Opera and Obsolescence in the Russian Culture Wars

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Vladimir Sorokin's scandalous novel *Blue Fat* (1999) presents several unforgettable episodes, including one about a performance of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* at the Bolshoi, attended by the novel's hero and his girlfriend. An abundance of detail inches its way under the skin of many a reader who has shared such experiences: the bright lights, standing between the columns, waiting in agitation—will she come? Finally she arrives, beautifully dressed; they kiss and then mingle with the crowd, pursued by the last-minute ticket hunters. The seats are ideal, the auditorium darkens, and the overture begins. There's Olga's aria, Tatyana's letter scene, then the interval, champagne, throngs of people known and unknown, all gathered with mounting excitement. Oh, and did I forget?—Stalin is among the delighted operagoers. Sorokin spins out his climax thus: "The opera is flying forward, flying in a single breath—performers, orchestra, sets, lighting—everything brought together in seamless harmony, everything intoxicating and enthralling beyond measure. We clap unselfconsciously, like schoolchildren, and then a heavy German word stirs up in my memory: *Gesamtkunstwerk*."[1] Any reader will recognize the scene in outline, and for Russian opera lovers it will be familiar in every detail, perhaps from lived experience or perhaps from collective memory, the stories of parents and grandparents, and from old black-and-white footage seen on Soviet television.

Yet among all these happy details, something is amiss—disturbingly amiss. The hero and his girlfriend have donned diving suits and weighted boots, but they do not look out of place, because the rest of the audience and even the performers have done likewise. An explanation is at hand: the theater has been flooded with murky water, the water—alas—of the Moscow sewage system. The Bolshoi has, in short, become the principal reservoir of the city's sewage system. No matter. The singers perform heroically under difficult conditions—under twenty meters of water, to be precise—and the audience, equally heroic, tries to catch a glimpse of their favorite singers through the floating excrement. Readers will be relieved to hear that there are compensations: some members of the

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audience avail themselves of contraptions that allow them to drink unpolluted champagne. And not the ubiquitous, middle-brow *Sovetskoye shampanskoye*, but a noble, imported Pommery.

The grotesque, absurdist humor of the passage is obvious enough, but Sorokin's achievement is considerably more impressive: the passage simultaneously exudes a poignant beauty. The imagery of sewage, moreover, has a source in Soviet-era lore: citizens would often complain that they were living in shit, while taking pride in the fact that this encouraged them to ennoble and enchant their mental lives. The Pommery, though, is an image drawn from the post-Soviet present, when a layer of Russian society has been able to flaunt its access to consumer luxuries from the West. This is no oversight, for Sorokin habitually jumbles cultural symbols of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. Sometimes he projects the present into the past: for example, when he presents us with a puzzled Stalin ruminating over the figures showing that Muscovites preferred Bugatti automobiles to Soviet makes. Ultimately, his novel inhabits a rubbish heap of anachronistic cultural symbols seen through the lens of a dystopian future.

But although Sorokin plays with anachronism, he is hardly oblivious to history: on the contrary, he expects his readers to be able to assign each item from the rubbish heap to its proper historical location. Only on that basis can they go on to judge what motivated the anachronisms in the first place. What, then, is the historical location of the *Eugene Onegin* production described in the novel? The fictional performance takes place in 1954, in a Soviet Union where Stalin is still alive (actually he died in 1953). Russian opera goers would recognize from this date that Sorokin is picturing the classic Soviet production that began life in 1944 and that can be seen to this very day. It is one of several enduring Bolshoi productions from the high and late Stalinist periods: in addition to *Onegin* (1944, staged by Boris Pokrovsky, sets by Petr Vilyams), we have *The Queen of Spades* (1944, staged by Leonid Baratov, sets by Vladimir Dmitriev); *Ivan Susanin* (1945, a version of *A Life for the Tsar* staged by Baratov, sets by Vilyams); *Boris Godunov* (1948, Baratov and Fedor Fedorovsky), *Sadko* (1949, Pokrovsky and Fedorovsky), *Khovanshchina* (1950, Baratov and Fedorovsky), and *Prince Igor* (1953, Baratov and Fedorovsky).[2]

The longevity of these productions is startling, but there are explanations ready at hand. First, their survival after the death and then denunciation of Stalin was no mystery, since the de-Stalinization process that shook up Soviet literature in the 1960s was limited in scope and left the venerable Bolshoi stage untouched. Secondly, their continued existence even after the collapse of the Soviet Union is understandable, given the financial squeeze on high culture that had already begun during the perestroika years; there were few opportunities to introduce new productions of classic works, and prestigious institutions such as the Bolshoi simply continued as best they could, following well-established routines. The real surprise is that the small number of more modern Bolshoi productions were ousted after a few years by those same Stalinist productions they were supposed to have replaced. Even Sorokin must have been amazed at his good luck: his novel was published in 1999, when the classic Stalinist production of *Onegin* had been replaced and apparently consigned to the dustbin of history; but only one year later, it returned to the Bolshoi stage. In 2006 a further attempt to replace it ran aground against much protest, and various maneuverings in the political establishment ensured the survival of the old production for the foreseeable future. As a result, it serves Sorokin even better today as a cultural marker than it did when the book first appeared.

I shall return to these issues later, but the scope of this essay is wider: I want to explore the theme of cultural obsolescence as played out in the history of opera at the two great turning points in Russian twentieth-century history, those of 1917 and 1991. The two crises were just close enough together to fall within the experience of some individuals; but, much more important, the transmission of memories, myths, and mythologized memories by parents and grandparents brings the first one alive for those who experienced the second as adults. The state that collapsed in 1991 had also found it useful to claim continuity with the revolutions of 1917 (in the same manner that Napoleon could claim continuity with 1789—he was not a Bourbon, nor was Brezhnev a Romanov), and it reminded citizens of this through a dense network of imagery.[3] The revolution swept away the old ruling class and its hangers-on, rendering obsolete all its ideological and cultural trappings. Or nearly all: the imperial architecture remained, as did, surprisingly and seemingly against all the odds, opera. A large swathe of the operatic public emigrated, but many remained; still, in the latter category most were discontented with or downright hostile to the October Revolution. Yet opera was allowed to linger on, win state support, and eventually become a deeply entrenched and prestigious part of Soviet culture under Stalin: not in the form of new socialist realist operas, which proved ephemeral and politically fragile, but rather by means of the standard repertory of Russian and Western classics.[4]

The sense of obsolescence in the late 1980s and early 1990s was different: now the entire population was affected in some way. Like a couple splitting acrimoniously after years of cohabitation, millions of ex-Soviet citizens suffered from the uneasy and inescapable feeling that much of their lives had in some way been wasted, their physical, mental, and emotional resources invested in the wrong place. The highly educated middle-class intelligentsia, who had previously occupied the bulk of the seats in the great opera houses, now found that their solid careers had become precarious, their salaries greatly reduced in buying power or even left unpaid, and their life savings evaporated in a mixture of bank scams and hyperinflation. There were further differences: whereas in 1917 the old ruling class had been swept away, in 1991 those who emerged on top were all creatures of the old system—people who gained public consent (or acquiescence) by wrapping themselves in a new ideology. And as so much depended on ideological window dressing, the more glaring relics of the past had to be demolished immediately. Accordingly, socialist realist opera was removed from the Bolshoi, much as Soviet monumental statuary was removed from its pedestals.[5] Dozens of operas about the revolution, the civil war, the collectivization of agriculture, or even the Great Patriotic War were rendered unacceptable. Like the statues, these works had been fashioned for the aggrandizement of the Soviet state; since this state had disappeared—even if its personnel had not—they had lost their raison d'être. But Soviet versions of the classics remained notably absent from the cull. Just as the ravages of the civil war were, for some Soviet citizens, softened a little by *Onegin* and *Boris*, so these very stalwarts softened the ravages of free-market "shock therapy." Only the familiar could serve as a tranquilizing distraction, and the familiar was, in this case, precisely the Soviet productions dating from Stalinist times. The new post-Soviet government was fully involved in this project and certainly not oblivious to its benefits.

Let us now go back to the era of the October Revolution and the ensuing civil war, when the very existence of opera as an institution was threatened, and see how it managed to weather the storms.

Culture wars I: the soviets in the royal box

The Bolshoi's programming was suspended for a fortnight after the October Revolution, but when it resumed, on November 21, 1917, the leaders of the Moscow Soviet, elected earlier in the autumn, took up their seats in the royal box. No doubt they were aware that the audience (at least those in the better seats) were no enthusiasts for revolution, and no doubt they meant to signal that even opera houses were now under the rule of the producing classes. However, they got more than they bargained for, because the well-heeled audience rose and began to pelt them with whatever objects came to hand—the Bolshoi's royal box makes its occupants embarrassingly accessible targets. Members of the revolutionary militia decided they had better intervene: using the design of the theater to their advantage, they locked the doors to the boxes, thus allowing them to make arrests later at their leisure.[6] In Petrograd, the royal box at the Mariinsky was at the center of a different row: in the closing days of 1917, the manager, Alexander Siloti, presented the keys to some of the more right-wing delegates to the Constituent Assembly, while the chorus and some other members of the company staged an anti-Bolshevik protest. Their efforts won them a swift rebuke. Siloti was placed under guard in his fine apartment for two weeks, and the chorus was sacked.[7] Members of the revolutionary government and their foreign guests were then able to enjoy performances from the royal box in relative peace.

Russia's two main opera houses (like almost all opera houses) had never been pure temples to culture—the social hierarchy was clearly demarcated, and the head of state had made his presence and power felt. Both these functions continued after the October Revolution, but the occupants of the better seats were put on notice, and as they were gradually deprived of their sources of wealth (that is, the work of others), the appearance and composition of the audience changed. The Bolshoi, the Mariinsky, and other former imperial venues were now declared state theaters. But after the dust had settled on the early rows, this change in name proved to mean very little: in practice, the direction of the theaters remained independent of the Soviets (who, admittedly, had more pressing matters to attend to), and the Bolshoi troupe soon passed a resolution expressing contempt for the revolutionary government:

> The activity of the theater as an institution serving the eternal mission of art and artistic culture must continue irrespective of political coups and changes in state power. It must be resumed as soon as technically possible and as soon as elementary civil liberties are reinstated, such as freedom of conscience and press, inviolability of person and dwelling. Considering ourselves part of the great democracy and deeply grieving for the fraternal blood that was spilt, we speak out against the savage vandalism which did not spare the old, sacred places of the Russian people, those monuments to art and artistic culture. The State Moscow Bolshoi Theater as an autonomous artistic institution does not recognize any right of interference in its internal and artistic life on the part of powers that have not been elected by the theater and are not a part of it.[8]

While the Bolshoi assembly perceived itself as a savior of culture, a bulwark against the vicissitudes of political change, the revolutionary government was only interested in the fact that the theaters were continuing as normal—motivation mattered little. The troupe saw itself soldiering on against the odds; the government, from its point of view, saw cooperation, and so both sides were content even as they glared suspiciously across the auditorium at each other.

Such, at least, was the general perception. But there was more going on behind the scenes, and foremost here was the work of Anatoly Lunacharsky, the revolutionary government's culture minister.[9] Lunacharsky was a keen theatergoer, an occasional critic, and sometime playwright, and he took it upon himself to establish personal contact with the creative leadership of the theaters. (The purely administrative apparatus had already been disbanded.) On December 12, 1917, he wrote a passionate letter "to the artists of the state theaters," in which he claimed that the new state would not demand political allegiance from artists: "You are free citizens, free artists, and no one is violating your freedom." He insisted, however, that the country's "new master," the working people, would need to strike an agreement with the artists on how their cultural needs were to be satisfied.[10] On many occasions Lunacharsky arranged personal meetings with the artists, using all his considerable charisma and eloquence to persuade them to cooperate. This was especially important in the case of the Mariinsky, which had mounted a strike at the time of the royal box incident.

But Lunacharsky had audiences on both sides to satisfy, and there was a certain tension between his love of old-society culture and his interest in the cultural prospects of any future socialist society. So while he went out of his way to save the opera houses as functioning enterprises, he also made some trenchant comments on the limitations of opera as an art form. He maintained that any systematic use of opera—that "quite absurd bastard child" of spoken theater and music—for the education of workers was unlikely, even though operas by Musorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Wagner, with proper introduction, could still be enriching cultural experiences. Crucially, Wagnerian that he was, he expressed a hope that at some point in the future a new kind of music drama would emerge, exuding the same powerful appeal for audiences that opera had, but in a manner better suited to the new society.[11]

Thus, much as he personally loved opera, Lunacharsky had to admit that he could produce no ideological justification for its survival. In the interim, however, opera's institutions nevertheless continued to receive support. The period of self-government for the state theaters lasted until August 26, 1919, after which they were placed under the administration of Tsentroteatr (the Central Committee for Theaters of the Culture Ministry). But even this move made little concrete difference, for the personnel of the autonomous theater directorates were now appointed to this committee at the Culture Ministry to carry out the same tasks as before.[12] The main difference was in finance—the theaters could no longer determine ticket prices but instead received state subsidies by way of compensation. In the artistic sphere, however, they generally retained control. While this was a pleasing outcome for the theater personnel, there were grumbles from the other side. Platon Kerzhentsev, one of Lunacharsky's critics, summarized the problem thus: "the Theater Department [the executive section of Tsentroteatr] was no pioneer of new theater, nor was it in any way a warrior for socialist theater; it was but a kind of museum department, or a department for guarding a dilapidated past and disappearing antiquity."[13]

The essential preservation of the status quo that Lunacharsky presided over induced the great stars of Russian opera to remain in Russia during the difficult years of the civil war and international blockade. Fyodor Chaliapin, a peasant's son with long-standing revolutionary views, composed his own hymn to the revolution and performed it for the first anniversary celebrations in November 1918. He acted determinedly as an artist of great civic conscience, performing in the most unlikely places with little remuneration, and writing passionate appeals for artists to unite in helping the famished Volga region.[14]

In the midst of all this activity, he still found time to perform his customary operatic roles, and he even directed some new productions. But eventually the strain proved too much, and he never returned from his tour abroad in 1921. His later association with the émigré community in Paris seriously damaged his reputation back in Russia. Leonid Sobinov, the great lyric tenor, became head of the Bolshoi directorate and proved a passionate and effective advocate for the theater's survival in spite of his initial hatred and fear of the Bolsheviks; unlike Chaliapin, he chose to remain in Russia up to his death in 1934. Ivan Yershov, the famous Wagnerian heroic tenor, also rejected the option of emigration and pursued his long career in the Mariinsky, after which he continued as a teacher.

The presence of these stars kept Russian opera alive and drew in audiences even in the direst period of the civil war, when there was insufficient money to provide heating or electricity. When the troupe of the Bolshoi requested permission to end the 1919–20 season early, due to exhaustion after a difficult winter, Lunacharsky remonstrated. His letter reveals that the work of the Bolshoi troupe was now considered important for reasons of international prestige. Moscow was about to receive numerous foreign delegates to the second Comintern Congress, with the main sessions to be held in the Bolshoi building, and during the Congress the May Day celebrations were also to take place.[15]

Having survived through the civil war period, the Bolshoi unexpectedly faced a new crisis. The removal of external threats to the state provided the space for a new scrutiny of seemingly obsolescent prerevolutionary institutions. The concessions to the peasantry introduced under the National Economic Policy (NEP) had brought with them a new layer of urban rich, overlapping only partially with the wealthier members of prerevolutionary society, and these entrepreneurs and speculators soon began to fill the better seats of the Bolshoi.[16] And aside from occasional concerts for Comintern congresses, celebrations of revolutionary anniversaries, and the like, the repertory remained unchanged. Where finance was concerned, the Bolshoi was a major drain on ever scarce resources. On all these grounds, the theater must have seemed ripe for closure, and when a decision to the contrary was taken by the Council of Ministers, Lenin himself decided to intervene. On January 12, 1922, he wrote to the members of the Politburo:

> Having learnt from Kamenev that the Council of Ministers has unanimously accepted Lunacharsky's utterly outrageous proposal on the preservation of the Bolshoi opera and ballet, I suggest that the Politburo resolve the following:
>
> (1) To entrust to the Presidium of the Party Central Committee the revocation of the Council of Ministers' resolution.

> (2) To leave the opera and ballet with a few dozen artists in Moscow and Petrograd so that their performances (both opera and dance) can pay for themselves,* i.e., to remove the need for high expenditure on sets, etc.
>
> (3) From the billions freed up by these economies, to give no less than half for the elimination of illiteracy and for the establishment of reading rooms.
>
> (4) To summon Lunacharsky in order to give the accused a few minutes to say his final words [Lenin's tone here was meant to be jocular], and to tell both him and all other ministers that if they put to the vote resolutions such as the one now being revoked by the Central Committee, then stricter measures will have to be enforced by the Central Committee.[17]
>
> *for example, through the participation of the opera singers and ballet dancers in all manner of concert presentations, etc.

It is not hard to see Lenin's point. He hoped merely that the company could be reduced to its performing members, to become a more mobile troupe that could generate much of its own income rather than depending on a high state subsidy; the money freed up could then be allocated to more urgent cultural causes. The Politburo, however, simply passed a resolution to close the Bolshoi the same day, without even bothering to ask Lunacharsky to give an account of his actions.[18] As soon as Lunacharsky learnt of this resolution, he wrote a lengthy letter to Lenin, complaining of the procedural "absurdity," namely that the Party's Central Committee could overrule the state's Council of Ministers without even consulting them. He further complained that Lenin was badly informed on the issue.[19]

The letter is a showcase for Lunacharsky's shrewdness. The idea that opera and ballet on a grand scale were in themselves worthy of the state's support was not even essential to his argument. Instead, Lunacharsky staked his defense on the costs of closing down the Bolshoi, thereby taking on the central plank of Lenin's argument. He argued that the productions actually paid for themselves and that it was the maintenance of the theater building that was the real drain on state resources. But since the building was needed for large official meetings, that cost would still need to be met for political reasons, and the valuables inside would actually be safer if the operas were kept running. It would be, therefore, more expensive to close the Bolshoi than to keep it open.

Only when he felt confident that he had won the financial argument did Lunacharsky finally turn to the Bolshoi's artistic activities. First, the Bolshoi offered international prestige to the state, which took its foreign guests to the operas and ballets knowing that they would make a good impression on them. Second, were the theater to be closed, the state would need to take care of the resident orchestra, the best in Russia and one of the most important in Europe. (Presumably Lunacharsky, knowing Lenin's musical tastes, calculated that he would care more about a symphony orchestra than an opera company.) Then he combined these artistic concerns with socialist principle: the closure of the Bolshoi would mean a loss of jobs for 1,500 people, meaning that a large number of their families would lose their source of sustenance; this would fit badly with the state's avowed respect for honest labor. Lastly, each night two thousand people, including five hundred workers, would lose the opportunity "to spend time in a warm, lit building, listening to good music."[20]

In these last details, Lunacharsky was, of course, skirting the fact that the bulk of the audience was still made up of the most reactionary elements of Soviet society, and that the productions reflected none of the enormous changes that had taken place from 1917 onward. Instead, he referred blandly to "people" and "good music," safe in the knowledge that even if he were challenged on this, his main arguments would stand firm. As a result of the letter, a commission was formed to examine the facts behind Lunacharsky's financial arguments, and the debate was reopened. The wrangling at the top continued throughout 1922, including a poorly conceived Politburo resolution of November 2, which announced that the Bolshoi and former Mariinsky would be closed down because they could not continue to exist without subsidies. Yet the same document provided for another commission charged to investigate other possible ways of keeping them open.[21] By the end of the year, Lunacharsky was vindicated: adequate state subsidies were reinstated, and the two major opera houses became the most privileged institutions of the new Soviet state.

Was this outcome entirely due to the arguments mustered by one person battling against the odds? Although Lunacharsky undoubtedly played a crucial role, he was by no means isolated. The revolution had certainly contained a strand that rejected all culture of the past as bourgeois or feudal, a line most famously articulated by Mayakovsky[22] but also to be found in Bogdanov[23] and the left-wing elements within the Proletcult (the initially autonomous revolutionary cultural organization).[24] But this strand never encompassed more than a minority among the Bolsheviks, and it was stronger outside the party than inside. Lenin himself, although he had argued for the closure of the Bolshoi, in general held that the prerevolutionary artistic heritage should be built upon just as much as the prerevolutionary scientific heritage. In any case, Lunacharsky was by this stage joined by many other senior party members, such as Mikhail Kalinin and Abel Enukidze, who had the same attachment to opera and were even more passionate about ballet. Increasingly, members of the administration were taking advantage of their position: the prerevolutionary practice of personal patronage of artists was being revived, including (according to rumors) backstage affairs with ballerinas (hardly what Lenin envisaged, or at least so one hopes). Meetings of the Council of Ministers would from this time onward include a "high life" element that defended its pleasures, cultural and otherwise.

The decision to put these bastions of prerevolutionary culture on a secure footing was in keeping with the general cultural environment brought into being under the NEP. Shops and restaurants sprang up rapidly around the city centers, with highly unrevolutionary slogans such as “Everything just like the old days.” Indeed, the repertories of the Bolshoi and Mariinsky now looked rather safe and dignified compared with the louche cabarets and music halls that thrived in nearby streets. Because of competition, state subsidies had to be set higher in order to keep the grand theaters afloat.

The news that the former imperial theaters were to be given a fresh lease on life was not well received by some critics, who had been rather looking forward to the “death of opera.” I will quote liberally from one response characteristic of this strand of opinion:

> At the time when life is seething, when revolutions take place, and classes, outlooks and eras are changing, when the era of capitalism will be supplanted by the era of proletarian culture combined with American supertechnology, when we may even live to see electrification . . . on the stages of the opera houses, they will still glorify kings and princes. Igors and Radameses will still fight with cardboard swords, beating their fists on their chests and standing on tiptoe for the high notes. Old Larina will still make jam, and poor Tatyana will write so many letters.
>
> In short, I don’t know of a more stagnant art form than opera. In spoken drama, we have seen many changes during these years: symbolist [*uslovnïy*] drama was replaced by “theatrical” drama, “theatrical” by utilitarian, utilitarian by “constructivist”. . . . And [in the opera house] the Demon still seduces the warbling Tamara, and the poor boyars with badly glued-on beards continue to have their feast, quietly discussing the price rises in bread and sugar. . . .
>
> And all the while they are crying that opera is at the crossroads, that it is degenerating, dying out. The sword of Damocles is hanging over it, forged by the whole of theatrical history, by modernity, by our new worldview.[25]

The prediction of (or call for) the death of opera was not, of course, unique to early Soviet Russia. But there is something particularly striking in the survival of an institution that made no attempt to reform and that did little to attract a different audience, as if the great social and cultural changes outside its walls were none of its concern.[26] One look at the Mariinsky’s operatic repertory of 1923 serves as eloquent testimony: *La traviata*, *Aida*, *Faust*, *Lakmé*, plus the Russian classics *Khovanshchina*, *Mlada*, *The Tsar’s Bride*, *Eugene Onegin*, *The Queen of Spades*, and others. A more weighty and focused criticism came from Lunacharsky’s most energetic opponent in the press, Platon Kerzhentsev, who hailed from the Proletcult left and advocated the development of new, proletarian theater that was to develop its material on the basis of collective creativity. He adopted a clear antiopera stance:

> This whole group of theaters subsidized by Soviet power was inherited by us from the "Imperial" regime, and some changes that they underwent during the revolution made no impact on their inner essence. Monograms and crowns have been removed. *A Life for the Tsar* is now called *Ivan Susanin* and plays with a corrected text that contains no servile expressions.[27] Simple citizens sit in the royal box. But the mighty centuries-old tradition still dominates everything.
>
> To begin with, the foundation of our state theaters is not drama, but opera—*grand opéra*. This is a characteristic feature of absolutist political regimes.... Opera supplies an expensive, magnificent, sonorous spectacle leaving the spectator unburdened by any problems, without reminding him of the modern world.
>
> Opera, of course, is well loved and popular.... A thirst for music, an attraction to bright colors, a love for the magnificent spectacle far from the everyday is perfectly understandable. But is this a good enough reason to put opera, the most traditional, ossified and expensive art, at the centre of state theater work?! A thousand times no![28]

Kerzhentsev saw no hope for opera's renewal: there were no old works that could be perceived as topical, no new works, and no composers to create them. Yet what was his ideal form of new theater? Building it on the basis of drama, he says, "will make possible a synthesis of arts, combining drama harmoniously with opera, ballet, pantomime, etc."[29] It would seem that the ghost of old Klingsor haunted Kerzhentsev just as much as it did Lunacharsky, when the latter spoke of a "new kind of music drama," even though they were supposed to be diametrically opposed in their views. Seven years later, as he was leaving his ministerial post, Lunacharsky would elaborate his vision further:

> We could portray... some mighty conflict and end it with a solemn apotheosis in victory, decked in the colors of life and man triumphant, and this last act would end in such an extreme of thunderously harmonious sound, in such an extreme brightness of light and color, in such an extreme of elemental song and dance that the whole audience would rise up, swept along by the whirlwind of this magnificent collective mood. Then the theater would enable people to lose their sense of separation in the midst of an organized collective experience that can never be forgotten—an experience almost as strong as an attack, when with bayonets, to the sounds of a military march, they go forward to their death or to victory—an experience that would leave an imprint on their souls for the rest of their lives.[30]

In short, opera in its current state was a concession to prerevolutionary ideology, but it seemed worthwhile preserving it so that it could, at some later stage, blossom into a new, higher form of theater: one fit for a socialist audience.

Before we consider what became of opera at the next crisis, seventy years later on the collapse of the Soviet Union, it will be useful to look briefly at what happened as the revolutionary period passed into the NEP, and the NEP passed into Stalinism. We have seen from those first squabbles over the royal box, through the surprising protection opera received from within the upper echelons of the Bolshevik Party, that opera emerged as a survivor. Ideologically, it was viewed as obsolescent, but its harshest critics were either too busy with weightier matters or failed to command enough votes in the committees. Other members of the post–civil war government lined up in defense of opera, whether on principled or self-indulgent grounds. With the introduction of the NEP, while state subsidies were provided to the most prestigious theaters, opera was generally left to its own devices and once again became an entertainment for the new privileged classes, whether from the ranks of entrepreneurs and speculators or from the higher levels of state bureaucracy. Speaking in 1929, the year Stalin brought the NEP to a close, Kerzhentsev was able to point to twelve years of failure on the part of opera to undergo any reform that might reflect the new social realities. But at this stage, there were no longer any serious plans to remove opera from the Soviet stage. Indeed, as hopes of world revolution faded and were even declared an irrelevance by Stalin, the bureaucrats discovered their own interests and won ever greater privileges for themselves. In the end, Stalin's Soviet Union became a hospitable environment for conservative productions of classic opera. Reform was no longer on the agenda.

It was not long before Kerzhentsev found his career leading him in the same direction (albeit in a political environment that neither he nor Stalin could have envisaged in the early 1920s). In 1936 he was appointed chair of the newly created Committee for Artistic Affairs, putting him in charge of opera (among other things). More particularly, one of his main tasks was to guide composers toward the creation of a new genre: socialist realist opera. In his new post, he was able to employ elements of his former ideas on collective creativity: composers soon found themselves working alongside committees of advisers under Kerzhentsev's direction. And if the committees were his Stalinist twist on ideals of collectivity from the revolutionary period, so his goal of achieving a grand artistic synthesis in socialist realist opera was a Stalinist twist on Lunacharsky's vision.

Culture wars II: attack of the clones

In 2005 the Bolshoi presented *Rosenthal's Children*, the first contemporary opera it had staged in a quarter of a century. Its predecessor, Vano Muradeli's *October*, had first appeared in 1964 and was trundled out repeatedly for revolutionary anniversaries until it was finally abandoned after 1981 (it boasted the great attraction of a singing Lenin). The death of Brezhnev the following year ended a long period of stability (or stagnation, as many would have it). The mounting ideological fragmentation and economic troubles that followed left insufficient consensus and no funds for mounting any new operas at the Bolshoi.

Rosenthal's Children thus signaled a major departure from the Bolshoi's conservatism. The opera was not tried and tested: the Bolshoi had commissioned it from composer Leonid Desyatnikov and writer Sorokin, who was already a perennial source of scandal in Russian cultural life.[31] The opera that emerged was a fantasy, but not of the escapist variety: it addressed a sense of loss that characterized the first decade of the post-Soviet era. The plot begins in the laboratory of Professor Alex Rosenthal, a refugee scientist from Nazi Germany who has been granted asylum in the Soviet Union and, with the support of Stalin, has been able to resume his research into cloning. As a service to his new homeland, he clones Stakhanovite workers, but he also finds the spare time and resources to pursue more interesting work, eventually managing to produce clones of five celebrated composers: Wagner, Verdi, Musorgsky, Tchaikovsky, and Mozart. As these gifted children grow up, the cloning project falls out of favor with the authorities, and Rosenthal eventually dies. The five composers, now effectively orphaned, plummet to the lowest rung of post-Soviet Russian society and eventually end up as tramps on Moscow's Three Stations Square, where we meet them in 1993 as they try to earn small change as buskers. Things look up when a prostitute, Tanya, falls in love with "Mozart." She decides to abandon her city life and promises to take all five composers to stay with her elderly mother, who lives on the shore of a warm sea. But this prospect never materializes, since an embittered fellow prostitute slips a fatal dose of poison into their vodka. The music, as might be expected of a self-consciously postmodern opera, uses the styles and conventional forms of our five composers, although much of the writing is not straightforward pastiche. The most recognizable and lingering musical quotation, however, comes from a Soviet mass song "Ah, it's so good to live in the Soviet land!" a melody usually given to "Tchaikovsky."

Rosenthal's Children caught the mood of desolation that gripped millions of Russians materially dispossessed by the free-market anarchy of the 1990s and ideologically and culturally orphaned by the loss of the Soviet state. But the fact that such an opera had been performed at all demonstrated that a change had taken place: the Bolshoi, and the Russian state, were once again prepared to sponsor the creation of major new works. And this particular example demonstrated that state patronage could embrace high art on the edges of what was considered acceptable by the more conservative opinion makers of the political and cultural establishment. A few members of the Parliament attempted to provoke a scandal around the opera, even before its premiere, simply on the basis of Sorokin's involvement. This seriously backfired and won the opera even more attention than it would have enjoyed otherwise, while also signaling that the art form was both alive and culturally significant in Russia. However, the opera's picture of a culture left adrift and dying in post-Soviet Russia also became a thing of the past: the ultimate prestige of appearance at the Bolshoi with state backing rendered Sorokin and Desyatnikov's nostalgia obsolete.

Rosenthal's Children is important for the view of 1990s Russia that it provides and for the suggestion that 2000s Russia differs. But my main focus in what follows is not opera about clones, but rather revived operatic productions that are themselves clones of their Stalinist counterparts. These are productions of the same Russian classics that carried opera (and its audiences) through a critical time of political transition, as in the years after 1917.

The first of them is Mikhail Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*, in particular the strange reestablishment, with only minimal recontextualization, of its Stalinist version, *Ivan Susanin*, in the post-Soviet era. Glinka's opera was based on the partly mythologized history that constituted the foundation narrative of the Romanov dynasty, and it was first produced in 1836 under Nicholas I. Its ultramonarchist scenario rendered it immediately obsolete in February 1917, but in the absence of any other opera that could assume its role as a rousing season opener, there was a succession of attempts to substitute more appropriate scenarios while leaving the music more or less intact.

A Life for the Tsar was certainly not alone in this respect, since several other operas and many songs were furnished with new words after the revolution. There were some hasty adaptations during the civil war and NEP periods, although these proved to be ephemeral. But the reimposition of a more conservative culture under Stalin, including the partial replacement of revolutionary imagery with that of Russian nationalism, opened up the possibility that *A Life for the Tsar* could return to the stage with a more subtle reworking. The title was easily dealt with: Glinka's working title had been *Ivan Susanin*, and this was now taken up again for a version that shifted the historical period only slightly, but enough to make the Romanov tsar-to-be an irrelevance. Unlike its predecessors from the early Soviet years, the new libretto commissioned from Sergei Gorodetsky was painstaking to a fault: the project took the librettist, working with various committees, almost two years to complete. Stalin was kept informed about its progress and even intervened directly by initiating and overseeing some last-minute changes to the set design. As I have argued elsewhere, this 1939 *Ivan Susanin* was far better able to satisfy Stalin's cultural policy than the many socialist realist operas created during those years, most of which were shelved after a single season or even before they went into production.[32] By the late 1930s, a regime had emerged that could once again use opera for the aggrandizement of the state and its head, much as the nineteenth-century tsars had used it.

The 1939 *Ivan Susanin* fulfilled the same role in Soviet culture as *A Life for the Tsar* had in late tsarist culture, and it remained unchallenged and unaltered for fifty years until the perestroika period. In 1989, two years before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Glinka's original finally reappeared at the Bolshoi (directed by N. Kuznetsov, sets by V. Levental), with its prerevolutionary title and scenario restored. This production was certainly of considerable political significance as a sign of how far the government under Gorbachev was prepared to relinquish control over culture, to the extent of allowing the appearance of the young Romanov tsar in the final celebration, as well as ubiquitous candles, icons, crosses, and prayers (Orthodoxy was also gaining ground on Soviet television at around the same time). Though few were prepared to admit it at the time, this production was artistically slight: behind the clouds of incense, it amounted to little more than timid adjustments to the mise-en-scène of the old 1939 version, with many of the costumes and set designs still recognizable.

The official fixation on Orthodoxy in the post-Soviet era has endured, even if it peaked some years ago, but the tsarist fantasizing of the 1990s soon collapsed under the weight of its own absurdity. After all, short of inviting a new tsar to mount the throne, the monarchist revival could hardly serve any political purpose beyond a rather thin reactionary smokescreen, while official flirtations with an assortment of émigré princes amounted to nothing more than another pretext for members of the Russian elite to organize banquets and other expensive entertainments. The piecemeal use of symbolism from different centuries was one thing, but establishing any more elaborate cultural continuity with the prerevolutionary period in the popular consciousness was hardly possible. By the 1990s, there was no one left with adult memories predating the revolution, and even the few who had been children then were not from the ranks of the minority who had benefited from the tsarist regime. Neither was there any Russian parallel to the Eastern European phenomenon of the descendants of aristocrats, industrialists, and landowners returning to pursue property claims. Instead, Russians both poor and wealthy had Soviet memories they could not wipe out, since they were entangled with all their other memories: personal and civic pride in fighting and winning the Second World War, hopes that somehow they were constructing a better future, sunny childhood outings with fellow Young Pioneers. To trade all of this for the vacant gaze of Nicholas II was pointless, and if that was the case, why should any contemporary Russian care that Susanin had saved the life of Mikhail Romanov? Once upon a time, this deed had carried a profound meaning for many Russians; now it was simply a historical fact among so many others.

With hindsight, then, it seems only natural that *Ivan Susanin* would return to the Bolshoi. But only with hindsight: I still remember my shock at its return in 1997, almost as startling as the return of the old Soviet national anthem in 2000. The reemergence of *Susanin* was most probably an independent choice by the new Bolshoi administration, while that of the national anthem was undoubtedly a government decision. But the two go hand in hand as the most prominent musical symbols of a return to Soviet cultural iconography. As with all such revivals of the Soviet past, however, the new context prompted some complications. The national anthem received new words, since citizens of the Russian

Federation could hardly sing the praises of a state that no longer existed. As for *Susanin*, the musical and dramatic framework and the sets of the 1945 Soviet production were retained, but the old, monarchist passages in the libretto were restored, as was the appearance of the young Romanov at the end. This resulted in an awkward hybrid. For example, the songs glorifying spring at the beginning are sung in the midst of the glorious autumnal landscape of the Soviet sets. The Soviet production had at least displayed some historical scruples, transferring the action, with appropriate changes to the libretto, from spring 1613 (when Romanov was elected) back to autumn 1612 (when the Poles were defeated). This shift allowed the plot to be relocated within a frame that was still historically correct, while removing the need for references to the future tsar. Even after great struggle, the Soviet version failed to achieve complete consistency; but the 1990s reconstruction made no effort at all, no attempt to conceal the discrepancies. One welcome return to Glinka's original version would have been the restoration of the episode in the final scene where Susanin's grieving family interrupts the pomp of the "Glory" chorus. This transforms the scene, adding an emotional depth and humanity lacking in the simplified Soviet version, which left the chorus undisturbed by any reminders of mortality and suffering. The political implications for the Stalinist production were clear, but remarkably this cut was also observed in the 1990s version, leading the viewer to wonder what that meant about the value of ordinary lives in post-Soviet Russia, at a moment when the average male life expectancy in the nation had plummeted to fifty-seven years.

But whatever decisions fed into the 1997 *Susanin*, and however much it was a makeshift solution at a time when there was neither the means nor the vision to create a new production for the new era, events of the following years invested it retrospectively with a much grander significance. Not long after Vladimir Putin was elected president, he began to develop an interest in the fate of the historical Susanin. Soon archaeologists excavated a set of bones and declared that these were likely the remains of the historic Susanin; the skull was presented before the public, complete with beard and other cosmetic accessories. Then, in March 2005, Putin visited the sites near Kostroma that are dedicated to Susanin's memory; in doing so, he harked back to Nicholas I, who had performed the same rituals in the 1830s, inspiring Glinka to take up the Susanin story in *A Life for the Tsar*. Finally, on November 4, 2005, Russians celebrated a new holiday, a "national day of unity" to commemorate the events of autumn 1612 showcased in the Soviet version of *Susanin*. Had Putin nurtured merely scholarly historical concerns, it would have made better sense to locate the holiday in the spring, marking the end of the Time of Troubles in 1613. Instead, Stalin's view, as mediated through the Soviet *Susanin*, prevailed. But this date had other things to recommend it over a spring holiday. The new holiday replaced the Soviet celebration of November 7, the date of the October Revolution (in the Gregorian calendar); there would be minimal disturbance if the festivities were moved to November 4. For the pious, the new date could even be linked back to the prerevolutionary religious holiday dedicated to the Mother of God icon of Kazan. And so all manner of Russians can construct their own personal reasons for celebrating November 4, while at the same they can unite in contributing to national unity through festive eating and drinking.

The Bolshoi's awkwardly celebratory vision of *Susanin* has not gone uncontested. Since 2004 *Ivan Susanin* has been running concurrently with a new Mariinsky production by Dmitry Chernyakov of *A Life for the Tsar*. The latter is a self-conscious postmodern mix of cultural symbols, unified only by Chernyakov's overarching desire to negate, undermine, or generally ridicule the opera's official messages, whether tsarist or Soviet. The fact that the two productions have been allowed to run in parallel in Russia's twin cultural capitals is not some startling oversight but rather entirely characteristic of the present phase of Russian cultural policy: on one hand the state makes overt ideological use of cultural institutions, while on the other hand it makes a show of its toleration of iconoclastic artists such as Sorokin and Chernyakov. However much various self-styled patriots and guardians of public morals might rail against them, these officially sanctioned iconoclasts do not ultimately pose a threat to the cohesion of the state, which looks all the stronger for being able to absorb them.[33]

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There can be no end to this story of appropriation and reappropriation, but a temporary halt might be found by returning once more to *Eugene Onegin* and to Sorokin. Our story this time begins in 1944, with the first appearance of the classic Soviet production of *Onegin*. While *Ivan Susanin* has the status of an "official" or "civic" opera, widely lauded but loved by comparatively few, *Onegin*, on the contrary, is held in deep affection by many Russians (who have also learnt by heart many pages of Pushkin's verse novel); it is often an intimate repository of personal memories. Generations of Muscovite girls, imagining themselves as Tatyana, have waited at the artists' entrance to catch a glimpse of their favorite tenor offstage (my mother in the 1940s and I in the 1980s both had adolescent dreams inspired by the same classic production of *Onegin*). The chronology of the *Susanin* and *Onegin* productions is, however, remarkably similar: the Soviet *Susanin* ran continually from 1945 to 1989,[34] the Soviet *Onegin* ran continually from 1944 to 1991; like *Susanin*, the classic *Onegin* was temporarily replaced by a production that failed to displace old memories (although in this case by the same director, Pokrovsky);[35] *Susanin* came back in 1997, the classic *Onegin* was resurrected in 2000. But my focus here will not be on the classic *Onegin* alone, but rather on its relationship to a further post-Soviet production, dating from 2006 and directed and designed by Dmitry Chernyakov.

Where modernist opera productions often treat the original as a tabula rasa, stripping it of the accretions of tradition, the purpose of Chernyakov's *Onegin* can only be understood by those who are acquainted with the 1944 production (fortunately, that means most of the Bolshoi audience). Sometimes Chernyakov lifts something directly from the Soviet version and recontextualizes it; more often, though, he reverses the old version—whatever was dark becomes light, both metaphorically and literally. For example, Chernyakov offers us a Tatyana very different from the familiar character. The tradition made use of hair-color stereotyping: Tatyana was always dark-haired, underlining her dreamy and soulful nature, while Olga, her sister, was blonde, symbolizing that she is fun-loving and superficial. This is to some extent derived from Pushkin's novel, which describes Olga's flaxen hair and blue eyes; Tatyana is generally presented as the opposite of her sister, although details of her physical appearance are never provided. Chernyakov makes his Tatyana blonde, not to signify a change in character but simply to reverse tradition. And in contrast to most Soviet singers who have distinguished themselves in the role, Chernyakov's Tatyana is thin—almost anorexic. The movements of her slight frame convey a teenager's anguish in a powerful, modern fashion; in the Letter Scene, for example, her body seems almost convulsed with pent-up desire and apprehension. This provides Tatyana with a gestural vocabulary not available to the more mature singers who traditionally took the role. Here, in fact, it is Chernyakov who is much closer to Pushkin, who emphasizes Tatyana's separation from her surroundings, describing her as wild, sad, silent, as fearful as a doe in the forest, and alien to her own family. And not only Pushkin—Tchaikovsky also expressed a wish that the opera's four leading roles should be taken by young singers.

Another reversal: rather than have them deliver their opening duet backstage, Chernyakov moves Tatyana and Olga to the front of the stage, but with their backs to us.[36] They now face an onstage audience of houseguests around the dinner table, instead of the actual audience in the theater; the guests themselves are entirely unexpected, since the plot doesn't require them until several scenes later. Such details allow Chernyakov to maintain a constant dialogue with his audience, who are impelled scene by scene to compare his production with the Soviet default. As it turns out, Chernyakov's premature dinner guests replace the original fancy-dress peasants and sing all their songs and choruses; this would be welcomed as an improvement by many, since the pseudofolk intrusion glamorized serfdom, and critics have often complained that it is dramatically weak.

Yet another surprise: the Letter Scene is not played out in the traditional darkened, intimate bedroom, but in the same dining room, now empty but still fully lit by chandeliers. Instead of the Romantic decency of a moonlit figure enveloped by darkness, we are plunged into a voyeurism more akin to reality television, watching Tatyana's most private moments under merciless lighting in a large room. Tatyana had traditionally played the scene in a nightdress, and even Sorokin pays tribute to this detail in *Blue Fat* (although he has her wearing the nightdress over her filthy diving suit). Chernyakov, by contrast, simply leaves her in her daytime clothes and yet manages to make her look more exposed and vulnerable than ever.

Another reversal lies in Chernyakov's manipulation of realism. Tchaikovsky included various musical counterparts for onstage gestures: we have Tatyana's "writing" theme, or the little flourish supposed to coincide with her action of tearing the page she rejects. The classic Soviet production, like most others, observed these correspondences scrupulously, but while Chernyakov predictably rejects them, he installs in their place the more sophisticated realism of Chekhov and Stanislavsky.[37] The singers have to maintain a constant succession of elaborately prepared gestures designed to give the audience further insight into the psychological depth of their characters, beyond the resources of the libretto and the music.

In scene 3, Onegin's rejection of Tatyana traditionally takes place in the garden. Landscape scenes were one of the treasures of classic productions: the audience invariably emitted a gasp of delight and burst into applause at the sight of beautiful sets featuring luxurious canopies of realistic-looking trees. Soviet set designers Vilyams and Fedorovsky were masters in this area, and the image of those gently rustling leaves, green or yellow and red according to the season, remain one of the most enduring memories of all the operatic productions I attended in the late Soviet era. Chernyakov knows this well; and so, inevitably, he denies us the garden, the rustling leaves, the forest in the background. Instead, he plants Onegin and Tatyana yet again in the dining room. But he offers a compensation: we are reminded of the absent foliage by a hyperrealistic projection of trees in the dining room window, a kind of graphic citation from the Soviet production. After the initial disappointment at the sight of the same old room, the projection induced the stirrings of wonderment in the audience that used to greet those old Soviet trees.

And indeed, as the reversals become more outrageous—What? No ballet? Not even a duel?—the quotations become more strangely evocative. The opera's most emblematic moment, at least for Russian audiences, is Lensky's aria before the duel, "What has the coming day in store for me?" The image of Lensky, in his winter fur-lined coat, a top hat placed atop his black curls, standing under the falling snow, was not only a climax in the Soviet staging but was also immortalized on film and forever associated with the leading Soviet Lenskys, Sergei Lemeshev and his rival Ivan Kozlovsky, who each commanded the adulation of mutually hostile armies of female fans (*lemeshistki* and *kozlovityanki*). Chernyakov cannot, of course, allow himself to perpetuate this. Sure enough, Lensky delivers his aria indoors, in the warm, and yet he is still in a winter coat, evoking the familiar scene while contravening the canons of realism. Chernyakov's Lensky even strives for the same vocal quality that Lemeshev lent to the role, evoking the same heart-rending vulnerability. In the performance I witnessed, this was achieved remarkably well, down to small details like choosing the spot onstage that Lemeshev had always inhabited during the aria. Some found this offensive to the memory of their hero; others, myself included, found the scene reawakening but also resituating long cherished memories.

Chernyakov continues determinedly through the opera. In scene 6 Prince Gremin, Tatyana's husband, traditionally delivers his aria standing, puffing out his mighty chest for the final low G-flat. Sorokin writes of "our glorious bass," who "sings as if he were sculpting." Chernyakov's Gremin, therefore, has to deliver the aria seated. Again this allows a subtle transformation: he is confining his feelings in intimate conversation with his old friend Onegin. For a moment he gets up, almost as a gesture toward the familiar version, but he soon takes his seat again. His role was highly conventionalized in the Soviet production, and this can perhaps be traced back to Tchaikovsky, who seemed to treat the part mainly as a showcase cameo for a bass. Chernyakov manages to deepen the role, making shrewd use of an orchestral interlude to present us with a mimed conversation between Tatyana and her husband. We can see that she tells him frankly about her past declaration of love for Onegin. Gremin's movements and gestures show his compassion and warm concern for Tatyana—his desire to minimize the pain of the meeting—but he is also firm, entertaining no possibility of Tatyana leaving him for Onegin.

Chernyakov's quotations are often quite elaborate. At the close of his Letter Scene, the violent surge of Tatyana's feelings is matched by a surge of current to the chandelier, which overheats, extinguishing at last its oppressive glare. A powerful gust of wind causes the windows to burst inward, while the curtains dance about. This is another reference, but to a Soviet production of another Tchaikovsky opera, *The Queen of Spades*, which is no less familiar (it could be seen up to 2007). If Onegin were Hermann, he would step through the open window, as love-crazed as the hapless girl—Chernyakov seems to be inviting us to contemplate Tatyana's wildest dream. Of course Onegin does *not* appear, but we are struck, fleetingly, by the comparison and by the contrast between the course of the love intrigue in Tchaikovsky's two most celebrated operas.

These are the ways in which Chernyakov engages his core audience of habitual Bolshoi operagoers in a memory game. The Soviet *Onegin* and *Queen of Spades*, and even the interiors of the Bolshoi itself provide a stock of recognizable signs to be recalled, recontextualized, and inverted.[38] As I have already hinted, the production polarized audiences; one of the advantages of Internet forums is that intangibles such as public reception can now be preserved in written form.

But in this particular case, the hostile reaction was sufficient to erupt into public scandal when Galina Vishnevskaya, former opera star and sometime dissident in the later Soviet years, wrote an open letter to the Bolshoi's director vowing never to cross the theater's threshold again. The crime was "distortion" of "the national heritage," which is indeed one way of describing Chernyakov's *Onegin*. The row soon took on the petty vindictiveness of another venerable Soviet tradition: the tit for tat of a communal flat row. Vishnevskaya escalated the dispute by making good on her vow, withdrawing her scheduled eightieth-birthday concert from the Bolshoi. In return, the Bolshoi management made a point of running Chernyakov's *Onegin* while Vishnevskaya's concert was taking place elsewhere. In the end, the theater made a gesture of compromise, and declared that henceforth both the 1944 and the 2006 *Onegins* would remain in the repertory. This, of course, was in no way a defeat for Chernyakov; on the contrary, it benefited his production greatly, allowing one part of his audience to refresh its memory of his point of reference, while allowing the other part (younger Russians and tourists) to become acquainted with it for the first time. Meanwhile, though, Chernyakov's enemies no longer had to grumble, tut, and fidget their way through his production.

To fully understand these stories of *Susanin* and *Onegin*, we have to look well beyond the confines of the operatic world. Writers on post-Soviet Russia often point to nostalgia for Soviet cultural iconography, from chocolate bars through classic films to Communist Party demonstrations for pensioners. While the picture is tempting, I remain unconvinced that this was ever a unitary phenomenon; in any case, I would argue that if this nostalgic trend ever existed, it is now itself obsolete, overtaken by events. One of the key ideological props of the Putin era is to create a sense of unbroken continuity with Russian Soviet grandeur, selecting aspects of those times to validate and justify the present, restoring civic pride in a strong state and major power status on the world stage, giving Russians a sense of meaning in life when the Yeltsin years only offered the cut-throat values of the market.

Nostalgia looks back to an irrecoverable past, and much of Soviet life may indeed have seemed distant and alien after 1991. But what was obsolete for a time in the 1990s has in the 2000s been stitched onto the present to form a suitable backdrop for today's Russia. Putin's authoritarian power and the people's love for him (I am not attempting irony here) may seem Stalinist, but his four-hour press conferences broadcast live on television evoke the very different glasnost era of the late 1980s—the reticent Stalin would never have risked his mystique in this way. Russian Orthodoxy acquired considerable political power and a cultural ubiquity during the 1990s; this has since become less strident, but it too retains an honored place alongside Soviet imagery. Sorokin was slightly ahead of his time, but he caught the beginnings of a development that has now matured. His postmodern cultural mishmash, where there are no oppositions and everything is on an equal footing, has now become normality, not by the chance confluence of unintended consequences but through deliberate design (given Putin's control over the mass media, no conspiracy is required by way of explanation). Just as red drapery and yellow stars jostle with the black robes and golden onion domes of Orthodoxy, so too in Putin's international relations do Cold War standoffs jostle with the smiles and backslapping of the G8 summit. This ideological synthesis has been accompanied by the return of a long-forgotten sense of stability that Putin has managed to by bringing Russia's new oil wealth under state control. As the commentators joke, the elections don't even have to be rigged.

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In conclusion, let me draw together the two strands of this essay. The cultural crises of both 1917 and 1991 led to an initial period of widespread and radical rejection of past cultural values, but in both cases this was followed by a partial restoration within a new cultural and political context. In both periods, opera proved to be the most intransigent of artistic institutions but managed to survive in spite of its apparent obsolescence, offering an escapist niche in which the past could be still contemplated, relived, and enjoyed, until further political and cultural changes eventually provided it with a new justification. Its new masters then reinstated parts of the old cultural text, while erasing or inverting the rest. Throughout all its troubles, opera in Russia was protected by its redoubtable institutional armor: its magnificent buildings, the social rituals that surrounded it, and the international cultural prestige that made it a desirable accessory to state power. Not least, though, opera survived because it provided unique pleasures unavailable from the other arts, pleasures intense enough to shine through even the filth of Sorokin's "murky waters." The story of opera in twentieth-century Russia reveals underlying cultural continuity even at the points of most radical rupture, a continuity that played its therapeutic role for several battered generations.

NOTES

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1. The full text of Sorokin's novel (in Russian) can be found on his personal Web site http://srkn.ru/texts/salo_part1.shtml, accessed December 13, 2007. All translations in this article are by Jonathan Walker and myself.

2. Here and subsequently, factual information about the Bolshoi productions is taken from V. I. Zarubin, *Bol'shoy teatr: Pervïye postanovki oper na russkoy stsene, 1825–1993* (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1994).

3. Soviet and Cold War historians shared a monolithic conception of Soviet history, even if they were diametrically opposed in their moral

evaluation of events. But this conception presents great difficulties, not least for historians who need to explain how the culture of the first dozen years was swept away over the course of the following few years. There was never a coup during the seven decades of the Soviet Union's existence, if that is understood as the overthrow of the head of state; but during the 1930s Stalin hollowed out all the institutions of state and party, replacing the personnel from the revolution and the 1920s with those bound to him by patronage. This radical political change found its expression in a new conservative cultural environment, including a return to Russian nationalist rhetoric and imagery borrowed from the tsarist era.

4. I have written about socialist realist opera in "The Soviet Opera Project: Ivan Dzerzhinsky vs. *Ivan Susanin*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): 181–216.

5. It was, of course, much easier to drop embarrassing operas from the repertory than to pull down weighty monuments; for this reason, some of the latter still remain in their places.

6. Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), Fund 1933 ("Yelena Konstantinovna Malinovskaya"), list 2, folder 12.

7. See A. V. Lunacharskiy, *O muzïke i muzïkal'nom teatre*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Muzïka, 1981), 287–88.

8. Ibid.

9. Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933) was educated at Zürich University, where he was a philosophy student under Richard Avenarius. A member of the Russian Socialist Democratic Party from 1898, he became an active revolutionary. One of the principal targets of Lenin's philosophical polemic against "empiriocriticism," he joined the leftist group Forward in 1909. In 1917, however, he joined the Bolsheviks and after the October Revolution became minister for enlightenment (in charge of education, science, and the arts). Simultaneously with his political activities, he maintained a literary career as a playwright and critic. He was removed from his ministerial position in 1929, when he was seen as a potential obstacle to a policy shift toward tighter control of the arts. He was demoted and served as a senior Soviet diplomat until the time of his death, four years later.

10. Lunacharskiy, *O muzïke*, 286.

11. Ibid., 212.

12. P. Kerzhentsev, *O tvorcheskom teatre* (Moscow and Petrograd: Gosudarstvennoye izdatel'stvo), 222.

13. Ibid., 223. Platon Kerzhentsev (real name Lebedev, 1881–1940) was a professional revolutionary, a member of the Bolsheviks since 1904. He held many important party and state positions after the revolution, ranging widely across foreign affairs, press, censorship, the arts, and other areas. Within the arts, his influence was felt most strongly during three separate periods: in the early 1920s, when he wrote several books on theater, polemicizing with Lunacharsky; around 1929, when as deputy head of the Central Committee's agitprop department, he was involved in the tightening of political control over the arts; and finally in 1936–38, when he headed the Committee for Artistic Affairs. This last period is given detailed treatment in Leonid Maximenkov, *Sumbur vmesto muzïki: Stalinskaya kul'turnaya revolyutsiya, 1936–38* (Moscow: Yuridicheskaya kniga, 1997).

14. F. Shalyapin, "Na pomoshch Povolzhyu," *Zhizn' iskusstva*, nos. 798–803 (August 9–14, 1921): 1.

15. See Lunacharsky's letter to the executive of the Council of Ministers of April 29, 1920, in Lunacharskiy, *O muzïke*, 309–10.

16. The NEP was implemented at the end of the civil war in 1921, when the continued requisitioning of food for the cities was no longer tolerated by the peasantry. A pragmatic measure, the NEP allowed a market economy in agricultural produce and revived small businesses in the towns. It rendered large-scale and rapid industrialization impossible, however, and Stalin finally replaced the NEP in 1929 with his first five-year plan.

17. V. I. Lenin, *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy*, vol. 54 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1965), 110.

18. See *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaya intelligentsiya: Dokumentï TsK RKP(b)—VKP(b)—VChK—OGPU—NKVD o kul'turnoy politike, 1917–1953*, ed. A. Artizov and O. Naumov (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnïy fond "Demokratiya," 1999), 31.

19. The complete text of the letter can be found in ibid., 31–33.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 43–44.

22. Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930), a distinguished modernist poet and playwright, joined the Bolsheviks in his teens and was arrested several times on political charges. During the civil war, his poetry readings won a mass working-class audience, and he designed agitprop posters. He toured the Soviet Union and several Western countries during the 1920s while serving the artistic organization LEF (Left

Artistic Front) and styling himself as a "futurist communist." Increasing disaffection with Stalin's regime led to his suicide in 1930; after an initially hostile posthumous period, his reputation was restored by Stalin in 1935, although this was at odds with the principles of socialist realist literature.

23. Pseudonym of Alyaksandr Malinouski (1873–1928), once a challenger to Lenin for the leadership of the Bolsheviks, who drifted away from the party. He was hostile to the October Revolution but soon became a leading figure in the Proletcult movement (see note 24), which he cofounded. His activities ranged widely, from writing science fiction to conducting experiments in blood transfusion.

24. The Proletcult was an independent Russian artistic association that promoted a revolutionary "proletarian culture" that was to oust and replace "bourgeois culture"; it also took responsibility for workers' cultural education. Initially receiving state support, it came to be viewed with suspicion and was placed under state control.

25. G. Krïzhitskiy, "Vmesto nekrologa," *Muzïka i teatr*, no. 10 (November 28, 1922): 3.

26. Admittedly, in the first operatic seasons after the revolution, there were attempts to include operas that could in some way be seen as "revolutionary," such as Wagner's *Rienzi*, or satirizing the old regime, such as Rimsky-Korsakov's *Kashchey the Immortal* and *The Golden Cockerel*. There were also several productions (mainly in the provinces) that completely replaced the old plots and librettos with more up-to-date texts (as in the case of *Tosca*, renamed *The Struggle for the Commune*, 1924). But such attempts, often ridiculed in the press for a merely superficial allegiance to the new regime, were easily outweighed by the traditional repertory.

27. It is not clear exactly which *Ivan Susanin* production Kerzhentsev is referring to here; there were several early attempts to perform Glinka's monarchist opera with a new libretto, but these were short-lived and should not be confused with the 1939 version.

28. Kerzhentsev, *O tvorcheskom teatre*, 226.

29. Ibid., 228.

30. Anatoliy Lunacharskiy, "Novïye puti operï i baleta," *Proletarskiy muzïkant*, no. 6 (1930): 8.

31. In 2002, the political youth group Going Together, usually described as pro-Putin, condemned Sorokin's novel *Blue Fat* as "pornography" and also criticized it for insulting the memory of two Soviet leaders (in one chapter, Stalin and Khrushchev enjoy sex with each other). The press was invited to a few public book-burning events; court cases followed in which both sides sued each other.

32. See n. 4.

33. This is not to suggest that the state has bought off such individuals: Sorokin's recent interview with *Der Spiegel*, for example, contains trenchant criticisms of current Russian domestic and foreign policy. See "Russia Is Slipping Back into an Authoritarian Empire," www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,463860,00.html. Nevertheless, for all the dash and startling imagery of his literary work, Sorokin's political thinking lies within the mainstream of Russian liberal opinion.

34. The 1939 production was replaced by a new one in 1945, although this amounted to a revision rather than a fresh start. Perhaps the most significant change appeared in the Polish act: the grotesque representation of the dances in the enemy camp was abandoned, and this act was made as beautiful as the rest of the production. Some of the everyday details that were unique to the 1945 version were subjected to ridicule and soon removed (such as Antonida coming onstage with a bucket). See the discussion of the 1945 production at the Committee for Artistic Affairs, RGALI, Fund 962, list 3, folder 1378).

35. It was premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where it was poorly received.

36. This is probably a reference to Pokrovsky's 1991 production, in which Tatyana and Olga also sang with their backs to the audience; critics then had said there was no justification for this device.

37. There are many pointers to Chekhov in Chernyakov's production, including the sets, costumes, and stage action. An important instance is the miscarrying of the duel, where the gun goes off by accident, introducing a tragicomic gloss that is unmistakably Chekhovian. We are also reminded of a theatrical bon mot ascribed to Chekhov: "If a gun is on the wall in act 1, it has to be fired by the end of the play." The gunshot in the duel usually comes as a shock, but Chernyakov provided elaborate anticipations in the previous scene, including the firing of a toy gun.

38. In the high-society setting of scene 6, Chernyakov refers to the decor of the old building's Beethoven Hall, whose luxurious deep red fabrics and elaborate crystal light fittings evoked theatricality, officialdom, wealth, imperial Russia, and Soviet Russia all at the same time—very fittingly for the Sorokin-like multivalent signification of Chernyakov's *Onegin*.