развитии к той стене, за которой начинается Россия, не только с языком, но и с ее историей, обычаями, общественным строем. Рок не в состоянии был развиваться дальше, поскольку без знания русского языка в роке сейчас делать почти нечего.” Сергей Славянин (pseudonym), “О текстах,” *Рокси*, no. 4 (January 1981): 9 This issue is also available electronically on the Russian web. See the link entitled “Архив” (“Archive”) on the following page, accessed July 15, 2020: <https://handbook.severov.net/>.

As we will see in a later discussion, one of my informants attacks Bi-2's terse lyrical style based partly on his perception of a language deficiency. At times his criticism takes an even harsher turn: their very sincerity is called into question for their desecration of the Russian language.

Troitsky also claims that "our rockers don't sing about the same things that Western rockers do (which flows from the [previous] point)." Citing the repertoire of one particular band, he specifies precisely wherein that difference lies: "In the entire repertoire of Time Machine [*Mashina vremeni*] there's not a single clear-cut love song, let alone one about sex. . . . So what, then, did our first rock poet (and his myriad successors) sing about? About social and ethical issues."<sup>8</sup>

Steinholt debunks this notion that love and sex do not appear in the work of Time Machine or its successors. But first he makes a crucial point about an under-acknowledged variable that at least in part contributed to a tamping down of these themes in the early days of Russian rock development: "It should come as no surprise that *Mashina vremeni*, the first widely known rock band to 'go official' in pre-Perestroika USSR, did not sing about love, sex or any subject that involved making reference to individuals. The band's endless lyrics about lanterns, candles and isles of hope bear witness to continual compromises with censors."<sup>9</sup> Though Bi-2's repertoire has taken a more pronounced socio-political turn, most of their earlier work and much of the current

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<sup>8</sup> Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Steinholt, "You Can't Rid a Song of Its Words," 101.

work still deals with themes of love. Lead singer, Lyova's "cat-like" voice has even been ridiculed by some critics for the sexual innuendo that it sometimes suggests.

An additional strike against Bi-2 among Russian rock purists is that much of their music incorporates pop and dance features. This is true even for their latest more politically active material which assimilates not only pop and dance features, but the stylistic traits of foreign subgenres. And any assimilation of global (non-Russian) popular trends is seen by upholders of the Russian rock canon as a deference to vain commercialism. That an exclusion of the bodily pleasure of dance is a fundamental feature of Russian rock for some is evident in another difference that Troitsky claims between Russian rock and models in the West: "the commercial and dancing functions of rock music never predominated here; more value was always placed on the ideas in a song."<sup>10</sup> But as Steinholt argues again, "It should be emphasized, however, that this was partly because of the ban on dancing at concerts which prevailed until 1987."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in addition to acknowledging censorship of the lyrical content, we must also make room for censorship of the body during the formation of Russian rock aesthetic principles in the Soviet period. It becomes problematic then to assert that connection to a poetic tradition is the reason behind a purported greater emphasis on ideas in "true" Russian rock.

Bi-2's latest critical stance toward the government is read as equally inauthentic as their version of Russian rock. All of this presumes that critique is an all-or-nothing

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<sup>10</sup> Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Steinholt, "You Can't Rid a Song of Its Words," 96.

affair and that commercial success nullifies any attempts to shed light on socio-political problems. But as one of my Russian expat informants, Svetlana Shabrova, explained, options for making a difference are limited. In a recent email she wrote, “There are three ways to oppose the Russian political system: join [Alexey] Navalny [one of the leaders of the opposition movement] and get put in jail, continue doing what you can and love to do, affecting as many people as you can (BUT being in very mild opposition), and third, like ours – immigration. People choose.”<sup>12</sup> Bi-2 is essentially judged for refusing to play the starving artist, yet perhaps they should be celebrated for “sticking it out” in Russia, making a difference (however small) in the only way they know how. As the following discussion shows, Lyova and Shura Bi-2 have been deeply thoughtful about the work they do and in recent years a new thread of social activism has been gradually building in their work.

### **Early Years in Belarus, Israel, and Australia**

Lyova, born Yegor Mikhailovich Bortnik in 1972 in Minsk, Belarus,<sup>13</sup> obtained his nickname, “Lion,” while living in the African Congo where his father had been invited to teach Radiophysics at one of the country’s universities.<sup>14</sup> He traces his family

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<sup>12</sup> Svetlana Shabrova, via email, March 4, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> “Лёва Би-2,” in *Википедия*, March 8, 2020, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%9B%D1%91%D0%B2%D0%B0\\_%D0%91%D0%B8-2&oldid=105566227](https://ru.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%9B%D1%91%D0%B2%D0%B0_%D0%91%D0%B8-2&oldid=105566227).

<sup>14</sup> Инна Фомина, “Лева Би-2: ‘Сначала мы купили красную ванну,’” *7 дней.ru*, March 19, 2009, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://7days.ru/stars/privatelife/leva-bi2-snachala-my-kupili-krasnuyu-vannu.htm>.

tree through Russian, Uzbek, and Ukrainian Cossack roots.<sup>15</sup> Shura, born Aleksander Nikolaevich Uman in 1970 in Bobruisk, Belarus, also claims Jewish and Uzbek heritage.<sup>16</sup> The pair met in 1985 as members of the “Rond” Children’s Theater Studio in Minsk where they staged avant–garde productions in the spirit of absurdist theater. When the theater was dissolved in 1988, they turned their energies to music, forming the band, Brothers in Arms (*Brat’ia po oruzhiu*), which was later renamed Coast of Truth (*Bereg istiny*), and then ultimately shortened to *Bi–2*. At the age of 19, Lyova followed Shura to Israel, where he lived for six years working in several odd jobs including a two-year stint in the army.<sup>17</sup>

Both Lyova and Shura participate in a number of Jewish traditions and speak Hebrew (in addition to the English they know). Shura even to this day visits family in Israel on a yearly basis.<sup>18</sup> The band also includes stops in Israel on their tours abroad. Shura, however, did not remain in Israel with Lyova. He decided to move to Australia in 1993 where he eventually joined up with the goth wave band *Chiron*. The pair continued to correspond via the internet, swapping lyrics and musical ideas. Lyova was eventually able to join him and the band *Chiron* in Australia before deciding that it was time to return home.

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<sup>15</sup> Роман И. Егоров, *Би-2 - Интервью* (Москва: АНТАО, 2004), 17–20.

<sup>16</sup> “Шура Би-2,” in *Википедия*, March 20, 2020, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%A8%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B0\\_%D0%91%D0%B8-2&oldid=105805952](https://ru.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%D0%A8%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B0_%D0%91%D0%B8-2&oldid=105805952).

<sup>17</sup> Фомина, “Лева Би-2.”

<sup>18</sup> Дмитрий Авдосьев, “Интервью: ‘Иврит мы знаем,’” *Jewish.ru*, May 15, 2009, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://jewish.ru/ru/interviews/articles/175329/>.

## “It’s Time to Return Home”

Arguably the most popular song on Bi-2’s 2017 album *Event Horizon (Gorizont sobytii)* is “It’s Time to Return Home” (*Pora vozvrashchat’sia domoi*). The song’s chorus and two verses read as an expression of the anxiety many expats from any nation inevitably encounter as they try to adjust to unfamiliar lands. The lyrics attempt to convey the intensity behind the feelings for the place left behind, if not the specific reasons for those feelings. Perhaps the feelings are even impossible to express verbally. The difficult-to-translate word “*toska*” seems close to the mark; it approximately encompasses all of the following meanings: melancholy, boredom, ennui, and a longing, yearning, or nostalgia for something. The song’s chorus captures this inability to fully express these feelings:

“Пора Возвращаться Домой”

Любовью чужой  
Горят города  
Извилистый путь  
Затянулся петлёй  
Когда все дороги  
Ведут в никуда  
Настала пора  
Возвращаться домой

“It’s Time to Return Home”

The cities are aglow with a vicarious love.  
The crooked path was tightened into a  
noose.  
When all roads lead nowhere,  
The time has come to return home.

In the first lines of the chorus, it seems the protagonist appreciates the attraction of the foreign cities he has inhabited, yet something more personal is missing. He will never love these cities with a native’s intimate understanding. The “crooked path” calls to mind the expat journeys of Lyova and Shura from Belarus to Israel, and later to Australia, as well as the paralysis they seemed to have felt as they unsuccessfully tried to realize their potential as artists outside of Russian-speaking lands.

The central section of “It’s Time to Return Home” features an extended rap by the hip-hop star Oxxxymiron (given name: Miron Fyodorov, b. 1985), another former expat with a “crooked path”: he spent many of his formative years in Germany and Great Britain, eventually earning a degree in English literature from Oxford before a similar longing brought him back to Russia. The complicated language drawing from personal experiences and the saturation of literary, historical, and cultural allusions from multiple countries in Oxxxymiron’s rap merits its own analysis.

Suffice it to say that the song seems to express sympathy for current expats, inviting them to return to Russia if their own “crooked paths” have become untenable. Both of the two official videos uploaded to YouTube by the band include a dedication near the end to past emigres who returned to the USSR between the 1930s and 1950s.<sup>19</sup> The song also seems to represent a limit point for the patriotism either the band or Oxxxymiron are willing to express. Whatever patriotic feeling can be extracted about the homeland from the lyrics is rendered all the more conflicted by Oxxxymiron’s rap. Though the homeland is not a place where you can truly find comfort, it is still not Lefortovo (a reference to the infamous Moscow prison). Other dark aspects of Soviet history are also named: he mentions the Red Army defector General Andrey Vlasov, whose Russian Liberation Army fought under German command during World War II, and immediately after that he makes a reference to “mass executions,” presumably of the Stalin era.

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<sup>19</sup> See for instance the end of the following “Lyric video”: “Посвящается эмигрантам, вернувшимся в СССР в 1930-1950-е годы,” in Би-2, “Би-2 feat. Оxxxymiron - Пора возвращаться домой (Lyric Video),” YouTube, September 28, 2017, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=АСТKw42n94w&lc=UgyNpyXXh0w38PLoZS54AaABAq>.

The music matches the melancholy of Bi-2's lyrics as well as the *toska* for the native land that Oxxxymiron could not keep concealed while living abroad. In style, tempo, and timbre it begins much like the Bristol, England band Massive Attack's 1998 hit single, "Teardrop." We might read this as an homage to black British musical influences for both the band and the rapper. At any rate, the trip-hop grooves of Bristol in the opening of the song foreground the rap of Oxxxymiron's Russian-style hip-hop that comes later. The arrangement is typical of the stylistic hybridity Bi-2 brings to their work.

Both songs hover around a tempo circa 78-80 beats per minute that includes two quick bass drum kicks on the downbeats of each bar, followed by single shot accents on the snare (beats 2 and 4). Both involve eighth-note ostinatos performed on a synthesized keyboard that begin from the second beat of each measure and largely oscillate in space between the tonic and dominant. After a short introduction of these patterns, an acoustic grand piano heavily strikes and sustains the roots of each chord on the downbeat of every bar. The inclusion of a simple countermelody sung by synthesized voices and the presence of ambient electronic timbres round out the similarities.

While Massive Attack exhibits the sensuous bluesy element of their subgenre that some critics have labelled trip-hop by calling on the Mixolydian mode, Bi-2 keeps their allusion to trip-hop centered in a darker minor throughout. Bi-2 also builds the intensity of their track with an increasingly more active and accented drum part. A moment before the second appearance of the chorus in Bi-2's song, the shift into the realm of hard rock is made complete with the pronounced entry of the electric guitar, zipping itself open with aggressive slides densely packed with distortion. The intensity continues to build as



Oxxxymiron's following rap progresses from speaking to full-throated shouting. Two choruses loudly conclude the track making use of the full complement of rock timbres.

There is a conspicuous effort in both of Bi-2's music videos for the song to make sure that the lyrics and Oxxxymiron's entire rap are completely understood. The most-viewed video (posted September 2018, with over 11.8 million views by June 2020) was shot during a nighttime outdoor festival called "Circle of Lights" on Moscow's Theater Square (the square in front of the Bolshoi Theater).<sup>20</sup> In addition to the surrounding theater buildings being bathed in a deep red light (one of the signature colors of this album), the song lyrics and rap text are projected onto the buildings in time with the music.<sup>21</sup> Despite, or perhaps because of, criticisms about the quality of their lyrics, they privilege this aspect of the song as much as any Russian rock artist who came before them.

Before turning to Bi-2's own transition from working in an Anglophone band in Australia to returning to their Russian roots, we should consider, at least briefly, what this song means to Russian listeners. The following colorful testimony is exemplary of the more positive reception of the song:

I inhabit this song anew every time. It seems to me that everything here is generally perfect: words, music, meaning, emotion, Bi-2 and Oxxxymiron. During

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<sup>20</sup> Би-2, "Би-2 feat. Оxxxymiron – Пора возвращаться домой ('Круг света,' Театральная площадь)," YouTube, September 28, 2020, accessed June 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmxPFK1e4Zs>.

<sup>21</sup> Japanese calligraphy also appears in the video. My Japanese friend, the orchestral conductor, Kayoko Dan translated these characters for me as "Event's Horizon" and "antimotion," the name of Bi-2's album (translated into the possessive form) and the Russian multimedia design studio who created the text projections, respectively. We might simply read this as an effort on the studio's part to broaden their visibility to markets outside of Russia.

Bi-2's parts, I want to wrap myself in a blanket and look indifferently out the window with a touch of anxiety, to sadly follow with my gaze the foreigners passing by. When Oxxxxy begins to read, I feel the rising *toska* and despair of his words and by the end of his part I want to either scream, sing, cry, or run somewhere. And it is simply amazing, still no other song has felt to me so emotional, so deep. I want to re-listen, to relive that feeling again. An *unfuckingbelievable fucking song*.<sup>22</sup>

The Russian multimedia design studio Antimotion, which created the text projections on the buildings of Moscow's *Teatral'naiia Square* for the "Circle of Lights" festival published their own statement interpreting the song's meaning on the English-language version of their website:

During the ART VISION Classic Competition, being a part of the Circle of Light Festival, Bi-2, [the] Russian rock band, made a video clip on Teatralnaya Square. [The] Antimotion team as one of five finalists of the competition [they took second place] created the video mapping show[n] on the facades of three theatres and used as a sound the famous Bi-2's song "Time to Return Home," feat. the rapper Oxxxymiron who has also lived abroad for a long time. [It] deal[s] with an immigrant's desire to return home to a house which is still vivid in one's mind even if it may have been razed to the ground in the meantime. Everything will not be able to sooth the melancholy lump in the throat that's longing for home. And while said home may not be the best place, sometimes the heart triumphs over reason and hearing one's native tongue just feels more real.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> "Я каждый раз проживаю эту песню заново. Мне кажется, тут идеально вообще все: слова, музыка, смысл, эмоции, БИ-2 и Оксимирон. На партии БИ-2 хочется закутаться в плед и смотреть в окно, равнодушно, но с ноткой тревожности, грустно провожать взглядом проходящих мимо людей (чужих людей). Когда начинает читать Окси, я чувствую всё нарастающие тоску и отчаяние его слов, и к концу партии хочется то ли кричать, то ли петь, то ли плакать, то ли куда-то бежать. И это просто потрясающе, ещё ни одна песня не ощущалась мною так эмоционально, так глубоко. Переслушивать хочется, чтобы ещё раз прожить это ощущение. Невхрененно охеренная песня." YouTube commenter Жру но не толстею (I gorge but I don't get fat) in Би-2, "Би-2 feat. Оxxxymiron - Пора возвращаться домой (Lyric Video)."

<sup>23</sup> I have lightly corrected the grammar and punctuation of the original. There is no direct link to the page that contains this statement. On the company's main page, select "EN" for English, then click on the "Projects" link, and finally click on the specific link for the Bi-2 project. "Мультимедиа-дизайн студия Antimotion," antimotion, accessed June 19, 2020, <https://www.antimotion.ru>.

A more succinct and colorful comment demonstrates even further the conflicted patriotism of Oxxxymiron's rap: "By the third time, I understood what Oxxxymiron is talking about. He says that Russia is in shit, but the soul of a Russian reaches for the homeland whenever he is not there."<sup>24</sup> Comments such as these, which find a great depth of meaning and feeling in Bi-2 songs, will appear throughout our discussion. These are merely the first of many that suggest Bi-2's latest music has entered and encouraged a lively conversation about society, politics, and belonging in Russia today.

Born in Yekaterinburg, the journalist, music critic, producer, and *Nashe Radio* founder Mikhail Kozyrev (b. 1967) also knows something about Russian expat life in the 1990s. While studying mass media at Pomona College in Claremont, California, he learned the ways of the radio industry, curating the playlists Angelinos heard during their rush hour commutes. Eventually he was called back to Russia by radio executives, bringing his newfound expertise to bear as the general producer and, later, the program director for Moscow's Radio Maximum before helping to found the *Nashe* corporation of radio, print media, and its annual rock festivals *Nashestvie* and *Maxidrom*.

Kozyrev said many were contemptuous of Bi-2 in the early days, giving them less than a year to fall out of the scene. Recalling the band's return to Russia in 1999, he declared, "The idea itself was absurd initially: to succeed in Russia after many years of

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<sup>24</sup> "С третьего раза понял о чём говорит Оксимирон.. Он говорит что Россия в говне , но душой русский человек тянется на родину где бы он не находился." YouTube commenter MsWayzot in Би-2, "Би-2 feat. Оxxxymiron - Пора возвращаться домой (Lyric Video)."

absence and wandering around the world.”<sup>25</sup> During his early years as a radio producer, he remembered receiving a number of records from all over the world from former compatriots ranging from the mediocre to the talented, but that none could ever really make it in Russia while still living abroad. Bi-2 was one of those rare bands, willing and able to uproot themselves, move back to Russia, and forge a substantial following.

Despite this glowing assessment by Kozyrev, it took some time for the group to achieve success. Lyova Bi-2 provides a synopsis of their earliest days in the capital:

We lived in the same cramped apartment with the Forbidden Drummers and Beetles. We had something around \$4,000 with us. Money disappeared rapidly. . . . This was the last chance. We bought a box of vodka, ordered a bus and invited a bunch of journalists to an acoustic concert in the country. We agreed to rent some cottage from a man we had never seen in our life. We asked, “Is the cottage at least functional, can you play and sit there at all?” “Yes, it’s ok, kind of ...” We arrived, and there was basically a tiny room and a frozen apple orchard.<sup>26</sup>

Shura Bi-2 provides a few more details of that night in 1999 and the success this acoustic concert brought to the band:

These journalists come, and there stands this hut, frozen apple trees, and seed beds. It’s good that young guys came. None of this bothered them. They went for firewood, lit a campfire, set up an apparatus, some kind of light, and started to grill kebabs ... In general, that was how everyone thawed out, especially with the help of vodka... We played for about two hours. As a result, the next day

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<sup>25</sup> “Абсурдна была изначально сама идея: добиться успеха в России после многолетнего отсутствия и скитаний по свету.” Mikhail Kozyrev in Михаил Козырев and Борис Барабанов, *Мой Рок-Н-Ролл - Black Book*, vol. 1 (Москва: Гаятри, 2007), 70.

<sup>26</sup> “Жили мы в одной тесной квартире с ‘Запрещенными Барабанщиками’ и ‘Жуками’. У нас с собой было что-то около \$4000. Деньги исчезали стремительно. . . . Это был последний шанс. Мы купили ящик водки, заказали автобус и пригласили кучу журналистов на загородный акустический концерт группы ‘Би-2’. Договорились о какой-то даче с человеком, которого мы вообще никогда в жизни не видели. Спросили: ‘Там дача хоть нормальная, там вообще можно поиграть, посидеть?’ ‘Да нормально вроде...’ Приехали, а там вообще комнатуха крохотная и замерзший яблоневый сад.” Lyova Bi-2, qtd. in Козырев and Барабанов, vol. 1, 71.

Kapitolina Delovaya writes a huge article in MK [*Moskovskii Komsomolets*]. And within a week we are suddenly appearing everywhere!<sup>27</sup>

From Kozyrev we get a sense of the problems the band faced in their early Moscow days:

The ascent of Bi-2 came at a time when the formation of a new musical genre was taking place. It is probably more accurate to call it “pop rock.” According to the style of their music, Bi-2 did not fit into the canons of Russian rock, but clearly could not be called pop music either. How much swill was poured on the group and on *Nashe Radio* by champions of “real rock and roll” over the years! The main message was simple: “Take that poppy Bi-2 off the air!”<sup>28</sup>

As we will see later when we consider the reception of their most recent work, some of these reception problems have persisted to this day.

The prodigious critic and Russian rock historian Andrey Burlaka spent much of his early career covering the luminaries of the Leningrad Rock Club for some of the self-published underground rock fan journals known as *rok samizdat*. His opinion of Bi-2 is indicative of the attitude rock purists had (and have) toward the band: “All these ‘Bi-2s,’ ‘Chicherinas,’ ‘Underwoods’ (there is no sense in listing them, since they differ only in their names) are helpless in terms of the artistic value of their music and texts, primitive in their public displays, and absolutely devoid of the living energy inherent to rock and

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<sup>27</sup> “Приезжают эти журналисты, а там стоит эта избушка, замерзшие яблони и грядки. Хорошо, что приехали молодые ребята, они плюнули на все это, пошли за дровами, разожгли костер, поставили аппарат, какой-то свет, начали шашлыки жарить... В общем, так все оттаяли, еще под водку... Играли мы часа два. В итоге на следующий день Капитолина пишет огромную статью в ‘МК’. А за неделю мы вдруг появляемся везде!” Shura Bi-2 in Козырев and Барабанов, vol. 1, 71.

<sup>28</sup> “Взлет ‘Би-2’ пришелся на время, когда происходило формирование нового музыкального жанра. Наверное, точнее всего назвать его «поп-рок». По стилю музыки ‘Би-2’ не вписывались в каноны русского рока, но и поп-музыкой явно не могли называться. Сколько помоев было вылито на группу и на ‘Наше Радио’ со стороны поборников «настоящего рок-н-ролла» за эти годы! Основной ‘message’ был прост: ‘Долой попсовых Би-2 из эфира!’” Mikhail Kozyrev in Козырев and Барабанов, vol. 1, 74.

roll. They will exist only as long as their inflated ‘*Nashe Radio*’ fame will be fueled by heavy rotation on that station. Remove this support and they will disappear overnight.”<sup>29</sup>

The music journalist Kapitolina Delovaya, writing the conclusion to her initial impressions of the band in an article entitled, “Australian-style Kebab,” for her column, *Megakhaus* (the *Moskovsky Komsomolets* article that Shura Bi-2 referenced above), offered a more positive, if slightly guarded assessment of the band’s unique style as well as a welcoming tone:

Having combined the mixed dacha impressions and having auditioned the demo tape of the “Russian Australians,” “Megahaus” undertakes to make this forecast: Although the album, “Bi-2” is something absolutely Russian (...), it is also a kind of combination of rock nostalgia with trendy bells and whistles (even acid-jazz undertones are included in some places), the fresh group will be able to pinch off a considerable piece of popularity from [the group] “Mummy Troll” (...). First, the masculine-sexual promise of the soloist, Lyova will compete with Lagutenko’s “cat-like aura” and will drive a lot of girls crazy. Well, and then among us there is also respect for the “foreign mystique.” And “Bi-2” after all, are characters with Australian citizenship. We hope they won’t have any problems with their work permit.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “Все эти ‘Би-2,’ ‘чичерина,’ ‘ундервуды,’ (нет смысла перечислять, ибо различаются они только названиями) - беспомощные с точки зрения художественной ценности их музыки и текстов, примитивные в своих публичных проявлениях и абсолютно лишённые живой энергии, присущей рок-н-роллу, будут существовать лишь до тех пор, пока их раздутая ‘Нашим Радио’ слава будет подпитываться тяжелой ротацией на нем же. Уберите эту подпорку - и они сгинут в одночасье.” Andrey Burlaka from the gazette, *Аргументы и Факты*, March 25, 2003, qtd. in Козырев and Барабанов, vol. 1, 74.

<sup>30</sup> “Совокупив неоднозначные дачные впечатления и прослушанную демо-кассету ‘русских австралийцев’, ‘Мегахаус’ берется сделать вот какой прогноз. Хоть пластинка ‘Би-2’ это и нечто абсолютно русское, эдакое сочетание рок-ностальгии с новомодными наворотами, свежая группа сумеет поотщипнуть немалый кусман популярности у ‘Мумий Тролля’. Во-первых, мужественно-сексуальный посыл солиста Левы посоперничает с ‘кошачьей аурой’ Лагутенко и немало девушек с ума сведет. Ну и потом — уважают у нас ‘заграничную загадочность’. А ‘Би-2’ как-никак персонажи с австралийским гражданством. Надеемся, у них не будет проблем с видом на работу.” Капитолина Деловая, “ШАШЛЫК ПО-АВСТРАЛИЙСКИ,” October 20, 1999, <https://www.mk.ru/editions/daily/article/1999/10/20/134744-shashlyik-poavstraliyski.html>.

Her impressions reveal with a tinge of sardonic wit the extent to which Russians (even as late as 1999) were fascinated with anything “foreign.” And her description of Lyova’s “masculine-sexual promise,” though appealing to some young women, might have turned some Russian rock purists away from Bi-2 early on.

Responding to these early charges, Lyova Bi-2 asserted, “We basically do everything ourselves, relying only on ourselves, on our inner voice.” Speaking to the issue of fitting within a standard Russian rock radio format, he stated,

“Many told us that allegedly, our songs [did not fit into the established radio formats]. And as Bi-2 became popular, so the songs became formatted [the radio formats adjusted to accommodate their songs]. We did not think about how long they should sound - three or six minutes. If necessary, we will add heaviness to the sound. Throughout the song there will be distortion. If we want - we will lighten it. The only reference point is our own feelings, which as they say is correct.”<sup>31</sup>

By ignoring the implications of others who suggested their music was not suitable for the market, Bi-2 demonstrated a stubborn independence in their approach to making music early in their career. This creative stance pushes against charges of commercialism that the band continues to encounter, even to the present day.

As Kozyrev reports, “They appeared in projects that many rock artists considered unacceptable to participate in. Their rationale was simple: ‘Nonsense, we just go out and

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<sup>31</sup> “Мы делаем в основном все сами, полагаясь только на себя. На свой внутренний голос. Многие говорили нам о том, что, дескать, наши песни неформатные. А как Би-2 стали популярными, так и песни стали форматными. Мы не задумывались о том, сколько они должны звучать - три или шесть минут. Если надо - утяжелим звук. Через всю песню будет проходить дисторшн. Захотим - облегчим. Единственный ориентир - собственные ощущения, которые говорят - это правильно.” Lyova Bi-2 in Роман И. Егоров, *Би-2 - Интервью* (Москва: АНТАО, 2004), 102–3.

play our songs, and it's not so important who came before us. Everyone is on the Top of the Pops program in England, and this seems like the right thing for us.”<sup>32</sup>

Writing in 2007, Kozyrev sought to further emphasize his friends' openness to experimentation while characterizing their continued attitudes toward critics as cavalier:

Do not be surprised if the album *Bi-2 On Ice* is waiting for us, which they will record on a glacier in the permafrost zone, sampling the cries of seals and reindeer during mating; or the premiere of the oratorio “Slippery from the Street”<sup>33</sup> recorded with a transvestite choir from San Francisco.<sup>34</sup>

It is difficult to know exactly the spirit in which Kozyrev intended those last words.

Though they might be read as a symptom of the casual homophobia and transphobia that pervades contemporary Russian culture, he might be implying that Bi-2 would position themselves in opposition to such prejudice. In the next section, I discuss how the results of one controversial collaboration shot them to superstardom, yet also associated the band with some unfortunate baggage.

### **The Film *Brother-2* – A Double-Edged Sword**

The 2000 film *Brother-2* (*Brat-2*) is universally acknowledged as the cause of the band's initial popularity in Russia. Because of this strong connection, the film's extreme

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<sup>32</sup> “Они появлялись в таких проектах, участвовать в которых для многих рок-артистов было неприемлемо. Обоснование было простым: ‘Глупости, мы просто выходим и играем свои песни, и не так уж важно, кто был до нас. Все выступают в программе “Top of the Pop” в Англии, нам такой подход кажется правильным.” Mikhail Kozyrev in Козырев and Барабанов, *Мой Рок-Н-Ролл - Black Book*, vol. 1, 75.

<sup>33</sup> This is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the song “Slippery Streets” (*Skol'zkie ulitsy*) from their 2004 album *Foreign Cars* (*Inomarki*).

<sup>34</sup> “Не удивляйтесь, если впереди нас ждут альбом ‘Би-2 on ice,’ который они запишут на леднике в зоне вечной мерзлоты, сэмплируя крики нерп и северных оленей во время случки; или премьеры оратории ‘Скользкие с улицы,’ записанной вместе с хором трансвеститов из Сан-Франциско...” Mikhail Kozyrev in Козырев and Барабанов, vol. 1, 79.



nationalistic bent is difficult to dissociate from the band's early output. In the film these tropes refer to Ukrainians, Jews, and especially Americans. Its plot revolves around the efforts of the main character, Danila, to honor the memory of his army buddy, gunned down by the Russian mafia, by making a whirlwind four-day trip to the United States to avenge the wrongs perpetrated against his friend's twin brother. The twin is a Russian hockey star who had been duped out of lucrative earnings by American and Ukrainian mobsters in Chicago sharing shady business interests with the mafia in Russia. The moral constitution of the American mob boss is presented as especially foul, signaled by his importation to the United States of black-market Russian films containing real rape and murder scenes.

Danila enlists his own older brother Viktor in his American adventure. They decide that in order to evade the mob at airports on both sides of the Atlantic, Viktor should fly one day earlier to Chicago and that Danila should fly to New York, rent a car in Brighton Beach, a well-known Russian immigrant community, and then drive to meet his brother in Chicago. When Viktor disembarks from his plane in Chicago he sees two burly men obviously looking for Danila, walks up to them and inquires whether they are fellow Russians. After they curtly respond in the negative, Viktor asks one of them, "So you're a *banderovets*?" associating him and thereby all Ukrainians with the Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera discussed in my previous chapter. The English subtitles define what this means more precisely: "So you're a Nazi collaborator?" When Viktor later finds himself at a bar in the Russian and Ukrainian district of Chicago, he realizes that the Ukrainian mobster from the airport now knows who he is. Viktor lures him into the bathroom and after shooting him once asks, "Who's after me you Nazi henchman?"

Before he shoots him two more times he shouts, “You’ll pay for Sevastopol, you pigs!”<sup>35</sup>

The language Viktor used in these scenes led the Ukrainian government to ban the film in 2015 in the wake of the annexation of Crimea and in response to the ongoing Russian-led insurgency in eastern Ukraine.<sup>36</sup>

*Brother-2* also presents a lopsided and caricatured view of the African American community in Chicago, portraying abject poverty and violent pimps in flashy fur coats as the norm. As the plot unfolds, Danila rescues Dasha, a compatriot who failed to achieve the elusive American dream and ended up working as a prostitute for one of these pimps. When the pair are reunited with Viktor they have nowhere to go and nothing to eat, so they start up a campfire to boil crawfish pulled from Lake Michigan. A black homeless man walks up to say hello and to see what they have cooking over the fire. When he realizes what it is, he exclaims, “You can’t eat crawfish! They’re bottom feeders! Do you know what’s at the bottom of Lake Michigan? Shit! They eat shit!” Dasha translates for the two brothers and Viktor begins an argument with the visitor. Danila tells his brother to leave him be and then says to the other man, “*Negr* Go!” This infuriates him and he runs off exclaiming, “I’ll show you a real \*\*\*\*\*!”

Dasha tries to explain that this word is offensive to black people, but Danila asserts what he learned in school: “The Chinese live in China; in Germany, the Germans; in Israel, the Jews; and in Africa, the Negros.” And then the well-meaning Dasha

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<sup>35</sup> In the film’s closing credits, this association between Ukrainian characters and Nazis is underlined by the fact that one of the roles is simply labeled, “Fascist.”

<sup>36</sup> “В Украине запретили фильм ‘Брат 2’ из-за ‘унизительных для украинцев сцен,’” TCH.ua, February 18, 2015, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://tsn.ua/ru/ukrayina/v-ukraine-zapretili-film-brat-2-iz-za-unizitelnyh-dlya-ukraincev-scen-411481.html>.

articulates some of the most essentialist notions imaginable: “I think the power’s in them. There’s something primordial and brutal about this people. We lost it. That’s why they’re stronger. The whites [here] know it and they’re afraid of them.” Right on cue, the homeless man returns with two other black friends to knock over the campfire and attack them. Danila disperses them with a couple of shots from a pistol he had stolen from Dasha’s pimp.

As Dasha and Danila are waiting for Viktor in an earlier scene, they make broader generalizations about Americans. Danila asks her what it means when an American says, “How are you?” After she gives him the Russian translation he asks, “Do they really mean it?” she answers, “No, they do not.” When he inquires “Then why do they ask?” she responds, “They just do. But they are dead serious when it comes to money.”

Radio producer Mikhail Kozyrev was asked to collaborate with the film’s production team by offering songs from Russian artists that articulated the musical sounds of the new era in Russia that director Alexey Balabanov meant to portray. Balabanov selected three Bi-2 songs, including, “No One Writes to the Colonel” (*Polkoniku nikto, ne pishet*), “Barbara,” (*Varvara*), and “Happiness” (*Shast’e*). Kozyrev acknowledges that these songs had already received airplay in Russia but that their popularity soared only after the film’s release.<sup>37</sup> Though none are overtly nationalistic, their use in the film connects them to such themes. One in particular is used during a climactic scene in which Danila metes out his form of Russian justice to American gangsters.

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<sup>37</sup> Михаил Козырев and Борис Барабанов, *Мой Рок-Н-Ролл - Red Book*, vol. 3 (Москва: Гаятри, 2007), 119–20.

After Danila and Dasha make their way into the Chicago bar that the Ukrainian and American mobsters use as a front to launder their money, we see Bi-2 performing “No One Writes to the Colonel” onstage. The song vaguely references the thankless and never-ending job undertaken by officers in the army in far away cities, places where ordinary citizens never need venture. From the Cold War to the present, life for the colonel remains the same. No one writes to him and no one waits for him. And despite the negative judgment of those who could never understand, he has not gone crazy.

As the band continues to play this song, Danila goes on a rampage in the back of the bar, killing eight men with cold precision on the assumption that they are all equally guilty. When he gets to the bookkeeper in the back, he finds him watching one of the rape movies imported from the Russian black market. After collecting all of the money from the safe and finding out the location of the bulk of the organization’s money, Danila spares the man, but shoots the television in a display of moral superiority. In Kozyrev’s final assessment of his role in the film, he admitted, “It has always been very difficult for me to answer the question of how moral it is to be involved in creating the image of a simple Russian guy who comes to the States, teaches Americans how to live with the words, ‘Whoever has the truth is stronger,’ and then wastes them with a sawed-off rifle.”<sup>38</sup> When the film was mentioned as a “must see” by a classmate in my second year of Russian language study, our teacher Marina (a native of St. Petersburg in her fifties),

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<sup>38</sup> “Мне всегда было очень сложно отвечать на вопрос, насколько нравственно быть причастным к созданию образа простого русского парня, который приезжает в Штаты, учит американцев, как жить, со словами ‘У кого правда, тот и сильнее,’ а потом мочит их из обреза.” Mikhail Kozyrev in *Козырев and Барабанов*, vol. 3, 125.

frowned and expressed extreme displeasure, stating that there were far better Russian films to watch.

Though the lyrics of the song that accompanies the scene described above insist the colonel has not gone crazy, the music seems to suggest otherwise. The song's intro begins in dream-like fashion with a pensive electric guitar melody filtered through a flanger pedal. The flanger combines the original signal with one that has been slightly slowed down. The end result in this case is a mysterious undulating reverb. A synthesized keyboard producing similar effects softly accompanies the guitar. As the last reverb of the intro fades, Lyova's sharp pronunciation of the opening line coincides with a long slide down to the tonic on the bass and guitar, jarringly interrupting the reflective mood.

As Lyova angrily spits out the first two verses, he is undergirded by heavy kicks in the bass drum and a formidable electric guitar filtered through a fuzz pedal. Fuzz clips the signal much more than basic distortion, imitating a faulty amplifier that has been pushed to its limits. It was used by several artists in the psychedelic rock of the 1960s (especially Jimi Hendrix) and carries with it a wild unpredictability. In this case it sounds more like rage that is barely held in check by the unrelenting eighth-note pulse that governs it. This pressure of regimentation is made more vivid by a slow and methodical rate of harmonic change with each chord in the G-minor progression sounding for two bars at a tempo circa 88 beats per minute. The mood set by the song's first two verses perfectly matches the methodical manner in which Danila makes his way through the club's back area. By the third verse the guitar has freed itself from the regimented eighth-note pulse that the bass still clings to. As it wails independently during both the third and fourth verses, the synthesizer plays a simple countermelody that repeatedly emphasizes

an extremely discordant C-sharp, accessing the harmonic colors of horror movies.

Otherworldly electronic timbres that are equally reminiscent of horror soundtracks appear during the final choruses.

The group made little effort to disentangle themselves from the hit film's darker themes in the years immediately following *Brat-2*'s release. This is evident in a statement Lyova Bi-2 made during that time: "The film '*Brother-2*' is, in a sense, the first harbinger [of the new sound in Russia]. It helped us a lot. I will not judge whether it was a good film or a bad one, whether it was chauvinistic or not—that is another matter. *Brother 2* sells well. It is a milestone. Perhaps it represents the appearance of our *Star Wars*."<sup>39</sup> This remarkable last sentence must be read in context: a time of lingering economic suffering, lawlessness, and identity crisis; a time during the first years of Putin's presidency when the promises of Western democracy had been all but extinguished in Russia. No one could have foretold that on September 3, 2004, the very same year that the book of Bi-2 interviews in which this quotation appeared was published, 334 people (including 186 children) would be killed after the Russian government forced a resolution to the Beslan school hostage crisis in North Ossetia.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> "Фильм 'Брат-2' - в каком-то смысле первая ласточка. Он нам очень помог. Не буду судить - хороший фильм или плохой, шовинизм там или нет - дело в другом. 'Брат-2' хорошо продается. Является определенной вехой. Возможно, появляются свои 'Звездные войны.'" Lyova Bi-2, qtd. in Егоров, *Би-2 - Интервью*, 103.

<sup>40</sup> A more than three-hour documentary (with both English and Spanish subtitles) dedicated to a meticulous revelation of the truths behind the events that led to the massacre was produced by Yury Dud. Dud even added Russian subtitles for the native hearing impaired after one commenter begged him to do so. The video has received over 19.7 million views, 1 million likes, and nearly 130,000 comments since its release on YouTube. In merely six months these numbers have far exceeded any total for the many music videos discussed in this entire dissertation. вДудь, "Беслан. Помни / Beslan. Remember (English & Español Subs)," YouTube, September 2, 2019, accessed, July 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vF1UGmi5m8s&t=2256s>.

Roman Yegorov devoted a short chapter of his book to *Brat-2* with the subheading, “Paradigm of Brotherhood, or Glitches of Sense 2?” He implied that parallels between the hero (Danila) and Alexander Nevsky, the conquering hero of medieval *Rus*, were intended by the filmmakers.<sup>41</sup> This is evident in his juxtaposition of a phrase attributed to Nevsky, “power is in truth,” with one of Danila’s lines from his conversation with the American mob boss, “there is no power in money, power is in truth,” appended to the chapter subheading.<sup>42</sup>

Paraphrasing the star of the film Sergey Bodrov, Jr., Yegorov related to readers the ostensible goal of *Brat-2*: “to convey to people simple beliefs and truths that, according to the creators of the film always have an enduring value, i.e., brotherhood, mutual assistance, strength, courage, kindness.”<sup>43</sup> Yegorov asserts that the “unpretentious image, created by Bodrov Jr., claims to be the standard for the ‘pop hero of the new time,’” citing the ease with which Danila seduced a Russian pop star, overcame various trials traveling across America as a broke outsider, and dealt with the Russian mafia in Moscow and the American mafia in Chicago (he fails to mention that the Ukrainian mafia also plays a role in both New York and Chicago).<sup>44</sup> He observes how “Danila pulls the

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<sup>41</sup> Recall that words attributed to Nevsky were also used in the beginning of Alisa’s song, “Sky of the Slavs” discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>42</sup> “ПАРАДИГМА БРАТСТВА ИЛИ ГЛЮКИ СМЫСЛА-2 (сила в правде) А. Невский (сила не в деньгах, а в правде) - Данила.” Егоров, *Би-2 - Интервью*, 111.

<sup>43</sup> “Идея же, но словам С. Бодрова мл., состояла в том, чтобы донести до людей простые убеждения и истины, которые, по мнению создателей фильма всегда имеют непреходящую ценность, т. е. братство, взаимовыручка, сила, мужество, доброта...”Егоров, 111.

<sup>44</sup> “Незатейливый образ, созданный Бодровым мл., претендует на стандарт ‘поп-героя нового времени.’ Ему удастся запросто познакомиться с певичкой, смотреться в Америку,

trigger without any emotion, simply solving any problems [that arise],” and Yegorov problematizes Danila’s chief philosophical position, defined by the line, “there is only one truth.” For Yegorov, “this opinion is as common as it is erroneous,” pointing to what it portends for contemporary Russian society: “It is easy to jump from this assertion to declarations like, ‘We are not ready to comprehend freedom,’ and [questions like] ‘Why do we need democracy?’”<sup>45</sup> In Yegorov’s assessment of the film, we can see parallels with the authoritarian beliefs espoused by Konstantin Kinchev from chapter 3: “Russia is only suited to the carrot and the stick.”

Kozyrev states that although he took great pleasure in working with Alexey Balabanov, the film’s director, they did not share the same ideology. To this day, he says the offensively provocative phrases directed at Jews, Ukrainians, and black people that were uttered by some of the characters still make him cringe. He wondered whether they were incidental or inserted by design and declared that what separated these phrases from aphorisms was “an absolute nationalistic whirlpool and abyss.”<sup>46</sup>

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разобраться с русскими и американскими мафиози, облапошившими недалекого хоккеиста.” Егоров, 111–12.

<sup>45</sup> “Герой Бодрова мл. - Данила без эмоций нажимает на курок, элементарно разрешая любые проблемы. ‘Правда одна’ ... говорит Данила, но это мнение сколь расхожее, столь и ошибочно. Легко от этого утверждения перескочить к заявлениям типа, ‘мы не готовы к восприятию свободы,’ ‘зачем нам демократия’ и им подобным.” Егоров, 112.

<sup>46</sup> “Правда, стоит отметить еще одну важную деталь. При всем том абсолютном наслаждении, которое я получал от работы с Алексеем Балабановым, идеологически мы не совпадали. Меня и по сей день напрягают фразы ‘Я вообще-то евреев не очень,’ ‘Вы мне, гады, еще за Севастополь ответите!’ или ‘Не брат ты мне, гнида черножопая.’ Случайны они или нет? Вроде смешно, а как расходятся в виде афоризмов - абсолютный националистический омут и пропасть.” Mikhail Kozyrev in Kozyrev and Барабанов, vol. 3, 124–25.



The appearance of the 1988 version of the song “Last Letter” (*Poslednee pis'mo*)—alternatively known as, “Good-bye, America!”—originally released in 1985 by the band Nautilus Pompilius, juxtaposes disillusionment with America and a kind of innocent Russian purity at the end of the film. Written on the cusp of glasnost, when most Soviet citizens could not travel to the United States, the song acquires a new and stronger resonance in the year 2000 once Russian citizens had sufficiently sampled America’s “forbidden fruits.” In this new context, the song becomes freighted with the nationalist sentiment of the film that drives much Russian political posturing today.

Before Danila and Dasha board their plane back to Russia, one of the gate attendants explains to Dasha that since she let her visa expire, breaking federal law, she would not be allowed to reenter the United States, to which she silently but emphatically thrusts her middle finger in his direction. As the plane takes off, we see Danila listening through headphones to a children’s choir version of “Good-bye, America” before it bleeds into a non-diegetic recording of the band’s second version of the song from 1988. The 1985 version appeared on their album *Invisible Being (Nevidimka)* and stylistically resembles the rhumba of American ballroom dancing. In its 1988 incarnation for the album *Prince of Silence (Kniaz' tishiny)*, we hear a mix of the rhythms of rhumba with the steel drums and saxophone timbres of reggae.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> In an interview with the music journal, Fuzz, Butusov stated that they originally intended to present the song in a reggae style, but since the Yamaha PS-55 Portasound keyboard/synthesizer did not have a reggae setting, they were left with either samba, bossa nova, or rhumba. My own comparison of PS-55 demos on YouTube with the original recording confirms that they chose the first variation of the rhumba setting to build their accompaniment. Вячеслав Бутусов, Александр Устинов, and Валерий Жук, “Вячеслав Бутусов о собственных песнях,” *Fuzz - Музыкальный журнал*, nos. 70-71, July-August 1999, 19. High quality color pdfs of back issues

This moment in the film was presaged in the Moscow part of the film after Danila tracked down the Russian mob boss to his young son's school recital. Before confronting him, Danila is visibly touched by the innocent son's recitation of a short poem full of pristine, unsullied descriptions of Russia's countryside: "I discovered that I have a huge family and a trail, and a little wood. In the field, every ear of corn, a little stream, the sky of blue, they're all my own, my native land. This is my homeland. I love all in its light."<sup>48</sup> Moments later, while Danila is holding a semi-automatic weapon to his father's groin, we hear from the other room the children's choir singing the same arrangement of "Good-bye America" that reappears later in Danila's headphones on the plane. After getting the information he needs, Danila lets the mob boss live, stating that he did not want to leave his son fatherless.

By the film's end, the innocent, pure sounds of the children's choir seem to represent not only Russia in contrast to America, but also an absolution for all the violent deeds Danila committed on behalf of his Russian brother-in-arms. In both the 1985 and 1988 versions of the song, lead singer Vyacheslav Butusov sings the opening four lines slowly, *ad libitum*. Butusov's comments about the background style and timbres of the

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of FUZZ are available for viewing at the following Google Drive link:  
[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-vq6B0yyJ2JGUeUnK\\_JmKDZpe11\\_6K-K](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-vq6B0yyJ2JGUeUnK_JmKDZpe11_6K-K).

<sup>48</sup> "Я узнал, что у меня есть огромная семья, И тропинка, и лесок. В поле каждый колосок. Речка, небо голубое, это всё моё, родное. Это родина моя всех люблю на свете я." The translation in the film's subtitles renders these lines more poetically; the objects of nature are represented metaphorically as extra relatives in the boy's huge family. This scene can be found at the 1:00 mark in the following clip: Кинокомпания "СТБ," "Брат 2 (фильм) - Я узнал, что у меня (лучшие моменты фильма)," YouTube, February 3, 2014, accessed June 18, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvaqR3pjDHM>.

original 1985 version reveal a playful, *ad hoc* approach to building the accompaniments: “And then I took the PS-55 – we had such a keyboard, it came already embedded with rhythmic effects, sounds of all sorts. You crank it up, and everything is playing at once, and you can't adjust anything, nothing. We turned on this rhumba, and we think how cool it is – everything plays like a barrel organ. And I recorded vocals to this rhumba.”<sup>49</sup> The children’s *a cappella* version replaces Butusov’s voice with a more vulnerable sounding boy soprano and the rest of the children take over the barrel organ timbre’s chordal accompanimental role. Because Butusov’s *ad libitum* opening tempo greatly contrasts with the uptempo Latin style that follows it, the large contrast between the children’s chorus and the band’s version at the start of the film’s credits is fairly smooth, almost expected.

“Гуд-бай, Америка!”

Когда умолкнут все песни,  
Которых я не знаю  
В терпком воздухе крикнет  
Последний мой бумажный пароход:  
“Гуд-бай Америка – о,  
Где я не был никогда,  
Прощай навсегда,  
Возьми банджо сыграй мне на  
прощанье!”

Мне стали слишком малы  
Твои тёртые джинсы.  
Нас так долго учили

“Good-bye, America!”

When all the songs I don’t know go silent,  
In the acerbic air will cry  
My last paper steamship:  
“Good-bye America - oh,  
Where I’ve never been,  
Farewell forever,  
Grab a banjo and play it for me in  
parting!”

They’re too small for me  
Your stone-washed jeans.  
We were taught for so long

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<sup>49</sup> “А тут взял PS-55-ю — была у нас такая клавишная, в ней были заложены уже ритмические эффекты, звуки всякие. Врубаешь, а там сразу все играет, и ты ничего поправить не можешь, ниче. Врубили мы эту румбу, и думаем, во как круто — все играет как в шарманке. И я под эту румбу записал вокал.” Vyacheslav Butusov. A digital version of this article is available at Игорь Свиначенко and Вячеслав Бутусов, “Вячеслав Бутусов: как я вернулся,” *Медведь*, March 2005, accessed July 15, 2020, <http://naunaunau.narod.ru/articles/0106-u-piter-history/>.

Любить твои запретные плоды.

To love your forbidden fruits.

Гуд-бай Америка – о ,  
Где я не буду никогда.

Goodbye America,  
Where I will never venture.

Услышу ли песню,  
Которую запомню навсегда?

Will I hear a song,  
That I'll remember forever?

The use of the song at this moment in the film emphasizes an implied idea that all things American—blue jeans, among other forbidden fruits, among them possibly even democracy—are completely alien to Russia. The answer to the song's concluding rhetorical question seems obvious in this context—there is nothing worth remembering of America. Butusov was asked in an interview in 2004 whether he liked the children's choir version and the way it was used in the film. He answered, "No, this is all unsatisfactory substitution, this is certainly not a children's song." He presumed that they thought it would be a funny "gag" to have a children's choir sing it and stated, "Well, I don't know. It wasn't funny," finally adding, "It was even somehow a little offensive the way it turned out."<sup>50</sup> He did not elaborate on what offended him. Yet the pairing of children's voices with violence seems the most likely culprit. It is an emotional ploy not unrelated to the "Kukushka" cover versions performed by young girls dressed in *faux* military chic for patriotic celebrations discussed in chapter 1.

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<sup>50</sup> "Э.НИКОЛАЕВА – Понятно. Вам понравилось, как детский хор спел «Гуд бай Америка»? В.БУТУСОВ — Нет, это все суррогат, это не детская песня, конечно. Э.НИКОЛАЕВА – В этом я с вами согласна. В.БУТУСОВ – А как это им в голову пришло, чтобы дети пели это? В.БУТУСОВ – Не знаю, ну, наверное, им показалось, что смешно это. Э.НИКОЛАЕВА – Типа прикольно? В.БУТУСОВ – У них называется в кино это «гэг». Ну, не знаю, мне не смешно было. Э.НИКОЛАЕВА – Грустно? В.БУТУСОВ – И не грустно. Даже как-то немножко обидно. Так получилось." Vyacheslav Butusov and Elina Nikolaeva in Бутусов Вячеслав and Элина Николаева, "Какого черта - Вячеслав Бутусов," Эхо Москвы, October 17, 2004, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://echo.msk.ru/programs/features/32633/>.

In 2015 an anniversary celebration of the film's release featured a live performance of the full children's choir version featured in the Moscow recital scene and members of the choir were asked beforehand about the song's meaning. At the 00:12 mark in the video cited below, a young girl begins to answer, "The song is about how..." and a friend fills in the pause by asserting, "What Bodrov [the actor portraying Danila] is saying, is that he will never be in America." Then the first girl finishes her thought: "Because he was *so* tired of this American fashion. You must get used to your own fashion. You need to create your own and not repeat after some other countries."<sup>51</sup>

Months before *Brother-2* was released, Butusov reported that this song was hastily thrown together at the last-minute to get their 1985 album, *Invisible Being* to the required length. His opinion of what the song meant is encapsulated in another statement he made to *Fuzz* magazine in 1999: "There, in my opinion, it feels like a person found himself in a mess, so he sang something to karaoke. We didn't take this song seriously, but for some reason the audience took it seriously."<sup>52</sup>

In a 2005 interview for the men's magazine *Medved'*, he was asked, "Were you really that worried about America back then?" His answer shows the vast gulf between his conceptions and the interpretations of others: "No, it was different for me: I didn't

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<sup>51</sup> "Песня про то как... то что Бодров говорит, что он никогда не будет в Америке. Потому что ТАК надоела это американская мода. Надо привыкать к своей моде. Надо свою создавать, а не повторять за какими-то другими странами." See in "Детский хор - Прощальное письмо," YouTube clip posted by Вадим Иванов, October 6, 2015, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkhHNn4M3AU>.

<sup>52</sup> "Там, по-моему, чувствуется, что человек впросак попал, так что-то спел под караоке. Мы серьезно к этой песне не относились, а слушатели почему-то наоборот отнеслись серьезно." Vyacheslav Butusov, quoted in Бутусов, Устинов, and Жук, "Вячеслав Бутусов о собственных песнях," 19.

even understand what I was writing about. I wrote intuitively. I had a certain feeling: at that time, I perceived America as a legend, as a myth of some kind—A myth that we invented ourselves, because we couldn't really imagine what was there.” He added that his strongest images of America came from movies made in East Germany about Native Americans and authors like James Fenimore Cooper (perhaps *The Last of the Mohicans*). Finally, he said, “I wrote on behalf of a man who was saying farewell to boyhood, going on an independent voyage. I left my parents at the time. I was 20 years old.”<sup>53</sup>

There is a quote (reportedly originating from a television interview) attributed to Butusov that often appears in online discussions about the song's meaning. Searching any segment of its text generates a host of links to such forums. Though it has proven impossible to verify, it bears a certain similarity to the statements cited above. The first clause (or first line) seems to provide the strongest reason to doubt its authenticity: it betrays an immodesty that I have not found in other interviews Butusov has given; and it conflicts with other statements cited above that paint the work as a trivial afterthought. Whether the words are Butusov's or the stuff of legend, they nevertheless represent an interpretation that is apparently relevant to a number of Russians:

I always perceived and perceive this song as the greatest masterpiece of my youth, but only now do I understand that the goal of this song is not a visit to America, but the realization of my dream. America is only the image of that unrealizable dream, a distinct dream of everyone that also lives in everyone's soul. It is not

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<sup>53</sup> “— А ты тогда действительно так волновался насчет Америки? — Нет, у меня иначе было: я даже не понимал, о чем я пишу. Я писал интуитивно. У меня было ощущение такого рода: по тем временам я воспринимал Америку как легенду, как миф какой-то. Миф, который мы сами себе и придумали, потому что реально мы не представляли себе, что там. У меня ассоциации с Америкой были такие: Гойко Митич как индеец, Фенимор Купер и так далее... А писал я от лица человека, который прощался с детством, он уходил в самостоятельное плавание. Я сам тогда уехал от родителей. Мне было 20 лет.”  
Vyacheslav Butusov in Свинаренко and Бутусов, “Бутусов: как я вернулся.”

America that we want to discover, but to turn our dream into reality. That's what the song is about. And it is about the fact that we say goodbye to our dream with the words goodbye America, unfortunately, and agree that it will never come to us. It is very sad to perceive this, but it often happens.<sup>54</sup>

This message of disappointment adds to the verifiable statements made by Butusov cited above and complicates the narrow reading that the film *Brother-2* privileges for “Last Letter.”

As radio producer and music consultant to the film Mikhail Kozyrev stated, “The song ‘Good-bye, America!’ is key for *Brother-2*.” The band Nautilus Pompilius was Danila’s principle musical obsession during the first *Brother* (1997). After acknowledging the song’s role as a tribute to Butusov, Kozyrev offers that it is also a tribute to the “generation that feels such a universal longing for how ‘much could have been, but did not happen.’” His final observations continue to betray a certain wistfulness that *Brother-2* transforms into sarcasm: “‘Good-bye, America!’ is the holiday you've been waiting for, but you weren’t invited to... This is parting with illusions and dreams.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> “Я всегда воспринимал и воспринимаю эту песню, как величайший шедевр моей молодости, но только теперь я понимаю, что не посещение Америки цель этой песни, а реализация своей мечты. Америка лишь образ той несбыточной мечты, разной мечты каждого, которая у каждого в душе то и живет. Не Америку хочется нам открыть, а превратить в реальность свою мечту. Вот о том и песня. И она о том, что мы словами Гудбай Америка, к сожалению, прощаемся со своей мечтой и соглашаемся, что она никогда не придет к нам. т.е. не будет явью. Очень грустно сие воспринимать, но зачастую это так и бывает.” Quote attributed to Vyacheslav Butusov. See for example the comment of Ия Четверухина in the discussion below the following live performance video of the song. “Гудбай, Америка! В. Бутусов. Goodbye, America. V. Butusov,” Kingknife.ru, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://kingknife.ru/watch/E6MksZvcB9A>.

<sup>55</sup> “Песня ‘Гуд-бай, Америка!’ – ключевая для ‘Брата-2’. Ее здесь исполняет детский хор, и это дань уважения - и к Бутусову, и к поколению, испытывающему такую вселенскую тоску по тому, как ‘много бы быть, но не случилось’. ‘Гуд-бай, Америка!’ – это праздник,

A postscript that stretches beyond the terminal limit of this dissertation seems appropriate here, for it shows that the song “Good-bye America” has become useful to the current propaganda interests of the Russian state. On Sunday evening, June 7, 2020, Russia’s Channel One broadcast both *Brat* and *Brat-2* to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the sequel’s release. As the rhumba/reggae strains of “Good-bye America” played at the end of *Brat-2*, instead of the closing credits, viewers all over Russia saw a montage of the most violent footage connected with the unrest that followed the death of George Floyd in the United States.<sup>57</sup>

### “The Theme of the Century”

It is possible to read Bi-2’s participation in *Brother-2* as more of an aberration than an example of early nationalistic sympathies. Yet their 2017 album *Event Horizon* represents a seismic shift in their engagement with political issues, an engagement barely discernible in a couple of their post-*Brother-2* songs, namely, “Revolution” (*Revolutsiya* – 2004) and “Taken Into the Army” (*Zabrali v armiiu* – 2014). The following discussion focuses on a song from *Event Horizon* that, according to commenters online, receives conspicuously little airplay, maybe none at all.

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которого ты так ждал, но тебя не пригласили... Это расставание с иллюзиями и мечтами...” Mikhail Kozyrev in Козырев and Барабанов, *Мой Рок-Н-Ролл - Red Book*, vol. 3, 122.

<sup>57</sup> “Russian State-Run Broadcaster Replaces End Credits of ‘Brat 2’ Movie With Video of Protests in U.S.,” *The Moscow Times*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/06/08/russian-tv-channel-appears-to-add-footage-of-us-unrest-to-film-a70509>; “Разграбленный Нью-Йорк и беспомощные полицейские — следствие протестного хаоса в США. Новости. Первый канал,” *Первый канал*, June 7, 2020, [https://www.1tv.ru/news/2020-06-07/387279-razgrablennyy\\_nyu\\_york\\_i\\_bespomoschnye\\_politseyskie\\_sledstvie\\_prottestnogo\\_haosa\\_v\\_ssha](https://www.1tv.ru/news/2020-06-07/387279-razgrablennyy_nyu_york_i_bespomoschnye_politseyskie_sledstvie_prottestnogo_haosa_v_ssha).



One of the songs on Bi-2's *Event Horizon* that does not have an accompanying music video is "Theme of the Century" (*Tema veka*). This song is important for the specific political events it references and the way in which the musical arrangement and timbres articulate the oppressive forces that the text stubbornly opposes. The absence of an additional visual narrative allows us to focus exclusively on the relationship between text and music, which many social media commenters found especially compelling. The following analysis reveals the song's commentary on society and the individual's power within it and complicates arguments surrounding the band's supposedly vapid commercialism.

In the course of the song's successive verses, the social commentary moves from a global perspective to an increasingly specific, contemporary Russian context. The band's decision to start with the chorus in this verse-chorus form, which addresses the general problem of the relationship between power and the individual, helps the listener to associate the more specific issues plucked from Russian society back to this larger message: despite the raging storms of the outer world (created by power), every person has the agency to not only shape their individual destinies, but to effect larger societal change in the very act of staying true to oneself.

Bi-2's lyrics are often stripped down to the barest essentials. One pop culture wiki identifies this trait as common to many artists across popular music genres, labeling it "Phrase Salad Lyricism." They call this practice Bi-2's "modus operandi," claiming that "most of their songs evoke a feeling rather than tell a coherent story, so they string phrases together which may have an overarching thematic meaning or evoke certain mental images, but only flirt with coherence at best." This is followed by the caveat, "To

be fair, the most egregious cases tend to rhyme in Russian.”<sup>58</sup> One of my informants, Oleg Ugryumov, pointed to a similar reading of their texts as well as their music videos when he said, “I perceive their texts and clips more as a set of words and I do not delve into their essence, nor what the images represent.”<sup>59</sup> Yet this does not mean that the band places less emphasis on their lyrics, despite charges of clumsiness and sloppiness. On the contrary, they pack each of these “bare essentials” with a maximum density of meaning. And the musical arrangement of “Theme of the Century” in fact suggests that the band wants you to clearly hear every “set of words” uttered.

Due to the stripped-down nature of their texts, it is helpful to translate their terse poetics into prose form. Thus, the text of the chorus (which also opens the song) reads, “The world owes me nothing, but it can’t hinder me. I am used to deciding for myself what I can and cannot be. The world owes me nothing, but it can’t break you as long as you keep all the threads of your fate in your hands.”<sup>60</sup> Aside from the sudden change of pronoun from “me” to “you” that occurs near the end of these opening lines, the meaning of the text seems straightforward. Another translator responding to a request for an English translation in the comments section of one of Bi-2’s official videos for the song

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<sup>58</sup> “Bi-2 (Music),” TV Tropes, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Music/Bi2>.

<sup>59</sup> “Я их тексты и клипы воспринимаю скорее как набор слов, не вникаю в суть и образы.” Oleg Ugryumov, Facebook Messenger dialogue, March 3, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> “Этот мир мне не должен; Но не в силах мне помешать; Что нельзя, а что можно; Я привык за себя решать; Этот мир мне не должен; Но тебя не сломать пока; Все нити своей судьбы; Ты держишь в своих руках.”

even disregarded this pronoun shift, keeping the focus on “me.”<sup>61</sup> Considering that in many languages the very specific “you” and the more generalized “one” are often interchangeable, the substitution becomes less jarring. In the move from the specific “me” to the more generalized meaning of “you,” we might interpret this as the singer indicating that what is true for him is true for all humanity. Individually, we have agency where our fates are concerned and collectively, we have a say in how we are governed.

The chorus opens and closes the song and is repeated one additional time in the middle after the second verse. In the first statement of the chorus, the instrumental forces that support it (simple drum pattern, bass, electric guitar, and a synthesizer doubling the voice an octave higher) are more turned down in the mix than they are for the two subsequent statements. The other choruses are much louder and the steady drive of the guitar’s eighth notes becomes a repeated assault of distorted power chords with far greater sustaining power. The end result is that the text of the chorus is put front and center for its initial hearing--it is totally intelligible.

Its melody is restricted within the interval of a perfect fourth and though lead singer Lyova’s first statement is made at a rather subdued dynamic level, it nevertheless betrays a seething defiance underneath due to his extremely sharp enunciation. With the

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<sup>61</sup> “This world owes me nothing But it cannot get in my way I decide what I want and That decision is mine to make This world owes me nothing And it can’t ever break me while I decide what my fate will be And hold on to its strings so tight.” YouTube user Ekaterina Yuvasheva. The commenter also provided an interpretation of the verses that largely agrees with my own. On March 4, 2020 when this comment was first accessed, YouTube showed that it was a year old. By June 19, 2020, both the request asking for the translation and this post had been deleted. Both user accounts are still active. If both did not independently decide to erase their comments, this points to the possibility that either the band or its publishers, Orchard Music feel the need to censor the comment sections of their videos. Би-2, “Тема века,” YouTube, November 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dW2CSxuqoyM>.

restricted melodic range, we can imagine the hero either clinging stubbornly to the very small corner of the world left to him or withdrawing inward to a point where he can exert maximum control. In other words, he has either been backed into a corner, or he has sought this corner as a place of refuge, a place where he only has to deal with what is directly before him. The insistently repetitive melodic gesture of the chorus (the first eight bars are shown in Example 4.1 below) also offers a sonic metaphor for these two dual aspects of control—one from without, the other from within.

**Example 4.1. Chorus melody, “Theme of the Century,” as sung by Lyova Bi-2**



The sudden and explosive second chorus is an emphatic gesture that reads as an act of even greater defiance following the artificial degradation of Lyova’s voice through digital sound processing during the two verses that sound in the interim. Though he stretches the limits of his melodic range during the verses to a minor sixth, a sinister and alien presence manifested by the digital processing erodes the integrity and autonomy of his voice, threatening its total atomization. Despite this, his text is still clearly intelligible and the volume of the surrounding sparse texture (drums and bass with a descant synthesizer countermelody appearing in the second half of the verse) is reduced back down to the same mixing level of the opening chorus. The second and third verses

receive the same musical treatment, indicating once again that new lyrical content is meant to be heard and understood clearly.

Though the texts for verses one and two are not as straightforward as the one for the chorus, they are not impenetrable. The first begins with a variation on the theme of the chorus and requires little deliberation: “The theme of the century has been invariable—that it’s not the individual, but a system that rules.”<sup>62</sup> The next phrase of the verse requires some unpacking: “We either maintain a deafening silence, or we Homerically cry, pretending that we cannot change.”<sup>63</sup> In the tragedies of Homer, the fates of individuals are inextricably tied to the capricious wills of the gods of Greek mythology. Therefore, to “Homerically cry” might be the outward resignation to the notion that fate is completely beyond an individual’s control. The band wants the listener to consider otherwise, to make the tougher, braver choice of taking full responsibility for not only their personal destinies, but the destiny of society as well. The addition of the new pronoun “we” comes with a parallel suggestion that collections of individuals have the added power to shape society and the government.

The second half of verse one contains a complex mixture of allusion and double meaning that offers a bitter critique of contemporary patriotic culture, beginning with, “And rusty clips/ties that bind appear on t-shirts.”<sup>64</sup> The word *skrepy*, meaning clamps or braces, or figuratively speaking, the ties or bonds that hold a people together, is

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<sup>62</sup> “Тема века; Всегда неизменна; Что нет человека; А правит система.”

<sup>63</sup> “Мы громко молчим; Гомерически плачем; И делаем вид; Что не можем иначе.”

<sup>64</sup> “А ржавые скрепы; Проступают на майках.”

phonetically similar to the word for clips, *skrepki*. So on the one hand, the first phrase could be restated as “And worn out values (slogans) appear on t-shirts,” while on the other hand, it could read “And rusty clips/ties appear on t-shirts.” The orange color of rust seems like a conspicuous allusion to one of the two colors found on the St. George ribbons (black is the other) that so many wear to patriotic celebrations in Russia today, an anachronistic reference to the tsarist military that the Russian state has aggressively appropriated for contemporary patriotic remembrance. Whether the line refers to rust-colored ribbons, the rusty clips that fasten them to t-shirts, or time-worn nationalistic slogans, a negative connotation with patriotic display emerges.

The next phrase contains another double meaning: “And torn from the crypt, growling tales/bikes have reached the Reichstag.”<sup>65</sup> Because the word *baiki* means both “myths or tales” and “bikes,” this line equates the infamous exploits of the Russian nationalist biker gang, the Night Wolves, with something out of the well-known horror television series, *Tales from the Crypt*, which according to some commenters on YouTube, is also known in Russia. The Night Wolves’ symbolic reenactments of Soviet troops reaching the Reichstag to defeat Nazi foes are inextricably tied up with far-right ideologies that smack of a new strain of fascism.

The last phrase of this verse calls to mind the hangover that has followed the patriotic celebration of Crimea’s annexation, which as we have seen prominently involved the Night Wolves: “But the holiday is over and the flags have been thrown

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<sup>65</sup> “И рвутся из склепа; Рычащие байки; Дошли до Рейхстага.”

along the dusty roadsides. I believe that...<sup>66</sup> By annexing Crimea, Russia absorbed a region hobbled by corruption. The act itself drew international sanctions that triggered the exit of major corporations providing such services as credit and international calling to the region's residents. Additionally, residents face frequent power and water shortages. By 2022, it is estimated that more than thirteen billion dollars will have been spent by the Russian government in its efforts to bolster the Crimean economy. While these enormous cash infusions have made Crimea the fastest-growing economic region in Russia as of late, the numbers are misleading. Residents report that corruption remains just as commonplace as it ever was and that their standard of living has shown little to no improvement.<sup>67</sup>

The third verse (following the explosive repeat of the chorus) is an expanded critique of this wasteful enterprise. While reiterating the terror of the moment, it points to the fact that Crimea used to be Ukraine's problem—or perhaps in another double meaning, that fascism used to be a foreign problem too: “The theme of the century is

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<sup>66</sup> “Но праздник окончен; И брошены флаги; Вдоль пыльных обочин; Я верю, что...”

<sup>67</sup> For discussion of these issues and more, see the following sources: “Crimea One Year After Russia Referendum Is Isolated From World,” NBC News, March 16, 2015, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/ukraine-crisis/one-year-after-annexation-sanctions-isolate-crimea-world-n324131>; Eva Hartog, “Dreams in Isolation: Crimea 2 Years After Annexation,” *Moscow Times*, March 18, 2016, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/03/18/dreams-in-isolation-crimea-2-years-after-annexation-a52184>; Eva Hartog, “Three Years After Crimea's Annexation, Russia Is Still Celebrating,” *Moscow Times*, March 17, 2017, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/03/17/bring-out-the-balloons-russia-celebrates-crimeas-three-year-anniversary-a57457>; “Crimean Economy Named Fastest Growing in Russia,” *Moscow Times*, June 3, 2019, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/06/03/crimean-economy-named-fastest-growing-in-russia-a65851>.

becoming nightmarish. Someone else's/A foreign problem will now be ours."<sup>68</sup> The verse's last phrase undoubtedly points to the military-style couture worn by young and old alike on patriotic holidays, while reminding the listener that as they celebrate, their nation's infrastructure crumbles: "While we march (or parade) in designer helmets, paint crumbles from the facades of buildings."<sup>69</sup> Anyone who has recently walked along the streets of St. Petersburg and Moscow will have noticed that despite the intensive modernization and new developments, there are many buildings (even state-owned) from which not only the paint crumbles, but many of the facades do as well. I saw this firsthand in spring 2019 while walking the perimeters of such buildings as the Russian State Library in Moscow. Some buildings have become such a nuisance and danger to pedestrian safety that large nets and screens have been secured to their entire front facades to catch falling debris. Though this line might be a more symbolic reference to economic problems like widespread poverty, its specificity is too applicable in the literal sense to be ignored.

The second half of this verse begins with a rebuke of the homophobia that runs especially rampant in contemporary Russian society: "What's important is what's inside. When everything is under prohibition, those guilty in love are called to account, and there is a rush to hate with an exclamation point."<sup>70</sup> A ban on "propaganda that negates

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<sup>68</sup> "Тема века; Становится страшной; Чужая проблема; Теперь будет нашей."

<sup>69</sup> "Когда маршируем; В дизайнерских касках; С фасадов домов; Осыпается краска."

<sup>70</sup> "Важно то, что внутри; Если всё под запретом; Виноватых в любви; Привлекают к ответу; И спешат ненавидеть; С восклицательным знаком."



traditional family values,” otherwise referred to as a ban on “propaganda of homosexuality” was passed in January 2013.<sup>71</sup> According to the Constitutional Court’s definition, homosexual propaganda consisted of the following: “information that can cause harm to the physical or spiritual development of children and create in them the erroneous impression of social equality of traditional and nontraditional marital relations.”<sup>72</sup> In this context, verse three’s final phrase referencing the 1899 Chekhov story “The Lady with a Dog” (*Dama so sobachkoi*), reads like a charge of hypocrisy relative to traditional marital relations cleverly connected back to the events in Crimea and the Greek theme of the first verse: “And along the beaches of Tavrida walks a lady with a dog. I believe that...”<sup>73</sup>

Tavrida was the ancient Greek name for Crimea. Since the annexation, there have been calls for the name of Crimea (as well as many of its cities) to revert back to the ancient Greek, an insulting proposition to ethnic Tatars. This is an effort to completely erase Crimean Tatar heritage from the region, an ethnicity that had been subject to removal from the peninsula well into the late Stalinist period out of fear of the group’s disloyalty to the Soviet government.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> For a discussion of the entire legislative history of the law, the one-sided anti-gay debates staged on state television, and the violence exacted on homosexuals and protesters leading up to its passage, see Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, 395–418.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>73</sup> “А по пляжам Тавриды; ходит баба с собакой; Я верю, что...”

<sup>74</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Wilder House Series in Politics, History, and Culture (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 342.

Returning to the Chekhov allusion, the famous story in which a married man from Moscow falls in love with a married woman he sees walking a dog on the beach in Yalta, Crimea, provides an ironic counterpoint. This illicit affair, willfully conducted between two Russians in Crimea would nonetheless be more acceptable in Russia today than any committed relationship between same-sex partners. The hypocrisy of this condition is thus comparable to the annexation of Crimea (another kind of illicit affair), not simply the result of fate or Russian destiny, but a calculated plan executed by the Russian state.

This last verse leads to a bridge full of percolating alien electronic timbres. The sense of terror builds with the addition of dark, synthesized horn lines leading to the climax of the final chorus. The chorus is presented in its thickest texture due to these new additions and with its loudest dynamic level yet. But all of this suddenly falls away just before the uttering of the final words “*v svoikh rukakh*” (“in your hands”), leaving the idea of free will to reverberate after this emotionally charged conclusion.

Some of the comments that follow the YouTube video of one of Bi-2’s live performances of this song indicate its relevance to contemporary Russian problems. Though many of the comments are passionate, the total number of views for this most-watched of “Theme of the Century” videos was just over 737,000 as of June 2020, well below the number of views for the other videos discussed in this chapter. As one user stated, “The Theme of the Century—the name itself suggests relevance. In it, each line is a slightly camouflaged soft criticism. I really liked it. It is the viewpoint of a sober person who is looking for freedom but does not seek coups...”<sup>76</sup> Another user remarked, “It’s

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<sup>76</sup> “Тема Века - само название предполагает актуальность. В ней каждая строчка - слегка закомуфлированная мягкая критика. Мне очень понравилось. Взгляд трезвого человека,

oppositional, but how impressively! Bravo!”<sup>77</sup> One devoted fan placed Bi-2’s lyrics on the same level as the revered bard Vladimir Vysotsky, declaring, “every time there are songs with great meaning, where the victory becomes horrific. . .it is one-hundred percent relevant. . .well done guys, the Vysotsky of our time.”<sup>78</sup> Someone else found the song to be so rooted in the moment that its complex allusions to specific events might be misunderstood in the near future: “There are a few too many transparent hints about topical political events and slogans: clips, abandoned flags, Taurida, the Reichstag. The only thing missing is ‘grandfathers fought.’” This is a clear reference to the obsession of World War II remembrance constantly stoked by the Russian state. This commenter goes on to say, “I’m not against politics and sarcasm in songs, but I’m afraid in a couple of years no one will understand half the meaning. As far as designer helmets are concerned, of course, this can be interpreted for any event and for all times.”<sup>79</sup> In response to another comment lamenting the fact that people have to find a political meaning in everything,

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ищущего свободы, но не стремящегося к переворотам.” Commenter Ivan Kalinin in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, “Би-2 – Тема века LIVE: teaser концертного фильма ‘Горизонт событий’ (25/11/2017 @ Москва),” YouTube, December 26, 2017, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0ftvKe-7-g>.

<sup>77</sup> “Оппозиционно, но как впечатляюще! Bravo!” Commenter Zhora Korruptsya in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, “Би-2 - Тема века LIVE.”

<sup>78</sup> “каждый раз песни с большим смыслом, где победа становится страшной, актуально на все сто, молодцы ребята, Высоцкий нашего времени.” Commenter Valerij Titov in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, “Би-2 - Тема века LIVE.”

<sup>79</sup> “Что-то многовато прозрачных намеков на актуальные политические события и лозунги. Скрепки, брошенные флаги, Таврида, Рейхстаг. Не хватает только ‘деды воевали.’ Я не против политики и сарказма в песнях, но боюсь, через пару лет никто не поймет половины смысла. Про дизайнерские каски сильно конечно. Можно трактовать к любым событиям и на все времена.” Commenter Donkey Iaiaia in *ibid*.

the same listener wrote, "...this song has a specific political meaning, and it is in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014."<sup>80</sup> Soon after this he added, "I would roughly divide the lines of the verses in half—that which is plucked from the news of the time, and more abstract general phrases. But I can admit that I was so attuned to political thoughts by this song that I noticed the wordplay about 'Tales from the crypt' only now. Before that, I clearly imagined the 'Surgeon' and his team."<sup>81</sup> The "Surgeon" is the well-known leader of the Night Wolves biker club mentioned above and in previous chapters. The most interesting aspect of this particular comment is that on first listening, this YouTube user recognized "bikes from the crypt" before the more common usage for the word *baiki* came to mind.

Other comments show the range of reasons so many listeners find the song appealing. For one user, it was about the emotional response it inspires: "Every time it gets cooler and more emotional! It ignites the blood inside!"<sup>82</sup> Another finds the dance aesthetic present in Bi-2's form of rock appealing: "It's rock that you want to dance to..."<sup>83</sup> And yet another felt compelled to comment in all caps on the universal message of

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<sup>80</sup> "...эта песня имеет конкретный политический смысл, и именно в контексте российско-украинского конфликта 2014 года." Commenter Donkey Iaiaia in *ibid*.

<sup>81</sup> "Я бы примерно пополам поделил строчки куплетов - что выдернуто из новостей того времени, и более абстрактные общие фразы. Но могу признать, меня настолько настроила на политические мысли эта песня, что игру слов про 'Байки из склепа' я заметил только сейчас. До того однозначно представлял себе 'Хирурга' и его команду." Commenter Donkey Iaiaia in *ibid*.

<sup>82</sup> "С каждым разом всё круче и эмоциональнее! Это зажигает кровь внутри!" Commenter Lavrenteva in *ibid*.

<sup>83</sup> "Рок, под который хочется танцевать..." Commenter Mikhail Berezhko in *ibid*.

love: “SUCH A THEME!!!! YOU CAN'T TEAR YOURSELF AWAY FROM THE SONGS!! AND LOVE IS THE ONLY PASSION THAT RECOGNIZES NEITHER THE PAST NOR THE FUTURE!! THANK YOU FOR THE PASSION OF LOVE, GUYS! Go for it!!!!!!”<sup>84</sup> “Go for it” is a colloquial translation of the imperative form of the verb “*deistvovat*,” meaning, “to act.” Thus, we might read this alternatively as an entreaty to other listeners to heed the song’s call to action.

Three more comments show that listeners who either did not like Bi-2 in the past or have forgotten about them for a number of years are suddenly enthusiastic about the album this song appears on. A listener indicates that they have evidently stormed back to the center of his attention: “Vakh, tomorrow I am going to see Bi-2. I haven’t listened to them in 10 years...decided to renew! Super song!”<sup>85</sup> Judging by the following statement, Bi-2 may have won over a new convert: “I don’t have a strong love for Bi-2, but the latest album is chic.”<sup>86</sup> For one listener, life simply got in the way of his devotion:

It’s a hit! Your next hit that you want to listen to and re-listen to again and again. There were many events in the last two years of my life—a wedding, the birth of a son—and I didn't have time to follow music. I listened to your old hits and everything went in the way of work-home-family-work. The son grew up a little and there was time...it was then that I dug up a whole treasure chest of your songs for myself.

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<sup>84</sup> “ТАКАЯ ТЕМА!!!! ОТ ПЕСЕН НЕ ОТОРВАТЬСЯ !! А ЛЮБОВЬ -ЕДИНСТВЕННАЯ СТРАСТЬ , НЕ ПРИЗНАЮЩАЯ НИ ПРОШЛОГО , НИ БУДУЩЕГО!! СПАСИБО ЗА СТРАСТЬ ЛЮБВИ, РЕБЯТА! ДЕЙСТВУЙТЕ!!!!!!” Commenter Elena Upatova in *ibid*.

<sup>85</sup> “вах....завтра иду на би2....не слушал их лет 10.....решил обновить! супер песня!” Commenter Vlad Ya in *ibid*.

<sup>86</sup> “Не сильно Би-2 люблю но последний альбом шикарный.” Commenter Diman Alexeev in *ibid*.

He then listed four new songs, three of which appear on *Event Horizon*, “Pilot,” “Black Sun,” “Compromise,” and “Whisky,” admitting that “each song clung [to me] for several days.” Speaking of the song under discussion here, he said, the “‘Theme of the Century’ pretty much tore the roof off.” Betraying a bit of genre bias, he declared, “At a time when all around there is continuous rap (I cannot organically digest this rubbish, neither the music nor the vocals) your creativity is like a balm for the soul...Thank You, Bi-2! Huge thanks! I need to get to your concert.”<sup>87</sup> He either had not heard the more popular track, “It’s Time to Return Home” (*Pora vozvrashchat’sia domoi*), or it did not rank as high due to its incorporation of hip-hop elements. Bi-2’s use of rap is an important point to underline because it reaffirms their already established willingness to experiment and indicates a desire to make their work relevant to a wide range of contemporary audiences.

In one interview with Lyova and Shura about *Event Horizon*, the interviewer seemed most concerned about rock’s demise in Russia, asking, “Why aren’t strong rock groups appearing now?” Shura offered some astute observations: “Now is a different time. It is the time of hip-hop. And the niche that rock and roll used to occupy with certain protest and social themes is now occupied by hip-hop. And over the past two years, it is very good that such an alternative hip-hop appeared, let’s say non-commercial

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<sup>87</sup> “Это хит! Ваш Очередной хит, который хочется слушать и переслушивать снова и снова. У меня последние два года произошло много событий в жизни - свадьба, рождение сына, и за музыкой не успевал следить, слушал ваши старые хиты и всё шло в стиле работа-дом-семья-работа. Сын чуть подрос и появилось время...тут-то и я откопал для себя целый сундук с сокровищами ваших песен... Лётчик, Чёрное солнце, Компромисс, Виски... каждая песня цепляла на несколько дней] Тема века - вообще крышу сорвала)) Во время, когда вокруг сплошной рэп (органически не перевариваю эту дрянь, ни музыки ни голоса) ваше творчество ложится как бальзам на душу...Спасибо, Би-2! Огромное! Надо на концерт к вам попасть.]” Commenter Pyotr Morgunov in *ibid*.

– well for example, like Oxxxymiron, right?” His next statement was difficult to accurately transcribe, yet it was clear that he believed there were several other artists in Russia participating in this new hip-hop direction. It is a direction that he appears to give credit to British artists for starting, stating that they were the first to introduce “poetry and smart hip-hop.”<sup>88</sup> While this last assertion is certainly problematic, with its possible division of the world hip-hop community into an unnecessary binary – American and commercial versus European and cerebral – Shura’s awareness of the contemporary relevance of the art form is evident. This statement also shows a possible reason for the appropriation of the Bristol trip-hop sound in the track they recorded with Oxxxymiron.

Lyova answered the next question as the interviewer openly wondered whether the collaboration with Oxxxymiron was opportunistic, or in other words, whether it was a monetary calculation made in the interest of appealing to the current market.<sup>89</sup> In a lengthy response Lyova asserted that the group had nothing to prove to anyone, that they simply heard some of Oxxxymiron’s work that they liked and broached the idea of collaborating with him in order to infuse the project with some “new energy and fresh blood.” Taking into account the number of diverse collaborations across their

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<sup>88</sup> “Почему сейчас не появляются сильные рок команды? Сейчас другое время, есть время хип-хопа и ту нишу которая занимала раньше рок-н-ролл с какой-то протестные социальные темы сейчас занял хип-хоп. И за последние два года очень хорошо что появился такой альтернативный хип-хоп скажем некоммерческий, а вот например как оксимирон, да? И ещё разные артисты вот в этом направлении которое в принципе грам британских ввели в первую очередь поэзию и умный хип-хоп.” Shura Bi-2 in Prima.tv “Интервью с Би-2,” YouTube, February 27, 2018, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Qa1DHGX6bg>.

<sup>89</sup> “Совместный трек с Оксимироном. Что это? Конъюнктура?” Interviewer in Prima.tv, “Интервью с Би-2.”

discography, it seems very possible that the motivation was creative, not monetary. And on the topic of “opportunism,” Lyova said, “hand over heart, probably based on our experience, I can say that it is absolutely impossible to know in advance what a song is going to be worth.”<sup>90</sup>

The interviewer seemed worried that hip-hop would continue to dominate the popular musical landscape in Russia, asking, “In your view, how long do you think hip-hop will be around for?” In his answer, Shura said he could not make predictions, but steadfastly asserted that this was a good time for music, that it was working out well and that there was good hip-hop out there. The only caveat he made was that he wished the quality of some of the work being put out was a little higher. He noted that in this era of fast internet, anybody could record something, immediately release it, and begin to earn money from it. He added that he thought it was so cool that young people were learning about artists like Oxxxymiron from Wikipedia and through Google searches.<sup>91</sup>

Though some detractors might disagree, this interview shows the group’s leaders to be highly attuned to what is not only popular, but also meaningful in contemporary

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<sup>90</sup> “Нет, не было никаких задач абсолютно ничего никому доказывать. В данном случае по его с песней нам показалось что в развитии этой песне было бы здорово использовать чуть ещё энергию такую скажем свежего какой-то кровь. . . . А если говорить о конъюнктуре эту мы такие знаете здоровые конъюнктуру щекино так чтобы делать что-то специально и положила руку на сердце наверно основано на нашем опыте я могу сказать что заранее знать что песня стоит и невозможно абсолютно.” Lyova Bi-2 in *ibid*.

<sup>91</sup> “На ваш взгляд как долго просуществует хип-хоп? Я не могу прогнозировать. Я думаю что сейчас то хорошее время...удачно сложилось. Принципе для такой музыки хотя хотел бы чтобы многие хип-хоп исполнители звучали поинтереснее скажем более качественно. Но вот это время когда быстро интернет. Ты можешь думать все записать выложить сразу бах бах всё заработало. Я не давать их прогнозов повторюсь что появился хип-хоп который вы знаете это же круто когда исполнители как Мирона молодежь изучают с википедией и с гуглом да о чём. Этот класс.” Shura Bi-2 in *ibid*.



culture. Where some artists presume to be Russian rock purists, Bi-2, like the band Shortparis discussed above, possesses no such scruples. This results in a body of work that is perhaps relevant to a broader spectrum of today's Russian audience than the audience so-called *Russkii rok* reaches. And for this reason, Bi-2 just might have the power to influence more listeners with their newer and thought-provoking lyrical content. In the next sections I discuss their recent mildly controversial use of film to reinforce the messages of some of their texts and to provide additional layers of meaning.

### **“Whisky”**

Bi-2 has partnered with a number of directors in recent years to create music videos for their songs. Most could be classified as mildly provocative, but with the arrival of the album *Event Horizon*, they reach a new level, deploying elements of intentionally grotesque humor in the videos for the songs “Whisky” (*Viski*) and “Philosophers’ Stone” (*Filosofsky kamen’*), both directed by Igor Shmelyov. (Often his music videos for Bi-2 are credited under the name Tigor Shmelév in Roman script.) On his Instagram page Shmelyov describes his overall work as “100% Mocumentary,”<sup>92</sup> and both of the videos discussed here seem to have a similar goal.

In the 2017 video for “Whisky” the colorful stereotypes of the nineteenth-century Russian village are on display,<sup>93</sup> but they are increasingly mixed with horrifying

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<sup>92</sup> “Tigor Shmelév (@igorshmelev),” Instagram account page, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/igorshmelev/>.

<sup>93</sup> As of June 2020, this video has received over 4,443,000 views and over 2,300 comments. Би-2 and Игорь Шмелев, “Би-2 Feat. John Grant – Виски,” YouTube music video, September 7, 2017, accessed March 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J15eegjEVZk>.

imagery.<sup>94</sup> Lyova and Shura play the part of two traveling salesmen bringing their new alcoholic spirit to a remote community aptly named, “*Borshch*”<sup>95</sup> for the blood-red carnage that goes on there. As the unsuspecting salesmen enter the town gates, the presumed boss attempts to surreptitiously kick a dismembered arm out of view. As this anti-hero sings the opening verse of the song, he spells out its general argument: “My god is harsh. Fate is difficult and my prison is my hut. But progress comes by a crooked path, even to my dark and wild forest.”<sup>96</sup>

After witnessing a variety of scenes ripped from the most grotesque *balagany* imagination possible, the salesmen sit down to dinner with the villagers, realizing too late that they are about to become side dishes at a cannibalistic feast. Within the chorus is an implied rebuke of another stereotype—that Russians only have a taste for vodka: “What about in Irkutsk, and how about in Norilsk? What Russian does not drink whisky?”<sup>97</sup>

Incidentally, my informant Gleb Vildanov confirms that this taste for whisky has long

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<sup>94</sup> During some live performances these village images are substituted with the bear costume that Lyova dons—yet another stereotype of Russia that the state itself has used most recently for the 2014 Olympic Games hosted in Sochi, as well as for the 2018 FIFA World Cup. See at the 4:17 mark in Би-2, “Би-2 – Горизонт событий LIVE (концерт @ ВТБ Арена),” YouTube live concert video shot November 25, 2017 at VTB Arena, posted February 14, 2019, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://youtu.be/gCsY8PwNFv4?t=2418>.

<sup>95</sup> Borshch is the well known soup made from a base of beet root stock. In a brief description of one of the teasers the band released of the video, they referred to the work as “*borshch* horror.” See in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, “Би-2 Feat. John Grant – Виски (Teaser 2),” YouTube clip, September 5, 2017, accessed July 12, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snatPiLsxDk&fbclid=IwAR3bdgWR9vPAWjvzUmwKIUA\\_xTmUD79dMunTkieVAFigcaQ7tbHcIzZNXVo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snatPiLsxDk&fbclid=IwAR3bdgWR9vPAWjvzUmwKIUA_xTmUD79dMunTkieVAFigcaQ7tbHcIzZNXVo).

<sup>96</sup> “Мой бог суров. Сложна судьба и мой острог – моя изба. Но даже в мой дремучий лес, кривой тропой, пришёл прогресс.”

<sup>97</sup> “Что в Иркутске что в Норильске? Какой русский не пьёт виски?”

been building throughout Russia based on his personal experience (as a city dweller) and from reading articles about the provinces far from Moscow or St. Petersburg. He cites this as an example of how Russians are generally more oriented to the West than they are to Asia.<sup>98</sup> Though the whisky delivered by Lyova and Shura would under normal circumstances be considered detrimental to village life and not a sign of progress, it is clear that the village inhabitants we see in the video were already in the deepest throes of moral degradation before any whisky even touched their lips.

The video parodies idealized notions of the Russian peasantry promoted by nineteenth-century nationalist thinkers that to some extent persist today. The singer's resignation to the fate decreed by a harsh god points to a slavish acceptance of prescribed (and proscribed) doctrine, and stands as the sarcastic antithesis to the main message of the song "Theme of the Century," namely that individuals hold their destinies in their own hands. I also read an implicit parallel between the backward, resistant-to-change peasantry of old depicted in the video and the rural regions of today's Russia, in which the majority of voters support the current government. As one commenter noted on YouTube, "The moral of this fable is this: Don't go into the middle of nowhere with 'progress' or they will devour you."<sup>99</sup> Thus, Bi-2 seems to counter the antimodern stance that Kinchev (chapter 3) has increasingly adopted.

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<sup>98</sup> "Это значит, что русский народ более Западный, чем азиатский." Gleb Vildanov, WhatsApp telephone conversation with author, March 25, 2020.

<sup>99</sup> "Мораль сей басни такова - не суйся с 'прогрессом' в глухомань, ещё сожрут тебя." YouTube commenter Катя Овсий in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, "Би-2 Feat. John Grant – Виски."

It was a doubly progressive move on the part of Bi-2 to invite John Grant to sing the verses of the song. Grant, who is not only American, but is also openly gay, achieved initial acclaim for his 2010 album, *The Queen of Denmark*, a project he states helped him finally come to terms with his identity.<sup>100</sup> Grant appeared not only on the recording and video of “Whisky,” but also on parts of the Bi-2 tour that promoted the new album all over Russia and beyond. Video footage from promo interviews and live concerts shows that audiences were particularly receptive to his talents for singing in Russian. While Russian society might have a long way to go toward more widespread acceptance of homosexuals, Bi-2 appears to be not only ahead of the curve, but intentionally striving for change by showing that John Grant’s sexual orientation makes no difference to them.

### **“Philosophers’ Stone”**

Perhaps the band’s most controversial release is their music video for the song, “Philosophers’ Stone” (*Filosovsky kamen’*), which was also created in partnership with Shmelyov.<sup>101</sup> The rhetorical scheme of this song’s text is similar to “Theme of the Century” and “It’s Time to Return Home” in that its verses outline the problems and the chorus provides a glimpse of escape (at least initially).

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<sup>100</sup> Gareth Grundy, “John Grant: ‘It Was Horrifying. I Got out Just in Time,’” interview in the *Observer* – Pop and Rock, the *Guardian*, June 19, 2010, sec. Music, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/jun/20/john-grant-queen-of-denmark>.

<sup>101</sup> Since its release in early 2019, the video has received just over 3,892,000 and over 3,600 comments as of June 2020. Би-2 and Игорь Шмельёв, “Би-2 – Философский камень,” YouTube, n.d., accessed July 12, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuM\\_7FMHM98&t=200s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuM_7FMHM98&t=200s).

In the opening verse, we encounter a lonely individual (apparently someone who enjoys playing hockey) suffering from a crisis of identity while wandering through life. He wants people to know he is a deep thinker. And although he wants to be needed and hopes for more meaningful connections to others, no one seeks him out. In this verse, Bi-2 paints a picture of alienation from contemporary society that bears a resemblance to the one Viktor Tsoi and Kino depicted during the late-Soviet era.

**“Философский камень” – Verse 1**

Я каждый день замыкаюсь в скобки  
 Не все хоккей в черепной коробке  
 На пляже и в безнадежной пробке  
 Я себя нигде не чувствую своим  
 Стою курю в ледяном подъезде  
 Мой телефон никуда не ездит  
 А мне так хочется быть полезным  
 Знать что я кому-нибудь необходим

**“Philosophers’ Stone”**

I lock myself in parentheses every day.  
 Hockey is not the only thing I think about.  
 On the beach and in hopeless traffic  
 I don’t feel like myself anywhere.  
 I stand smoking at the entrance to the ice.  
 My phone never rings/vibrates anywhere,  
 And I so want to be useful,  
 To know that someone needs me.

In the first half of the chorus we hear the only truly hopeful or comforting words in the song: “I’m always happy where I can be real, where it’s possible to get lost in the crowd and I don’t have to pretend to be someone.”<sup>102</sup> The second half of the chorus offers something bleaker and more incongruous to the first half: “Let fate lead me in circles. The philosophers’ stone is cracked in half, but the fragile, suicidal moth strives desperately for the fire.”<sup>103</sup> The defiant views about destiny and fate set forth in Bi-2’s “Theme of the Century” are here replaced with a sense of resignation. Instead of offering instructions, these lines depict the fatigue of the individual in society. Despite the

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<sup>102</sup> “Я всегда испытываю счастье, Там где я могу быть настоящим, Где в толпе возможно затеряться, И не нужно кем-то притворяться.”

<sup>103</sup> “Пусть судьба ведет меня кругами. Треснул пополам философский камень, Но отчаянно к огню стремится, Хрупкий мотылек-самоубийца.”

acknowledgement that the alchemy or transformation promised by the philosophers' stone is false, many continue to place their hope in the stone's assurances. It reads as a metaphor for citizens dutifully nodding to the view of reality that constantly streams from their glowing television screens.

**“Философский камень” – Chorus**

Я всегда испытываю счастье  
Там где я могу быть настоящим  
Где в толпе возможно затеряться  
И не нужно кем-то притворяться.

Пусть судьба ведёт меня кругами  
Треснул пополам философский камень  
Но отчаянно к огню стремится  
Хрупкий мотылек-самоубийца

**“Philosophers' Stone”**

I always feel happy  
In a place where I can be real.  
In the crowd you can lose yourself  
And you don't have to pretend to be  
someone else.

Let fate lead me in circles.  
The philosopher's stone is cracked in half  
But the fragile, suicidal moth desperately  
strives toward the fire.

The second verse references specific events in post-Soviet society. The singer expresses his disappointment in the ultimate outcomes of the various “Color Revolutions” of the early 2000s which saw largely peaceful protests against fraudulent elections in Georgia (Rose Revolution, 2003), Ukraine (Orange Revolution, 2004), and Kirgizstan (Tulip Revolution, 2005). Though they were initially viewed as pivotal moments in the transition to more democratic principles in the post-Communist space, hindsight suggests that the changes brought about were less than revolutionary.<sup>104</sup> The first line of this verse clearly alludes to “colorful revolutions,” while the last line refers to the letdown that followed.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Lincoln Abraham Mitchell, *The Color Revolutions*, 1st ed.. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>105</sup> Mitchell, 11.

**“Философский камень” – Verse 2**

В пожаре красочных революций  
В потоках слов что с экранов льются

Я не нашёл никаких инструкций  
По выживанию моей души  
Когда тебя припирают к стенке  
Не так легко различать оттенки  
И представляется слишком мелким  
То что до сих пор казалось мне  
большим

**“Philosophers’ Stone”**

In the fire of colorful revolutions,  
In streams of words that flow from  
screens,  
I didn’t find any instructions  
For the survival of my spirit.  
When you’re pinned against a wall,  
It is not so easy to distinguish nuances.  
And something that until now seemed  
large to me seems too small.

The internal lines of this verse read as a critique of Russian television’s (or Russian state media’s) slanted, problematic representation of events. As more Russians find themselves “pinned against a wall” due to economic hardship or some form of political oppression, they have little mental energy remaining to separate fact from fiction in the news, much less to make sense of the subtle complexities involved in sociopolitical issues.

The musical setting is completely at odds with most of this text. Its bright, G-major tonality and the constantly syncopated dance beat that it eventually falls into suggests sentiments that are much more positive than the song’s despondent lyrics. The arrangement opens with a constant cello pizzicato that at first seems to occupy the front half of each beat since it is the only thing heard across the first eight beats of the song. Even though sustained low strings enter with Lyova’s voice shortly thereafter and change pitch on opposing downbeats at the beginning of each subsequent bar, their presence is soft and very understated, lending to the metric confusion. This lack of a more assertive downbeat from the very beginning creates an aural phenomenon that could be vaguely disconcerting to some ears (and especially bodies).

The video opens with a typical *babushka* (grandma) played by the beloved actress, Tatyana Dogileva (b. 1957), most famous for her role in the 1984 Soviet film, *The Blonde Around the Corner* (*Blondinka za uglom*). She is bundled up tightly and carries various large bags as she walks along an empty street in the snow. Before lagging behind from the fatigue that is evident in her body language and facial expressions, her feet initially fall on the pavement in time with the cello pizzicatos, adding to the confusion of whether they are downbeats or offbeats. Next we see her waiting at a *marshrutka* stop. (*Marshrutki* are small buses with fixed routes that usually operate independent of municipal governments. Many citizens regularly depend on these often overcrowded and barely regulated buses because they are usually cheaper and more convenient to their personal routes than other public transport.)

As the *babushka* is about to board, the previously non-diegetic voice of Lyova becomes diegetic, a part of the bus's small and non-reverberant sound world. The inside of the *marshrutka* is a strange mix of chapel and discotheque with stained-glass windows and a large disco ball. The entire band is inside and they freeze behind their instruments, coming to a halt at the end of the first verse at the sudden interruption of her entry. Because the sound of Lyova's voice is only made apparent to the elderly woman at this moment, she herself is momentarily startled. Before boarding, she references the famous Moscow hospital, Botkinskaya in the question, "And can I get to Botkinskaya?"<sup>106</sup> She is momentarily unsure but decides to board after getting confirmation from the driver that

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<sup>106</sup> "А я до Боткинской-то доеду?" Asked by Tatyana Dogileva's character in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, "Би-2 – Философский камень."



she is indeed on the right bus—“Just another weird day in my life” seems to be the expression on her face.

As she takes her seat, the band continues with the chorus in that peculiar hybrid non-diegetic/diegetic mode that is typical of most music videos: our ears are no longer within the cramped confines of the bus as the soundtrack switches to the studio recording and the band members most likely lip sync and perform along with a click track. In the recording, a clean electric guitar timbre performs an embellished higher-octave doubling of Lyova’s voice and the ambiguously placed pizzicato strings that opened the song give way to the synthesized drum and bass timbres that aficionados of the EDM (electronic dance music) genre most readily associate with offbeats. Inexperience with the timbres of EDM probably leaves some bodies still slightly unsure of when to bounce up and when to sink down.

Dogileva’s facial expressions in response to the band are a mixture of delight and discomfort. Many social media commenters felt that her expressive gestures fit perfectly with the action. When she takes her phone out to snap a picture of the famous group, the keyboard player, Yanik Nikolenko, gently wags his finger as if this is not permitted. When lead guitarist Andrey Zvonkov moves to a slightly more erotic pose with his guitar, Dogileva closes her eyes in embarrassment. The subtle actions throughout this scene play with notions of propriety in contemporary Russian culture, providing an interesting counterpoint to the words of the first half of the chorus that deal with what feels real or natural and what feels like pretense.

Contrary to the text and the opening metric instability, a sense of promise is ever present in a vocal melodic line that never achieves a conclusive tonic resolution. This is

due in part to the I – V – iii – IV progression that loops continuously throughout all the verses and choruses. It is further reinforced by other features of the melody. For instance, the first three lines of each verse conclude with a hopeful leap to the dominant, while the fourth line ends with a stepwise ascent to the third scale degree instead of the tonic. Avoidance of the tonic continues in the chorus where ends of lines alternate between the third and second scale degrees.

The interior of the *marshrutka* changes instantaneously at the conclusion of the chorus when the disco ball drops without warning onto a table surrounded by drooling crocodiles in military uniforms. We are now in a war room and the sound world suddenly switches back to the diegetic. The outside light appears red from the glow of battle and camouflage-patterned cloth covers the former stained-glass windows. Gunfire, alarms, and the “Ura!...Ura!” of the troops, a commonplace feature of every patriotic parade in Russia fill the background soundscape. A squat and balding general (in human form) at the head of the table knocks the disco ball to the floor and delivers the following rant to his reptilian officers:

Our strategic partners turned out to be neither partners nor comrades—they haven't done even one damn thing! And at the most crucial moment when we are surrounded by the enemy—these pterodactyls, dinosaur caterpillars, armored beetles and these other creeping bastards. Where are our new developments? Who can report back to me? What else? I can't hear you! Where is the anti-tank vermicelli? Where are the Cheburashka-kamikaze I ask you? Where is our latest iteration of the intercontinental rocket launcher, “Tanya,” which turns out to be too fat to fit into the tube, bitch?!<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> “Наши стратегические партнёры оказались совсем не партнёрами и не товарищами, ни хрена ни разу. В самый ответственный момент когда мы окружены врагом этими птеродактилями, динозаврами-гусеницами, бронированными жуками и прочими ползучим этими сволочами. Где наши новые разработки, кто мне может доложить. То ещё? Не слышу! Где вермишель противотанковая? Где чебурашки-камикадзе я вас спрашиваю? Где наша новейшая разработка межконтинентальной ракетноситель ‘Танюша,’ которая

For a brief moment the camera focuses on Dogileva as she pulls her knit cap over her face to shield herself from the terrible barrage.

The general concludes his tirade with the fearful recognition of what their presumed enemies have already accomplished: “The Jews have already landed on the sun twice!”<sup>108</sup> One viewer made a reference to one of Bi-2’s earliest hits from the film *Brother-2*, musing on an Instagram post, “It feels like Burunov [the actor playing the general] is about to lose his temper and start to sing ‘No One Writes to the Colonel’ [three laughing until crying emojis].”<sup>109</sup> Yet Bi-2 had radically departed from their earlier celebration of the sacrifice of military officers who stoically go about their thankless, violent duties. Burunov’s final utterance, much like the example of Konstantin Kinchev in the previous chapter, is exemplary of the anti-Semitism that still persists in Russia. The general’s comment parodies the ridiculous claims about the Jewish threat to world civilization met with all-too-frequently, both on the internet and in other media.

For the second verse (again, referencing “color revolutions” and television screens), the sound world returns to the non-diegetic, alternating between shots of the band performing in the disco chapel version of the bus and the general continuing a

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оказывается разжирела до такой степени, что не влезает в шахту, сука!” Shouted by the general in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, “Би-2 – Философский камень.”

<sup>108</sup> “Евреи два раза уже на солнце высаживались.” The general, in *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> “Такое чувство, что Бурунов вот-вот выйдет из себя и начнёт петь ‘Полковнику никто не пишет’ [three laughing until crying Apple emojis].” Instagram commenter mardanovalim in b2band, “Видео-трип ‘Философский камень’ [#alligator and diamond Apple emojis] 22 марта — на всех экрано-носителях мира!,” March 18, 2019, accessed March 30, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BvJFLCZnuz1/>.

muted discussion with the crocodiles in the war room, periodically incorporating hand gestures in coordination with the music.

The second verse also signals the very first entry of the drums and we finally hear strong beats on one and three to make the EDM dance beat feel totally secure and easily intelligible to moving bodies. At one point the general seems to become aware of Dogileva's presence. She gives him an uneasy wave and a smile, but he immediately disregards her and returns to his conversation with a violent gesture. Before the end of the second verse, the expense of energy has overtaken both as we see them nod off. After the general violently reawakens at the end of the verse, he pushes the long table out of the way, as the crocodiles, wearing ballet tutus (the accoutrement of an art form that is symbolic of Russian high culture) begin to dance on point for the next chorus.

Dogileva's expressions continue to exhibit a mixture of unease and cautious enthusiasm. In between anxious smiles she even makes a hand-jive gesture redolent of John Travolta and Uma Thurman's dance contest in Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film, *Pulp Fiction*, in which the brooding and violent gangster portrayed by Travolta lets himself relax to the tune of Chuck Berry's "You Never Can Tell." The scene of gruesome military figures suddenly dancing pirouettes in Bi-2's video provides a similar, unexpected moment of absurdist contrast.<sup>110</sup> The interior of the *marshrutka* undergoes yet another dramatic transformation in the second stanza of the chorus, becoming a hospital delivery room in which we see a nun with thigh-length, black vinyl boots miraculously giving birth to an albino crocodile. Dogileva's character looks on in shock and disgust.

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<sup>110</sup> "Pulp Fiction - Dancing Scene," YouTube clip posted by François-Xavier, December 15, 2008, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ik-RsDGPI5Y>.

A reprieve from the elliptical chord progression of both the chorus and verses described earlier appears only during the following bridge section that alternates between tonic and dominant harmony as the band vocally outlines the two chords on blissfully nonsensical syllables. As the band sings “da-dam-dam-dai-dam-da-dam-dai” several times, the newborn is passed from between band members, crocodiles, and the general, from one to another. After the bass player, Maksim Andrushchenko, passes it off to one of the crocodiles, he too pulls out his phone to snap a picture in a wry allusion to contemporary cultural norms (or stereotypes). Lyova takes a moment to playfully spin the baby around before handing it off to the next crocodile. Where the text of the verses and chorus supply all the upsetting reasons for social alienation, the music (especially during this bridge) parodies a kind of ecstatic resignation. To some of the band’s detractors, the pop dance aesthetic and simple (if not simplistic) chord progressions and melodies might signal crass commercialism, but as the music video demonstrates these devices were evidently deployed in the service of parody, however ambiguous.

A wordless chorus begins as the baby crocodile is offered to Dogileva. Without a moment’s hesitation she takes only the large crystal (philosophers’ stone) resting between its legs, having evidently grown weary of the scene. As she walks for what seems like an inordinately long period of time toward the front of the bus, we see that the windows now have the red crosses of an ambulance. For the final sung chorus, almost all of the video participants, minus Dogileva, dance together and sing in the cramped space of the *marshrutka*. Though the general stands rather still and continues to display angry expressions, he too mouths the words of the final chorus. In another miraculous moment,

the nun makes some rather acrobatic poses while the two doctors who delivered her baby sit exhausted on chairs.

At the end of the video, Dogileva reaches the front of the bus and we see that she is now on some kind of cosmic vehicle careening through a sea of celestial bodies. The bus driver appears to be God, yet the truth of his existence is undermined by the pulsating white neon halo over his head. It is connected to a steel rod that is in turn connected to an adjustable metal band wrapped around his forehead. After sharing an uneasy glance with the unspeaking and dispassionate deity, the *babushka* seems to have acknowledged that she has in fact died, resignedly stating, “Well, we’ll all get somewhere sometime.”<sup>112</sup>

Meanwhile, the credits for the video production staff have finished rolling and all sound stops as the screen goes to black. At this point the viewer may or may not realize that there is still a significant amount of time left on the video. If they wait a few more patient seconds, the old white-haired and bearded man playing God appears again, sitting atop clouds cut from cardboard with his fake halo. His last words echo the pessimism of the video and, much like the neon halo, they offer the possibility that God is merely a figment of (creative) imagination: “I told you through my son: ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ And then you killed each other. You proved who among you is more loved. And I can’t blame anyone, because after all I created you. I knew who I was talking to [In other words, “I knew I was dealing with capricious humans”]. But maybe I don’t really

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<sup>112</sup> “Ну что ж, все мы когда-нибудь куда-нибудь приедем.” Tatyana Dogileva’s character in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, “Би-2 – Философский камень.”

exist. Then it is clear why everything is the way it is.”<sup>113</sup> These final lingering doubts call into question not only Church doctrine, but the authority that ruling powers have claimed vis-à-vis the Church throughout history. Finally, they seem to question the state’s current relationship to Orthodoxy as well.

### **Waxing Philosophical on Social Media**

As might be expected, the video for “Philosophers’ Stone” triggered an enormous response on social media. Many simply found the “slathering crocodiles” “disgusting.”<sup>114</sup> A remark on the Instagram post that Bi-2 made to promote the song is indicative of another common reaction—that the clip ruined one of this fan’s favorite songs.<sup>115</sup> The most liked comment on YouTube (over 3,500 likes to date), made by someone with the bizarre screen-name “Comrade Stalin” (*Tovarishch Stalin*), expressed the confusion of many: “Where is the commentator who will sort everything out and explain what the hell is going on in this clip?”<sup>116</sup> Responding along similar lines were those who seemed to be willing to give the band a pass on the video’s more grotesque elements, if only someone would explain what it all meant. This type of reaction is captured by the following

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<sup>113</sup> “Я вам через сын своего передал: возлюби ближнего своего как самого себя. А вы после этого перебили друг друга. Доказали кто из вас более возлюбил. И никого не обвинить, ведь это же я создал вас. Знал кому говорил. А может быть и вправду нет меня. Тогда понятно почему всё так.” See in *ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> “Эти слюнявые крокодилы просто отвратные [Apple emoji depicting frowning, open-mouth despair].” Instagram commenter *biktimerova\_g* in *b2band*.

<sup>115</sup> “Разочаровал клип.. я ‘видела’ любимую песню иначе.” Instagram commenter *t.chernoalova* in *b2band*.

<sup>116</sup> “Где тот комментатор, который разложит всё по полочкам и объяснит, что, чёрт возьми, в этом клипе происходит?” YouTube commenter *Товарищ Сталин* in *Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, “Би-2 – Философский камень.”*

Instagram comment: “My first emotions after watching the clip are that I would like to unsee it))))).” The four ending parentheses seem to indicate that this statement was made with a large smile. Continuing, they assert, “There is meaning, of course, but to watch it is unpleasant...especially the drool of the crocodiles and child-birthing nuns...Yes, I would like an explanation from the authors of this clip.”<sup>117</sup> Perhaps to the chagrin of many, Bi-2 seems to have kept silent.

Yet many expressed full support for the video. One Instagram commenter declared, “The clip showed all the absurdity that is happening everywhere right now. The song is super.”<sup>118</sup> On YouTube, the second most liked comment (over 2,600 likes to date) was put more in the form of a humorous question: “Tell me, what is the number of this *marshrutka*?”<sup>119</sup> The exasperated question posed by “Comrade Stalin” generated a thread of 157 replies. One user’s response has received nearly 500 likes and several of its own replies:

I see this clip as epochal. The bright images are clearly not forced, but naturally floated from the authors’ subconscious. They very powerfully reflect the feeling of looming reality: with brainless crocodiles in uniform, schizophrenic military actions, a general who has gone nuts, and a nun giving birth. All this happens to the accompaniment of an unnatural dance with the words, “I always feel happy

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<sup>117</sup> “Первые эмоции после просмотра клипа- хочу это развидеть)))))) смысл конечно есть, но смотреть не приятно...особенно слюни крокодилов и роды монашки...да, хотелось бы пояснения именно от авторов этого клипа.” Instagram commenter skidanovaliudmila in b2band.

<sup>118</sup> “Клип показал весь абсурд который происходит везде сейчас. Песня супер [hand-clapping Apple emoji].” Instagram commenter yulya\_ko\_ in b2band.

<sup>119</sup> “подскажите, это какой номер маршрутки?” YouTube commenter Olga Shavrina in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, “Би-2 – Философский камень.”



where I can be real.” And behind the wheel of all the crazy reality is the author of reality, who is himself to blame. That’s cool.<sup>120</sup>

For this commenter, the video is topical, works on many levels, and connects ironically with the words in the text. Later, the same user pasted this explanation into the main comment thread with one slight addition before the final “That’s cool”: “That is of course if he (a creator) exists.”<sup>121</sup>

Coming in a close third on YouTube (over 2,200 likes to date) was a lengthy exegesis that deserves to be quoted in full:

The main hero of the clip is a grandmother with a handbag—a symbol of the most ordinary person who accepts everything that happens and does not fight with anything. It is important for her that bread is on the table and that there is stability. She gets on the bus, and this is already in fact a higher world—art, power, religion—all this is cooked in one pot.

Burunov [the general] is a symbol of totalitarian government, for which war, war and only war is important. His fellow alligators [are] ruthless predators that grab their prey, never unclenching their jaws and dragging their victims to the depths, where in fact they devour without a pang of conscience.

The nun who gives birth to an alligator shows that power and religion are always together and are one, and that aggressive predators (people) always need conscientious and morally pure beings to purge their sins [and] their conscience of bad deeds. Of course, violence breeds violence, aggression breeds aggression, and monsters breed monsters. A nun gives birth to the same future predator (even the purity of the mother will not kill the aggression already laid down at the genetic level).

The baby is passed on to everyone in turn, as if showing the bright hopes of the people for the future predator—that he will turn from a killer into a defender. But we know that this is not so. And just then Shura removes the diaper

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<sup>120</sup> “Мне видится этот клип эпохальным. Яркие образы явно не вымученные, а естественным путем выплывшие из подсознания авторов - они очень мощно отражают ощущение от нависшей действительности: с безмозглыми крокодилами в погонах, шизофреническими военными действиями, спятившим генералом и рожаящей монашкой. Все это происходит под неестественный танец со словами, ‘Я всегда испытываю счастье, там где я могу быть настоящим.’ И за рулем всей сумасшедшей действительности - автор действительности, который сам виноват. Это круто.” YouTube commenter Agape Pastrelli, in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, “Би-2 – Философский камень.”

<sup>121</sup> “Если он, конечно, есть.” YouTube commenter Agape Pastrelli. This reposting received over 80 additional likes. See in *ibid.*.

from the baby, as if showing that art will always expose the true essence of things that are hidden by white diapers (a symbol of purity and innocence). At the end, our commoner receives the child. She doesn't need much, taking only the crystal (a symbol of a bright and cloudless future), but perhaps it is the very same philosophers' stone (something that turns metals into gold or creates an elixir of life) and she leaves. On the one hand, this shows that people don't need much: just peace, stability and a simple life. On the other hand, [it shows] that people don't want to have anything in common with the power of violence (she does not take the child in her arms, but simply leaves, taking the crystal). Also, if we are talking about the transformation of metals into gold, there is the idea that in a world of violence and aggression, only money can save [you].

Then she goes along a monotonous corridor, a symbol of a cheerless and monotonous life. Sometimes crosses are seen, that is, diseases and hardship. But later there is a kaleidoscope, a symbol of the fact that life is very diverse and beautiful, and that everyone is predisposed to this beauty, from dictators to poets. But at the crossroads of power intrigues, this kaleidoscope of life bypasses ordinary people. In the end, we see God, that is, the life path of our character has terminated. In the end, a simple person suffers from what the predatory power contrived.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> “Главный герой клипа - бабушка с авоськой. Символ самого обычного человека, который принимает все что происходит и не борется ни с чем. Ей важно чтобы хлеб был на столе и стабильность. Она попадает в автобус, а это собственно мир высший уже. Искусство, власть, религия. Все это варится в одном котле. Бурунов - символ тоталитарного правительства, для которого важна война, война и только война. Его товарищи - аллигаторы. Безжалостные хищники которые хватают свою жертву, никогда не разжимают свои челюсти и утаскивают свою жертву на глубину, где, собственно без зазрений совести съедают. Монашка, которая рожает от аллигатора показывает что власть и религия всегда вместе и являются одним целым, также агрессивным хищникам (людям) всегда нужны совестливые и морально-чистые существа, чтобы очистить свои грехи, свою совесть от плохих поступков. Понятное дело, насилие порождает насилие, агрессия порождает агрессию, а чудовища порожают чудовищ. Монашка рожает такого же будущего хищника (даже чистота матери не убьет агрессию, заложенную уже на генетическом уровне). Младенец передается всем по очереди, как бы показывая, светлые надежды людей на будущего хищника, что он из убийцы превратиться в защитника, но мы то знаем что это не так, и тут как раз Шура и убирает пеленку с младенца, как бы показывая, что искусство, всегда будет обличать истинную сущность вещей, которые скрывают белые пеленки (символ чистоты и невинности). В конце ребенка получает наш обыватель. Ей многого не надо, она берет только кристалл ( символ светлого и безоблачного будущего), а возможно и тот самый философский камень (нечто, что превращает металлы в золото или же создает эликсир жизни. и уходит. С одной стороны это показывает то, что людям многого не надо, лишь мир, стабильность и простая жизнь, с другой, то что люди не хотят иметь ничего общего с властью насилия (ребенка она не берет на руки, а просто уходит, забирая кристалл). Также, если речь идет о превращений металлов в золото - идея о том, что в мире насилия и агрессии могут спасти только деньги. Далее она идет по однообразному коридору, символу унылой и однообразной жизни, иногда видны кресты, то есть болезни и невзгоды. Но позже появляется калейдоскоп,

While both of the previous comments relate the plot of the video more generally to the violence and oppression of totalitarianism and to problematic relationships between church and state, other comments tied the video more specifically to contemporary Russia. For instance,

What's not clear here? First, there is blatant *styob* ' [ironic parody] over all the bullshit (*umootsos*) [exhaust] that Oostankino plentifully pours on us, plunging the country into a state of absolute, rampant lying: all around us are enemies, we have the best weapons, we will win, well, etc. Not a word of truth has been said in recent years from Oostankino. One solid, utter lie and hatred for everyone and everything! In the end, there is an appeal from God to people who do everything exactly the opposite of what his son Jesus Christ teaches them: lie, fight, compete, instead of helping each other, and so on and so forth.<sup>123</sup>

Another person made similar observations, but took umbrage with his favorite band's depiction of members of the military as animals:

I believe the grandmother in the *marshrutka* represents the people in our country, or rather, the direction in which our people (the country) are going, and that we are brainwashed by the TV. We are going, according to Bi-2, in the direction of aggression and hostility against other countries. For example, against Ukraine (by the way, the first arrow on the map is pointed precisely at Ukraine). And our strategic partners (Belarus, Kazakhstan) do not support us in this. The new types of weapons that we so often hear about from the president's mouth on TV,

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символ того, что жизнь очень разнообразна и прекрасна и этой красоте подвержены все, от диктаторов, до поэтов. Но в перепутье властных интриг этот калейдоскоп жизни обходит обычных людей. В конце мы видим Бога, то есть жизненный путь нашего персонажа завершился, в итоге - простой человек страдает от того что там придумала хищная власть.” YouTube commenter Nikita Morozov in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, “Би-2 – Философский камень.”

<sup>123</sup> “А чё тут непонятного? Сначала откровенный стёб над всей той бредятиной, которой останкинский ‘умоотсос’ обильно поливает нас, погрузив страну уже в состояние абсолютной, повальной лжи: кругом одни враги, у нас лучшее оружие, мы всех победим, ну и т.д. Ни слова правды за последние годы из ‘Останкино’ не сказано. Одна сплошная, голимая ложь и ненависть ко всему и вся! В концовке обращение Бога к людям, которые всё делают прямо наоборот тому, чему учит их сын его Иисус Христос: лгут, воюют, конкурируют, вместо того, чтобы помогать друг другу, ну и т.д.” YouTube commenter stgetman in *ibid.*

according to Bi-2, are completely fruitless, and so on. I like such a point of view, but the truth causes antipathy, [like] how people in uniform are shown. I myself have been in the armed forces for 12 years and I cannot calmly react when we are shown as animals, even (by) my favorite group...<sup>124</sup>

It seems unlikely that Bi-2 or Smelyov would have intended to insult members of the military in general. Though Lyova Bi-2 never served in the Soviet or Russian military, he did serve in the Israeli army and knows well enough the hardships and sacrifice that come with that occupation. This viewer's comments raise the question of whether it is at all possible for artists to critique the military complex at large without insulting individual service members.

One woman's interpretation was generally consistent with much of what has been already cited, yet she reads another layer in the video, one that places the responsibility for shaping government and society in the hands of individuals:

This is my version: Grandma is going to the hospital. She gets into the *marshrutka*. There her life sweeps by. She's dying. And what happened in her life? [There was] political news about the evil surrounding world, amusing stupid shows. And everyone seems to understand that this is lawless. But after all, 'crocodiles' don't come from nowhere. No matter how much society pretended to be holy and helpless under the oppression of a few, it spawned all of its troubles. Everyone comes into contact with these troubles and shares their impressions of what is happening in the world with others. Yet in the afterlife all of this is a superfluous, unnecessary husk. Therefore, the heroine takes only the philosophers' stone with her. And then there's the light at the end of the tunnel

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<sup>124</sup> “Полагаю бабушка в маршрутке олицетворяет народ в нашей стране, а точнее в каком направлении наш народ (страна) едет и чем нам промывают мозги по телевизору. Едем мы, по замыслу Би-2, в направлении агрессии и вражды против других стран. Например, против Украины (Кстати, на карте первая стрелка направлена именно на Украину). И наши стратегические партнеры (Беларусь, Казахстан) нас в этом не поддерживают. Новые типы вооружения о которых мы так часто слышим из уст президента по телевизору, по замыслу Би-2 совершенно безуспешны и так далее. Мне нравится такая точка зрения, но правда вызывает антипатию, то как показаны люди в форме. Я сам в вооруженных силах 12 лет и не могу спокойно реагировать, когда нас показывают животными, даже любимая группа...”  
YouTube commenter Дмитрий Селивёрстов in *ibid.*

and God taking her to eternity. And whatever the end is, that end is waiting for everyone. “We’ll all get somewhere sometime.”<sup>125</sup>

The pointed critique that she reads in the video is directed at every member of Russian society for allowing the state to continue on its path for so long. She references a recurring theme in Russia’s autocratic history—the pretense of saintly naiveté and helplessness in the face of conniving, corrupt, and exploitative leaders. This interpretation echoes the main idea in “Theme of the Century”: individuals have the power and responsibility to make a better world.

Another commenter on the thread started by *Tovarishch Stalin* made the joke, “This is Bi-2 after they changed their (drug) dealer.”<sup>126</sup> Several others wrote the video off in similar terms as a wild, drug-induced dream. One viewer, following this theme, noted a similarity to the work of the internationally popular German band, Rammstein, musing, “Well, it appears they purchased their trip from the same dealer as Rammstein.”<sup>127</sup> Those familiar with Rammstein’s industrial, goth metal aesthetic might find this perplexing, yet

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<sup>125</sup> “Мой вариант: Бабушка собирается в больницу. Садится в маршрутку. Там проносится ее жизнь. Она умирает. А что было в жизни? Политические новости о злом окружающем мире, развлекательные глупые шоу. И все, вроде, понимают, что это беспредел. Но ведь ‘крокодилы’ не берутся из ниоткуда. Как бы общество ни притворялось святым и беспомощным под гнетом немногих, это оно породило все свои беды. Каждый с этими бедами соприкасается, делится с другими впечатлениями о происходящем в мире. Только на том свете все это лишняя ненужная шелуха. Поэтому героиня берет с собой только философский камень. А дальше свет в конце туннеля и бог, везущий в бесконечность. И что бы там ни было бы в конце, этот конец ждёт каждого. ‘Все мы когда-нибудь куда-нибудь приедем.’” YouTube commenter Мария Новичкова in *ibid.*.

<sup>126</sup> “Это Би-2 сменили дилера [Apple emoji with teeth clenched together].” YouTube commenter Sirius 22 in *ibid.*.

<sup>127</sup> “Ну походу у того же барыги что и Рамштайн закупаются.” YouTube commenter shadow darkness in *ibid.*.

comments from other users connecting the Bi-2 video specifically to Rammstein's own video for the song "*Deutschland*" reveal interesting similarities.<sup>128</sup> This comparison is telling because Rammstein enjoys a massive following in Russia that seems due in part to Russians' recognition of the band's ambiguous relationship to their own homeland, the land of Teutons and Nazis, two of Russia's most notable historical foes. Though the cited commenters do not articulate them as such, the parallels that they see with Rammstein connect to the ambiguous feelings about homeland that Bi-2 seems to also possess, as well as the relationship between church and state in general.

### **Bi-2 and Rammstein**

The Rammstein video, directed by Specter Berlin,<sup>129</sup> traverses a gruesome account of German history that is controversial for its completely pessimistic tone—it omits the events surrounding the fall of the Berlin wall and subsequent German reunification—as well as its inclusion of explicit Holocaust imagery. Throughout the video, we follow Germania, a female warrior figurehead who has historically symbolized the German people. It begins in AD 16 with Germania taking the head from an invading

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<sup>128</sup> “Кто то смотрел rammstein deutschland :)” YouTube commenter ни кто ни где. “Напомнил клип Дойтчланд у Рамштайн, подача, идея, и кстати там тоже рожают то ли монашка то ли богиня не понятно кого.” YouTube commenter 147896531 147896531. “Ах вот кем РАММSTEIN вдохновлялись, когда делали свой Deutschland)))” YouTube commenter Oleg Ivlenkov. “Чет есть сходство с рамштайн.” YouTube commenter KiresKou. “[Н]адо же))) у рамштайна щенки рождаются, а здесь крокодилычики)))” YouTube commenter Citizen Gangster. See all in *ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Rammstein and Specter Berlin, “Rammstein - Deutschland (Official Video),” YouTube, March 28, 2019, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeQM1c-XCDc>.

Roman soldier (who in the video is represented by lead singer Till Lindemann) and ends with the band taking her into the unknowns of outer space in a glass coffin.<sup>130</sup>

The work of Rammstein and Bi-2 also demonstrates a specific anxiety about the resurgence of relationships between governments and religious institutions. In “*Deutschland*” a cannibalistic dinner table scene (that also parallels Shmelyov’s “Whisky” video for Bi-2) shows that Germania’s still living body has transformed into the bratwurst and sauerkraut that Medieval monks gorge themselves on. Later, during a Nazi book burning, a monk with a pastoral staff in a dark hood and cloak embraces an SS officer, alluding to the continued controversy surrounding the Catholic church’s relationship to the Third Reich.

Two other similar, direct visual and thematic parallels to “Philosophers’ Stone” occur in Rammstein’s video during a scene in which Germania gives birth to a German shepherd pup, a breed that carries the cultural baggage of aggression (similar to the nun’s baby crocodile). Before she is put to sleep in her glass coffin, she descends from a cross made of angel’s wings and later takes her place among the band members dressed in pure, sparkling white. Each holds a shepherd pup in its arms. A fabricated white neon halo (compare with the bus driver’s/God’s halo in “Philosophers’ Stone”) hovering just above Germania’s head suggests that the holiness of this matriarch, genetically connected to an aggressive progeny, is illusory.

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<sup>130</sup> For a detailed discussion of the historical allusions found in the video see Alexandra Lloyd, “Rammstein Deutschland Video: We Got an Oxford University Professor to Explain What on Earth Is Going on,” *Metal Hammer*, March 29, 2019, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.loudersound.com/features/we-got-an-oxford-university-professor-to-explain-what-the-fcks-going-on-in-that-rammstein-video>.

My informant Svetlana Shabrova offered another layer of complexity to the religious theme associated with the nun in Bi-2's "Philosophers' Stone." As she understood it, the nun, having taken a vow of celibacy, represented an "image of the hypocritical Church" during the crocodile birthing scene. Then she stated, "People give birth to their own kind – crocodiles who are in the system, nodding to the authorities."<sup>131</sup> By stating it this way, the Church begets monstrosities and raises dutiful sycophants for the state. It is arguable that Rammstein takes a similar stance in their video.

The "*Deutschland*" video was Rammstein's first after a decade's hiatus and was released a mere six days after Bi-2's video for "Philosophers' Stone" appeared, so the similarities cannot be explained by the influence of one on the other. The parallels between the two videos point instead to shared tropes and concerns of modern society across Europe, if not worldwide.

"*Deutschland*" resembles at least four songs on Bi-2's album *Event Horizon*. In the broadest terms, all include a love of homeland problematized by a reckoning with the worst aspects of the nation's past and present (Germany in the case of Rammstein, Russia in the case of Bi-2). The correspondence of these equivocal feelings developed in Bi-2's "Black Sun," "It's Time to Return Home," "Homeland," "Whisky," and "Philosophers' Stone" is perhaps most easily illustrated by comparing the chorus of Rammstein's "*Deutschland*" with the full text of Bi-2's "Homeland" (*Rodina*).

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<sup>131</sup> "Кадр, где рожают монашка (давшая обет безбрачия) - это образ лицемерной церкви. Люди рожают себе подобных - крокодилов, которые в системе, кивают начальству." Svetlana Shabrova, second email, March 3, 2020.



“*Deutschland*” (chorus) – Rammstein

Deutschland, mein Herz in Flammen  
Will dich lieben und verdammen  
Deutschland, dein Atem kalt  
So jung, und doch so alt  
Deutschland, deine Liebe  
Ist Fluch und Segen  
Deutschland, meine Liebe  
Kann ich dir nicht geben

“*Rodina*” – Bi-2

**Verse 1**

Пристрели меня как блудного пса  
Я в своей любви готов идти до конца  
Бей меня по морде до потери лица  
Я бродяжничать устал

А за это я всего лишь прошу  
Выключить хоть ненадолго яростный шум  
Я по дивным песням соловьёв нахожу  
Сердцу близкие места

**Chorus:**

Милый дом  
В поле брошенный вагон  
Видеть не могу без слёз  
Фотографии берёз  
Ты моя  
До последнего рубля  
Невозможно запретить  
Бесплатно Родину любить

**Verse 2**

Окружённое кольцом гаражей  
Высится бетонное яйцо Фаберже  
Птица счастья постоянно требует жертв  
Ждёт заклятия Козла

“Germany”

Germany, my heart is on fire  
I want to love and condemn you  
Germany, your breath is cold  
So young, and yet so old  
Germany, your love  
Is a curse and a blessing  
Germany, my love  
I can't give you

“Homeland”

**Verse 1**

I was shot like a lecherous dog,  
But in my love I'm ready to go to the end.  
Beat me by the snout until I lose face.  
I'm tired of wandering (like I'm  
homeless).  
And for that I only ask,  
Turn off the violent noise for at least a  
while.  
In the songs of nightingales I will find  
Places close to the heart

**Chorus:**

My dear home  
In the field is an abandoned railcar.  
I cannot see without tears  
Photos of birch trees.  
You are mine  
Until the last ruble.  
It's impossible to deny,  
To love the homeland is free of charge.

**Verse 2**

Surrounded by a ring of garages  
A concrete Faberge egg rises  
The bird of happiness constantly demands  
sacrifices  
It waits for the slaughter of the Goat<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> In the bible there are numerous references to the sacrifice of a goat as a sin offering.

На челе его застыла печать  
В зарослях терновника расстелена  
кровать  
Ну за что скажи мне я пытаюсь понять  
На меня Империя зла

On its brow a seal hardens<sup>133</sup>  
In the blackthorn bushes a bed is spread  
out  
Well, what for? Tell me. I'm trying to  
understand  
[why] the Empire is mad at me?

In “Homeland” Bi-2 runs down a list of some of the evils people have been subjected to in their native land: oppression, violent noise (possibly a metaphor for the nonstop propagandizing of state media), dilapidated infrastructure (“abandoned railcars” and “rings of garages”), and economic hardship (“until the last ruble” and “the bird of happiness constantly demands sacrifices”).

One of the most interesting visual images references the famous St. Petersburg House of Fabergé, maker of ornate jeweled eggs given as gifts to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian imperial families. The concrete egg rising in the middle of a ring of garages signals a new, untouchable cadre of aristocracy made up of oligarchs and corrupt government officials. The city could be either St. Petersburg or Moscow, because rampant demolition of historical buildings to make way for the playgrounds and posh living spaces of this class has been a contentious issue in both metropolitan areas. The actress in “Philosophers’ Stone,” Tatyana Dogileva, has vehemently protested against this extreme gentrification and has even been arrested for her actions.<sup>134</sup> Association with

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<sup>133</sup> The book of Revelations (13:16-18; 14:9-11) speaks of the seal or stamp of the beast (devil) on the forehead. Those with the mark are said to be of one mind with Satan.

<sup>134</sup> Варвара Петренко, “Переулок заблокировал актрису,” Газета.ру, November 18, 2010, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2010/11/18/3440045.shtml>.

such a vocal opponent of the status quo adds another layer to Bi-2's opposition credibility.

Bi-2's listing of these problems in "Homeland" expresses resignation. Despite the sad and distressing imagery in the text, one cannot escape loving the place they call home. These feelings, as well as those expressed in "It's Time to Return Home," create an artistic tension with the prescriptions issued in songs like "Theme of the Century." Thus, across the entire album *Event Horizon* we encounter a complex range of emotions and responses that many in Russia seem to identify with.

A comment on the YouTube video<sup>135</sup> expresses one example of such emotion: "One of the most powerful songs of recent times in terms of lyrics; the melody just penetrates to the point of trembling. Bi-2 is a unique phenomenon in our country."<sup>136</sup>

Another offered very passionate words not only about the song and Bi-2 in general, but of the potential for rock to express powerful meaning:

Tears heap up in my eyes when I listen to this song. Rock is not just bass and guitar. Rock is meaning! In every song there is meaning! And Bi-2 is a masterpiece of the 21st century. It was precisely in the 21st century that they hatched :)))) In Chechnya when I served (2nd company) I listened mainly to DDT and Bi-2, who (Bi-2) had then just appeared. And I still listen. ROCK is really eternal, but only real rock, not fakes, which we are now full of.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> This video has received just over 1,200,000 views, 860 comments, 13,000 likes, and 1,000 dislikes as of June 2020. Би-2, "Би-2 – Родина (Lyric Video)," YouTube video, October 12, 2018, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWDeDX4IpQc>.

<sup>136</sup> "Одна из самых сильных песен последнего времени с точки зрения текста, а мелодия просто пробивает до дрожи. Би-2 - уникальное явление в нашей стране." YouTube commenter Natalya Kostyuchenkova in Ibid..

<sup>137</sup> "у меня слезы на глазах наворачиваются, когда слушаю эту песню... рок не просто басы и гитара. рок это смысл! в каждой песне смысл! а БИ-2 - это шедевр 21 века. именно в 21 веке они вылупились :))) в чечне когда служил (2 компания] слушал в основном ДДТ и БИ-2 , которые (БИ-2] тогда только появились ... и слушаю до сих пор... РОК реально

Perhaps even more significantly, this YouTube user, who clearly views bands along a continuum from “real” to “fake,” obviously identifies Bi-2 as a “real” rock band, despite what their strongest critics say.

The artistic tension I referenced above is further complicated by a statement Lyova Bi-2 made in a group interview and live performance on the *Nashe Radio* show, *Vozdukh*: “...such songs like ‘Homeland’ . . . were written in an absolutely ironic tone, but in character. They [the listeners] react too . . . well, so seriously to it.”<sup>138</sup> Yet he does not make it clear what the irony is directed at, nor what specifically listeners are reacting to “so seriously” in the song. The musical arrangement builds to an almost terrifying intensity, incorporating a full string section to dramatic effect. Its affective qualities cannot be ignored when discussing what the band is trying to communicate. Perhaps Lyova’s comments are directed at the more angry responses the band has received in which listeners take their words too far and believe that the band actually hates Russia. I have selected a few additional comments from a specific thread connected to the YouTube video to illustrate the kinds of anger the song incited among listeners. This sub-discussion began with a very favorable comment:

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вечен... но только настоящий рок, а не подделки, которых сейчас полно....” YouTube commenter Oleg Goryanikov in *ibid*.

<sup>138</sup> This statement begins at the 12:00 mark: “Это касается например таких песен как родина которая была нами написана абсолютно в ироническом тоне, но в характере. Вот к ней относятся черезчур, ну так серьёзно.” Lyova Bi-2 in *NasheTV*, “ВОЗДУХ - БИ-2,” YouTube, December 7, 2017, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYhRgVNLG-I&t=1208s>.

Stiv23 Ivanov: “How do they manage to see and write about what the majority of Russians cannot see!? This is such a masterpiece!!!!!!”<sup>139</sup>

Okolesin: “What does Russia have to do with it? They sing about Israel and Belarus. They are originally from Belarus and both later became Israelis. In Russia they just earn money. They are not singing about Russia.”

Alex Stepanenko: “Okolesin, They lived in Israel for a very short time, and in Australia for longer, so if that were the case, then it’s about Australia, but I personally think it is about Russia and Putin, or about Belarus and Lukashenko. Maybe I’m mistaken.”

Irina A.: @Alex Stepanenko. “Do you seriously think that emigres are interested in anything other than money? They don't even remember Russia or Belarus....More precisely, they remember when the moolah runs out.”

Alex Stepanenko: “Irina A, In what way should they remember? If you mean that they should remember it in a good way, then who told you that this is a song about the good? Can’t they remember and write songs in a cynical accent?”

Irina A.: @Alex Stepanenko. “I mean when they need to throw mud at the former Homeland for money (even if it is not the former and not the current homeland). And who needs them in Australia or in Israel? And in some of our circles, mud-sliding works well. The sincerity in this song is zero.”

Irina A.: @Alex Stepanenko. “They are not from Russia but the song is about Russia. What kind of thoughts can they possibly have on this matter?”

Alex Stepanenko: “Irina A., Mmmhmm...and where are they from if not from Russia!? By birth yes, they are not from Russia. But they live, work, [and] pay taxes in Russia. And why can’t they criticize it (Russia)? You live in a democracy, don’t you??”

Irina A.: @Alex Stepanenko. “They don’t work but earn. These are different things. I also do not think that this earning somehow oppresses the poor things. And as a person who lives in a democracy, I consider them to be hypocrites trying to hype on complex topics that do not concern them at all.”

Alex Stepanenko: “Irina A, If these topics do not concern ordinary people, then who exactly do they concern. Those who sit in the government!? They convey

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<sup>139</sup> One-hundred and eighty-nine other users liked this particular comment. “Как они умудряются видеть и писать о том, что не видят большинство россиян!? Это же шедевр!!!!!!” YouTube commenter Stiv23 Ivanov in Би-2, “Би-2 – Родина (Lyric Video).”

this in the usual way, in the usual language, to ordinary people who work and do not earn in a democratic country called Russia.”

Irina A.: @Alex Stepanenko. How can you convey what you don't know and don't feel? Listen to the song once more....they sing about love for the Homeland in spite of everything....What is their homeland and what is their love? This is the usual template for liberals.”<sup>140</sup>

This thread, as so many on social media do, then took an abrupt turn toward (willful) misunderstanding and insults, not worth quoting further.

Yet even before the personal ugliness starts, we see that Bi-2 still faces prejudice and suspicion because they were born in Belarus and lived abroad for a number of years.

There might even be some coded anti-Semitism in some of the remarks about “earning”

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<sup>140</sup> Okolesin: “Россия-то причем? Они поют об Израиле и Белоруссии. Они родом из Белоруссии и оба впоследствии стали израильянами. В России они просто зарабатывают. Они не о России поют.” Alex Stepanenko: “Okolesin, Они в Израиле очень мало прожили, в Австралии и то больше, так если то об Австралии, но мне лично кажется об России и Путине, или об Белоруссии и Лукашенко. Может быть я и ошибаюсь.” Irina A: @Alex Stepanenko. “Вы серьезно думаете что эмигрантов интересует что-нибудь кроме денег? Да они и не вспоминают Россию или Белоруссию....вернее вспоминают когда бабки заканчиваются.” Alex Stepanenko: “Irina A, Вспоминают в каком плане, если вы имеете в виду что вспоминают в хорошем плане, то кто вас сказал что это песня о хорошем, может они и вспоминают и пишут песни в циничном акценте.” Irina A: @Alex Stepanenko. “Я имею ввиду когда за бабки нужно облить грязью бывшую Родину (даже если она не бывшая и не Родина). А кому они нужны в Австралии или в Израиле? А у нас в некоторых кругах поливание грязью идет на ура. Искренности в этой песне ноль.” Irina A: @Alex Stepanenko. “Они же не из России а песня о России. Какие у них могут быть мысли по этому поводу?” Alex Stepanenko: “Irina A, мдааа, а от куда тогда они если не из России!? Родом да, не из России, но живут, работают, платят налоги в России, и почему тогда они не могут критиковать её (Россию), вы же в демократии живёте, не так ли!?” Irina A: @Alex Stepanenko. “Не работают а зарабатывают. Это разные вещи. Я так же не думаю что это зарабатывание как то угнетает бедняжек. И как человек живущий в демократии я считаю их лицемерами пытающимися хайпануть на сложных темах, которые их совсем не касаются.” Alex Stepanenko: “Irina A, Если эти темы не касаются обычных людей, то кого именно они тогда касаются, тех кто сидит в правительстве!? Они обычным путём, на обычном языке доносят это до обычных людей которые работаю, а не зарабатывают в демократичной стране под названием Россия.” Irina A: @Alex Stepanenko “Как можно донести то что не знаешь и не чувствуешь? Послушайте песню еще раз....они поют про любовь у Родине вопреки всему....какая у них Родина и какая у них любовь? Обычный шаблон для либерастов.” YouTube comment thread including commenters Okolesin, Irina A, and Alex Stepanenko in Би-2, “Би-2 – Родина (Lyric Video).”

versus “working.” Although they now live and work in Russia, they are characterized by two commenters as merely “earners” who have no reasons to speak of oppression (or presumably anything concerning Russia) in their songs. According to this line of thought, the facts surrounding their origin negate their rights to protest and their success makes them hypocrites for speaking out. Recall that some see Konstantin Kinchev negatively precisely for doing the opposite (see chapter 3).

Lyova and Shura Bi-2 were asked in a filmed interview, “How do you manage to stay outside of politics?”<sup>141</sup> Knowing the political content in their recent work, it seems the interviewer was more precisely asking, “How can you stay out of political discussions?” Shura’s eye-rolling smile seems to say, “Here we go again,” but Lyova quickly jumps in with an artful dodge, asserting that such a question is somehow not appropriate or too intimate for the “light” or “easy” interview format. Yet their reluctance might have other causes. They might feel the prejudice outlined above rather acutely and prefer to not make the situation any worse for themselves. They have also learned from the recent histories of other more vocal artists, such as veteran rocker Andrey Makarevich and younger musicians like the electronic duo IC3PEAK and the rapper Husky, that speaking out is sometimes followed by a ferocious backlash.<sup>142</sup> By letting the songs speak

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<sup>141</sup> “Как удаётся быть вне политики?” Interviewer (no name provided) in Prima.tv, “Интервью с БИ-2.”

<sup>142</sup> See the following sources: Anna Dolgov, “Rock Star Makarevich Slammed for Criticizing Russia’s Role in Ukraine,” *Moscow Times*, August 18, 2014, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/08/18/rock-star-makarevich-slammed-for-criticizing-russias-role-in-ukraine-a38443>; Anastasiya Kreslina, “Young Russian Musicians Struggle Under Government Scrutiny,” NPR.org, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/17/685973630/young-russian-musicians-struggle-under-government-scrutiny>.

for themselves, they can preserve at least partial deniability. Yet Lyova's final words on the subject in the filmed interview suggest that they would no longer be able to keep these issues out of their songs: "In any case, it is natural that the social theme somehow permeates the song because we live here. We suffer from the same problems as everyone else. Therefore, everything is relevant for us, from politics to nature. Do you understand?" And then Shura added, "Ecology," to which Lyova replied, "Ecology, yes."<sup>143</sup>

The storm of comments and cross-cultural connections made on Instagram and YouTube for Bi-2's "Philosophers' Stone" shows that, at the very least, this video provoked a significant number of people to think and talk about their government and its relationship to its people, the church, and the world at large. It is a testament to the power of pop music to induce deep engagement. And the vivid interpretations cited earlier demonstrate that Russians also find relevant expressions of the social and political phenomena of their lives in Bi-2's most recent work, regardless of the charges of vapid commercialism. Some of the strongest and most well-articulated of these charges come from my informants, so before my concluding arguments, I will discuss a few of the reactions my interlocutors have had to the "Philosophers' Stone" video, among other Bi-2 works.

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<sup>143</sup> Lyova Bi-2: "Но это, вопрос такой кулуарный. Я думаю не стоит о нем говорить в таком легком формате, в котором у нас проходит интервью. Естественно, что социальная тема она в любом случае как-то проникает в песне, потому что мы живем здесь, мы боеем теми же самыми проблемами, что и все. Поэтому для нас актуально всё - начиная с политики и заканчивая природой, понимаете?" Shura Bi-2: "Экология." Lyova Bi-2: "Экология, да." This exchange begins at the 5:25 mark in Prima.tv, "Интервью с БИ-2."



## Issues that Informants Raise and Their Interpretations

Taste and preference seemed to be the most important factors determining whether my informants would appreciate the music video Bi-2 made with Shmelyov. An exception to this tendency is notable in Gleb Vildanov's response. As I mentioned in previous chapters, Gleb prefers harder sounding rock subgenres like heavy metal. Though he is not a fan of Bi-2, he was impressed by this particular video. Most importantly, from Gleb we get a sense of Bi-2's audience reach and how they have achieved it: "This is a very interesting video! I need to think a little and watch it 20 more times [smiling Apple emoji]. I'm sorry, I'm not a fan of Bi-2, but I think they are popular. They make high-quality videos [and] songs and some of them become popular. [They don't become] hits, but people know them."<sup>144</sup> Whether a song is a hit or not seems open to interpretation. Because Gleb's own musical taste runs contrary to what is most popular in Russia, his sense of what constitutes a "hit" might be skewed. As I stated in earlier chapters, Gleb prefers hard rock and heavy metal that affects no pretensions to seriousness. According to nearly all of my informants, this type of music is not popular in Russia. Gleb even avoids *Nashe Radio*, the one station solely dedicated to rock music in Russia, because he says they always play the same old things over and over.

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<sup>144</sup> "Это очень интересное видео! Мне нужно немного подумать, посмотреть его ещё 20 раз [smiling Apple emoji] я, к сожалению, не являюсь поклонником Би 2, но, мне кажется что они популярны. Они делают качественные видео, они делают песни и часть из них становится популярными. Не хитами, но люди их знают." Gleb Vildanov, Facebook Messenger dialogue, March 5, 2020.

Gleb's next statement points to the versatility of the band: "Bi-2 can perform at rock festivals and sometimes pop festivals."<sup>145</sup> On the subject of transformation, Gleb is somewhat equivocal: "I don't think the band has changed much. It has become more professional over the years. Probably because it plays for a very wide audience, it has money and they can afford experiments, to make a good recording."<sup>146</sup> His perception of the band connects the monetary success they have achieved from wide appeal to greater professionalism and experimentation. Despite Gleb's own inclinations, this suggests that Bi-2 has been able to successfully negotiate between commercial success and artistic growth on their own terms.

Hoping to push him into a deeper discussion of the video, I said, "Isn't it wild?" and he replied, "Very much! But it's also cool!"<sup>147</sup> He wanted more time to process everything, so we returned to it a few days later. From the remainder of our conversation about the video, I got the sense that he had not taken the time to delve very deeply into it: "This video fucked my brain. I don't know how to comment on it. I don't see that the words and the video are very related, but there is a certain context of possible sadness, hopelessness."<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> "Би 2 могут выступать и на рок фестивалях и иногда на поп фестивалях." Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> "Мне кажется группа не сильно изменилась, с годами она становилась более профессиональной, возможно, из за того, что она играет для очень широкой аудитории, у нее есть деньги и они могут позволить себе эксперименты, хорошую запись." Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> "Очень! Но это и круто!" Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> "Это видео fucked my brain. Я не знаю как его комментировать. Я не вижу, что слова и видео очень связаны, но определенный контекст возможной грусти, безнадеги присутствует." Gleb Vildanov, Facebook Messenger dialogue, March 9, 2020.

In addition to the relationship between the text and the video's plot, I wanted to know whether Gleb believed some might find the video offensive. He responded, "It's possible that the final dialogue [sic] can offend someone, because the old man [uncle] with the beard [referring to God on the swinging cloud with the neon halo] says 'but maybe I don't exist.' Religious people have become very vulnerable lately."<sup>149</sup> As those who follow current events in Russia know, the protest performance called a "Punk Prayer" that the art collective Pussy Riot thrust on supplicants in Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow in 2012 led to the signing of legislation by Putin in June 2013 that criminalized those who offended religious believers.<sup>150</sup> It signaled that the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the state that Pussy Riot had been protesting had become even more intertwined.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> "Возможно финальный диалог может кого-то оскорбить, ведь дядя с бородой говорить "а может нет меня", сейчас религиозные люди стали очень ранимыми." Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> A live video of the performance is available at "Pussy Riot Gig at Christ the Savior Cathedral (Original Video)," YouTube video posted by timurnechaev77, July 2, 2010, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grEBLskpDWQ>.

<sup>152</sup> The Pussy Riot phenomenon has been discussed extensively in popular music studies. See Stephen Amico, "Digital Voices, Other Rooms: Pussy Riot's Recalcitrant (In)Corporeality," *Popular Music & Society* 39, no. 4 (October 2016): 423–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2015.1088284>; Volha Kananovich, "Progressive Artists, Political Martyrs, or Blasphemous Hussies? A Content Analysis of the Russian Media Coverage of the Pussy Riot Affair," *Popular Music & Society* 39, no. 4 (October 2016): 396–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2015.1088280>; Svitlana Kobets, "From the Tabennisi Nunnery to Pussy Riot: Female Holy Fools in Byzantium and Russia," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 60, no. 1–2 (2018): 87–107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2018.1447741>; Andrei Rogatchevski and Yngvar B. Steinholt, "Pussy Riot's Musical Precursors? The National Bolshevik Party Bands, 1994–2007," *Popular Music & Society* 39, no. 4 (October 2016): 448–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2015.1088287>; Yngvar B. Steinholt, "Kitten Heresy: Lost Contexts of Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer," *Popular Music and Society* 36, no. 1 (February 1, 2013): 120–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2012.735084>; Yngvar B. Steinholt and David-Emil Wickström, "The Pussy Riot Complex: Entering a New Stage of Academic Research into a Viral Russian Controversy," *Popular Music & Society* 39, no. 4 (October 2016): 393–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2015.1088279>.

Gleb then asserted, “The clip can generate many associations and thoughts,” and then in jest he too alluded to some kind of substance abuse: “Maybe the director is a drug addict [narcomaniac].”<sup>153</sup> In order to keep the conversation with Gleb going, I asked him what he thought about the interpretations offered by yet another YouTube user who related the video to specific events in Russia. This commenter wrote:

Well, hello. I see here that not everyone understood, but the clip is very deep. What do we see? First there is a grandmother – this is a typical Russian, and that includes you. She is waiting for the *marshrutka*, which symbolizes Russia, aspiring to the future (presumably, she is going around her district). All that happens in the *marshrutka* are events in Russia. The *babka*, as a typical citizen, does not interfere, but only observes, taking pictures on her phone of the military and the crocodiles – this is, of course, our government – meaningless decrees, fictional enemies. The crocodiles dance (presumably on bones, although they are not shown) in ballet tutus (Russian ballet is especially famous, so this once again proves that what is happening symbolizes Russia). Then we see a nun giving birth, which shows the influence of the Church on the state: it should bring good, but as a result we get a crocodile (the Antichrist?), symbolizing incipient evil. Note that Lyova even dances around with it – that is, negative things are trying to present themselves as something good. It is also worth noting that everything, even the crocodile, reaches the grandmother (a typical Russian) who is last in line. But she already knows how to distinguish true evil and takes only the last good remnant from Russia – a pure crystal, aka the philosophers’ stone. Where does she go with it? It is unclear, but it symbolizes that there is still hope for the beautiful Russia of the future.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> “Клип может порождать очень разные ассоциации и мысли. Может его режиссер - наркоман.” Gleb Vildanov, Facebook Messenger dialogue, March 9, 2020.

<sup>154</sup> “Ну, привет, я вижу здесь не все поняли, но клип очень глубокий. Что мы видим? Сначала появляется бабка - это типичный россиянин, ты в том числе. Она ждёт маршрутку, которая символизирует Россию, стремящуюся в будущее (предположительно, она ходит по окружной). Всё, что происходит в маршрутке - это события в России. Бабка, как типичный житель не вмешивается, а только наблюдает, снимает на телефон Военный и крокодилы - это, конечно, наше правительство, бессмысленные указы, выдуманные враги. Крокодилы танцуют (предположительно на костях, хотя они и не показаны) в балетных пачках (русский балет особенно известен, так что это ещё раз доказывает, что происходящее символизирует Россию). Дальше мы видим рожаящую монашку, что, показывает влияние церкви на государство: должна нести благо, но в результате мы получаем крокодиличка (антихриста?), символизирующего зарождающееся зло. Обратите внимание, что Лёва даже кружится с ним - то есть вещи отрицательные пытаются преподнести, как что-то хорошее.

I told him that this interpretation was interesting to me and asked whether he agreed with it. He responded, “Yes, indeed.”<sup>155</sup> I shared this specific comment with him because I wondered whether he too noticed a commentary on Church-state relationships in the video. After I told him that religion seemed to be one of the main themes he replied, “Not quite the main one, everything ends with it [religion], but it all begins with everyday life: new buildings, a grandmother who goes to the hospital. It’s all mixed up.”<sup>156</sup>

Near the end of our exchanges about Bi-2’s video, I asked Gleb a related personal question about why he developed such an interest in Judaism when so many others have been turning or returning to Orthodoxy. His response points to the general problem of anti-Semitism in Russia that the video brings up when the general absurdly cries out, “The Jews have already landed on the sun twice!” yet it also offers hope that minds can be changed: “In short, I used to be an anti-Semite. I thought that all the troubles were the fault of the Jews, but when I figured it all out, it turned out that I was wrong and the Jews

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Стоит также отметить, что всё, даже крокодильчик доходит до бабки (типичного россиянина) в последнюю очередь. Но она уже умеет отличать истинное зло и берёт только последнее хорошее оставшееся от России - чистый кристалл aka философский камень. Куда она уходит с ним? Непонятно, но это символизирует то, что есть ещё надежда на прекрасную Россию будущего.” YouTube commenter Аня Корытник in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, “Би-2 – Философский камень.”

<sup>155</sup> Author: “Я думаю, что этот комментарий является самым интересным. Ты согласен с этим?” Gleb: “Да, так и есть.” Author and Gleb Vildanov, Facebook Messenger dialogue, March 9, 2020.

<sup>156</sup> “Не совсем главной, ей все заканчивается, а начинается все с быта: новостройки, бабушка, которая едет в больницу. Тут все понамешано.” Gleb Vildanov, *ibid*.

were not to blame. When I investigated it, I really liked their religion. That's how it is, in short. Briefly.”<sup>157</sup>

Gleb may have some way to go before he is able to relinquish other prejudices, however. While staying with him and his family in St. Petersburg, he and I conversed sometimes late into the night about both Russia's and America's problems. When I first brought up race relations in the United States as a fundamental issue affecting nearly everything, he opined that African Americans were mostly to blame. To his credit, he patiently listened to my counter arguments and acknowledged that he had not learned about some of the forms of prejudice and disadvantages that African Americans face in the U.S. During our latest text dialogue I lightly teased him, asking if the film *Brother-2* had informed his understanding of African Americans. He responded with, “Yes! Therefore, I am afraid to go to America! ☺”<sup>158</sup> Though I know his reply was in jest, I still wonder whether there was some grain of truth behind it and cannot help wondering how many other Russians had been negatively influenced by the film's portrayal of African Americans specifically and all Americans in general.

### **Bi-2's Status as Rockers and Russians**

Two of my other informants had little to say about Bi-2's “Philosophers' Stone” because their dislike of certain genres was so entrenched. Alexander Petrov was rather stingy in his initial response: “I didn't like them before, and now I won't even watch

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<sup>157</sup> “Если в кратце, то раньше я был антисемитом, и думал что во всех бедах виноваты евреи, а когда во всем разобрался, оказалось что я был не прав и евреи не виноваты. Когда я разобрался мне очень понравилась их религия. Это так, в кратце. Кратко.” Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> “Да! Поэтому я боюсь ехать в Америку! :)” Ibid.

them. [They're] not interesting.” And then, going against the grain of those who do not even consider Bi-2 to be rock, he declared, “Concerning popularity, rock in general is less popular now than it was in the year 2000. Bi-2 had their main hits in 2000-2001. I don't know what they did after that.”<sup>159</sup> A report of their 2004 concerts in St. Petersburg by music critic Kapitolina Delovaya shows that rock was already on the wane then:

The second presentation (the first one took place a fortnight ago at Olimpiyskiy, the Moscow sports complex) of the new Bi-2 album, “Foreign Cars” took place at the end of last week, this time in the Northern capital. And to put it bluntly, it went symptomatically: to the twelve-thousand-seat hall of the Ice Sports Palace for the rumbling rock driving tandem – the solo act Bi-2, coupled with a warm-up set of the Baltic heroes “Brainstorm” – there came, well, something like three thousand fans. “Akh, rockers now play in the houses of culture, but once there was such a trend with stadiums!” – chuckled some kind of near-show-biz do-gooder back stage, and thereby expressed the still prevailing tendency: it has nothing to do with “Bi-2” and “Brainstorm” here, but with a tough change, you understand, of mental music priorities. In other words, rock headliners don't attract [stadium-size audiences], even when everything is done on the level.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> “Я их и раньше недолюбивал, а сейчас даже смотреть не буду. Не интересно. Насчёт популярности, рок в целом сейчас менее популярен, чем был в двухтысячные. У Би-2 главные хиты были в 2000-2001 году. Чем они занимались после этого, мне неизвестно.” Alexander Petrov, VKontakte dialogue, March 3, 2020.

<sup>160</sup> “Презентация номер два (первая случилась с полмесяца назад в «Олимпийском») новой «Би-2»-шной пластинки «Иномарки» имела место в конце прошлой недели, на сей раз - в Северной столице. И прошла, говоря без обиняков, симптоматично: в 12-тысячный зал Ледового дворца спорта на грохочущий рок драйвовый tandem - сольник «Би-2» вкупе с разогревающим сетом прибалтийских героев ‘Brainstorm’ -- пришло ну эдак тысячи три фанатеющих. «Эх, рокеры, играйте уж в домах культуры, раз со стадионами такой трендец!» - хмыкнул под сценой какой-то околошоу-бизовый доброхот и выразил тем самым все еще довлеющую тенденцию: не в «Би-2» тут с «Brainstorm» дело-то, а в жесткой смене, понимаешь, ментальных музприоритетов. Иными словами, рок-хэдлайнеры не собирают, даже тогда, когда все сделано на уровне.” See in Капитолина Деловая, “Рок-невроз,” April 28, 2004, <https://www.mk.ru/editions/daily/article/2004/04/28/113954-roknevroz.html>; this article was republished in a collection of the music critic Kapitolina Delovaya's articles. See Капитолина Деловая, “Рок-невроз: ‘Би-2’ проверили на себе смену приоритетов,” in *“Мегахиты”: Музыка нового времени* (Москва: КРПА Олимп, 2006), 193.

Alexander's dislike of Bi-2 followed the peculiarly Russian phenomenon that disparages Russian language acts who show too much Western influence, as if native groups need to pass a sort of purity test before gaining acceptance. Not speaking about Bi-2 specifically, but about foreign influenced groups in general, Alexander declared, "the music quality is low. Frequently they blindly repeat foreign performers, sometimes they even directly steal music. Why listen to a fake if there is an original?"<sup>161</sup> Alexander also lumped the group, Shortparis, discussed in chapter 3, together with these kinds of foreign-influenced groups. Yet aside from the dance beats and heavy use of electronic timbres, Bi-2 and Shortparis have very little in common.

Delovaya also asked the leaders of Bi-2 in the 2004 interview what they thought was happening at the time with rock music in Russia. It is unclear which musician responded to the question, but the answer suggests a cyclical pattern: "It's fucked. It reminds us of 1995 when we were looking at Russia from Australia, and there were only two rock bands who were being played and featured anywhere, Agatha Christie and DDT. And there was a total dominance of pop music. In Russia, this apparently happens from time to time. In 2000 there was a rise of rock and roll; now it's a different story."<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> "Качество музыки низкое. Зачастую слепо повторяют иностранных исполнителей, местами даже прямо крадут музыку. Зачем слушать подделку, если есть оригинал?" Alexander Petrov, VKontakte dialogue, March 5, 2020.

<sup>162</sup> "Жопа. Это напоминает девяносто пятый год, когда мы смотрели сюда из Австралии, а тут наблюдалось всего две рок-группы, которых где-то крутили и показывали... 'Агата Кристи' да ДДТ.'" И полное засилье попсы. В России так, видимо, временами происходит - в двухтысячном был подъем рок-н-ролла, сейчас другая история." Bi-2, qtd. in "Деловая, "Рок-невроз"; See also Деловая, "Рок-невроз: 'Би-2' проверили на себе смену приоритетов," 194.



The 2000 resurgence they speak of might be due to a rise in patriotic sentiment associated with Russian rock acts not only in Alexey Balabanov's film, *Brother-2* (2000), but also in the first *Brother* (1997).<sup>163</sup> Though the first film featured late-Soviet rock and the second film featured more contemporary rock acts, both included an obvious musical plot of rock versus pop that paralleled the main narrative of native versus foreign, self-sufficiency versus exploitative and violent greed. It was entirely in keeping with the times (the late 1990s), in which a backlash against the massive influx of Western culture that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union occurred. Pop music at that time thus became associated with the most extreme examples of empty and banal culture inherited from the West.

Since Alexander's attitude toward Bi-2 taps into similar antipathies toward foreign elements, it might be surprising to learn that Alexander's listening tastes are perhaps the most eclectic of all my informants. Despite his dislike of Russian music that bears a foreign influence, he very enthusiastically listens to a host of foreign styles and groups. During a chess game in the Petrogradskaya pub, Bar Leningrad, he kept making faces about the music that some of the other patrons requested the bartender to stream. After telling me he adored Ella Fitzgerald, I decided to test the waters with American jazz of the instrumental variety. I handed him my headphones and had him listen to The Jazz Messengers' 1958 recording of Bobby Timmons's "Moanin'," and after about half a minute of silent and still listening (about long enough for the groove to kick in with the

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<sup>163</sup> For a recent discussion of the use of rock in Russian film up to the appearance of Balabanov's first *Brother*, see Ira Österberg, "What Is That Song?: Aleksej Balabanov's *Brother* and Rock as Film Music in Russian Cinema" (Doctoral diss., University of Helsinki, 2018), accessed July 13, 2020, <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/234141>.

entrance of the drums) his eyes lit up and he expressed heartfelt thanks for sharing it with him. Before he said much else, he finished listening to the entire nine-and-a-half-minute recording.

Alexander offered up a couple more thoughts about Bi-2, stating, they “are based in Australia, they record there.” When I reminded him that they moved from Australia two decades ago, he replied, “They didn’t quite move. They record in Melbourne and London.” And then quoting Lenin, “‘They are terribly far from the people,’ in general. Alisa is closer. From Alisa, I like the ‘E-95 Highway,’ ‘Rain,’ and ‘My Generation.’ [Their] later things get worse.”<sup>164</sup> Knowing that Alexander’s testimony in the previous chapter vehemently denounces the latest work of Alisa’s Konstantin Kinchev as a deleterious form of nationalism, his feelings about conspicuous foreign influence becomes all the more ironic.

Alexander’s antipathy toward foreign influence is something plenty of his countrymen do not share—at least for the time being. According to his notions of authenticity, foreign influence destroys originality. But what musical practices of any tradition, past or present, art or popular, completely eschew imitation or even outright theft? Bi-2 seems unconcerned about such perceptions. In their 2009 song “Bowie” from the album *Amusement Park (Lunapark)*, they wear at least the influence of David Bowie on their sleeves. The unapologetic dance aesthetic, electronic timbres, and an instrumental bridge straight out of prog rock are a sonic homage to the British pop rock

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<sup>164</sup> “Би-2 базируются в Австралии, записываются там... Не совсем переехали, записываются в Мельбурне и Лондоне. “Страшно далеки они от народа,” в общем. Алиса ближе. Из Алисы мне нравится Трасса Е95, Дождь, Моё поколение. Более поздние вещи чем дальше, тем хуже.” Alexander Petrov, VKontakte dialogue, March 5, 2020.

icon and the lyrics from the chorus seem to mock anyone who denies the attraction and escape that Bowie's music offers:

**“Bowie” – Bi-2 – Chorus**

Ты веришь в эти песни	You believe in these songs
Средство от депрессий	A remedy for depression
Напудренные головы	Powdered heads
Ты любишь David Bowie	You like David Bowie.
Страницы дневника	Pages from a diary
Лолиты на плакатах	Lolitas on posters
Застенчивые, голые	Shy, naked
Ты любишь David Bowie	You like David Bowie.

The video for the song was shot live in the Moscow club, B1 Maximum, and between segments of the stage performance and shots of the youthful bouncing audience, members of the band even appear in David Bowie masks backstage.<sup>165</sup>

When the duo of Lyova and Shura Bi-2 were asked about the concept behind this album, they responded in a tag-team manner:

There's a lot of stuff... We wanted to do three-quarter waltzes, so we did... It may not be the most innovative record in the way it sounds, but it's the most correct one... And Bi-2 has always been a very eclectic band. Here it became possible to record live a huge number of instruments (violin, wind, bagpipes, tambourines)... We wanted to record a live Hammond from 1945 (when it was actually invented) and we recorded it. And we even recorded an entire ensemble of *balalaikas* – “White Day.” In General, what we could not afford before, we did on this record.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Би-2 and Дмитрий Махов, “Би-2 - Bowie (2009),” filmed at Moscow's Club B1 Maximum, YouTube, 2009, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROkkEGKmy9w>.

<sup>166</sup> “Там много всего... Хотелось нам сделать трехчетвертные вальсы - сделали... Она, может, и не самая новаторская пластинка по звуку, но самая правильная... А «Би-2» всегда была очень эклектичной группой. Здесь же появилась возможность записать вживую огромное количество инструментов (скрипичные, духовые, волынки, бубны)... Захотели записать живой хаммонд сорок пятого года (когда его, собственно, и изобрели) - записали, целый ансамбль балалаечников «Белый день» записали даже. В общем, чего не могли раньше себе позволить, то в этой пластинке и сделали.” Lyova and Shura Bi-2, qtd. in

Facts about the Hammond organ notwithstanding (it was actually invented in 1935),<sup>167</sup> this account shows that with commercial success came the financial means to creatively explore a host of styles and that the band made every effort to expand their palette. The recently deceased American country-pop crossover artist, Kenny Rogers, actually got his start playing upright bass and singing harmony in a small jazz group. In his memoirs, he offered eclecticism as an artistic strength:

One of the strengths of my eclectic musical history, perhaps dating all the way back to that day as a child when I heard gospel music pouring out of the little church in Houston, is that I never felt hamstrung by one form, even if I had been successful with it. . . . I was pretty comfortable going from a drug-culture song, “Just Dropped In,” to a country-tinged story song like “Ruby.” Having been exposed to and well versed in all kinds of music before Nashville, I saw no reason to limit the range of songs I could do after getting there.<sup>168</sup>

To be fair, Kenny Rogers never incorporated music from foreign cultural traditions (African influences vis-à-vis African American influences on the popular country genre notwithstanding), but how can any Russian rock artist claim total purity? Western popular music styles, with undeniable roots in the African American experience, penetrated Russian culture as much as they did anywhere else. By refusing to abide by these insular notions, Bi-2 avoids feeling “hamstrung” themselves and makes evolution

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Деловая, “Рок-невроз”; This interview was republished in Деловая, “Рок-невроз: ‘Би-2’ проверили на себе смену приоритетов,” 195.

<sup>167</sup> “Electronic organ,” in Willi Apel and Don Michael Randel, eds., *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 282.

<sup>168</sup> Kenny Rogers, *Luck or Something Like It: A Memoir*, Reprint edition (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2013), 163.

an intentional strategy. Evaluating them according to notions of native authenticity puts them in a double bind between artistic expansion and slavish devotion to the motherland.

Delovaya later declared that it was now “somehow moot to travel for mixing and mastering to London, to go abroad, to be pompous, to flaunt oneself with expensive studios.” She added, “After all, let’s say, in Kiev, you can make a good sound for cheap.”<sup>169</sup> The band members countered, “Each group has its own way. We like to do everything in Australia. And compare what our record sounds like to what they do, say, somewhere here. Yes, we were able to afford one of the most expensive budget records released this year in this country. And we are pleased with the result.”<sup>170</sup> Though spending that money in a foreign country might ruffle many Russian feathers, domestic economics do not seem to be Alexander’s primary concern. It seems obvious that the group either has trusted relationships with record producers in Australia or that native studios somehow do not provide exactly what they want. What is not so obvious is how the act of recording in Russia could possibly make a group somehow “closer to the people.”

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<sup>169</sup> “Сейчас ведь как-то уже неактуально ездить для сведений и мастерингов альбомов в Лондон, в заграницы, пафосничать, бравировать дорогущими студиями... Ведь и, допустим, в Киеве можно дешево, но сердито звук сделать.” Kapitolina Delovaya in Деловая, “Рок-невроз”; See also in Деловая, “Рок-невроз: ‘Би-2’ проверили на себе смену приоритетов,” 196.

<sup>170</sup> “У каждой группы свой путь. Нам нравится вот все делать в Австралии. И сравни, как звучит наша пластинка, с тем, что делают, допустим, где-то здесь. Да, мы смогли позволить себе одну из самых дорогих бюджетных записей в этом году в этой стране. И мы довольны результатом.” Би-2 in Деловая, “Рок-невроз”; See also in Деловая, “Рок-невроз: ‘Би-2’ проверили на себе смену приоритетов,” 196–97.

## Bi-2 as “Insincere” and “Pop Without Soul”

Of all my informants who viewed Bi-2’s “Philosophers’ Stone” video, Sergey Klishis had the most perfunctory response: “Well, pop music for me...there is no need to look for depth here. The clip is done well, and without spending too much. The words and images here are like on MTV. They take up airtime and retain customers ;).”<sup>171</sup>

Sergey clearly finds the work to be an entirely commercial endeavor. From his very first sentence we can see that he is disinclined to give popular culture much thought.

From Delovaya’s questions to Bi-2 in her 2004 interview with Lyova and Shura, it is apparent that she does not see them as mere pop stars. She asked them whether it was the duty of rock heroes to step forward and vocally counter the latest resurgence of pop music, to offer reasons why rock was more deserving of mass attention and love. One of the band members felt it would be uncouth for them to do so: “The only motive for a musician is to record songs and release records; to stand on barricades and organize actions with posters, saying, ‘We are against pop music’ would somehow not be very good.”<sup>172</sup> Though artists such as Konstantin Kinchev have railed against pop music, going so far as to claim it is rooted in evil (see chapter 3), Bi-2 refuses to engage in such business strategies, preferring to focus on their own developing work.

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<sup>171</sup> “Привет Шон! Звини, приболел... Ну поп музыка для меня.. тут искать глубины не приходится. Клип - дешёво и сердито, молодцы. Слова и образы здесь как на MTV, занять эфирное время и удержать клиентов;).” Sergey Klishis, VKontakte dialogue, March 4, 2020.

<sup>172</sup> “Деловая: А что же рок-герои? Они же должны этому сопротивляться, подавать поводы для массового внимания и любви? Би-2: Единственный повод для музыканта - записывать песни и выпускать пластинки, а стоять на баррикадах и устраивать акции с плакатами ‘Мы против попсы’ как-то не очень.” Kapitolina Delovaya and Bi-2 in Деловая, “Рок-невроз”; See also Деловая, “Рок-невроз: ‘Би-2’ проверили на себе смену приоритетов,” 194.

I presented my informant Sergey Chubraev with the same questions I gave everyone else. Though he provided the most thoughtful and articulate responses, negative bias against pop culture informs his dislike of nearly everything associated with Bi-2. His paragraph below could just as easily describe any commercially successful rock or pop act that projects a distinct image. It seems to discount the possibility that a group might be simultaneously tuned into trends and social issues, and not just focused on the music itself:

When viewing their videos, concert performances and photo shoots, the extremely unpleasant feeling that they just revel in and enjoy their beauty, fashion, and coolness never leaves for a second; that they treat every ruffle, every ribbon, every bauble on their ridiculous costumes with great care and meticulousness; that they carefully study and rehearse the heroic poses of world pop stars, their manners of standing on stage, dressing, cinematography, etc.<sup>173</sup>

Here Sergey faults Bi-2 for exhibiting an extreme degree of inauthenticity, implying that other more worthy artistic personas are absolutely pure and free of artifice. He seems to deny the reality that all artistic identities are constructed, subscribing to a particular brand of authenticity discourse that Allan Moore has identified as “first-person authenticity.”<sup>174</sup>

Weisethaunet and Lindberg’s “authenticity as negation” offers an even more refined category, which as they observe, “evolves as the antidote to the world in which

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<sup>173</sup> “При просмотре их клипов, концертных выступлений и фотосессий меня ни на секунду не покидает крайне неприятное ощущение, что они просто упиваются и наслаждаются своей красотой, модностью и крутизной. Что они с огромным вниманием и дотошностью относятся к каждой рюшечке, каждой ленточке, каждой фенечке на своих нелепых костюмах. Что они тщательно штудируют и репетируют героические позы мировых поп-звёзд, их манеры стоять на сцене, одеваться, сценографии и пр.” Sergey Chubraev, email, March 4, 2020.

<sup>174</sup> Allan Moore, “Authenticity as Authentication,” *Popular Music* 21, no. 2 (2002): 214.

popular music operates, the realm of the music industry.”<sup>175</sup> In a definition full of rightfully deserved scare quotes, they state, “This variant of ‘authenticity’ is the idea of artistic independence as ‘refusal’ or ‘purity.’ It defines itself against that which it thinks it is not: commerce; standardization; schmaltz; a general suppression of the darker sides of human experience,”<sup>176</sup> or in the case of Sergey’s conspicuously feminizing assessment of Bi-2’s “Philosophers’ Stone” video, “ruffles,” “ribbons,” and “baubles.”

Following Sergey’s line of thinking, Bi-2 has failed to convey a kind of integrity (or alternatively, masculinity) ostensibly represented by “unmediated” communication with the audience. Later, Sergey criticized the band’s use of pyrotechnics as “cheap show business effect,” which he actually considered to be a “typical show business product.”<sup>177</sup> He was referring to the sparks flying from Shura Bi-2’s guitar during their performance of “Theme of the Century” in Moscow’s VTB Ice Palace Arena.<sup>178</sup> He implied that Shura Bi-2’s use of a sparkler was neither “intelligent” nor “thoughtful,” but I argue for an alternative to the notions of authenticity that Sergey holds dear.

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<sup>175</sup> Hans Weisethaunet and Ulf Lindberg, “Authenticity Revisited: The Rock Critic and the Changing Real,” *Popular Music & Society* 33, no. 4 (October 2010): 472, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007761003694225>.

<sup>176</sup> Weisethaunet and Lindberg, 472.

<sup>177</sup> “Но согласитесь, Шон, что умному и мыслящему человеку не придёт в голову во время исполнения антиправительственной или оппозиционной песни вставлять в гриф гитары горящий бенгальский огонь и пафосно размахивать им на сцене. Это полная клоунада и дешёвый эффект шоу-бизнеса. Ну вот, собственно, по моему мнению, это и есть типичная продукция шоу-бизнеса.” Sergey Chubraev, email, March 4, 2020.

<sup>178</sup> The name for the 14,000 capacity venue changed to CSKA Arena in 2018. See the performance of “Theme of the Century” in Би-2 and Игорь Шмелёв, “Би-2 - Тема века LIVE: teaser концертного фильма ‘Горизонт событий’ (25/11/2017 @ Москва),” YouTube, December 26, 2017, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0ftvKe-7-g>.



As early as 1980 in the West, Weisethaunet and Lindberg note, “the tide decisively turned from ‘authentic’ rock to a postmodern pop sensibility that was to indulge in spectacular self-staging.” They note that David Bowie, one of Bi-2’s avowed influences, was partially responsible for igniting this phenomenon: “Transformed into a strategy by artists like David Bowie and Madonna, the possibility emerged of identifying a new dimension of the ‘authenticity paradigm’ focused on *play*, whose claim to truth lay precisely in the exposition of artistic identities as constructions.” They suggest that this newer form of authenticity could be called “meta-authenticity,”<sup>179</sup> or referencing Grossberg, “authentic inauthenticity.”<sup>180</sup>

Keir Keightley has also observed how the value judgements that rock purists make, both aesthetic and political, are interrelated, all geared toward preserving a hierarchy: “...rock emerges in a stratification that is accomplished through the making of distinctions, within the mainstream, between the ‘serious’ and the ‘trivial,’ the ‘oppositional’ and the ‘complicit,’ the ‘truthful’ and the ‘fraudulent,’ the ‘anti-mass’ and the ‘mass,’ the ‘authentic’ and the ‘alienated.’”<sup>181</sup> In a later discussion about notions of authenticity in rock, she adds, “Rock culture asserts its superiority over the ‘mass,’ and

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<sup>179</sup> Weisethaunet and Lindberg, “Authenticity Revisited,” 474.

<sup>180</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 224.

<sup>181</sup> Keir Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street, Cambridge Companions to Music (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 128.

this is absolutely crucial to the role it assumes for itself within contemporary societies.”<sup>182</sup>

Across the entire concert video for the *Event Horizon* album, we see a very intentionally “constructed” performance that “plays” with a host of tropes from the barbed wire of gulags to apocalyptic visions, all saturated in blacks and deep reds. The song, “Pilot” (*Lyotchik*), which the band cites as central to the sound and concept of the album is even visibly referenced in the futuristic jumpsuits members of the band wear. Konstantin Kinchev and the band Alisa, (a group Sergey supports) also deploy a variety of their own signature “show business effects” in live performances of the song “*Naebali*,” discussed in chapter 3.

Delovaya exhibited the same distaste for artists closer to the end of what we might call the “pure pop” spectrum in another question she asked Lyova and Shura in 2004. Referring to the rise in pop music’s popularity she asked, “What do you imagine is going on with people's brains?” One of them responded, “Well, on TV right now the most relevant topic is pensions,” and another added, “Pensions, Alla Pugacheva, and various amusements.” He added, “Everyday concerns after all do not anticipate any kind of breakthroughs. The people on TV constantly amuse but provide no opportunities to think about anything.” When Delovaya asked whether this depressed them, one of them asked, “Why should we be sad?” and then declared, “You have to live and write songs, and in life, anything can happen.”<sup>183</sup> Reading between the lines, it is apparent that Bi-2 believed

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<sup>182</sup> Keightley, 132.

<sup>183</sup> “Деловая: ‘А что же у людей с мозгами происходит, как вы разумеете?’ Би-2: ‘Ну вот по телевизору ведь сейчас самая актуальная тема - пенсии... Пенсии, и Алла Пугачева, и

pop music's rise at that moment was due to economic hardship, that people under this level of stress sought only mindless escape, and that the television was providing exactly that. And though some have consistently lumped the band together with the much-maligned pop culture, they clearly see themselves as rock musicians occupying a space outside of that domain.

Anna Bessanova, a thirty-two-year-old visual artist who emigrated from Novokuznetsk, Siberia to Tel Aviv, was not sour on pop music in general, but has never been enthusiastic about Bi-2. Yet her views on the group's general level of popularity mirror those of my other informants who do disparage pop: "Bi-2 is not as popular now as it was at the beginning of its career. Their work does not seem to have changed much; the quality has fallen. But I may be mistaken. I'm not a big fan of them."<sup>184</sup> Considering the eclectic nature of their discography, it is perhaps easy to understand why even the most devoted Bi-2 fans might not perceive stylistic changes—their entire style is change. And it would take a truly dedicated fan to notice that the band began to trend toward at least mild sociopolitical activism in the lyrics of an increasing number of songs over the past five to seven years.

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веселуха разная. Бытовые интересы ведь не предполагают каких-то прорывов. Людей по телевизору планомерно веселят и не дают возможности подумать о чем-то.' Деловая: 'А у вас присутствует на этот счет какая-то грусть, тоска, депрессия?' Би-2: 'А чего нам грустить-то? Надо жить и писать песни... А в жизни всякое бывает.'"' Kapitolina Delovaya and Bi-2 in "'Деловая, "Рок-невроз"; See also in Деловая, "Рок-невроз: 'Би-2' проверили на себе смену приоритетов," 194.

<sup>184</sup> "Би-2 сейчас не так популярно, как в начале своей карьеры. Творчество вроде не сильно поменялось, качество упало. Но я могу ошибаться. Я не большой их фанат." Anna Bessanova, Facebook Messenger dialogue, March 13, 2020.



integral part of the team’s output” by their second album, *Profanity Without Electricity* (*Mat bez elektrichestva*, 1999).<sup>186</sup> Receiving aggressive attacks from the mainstream media for their obscenity as well as having their large-scale performances in Moscow banned by the much reviled late mayor Yuri Luzhkov solidified their popularity.<sup>187</sup>

According to Anna, though Leningrad exhibits *popsovyi* characteristics, they have become better and better over time. I interpret this to mean that she approves of their increasingly polished sound and videos. She asserts that being *popsovyi* is not always bad and that Leningrad assimilates these traits successfully.<sup>188</sup> When I asked her exactly what it was about Bi-2’s brand of pop that was so uninteresting to her, she replied, “There is no spirit/soul,” and in reference to the song in question, “Philosophers’ Stone,” she opined, “This particular song doesn’t seem very good. It’s a *programmnoe proizvedenie*.” In this specific context I understand this to mean a “template” or “cookie-cutter work.” For clarity, I asked her to elaborate and she added, “This is a song that was written just to be. It’s not a hit. It’s not anything very interesting. It simply followed a style of music.” (This description echoes Butusov’s origin story for Nautilus Pompilius’s first version of “Goodbye, America.”) After asking whether she perceived the song as fluff material,

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D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B4\_(%D0%B3%D1%80%D1%83%D0%BF%D0%BF%D0%B0)&oldid=105778890.

<sup>186</sup> “Если на раннем этапе мат в песнях Ленинграда носил эпизодический характер, то начиная со второго альбома (*Мат без электричества*) матерные слова стали неотъемлемой частью творчества коллектива.” See in “Ленинград (группа).”

<sup>187</sup> See the section with the subheading, “2000-2002” in “Ленинград (группа).”

<sup>188</sup> “Ленинград стали лучше. Хотя и попсовее. Попсовый-это не всегда плохо. У Ленинград хорошо.” Anna Bessanova, Facebook Messenger dialogue, March 13, 2020.

composed merely to fill out the album, she replied, “In my opinion, Yes. I don't know why they even made a video for it. Apparently, the quality of their music has fallen and they are just writing something for the sake of it.”

Regarding the meaning of the text, Anna guessed, “I would say that this song is about a man who is tired of politics and confused. And there is a lot of strange information around and it is not very clear how it will all end.” And then moving on to whether there is a connection between the text and the video's imagery she asserted, “The words and images are not coordinated in my opinion. But this often happens in clips.” Then she expressed her bewilderment about the video: “I didn't understand what the clip was about. A woman goes to the hospital. And something strange is happening to her. She meets the group Bi-2 and some crocodiles.” And on the subject of whether she found it offensive, she declared, “The clip doesn't offend me, or anyone else. Although the crocodiles are very unpleasant.”

When I asked her whether she observed a political element in the video, she replied, “Yes. It's not strong, but it's there. The government are the crocodiles and the generals. There is criticism in the video, but not in the song itself.” She does interpret the song to be about someone who is tired and confused by politics, so it is unclear why Anna finds no connection between the text and visual narrative. Referring back to the low quality she perceives in the music, it seems entirely possible that a song composed from a bright, pop template, could intentionally employ banality as an ironic critique.

Scrolling through the social media commentary connected with Bi-2 and Smelyov's music video, I found the word “*styob/stiob*,” a form of absurdist humor with

origins in the Soviet period, referenced a number of times. The list of characteristics

Alexei Yurchak provides for *styob* are once again useful. He defines it as:

. . . . a peculiar form of irony that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision, or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor. It required such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob* was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two. The practitioners of *stiob* themselves refused to draw a line between these sentiments, producing an incredible combination of seriousness and irony, with no suggestive signs of whether it should be interpreted as the former or the latter, refusing the very dichotomy between the two.<sup>189</sup>

It seems obvious that the video involves absurdity of the more familiar variety that Yurchak speaks of. In other words, Bi-2's "overidentification" with the military figures in the concluding dance sequence cannot be confused with "sincere support" or even a mixture of support and ridicule. The strategy of *styob* evolved during a time when it was much more dangerous for ridicule to be unambiguous in artistic production.

The "Philosophers' Stone" example shows that the present differs from the days of Stalinism in that humorous ridicule does not need such an impenetrable cloak of political ambiguity. Though ambiguity certainly exists in this video on the level of the specific, most viewers, informants and online alike, recognize a generalized parody of the Russian state and military. But perhaps it is precisely a favorable comparison with Stalinism that the Russian government would like everyone to read in its dealings with contemporary culture, hence its indulgence of a certain range of "critical" cultural products.

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<sup>189</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 249–50.

I would like to offer a way that this particular work might indeed act as a form of *styob* connected with Bi-2's relationship to pop culture. As we have seen, Bi-2's brand of rock has long been identified with the scourge of pop by their detractors. Yet Bi-2's leaders self-identify as eclectic rock artists, unafraid to incorporate elements of other popular music genres. If we remember that many viewers interpret this song in part as a critique of the unreal image of life presented by contemporary Russian pop culture (both on television and, indirectly, by the government), then both the musical setting and the visual narrative might represent an extreme "overidentification" with pop aesthetics. Sergey Klishis's reading of both text and video as a product of MTV culture and Anna Bessanova's assessment of the work as *programmnoe proizvedenie* are related. Their judgments are symptomatic of Bi-2's intentionally ambiguous relationship to pop culture, rather than politics. In the music and video for "Philosophers' Stone," it almost seems like the band is saying, "You want to call us *popsovyi*? Ok, we'll show you *popsovyi*!"

### **Bi-2 and the Political Question**

Sergey Chubraev summed up his assessment of Bi-2's brand of political activism in a sharp and pithy statement: "For me, in the lines and clips you sent [from "Theme of the Century" and "Homeland"], everything is clear enough. I call it flirting with the people and the authorities. In their texts there is no harsh criticism, but there is a certain bitterness and frustration from the helplessness of the same 'little man' in a big city, a big country, a big system. A small cog that must obey the mechanism."<sup>190</sup> But I would like to

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<sup>190</sup> "Для меня в присланных вами строчках и клипах всё достаточно ясно. Я называю это заигрыванием с народом и властью. В их текстах нет никакой жёсткой критики, а есть некая горечь и расстройство от беспомощности всего того же «маленько человека» в



push against this negative (and obviously feminized) idea of flirtation even more. For the vaguer a text is, the richer the interpretive possibilities, and the broader its relevance becomes. Additionally, some listeners undoubtedly feel rewarded by the process of cracking the codes of cultural allusions hidden or obscured within the authors' lyrical offerings. As a result, a measure of respect develops for songwriters who can do the delicate dance between the obvious and obscure that makes interpretation pleasurable.

I also asked Sergey to help me understand how the authors of these politically charged songs could have possibly evaded a government backlash, much less gained admittance to the Kremlin Palace. More specifically, I asked him whether he perceived the band to be what some might call representative of the "permitted" or "controlled opposition," merely one of many tools the state might use to create the "illusion of free expression."

In his comments below, Sergey addressed the specific social and political allusions inherent in the texts more directly. And though Sergey acknowledges the band members' concern for the future of their homeland, he continues to equate their artistic decisions with motivations that are commercially opportunistic:

At the same time, I do not say at all that they are not concerned about the fate of Russia and the course of its ruling power and regime. The question is how this is served. Do not get rid of the feeling that this is a measured and calculated step, like all that they do: "Dudes, I came up with something. Let's add something about the 'Reichstag' and the 'Homeland' to the text! But carefully, cautiously. And let's shoot the video right on Red Square! It'll be cool. But without provocation." Etc.

In short, I don't believe them, Shaun, not a gram of it. Therefore, they are a "useful" group for power. There they meow something with insinuating voices

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большом городе, большой стране, большой системе. Маленький винтик, который должен подчиняться механизму." Sergey Chubraev, email, March 4, 2020.

at their fashion show on the stage of the Kremlin Palace and wonderfully! And therefore, your definition fits perfectly with the status of these glorious and benevolent guys – “controlled” and “authorized opposition.” And yes, of course, they create the illusion of free expression. And let each one draw his own conclusions.<sup>191</sup>

I continue to find it impossible to separate the judgments Sergey makes about the band’s creativity, professionalism, sincerity, and authenticity from his charges of mere “flirtation” with power. My informant Maria Udovydchenko similarly describes the band as “friendly opposition,”<sup>192</sup> yet she tends to avoid the colorful language Sergey uses. She finds that Bi-2’s performance in the Kremlin Palace “speaks, rather, not about the proximity to power, but to the fact that the government does not see any threat in the work of these performers.” She concluded her comments relative to the Palace by asserting that “harmless pop stars perform in the Kremlin.”<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> “При этом я совсем не утверждаю, что они не обеспокоены судьбой России и курсом её правящей власти и режимом. Вопрос в том, как это подаётся. Не избавиться от чувства, что это дозированный и расчётливый шаг, как и всё то, что они делают. «Чуваки, я придумал, а давайте в текст добавим про «Рейхстаг» и «Родину»! Но осторожно, аккуратно. А давайте клип снимем прямо на Красной площади! Это будет круто. Но без провокации». И так далее. Короче, не верю я им, Шон, ни на грамм. Поэтому они «удобная» группа для власти. Мяукают там чего-то вкрадчивыми голосами на показе своих мод на сцене Кремлёвского дворца и замечательно! И поэтому Ваше определение отлично подходит под статус этих славных и добрых ребят- "контролируемая" и "разрешённая оппозиция". И да, конечно, они создают иллюзию свободного самовыражения. А выводы пускай делает сам каждый свои.” Sergey Chubraev, email, March 4, 2020.

<sup>192</sup> “Это ‘дружественная оппозиция,’ да.” Maria Udovydchenko, Facebook Messenger dialogue, March 25, 2020.

<sup>193</sup> “Выступление в кремлевском дворце говорит, скорее не о близости к власти. а то что власть не видит в творчестве этих исполнителей какой-то угрозы, В Кремлевском выступают безобидные поп-звезды. О качестве музыки в Кремлевском мне сложно судить, но это то, что называется массовая поп культура. Поэтому был такой комментарий под видео -- группа БИ 2 действительно отличается от творчества Егора Крида, Филиппа Киркорова и других российских поп-звезд. Это, безусловно, более глубокая и философская музыка.” Ibid.

Maria also pointed out some information related to the actor Sergey Burunov, who played the unhinged general in the “Philosophers’ Stone” video, that led me to find more information that complicates Bi-2’s relationship to the state. Maria stated that Burunov most famously plays a similar role as a police officer with an “unstable psyche” in a very popular comedy-detective serial called *The Policeman from Rublevka* (*Politseiskii s Rublovki*). Many of his television shows are produced or at least broadcast on the TNT channel (no relation to the American company, Turner). The television producer Peter Pomerantsev worked for TNT for a time and he described life in Moscow in terms of the same world that TNT curates for its viewers—a completely synthetic world that copies all of the trappings of a Western democracy, yet somehow feels quite different:

We live in a world designed by the political technologists. A fragile reality show set that can seem, if you squint, almost genuine. We move from gym to open plan office to coffee bar to French movie to wine bar to holidays in Turkey, and it could seem better than Paris: better because it’s newer and more precious. And we can read *SNOB* or watch the reality shows on TNT, and it’s a simulacrum of the whole democratic thing. It feels almost real. But at the same time the other, real Russia rumbles on like a distant ringing in the ears. And it can grab us and pull us in at any moment.<sup>194</sup>

Pomerantsev describes the network as trying to find something edgy, but not too much so: “This was the paradox: TNT wanted to find the new heroes. Capture (and advertise to) the new (lucrative) middle class. But TNT couldn’t touch politics. And at one point the two meet. Crash. And so all the time I’m waiting for the call: ‘We can’t show this,

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<sup>194</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), 86.

Sorry, Piiiitrrr, we can't show this.'"<sup>195</sup> The use of Burunov, one of TNT's biggest stars, in the music video for "Philosophers' Stone," arguably connects Bi-2 with the same "simulacrum" that Pomerantsev describes. Alternatively, perhaps the video presented Burunov with a rare opportunity to step away from the banal fare that he is most readily associated with. Maria sees the general's rant as an obvious moment of irony related to the government, but in her opinion this irony is very mild.

When I asked whether she believed it possible for Bi-2 to have a special arrangement or mutually beneficial relationship with the state, Maria said, "It is difficult to say that Bi-2 is cooperating with the government, but it is definitely not the opposition. If there is something there, everything is within the acceptable limits. For example, in this clip, all references to the current situation are quite veiled and this is not a direct criticism, as in Shortparis."<sup>196</sup>

Like my informant Anna Bessanova, Maria cites the band Shortparis as an example of a group that is really testing the limits politically. Maria claims that Shortparis is the only Russian band she listens to and that she has been to several of their concerts. Regarding the "Philosophers' Stone" video, she asserts, "If the Russian flag had been hanging behind the general's back in the clip, this video would not have come out.

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<sup>195</sup> Pomerantsev, 88.

<sup>196</sup> "Сложно сказать, что БИ2 сотрудничают с властью, но это точно не оппозиция. Если что-то там и есть, все в нормах допустимого. Например в этом клипе все отсылки к сегодняшней ситуации довольно завуалированы и это не прямая критика, как у Shortparis." Maria Udovydchenko, Facebook Messenger dialogue, March 25, 2020.

As it is, there is room for interpretation.”<sup>197</sup> She was alluding to the presence of the Russian flag at the end of Shortparis’s anxiety inducing video for the song, “Scary” (*Strashno*), whose text presents the paradox of an ostensibly honest nation in which citizens are nevertheless filled with fear.<sup>198</sup> Yet apparently even this song and its accompanying video were sufficiently vague, for Shortparis recently performed a live stage version of it during an appearance on the television program, *Nightly Urgant* (*Vechernii Urgant* ).<sup>199</sup> The show, hosted by Ivan Urgant and appearing on the federal Channel 1, is a “simulacrum” in its own right of American late-night talk shows.

### **Bi-2’s Audience and Popularity in Russia**

About his impressions of the band as well as their general level of popularity in Russia, Sergey declared, “My perception of this group is purely negative and I believe that the popularity of this group is overblown and exaggerated by effective advertising, public relations, and so-called ‘cronyism.’”<sup>200</sup> Revealing more about the company he keeps and the stations he listens to than the actual popularity of Bi-2, he claimed, “I don’t know a single person who listened to or went to a Bi-2 concert. They are happily played

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<sup>197</sup> “Если бы за спиной у генерала из клипа висел российский флаг, это видео не вышло бы. А так есть простор для интерпретаций.” Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Shortparis, “Shortparis - Страшно,” YouTube, December 19, 2018, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUdteCBRX9c>.

<sup>199</sup> Вечерний Ургант, “Shortparis – ‘Страшно.’ Вечерний Ургант. 21.02.2019,” YouTube clip, February 21, 2019, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNYd44nS0J8>.

<sup>200</sup> “Моё восприятие этой группы сугубо отрицательное и я считаю, что популярность этого коллектива раздута и преувеличена хорошо сделанной рекламой, пиаром и так называемым ‘кумовством.’” Sergey Chubraev, email, March 3, 2020.

by squalid Russian radio stations, corrupt TV channels, and stuffed into every conceivable *Solianka*<sup>201</sup> concert [a kind of variety show featuring nostalgic Estrada], from festivals to the Kremlin Palace.”<sup>202</sup>

The remark about *Solianka* concerts seems hyperbolic. Over at least the past few years, the band’s popularity has been strong enough to maintain a busy touring schedule as headliners, not merely warmup acts, throughout Russia, the Commonwealth of Independent States, several regions of Europe, and even the major cities of the United States (including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, Boston, Chicago, and New York).

Sergey later described who he thought Bi-2’s music spoke to and why, asserting that in their music they regularly employ a “little about the loneliness of the soul, the loneliness of the body (this same theme is always so close to teenagers and young men – the main consumers of this stream of ‘revelations’ from Lyova and Shura!).”<sup>203</sup> Yet according to my youngest informants, it is doubtful that Russian teenagers are much

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<sup>201</sup> *Solianka* is a thick, spicy, and sour soup made from a base of cucumbers stewed in brine, to which are added a number of other ingredients which complement one of the three main ingredients of meat, fish, or mushrooms. Yet Sergey’s term “*Solianka* concert” is not merely a euphemism. Such concerts feature upbeat nostalgia drawn from *estrada*, pop, rock, and folk musical acts put on in communities throughout Russia.

<sup>202</sup> “Мне неизвестен ни один человек, который бы слушал или ходил на концерт «Б2». Их с удовольствием крутят убогие российские радиостанции, продажные ТВ-каналы и впихивают во все мыслимые концерты-солянки, начиная от фестивалей и заканчивая Кремлёвским дворцом.” Sergey Chubraev, email, March 3, 2020.

<sup>203</sup> “...добавляют. . .немного об одиночестве души, одиночестве тела (эта же тема всегда так близка подросткам и юношам- главным потребителям этого потока «откровений» от Лёвы и Шуры!), немного политики, немного урбанизма, немного истории России, немного литературы (как ‘Дама с собачкой’).” Sergey Chubraev, email, March 4, 2020.

affected by their songs since hip-hop and dance pop have been gaining ground with listeners from their generation much more than any form of rock music for a number of years. And though the multiple rows of young women may have been strategically placed near the front of live concert recordings for marketing purposes, the fact that so many of them can be seen mouthing the words to every song (with varying degrees of enthusiastic abandon) seems to demonstrate that young men are not the only ones who find Bi-2's latest, more political songs relevant to their lives.

I managed to see the band perform live to a packed house in St. Petersburg's 3,700-seat Oktiabrskii Concert Hall on February 26, 2019. Though they were performing with the four-man theatrical-comedy duo *Kvartet i (Quartet and)* in a presentation entitled *Letters and Songs of Middle-aged Men (Pis'ma i pesni muzhchin srednego vozrasta)*, their music was as integral to the presentation as the stage actors.

The quartet's content was similar to that found in their three films under the same main title, *What Men Talk About (O chyom govoriat muzhchiny)*, for which Bi-2 has provided the soundtracks. Most of the themes dealt with the comedy and sadness of life and relationships with heavy doses of nostalgia, but also a fair amount of mild political banter. In between many of the "letters," the band predictably performed some of their more sentimental favorites such as "Prayer" (*Molitva*), the hit single from their 2011 album, *Spirit*.

I recorded some of the most compelling moments with my phone so that I could more accurately report on what I witnessed later. Just before the penultimate statement of the chorus for *Molitva*, the band cut the accompaniment down to an arpeggiated guitar pattern and nearly the entire audience sang the words to the chorus in unison:

“Everything, except love, our whole life is so far away. I...I’m not alone, but without you I’m simply nobody.”<sup>204</sup> On my brief recording of this particular moment, voices of varying quality and pitch (some merely speaking) utter the chorus without a care for who is listening nearby. At the very end of the chorus a woman in the distance shouts out the final word, *nikto* (“nobody”). In a moment of cathartic release, her intonation falls from a high, indeterminate pitch.

The most pronounced moment of audience identification with the music occurred when Bi-2 performed their recent hit, “La-La Poplars” (*Lia-Lia Topolia*) from the soundtrack the band put together for *Quartet and’s* latest film in the franchise, *What Do Men Talk About? Continued* (*A chyom govoriat muzhchiny? Prodolzhenie*, 2018).<sup>205</sup> As soon as the beginning of this song sounded with its bright major mode and its catchy soaring and sweeping melody, the entire audience stood up from their seats and swayed their bodies to and fro (and raised the illuminated screens of their smartphones) throughout the song’s performance. The title is perhaps perplexing at first, but stands of balsam poplar trees are almost as ubiquitous in Russia as the birch trees referenced throughout the recent centuries of Russian culture.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> “Всё, кроме любви, вся наша жизнь так далеко.  
Я, я - не один, но без тебя просто никто.”

<sup>205</sup> The band made a music video with the quartet on and along the Neva river in St. Petersburg. It was jointly directed by Igor Shmelyov and the director of the film, Fluza Farkhshatova. See Би-2, Игорь Шмелёв, and Флюза Фархшатова, “Би-2 – Ля-ля тополя (OST «О чём говорят мужчины. Продолжение»),” YouTube, February 15, 2018, accessed July 16, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7\\_c3mmvF02o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_c3mmvF02o).

<sup>206</sup> During the post-war period, the Soviet Union planted poplars throughout its cities as part of an urban renewal project. See Anna Sorokina, “You Can Run, but You Can’t Hide: Why Is Moscow Covered by Poplar Fluff Every June?,” *Russia Beyond*, June 4, 2018, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.rbth.com/lifestyle/328455-moscow-poplar-fluff-june>.



The text of the song wrestles with the same questions of eternal life and the existence of a higher power that are interrogated at the end of the “Philosophers’ Stone” video. In the first verse the protagonist looks back without regret on all the foibles of life, leaving it up to the listener to guess who the lucky ones are in the long run. The first two lines of the verse seem to make an obscure reference to the notion of transubstantiation: “How much water has flowed away, and now what is blood and what is wine is all the same.”<sup>207</sup> The bitterness of lost love and a question that seems to ask whether those who are sick in spirit will reach eternal life or remain standing on the earth are the subjects of the second verse.<sup>208</sup> Finally, the chorus makes an intertextual allusion to the “Philosophers’ Stone” video (a song which also appears on the soundtrack to the new *Quartet and* film): “La-La, poplars! Escape from the ship to the ball in the ambulance. La-La, poplars! Good day to all, and may the summer never end.”<sup>209</sup> The blooming of poplars, which fills the streets of the cities with white fluff in June, signals the beginning of summer in Russia (particularly Moscow). The chorus reads as a salutation to both the dead (those who have escaped this vessel for a possible party in the afterlife) and the living, wishing for them a life of endless summer.

Bi-2 also sharpened the political banter of the program by playing some of the more socio-politically charged songs from the *Event Horizon* album such as “Whisky,”

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<sup>207</sup> “Сколько воды утекло, И теперь всё равно: что кровь, что вино. Больше не буду жалеть. Попробуй ответить, кому повезло?”

<sup>208</sup> “Слёзы ползут по лицу, И твой поцелуй горчит словно хмель. Если Земля – это шар, То большая душа устоит ли на ней?”

<sup>209</sup> “Ля-ля, тополя! Сбежим с корабля На бал в санитарной карете. Ля-ля, тополя! Всем доброго дня, И пусть не кончается лето.”

“Homeland,” and “Philosophers’ Stone.” All were enthusiastically applauded by the audience. When the instrumentation was suddenly reduced after the final, climactic push in “Homeland,” many of the audience members on my recorded fragment can be heard clapping with the bass drum kicks that at that moment begin to sound on every beat.

The audience was composed of people from a diverse range of ages, from those in their twenties to those in their sixties. Possibly owing to the pairing with *Kvartet and* and their continuously running theme of conversations between middle-aged men, the average audience age seemed to be late-thirties to early-forties. Judging from the younger faces in the crowds of various recent concert videos, the audience for this performance does not seem entirely representative of their fanbase.

## **Conclusion**

Joshua Yaffa’s book *Between Two Fires*<sup>210</sup> explores the decisions various citizens across Russia have made over the course of the Putin era. His case studies cover people who he reports began with the noblest ambitions for improving life for themselves and for others. But the realities of life in Russia forced them to adapt, to make a series of increasingly greater moral compromises in order to achieve their goals or to help the greatest amount of people. He suggests that the person who emerges on the other side of this gradual, almost imperceptible transformation has in fact changed considerably. And as he stated in an interview promoting the book’s release, “I personally chose people who

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<sup>210</sup> Joshua Yaffa, *Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin’s Russia* (Tim Duggan Books, 2020).

I could not come to some final conclusion about. Were they good or were they bad? They are people who defied my attempts at categorization.”<sup>211</sup>

Bi-2’s decisions about where they are willing to play still raise questions about their relationship to power. Whether they warrant a chapter in a hypothetical sequel to Yaffa’s book is still too difficult to determine because the opaque nature of Russia today always leaves some room for us to doubt our understanding of many social and political phenomena. Therefore, my conclusions about Bi-2’s relationship toward the Russian government must remain open-ended. Whatever that relationship is, it seems safe to say that subservience to commercialism, foreign elements, and sloppy treatment of the Russian language are unfair charges to level against them. And if *Event Horizon* merely displayed a mild and vague form of opposition, the darkness of their very latest work is anything but mild.

My informant Svetlana’s interpretations reflect the evidence I found combing through social media comments for each of the Bi-2 videos discussed in this chapter – evidence that their most recent work inspires deep engagement and critical reassessments of the roles of the state, the military complex, and the Church in relation to ordinary people. In these songs, many find recognition and validation for their feelings about life in Putin’s Russia. It is perhaps naïve to suggest that the band is a force for change, yet it does not seem unreasonable to say that, at the very least, their music is causing some fans to think about important issues when they hear the songs and engage with the videos connected to their latest album, *Event Horizon*.

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<sup>211</sup> Politics and Prose, “Joshua Yaffa, ‘Between Two Fires,’” YouTube, January 29, 2020, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAsZL0zEVpo>.

Barely a month before I finished my first draft of this chapter, Bi-2 went in an even darker direction with their new song “Hell” (*Peklo*). The accompanying music video, directed by their brand-new partner Ivan Shishkin, has all of the shocking imagery of the Shmelyov videos for “Whisky” and “Philosophers’ Stone,” but none of their humor. It comes much closer to Rammstein’s video for “*Deutschland*” and possibly represents an even newer direction for the band. On YouTube, the video has already been viewed by over 5.6 million people (as of June 2020); in the first month post YouTube debut, it nearly matched the number of likes that their biggest sentimental pop-rock hit, “Compromise” (*Kompromiss*) has received since it was released four years ago. Bi-2 appears to be gaining more relevance to newer audiences. Before giving a lengthy interpretation of the meanings behind the text and imagery, one commenter on the “Hell” music video very succinctly laid out the transformation I have been discussing over the course of this chapter:

Through the work of Bi-2, one can trace the development of culture and art in Russia for a decade. The themes raised by the musicians slowly changed from romantic to socio-political. The album *Event Horizon*, released in 2017, was a real turning point in the group’s career: for the first time, social themes began to dominate [over] love affairs, and one of the key tracks was the song about the Homeland. The year 2020 is approaching, and everyone who is now listening to the new Bi-2 song understands: *Event Horizon* was just a prologue.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> “Через творчество группы Би-2 можно проследить тенденции развития культуры и искусства в России на протяжении целого десятилетия. Поднимаемые музыкантами темы медленно менялись с романтических на социально-политические. Альбом «Горизонт событий», выпущенный в 2017 году, стал настоящим поворотом в карьере группы: впервые социальная тематика стала главенствовать над любовной, а одним из ключевых треков стала песня про Родину. Наступает 2020 год, и каждый, кто сейчас слушает новую песню Би-2, понимает: ‘Горизонт событий’ был лишь прологом.” YouTube commenter Ghost11 in Би-2 and Макс Шишкин, “Би-2 – Пекло,” YouTube, 2020, accessed July 14, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ma4g3R0S2Zc&list=PLVFrw4Sh9eB8VYp2OlcAMv7y\\_unV8f9MT](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ma4g3R0S2Zc&list=PLVFrw4Sh9eB8VYp2OlcAMv7y_unV8f9MT).

Further evidence that this new song is relevant to Russian culture is that someone has already posted an acoustic guitar and voice cover on YouTube, bringing Bi-2 into the bard tradition of Okudzhava and Vysotsky that amateur Russian musicians so often engage with in their kitchens or around campfires (and now in the digital domain).<sup>213</sup> And as one Belarussian concert review reported during their last tour, among the ten to twelve thousand who attended their concert in Minsk were a “huge number of young people,” “who clearly say that Bi-2, even with a web of wrinkles around the eyes and with gray in the beard, are not yet veterans [read: “has beens”] of rock, but [represent] the real mainstream.”<sup>214</sup> Perhaps the large presence of youth at this concert is merely a prologue to a resurgence of their popularity among youth all over Russia and the former Soviet Union and perhaps a harbinger of a type of social change signaled by their least-ambiguous moments.

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<sup>213</sup> Денис Сосна, “Би-2 - Пекло (Акустика),” YouTube, February 17, 2020, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxhnAMTKWRw&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>214</sup> “Впрочем, среди 10-12 тысяч зрителей этого концерта были не только Левины и Шурины ровесники (плюс-минус). Огромное количество молодежи однозначно говорит, что ‘Би-2,’ пусть и с сеточкой морщин у глаз и с сединой в бороде, еще не ветераны рока, а самый настоящий мейнстрим.” Close up pictures of the audience reveal the variety of age ranges attracted to the band. “Неветераны Рока. Группа ‘Би-2’ представила в Минске ‘Горизонт событий,’ Naviny.by, April 1, 2018, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://naviny.by/article/20180401/1522534450-neveterany-roka-gruppa-bi-2-predstavila-v-minske-gorizont-sobytyi>.

## Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to shed light on the particular phenomenon of artistic transformation in response to shifting political rhetoric, popular sentiment, or an artist's own desire to become more socio-politically engaged. In contemporary Russian music we have seen these transformations affect works of art as well as artistic identities in both classical and popular genres. And in most of the studied cases the transformations have resulted in a more nationalistic turn. The musical works and artists discussed in the first three chapters of this dissertation seem to accord with if not perform the cultural work called for by both Putin and the decree discussed in the introduction. The transformations of works and artistic identities into patriotic and even nationalistic forms provide broader resonance for the increasingly conservative-authoritarian rhetoric privileged in the media. The readings and presentations of history that result from these transformations – including that of past literature and the music of past artists – hint at the same “unity of the historical process” that the state is seeking to build. As we saw in the final chapter, the latest transformation of Bi-2 during this period has been clearly read by Russians as a negative reaction to what is currently going on in their country. Yet the strength of this simultaneously explicit and implicit protest is debateable, and questions of some form of arrangement between band and state actors linger without clear resolution.

The connection between state funding and Shchedrin's opera *Levsha* is strong, most evident in its premiere at the Mariinsky Theater. When *Levsha* was first performed in summer 2013, the ideas and goals expressed and codified in Putin's *ukaz* (decree) were already familiar. They even predate Shchedrin's work on the composition between 2012

and 2013 in his friends' Swiss chalet. This document merely represents the official sanctioning of ideas about culture that Putin had been espousing for years. It points out the “correct path” for artists to pursue for success in Russia, and Shchedrin and the Mariinsky followed suit, producing a work that offers its elite patrons the fantasy of Russian exceptionalism in the areas of technology, artistic production, and, especially, morality.

In his libretto Shchedrin made significant alterations to the plot of Leskov's tale, particularly to the portrayal of the dancing and singing flea, which now serves to privilege Russian supremacy in both technology and artistry. Shchedrin's music and the Mariinsky staging further portray Russians as morally superior. *Levsha* also relies on still-potent nationalist and orientalist tropes, a legacy of both nineteenth-century Russian opera and of Soviet Socialist Realism. Finally, the opera's loose treatment of the original tale represents a return toward pre-perestroika Soviet readings. Where Leskov sought to find the source of Russia's historical problems (i.e., its “backwardness”) by directing the Russian gaze inward, Shchedrin and the Mariinsky divert listeners' attentions to the foreign element, distracting them with debauched depictions of the West.

For some of the popular music cases studied in the other chapters we can also reasonably assume that financial support from the state was involved—even if we cannot trace the specific mechanisms of payment. State funding for the live performances of the drastically altered cover versions of Tsoi's “Kukushka” and of Kinchev's “Sky of the Slavs” at patriotic celebrations (especially in Crimea) is unambiguous. The World War II nostalgia film, *Battle for Sevastopol*, that so prominently features Gagarina's cover version of “Kukushka” received Russian government funding as well. Statements from

then Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky suggest that one goal for the film was to subtly suggest the political reunification of Russia and Ukraine. The performance of ten-year-old Yaroslava Degtyareva of “Kukushka” backed by sailors from the Black Sea Fleet at the opening of a bridge to land annexed by Russia from Ukraine goes one step further: it reasserts Russia’s dominance in this relationship. Finally, “Kukushka,” a song written by a half-Korean artist, boosted Gagarina’s career and also helped Russia make cultural overtures to its Asian neighbors, especially China.

The newfound official lives of “Kukushka” rely on the dramatic alterations Kormukhina and Gagarina have made to the musical and performative aspects of Tsoi’s original. These transformations allow a song about the inward struggle of a lonely artist to be reimagined as a militant, banner-waving, and fist-pumping patriotic anthem. Most of my informants hear “Kukushka” in these contexts as propagandistic. My informant Maria Udovydchenko reads the pairing of this dramatically embellished and highly polished pop version of the song with patriotic World War II nostalgia as an intentional strategy to bridge the gap between generations in Russia. This generational unification is another stated goal of Russia’s official cultural politics.

Because Russian copyright law is still in a relatively early stage of development, it is especially difficult to determine whether Konstantin Kinchev receives any residual financial benefit from the state’s continued use of his song “Sky of the Slavs” in patriotic celebrations. What is clear is that he and his band no longer suffer at the hands of the authorities, and unlike opposition protesters, the roudy nationalists who constitute a significant portion of Alisa’s fanbase (the *Alisameny*) do not have to fear the police.



In his transformation into a musical warrior for Russian Orthodoxy, Kinchev enters into a mutually beneficial relationship with the church as well as with the state that has helped it to gain a foothold in contemporary political life. It matters little that Kinchev's version of a church-centered "symphony of power" does not exactly match the vision that Putin has for the more supreme position of the state. Kinchev's unique brand of nationalism still makes him a pied piper for the current regime: his mesmerizing stage persona still calls up tunes supporting the conservative-authoritarian leadership of the moment.

Kinchev's song "Sky of the Slavs" connects an imaginary, unbroken historical process across all periods of Russian and Soviet history to continued pan-Slavic ambitions. Due to its wide use in diverse generic contexts (an indication of its immense popularity), the impact of "Sky of the Slavs" on political thought might be stronger and broader than that of any other work discussed in this dissertation. As we saw in a report from a journalist in chapter 3, Russians of all ages and with varied musical tastes—"punks and metal heads; vocalists of old, long-disintegrated jazz bands; and even skin-headed nationalists"—fervently identify with this song. Despite the assertions of some of my informants, my study of Kinchev in the context of social media reveals that a sizable sampling of Russian youth still finds his music compelling. Whether their initial attraction leads them to adopt Kinchev's nationalist and authoritarian worldview deserves future study.

Though Kinchev's performative habits throughout his career suggest that an authoritarian streak was present even when he was protesting communist totalitarianism, his more recent statements reveal an added vein of anti-Semitism. He also has turned

toward anti-Ukrainian positions in songs such as “Power,” written as a reactionary response to the Orange Revolution, and “*Naebali*,” a sarcastic criticism of the Euromaidan protests. Yet Kinchev’s most fundamental transformation is his abandonment of his former role as rock protester. Once seen as a representative of the people in opposition to the state, he is now a rocker perfectly content with the status quo.

Though Bi-2’s relationship with the Russian state is shrouded in ambiguity, their transformation of a band that primarily wrote love songs and occasionally signaled sexual innuendo into a group that writes socially progressive lyrics has roused almost no pushback. They continue to enjoy access to prestigious state-owned performance venues, suggesting that their mild form of critique is tolerable. Since the massive protest events of 2012, the negative optics of the government’s reactionary responses has resulted in an indirect public relations campaign showcasing the fact that in Russia today not all forms of protest are stifled.

Comments from social media show that many listeners read anxiety and apprehension about “the regime” in Bi-2’s newest lyrics. Yet their music remains sufficiently cryptic, open to a variety of interpretations. Yurchak’s non-binary concept of being *vne*, the strategy of existing simultaneously within and without the Soviet system, might once again be applicable in today’s Russia, offering an alternative possibility for Bi-2’s transformation during this post-Soviet period, one that affords them a greater degree of artistic agency than the binary opposites of protesters and government allies.

Many doubts about their sincerity arise from the conceits of genre purists who believe their stylistic hybridity, pop and dance aesthetics, and economical choice of words exclude them from the Russian rock canon, marking them as vain, vapid, and

commercial. “Authenticity” is a slippery term in the history of popular music worldwide: newer ways of being authentic (or not) emerge with every new epoch in popular music culture. Continuing to rail against Bi-2’s authenticity reads as a strategy to disqualify the band from any conversations about political activism. Alternatively, a closer, more holistic examination of their individual works and their reception points to a new, stronger commentary on contemporary life. In my analysis of their work I have endeavored to reveal that the relationships made between text and music (and also video) deserve further scholarly attention because of the productive political discussions they generate.

### **Yuri Dud Revisits the 1989 Moscow Rock Festival**

I close with a brief discussion of a project related to contemporary Russian musical culture that characterizes a clear reaction against nationalist and anti-Western rhetoric. Yuri Dud’s documentaries about the AIDS epidemic in Russia and the government’s botched handling of the Beslan school hostage situation were mentioned earlier. Yet the majority of the content he publishes on his YouTube channel is related to musical culture (the revealing Kinchev interview discussed in chapter 3 is but one example). Dud’s approach to cultural and historical understanding differs significantly from the more nationalistic examples discussed above or those found on state television.

Judging from the number of views for each production posted to his YouTube channel, it is an approach that is becoming more and more popular. This points to the possibility that people who want more objective coverage of events have turned away from state media and toward online content. Yet the notion of the internet in Russia as a continued source for reliable and trustworthy analysis may be in danger as opposition

news sites have been blocked (see chapter 3) on charges of extremism and discussion of the need for a “sovereign internet” lingers.

In an episode released on February 12, 2019, Dud’s discusses a 1989 rock festival held between August 12 and 13 at Moscow’s Luzhniki stadium, featuring American, British, Soviet, and Eastern Bloc bands including Bon Jovi, Mötley Crüe, Gorky Park, Skid Row, Ozzy Osbourne, Cinderella, The Scorpions, Brigada S, and Nuance, and sponsored in part by MTV.<sup>1</sup> The festival attracted over 150,000 attendees over its two days and over one billion viewers on television worldwide.

Dud’s project culminates in a comparison of East-West relations between the very late-Soviet period and today, between the Cold War and what former United States ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul has called a “hot peace.”<sup>2</sup> Much of Russian nationalism since the nineteenth century has been framed in relationship to the West, but Dud’s documentary avoids essentializing binary oppositions and promotes more constructive dialogue. His interviews with musicians, producers, and fans who participated in the 1989 festival reveal that there remain producers of culture who have not transformed themselves into spokespeople for anti-Western ideological agendas.

The substantial following that Dud has generated on YouTube suggests that many Russians have not given up on more progressive ideals. Though these Russians, members of the last Soviet generation, look to the future with pessimism, the episode reveals that most still wish for a return to the hopeful days of 1989 and recognize that the Russian

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<sup>1</sup> ВДудь, “Первый рок-фест в СССР / First rock festival in Soviet Union,” YouTube, February 12, 2019, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaCcVs9GV00&t=134s>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

media landscape, controlled by the state, is a principal reason for nationalist thinking among the populace and for much of the ongoing tension with the West. The implication is that the free and open discussion of ideas online is critical to reducing these tensions. Furthermore, Dud, who has dedicated most of his YouTube videos to Russian rock subjects, reveals himself as one of Russian society's "discontents." As we saw in his interview with Konstantin Kinchev in chapter 3, his tough questions expose the inadequacies of extreme nationalism as the basis for a brighter future in Russia.

In the 1989 Moscow Rock Festival episode, Dud skillfully crafts a divide between a larger vision of hope and change and the lone voice in the program who supports the status quo, Alexander Marshal, former member of the late-Soviet band Gorky Park. The unbalanced juxtaposition makes Marshal's position seem all the more stagnant, gloomy, and utterly irrational. Dud's passion for rockers of all stripes and nationalities, his fluent English, and his high-quality English subtitles demonstrate that he seeks better dialogue between Russia and the West. Dud's still-growing popularity in Russia, as well as that of such recent artists as Shortparis and even Bi-2, suggests that many Russians are growing weary of nationalism. Though my analysis of other online content in the chapters above shows that the internet is equally useful for the promotion of nationalism, it remains one of the most important and accessible places to find more progressive perspectives.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Chapters 1, 2, and 4 (in the example of "Goodbye, America") of this dissertation have important implications for both transposition studies and appropriation discourses. They each reveal how well-known, even canonical works of literature and popular music can still be transformed before the eyes and ears of the public. This means that we cannot

assume that current interpretations of canonic works are true for all periods.

Contemporary transpositions and adaptations of art works need to be continually compared and contrasted with their original sources with the utmost care to discover whether these adaptations transform the originals for political use. Though an interpretation might be widely held in current society, it may differ widely from the interpretations of previous eras. Comprehending how and why they differ is crucial to our understanding of the ongoing roles that art plays in political discourse.

An added benefit to approaching artistic manifestations of nationalism more broadly and holistically is that we will better understand the extent to which it has become pervasive in a particular society. By focusing exclusively on one genre, we potentially risk narrowing our perspectives to one segment of the population. Though the benefit of deeply engaging with one particular social group is well-understood, expanding our study to embrace more diverse musical practices unearths a different set of underexplored knowledge. If applied more often, this approach could help us comprehend what is generalizable across genres, styles, and sub-populations. Another advantage to studying any phenomenon across multiple genres is that it forces us to stretch our own competencies, making ourselves more flexible in an age that is increasingly recognizing the value of interdisciplinary (and transdisciplinary) methods.

Though my research took into account perspectives from native Russians that exceeded the usual geographical limits of Moscow and St. Petersburg, I did not realize the benefits of the wider geographical potential the digital tools I was using afforded until I was well into the writing phase. Future musicological studies could benefit even more from the ethnographic methods I employed by intentionally targeting little-studied areas

of not only Russia, but of other countries as well. The only condition that would exclude an area from this type of methodology is non-existent, or very poor cellular (or wifi or internet) service. And ever-expanding coverage areas and the growing ubiquity of smart phones (for better and for worse) make access to the culture of these under-studied areas more and more feasible from a distance. Though I would certainly not suggest that this type of informant interaction could replace face-to-face dialogue with another human being, we must not categorically dismiss the richness that this type of engagement still offers.

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